

The Sprinkles of Whiskey: *Distilling Their Story*

By Jack Sullivan



LIVING

on his farm in Liberty Township, Yadkin County, North Carolina, the elderly Hugh Sprinkle must have thought frequently about how distilling whiskey had impacted his life, the lives of his sons, and even the lives of his grandsons. It had been a bumpy, three-generation ride, but the Sprinkles had persevered.

Shown here (Fig. 1) with his wife, Martha, Hugh Sprinkle was born in 1883 into a family with deep roots in Yadkin County, located in the north-western Piedmont region of the state. The county was rife with distilleries, most of them small but legal, operations on farms that used homegrown corn and rye to make small quantities of whiskey for local sales. It is possible but not documented that Hugh's father had such an operation.

Hugh himself first appears in the public record during the Civil War. By the end of March 1862, the Confederacy was running short of soldiers. President Jefferson Davis proposed that all men between the ages of 18 and 35 should be enrolled in Confederate service, and 19 days later, the Confederate Congress passed the first conscription law in U.S. history. Sprinkle was 29, married, with two small children at home and like many Southern hill farmers without slaves, not passionate for Dixie's cause.

In 1863 a group of Yadkin men, among them Hugh Sprinkle, resisted being conscripted against their will and precipitated what came to be known as the "Bond School House Affair." In February, a group of resisters, numbers differ, gathered in a one-room log school building near a Quaker Meeting House. With the help of

the Quakers, they planned to hike over the mountains to Union territory. Alerted to this gathering, the local North Carolina militia rode up to arrest the resisters and gunfire broke out. Two members of the militia were killed, including a captain, as well as two of the resisters. Many escaped but a number were arrested and charged with murder, among them Hugh. A historical marker notes the spot. (Figs. 2, 3).

Friendly local officials wrested the resisters from military control and a firing squad, putting prosecution into civil justice hands. Bail was set at \$250 each, and a future trial date was set. It appears that the judge was willing to hold Sprinkle not guilty of the shootings and drop any charges if he joined the Confederate Army. The record shows that in November 1863, Sprinkle enlisted as a private in the 31st Infantry at Camp Holmes, North Carolina. Subsequent to his joining, the 31st fought at White Hall, then moved

to the Charleston area where it was engaged in various conflicts, including the battle at Battery Wagner. Ordered to Virginia, the regiment took an active part in the battles at Drewry's Bluff and Cold Harbor and later endured the hardships of the Petersburg siege north and south of the James River. In 1865 the 31st fought its last battle at Bentonville, North Carolina. The history of his unit would indicate that Sprinkle saw plenty of combat but managed to survive.

After the war, Hugh returned to Yadkin County and resumed farming. The 1870 U.S. Census recorded him there, living with his wife, Martha, and four children, including the eldest son, named Benjamin Franklin (known as "B.F.") Sprinkle. During ensuing years, Hugh



[Fig. 1] Hugh Sprinkle and his wife Martha.

ran a distillery in connection with his agricultural pursuits. A North Carolina directory listed the following: "Distillery (whiskey), Yadkinville, Hugh Sprinkle." Moreover, in the 1880 census B. F. Sprinkle, age 21, gave his occupation as "working in distillery."

The Sprinkles continued making whiskey without important intrusions until 1903. That year the North Carolina legislature, in an attempt to appease Prohibitionist forces, passed a law that required all distilleries to operate in incorporated towns. Some whiskey makers were forced out of business, and others took the expedient of incorporating. It appears that Hugh and his sons took that step. U.S. internal revenue documents for that year record the town of Sprinkle, N.C., where several distilleries were registered. Sprinkle was listed as having a post office. If it was like other distillery incorporations, the town elected a mayor and aldermen, wrote bylaws and ordinances, often with tongue in cheek.

By this time, the distilling torch had been passed to Hugh's sons, Benjamin and Hugh Clinton. Although evidence is scant, they appear to have expanded production and sales to some degree while still farming. In 1880 B. F. Sprinkle married a woman named Martha Gross of Yadkin County and they raised a family in neighboring Rockingham County. Shown here is a photo of the couple surrounded by six of their children (**Fig. 4**). All four boys pictured—Benjamin Jr., James T., Henry "Hence" and Hugh "Clint" Sprinkle—would follow in the family tradition of whiskey making.

