1

A LITTLE HISTORY

I was born on March 9, 1957, in the Baptist Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. At first, my grandfather, my mother's father, refused to come see me because he was a serious Catholic and didn't like the idea of me being born in a place where you could eat meat on Fridays. But he eventually came and we all went home in a brand new 1957 Ford Fairlane that my dad, Booker, bought just for the occasion. My dad said his son was coming home in style, so he ran his bank account down to $21 to buy that car, which was kind of a waste because I don't remember that drive at all. But Booker had a flair for the dramatic, so that's how I arrived in

Bardstown, Kentucky, the Bourbon Capital of the World, a seventh-generation, soon-to-be whiskey-making Beam.

That's the official, birth-certificate beginning of my story, but my story really starts a lot earlier—way back around 1790. That's when—sit down now, this might take a while—my great-great-great-great-grandfather Jacob Beam crossed over into Kentucky from Maryland through the Cumberland Gap with his wife, Mary. Jacob was of German descent; his name was originally spelled "Boehm" and he, like a lot of people, was pushing westward, looking for a place he could put down roots, make a life.

He found that place near Hardin Creek in what's now Washington County in central Kentucky. It was a nice tract of land, about 100 acres, close to good streams and rivers, and he went to work on it right away. Germans like to work. Work is fun for them. So he went at it hard, raising hogs, cattle, horses, and tobacco, but mostly corn. Corn was king in Kentucky back then. The hot summers, the warmer winters, and spring water made it a perfect place for growing it. They grew a lot of it. Probably too much, so they turned some of that corn into whiskey, which was pretty common thing to do on the frontier. A lot of people knew how to do it. Making liquor was the safest and cheapest way to use up the extra corn because it was easy to transport downriver and wasn't susceptible to mildew. Using a water-driven mill to grind the corn and a pot still he had brought with him, Jacob slowly began making whiskey from a fermented mash of corn, rye, and malt.

The water he used was sweet Kentucky limestone—especially good for whiskey making since it's rich in calcium, which works well with yeast cells during the fermenting stage. (I promise, that's about as technical as I will get right now.)

Jacob tried different grain mixtures—a little more corn, a little less rye, a little more rye, a little less corn, back and forth, back and forth—until he hit on a new recipe in the mid-1790s. Bingo, he got it right. We still use that recipe today, keep it under lock and key.

He brought his first whiskey to market in 1795, and he entered a somewhat crowded marketplace. There was competition; a lot of people were making whiskey, even George Washington. Yes, *that* George Washington. He had a still over at Mount Vernon and records show that he turned a tidy little profit making rum and then, later, rye whiskey. (Washington was actually a fan of whiskey, especially during the Revolutionary War. In *The Book of Bourbon and Other Fine American Whiskeys*, my friend Gary Regan wrote that old George thought America should build a lot of distilleries, claiming that "the benefits arising from the moderate use of strong liquor have been experienced in all armies and are not to be disputed.")

But Jacob's whiskey stood out from the rest and it soon earned a following. People in Kentucky started talking about it, making special trips out to Hardin Creek to get it. They came on Sunday after church, came in the evening after the mules were tired and plowing was done, came before a wedding or on the way to a funeral. Tired and thirsty

pioneers, looking for a little relief after another hard day at the office. After a while, his whiskey started to gain a following and its reputation, like Jacob's, grew throughout Kentucky and then through the Ohio River Valley. Old Jake's whiskey, top-shelf stuff, come and get it—it's worth the trip.

It's important to remember that up until that time, the whiskey that Jacob made was a novelty. New stuff. When people drank, they usually drank rum, which they made from sugar and molasses that was brought in from the Caribbean. They also made brandy from peaches and other fruits. Those spirits were popular in New England and consequently, the rest of Young America. So when Jake's whiskey came on the scene, it was something different, something special: liquor made from grains, particularly corn.

A lot of people and families lay claim to being the first to make bourbon or age it in oak barrels. Since records were scarce back then in Kentucky (pioneers were more interested in staying alive than trying to get legal patents on products and processes), no one is really sure who first hit on bourbon. I do know one thing for sure, though: while we definitely weren't the first family to make it, we definitely were the best.

After a while, Jacob had himself a pretty good little business, and he worked hard at it and it grew. Supply and demand. He had to keep up, and he did. Soon, he was shipping the whiskey out in oak barrels on flatboats, using the waterways. And he had a lot of water to work with.

