

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

January 2014

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January 28th Meeting

The January meeting will feature our annual club contest for the best bottle, go-with, dug item, and shard acquired during 2013.



In the December *Pontil* we attributed the wood-cased ink bottle shown above to the S. Silliman Company of Chester, Massachusetts. Ed Faulkner reminds us that Chester is actually in Connecticut. The Faulkners describe the company correctly in their reference book.



Lee Shipman shares the cartoon showing her late husband Karl as a bottle digger to remind everyone to bring their digging finds including shards, whole bottles, and go-withs to the January meeting for our annual contest. We are also interested in seeing bottles and go-withs that were purchased during the past year.

We will collect annual dues of \$10 per person or family at our January meeting. If you are unable to attend, **please send dues to Potomac Bottle Collectors, c/o Jim Sears, PO Box 370, Garrett Park, MD 20896**

Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month January-June, October-November; picnic in September.

President: Andy Goldfrank

Vice President: Al Miller

Secretary: Jim Sears

Treasurer: Lee Shipman

Pontil: Jim Sears (email: searsjim@usa.net, PH: 609/472-5473) &

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Mystery Man Joe Rickey Gave His Name to the DC Cocktail

By Jack Sullivan

[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

“Colonel” Joseph K. Rickey (**Fig. 1**), after whom the gin rickey cocktail was named, became a well-known Washington lobbyist and eventually the owner of the National Capitol’s most famous saloon, but myths and contradictions in biographies leave many questions unanswered about this flamboyant figure.



Fig. 1: Joseph K. Rickey

Even Rickey’s birthplace and full name are unclear. According to a family website, he was the fourth son in a family of 13 children born to Dr. Joseph Rickey of Pennsylvania and Elizabeth McCleary, an immigrant from County Cork Ireland. The family history puts his 1842 birthplace as Keokuk, Iowa, but his front page obituary in the New York Times said he was born in a small town in Wisconsin and only several years later did the family move to Keokuk. The “K” in his middle name variously has been given as Kyle, Kerr, and Karr.

The several accounts of Rickey’s life also differ on where he spent his early life. His obituary stated that the family moved to Fulton, Missouri, near St. Louis, when he was a young man. A family history suggests that early on he was gambling on riverboats plying the Mississippi river. Another account has him as a law student in Iowa. While there is agreement that he served as a soldier in the Civil War, there is disagreement on which side. One history has him as a private in the 2nd Iowa Infantry. Other accounts have him joining the Southern cause. According to family legend, although his father and two brothers served in the Union Army, Joe Rickey stepped off a side-wheeler somewhere in the South and joined the Confederacy.

There is unanimity that sometime during the war, he met a Miss Sallie Howard who was attending a Missouri convent school where his sister was a fellow student. They

were married soon after the end of the war and had five children. Rickey’s occupations over time seemed to have been gambling, operating a brokerage business and lobbying the Missouri State Legislature in Jefferson City, the capital. From a Rickey family member: *Cousin Joe soon found that silently guiding the destinies of legislatures was not an unpleasant business, and could be pleasantly lucrative. The main thing was to know the men who controlled the votes. This meant eating, drinking, laughing, and gambling with them; all things that suited his fancy and in which he excelled. Politicians, like most other people, liked a good story, and Joe already had a reputation as a fluent raconteur.*

Recognizing his own superior talents as a lobbyist, Rickey determined to take them to the Nation’s biggest stage, Washington, D.C. He apparently came during the early-1880’s bearing the title “Colonel,” a rank he did not achieve in the Civil War but apparently bestowed on him because of service to the Governor of Missouri. Among his clients were Western silver interests. Before long Rickey was as popular in Washington, D.C. as he had been in Missouri. His favorite “watering hole” was Shoomaker’s Saloon, called “Shoo’s” by Washington insiders (**Fig. 2**). It was located a few doors from the National Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue and a fixture on the city’s notorious “Rum Row.”



Fig. 2: Shoomaker’s Saloon

Journalist Raymond Clapper described the saloon: “There was no more disreputable looking bar in town. The place was never dusted. Cats crawled over the rubbish. A stale smell of beer greeted customers at the door. The dingy walls were hung with faded cartoons and yellowed newspaper clippings.” Some called it “Cobweb Hall.” Nevertheless, it was the place where senators, Congressmen, Supreme Court justices, cabinet members, generals, newsmen, and other Washington power brokers met regularly. Author and philosopher Elbert Hubbard wrote a fancy monograph on the experience of having a drink there (Fig. 3).