Whatever distilling operations the Sprinkles engaged in after 1903 were terminated in 1909 when North Carolina dealt its whiskey-making industry a final blow by passing a statewide ban on all alcohol production. Soon after, the state legislature revoked the incorporation of "whiskey towns." Some displaced distillers moved to Virginia, where



B.F. SPRINKLE & FAMILY

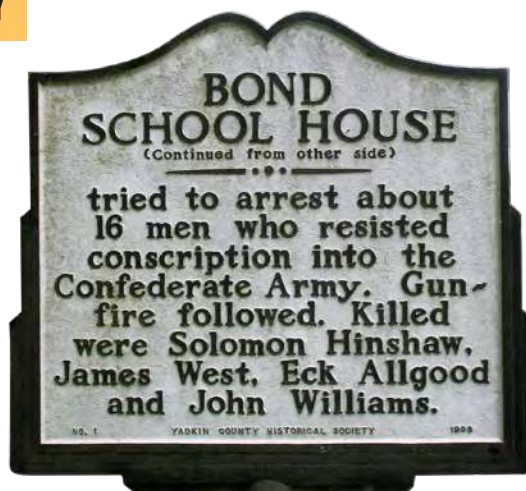
liquor was still legal. Others headed to Florida. The whereabouts of the Sprinkles immediately after 1909 is absent from the public record.

The first evidence I can find of the H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Company—named for Henry L. "Hence" Sprinkle, the son of B. F., was its 1912 incorporation in the town of Girard (now Phoenix City), located in Russell County, Alabama. The purpose of the business, as recorded with the state, was the "manufacture, purchase & sale of whiskey." During this period, the Sprinkles also appear to have operated a distillery in or near Pensacola, Florida. It was incorporated in 1914 with a capitalization of \$15,000. Unfortunately, Florida documents do not record the individual incorporators. The Sprinkle company letterhead claimed that this facility was the only distillery in Florida "operating both dryer and compressor, saving all the byproduct of the grain for feed" (**Fig. 5**).

[**Fig. 4**] B. F. Sprinkle and his wife Martha. Shown here is a photo of the couple surrounded by six of their children. All four boys pictured: Benjamin Jr., James T., Henry "Hence" and Hugh "Clint" Sprinkle would follow in the family tradition of whiskey making.

HISTORY

[**Figs. 2 & 3**]
Bond School
House historical
marker (front and
back)





SPRINKLE DIST.
JACKSONVILLE, FLA. MONROE, LA. PENSACOLA, FLA.

[Fig. 5] Illustration from a Sprinkle company advertisement showing one of the distilleries in Girard, Alabama or Florida operating both dryer and compressor, saving all the byproduct of the grain for feed.

DISTILLERIES

Although the Sprinkles almost certainly had relocated to Jacksonville several years earlier, their company first showed up in a 1916 local directory. That likely is the result of a gap from 1905 to 1916 in extant Jacksonville directories. When the company did appear, it was listed as located at 34 East Bay Street. Hence Sprinkle, Hugh's grandson, was recorded as the president and his brother, James T., as the secretary-treasurer.

By the following year, a major change had taken place in the management. Now James T. Sprinkle was named as President, Hugh Clinton Sprinkle was vice president, and B. F. Sprinkle was secretary and treasurer. B. F.'s third son, Benjamin Franklin Jr., was working as a clerk. According to the directory, James was residing in Pensacola, where I surmise that he was in charge of the distilling operations and that the other Sprinkles were managing sales operations at the family liquor store in Jacksonville, where the three were recorded living. The following year saw further changes in the directory entry. James was still the president, but now B. F. was vice president, Hugh Clinton was secretary-treasurer, and Benjamin Jr. was the manager of the H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co. James was still living in Pensacola and B. F. was recorded living in Reidsville, North Carolina.

Because of its proximity to rail lines up and down the East Coast, Jacksonville had become a hub of whiskey dealers, many of them displaced from other states and now emphasizing mail-order sales. Some 77 were listed in the 1916 city directory. Among them was I. C. Shore, who arrived from North Carolina via Virginia. Another was John Casper, originally from North Carolina, who

ADVERTISING

SPECIAL OFFER

2.25 GALLON EXPRESS PAID

SPRINKLE 100 PROOF CORN WHISKEY

Made from the most Select Grain. ABSOLUTELY PURE.

The offer is made in order to introduce our Corn Whiskey more thoroughly, and meet the requirements with 10 Good Names.

Wholesale and Retail Dealers will charge for \$2.50 and \$4.00 a Gallon.

This is our original NORTH CAROLINA STYLE CORN Whiskey direct to you, just like it comes from the Distillery.

Send Us \$2.25 With 10 good names of persons who you trust in our name, and we will send you 1 Full Gallon, Express paid, of our Extra Straight Corn Whiskey, absolutely pure, 100 Proof, just like it comes from the Distillery. *Guaranteed to please you or not cost you One Cent.*

This is Special Offer in order to get new customers, and the 10 names must accompany order. We want to convince you our goods are superior in quality, and better price than you can get elsewhere. Cut out this Ad. and return with order.

