

# The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

## May 2008

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### Meeting May 27<sup>th</sup>

Please join us at 8 PM at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda. Visitors are always welcome, and we enjoy seeing antique bottles and related items for show & tell.

### Show Dilemma

At our April meeting, club members discussed whether and when our club should sponsor a bottle show. Most of us agreed that we would not want to organize a show before 2009, but some would prefer to concentrate on updating our Washington, DC bottle book rather than holding a show any time in the foreseeable future. Our members will remain active in the Baltimore Antique Bottle Club’s wonderful March show, and we are looking forward to the Expo in August. Do we need our own show as well? Opinions are welcome at our web site: [www.potomacbottlecollectors.org](http://www.potomacbottlecollectors.org). Henry Fuchs (below right) expressed a willingness to help organize a show. Lee Shipman shows some of her cobalt glass below left. The bottles abover were displayed by Richard Lilienthal.



Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month in the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, 6201 Dunrobbin Dr., Bethesda, MD 20816.  
President: Andy Goldfrank Vice President: Al Miller Secretary: Jim Sears Treasurer: Lee Shipman  
*Pontil*: Jim Sears (email: [searsjim@usa.net](mailto:searsjim@usa.net), PH: 301/588-2174) & Andy Goldfrank (email: [amg\\_sticky@yahoo.com](mailto:amg_sticky@yahoo.com), PH: 202/588-0543)  
Web Site: [www.potomacbottlecollectors.org](http://www.potomacbottlecollectors.org) Maintained by Al Miller: [www.potomacbottlecollectors.org/contact.php](http://www.potomacbottlecollectors.org/contact.php)

# Charles Clarke and “Secrets” of the Whiskey Trust

by Jack Sullivan  
(Special to the Potomac Pontil)

In failing health and only three years from his death, Charles C. Clarke was summoned in 1899 from his Peoria, Illinois, distillery to testify before an elite Washington, D.C. commission about one of America's most notorious organizations. Known popularly as “The Whiskey Trust,” it bore a reputation for ruthlessly shutting down distilleries throughout the Midwest, reputedly using dynamite when necessary.

Clarke knew a lot about the Whiskey Trust. Peoria was its headquarters, he was among its founding members, and his Clarke Bros. distillery had prospered. Several years earlier, however, he had broken away from the monopoly and declared his operation “independent.”

Federal investigators saw Clarke as a key witness who might, under oath, disclose the full inside story of this secretive organization. The Industrial Commission had been appointed by President William McKinley in 1898 to investigate monopolistic practices in a wide range of industries. It was chaired by a close friend of the President, Andrew L. Harris, a former Ohio governor and Civil War general (Fig. 1). Members were a hand-picked group of prominent senators and congressmen.



Fig. 1: Portrait of Andrew L. Harris

The Commission's interest in the Whiskey Trust in part resulted from its reputed strong arm tactics. In 1880, the average American adult consumed 2.4 gallons of spirits annually. By volume most alcohol was consumed as liquor. As a way of keeping whiskey prices high, a number of Midwest distillers in 1887 had organized a monopoly under the name of the Distillers and Cattle Feeders' Trust.

When a distillery joined the Trust its owners received stock but surrendered control of operations to a board of trustees. Of some 86 distilleries that eventually joined (or were forced into) the Trust, only about a dozen were kept operating. The rest were shut down. The idea was to corner an overwhelming market share and fix prices to insure ample profits. At the time such business practices were legal.

Criminal activity often was alleged in the strong arm tactics employed by the Trust against whiskey-makers who refused to join it. In February 1888 a large Chicago distillery reported that an agent for the Trust had been apprehended in its factory. He reportedly confessed in writing to spying. Subsequently, in September a valve on a vat in the same distillery was discovered to have been tampered with in a way that eventually could have caused an explosion. Three months later at the same site a dynamite explosion did extensive damage to the distillery and blew out windows in the surrounding neighborhood. Strong evidence pointed to the Trust as the perpetrator.