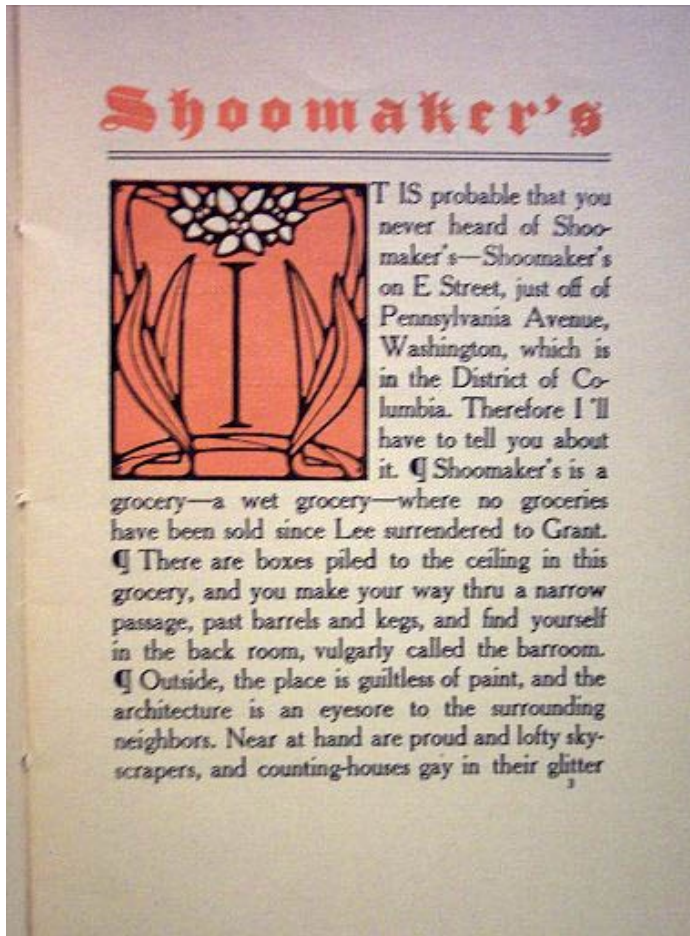


Fig. 3: Elbert Hubbard monograph

When Shoomaker's came up for sale about 1883, Joe Rickey bought the place and hung out there as the genial host. Although stories differ widely as they do for many events dealing with this character, evidence suggests that Rickey himself first conceived his signature drink in the typically hot, DC summer season. His bartender, George Williamson, prepared it to the Colonel's instructions, and the first “Rickey” was a rye cocktail made with Shoomaker's own house brand whiskey. That same rye was sold “over the bar” in embossed flasks, both half pint and pint (Figs. 4, 5). Note in the label close-up shown here that the saloon is jokingly referred to as “Shoomaker's Famous Resort” (Fig. 6). It was estimated that the profits from the saloon were not less than \$50,000 a year, more than \$1,100,000 in today's dollar.



Fig. 4: Shoomaker's half pint flask



Fig. 5: Shoomaker's pint flask

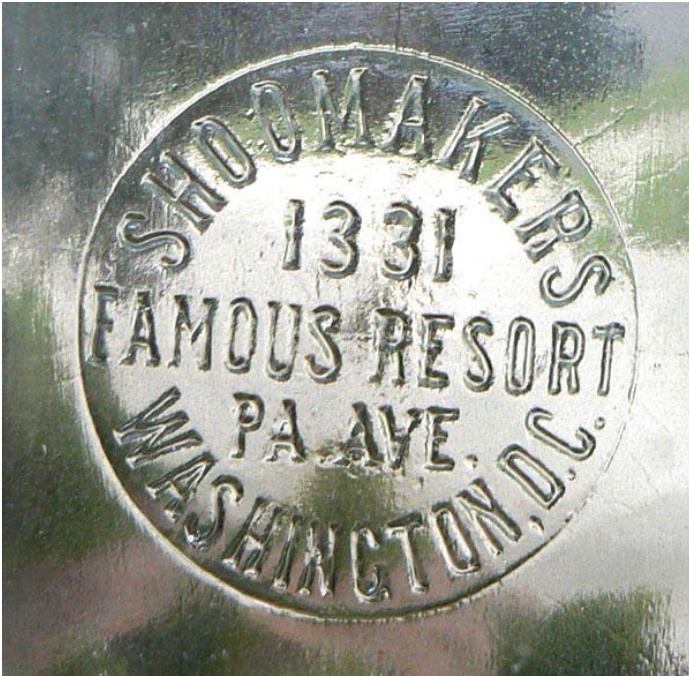


Fig. 6: Shoomaker's pint flask, close-up

Very soon, gin would eclipse rye as the favored liquor for the cocktail and the "gin rickey" was born, a concoction that spawned a myriad of cocktails called "rickeys". Before long Colonel Joe publicly disavowed that he had invented the gin drink connected with his name. In an interview published in the New York Telegraph, he was quoted to say: *"The drink named after me was always made by the experts in Shoomaker's from limes thereafter, and soon became popular. Washington during a session of Congress, is filled with people from all parts of the country....Only here in New York was it perverted and made a thing of shame. Here they make it with gin, which is a liquor no gentleman could ever bring himself to drink. In fact, the gin rickey is about the only kind known in this city and the average barkeeper looks surprised if you ask him for one made with rye whisky."*

Despite his earlier extensive rejection of the gin rickey, in 1899 Joe applied for and was granted a trademark for the name "Rickey" on both whiskey and gin. The trademark included a picture of Rickey and his autograph, as shown here earlier. It clearly was the Colonel's effort to capitalize on the cocktails using his name. By this time he also had moved from DC to New York, living at 24 West Twenty-Fifth Street.