Kentucky has more navigable streams and rivers than just about any state in the union, a real asset that Jake took advantage of. Some of his whiskey made it all the way to New Orleans and then to ports unknown.

His enterprise was growing and he needed help, so he brought in his son David, his 10th child (he had 12 children in all; he had a lot of energy), and together they worked the mill grinding the corn, and they worked the pot still, burning it off. After a few more years, Old Jake eventually called it quits and retired to another son's farm. Time to sit on the front porch. His job was done.

David Beam's job was just beginning. He threw himself into the business, and set it on a solid path. More and more distilleries were popping up all over Kentucky, and competition for what was now being called bourbon whiskey (named because it was made in what was then Bourbon County) was getting fierce. So, he ramped up production, made even more good use of the streams and rivers to ship it west and east, and all in all made a name for himself and the family. Things were pretty good.

They got better when his son David M. took over in 1853. Railroads were being built at a crazy pace; thousands and thousands of miles of track was being laid, and trains with steam engines were on the move. The trains, along with steamboats on the Mississippi, gave my family another and faster way to ship our product. The telegraph helped business too; when barkeepers ran low on whiskey, they had a way to reach distillers and order more.

Also adding to the growth of the industry was a change in the distilling process. David M. and other distillers were getting away from the pot still and using something called column stills. These new stills increased production so we could make more and more brown liquor.*

Thanks to these new distribution channels and processes, bourbon was proving popular, and it soon emerged as the drink of choice in the Old West. When cowboys bellied up to bars in frontier towns like Dodge City or San Antonio and asked for a whiskey, chances are they got bourbon. It was the cowboy drink.

During the Civil War, troops on both the Union and Confederate sides had their share of bourbon. After a battle, it helped eased their pain and fortify their spirits. It also served as a necessary anesthetic to help the wounded; medicines weren't what they are today. Kentucky was a

*Just in case you're interested, bourbon gets its dark color from sitting inside, or aging, in a new oak barrel that is burned or charred on the inside. When it comes off the still, it's white as water, and when it comes out of the barrel, it's brown, having absorbed the color of the caramelized layer of sugar that is created from the charring. That's some knowledge you can impress your friends with.

border state; it stayed in the Union. Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the president of the Union, was from Kentucky, but you could still own slaves there, so it was about as close to being neutral as you could get. Legend has it that when the Union troops came through Bourbon County, the distilleries would fly the American flag; when the Confederates did, they flew the rebel colors. Both were good customers, no need to choose sides now.

General Ulysses Grant, commander of the Union forces, was probably the bourbon industry's biggest customer; he drank so much of it that congressmen started complaining to President Lincoln about him, said he was an embarrassment, wasn't fit to hold the position. Lincoln didn't care. Always a big Grant supporter, he reportedly responded, "Find out what he drinks and send a case to my other generals." (For the record, Grant drank Old Crow, which would one day become a fine Beam product.)

With demand for bourbon growing, David M. left the original distillery on Hardin Creek (his brother Joseph took it over) and founded a new one about seven miles west in Nelson County, near the new railroad. It was here that he launched a brand named Old Tub that would end up proving quite popular. He also brought his son into the enterprise. His name was Jim Beam. You probably have heard of him.

I never met my great-grandfather, so what I know is what I've been told, and I've been told a lot. He was only 16 when he went to work at the distillery and, along with

his brother-in-law, Albert Hart, took it over when he was 30 years old, so he must have known what he was doing. (When I was 30, I was working the night shift on the bottling line, punching a clock.) I guess you could call him the Bill Gates of bourbon, because he took not just a business, but an entire industry, and kind of propelled it forward. He was the man all right.

From what I've been told, my great-grandfather was "classic Kentucky," a straightforward and simple man who saw things in black and white, threw big parties but probably didn't give too many toasts, and went to church but probably didn't sing too loud. He was a formal man, never went anywhere without a suit and tie—even fished and hunted in a suit and tie—and drove a Cadillac car back and forth from the distillery to Bardstown, a jug of family yeast sitting in the front seat next to him. That yeast was a Beam heirloom, passed down through the generations, and it turned the mash into alcohol. You see, you have to use the same yeast to keep your whiskey consistent and tasting right and he wasn't about to let it out of his sight. No room for error on that subject. My great-grandmother Mary, his wife, complained, said the yeast stunk up the house, said it smelled like old socks, but Jim didn't care. He just shrugged, asked what's for supper. That yeast was gold; it made his whiskey special and it smelled just fine to him.

