



An early 19th Century Pennsylvania Dutch still made entirely of copper—found in the hills near Kutztown. Notice the tank spigot to clean the 50-gallon boiler. From the author's collection.

Distillation and Distilleries Among the Dutch

By RICHARD H. SHANER

The art of distilling spirits has been an integral part of the rural Dutch culture ever since the early 18th Century. Whiskey burning in earlier days was very popular among the farmers and throughout the countryside on almost every fair-sized farm was a still. Most of the spirits were consumed by the local Dutch and not too much whiskey was exported outside of Pennsylvania. There were no large commercial stills in the 1700's, and spirits which were sold to the local taverns and inns were made by independent farmers.

On many occasions farmers of the Dutch area would distill a large batch of whiskey and take it to the Philadelphia market. The oldtimers of Lehigh County tell that when John Jacob Mickley went down to Philadelphia in September of 1777, he transported a cargo of several barrels of whiskey. On the return trip he brought back with him the now famous Liberty Bell, which was safely kept in Allentown for part of the American Revolution.

In the colonial Dutch Country were to be found among the best foods and liquors in America. The fame of the rural taverns and inns of this locality was spread throughout the colonies. Of note, even Kutztown (a very small

village at that time) was complimented for its fine foods and good hospitality by a few members of the Continental Congress. On the various travel routes tavern proprietors would attempt to lure wagoners to eat regularly at their establishments by giving them one or two free drinks of whiskey with their meal.¹ However, these robust men usually became involved in vigorous fights, especially the Conestoga wagoners.

For the most part distillation always remained a home industry with the exception of a few commercial distilleries which appeared in the early 19th Century. After the Civil War private distilleries went out of existence and only a few commercial enterprises tried to stay in business.

Of all the commercial whiskey distilleries, probably Stein's Distillery was the best known and the most popularly patronized. Located in rural Kutztown, the Stein Distillery operated for almost a full century (1830-1920). The still was founded and operated by Jacob Stein on his farm near the three-mile house on the Kutztown-Krumsville road.²

¹ D. K. Noel, "Seventy Years Ago," *York Gazette*, March 10, 1895.

² Currently known as the Fisher farm, Kutztown R. D. 3, Pa.



The Rittenhouse Birch Distillery at Seisholtzville, Berks County—once one of the largest producing sweet-birch-oil distilleries in the Dutch Country. It went out of operation in the 1930's but is completely intact, and may start up again.

Only pure rye whiskey was made by Stein, and later his son and descendants. At Main and White Oak streets in Kutztown the Steins maintained a whiskey store where they sold their own whiskey.

Near the distillery on the Stein farm was the bonded warehouse.³ Here the barrels of whiskey were stacked on racks and occasionally inspected until they matured. Usually the whiskey was aged from three to eight years. At the distillery the whiskey was sold by the barrel and shipped to all parts of the Dutch Country, going especially to local taverns. Whiskey was not only sold by the barrel later on, but in stone-ware jugs, and if you wished you could buy a case of 12 quart bottles.

The Uses of Whiskey

In a pamphlet printed for the Stein Distillery it was stated that whiskey had two purposes: 1. pleasure and 2. medicinal. This brochure printed at the turn of the century lists the following remedies:

1. *Bites of Poisonous Snakes and Insects:*

Full drafts of Stein's Whiskey will help to ward off the danger.

2. *Colds:*

Take two ounces of Stein's Whiskey mixed with four grains of quinine, preferably before retiring in the evening.

3. *Sore Throat:*

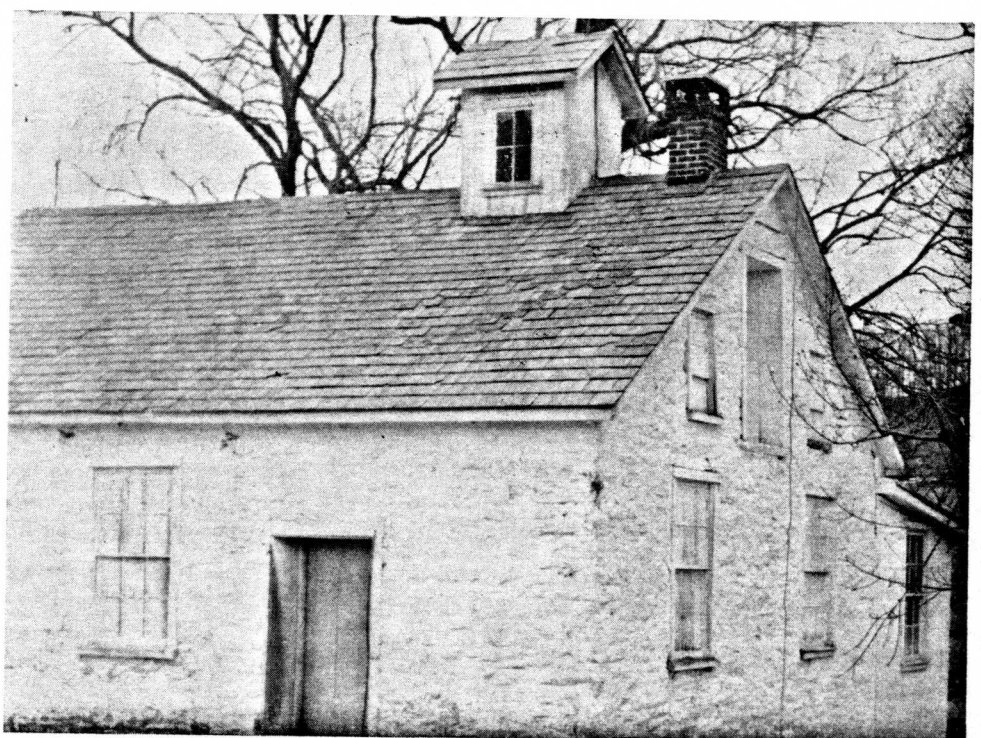
Thousands of cases have been cured with Stein's Whiskey and glycerine.⁴

