

TALLY HO, THE WHISKEY!

By Jack Sullivan
Special to Bottles and Extras

Fox hunting once was defined by a critic as the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible. Nevertheless, the sport, which began in England, has had its adherents in the U.S., particularly on the East Coast. This is the story of two whiskey makers who not only rode to the hounds but also incorporated their horsey passion into their business. They were William Lanahan, Jr., of Baltimore, Maryland, and A. (Abraham) Smith Bowman of Fairfax, Virginia.

Hunter Baltimore Rye

William Lanahan Jr., during his lifetime, became the master of the Elkridge Hounds — a highly prestigious title for the scion of a whiskey-making family. Not that the founding father, William Sr., was shanty Irish when he founded the business. While there is scant information about his life, the elder Lanahan is said to have achieved considerable wealth and influence as a confectioner before the Civil War. During the early 1850s he began producing and selling a whiskey he first federally

registered in 1855 as Hunter Pure Rye and, afterward as Hunter Baltimore Rye. The brand would make the Maryland city almost synonymous with quality rye.

From the beginning, the Lanahan's whiskey exhibited aristocratic pretensions: The label and ads featured a man formally dressed in fox-hunting garb astride a horse, both set to gallop with the hounds [Figure 1]. Subsequent branding featured a horseman with top hat and the slogan: "The American Gentleman's Whiskey." [Figure 2] This "timber-topper" image clearly was attempting to appeal to the upper classes or people aspiring thereto. After his father's death in 1868, William Jr. took over the business and vigorously expanded whiskey-making operations.

In 1870, according to the earliest city

directories, Wm. Lanahan & Son was doing business at 20 N. Light Street. The company was located there in 1904 when the Great Baltimore Fire destroyed its building. It relocated at 205-207 Camden Street shortly thereafter, but obtained permission to rebuild at its old location after the widening of Light Street. In 1906 the firm resumed business in a newly constructed building at 20 Light. Its three story facility, known as the Lanahan Building, loudly announced its purpose with the word "whiskey" in prominent letters on its face. [Figure 3] It also proclaimed Wm. Lanahan & Son as "distillers." Jim Bready, the noted expert on Baltimore whiskey, insists that the Lanahans actually were "rectifiers," who took alcohol distilled by others, mixed it with other ingredients, bottled, labeled and marketed it.

Although the firm sold other whiskeys, among them "365," Bodega and Hunter Bourbon, Hunter Baltimore Rye was its flagship brand. Lanahan Junior embarked on a major advertising campaign, painting its logo and a mounted fox hunter on a wide range of locations. Its signs graced outfield fences in major league baseball parks in New York and Chicago as well as in Baltimore. Several years ago when a building was torn down at Broadway and 64th St. in Manhattan, the heart of the theater district, it uncovered a colorful ad for Hunter Baltimore Rye on a wall eight stories tall.

Lanahan's Marketing Genius

Unusual for the time, Lanahan employed a sales force of six men who traveled the country marketing the whiskey and signing up local distributors. In 1896, for example, Christy & Wise of Sansome St. in San Francisco advertised themselves as sole agents for Hunter Rye. As was common with brands seeking national attention, Lanahan issued a wide range of advertising items. Among them were a celluloid pin depicting a fox hunter [Figure 4] and a glass bottle in the shape of an oyster shell [Figure 5]. The company issued at least four varieties of paperweights. A scalloped one declared Hunter Baltimore Rye "unexcelled in purity." [Figure 6]

Never shy about extolling the virtues of



Figure 1: An early Lanahan ad.



Figure 2: Hunter Baltimore Rye label.

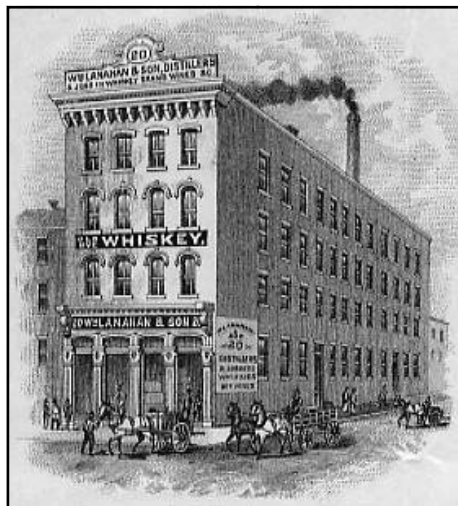


Figure 3: The Lanahan Bldg. at 20 Light Street.



Figure 4: Hunter Rye celluloid badge.



Figure 5: Hunter Rye glass oyster shell nip.