According to an old newspaper we keep, *The Nelson County Register*, "Jim Beam was full of energy, no one was more popular than he." And by all accounts, that

was true. Leslie Samuels, whose family would own the Maker's Mark distillery, was a next-door neighbor and a best friend. They were close, had big times together, and even had a special sidewalk put in to connect the two houses. They drank their share of whiskey out on the front porch together, discussing things: their hopes, ambitions, their dreams for life. One story about those two has stood the test of time, so I'll tell it now. Shows that my great-grandfather wasn't all work; he had himself a sense of humor too.

My great-grandmother Mary ("Maw Maw") Beam was a devout Catholic. Jim Beam wasn't. Anyway, the archbishop of the area, a higher-up to be sure, was coming to Bardstown for a visit. A big deal. Maw Maw Beam snapped into action, got the Big House and the entire town ready to receive him. She pulled out all the stops, had a parade planned, had a stage set up, put away the liquor in the basement. Then she dispatched Mr. Beam and Mr. Samuels to Louisville to pick him up while she waited at home for the Second Coming. Well, apparently when the two boys got to Louisville, they learned that the archbishop hadn't come. He was sick, stayed home in Chicago. (Archbishop or not, the guy could have called. But that's just my opinion. . . .) Anyway, Jim, who was a mason, and not wanting to disappoint the faithful back in Bardstown, especially his wife, decided to put on his Mason uniform, which included a hood that pretty much covered his whole face, get back in the

convertible car they had come in, return to town, and take on the role of archbishop. They drove the parade route, waving to everyone and blessing people; they might have pulled over to take a few confessions, I'm not sure. When they got to the stage, Maw Maw was there to greet them, beaming with joy. She got the surprise of her life, though, when Jim took off his hood to reveal that rather than His Holiness, the town had just been genuflecting to a bourbon distiller. Everyone was shocked and confused, especially Maw Maw Beam, who, while not known for her temper, reportedly lost it on the stage and said a few very un-Christian things out loud. A bit of scene ensued in front of the whole town. I suspect Jim regretted his little stunt, but I'm glad he did it. It's made for a good story.

Down deep, parties and practical jokes aside, I don't think Jim Beam really cared if he was all that popular. What he really cared about was the family business. He wanted to grow it, he wanted to take it to a whole new level. And, by all accounts, he succeeded.

Like a lot of ambitious people, he had a single-minded purpose, a clear vision about how things should and were going to be, and nothing was going to get in his way. Eyes on the prize. Let me do my job, and you do yours. So, what's for supper?

By 1899, business was booming and demand was high. To accommodate it, he built new rack houses to store more whiskey, hired more people to do more work. Everything

was going along about as well as could be. Things were moving forward.

Then, just like that, things stopped, stopped cold. The government decided that liquor was the root of all evil (though they later would decide it was the root of a lot of good tax revenue . . .) and declared that the production and sale of alcohol was illegal. Prohibition set in.

Now, to be fair, the bourbon industry knew Prohibition was coming. It wasn't like the federal government just sprang it on the country overnight. The temperance movement had been growing for decades, and individual states had already gone dry. But when something called the Volstead Act was passed in 1919, it still caught everyone in our business flat-footed, and the whiskey industry just shut down.

My great-grandfather did a lot of things to stay afloat during that time, but one thing he didn't do was go to jail. He sold the plant, took a few barrels home and stored them in his basement for his personal use, then locked up the barrels in the rack houses and decided to try his hand at some other ventures: operating a coal mine and then a rock quarry in Kentucky, and owning citrus groves in Florida. He was a duck out of water, though. Heart wasn't in it and it showed on his bottom line. Bourbon was in his blood, so he bid his time, waiting for the Repeal. He bought an old distillery, the Murphy Barber in Clermont, Kentucky, about 13 miles west of his old plant, and attached to that rock quarry. He and the family worked that quarry and

waited for the storm to pass. The storm lasted a lot longer than he ever imagined, though. Thirteen years. Most distillers thought it would last five at most.