Besides the previous sampling the book also lists several popular drinks in which Stein's whiskey was used—whiskey toddy, stone-wall, whiskey cocktail, etc.

During the days of the private and commercial distilleries, up to about 1850, whiskey was a major drink in many Dutch homes. Farmers in the 18th and early 19th Centuries took bottles of whiskey into the harvest fields with

³ Collected from William Stein, age 84, Kutztown, March 16, 1963.

⁴ *Stein's Pure Rye Whiskey*, printed for I. B. Stein and Son, Distillers of Pure Rye Whiskey, Kutztown, Pennsylvania (undated).



Jacob Stein's Whiskey Distillery built about 1830 near Kutztown, Berks County. In the basement of the building is a fast running spring and the original trough used to cool the condensing coil. The door in the front at the top level was used to bring the rye into the building to be burned.



them as they did their work. It was not uncommon to find ground-cellar and spring-cellar stores with fermented wines and distilled liquors.

The Dutchman took great pride in this art and produced many types of beverages. It is unlikely that anyone can tell which of the spirits was most popular among the Dutch—rye whiskey, corn whiskey, applejack, etc.

It would also be hard to list all the remedies for sickness which used whiskey among the Dutch. The most popular is probably the remedy for an upset stomach which I collected from Yuni Day of New Jerusalem, Berks County. Take several roots of the plant called snake root, wash the ground from them and put them in a bottle of whiskey. After a few days, whenever you have an upset stomach, take a swig of the whiskey with the snake root in and you will become better very quickly. It is also good to take a swig of it every night or so, before going to bed—for good health.

The second most popular remedy in the Dutch Country is the use of a local type of white lily petal for the healing of cuts and burns. This among other people was recorded from my neighbor, Marie Moyer, New Jerusalem. When the lily flower blooms collect the white petals from it and immerse them in a bottle filled with whiskey. If someone should cut himself, put several petals on the cut (or burn) and bandage it up. Within a very short time the sore will be healed. A neighbor of Mrs. Moyer one time cut the tip of his finger off, and when it was attended to in the previous manner the finger healed in record time without any ill effects to the victim. Most of my neighbors in Rockland Township all have large bottles filled with whiskey and lily petals from their herb gardens.

Applejack for Sore Throat

Viola Miller of Kutztown tells of a typical cure for a cold or sore throat. Take some butter melted in a pie-pan and fill a soup spoon half way, then add applejack for the second half and swallow. More curious are two remedies from Edwin M. Fogel's *Beliefs and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans* (1915). 1. Grow a wild balsam apple in a bottle, when ripe, fill the bottle with whiskey. This will heal any wound on which it is poured or rubbed (page 274). 2. To cure a heavy cold drink burned whiskey before going to bed. During the process of burning the whiskey the flame should be extinguished and relit three times, after which it should be permitted to burn until all the alcohol is burned out (page 286).

One of the most curious bits of lore concerning the distilling of whiskey was recorded in the *Pennsylvania Dutchman* for February 1, 1952, in an article called *Witches and Witchcraft*. In this entry a Mr. Muhlenberg told of a man who paid 10 shillings for having the witches driven out of his distilling kettle. The person performing the exorcism was reportedly quite gifted in such feats.⁵

The Whiskey Rebellion

Undoubtedly the early distilling industry of the Dutch was no match for the Scotch-Irish whiskey producers of Western Pennsylvania. With the exception of relatively few cases not any farmer in the Dutchland was dependent on his whiskey still for a livelihood. When later in the 18th Century the Federal government placed an excise tax on whiskey, it was not the Dutchman who revolted. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 in Western Pennsylvania was largely a Scotch-Irish protest against a tax which was endangering their main source of income. From Pittsburgh to Philadelphia (almost 300 miles) came Scotch-Irish whiskey in Conestoga wagons. Being so distant from the Philadelphia market it was not profitable for these farmers to export their bulk crops. Thus the Pennsylvania Dutch fed Philadelphia and occasionally allowed it some of their fine whiskey, but the Scotch-Irish had to be satisfied to sell the city only whiskey.

