

BACK IN THE DAY

BEFORE JOHNNY & AMBER, THERE WAS HIRAM & MOLLIE

BY CHUCK COWDERY

It is a timeless tale: older man, younger woman, a heady mix of alcohol and sex followed by bitterness, recrimination, violence, and, always in the background, money, lots of money. “Hiram” was Hiram Berry, 59, a recent widower and one of the principal owners of W.A. Gaines and Company, makers of Old Crow bourbon, which made him one of the richest men in Kentucky’s capital city, Frankfort. “Mollie” was Mollie Hill, a.k.a. Mollie Taylor, a.k.a. Annie Greer, a “public prostitute” and “keeper of a house of ill fame on Madison Street” in Louisville. The liaison had been going on for years but after Hiram’s wife, Ellen, passed away, Mollie repented her sordid past and checked into a convent for a four-month purification. Upon its completion, she and Hiram wed, in Louisville, on a cold January night in 1880.

The papers reported: “The many friends of Mr. Berry argued that he was drugged, drunk, and mentally irresponsible at the time he entered upon this unholy contract.”

Later that year, the new Mrs. Berry presented herself at the family mansion in Frankfort. There she was allegedly pummeled by George Franklin Berry, 24, Hiram’s “chivalrous” eldest son and successor at W.A. Gaines. She withdrew to a local hotel where she met with a “prominent attorney.” Her Boswells were close behind.

The scandal was reported in glorious detail by newspapers in Frankfort, Louisville, and Cincinnati, then picked up by journals in Chicago and throughout the United States. It “fell like a bombshell in society circles,” said the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Soon a divorce was arranged, swiftly followed by a more respectable union for Hiram with Clarinda J. Cunningham of Bourbon County, daughter of Arthur and Elizabeth Cunningham, formerly of Baltimore, Maryland.

Clarinda was just what Hiram needed. For the next 15 years, their names appear only in the business and social columns. Mollie moved to Cincinnati, where she possessed enough wealth to report some of it stolen. The rest of her story is unknown.

Hiram Berry died in 1896, age 75.

An official capsule biography, published several years later but before his death, makes no mention of the scandal of 1880.

We learn he was raised on a farm in Pennsylvania and became a carpenter, moved around, got married, settled in Frankfort, made a lot of money during the Civil War doing something financial for the Union, then got into cotton trading. When he was about 45, William Gaines and Edmund Taylor talked him into sinking some of his growing fortune into the whiskey business.

Neither Hiram nor his son George were distillers or presidents of the company. They mainly hired distillers linked to William Mitchell, who trained with Dr. James Crow, the legendary distiller after whom Old Crow is named. The real money, as it always is, was in New York and so was the president. The Berrys were major shareholders and responsible for the company’s Kentucky operations, which at one time included three of the largest distilleries in the United States. In 1900, George and Mary Berry built a grand mansion that is still the pride of Frankfort: Juniper Hill, now known as Berry Hill. The rest of their 200-acre estate is now a golf course and other developments.

We know plenty about George’s fancy house but not very much about what he and his father did at W.A. Gaines, at one time the largest whiskey maker in the United States. Learning about the history of American whiskey and whiskey-making poses unique challenges. Many people left the business either because of pressure from Prohibition advocates or eventually because of Prohibition itself, then concealing their family histories. Distillery ventures were financially risky and stories of long-running, financially stable enterprises are rare. Berry’s company was one of the first and most successful, in business for 54 years. The industry was just beginning to become sound, stable, and modern when it was snuffed out by Prohibition.

Sadly, too much of what is written about bourbon history is written by people like me, an enthusiastic amateur but not a proper historian with proper resources and funding. There are 75 colleges and universities in Kentucky; Tennessee has 105. Cincinnati, once as important to the bourbon business as Louisville, has 22. Most have history departments, yet they have produced very little about whiskey making in the region. And with illuminating and sensational tales like that of Hiram and Mollie hidden in bourbon’s rich past, that’s a shame. ✦