

WATERFILL AND FRAZIER



Fig. 1: The Waterfill & Frazier distillery

How Mary Dowling **Outwitted** National Prohibition

by Jack Sullivan

Having tried for years to find a woman who played an important early role in making American whiskey, at last I have come across an extraordinary one. Not only did she own and run a major distillery in Anderson County, Kentucky, she figured out a way to stay in the liquor business after 1920 and, in effect, thumbed her nose at National Prohibition. Her name was Mary Dowling.

She was born Mary Murphy in 1858 the daughter of Irish immigrants who settled in Kentucky. Little of her girlhood or education is recorded until she reached the age of 17 when she married a man at least 17 years her senior. His name was John Dowling. They would have nine children, eight of whom would live to maturity.

Born in Ireland in 1841, her husband had come to the United States with a brother, Edward, and was already established in the Kentucky whiskey trade at the time of their marriage. John Dowling was a partner in a distillery in Anderson County, located on Bailey's Run about four miles south of Lawrenceburg Courthouse (**Fig. 1**). The facility had been built in 1810 and after several owners had come into the hands of J. M. Waterfill and



Fig. 2: The Waterfill and Frazier flask



Fig. 3: W&F backbar bottle

G.G Frazier during the Civil War. The partners produced a brand of whiskey they called "Waterfill & Frazier."

During the early 1880s, Dowling joined the original pair and the firm became Waterfill, Dowling & Company. At the time, the distillery was mashing 60 bushels a day and had a storage capacity for about 3,000 barrels for aging the whiskey. Over the next few years the facilities were greatly expanded. By 1890 mashing capacity had been increased to 125 bushels and warehouse capacity exceeded 9,000 barrels. Insurance records from 1892 noted that the entire dis-

tillery was ironclad with metal or slate roofs, including four bonded warehouses and one "free" (from Federal regulation) warehouse.

By 1890 the Anderson County distillery was mashing 250 bushels per day and had a warehouse capacity for 21,000 barrels. Over the years John Dowling increased his ownership of the facility and by the early 1900s had become the full owner, with brother Edward assisting him. They kept the "Waterfill & Frazier" name for their flagship brand (Figs. 2, 3) and also did business as the Pilgrimage Distilling Co., with offices in Cincinnati. About the same time, apparently recognizing the business acumen of his wife, John brought Mary into the company. Not long after, he died at age 61. His grieving widow inherited the firm and its management, becoming one of a handful of women in that era to run a major distillery.

During ensuing years, Mary Dowling became part of Kentucky whiskey lore because of her evident ability as a distiller. Even a major fire in 1904 that destroyed the plant did not deter her and the distillery was quickly rebuilt. When Mary's sons came to maturity, they too were brought into the company. As her reputation for good business sense rose in Anderson County, Mary followed other economic opportunities. She became a founding stockholder of the Anderson National Bank in 1907, capitalized at \$100,000. She was not, however, given a seat on the bank board.

Mary's success of almost two decades came to screeching halt with the imposition of National Prohibition. Federal records shown her withdrawing large quantities of whiskey from her bonded warehouse in the run up to the ban on alcohol. Some of this whiskey she is reported to have sold to those Kentucky distillers fortunate enough to be licensed to sell liquor for "medicinal purposes." Other stocks, it would appear, she was bootlegging. It was during this period, I assume, that she earned the reputation for being "mysterious" and caused at least one writer to term her "infamous."

Her illegal business worked for about four years until 1924 when revenue agents set a trap for the Dowlings, who were operating both out of their home and from an office next to two distillery warehouses, supposedly sealed, in which large quantities of liquor were stored. Federal agents arrived with two "turncoat" bootleggers in their automobiles, men who had done business with Mary in the past. The agents watched as the bootleggers entered the house, bought two sack loads of whiskey, each containing a dozen bottles. They watched as the sacks were placed in one of the autos, searched, and seized them, as their stool-pigeons reputedly "fessed up". The "sting" had worked. The agents then entered the Dowling home with search warrants.

In the basement they found and seized 478 sacks, each holding 12 quarts of whiskey, exactly like the ones deposited in the bootlegger's car. They confiscated the liquor and arrested Mary and three of her sons. She protested, according to court records, that the whiskey had been in the basement before Prohibition and was "to be for the use of family and guests, whom she entertained on a large scale."

