

Melky Miller Maryland Rye Whiskey

Exploring Local History at the Garrett County Historical Society Museums

Historical Museum • Transportation Museum • Grantsville Community Museum

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Illegal moonshine stills have long been a part of mountain culture, but did you know that legal manufacture of whiskey has also played a significant role in the area?

Before modern roads and transportation, farmers who grew grain found it more economical to ship and sell their crop in liquid form! Maryland, in particular, developed a reputation for excellent rye whiskey. The Waldorf Maryland Old Rye Whiskey label extolled the virtues of Maryland whiskies due to “the equitable climate, remarkably soft water,” and “the superior rye grown on the uplands.”

The Garrett County Historical Museum displays artifacts from a well-known Garrett County man who set up a distillery for rye whiskey in 1875. Melky (nickname for Melchior, sometimes spelled Melchoir) Miller immigrated as a

teenager to stay with an uncle in the Cove area of Northern Garrett County and reported back to his father in Germany about the conditions he found. The report was favorable, and the rest of Melky’s family joined him in this country.

Melky married and settled in Accident, Maryland, buying a farm known as Woodland Acres. In addition to farming, Melky purchased some distillery equipment, built buildings to house it, and employed experts in the making of rye whiskey. Using local rye, as well as barley and rye bought

from outside the county, the distillers created whiskey from 10 percent barley and 90 percent rye malt.

Melky proved an able businessman. He expanded and modernized the business, adding a sawmill and steam boiler, a large mixing vat with a powered agitator, a copper still cooled by running water, a bottling facility, and bonded warehouses where as many as 1,200 charred oak barrels of whiskey were aged for four years. When it was ready, the whiskey was bottled into properly labeled half-pint, pint and quart bottles, or stoneware jugs.

Whiskey was transported by horse drawn wagon (or sled when sufficient snow was on the ground) to Westernport and other locations. After a day of rest, the horses would make a return trip with a load of coal to

fire the boilers. The distillers established a wholesale warehouse in Westernport in a building that also sported a pool hall.

The business provided employment for many and a market for local products such as grain, wood, and barrels. Every effort was made to avoid waste, including the feeding of the discarded mash to cattle.

In 1902, sons William, John and Charles bought the business from their father and named it M.J. Miller’s Sons





Distillery. William became proficient in the art of distilling and John and Charles ran the wholesale and retail business in Westernport, Maryland.

All aspects of the business were under careful federal control; thus it was “bonded” whiskey, with a cancelled tax stamp on every container. Purchasers could be sure that the alcoholic content, the quantity being sold, and the necessary taxes were all in order.

In the early 1900s, the Temperance Movement was in force all over the country. In 1914, Garrett County citizens voted to join the list of “dry” counties in Maryland, but the rye whiskey made in Garrett County could still be sold elsewhere. With the passage and enforcement of the Volstead Act in 1920, the family business was forced to close, and was never re-opened, even when Prohibition was repealed in 1933.

Visitors to the Garrett County Historical Museum can learn more about this legal local industry through the museum’s collection of items such as bottles, jugs, shot glasses,

M.J. Miller’s Sons wholesale/retail building, Westernport, Maryland, circa early 1900s.

Photo courtesy Garrett County Historical Museum

hydrometers (gauges to measure the proof of whiskey), photographs, articles and accounts by family members. The Museum acknowledges the generosity of those who have given or loaned materials, including Cecil and Arletta Bittinger; Charles Railey; and Ralph Miller, great-great-grandson of Melky Miller.

Garrett County Historical Museum

107 S. Second St., Oakland, MD 21550

Museum Summer Hours:

May through December open Monday through Saturday
10am - 3pm

Museum Winter Hours:

January through May open Thursday, Friday & Saturday
10am - 3pm

Closed Major Holidays.

Please call first – 301-334-3226