

MARK TWAIN: "PATRON SAINT" OF AMERICAN WHISKIANA

by Jack Sullivan
(Special to Bottles & Extras)

Capitol. Put simply, the quotation implies that the United States was destined to move westward and create an new empire in North America -- a prediction that largely has become true.

Twain's "Jug of Empire"

For Twain, who made a career out of debunking overly romantic notions, the driving force behind American expansion was not empire-building but whiskey. In his famous autobiographical book, "Life on the Mississippi," the author takes issue with the well-known quote about America's expansion. It should have been, he said: "*Westward the JUG of Empire takes its way.*" Twain explained:

"How solemn and beautiful is the thought, that the earliest pioneer of civilization, the van-leader of civilization, is never the steamboat, never the railroad, never the newspaper, never the Sabbath-school, never the missionary -- but always whiskey! Such is the case. Look history over; you will see. The missionary comes after the whiskey -- I mean he arrives after the whiskey has arrived; next comes the poor immigrant, with ax and hoe and rifle; next, the trader; next, the miscellaneous rush; next, the gambler, the desperado, the highwayman, and all their kindred in sin of both sexes; and next, the smart chap

who has bought up an old grant that covers all the land; this brings the lawyer tribe; the vigilance committee brings the undertaker. All these interests bring the newspaper; the newspaper starts up politics and a railroad; all hands turn to and build a church and a jail -- and behold, civilization is established for ever in the land. But whiskey, you see, was the van-leader in this beneficent work."

Twain and Whiskey

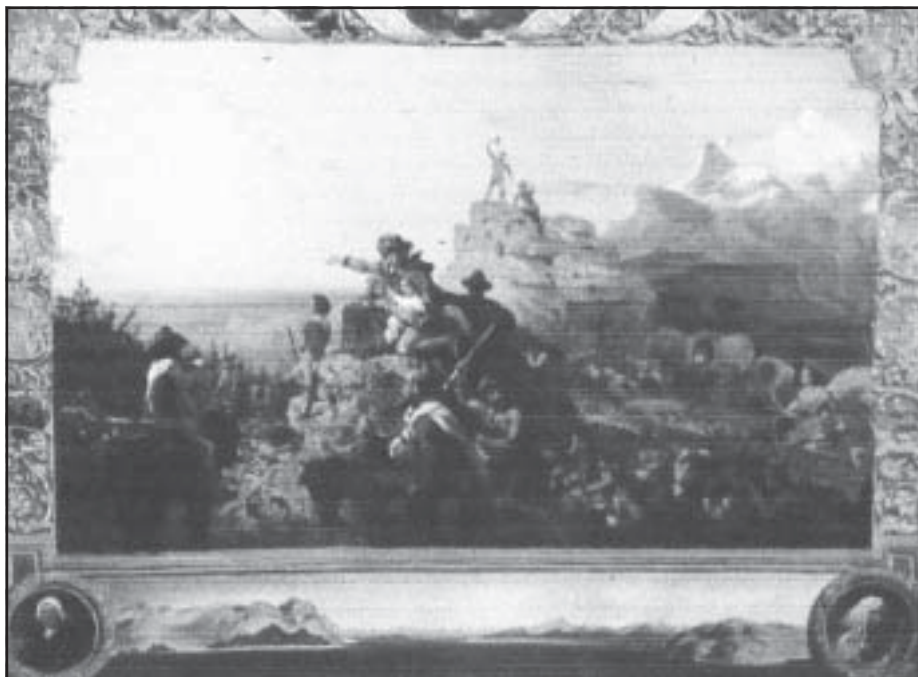
But Twain/Clemens was not merely a man of words about whiskey, but of deeds as well. While not given to over-indulging, his fondness for bourbon was well known. As he wrote in his "Autobiography", he recalled imbibing at an early age: "*For many years I believed that I remembered helping my grandfather drink his whiskey toddy when I was six-weeks-old, but I do not tell about that any more, now; I am grown old and my memory is not as active as it used to be.*" During his brief career as a journalist in Washington about 1868, Twain agreed to share expenses with a roommate with a similar taste for whiskey. Their total joint income per week was \$24. In his autobiography he recounts: "*Twenty-four dollars a week would really have been riches to us if hadn't had to support that*

Whether you collect whiskey jugs, whiskey bottles, whiskey shot glasses, whiskey pub jugs, whiskey decanters, whiskey labels or general American whiskiana, know that you have a "patron saint." He is the famous American author and humorist, Mark Twain.