H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co.
Order from Nearest Point.
Jacksonville, Fla. Girard, Ala. Pensacola, Fla.

1915 - Greenville

PURE EXTRA STRAIGHT SPRINKLE'S WHISKEY

Absolutely Pure Straight 100 Proof Whiskey is what you want! This is what our Extra Straight Pure Corn Whiskey is. It is the only distilling in its original richness in body and strength, which is unsurpassed by any. Contains no Neutral Spirits, Coloring or Foreign Matter whatever. Beware of Imitations marked "Whiskey". More than 100,000 Pleased Customers on these Goods. In order to prove their popularity to you we make the following Limited Special Offer:

2 full Gallons for \$3.90, Express PAID

We only ask a Trial at this Special Offer price. If not found equally as represented, and you are not more than pleased with the superior quality, return any amount wanted and we will refund your money as cheerfully as received.

We refer you to the Atlantic National Bank of our city.

This Offer may not appear again, so order today.

H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co.
334 East Bay St.
Jacksonville :: Florida

1910 - Atlanta

Sprinkle's Square and HONEST PURE North Carolina WHISKEY

2-1 GALLON BOTTLES \$3.65 **3-1 GALLON BOTTLES \$5.25**

We Pay Express

Now I understand that this is a Pure, Plain Old North Carolina Whiskey that we have been making, selling and bottling to you for years past in our name.

Sprinkle's Square and Honest North Carolina Whiskey is not a blend or compound of mixed and modified liquors of artificial flavoring, but is Straight, Standard, Full Proof Natural Flavor Corn Whiskey presenting to original richness as you from the still and guaranteed by us under the National Pure Food Law.

We want you to try our Square and Honest Corn. Put the goods to any test and if you are not satisfied that they are better than what you have been buying from your jobbers and dealers, we will refund your money.

We refer you to the Atlantic National Bank of this city.

FREE! Order Today—Return this ad., as it may not appear again, and receive sample bottle of Sprinkle's Bottled in Blend Whiskey, 4 years old, FREE with your first order.

WE GUARANTEE CASH DELIVERY and PAY EXPRESS at the following prices:

4 quarts - \$2.25 2 1/2 gallon bottles - \$3.65
12 quarts - \$6.00 3 1/2 gallon bottles - \$5.25
4 1/2 gallon keg - \$7.75

H. L. Sprinkle DISTILLING COMPANY
336 East Bay Street
JACKSONVILLE
Florida

1910 - Valdosta

100 PROOF WHISKEY

Sprinkle's Absolutely Pure N. C. Whiskey

2 FULL GALLONS \$3.90

Finest, Honest 100 Proof Whiskey, in 2 Glass Jugs

WE LOSE \$1.00

WE PAY EXPRESS CHARGES

Now I understand that this is a Pure, Plain Old North Carolina Whiskey that we have been making, selling and bottling to you for years past in our name.

Sprinkle's Square and Honest North Carolina Whiskey is not a blend or compound of mixed and modified liquors of artificial flavoring, but is Straight, Standard, Full Proof Natural Flavor Corn Whiskey presenting to original richness as you from the still and guaranteed by us under the National Pure Food Law.

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H. L. Sprinkle DISTILLING CO.
336 East Bay St.
JACKSONVILLE, FLA.

1910 - Valdosta

[Fig. 6] Five H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co. newspaper advertisements. "This is the original NORTH CAROLINA CORN shipped direct to you, just like it comes from the Distillery" and "Sprinkle's Square and HONEST PURE North Carolina WHISKEY." Express PAID to your Door.

changed the name of his firm from The Casper Co. to Atlantic Distilling in Jacksonville. One Sprinkle ad seemed pointed at Casper, who was something of a scoundrel, emphasizing that their company had always advertised under the Sprinkle name: “Our reputation is so well known that we never have to change our name.” As shown in a 1915 ad, the firm also stressed its North Carolina roots, saying: “This is the original NORTH CAROLINA STYLE CORN, shipped to you just as it comes from the Distillery” (Fig. 6).

As shown here, much of Sprinkle’s whiskey was sold in gallon jugs with the embossed motto, “Sprinkle Whiskey Wants Your Business” (Fig. 7). Three cities appeared on each bottle. Early jugs bear the Girard address. Clear quarts (Fig. 8) were also used. After Alabama went dry, the Sprinkles moved that retail outlet to Monroe, Louisiana. The Monroe outlet appeared on clear quarts. The Sprinkles also used ceramic jugs to bottle their whiskey (Fig. 9). In addition, the company became known for issuing a variety of small ceramic mini-jugs, many of them bearing the name of the family’s flagship brand, “Ridgeway Straight Corn Whiskey” (Fig. 10).