No evidence exists that Charles Clarke was involved in this mayhem. With his brother Chauncey he had inherited a highly successful and lucrative whiskey business that his father, a Massachusetts Yankee of Puritan stock, had begun about 1870.

The distillery stood on Grove Street, at the foot of Persimmon in Peoria. It initially produced a number of brands, including Castle Rock, Checker Board, Elkhorn Gin, Kickapoo Bourbon, Pearl Spirits, and R.D.C. Bourbon. The flagship brand was Clarke's Pure Rye.



Fig. 2: Clarke's Pure Rye Ad

Perhaps at the behest of the Whiskey Trust, in 1888 Clarke Bros. dropped the most of its other brands to concentrate on merchandising Clarke's Pure Rye (Fig. 2). It was sold in clear glass bottles with little embossing and paper labels (Fig. 3, 4). About the same time, Clarke Bros. built a new facility at the foot of Pecan and South Peoria Streets, boasting that it was the "largest whiskey distillery in the world" (Fig. 5). A drawing of the facility on the firm's letterhead, however, fails to bear out that claim (Fig. 6).



Fig. 3: Clarke's Rye half pint bottle (left)  
 Fig. 4: Clarke's Rye pint bottle (right)

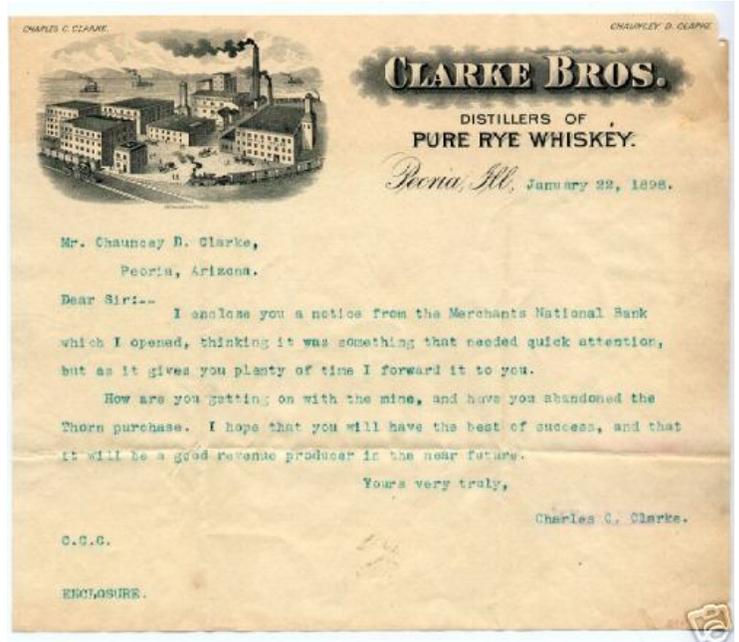


Fig. 6: Letter on distillery letterhead, 1898

The most unusual merchandising strategy employed by Clarke Brothers was plastering the face and body of an elderly and sickly looking man on its advertising. This codger shows up on items from hand mirrors (Fig. 7), to decorative plates (Fig. 8), to bar signs (Fig. 9). It apparently was an image that sold whiskey because Clarke Bros. Rye became a top-selling regional and national brand.