Virtually every school child in America knows about Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835 in Hannibal, Missouri. They have heard about his rise from Mississippi River pilot and journalist to America's most celebrated author. They know of his major characters, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. But they are not taught about Twain and whiskey. It is time to set that matter right.

More than any other writer in the Nation's history, Twain celebrated whiskey as the national drink of choice. He has been quoted saying: "*Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting over.*" But perhaps his most famous tribute to whiskey was Twain's rather elaborate spoof on a patriotic saying known to young and old of his time: "*Westward the course of empire takes its way....*"

Originally penned by an obscure American poet named George Berkeley in the early 1700s, the quote was picked up by Historian George Bancroft in 1840 and became a line stamped on the back cover of his highly popular (and still read) "History of the United States." In turn, the quote became the title and theme of a painting that adorns a stairway in the U.S.



"Westward the Course of Empire" by Emanuel Leutze, 1861

jug; because of the jug we were always sailing pretty close to the wind...."

When a friend sent him a case of whiskey, his thank-you note ran this way: *"The whiskey arrived in due course...; last week one bottle of it was extracted from the wood and inserted in me, on the installment plan, with this result: that I believe it to be the best, smoothest whiskey now on the planet."*

In his later years, while in England on a lecture tour, Twain remarked to companions that despite enjoying their company he badly missed the taste of Kentucky bourbon. To accommodate him, his friends imported six cases and even switched from Scotch to help him drink it. When he left England two cases remained. *"I will be back very soon,"* said he. *"Save them for me."* Though he never returned, the bourbon was left untouched until World War II when the supply was destroyed during a German bombing raid.

Merchandising Twain

During his lifetime, Twain lent his famous face and name to a wide range of products, including pens, shirts, and sewing machines. There was Mark Twain Tobacco, Mark Twain Cigars, and naturally -- Mark Twain Whiskey. One such brand was registered by Ralph W. Ashcroft of Brooklyn, New York, in 1907.

Other Twain-related whiskeys are shown here: Mark Twain's Private Stock, a pre-Prohibition jug with a drawing of Twain on the front. A label from Mark Twain Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey from a distillery identifies itself as the "Mark Twain Distilling Company" of Bardstown, Kentucky. This was a post-Prohibition brand showing a Mississippi riverboat on the label. There also was a Tom Sawyer Whiskey.

Twain's image is used in advertising even to this day. According to Jim Zwick, the guru of Mark Twain collectibles,

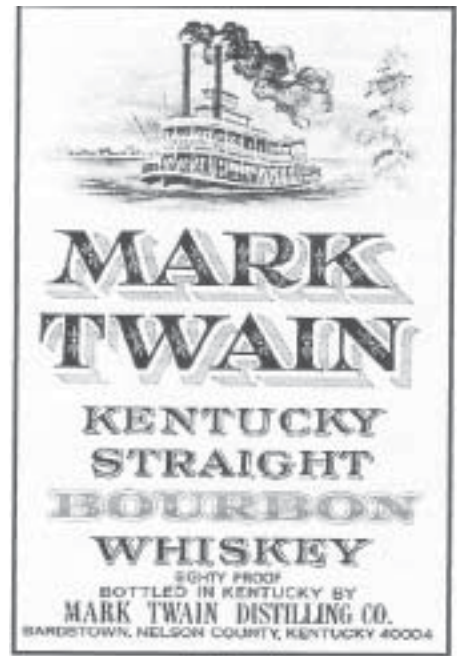


Mark Twain's Private Stock jug

products that have been sold by drawing on the author's popularity after his death are Cream of Wheat cereal, Bass Ale, billiard tables, writing paper, natural gas, dry-cleaning services, cars, real estate agencies, the Mark Twain Bank, and numerous hotels, restaurants, and other tourist attractions in places he lived or visited. The ads and other Twainiana have become popular collectibles. For example, eBay regularly offers more than 600 Twain items, including books, at auction.

