



SPIRITS OF THE 1800's

By Joan Rupert-Barkley

It wasn't hard to find a place to drink in the mid to late 1800's in Prescott. Numerous taverns and hotels lined the dirt roads. There was an excess demand for whiskey both for medicinal purposes as well as for consumption.

J.P. Wiser was born in Trenton, New York in 1825. He was always interested in business and his dream was to build an empire along the St. Lawrence River. In 1857, he was a partner in the Averill & Egert Distillery in Prescott. When a fire destroyed that business in 1864, Wiser decided to build his own distillery on a much larger scale.

Wiser's distillery was built on a slope of land just up from the St. Lawrence River near Mary Street. The Wiser home was built on the distillery grounds at the top of the hill facing King Street. He built barns that could accommodate 2000 head of cattle. These barns were located a short distance west of the distillery. Although the neighbours complained about the smell from both the distillery and the barns, Wiser paid very little attention to the complaints.

There were 60 men employed at the Wiser's distillery year-round. Some workers were as young as fourteen. Jobs for coopers, carpenters and teamsters were steady; whereas the jobs in packaging, bottling, mashing and dock work were more unpredictable. The average wage at the turn of the century was \$10.00 to \$15.00 a week. The employees worked from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. with one hour off for dinner. A normal work week was from Monday to Saturday. However, the Saturday shift was less than 10 hours. Statutory holidays were the only holidays the men were given. At Christmas, all the employees were given a bonus and were treated to a free half gallon of Red Letter Rye. This spirit was smooth, well matured and Wiser's biggest seller.

Although Wiser was a nondrinker, his accountant, Albert Whitney liked to sample the product on a daily basis. However, he paid for everything he drank.

Wiser hired men from Prescott first. Once in a while he would employ and shelter seamen who were seeking refuge.

Wiser also supported businesses like the railroad, shipping, grain elevator, coal and cattle.

By the late 1800's all the families in Prescott had jobs through one of Wiser's businesses. He was also on the town council in Prescott and from 1878 to 1882, Wiser was a Liberal member in the Canadian House of Commons.

Although Wiser was very generous with his money and every Christmas he donated to the local churches, he was once criticized for his donation and his money was referred to as dirty money. Wiser quickly explained that the money was not necessarily from the Wiser distillery but could be from his farm, just outside of town, where he raised and sold horses, cattle, wheat, hay, hops and potatoes, or the money could have come from his brick house, where he sold millions of bricks.

Nothing went to waste at the distillery. Four skilled employees worked in the 2-storey cooper shop. While one employee's job was



to make new barrels all the time, the other employees repaired and scorched the used white oak barrels. The oak shavings from these barrels were given to employees for firewood for their wood-burning stoves. Wiser also fattened his cattle with waste from the distillery.

Wiser had a reputation for producing high quality whiskey and he was ranked third largest distillery in Canada.

In the late 1860's, Grenville Brewery, under the management of John McCarthy, was being established west of Prescott. This brewery was located west of the present day Dewar's Inn on the River. Like Wiser, McCarthy had many years of experience in the distilling business before he ventured out on his own. In the 1880's he spent more than \$27,000.00 building a five-storey malt house and enlarging the entire brewery. It was reported that he produced 7,000 barrels of beer a year. In the early 1900's, one freight carload of Prescott beer was shipped every week to Ottawa and wagon loads of beer headed for Prescott and Brockville on a daily basis. McCarthy soon became one of Upper Canada's largest and most successful breweries. The eight cottages and part of the home/office of Dewar's Inn were built from salvaged bricks from the brewery building.

McCarthy died in 1896 and Wiser in 1911. Although they had children to take over their

empire, it was reported both the distillery and brewery started to decline after their deaths, mainly due to prohibition.

In 1916, the Ontario Temperance Act was passed. This Act was known as prohibition. Religious groups believed that liquor was responsible for violence, family abuse and political corruption. Prohibition in Ontario continued until 1927.

During this period, breweries and distilleries could still manufacture alcohol for export to the United States, but it was illegal for customers in the United States to import alcohol. This created an increase in smuggling and the St. Lawrence River became a very popular place for rum-runners. The 1000 Islands was called a smuggler's paradise. They would transport their load in mislabeled crates and even undertakers wagons. Because these bootleggers worked at night and often without lights on their fast boats, smuggling by water, especially in the winter months, was very dangerous. Many bootleggers suffered untimely deaths.

Wiser's failing distillery was sold to Corby's (Hiram Walker Distilleries). Wiser's Distillery closed in Prescott leaving a large economic hole and was moved to the Belleville area in 1932. [LH](#)

L to R: John Phillip Wiser -Library and Archives Canada; Pictures of Some Early Whiskey Bottles; Salvaged Bricks from Grenville Brewery were used to Build Cottages at the Present Day Dewar's Inn On the River.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The whiskey trade and the resulting smuggling/bootlegging is a fascinating story, and is part of the appeal and history of the 1000 Islands. We will look into finding more interesting stories to share with our readers. In the meantime, we encourage our readers to go to your local library/museum/or historical society to get more information about the history of the 1000 Islands and its many interesting stories.

John A. H. Morris' book "The History of Prescott 1800-2000" is a great read and a resource of information about Prescott.

The Town of Prescott's website offers a history of Wiser's. You can find it a www.prescott.ca (go to tourism menu and heritage submenu for J.P.Wiser's Distillery.

The Red George Pub in Prescott has a J.P. Wiser room that occasionally displays Prints on the wall about the history and times of Wiser's.