Fig 5: Clarke's Rye tip tray

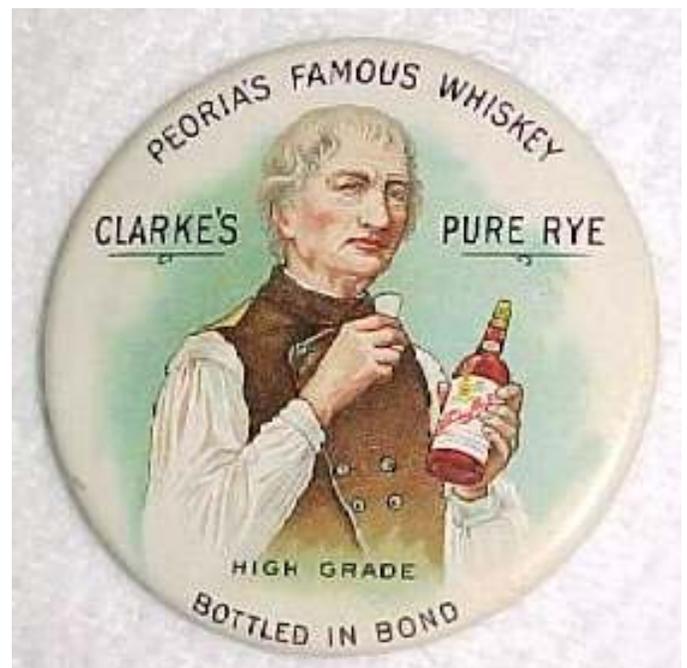


Fig. 7: Advertising hand mirror



Fig. 8: Clarke's porcelain plate

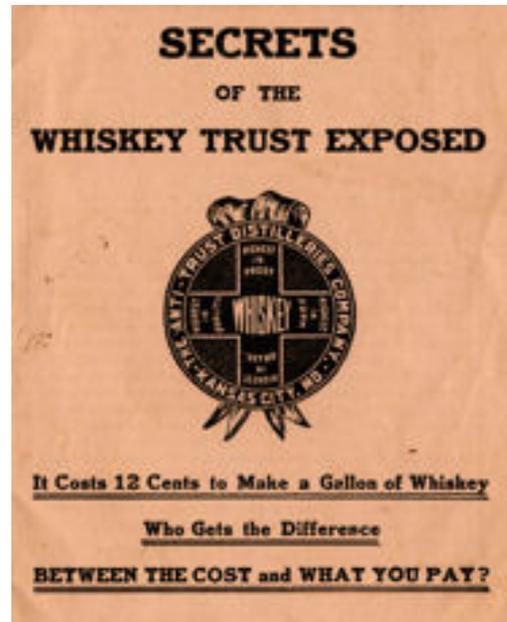


Fig. 10: Booklet attacking the Whiskey Trust

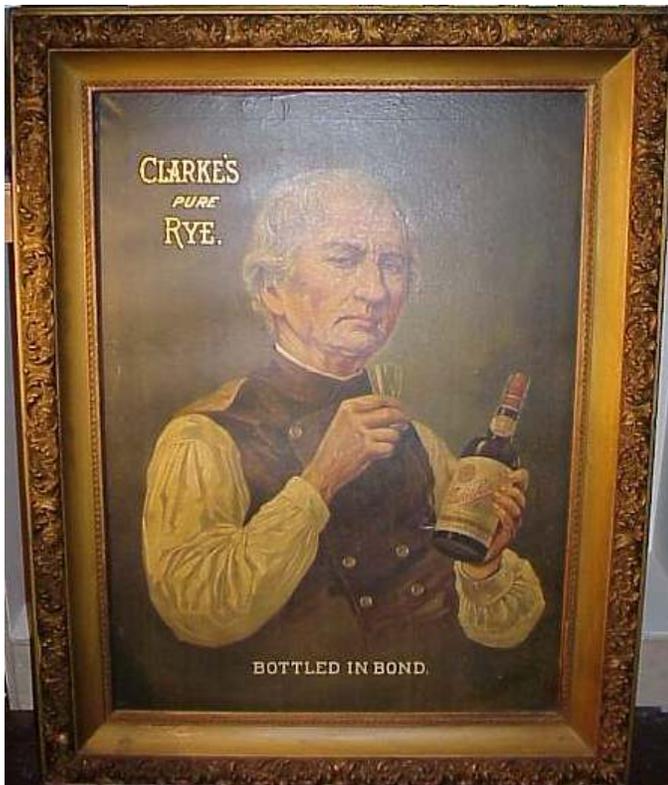


Fig. 9: Clarke's bar sign

In the meantime the Whiskey Trust was experiencing financial troubles. About 1893 five major firms pulled out, including Clarke Bros. In January 1895 the Trust went into receivership only to emerge from bankruptcy and reorganize itself eight months later as the American Spirits Manufacturing Company. Even in its new and weakened form, however, the Whiskey Trust continued to be attacked in newspapers and other publications (Fig. 10).