Figure 6: Hunter Rye paperweight.

his whiskey, Lanahan advertised Hunter Baltimore Rye as “The Perfection of Aroma and Taste...the Leading Whiskey of America.” Perhaps recognizing that its appeal as a “gentleman’s” drink might have a negative effect on potential female customers, the whiskey also was touted as “particularly recommended to women because of its age and excellence.” All this hype worked. Hunter became the largest selling rye whiskey in America. A 1912 book entitled, *Baltimore: Its History and Its People*, extolled the firm thus: “There is no article made in Baltimore that has done more to spread the fame of the city as a commercial centre than has Hunter Baltimore Rye.”

Others were not so sure of its benefits. In 1900 Robert M. La Follette, the governor of Wisconsin, was pressing his opposition controlled legislature to pass an elections reform bill. Action was blocked during a night session of “wild carousels and debauchery” not seen in a Wisconsin legislative hall even in frontier days. Mrs. La Follette later wrote:

The Assembly floor was a sight to behold. Just in front of the tier of desks was an empty bottle marked ‘Hunter’s Rye.’”

Hunter Rye Goes Global

Having conquered America, Lanahan looked abroad to expand his market.? In London in the program of a performance of “Sherlock Holmes,” Hunter Rye was advertised as “The Popular American Whisky.” (Brit spelling). It was the lone Yankee booze sold at the Duke of York Theater that season.

In 1902 the firm tried to get a concession from the imperial court of China. Letters to that effect exist from Wm. Lanahan & Son to Gen. Thaddeus S. Sharretts in Shanghai. Sharretts had been appointed by President

Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 to negotiate with the Government of China on increasing imports of U.S. goods. Lanahan’s plea may have paid off. A Hunter sign in Chinese recently sold on Ebay. Another Asian port in which the whiskey found a place was in Manila, the Philippines. A photo exists of American soldiers of the 8th U.S. Infantry, in the islands to put down an insurrection, swigging down quarts of Hunter Baltimore Rye during their off-duty hours.

With success came competition. Many other whiskeys began to call themselves Baltimore rye — even products made hundreds of miles from the Maryland city. Moreover, in 1895, the Shields-May Company of Cincinnati issued its “Hunter’s Own Bourbon” and Sherbrook Distillery of the same city had its “Hunter’s Lake” whiskey. From Lair, Kentucky, came the brand “Old Lewis Hunter Rye.” In likely reaction to these presumed copycats, Lanahan registered “Hunter Rye” with the government as a trademark in 1890 and again in 1905; and “Hunter Baltimore Rye” in 1898 and in 1908.

The Hunter Brand Survives

Wm. Lanahan & Son and its brand operated for 59 years, a long corporate life in the turbulent history of Baltimore whiskey-making. By the time the doors to the operation finally closed in 1919 with the coming of Prohibition, Lanahan family members had moved into the world of banking and high finance. One Lanahan became a governor of the New York Stock Exchange. Another achieved a measure of fame by marrying Scottie Fitzgerald, the only child of author F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Those Lanahans moved to Washington, D.C., where they were a glamour couple during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Hunter Rye brand survived Prohibition. The name eventually was bought by Seagram, one of the big whiskey cartels out of Canada. About the same time Seagram purchased the Wilson Distillery in Baltimore, producer of Atlas Bourbon. It merged the two operations and began making Hunter Rye at its Calvert distillery in Baltimore. When that facility subsequently was shut down, the Hunter-Wilson Distilling Company was relocated to Seagram’s Louisville plant. Apparently because “rye” was losing popularity, Hunter became a Kentucky bourbon.? It did not give up its “Tally Ho!” image, however. Its advertising featured a man on horseback clearing a jump with the slogan: “The first



Figure 7: 1930s pint bottle of Hunter Rye



Figure 8: 1942 national ad for Hunter Rye

one over the bar.”

Shown here is a post-Pro pint bottle with the horse and rider trademark [Figure 7]. As late as 1942 the brand was being advertised in national magazines, as shown here [Figure 8]. The brand subsequently faded from view and remains today only as a reminder of the whiskey-making “master of the hounds” that put Baltimore rye on the map.

The A. Smith Bowman Distillery

Meanwhile, in Fairfax County, Virginia, another fox hunting whiskey story was unfolding. It began with a Utopian dreamer named Dr. Carl Adolph Max Wiehle. In 1886 at a tax auction Wiehle bought land in Northern Virginia where the town of Reston now stands. Imbued with philosophical notions that community planning could result in ideal societies, Dr. Wiehle drafted plans for a model town and gave it his own name. The town of Wiehle was incorporated in 1897. But the doctor’s fellow Americans failed to rally to his vision and the place was never built.

