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Special to Bottles and Extras

ARTHUR MCGINNIS and the GREAT WHISKEY HEIST

by Jack Sullivan

In early January 1926, as many as 50 men entered the government-held liquor warehouse of the McGinnis Distillery near Baltimore and hauled away 71 barrels and 32 cases of aged rye whiskey, with a present day value of more than a million dollars. It was the kind of bold caper that Arthur McGinnis, founder of the distillery and 21 years dead, might well have admired.

Arthur himself was a bold man. An immigrant from Ireland he began his American career during the 1870s as a wagoner, like the one shown here (Fig. 1), working out of the east side of Baltimore. It was a difficult life, usually requiring hard work and heavy lifting. McGinnis knew he was meant for better things. His intelligence and "go getter" attitude brought him to the attention John B. Brown, the owner of a successful liquor outfit Brown had founded in 1869. The company flagship brand was Brown's Malt Whiskey that the owner merchandised as a medicinal beverage. An 1891 ad asserted: "Brown's Malt Whiskey is a cure for Indigestion, Brown's Malt Whiskey is a Tonic and Invigorant, Brown's Malt Whiskey is a Healthful Beverage, Brown's Malt Whiskey is a Genuine Distillation, Brown's



Brown hired McGinnis in the mid-1880s and taught him the liquor business. One of Brown's sons, J. Badger Brown, was involved with the company but appears to have died early. In 1895, the name of the firm became Brown, McGinnis & Company. McGinnis's three sons -- John, James and Patrick -- all became involved in the business. This firm appears to have bottled and sold wine as well as whiskey. By 1905, Brown's name had disappeared entirely and the A. McGinnis Company of Baltimore emerged.

The Distillery at McGinnis Siding

McGinnis reorganized the firm, incorporated it and personally invested an additional \$5,000. Other incorporators and investors included sons John and James along with two of Arthur's Irish compatriots, Martin O'Connor and Patrick McGrath. With the infusion of new money, McGinnis built a distillery adjacent to the Western Maryland Railroad at a place that came to be called McGinnis Siding. It was located four miles from Westminster, Maryland, but Arthur chose to name the site "Carrollton." This identified the location with John Carroll, the state's signer of the Declaration of Independence. The place existed only in Arthur's rich Irish imagination. McGinnis Company offices remained in Baltimore, first at 208 Lexington Ave., and then in the American Building downtown (Fig. 3).

Almost from the beginning, the whiskey business was successful and McGinnis Rye enjoyed strong regional sales. In 1905, the state tax commissioner set the taxable value of distilled spirits for the McGinnis Co. at \$13,368. By 1907, that figure had grown to \$21,496, and by 1909 had jumped to \$62,760. Even with this growth the McGinnis distillery was among Maryland's smaller operations, able to process only a relatively modest 250 barrels of mash per day.

The whiskey was bottled in a range of readily identified containers. McGinnis labeled square quart bottles could be found in both clear (Fig. 4) and amber (Fig. 5). All were embossed with the name of the distillery (Fig. 6). McGinnis Pure Rye also came in a pint flask (Fig. 7) and an embossed miniature bottle (Fig. 8). The firm issued merchandising giveaway items to saloons and selected customers including back of the bar bottles and shot glasses (Figs. 9-11)

Fig. 3: American Building, Baltimore



Fig. 2: J.B. Brown ad, 1891





Fig. 5: Amber McGinnis Quart Fig. 6: McGinnis embossing on four bottles

Below: Fig.7: Amber McGinnis Pint

Arthur's Recklessness Is Revealed

In November 1905, Arthur was injured in an accident and after lingering for a few weeks, died. His death triggered not only tumult at the A. McGinnis Co. but a legal dispute that fractured his family. The attempt to settle his estate required investigation of the balance sheets of the distillery. Except there weren't any. As his son James told the court, Arthur "carried a bank book and a little stub. He carried the bank book in his pocket and the cashbook in his head. That is how he ran the business."

As the court determination subsequently stated, McGinnis's company had been a success but "the financial part of the concern was managed in a most loose and careless fashion." Arthur's recklessness engendered legal actions that pitted Mary McGinnis (likely his widow) and son James against son John and other investors. After the case reached the Maryland Supreme Court, a settlement was made among the McGinnises.

What happened then is not entirely clear even to their descendants. Apparently James and John mended their differences. Brother Patrick entered the picture as a whiskey executive. A Baltimore company called McGinnis Brothers was created in 1905 and existed alongside the A. McGinnis & Company until Prohibition shut both of them down in 1920. At the time the McGinnis distillery was still operating and its warehouses were full of aging

whiskey. The facility was put under U.S. Government control and the product was slated to be extracted in small amounts and sold for allowable "medicinal purposes."

The lure of so much whiskey in one place proved very tempting to bootleggers. In 1922, the head of a Baltimore ring named Charles Scandalis was caught trying to secure liquor from the McGinnis Distillery using false permits. Convicted, Scandalis later converted to being a Prohibition enforcement officer and was murdered on the job. The site drew other violence. The Baltimore Sun of March 30, 1923, recounted that a second attempt had been made in two weeks to rob the McGinnis warehouse of its whiskey. The would-be robbers shot at the guard on duty who used a shotgun to wound several of the miscreants and put them to flight. They were never caught.





Above Fig. 8: McGinnis clear miniature



Right Fig 9: McGinnis back of the bar bottle



Fig. 12: A bootlegger's truckbottle

The Great Whiskey Heist

These incidents all were a prelude to the events of January 8, 1926. On that fateful winter afternoon, according to witnesses, three men, earlier seen ice skating on a nearby pond, suddenly confronted a government guard named Charlie Thompson. They drew pistols and tied him up. The next to be trundled was an 80-year-old man who had wandered by the scene looking for his lost cat. In time, some seven guards and watchmen were shackled and a gang, estimated at from 40 to 50 men, made themselves at home in the distillery for a full 15 hours.

The robbers not only were professionals, they knew something about whiskey. Sampling on each floor as they went, a time-consuming process, they passed up the newer barrels on lower levels of the warehouse to get the well seasoned booze on the seventh and eighth floors. Taking all night, by dawn they had loaded five trucks with 71 barrels of the oldest whiskey and 32 cases of bottled stock. The total value of the liquor at the time was estimated at \$100,000 --- more than a million dollars today. Federal officials later traced the trucks, now accompanied by mobsters in automobiles, south to Mexico. Crossing the border, the trucks may well have been disguised as this clever bootlegger "lumber" wagon (Fig. 11).

A subsequent hearing into the robbery by a federal grand jury in March 1926 deteriorated into a finger-pointing exercise. The stolen whiskey and the men responsible for the robbery seemingly had evaporated into thin air. Suspecting an inside job, the guards and nearby residents had been grilled relentlessly by the U.S. District Attorney but to no avail. The head of the Maryland Anti-Saloon League launched a bitter attack on federal officials, blaming "too much temporizing and too much politics" for the looting.

In April of that year, a Baltimore man named James Geisey of Baltimore and six accomplices were charged with the crime after being caught transporting carloads of beer into Baltimore via railroad. The record does not reveal if they ultimately were tried or found guilty. Nevertheless, taking no more chances, federal officials moved the remaining whiskey to another location and in October 1926, brick by brick, tore down the distillery that Arthur McGinnis had built and sent the building materials to New York. (x)



Fig. 10: McGinnis shot glass #1



Fig. 11: McGinnis shot glass #2