Now, a lot of people ask me about Prohibition, ask if we were in the bootlegging business, and they make a lot of assumptions when they do. They assume that we went into the business, that we kept making our whiskey on the sly, up in the hills. They romanticize the period. The truth is, I don't know exactly what took place during that time. It's not like we kept records on bootlegging or moonshining. I do know that when we shut down in 1920, we had a lot more bourbon in our rack houses than when we opened up some 13 years later. It went somewhere. Probably north, probably east. My cousin Carl Beam, who was a Master Distiller, said that he remembers seeing a line of shiny black cars outside the plant in the evenings with their trunks open. And the next morning, after those trunks were slammed shut and those cars were long gone, there were a few less barrels in our rack houses. Someone's pocket was getting fat, but it wasn't ours. Probably some local sheriffs, or some distant cousins, or some forward-thinking former distillery worker who had kept an extra rack house key. Anyway, a lot of that bourbon went, and it probably went to Chicago.

The Beams hunkered down during that period, did what they had to do to survive. One cousin went off to Mexico to start a distillery; making whiskey was legal there. Another went off to Montana to make "medicinal"

bourbon. That's right, during Prohibition, bourbon suddenly became government-approved medicine, good for what ails you. A handful of distilleries stayed alive by getting permits to sell their whiskey to drugstores that could then turn around and sell it to people who had a prescription from a doctor. (I would love to see one of those prescriptions*: Take two tablespoons of bourbon as needed. This medicine might make you drowsy—or really happy*.) I may be wrong, but I don't think anyone made much money doing that, but every dime helped back then, I guess.

Prohibition hurt all of Kentucky and people did what they could to get by. Moonshining, supposedly named because it was made up in the hills at night when the moon was shining, became common. The 'shiners made what they could with whatever ingredients they had. The result was a whiskey of dubious quality. Some of what they made was flat-out dangerous; you could go blind drinking a bad batch, and more than a few poor souls did. Buyer beware.

Once it was made, the 'shiners poured it into Mason jars and bootlegged it out, the law not far behind. There was a famous sheriff from that time, "Big Six" Henderson, who was hell-bent on taking Prohibition seriously. He chased a lot of people around, reportedly caught a cousin or two up in the hills, shut down or broke up a lot of stills in the area. There was a fair amount of pistol waving and shotgun shooting during those years. Exciting and dangerous times. Old-timers have told me that Bardstown was a main

staging area for bootleggers; they'd load up and make a run for it. There was a road not too far from the Beam house that led out of town. It was nicknamed "Alcohol Avenue," and apparently it was a main whiskey thoroughfare. Late at night, you could hear engines roaring as the cars headed off to Louisville and other big cities. The risks were high; if they got caught it was jail for sure, but the rewards—cash money in your pocket—were higher, so they drove like hell.

It's a well-known fact that NASCAR, the stock car circuit, got its start during Prohibition. Sounds strange, but it's true. The very first drivers were bootleggers. Those drivers souped up their cars, put powerful engines in them so they could outrun the tax agents, then learned to drive those hilly back roads at high speeds late at night, sometimes throwing cans of oil out their windows to make the road behind them slick. They honed their driving skills, became masters of their car, knew how to take a country road curve at 80 miles per hour, spin around 360 degrees on a dirt path, change a blowout in less than two minutes. Pretty soon those drivers began racing each other on Sunday afternoons for fun; later on they started doing it for money and another industry was born. Legendary NASCAR driver Junior Johnson was a bootlegger, although he wasn't from Kentucky.

In addition to bootlegging, there were other crimes in the Bardstown area during that time. Warehouse robberies weren't that uncommon. Transporters, or "white

mule runners," would break into warehouses that still had barrels in them, siphon off the whiskey, and replace it with water. No one was the wiser. Most times the mule runners weren't that polite. They'd just pull up in a big truck, overpower the guards, tie them up, and take what they wanted. A month or two later, they'd be back for more.

Prohibition had an impact, all right. Before the law went into effect, there were 17 large distilleries operating in the Bardstown area. Kept a lot of people employed, a lot of families in groceries. But when they shut down, hard times hit and most of the distilleries went dark for good. They couldn't wait out the storm. The families that owned them—good families, friends of my family—just walked away.