The Dowlings were prosecuted for possessing, transporting, and selling intoxicating liquors in violation of the National Prohibition Act. Three years of court cases ensued in both Kentucky and Federal courts as the Dowlings through their attorneys contended that the search warrant was flawed, that criminal charges should be dropped and the seized liquor returned.

An initial trial was adjourned when Mary Dowling became sick. The indictment was renewed by authorities in 1925 and this time the Dowlings were convicted. Then fate intervened. Upon appeal of the conviction by the Dowlings to the U.S. Sixth Court of Appeals, it was found that the stenographer who had taken the record of the earlier trial had died and no one could read his shorthand notes. That was enough for the Circuit Court and they threw out the convictions.

By this time Mary Dowling had hatched a new -- and more successful -- business plan. About 1926 she hired Joseph Beam, one of Kentucky's premier distillers but now out of work, to disassemble the Waterfill & Frazier distillery, transport the pieces to Juarez, Mexico, reassemble it there, and resume making whiskey. Because Mexico had no prohibition, liquor production



Fig. 4: Photo of Joseph Beam

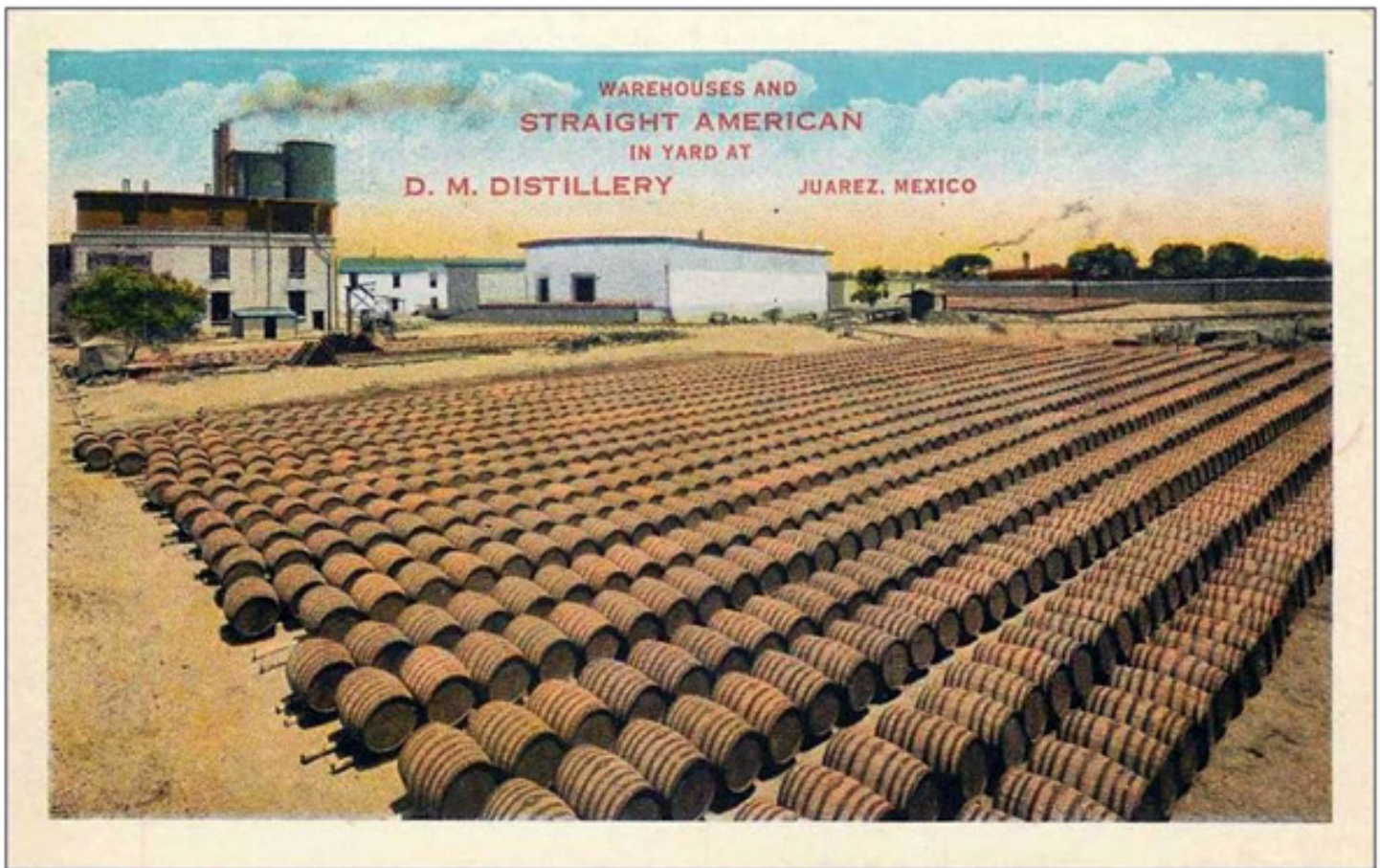


Fig. 5: Juarez Plant postcard

was completely legal. Beam (Fig. 4) was all too glad to oblige. With one or two of his seven sons, he decamped “South of the Border” for several years and established the facility shown here on a postcard (Fig. 5). They called it the “Dowling Mexican” (D.M.) Distillery.

The primary market for this Waterfill & Frazier whiskey was in Mexico and Central and South America. Compared to the local whiskeys, Mary Dowling’s purported “bourbon,” (actually a blend) was a quality product and highly successful. As a result a number of artifacts bearing Spanish language and theme, particularly tip trays, can be found (Figs. 6-8). Because Juarez is so close to the U.S. border, thirsty American tourists also could enjoy it and even, as an ad hinted (Fig. 9), bring a bottle or two

with them back to the U.S.

