

A Bitters Bottle, the “Sylph,” and a President

Special to the Potomac Pontil
by Jack Sullivan

The exposure of the Great Whiskey Ring of 1875 rocked Washington D.C. and indeed the entire country like few national scandals before or since. On May 10, 1875, Federal agents stormed into the offices of nine St. Louis distilleries, seized illicit whiskey and box loads of records, and arrested their proprietors. Simultaneous arrests occurred in Cincinnati, Milwaukee and Chicago. Ultimately, indictments were issued against 240 whiskey-makers, government officials and others; 110 were found guilty. Most of them went to jail. Thus ended a massive scheme to defraud the U.S. of excise taxes on distilled spirits.

At this time when politically related scandals seem to proliferate – Abramoff, DeLay, “Duke” Cunningham, “Scooter” Libbey, etc. – we are reminded of such historical incidents. Indeed, three elements illustrate the multiple dimensions of the The Great Whiskey Ring: Kelly’s Old Cabin Bitters, Louise Hawkins, a.k.a. “The Sylph,” and President Ulysses S. Grant.

Kelly’s Old Cabin Bitters

Shown at left is a bottle shaped to look like a two story log cabin with a peaked roof. It is a Kelly’s Old Cabin Bitters. Examples have sold to bottle collectors in recent months at prices approaching \$2,000. Kelly was James B. Kelly of New York, a distiller, who is shown below on a self-produced “proprietary” revenue stamp. This is an ironic touch since it was an attempt to evade federal revenues on alcohol that lay at the heart of the Great Whiskey Ring.



Kelly also had a St. Louis address and a partnership there with a man named John H. Garnhart (sometimes spelled “Garnhard”). Garnhart began in a wholesale liquor business in about 1854. He was a “rectifier” who took raw spirits, added other ingredients and sold them. Among the spirituous products he apparently concocted with Kelly’s collaboration was Old Cabin Bitters. When the May 10 raid occurred,

Garnhart was one of those arrested. His company disappeared forever from city directories. For one year, Adler, Furst & Co. was listed in St. Louis directories as “successor to J. H. Garnhart & Co.”, then it too disappeared.

My research has failed to determine the fate of Kelly but his Cabin Bitters brand vanishes about the same time. Through years the figural log cabin bottle has engendered fakes and repros, including one in milk glass shown at right.

Louise Hawkins, The Sylph

The “femme fatal” of the Great Whiskey Ring was a St. Louis woman of easy virtue named Louise “Lu” Hawkins, who ultimately would become known to millions of Americans simply as “The Sylph.” This was the name given to her by one of the conspirators, General Orville E. Babcock, who also happened to be a White House aide, personal secretary to President Ulysses S. Grant

General Orville E. Babcock (right)
Louise Hawkins, the Sylph (below)



A contemporary writer described Ms. Hawkins this way: “Her form was petit and yet withal, a plumpness and development which made her a being whose tempting luscious deliciousness was irresistible....She was the essence of grace, distilled from the buds of perfection, and with a tongue on which the oil of vivacity and seduction never ceased running; she was indeed a sylph and a siren, whose presence was like the flavor of the poppy mixed with the perfumes of Araby.” While she might not have lived up to this extravagant description, one of her few extant likenesses (at left) indicates a certain appeal.

Certainly General Babcock found her enchanting. In St. Louis to collect a share of kickbacks from local whiskey men, he met her through a friend and the two almost immediately began an affair which eventually all America knew about. Babcock’s visits to St. Louis to pick up graft payments for himself and, some have alleged, the Republican Party, became more frequent. Back in Washington, he repeatedly referred to “The Sylph” in messages to cohorts that eventually became public through court records and titillated a Nation.

Because Babcock was a close colleague of Ulysses S. Grant, the press and public began to ask: “What did the President know and when did he know it?” – the same questions that later would fuel speculation about Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal.

Grant Testifies



Leader of the victorious Northern armies in the Civil War and a fascinating figure of American history, Grant was in his second term as President when the scandal broke. His Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin H. Bristow discovered that in St. Louis alone at least \$1.2 million in tax revenues annually were not accounted for. The total cost of the scam to

the U.S. approached \$3 million a year at a time when fifty cents would buy a hefty meal. Knowing that the corruption involved Republic political appointees, Bristow discussed the investigation with Grant who told him to proceed with vigor without regard to party labels or government positions.

Grant’s response likely occurred before he was aware of Babcock’s involvement in the Great Whiskey Ring. Always loyal to his staff, Grant later agreed to be deposed in the Babcock’s case. He was willing to go to St. Louis to testify but was persuaded by his advisers to answer questions from prosecution and defense lawyers only in the White House. Even so, it was the first and only time in American history that a sitting President has testified in a criminal case.

Grant’s usually good memory seemed to fail him at times during the examination but he was strong in his defense of General Babcock’s character and conduct. The President’s testimony clearly influenced the St. Louis jury which ultimately acquitted Babcock and then adjourned to a nearby saloon to celebrate. Grant subsequently appointed his erstwhile secretary to the post of inspector of lighthouses in the South. Babcock later drowned while on an inspection tour in Florida.

Grant himself never admitted any involvement in the Great Whiskey Ring – but faced many nasty accusations. Perhaps indirectly the flap resulted in only one whiskey being named after the North’s premier Civil War hero (by contrast, Gen. Sheridan was named on three brands). In 1892 the Joseph Spang distillery, located in Boston, issued its Grant ‘63 brand in his honor (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, Grant – who was known to be fond of whiskey – never got to sip his brand. He died seven years earlier.



Grant '63 ad on an ink blotter

NOTES: Material for this article has been gathered from a number of sources. The quotes about “The Sylph” are from *Secrets of the Great Whiskey Ring*, written by Gen. John McDonald, one of the conspirators who served time, and published in 1880. The picture of the shady lady is from McDonald’s book.