We didn't, though. Somehow, Jim Beam got us through it and when Repeal came on December 5, 1933, he was ready. He was pushing 70 by then, but he still wore that suit and tie, still had a plan, still had the fire in him. Get out of my way, let me do my job. He applied for a reinstatement of his liquor-making license, then spent a year trying to get financing in order. Finally, in 1934 and with the help of his son T. Jeremiah, his brother Park, and his nephew Carl, they rebuilt that old Murphy Barber plant from scratch, bit by bit, renamed it the James B. Beam Distilling Company, and got it up and running in less than 120 days. The first post-Prohibition whiskey was sold about a year later. It was a real family effort, a high point in our history, everyone working together to preserve the legacy, the heritage, and even though they were crunched for

time and money, they pulled it off. The Good Times, they were back.

Well, maybe not all the way back. Prohibition was like death to the bourbon distillers. As soon as the law was lifted, scotch, gin, and Canadian whiskies flooded the market. Remember, they hadn't stopped making that stuff in Canada and Scotland, so those distilleries were ready to go, they were chomping at the bit. Meanwhile, we pretty much had to start over: grind up the corn, distill it, and most important, age it. It takes time to age bourbon whiskey, years, and people weren't about to wait years. Hell, they had waited long enough for a drink. So they turned to scotch, gin, and Canadian and Irish whiskies. We were all but forgotten. Bourbon, hell, what's that again?

To make matters worse, a lot of the post-Prohibition bourbon was inferior whiskey. We and the other distillers rushed young whiskey to market or took old whiskey and added neutral spirits to it in an effort to stretch it, make it go further. The result wasn't high quality and this caused even loyal customers to look elsewhere for a cocktail.

But we kept on at it. Jim and Uncle Jere, Uncle Park, and Cousin Carl worked hard, worked their asses off, but hard work sometimes isn't enough. They needed money and thanks to Prohibition, they didn't have much. So, after I'm sure some thought and some debate and a few late nights, and a few trips to the bank and a few more trips to the accountants, and another trip to the bank, they decided to sell a big chunk of the distillery to a group of investors in Chicago, who gave them a free hand in running things. A few years later, they

sold off the rest. My family had lost their independence but had gained the freedom to pursue their life's work. They got production moving again, brought what was left of our inventory to market, and probably bought other, bankrupt distilleries' inventory as well. Then they hit the road, promoting it all over the country. Billboards went up on the side of the highways, lifelong relationships with retailers and distributors were forged, ads in magazines taken out. The Beams are good at making whiskey, but we're also pretty good at selling it. In the 1950s, Colonel James B. Beam (later to be named Jim Beam Bourbon) was a national brand, and things were humming along.

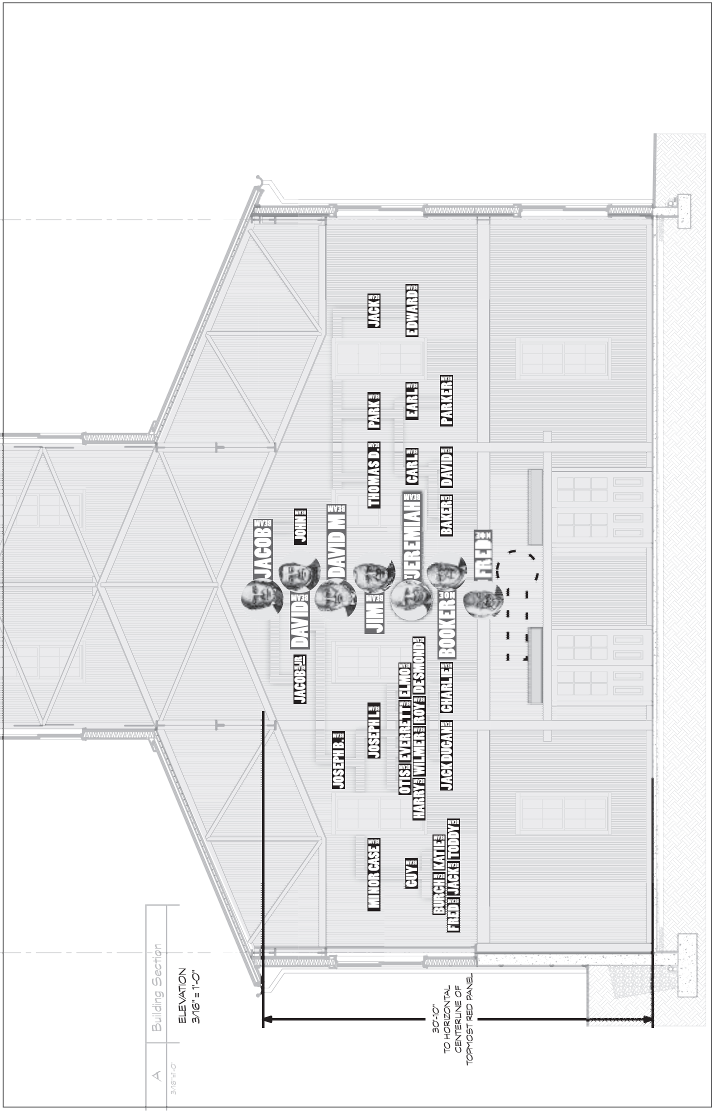
Jim Beam kept running as fast as he could, but you can't outrun time and age, and pretty soon he said, "That's it," and turned the operation over to Jere. Time to head off to the front porch. In Kentucky, people don't ride off into the sunset, don't head out to pasture; they sit on the front porch. And he had one of the best front porches in Kentucky. Wide and sturdy and overlooking North Third Street, Bardstown's main drag. Jim watched the world go by from that porch for a few years, then on Christmas Eve 1947 he gave my father, Booker, his Winchester Model 12 shotgun—good for hunting quail, he said—and the next morning, Christmas Day, he died in his own home, in his own bed, 83 years old, a life lived.