Birch, Sassafras, and Wintergreen

Existing side by side in the Dutch Country were various birch, sassafras, and wintergreen distilleries. The oils which these stills produced were used basically for (1) medicinal purposes, and (2) non-intoxicating drinks. In about every wooded area of the territory was located an oil distillery. Often large saw mills combined both processes. Since birch trees were in a greater abundance than the other two, most stills in the late 19th and early 20th Century specialized in sweet-birch oil.

In the making of oil the twigs and bark of the tree trunk are used. After both of these have been chopped up fairly fine, they are put into a large copper-lined box. The boxes which ranged in all sizes were usually about five feet wide, six feet long and four feet deep. A copper lid was fastened on top of the box and sealed with a flour paste. Most of

⁵ It is quite common to hear of a bewitched butter churn in the Dutch Country but it is rare to hear of an incident where a witch has "possessed" a distilling kettle.



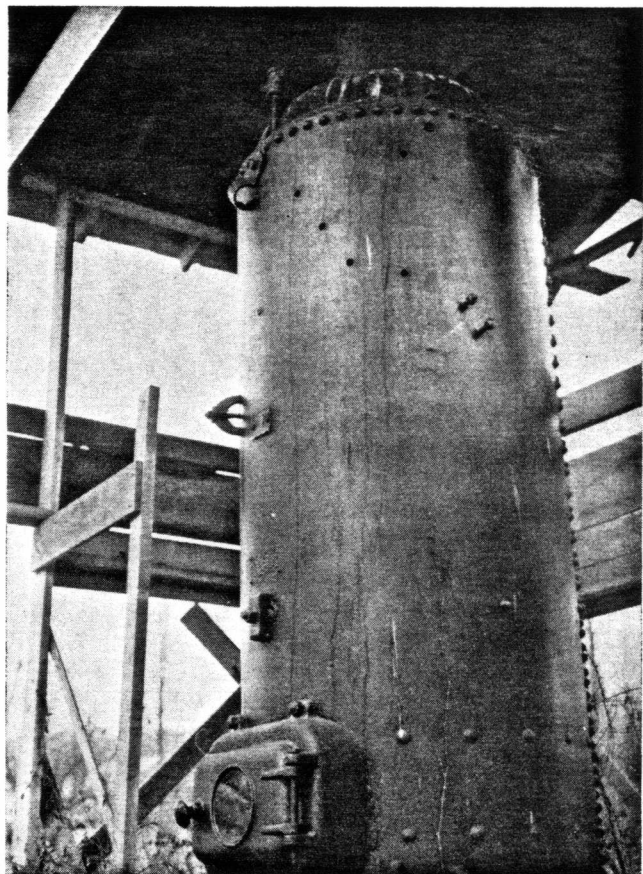
One of the two copper-lined steam boxes used at Kemmerer's distillery. To the right of the large box can be seen part of the eight-foot cooling trough which is continually kept filled with running spring water.

the oil distillers used steam heat to extract the oil, and once the used wet chips of twigs were dried they used them to fire the steam boiler. Thus the distiller had no waste to get rid of as in the making of cider. Like the whiskey stills the vapor from the tank was condensed in a copper coil which was cooled by running water. Often the stills were set up near cold mountain springs which offered the best results in the condensing of the vapor.

The birch and sassafras trees which were used to make oil came from the wooded areas of farms near to the stills. The wood was bought by the distiller by the wagon or truck load and the usual price in recent years was two to three dollars a load. The sweet-birch oil industry of the Dutch Country is still a major rural business. Most of the distillers, however, now use much more modern lumbering equipment and produce greater quantities than their forefathers ever dreamed. Since most beverage companies now use artificial flavoring, the Dutch birch oil is being purchased for medicinal use mainly.

Among many of the farm families the making of home-made birch and root beer was a periodical chore in the summer time. When the mix was made it was poured into large five gallon crocks and allowed to sit in a warm place. After it had "worked" a few days it was cooled and served. On some occasions the beverage was bottled and kept for later use. The making of these beverages was only slightly less popular than making home-made ice cream.

In years gone by sassafras was also used by the Dutch but in a lesser quantity. A tea made from the roots of the sassafras tree was known to thin and purify the blood. During the spring of the year several families still prepare sassafras tea for cleaning the blood. Its use is similar to the eating of wild dandelion in the springtime. Sassafras was mainly used by beverage companies and is no longer produced because of the use of artificial flavoring.



This is the first steam boiler used by Kermit Kemmerer's father when he had located the distillery in the Blue Mountains. It is the typical vertical type which is used in most of the distilleries. The boiler dates from 1909.