As in the new century arrived, Rickey, now in his 60s, was in increasingly bad health. His doctors advised against exertion. Ever the gregarious bon vivant, however, he insisted on a daily walk on Broadway and became a familiar figure at its top hotels. According to the New York Times, on April 23, 1903: *"...He started for a walk, visited the Hoffman House and was standing at the corner of Broadway and Twenty-fifth Street watching the crowd. The Times described what happened next: "Suddenly he reeled and clasped one hand to his breast. Policeman Riordan ran to his assistance and escorted him home. He died soon afterwards. It is said he had been despondent recently."*

That last sentence related to the findings of the New York City's Coroner's Office that Rickey had committed suicide. The coroner after an autopsy stated that he had found a small amount of carbonic acid in Rickey's stomach. He concluded that the deceased had taken the acid with whiskey. Because of the condition of Rickey's heart, the combination had been enough to kill him. Although the family objected strenuously to the diagnosis that Rickey had taken his own life, the verdict was never reversed. His body was returned from New York City to Fulton, Missouri, for burial. Even in death Rickey left key questions unanswered.

Shoomaker's survived Rickey's demise. When the Colonel purchased the saloon he hired as managers the bartender, Williamson, and August W. Noack Jr. They bought it and apparently moved the establishment to a location close by at 1331-1333 E. Street N.W. or, as one observer has suggested, the saloon stayed but the address was altered by the city (Fig. 7). Some Shoomaker's flasks bear the E Street address (Fig. 8). While keeping the original name, the partners had a new emphasis: wine, champagne and cigars. They also sold whiskey, advertising in Washington's establishment newspapers like the "Post" (Fig. 9) and the city's "Negro American" (Fig. 10). When the U.S. Congress voted the District "dry", Shoomaker's served drinks until the stroke of twelve on October 31, 1917, and opened the next day as a soft drink establishment.



Fig. 7: Shoomaker advertisement with E Street address



Fig. 8: E Street address on pint flask



Fig. 9: Rye advertisement from *Washington Post*

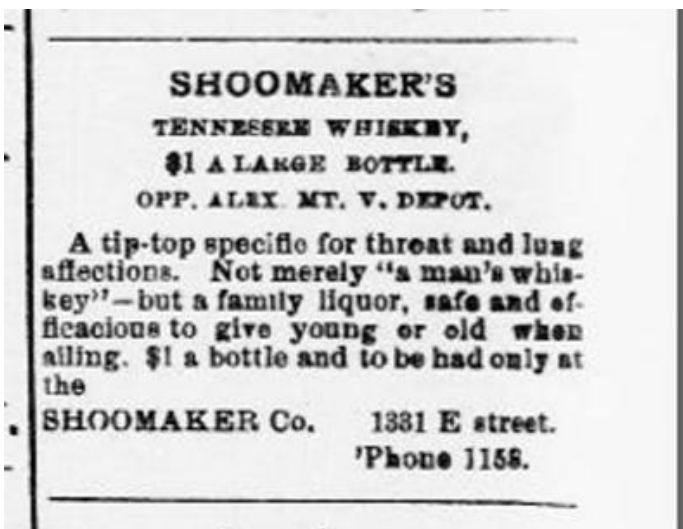


Fig. 10: Whiskey advertisement from *Negro American*

As for Joe Rickey, an eloquent tribute came from Al Smith, future governor of New York and later a Presidential candidate. Smith told the Times: *"He was the soul of honor. He was square as a die, and if you were his friend you could command his last dollar. He has given away a fortune to those he deemed in need."* Perhaps an even more apt memorial came from a Midwestern newspaper: *And as long as there is thirst and limes, or lemons and gin, so long will the Honorable Joe Rickey be remembered ...and his famous beverage tickle the palates of discriminating citizens.*

Today the gin rickey is the official cocktail of Washington, D.C., by order of the City Council. The recipe for making one: Into a tall glass, 1.5 oz. of gin, .5 oz of fresh lime juice, add soda water, and stir. Garnish with lime wedge and/or sprig of mint (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: Gin Rickey

Note: The photos of the Shoomaker bottles are through the courtesy of Dr. Richard Lillienthal.

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

Feb. 1 Rome, GA
 Feb. 2 Manville, NJ
 Feb. 9 Milwaukee, WI
 Feb. 14-15 Columbia, SC
 Feb. 15 Columbus, OH
 Feb. 15-16 Las Vegas, NV
 Feb. 21-22 Aurora, OR
 Feb. 22 Grand Rapids, MI
 Feb. 23 Enfield, CT
 Feb. 28 Phoenix, AZ
 March 7-8 Chico, CA
 March 15 Athens, GA
 March 16 St. Louis, MO
 March 28-29 Morro Bay, CA
 March 30 Enfield, CT
 April 5 Daphne, AL



March 2 Baltimore, MD
 March 14-15 Deland, FL
 March 16 Flint, MI
 March 23 Bloomington, MN
 March 30 Brewerton, NY
 April 5 St. Clairsville, OH
 April 6 Dover, NH

August 1-3, 2014 FOHBC National Show in Lexington, KY