Being summoned to Washington by a high-powered investigative panel in 1899 likely held no fears for Charles Clarke. His father had been a friend of Abraham Lincoln and a well-known figure in the Republic Party. He himself, running on the GOP ticket, had been elected twice as major of Peoria, the first time when he was only 36. In short, Clarke was accustomed to the rough and tumble of politics.

The New York Times of May 14 headlined his testimony before the Commission. Clarke was cautious. He revealed nothing very new, restating only the obvious. "We thought we could make better profits and create a more stable business by organizing into a trust," he told the Commission. He added that the Whiskey Trust had been patterned after the Standard Oil Trust. But unlike that monopoly on oil, as soon as the distillers group decided to raise prices, new distilling operations on the outside started up that drove prices down again. Apparently no amount of corporate muscle (or even dynamite) was able to reverse that dynamic.

The Trust was, Clarke testified, "bound to fall of its own weight." He argued against passing new antitrust laws. The Commission, however, did not agree and in concluding its work in 1902 recommended stronger legislation. Teddy Roosevelt, by then President, agreed, ushering in the "Trust Busting Era" in American history. By then the Whiskey Trust was virtually moribund and Charles Clarke was dead, only 46 years of age. The distillery he helped build would last another 16 years until Prohibition. The facility subsequently would be bought by one of the remnants of the Trust, called the U.S. Industrial Alcohol Company. After Repeal it marketed Clarke's Pure Rye until the mid-1940s when the brand disappeared completely.

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**Notes:** The material for this article was derived from a number of internet sources. Illustrations of Clarke items are courtesy of Robin Preston and his [www.pre-pro](http://www.pre-pro) website.

# Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

## JUNE 5-7 - GRANTVILLE (HERSHEY), PENNSYLVANIA

The National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors (NAMBC) Annual Convention (.) at the Holiday Inn, Grantville (Hershey), Pennsylvania. Displays, seminars, awards banquet, Sundae on Saturday ice cream social, auction.

Registration necessary (\$10 for members, \$12 nonmembers).  
INFO: Penny Gottlieb, 18 Pond Pl., Cos Cob, CT 06807, PH: (203) 869-8411, E-mail:

[gottmilk@msn.com](mailto:gottmilk@msn.com). More info available on website:  
[www.milkbottlecollectors.com](http://www.milkbottlecollectors.com).



## JUNE 6-7 - LUMBERTON, NORTH CAROLINA

The Robeson Antique Bottle Club's Annual Bottle, Coin & Collectible Show & Sale (Fri.. 3 - 9 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 1 PM) at the Expo and Farmer's Market, 1027 US 74 East, Lumberton North Carolina. INFO: **PAUL VALENTI**, PH: (910) 738-3074, 456 Boone Rd., Lumberton, NC 28360 or **MITCHELL McCORMICK**, PH: (910) 628-6245 or **BRET LEE**, Email: [dex@intrstar.net](mailto:dex@intrstar.net).

## JULY 19-20 - ADAMSTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

The 7th Annual Shupp's Grove Bottle Festival (Sat.- Sun. 6 AM to dark; Fri. Dealer Set-up 2 PM followed by Early Buyers 5 PM) at Shupp's Grove in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. INFO: **STEVE GUION**, E-mail: [sguoin124@comcast.net](mailto:sguoin124@comcast.net) or **JERE HAMBLETON**, E-mail: [jshdetector@webtv.net](mailto:jshdetector@webtv.net) or PH: (717) 393-5175.