Evidence is that Mary Dowling found other ways to get her whiskey across the border to the American consumer. A letter exists to her from Julian “Pappy” Van Winkle, one of those lucky enough to hold a medicinal license. He complained that his sales reps were having trouble selling Kentucky-made Waterfill & Frazier Bourbon because of competition from other quarters selling her Mexican product. Van Winkle did not even hint at how Mexican whiskey might have made it onto the market in the United States. He knew Mary already knew.

In 1930, four years short of Repeal, Mary Dowling died and was laid to rest in Section 5 of the Lawrenceburg Cemetery in



Fig. 6: Tray # 1, Old man sipping on a Waterfill & Frazier



Fig. 7: Tray #2, Matadore and a bull whiskey advertising tray



Fig. 8: Tray #3 Bottle tray

Anderson County (Fig. 10). In the grave next to her is John Dowling whom she outlived by 27 years. The remaining buildings of the Anderson County distillery were allowed to decay as the forest grew up around them (Fig. 11).

After the end of Prohibition in 1934, John Dowling, one of Mary's sons, built a new distillery at Fishersville, just outside Louisville. Sometime later he sold the property to a Kentuckian who closed the facility but kept the Waterfill & Frazier brand name and label design, transferring both to Bardstown where he had another distillery. Thus some U.S. bottles and artifacts designated "Waterfill & Frazier" are post-Prohibition.

Although she died before witnessing Repeal, Mary Dowling had made whiskey history and shown the world that a woman could run a distillery successfully. Moreover, unlike most of the Kentucky's male distillers who quietly shut down, Mary had rebelled actively against the "Dry Laws" and after one attempt to circumvent them proved to be problematic, devised a second strategy that succeeded beyond all expectations. Define her as mysterious or infamous, as some have done, I call her a genius for having defied National Prohibition and outwitted it.

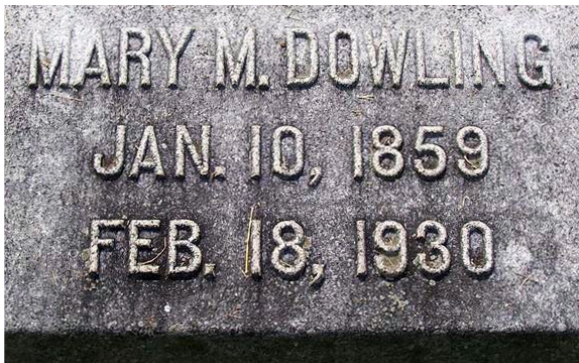


Fig. 10: Mary Dowling gravestone



Fig. 9: Waterfill & Frazier ad

Below - Fig. 11: Ruins of the distillery

