

A Big Man in Idaho Springs

Sol Weinberger left his mark on old whiskey jugs

By Jack Sullivan



Figure 1

Shown here behind the bar of his saloon, Solomon “Sol” Weinberger stood a diminutive five feet, three inches (Figure 1). His height had little to do with his reputation as a genial and civic-minded resident of Idaho Springs, Colorado. Shown here are four jugs in which he sold his whiskey throughout the region, all of them proudly emblazoned with the name of his hometown.

Each jug has a distinct personality. My guess is that an early one was the plain gallon “shouldered” jug, somewhat rustic and primitive in appearance (Figure 2). This ceramic recently sold at auction for \$322, indicating a healthy market for Western whiskey ceramics.

The next jug (Figure 3) still bears a stenciled label but adds a dark brown “Albany slip” top. That is followed by a more cleanly thrown container with a more defined stencil (Figure 4). The final jug (Figure 5) is the most finished, bearing an all-over white Bristol glaze, tapered neck and underglaze cobalt label. As the capacity of local potteries was improving, Weinberger was simultaneously improving his whiskey containers.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

The diminutive Sol was born in July of 1864 in a part of Europe then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the age of 17 he emigrated to the United States, arriving in June 1881 and settling in Cripple Creek, Colo. There Weinberger met his future wife, Anna Glauber, a woman who had immigrated to Colorado from Hungary. They would have three children.

After working in other saloons, Sol struck out on his own, opening his own drinking establishment. The 1900 census found him in Cripple Creek and recorded his occupation as “wholesale liquor.” A year or so later, for unexplained reasons, Sol moved his family 105 miles north to Idaho Springs, located in Clear Creek County, Colorado, about thirty miles west of Denver.

Idaho Springs had been the site of the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush, the state’s first gold strike. Findings of gold in stream beds were soon followed by discoveries of rich veins of gold in the rocks of the canyon walls on both sides of Clear Creek. Underground mining for valuable metals and minerals became the mainstay of the town long after the gold-bearing gravels were exhausted. As a result, Idaho Springs moved into the 20th Century with a healthy economy. An early photo captures dozens of wagons hauling ore and other goods down the town’s main drag, Miner Street (Figure 6).

In Idaho Springs, Weinberger opened a saloon and liquor store. A photo of the interior (Figure 7) shows him with four customers. Sol had installed or inherited a fancy carved bar with an unusual elaborate tower that held bottles of liquor. The usual foot rail and spittoons are in evidence and an array of glasses are reflected in the large mirror. From his facial expression and body language, Sol looks somewhat discomfited by having his picture taken. Called the Weinberger Liquor Co., the saloon and store stood downtown at 1630 Miner St.