[Fig. 7 Left] Sprinkle’s whiskey was sold in gallon glass jugs with the embossed motto, “Sprinkle Whiskey Wants Your Business.” Three cities appeared on each jug.

[Fig. 8 Right] Sprinkle’s whiskey was also sold in clear fluted quarts, this example embossed, “One Qt. Sprinkle Whiskey Wants Your Business Jacksonville, Fla., Pensacola, Fla., Girard, Ala.”

Despite their exile from their old home place in North Carolina, the Sprinkles seem to have found success in a short time with their Florida base. Not only did the company provide its customers with whiskey, it also bottled and sold its own brand of beer, Sprinkle’s “Dixie Delight.” As shown in an ad here (Fig. 11), the company emphasized that its brew was “The Good Wholesome Brand” and suggested that “All people should drink good wholesome beer daily with their meals.” This merchandising mix of liquor and beer is itself enough to set the Sprinkles apart. At this time, a feud was raging between distillers and brewers, with some of the latter blaming the Prohibition movement on the liquor industry, apparently in the hope, fruitless as it turned out, that beer would escape a national alcohol ban.



[Fig. 11] Sprinkle’s Dixie Delight Beer advertisement.

The Sprinkles’ advertising throughout the South, both for whiskey and beer, emphasized mail-order sales, suggesting buying by the case. The messages were carried in their newspaper ads, such as this example from a 1915 Atlanta Constitution (Fig. 12) and on colorful celluloid pocket mirrors (Figs. 13, 14). While mail order was a lucrative trade, it was not without its problems. Although Georgia had voted itself “dry,” the law allowed residents to have limited amounts of alcohol shipped to them monthly from out of state. Frequently, however, local authorities would seize such shipments and arrest the express agents. As a result, express companies often refused to carry “wet” goods into dry states. In 1913 the Sprinkles took a proceeding to the Georgia Supreme Court to force the Southern Express Company to carry their liquor to its destination. Moreover, in 1916 B. F. Sprinkle Jr. was forced to apologize for a situation in which a liquor shipment had been sent to an individual identified as a minor. He promised to reimburse the 70 cents in express charges if the whiskey was returned for reshipment to an adult.

Because of their struggles with “dry” forces in North Carolina, the Sprinkles must have been keenly aware of the tightening

noose of National Prohibition around the liquor industry. With the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, the H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Company shut down its distillery and sales offices. According to Sprinkle descendants, the family had a stock of liquor when America went dry but was allowed to book passage on ships and take their wares abroad to sell. After their supplies were gone, B. F. and Hugh Clinton began investing in gas stations in North Carolina. In the 1920 U.S. Census, the occupation of James T. Sprinkle was listed as “green grocer” in Pensacola.

The man who had launched the family into distilling, Hugh Sprinkle, died in 1914. B. F. Sprinkle died in 1936, living long enough to see Prohibition repealed. Shown here is a Sprinkle family burial plot with its identifying marker

GLASS



located in Greenview Cemetery, Rockingham County, North Carolina. (Fig. 15). B. F.'s grave is in the foreground. Around him are other family members, including Hence and James. Thus ended a whiskey dynasty that fought the good fight against the forces of Prohibition and, although losing in the end, prospered for a time and left behind the bottles and other artifacts by which we can remember the Sprinkles of whiskey.

Note: My gratitude goes to two individuals who have a kinship with the Sprinkle family. A direct descendant, Margaret Sopp, keeps a website devoted to the Sprinkles. The other contributor, Wanda Sprinkle, is related through her husband. Both have provided important information and photos for this profile. Their contributions include the family pictures, the color illustration of the distillery, and the ad for Dixie Delight beer.



[Fig. 9] At least two types of stoneware whiskey jugs were made for H. L. Sprinkle Distillery. Pictured is a two-gallon, cream-colored jug with a brown cone top and advertising in a rectangular border that reads, "We Make A Specialty of Corn Whiskies At Best Prices H. L. Sprinkle Dist. Co. Jacksonville, Fla."



[Fig. 10] H. L. Sprinkle Dist. Co. also issued a variety of small ceramic mini-jugs, many of them bearing the name of the family's flagship brand, "Ridgeway Straight Corn Whiskey."

JUGS

[Fig. 12 Right] H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co. advertised throughout the South, both for whiskey and beer, emphasizing mail-order sales. The *Atlanta Constitution*, March 12, 1915



[Fig. 13] Oval H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co. give-away pocket mirror.

MIRRORS



[Fig. 14 Below] Circular H. L. Sprinkle Distilling Co. give-away pocket mirror.



[Fig. 15] Sprinkle family burial plot in Greenview Cemetery, Rockingham County, North Carolina. B. F.'s grave is in the foreground. Around him are other family members, including Hence and James.