The Old Crow Series of Ads

No whiskey, however, can match Old Crow for latching onto the aura of Mark Twain. In a series of ads that ran in national magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *LIFE* during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Twain is shown in various situations, including holding forth at a tavern, conversing with other notable contemporaries over a glass of bourbon, and as shown here, visiting the distillery



Label -- Mark Twain Bourbon

to view the product being made and, obviously, to sample some. In another ad he is shown visiting Klapproth's Tavern, an Elmira, N.Y., saloon, not far from Twain's spacious home. A barrel of Old Crow is being tapped on the bar and the author inquires of the bartender: *"Lou, which barrel are we using now?"*

Old Crow was created by a man credited with developing the first bourbon whiskey, James Crowe, a Scottish chemist and physician who settled in Kentucky. The brand probably was familiar to Twain and may well have been his whiskey of choice. But he would not have appreciated the Old Crow ad that showed him entertaining fellow writer, Bret Harte, at home.

The ad, shown here, depicts a mature, seated Twain while Harte is standing as if in the midst of a discourse. The scene could never have happened. Although Twain and Harte had been youthful friends, later in life they had become



Old Crow Ad -- Twain at the Distillery



Old Crow Ad -- Twain and Bret Harte

estranged. Twain publicly pilloried Harte in his autobiography, stating: "*He was bad, distinctly bad; he had no feeling and he had no conscience.*" In an 1878 private letter he wrote: "*Harte is a liar, a thief, a swindler, a snob, a sot, a sponge, a coward...*" Clearly Harte was never invited over to Twain's house to sip Old Crow or anything else.

The Mark Twain Decanters

From the 1950s to the 1970s when many whiskeys were merchandised in interesting, colorful, and collectible decanters, it was natural that Mark Twain would be a favored subject. As part of its series on famous Americans, McCormick Distilling of Weston, Missouri, in 1977 issued a 9 and 1/2 inch high decanter of the author wearing his typical white suit and sitting in a chair. The bottom is marked by Americana Porcelain as "Original Lionstone Sculptured Porcelain." In 1978 McCormick issued a miniature version of the same ceramic.

Another handsome tribute to Twain is a decanter issued by Marita Spirits Ltd. of Clifton, New Jersey. Issued in 1973, the porcelain container is entitled "Mark Twain's Missouri." Shown here, the colorful boat-shaped bottle is dominated on one side with depictions drawn from the author's life and writings. It features a portrait of the younger Twain along with the figures of his two creations, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Also pictured are his boyhood home in Hannibal, Missouri, a stern wheeler riverboat and a light house made famous by the author. It held Anniversary brand Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey, aged 12 years. A mark on the bottom identifies the potter as "Authentic Liverpool Porcelain." Liverpool has been a major ceramics center in England for several centuries.

Twain, with his eye for advertising, probably would have enjoyed seeing these decanters in his lifetime. After all, he is the one who said: "*I am proud to say that I lose my reason as immediately in the presence of a rare jug with an illustrious mark at bottom of it, as if I had just emptied that jug.*" With that statement the author admitted to being a "bric-a-brac" collector. Those words appear in his 1898 book, "A Tramp Abroad," written twelve years before his death in 1910. He was referring to German ceramics, which then were a major collecting craze of visiting Americans, but he might have felt the same about Lionstone and Liverpool Porcelain -- especially when they were celebrating him.

Look at the record: Twain the advocate



Old Crow Ad -- Twain at Klaproth's Tavern

of the role of whiskey in American history. Twain the enthusiastic consumer of bourbon. Twain the merchandiser of his image with whiskey. Twain the lover of jugs with marks. With that combination of attributes, what more do we need to anoint this great American author as fully meriting a citation as the "patron saint" of American whiskiana collectors?

Material for this article has come from a number of sources, not the least of which are Twain's own writings. For those interested in Twain collectibles, Jim Zwick's highly informative website is www.BoondocksNet.com.



The Lionstone Twain Decanter



Mark Twain's Missouri Decanter