

THE GROSSCURTH DISTILLERY—A story by Bob Hill



Photo of Grosscurth Distillery by Robert Steinau. Published date is March 6, 1973. © The Courier-Journal.

All that's left of the Grosscurth Distillery now are the rusted and decayed pieces of the puzzle; the scattered hunks of iron pipe jutting out into the thinly wooded landscape along Echo Trail; remnants of the distillery dam on Floyds Fork where the water bubbles and churns at its edges.

It all makes a good story beginning with the distillery's construction in 1933 – a complex of holding tanks, warehouses and an ugly, angular four-story distillery building that loomed above the rural landscape. Add to that its convoluted whiskey history that so matches Kentucky bourbon history; the comic aspects of the Great Whiskey Heist of 1963.

Then there was the 1968 conflagration that destroyed part of the distillery, a fire so fierce the Courier-Journal breathlessly reported "Light from the flames were so bright that a book could be read by it a half-mile away."

Like somebody is going to break out a good book when it seems the whole neighborhood could go up in smoke.

You can almost hear the Kentucky bluegrass music backing up this whiskey tale – hard-strummin', foot-stomping backwoods music from a group called "Distillery Bend," which just happens to be the name given the old site on your Beckley Creek Park map.

Most important – and much too forgotten – are the distillery owners, Charles and Theresa Grosscurth, who balance out the story, who did so much for Louisville, including leaving the University of Louisville's Speed School \$12.5 million for its "Bucks for Brains" program and \$3 million to the Community Foundation of Louisville.

According to the book "Bourbon in Kentucky" by Chet Zoeller, the Grosscurth Distillery was built along Echo Trail in 1933 by a John Dowling just months after prohibition was repealed.

It was built as the Waterfill and Frazier Distillery. The Grosscurths – who had met and married in Chicago in the 1930s – purchased it in 1948. The distillery’s brand was “Kentucky Supreme,” although in the literal mish and mash of ownerships over the years many other brand names would be subscribed to the distillery, including “Old Boone” and “Old Prentice.”

Over time the Grosscurth name would also appear on distilleries in other parts of Jefferson County, Anderson County and near Bardstown, making the lineage – and Kentucky has had almost 1,000 different bourbon brands in its history – very difficult to trace.

The bluegrass music kicked in a little louder in June of 1963 with this Courier-Journal headline and story:

Two Thugs Get \$11,750 in Bourbon

“Two armed holdup men got the drop on a distillery watchman here early today, chained him to a steel girder, and made off with \$11,750 worth of bourbon.”

The story said the watchman, Andrew Russell, 54, of Fisherville, was making his rounds about 1 a.m. when two men jumped out of the bushes, one carrying a rifle and the other a .45 automatic. The faces of both men were covered with women’s stockings.

The two men walked Russell behind one of the warehouses, sat him on the ground, tied his feet together and used an “auto tire chain” to fasten him to padlock him to a steel girder.

The men loaded a distillery truck with 235 cases of eight-year-old Kentucky Supreme and left. Some four and one-half hours later Russell’s shouts attracted a neighbor, who freed Russell with a pair of bolt cutters.

In August 1963, two Crestwood, Kentucky, residents were arrested and charged with knowingly receiving stolen property after 175 full cases of bourbon whiskey were found in their trailer home and a nearby house – whiskey identified as taken in the Grosscurth heist. The two men, Walter Brock and Francis Newton, were given two years in jail.

On April 25, 1968, a raging fire destroyed two warehouses at the Grosscurth complex, burning up almost 5,000 barrels of whiskey. A resident of the area reported hearing an explosion just before the blaze. As the burning liquid poured out onto Floyds Fork, witnesses said it seemed the river was on fire, the air filled with the saucy odor of burning bourbon.

Flames shot 200 feet into the air, sparks from the blaze set nearby fields and woods on fire, and even nearby utility poles were destroyed. Nine fire departments would be called to the scene to quell the blaze and water down the other buildings, saving them. A company executive said the whiskey was only being stored for aging in the warehouses; the company had not produced any on the site for two years. The cause of the blaze was never determined.

The distillery’s destruction was also a loss for area farmers. One former resident, Jim Oesterritter, said it had also been a source of food for dairy and beef cattle.

Oesterritter said as a boy he would accompany his father as he drove a big tank truck to the distillery to pick up 20 to 25 barrels of corn mash for cattle feed. Many area farmers did the same thing, backing their tank trunks beneath a huge distillery spigot. The cost of the mash was about 10 to 15 cents a barrel.

“It was hot,” Oesterritter said. “Right out of the cooker...I tried some once. It tasted pretty terrible. It was really foul stuff, but the cows loved it.”

Oesterritter also had strong memories of the rickety old iron bridge that spanned Floyds Fork on Echo Trail near the distillery.

“It used to pop and bounce,” he said. “I always thought I’d meet my maker on the other side.”

The Grosscurths had worked very hard to build their demanding and very competitive distillery business; he as president and she – with only a high school education – as secretary-treasurer. After the fire they sold the distillery to the Chicago-based Makler Brothers who moved production to Bardstown.

The couple had been very active in Louisville society; the box seats at the Kentucky Derby, Life Master bridge tournaments, golf at Audubon Country Club – where a stray lightning bolt almost killed them – a 50-year membership at the First Unitarian Church.

Petite, vivacious and fashionable, Mrs. Grosscurth loved to cook and entertain at their Valley Vista home, eventually taking piano lessons which gave way to a parlor organ where she would hold singing songs.

Mr. and Mrs. Grosscurth never had children of their own, but became foster parents and eventually adopted three children – who gave them nine grandchildren. They were married 60 years and died – just a few months apart – in 1999. Their mutual generousities were lauded at their memorial services, particularly their gifts to Boys Haven and a number of other charitable and social justice organizations.

University of Louisville officials said they had not been surprised by a gift from the Grosscurths – the couple had hinted a donation was coming – but were very surprised by the amount, the \$12.5 million was then the largest in U of L history.

Their gift was met with \$11.5 million from the State of Kentucky – bringing the total to \$24 million – a supreme and enduring Kentucky legacy of another sort.

-Bob Hill

It is a little bit, then, like railroad tracks.