Enter A. Smith Bowman, a farmer and fox hunter from Kentucky, whose family had originated in Virginia. He is shown here in his hunting togs [Figure 9]. In 1927 Bowman bought 4,000 acres of the never-established town and started a dairy. Calling

the operation Sunset Hills Farm, he also grew field crops, including corn. With grain prices depressed by bad economic conditions, the elder Bowman shrewdly decided to turn his corn into whiskey. Almost immediately after the repeal of Prohibition in 1934, he built a distillery just north of the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad tracks that ran along his property. Sales begin in 1937. He called his principal brand "Virginia Gentleman Bourbon," apparently looking for the same elite status for his whiskey that marked Hunter Baltimore Rye..

Like William Lanahan in Baltimore, Smith Bowman was active in local fox hunting. He was master of the hounds for the prestigious Fairfax Hunt Club and a large portrait of him still graces the club headquarters. In their labeling and advertisements Smith Bowman's brands both then and now tout their Virginia roots and riding to the hounds [Figure 10]. Hundreds of new and revived distilleries sprang up in the immediate aftermath of Repeal. Unlike most of them, however, this firm survived through the Great Depression, World War II, and the ruthless consolidation that extinguished hundreds of brands in the 1930s and after.

The Fox Hunter's Sons Take Over

The business eventually was put into the hands of Abraham's two sons, A. Smith Bowman Jr. and E. Delong Bowman [Figure 11]. As the profits of the distillery began to eclipse revenues for the dairy farm, the family added a second brand, Fairfax County Bourbon. A bottle is shown here with the photo of the original distillery in the background [Figure 12]. Fairfax Bourbon also featured a group of foxhunters on the label. Although sales of Bowman's brands originally were largely regional, they gradually began to attract a national customer base.

While none of its containers date any earlier than 1937, Bowman Distillery bottles, particularly minis like the ones shown here [Figure 13-14] are widely collected. David Spaid, who for many years produced the *Miniature Bottle Collector* magazine, was always keen to obtain the latest miniature editions from Bowman. He also featured them in his publication.

Move to Fredericksburg

Fairfax County lost its distillery in 1987 when the operation moved 60 miles south



Figure 9: A. Smith Bowman in huntsman attire.

Figure 10: Virginia Gentleman Bourbon label.



Figure 11: A. Smith Bowman Jr., left, and E. Delong Bowman.

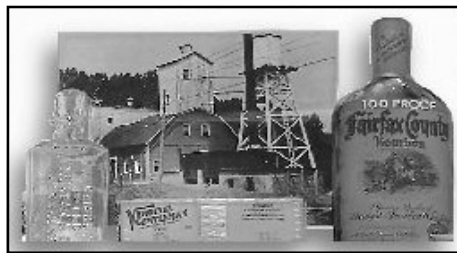


Figure 12: Fairfax County bourbon with photo of Reston distillery.



Figure 13-14: Two Virginia Gentleman minis.



Figure 15: The Bowman Fredericksburg facility



Figure 16: The Fox logo

to Fredericksburg, Virginia. In 1961 the Bowmans had sold all but the farm's main house and the distillery to Robert E. Simon, another visionary. He gave his initials to Reston and in a sense fulfilled Dr. Wiehle's dream. Simon's planned community was built and prospered. By the late 1980s the rapid growth of Reston and Northern Virginia had convinced Bowman's executives to relocate to less crowded climes.

The company purchased the former FMD Cellophane plant in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It had been vacant and deteriorating for years. The Bowmans restored the buildings, which held real architectural interest, and converted them to making and merchandising whiskey [Figure 15]. The plant produces other kinds of alcoholic drinks like gin and vodka, as well as a higher quality, 90 proof bourbon. The latter is sold under the Virginia Gentleman label and is popularly known as (what else) "The Fox" [Figure 16]. This whiskey comes in a custom bottle with a fox's head molded into the glass and has won the distillery national recognition for quality.

At the time the Bowmans moved in 1987, they could boast that it was the oldest family owned bourbon distillery in America. In 2003, however, the operation was sold to the Sazerac Company of Frankfurt Ky., who continue to produce Virginia Gentleman as a popular brand of blended whiskey.

William Lanahan and A. Smith Bowman, in adjoining states, operated in two different eras, one before Prohibition and one after. Both, however, made their love of fox-hunting an integral part of their whiskey merchandising and found that their symbolic cry of "Tally Ho!" brought fame and fortune.

Material for this article was drawn from a number of sources, including the current website of the A. Smith Bowman distillery. A key reference on Hunter Rye was an article by Baltimorean Jim Bready entitled "Maryland Rye: A Whiskey the Nation Long Fancied — But Now Has Let Vanish" that appeared in the Winter 1990 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*. Portions of this article previously have appeared in the *Potomac Pontil*.