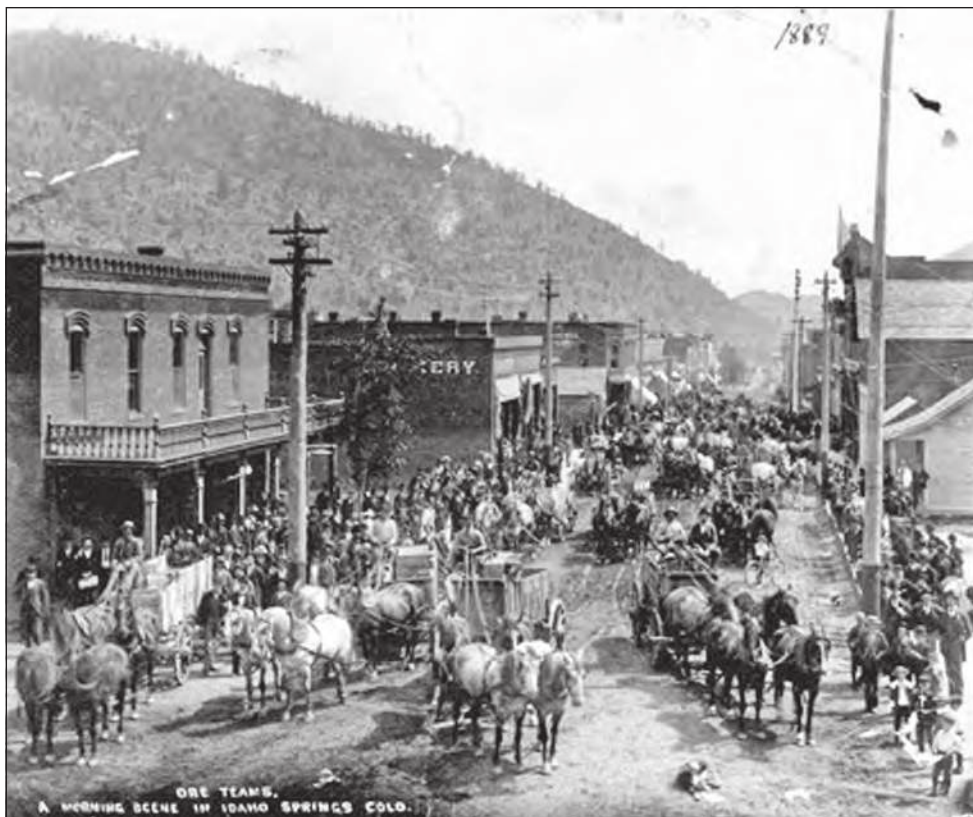


Figure 6



Figure 7

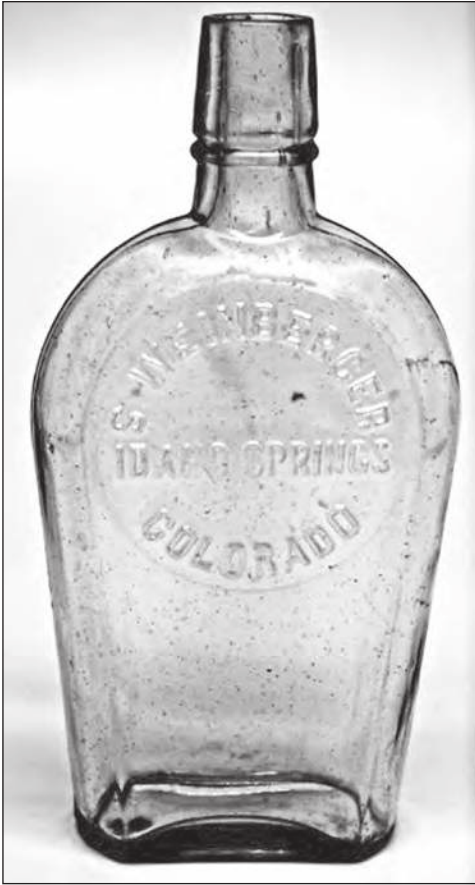


Figure 8



Figure 9

Sol also sold his liquor in smaller flasks, most of them embossed with his name and “Idaho Springs” (Figure 8). Recently a clear flask has come to light that contains a rare Weinberger label advertising “M.S. Bond” whiskey (Figure 9). This was a brand from T.B. Ripy Distilleries in Lawrenceburg, Ky., owned by one of the famous Ripy distilling family. Bringing liquor from distant places to Idaho Springs had been made possible because the Colorado & Southern line, financed by railroad millionaire Jay Gould, had reached Idaho Springs by 1877. An engine and tender have been preserved in a local museum (Figure 10).

Sol rapidly gained popularity in Idaho Springs as a saloonkeeper, providing strong drink to thirsty miners. He gave five-cent tokens to regular customers, (Figures 11,12), always a way to gain acclaim among the drinking public. The token would have been enough to buy a shot of bar whiskey. As this mining camp evolved into a town whose main street is now on the National Register of Historical Places, Weinberger became known for his strong support of progressive civic causes.

Although Idaho Springs continued to exhibit a buoyant economy into the 20th Century, Prohibition was making a statement in Colorado, first through local option laws and then a state law establishing a total ban on making or selling alcoholic beverages. On Jan. 1, 1916 — four years before National Prohibition — Colorado went “dry.” Sol had no choice but to shut down his saloon and liquor business. He wasted no time in making another move.

Taking his profits from his Idaho Springs saloon, Weinberger said goodbye to Colorado for “wet” California, settling in San Francisco. Not long after, with a relative of his wife, he opened a restaurant/saloon at 1510 Fillmore St. This was soon followed by a second eatery in which he appears to have been sole proprietor, one located at 1106 Market St.



Figure 10



LEFT COLUMN: Figures 11 and 12, the five-cent tokens Sol Weinberger gave out to frequent customers.

ABOVE: Figure 13, the Sol Weinberger gravesite outside of San Francisco, in the Hills of Eternity Memorial Park in Coma.

Sol Weinberger died at the age of 87 in June 1952. His small stature and labors in the hardscrabble American West clearly had not proved to be an impediment to longevity. His grave lies adjacent to his wife's in Hills of Eternity Memorial Park in Coma, outside of San Francisco (Figure 13). While his height may have been short, Sol's legacy is large in the jugs and bottles he left for posterity.

Note: The photo of Sol Weinberger in his saloon has fascinated me for showing the diminutive immigrant proprietor holding his own among the rough and tumble residents of an often rowdy Western mining town. The photo was displayed on the internet in 2014 by Sol's great-grandson,

Mark Weinberger, who ran a local history museum outside San Francisco. He in turn credited Marjorie Bell of the Idaho Springs Historical Society for finding the photo, dated circa 1915.

FYI: Local legend is that Idaho Springs' name derived from annual visits to the radium hot springs made by a Native American chief and his tribe who journeyed there each year from Idaho to bathe in the "magic healing waters."

Also: The 1969 film "Downhill Racer" portrayed an alpine ski racer from Idaho Springs, played by Robert Redford. A brief scene in the movie was shot on location in Idaho Springs.