## AUGUST 8-10 - YORK, PENNSYLVANIA EXPO

The 2008 FOHBC EXPO (Fri. Seminars and Specialty Meetings in AM; Set-up, Early Adm. 1 - 5 PM, Banquet 6:30 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 5 PM, Early Adm. 7 - 9 AM; Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the York Fairgrounds, York, Pennsylvania. 600-800 tables capacity for the largest EXPO ever! For consignments, contracts and INFO: **R. WAYNE LOWRY**, 401 Johnston Ct., Raymore, MO 64083, PH: (816) 318-0161, E-mail: [JarDoctor@aol.com](mailto:JarDoctor@aol.com)

## SEPTEMBER 21 - WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA

The Apple Valley Bottle Collectors Club 34th Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 3 PM, Early Buyers 7:30 AM) at the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church Family Life Center, 1309 Opequon Ave, Winchester, Virginia. INFO: **RICHARD M., VENSKOSKE**, 2038 Chestnut Grove Rd., Winchester, VA. 22603, PH: (540) 247-4429.

## OCTOBER 18 - LOUISBURG, NORTH CAROLINA

The Raleigh Bottle Club's Annual Show & Sale (Sat. 8:30 AM - 2 PM) Gen. Adm. \$3; Early Adm. 7 AM, \$10) at 111 South Church St., Louisburg, North Carolina. INFO: **BARTON WEEKS**, Show Chairman, PH: (336) 508-2759, E-mail: [bweeks6@triad.rr.com](mailto:bweeks6@triad.rr.com) or **DONNIE MEDLIN**, Co-Chair. PH: (919) 496-1367 or E-mail: [donniepepsinut@msn.com](mailto:donniepepsinut@msn.com). All show info available at: [www.raleighbottleclub.org](http://www.raleighbottleclub.org). Club E-mail: [raleighbottleclub@gmail.com](mailto:raleighbottleclub@gmail.com).

## NOVEMBER 2 - ELKTON, MARYLAND

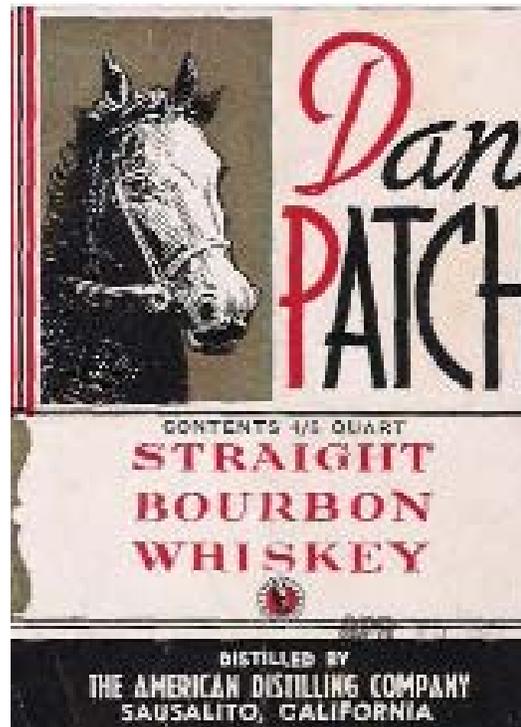
The Tri-State Bottle Collectors & Diggers Club 36th Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 2 PM) at the Singerly Fire Hall, Routes 279 & 213, Elkton, Maryland. INFO: **DAVE BROWN**, PH: (302) 738-9960.

## NOVEMBER 9 - PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

The Pittsburgh Antique Bottle Club Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 2 PM, Early Buyers 7 AM) at The Ice Garden, Rostraver Twp. (Exit 46B of I-70, 4.1 miles north) Pennsylvania. INFO: **BOB DeCROO**, 694 Fayette City Rd., Fayette City, PA 15438, PH: (724) 326-8741 or **JAY HAWKINS**, 1280 Mt. Pleasant Rd., West Newton, PA 15089, PH: (724) 872-6013.

## NOVEMBER 30 - BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA

The Forks of the Delaware Bottle Collectors Assoc. 35th Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 3 PM, Early Buyers 7:30 AM) at the Bethlehem Catholic High School, Madison & Dewberry Avenues, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. INFO: **BILL HEGEDUS**, 20 Cambridge Pl., Catasauqua, PA 18032, PH: (610) 264-5945.



Lee Shipman would like to find a Dan Patch whiskey bottle. If you have one that you would be willing to sell, please call Lee at (301) 229-2005.