I guess you could say things changed after that, and they did and they didn't. A few years before, and with Jim's blessing, a nephew, Earl, Park Beam's son, had gone to work for another distillery, and we no longer owned the

business, but we still were in charge, we were still making bourbon whiskey. Uncle Jere and my cousin Carl, and later his sons, Baker and David—good old Kentucky boys you didn't mess with—did more than just preserve the legacy; they grew the business during the fifties, sixties, and seventies, gave everything they had, put their hearts and backs into it. They lived right there at the distillery, the plant a part of the family, a living and breathing thing. They took care of it, through floods, tornadoes, and lightning strikes, and it took care of them. Sales soared, and then we got bought by American Tobacco, which later became Fortune Brands, which later took us public, so we were independent again. An American company, now a global company selling more than six million cases of Jim Beam Bourbon every year, along with a lot of other bourbons and spirits.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. In 1950, my dad, Booker, entered the picture. Big man, big ideas. (More on him later; he deserves his own chapter.) He was close to Uncle Jere, a favorite, had a knack for the business and soon enough was named Master Distiller. Booker worked for more than 50 years at our distilleries (we had two by then, one in Boston, Kentucky, and the flagship in Clermont), increasing production year after year, broadening our portfolio of brands, introducing higher-end bourbons. In short, making sure things got done right and that the foundation was solid for the next generation.

And that next generation, a seventh generation, slowly but surely came along. I'm referring to me, of course. Lucky Seven. Yours truly.


A
Building Section
3/16"=1'-0"
ELEVATION
3/16" = 1'-0"
30'-10"
TO HORIZONTAL
CENTERLINE OF
TOPMOST RED PANEL
JACOB
JOHN
DAVID M
DAVID
JIM
JEREMIAH
BOOKER
FRED
JACOB JR.
JACK
EDWARD
PARK
EARL
PARKER
THOMAS D.
CARL
DAVID
BAKER
JOSEPH B.
JOSEPH L.
OTIS
EVERRETT
ELMO
HARRY
WILMER
ROY
DESMOND
JACK DUGAN
CHARLIE
MINOR CASE
GUY
BURCH
KATIE
TODDY
FRED
JACK

BOURBON PRIMER

Behind Every Good Bourbon There's A Beam

There are a lot of Beams in Kentucky. Always have been, probably always will be. We have a reunion every year next to the distillery, organized by my first cousin Jim Beam Noe, who is an engineer at the Clermont Plant. More than 100 people show up and we have a big time. Thumb through the Bardstown phone book and you'll see a lot more Beams. Our family tree bears out our size, and a little more research will bear out our influence in the bourbon industry. I have a long line of cousins and uncles that have worked not only at our distillery, but for competitors as well. A second cousin, Joseph, helped found Heaven Hill. Another cousin, Jack, founded the Early Times Distillery. And another Beam, Elmo, was a Master Distiller at Maker's Mark. The list goes on and on, stretching back more than 200 years. While there aren't a whole lot of direct descendants of Jim Beam, there are a whole lot of cousins. Joe Beam was one of them, for example. He was Jim's cousin, and he had seven sons and those sons were all distillers, every last one of them. All told, more than 30 descendants of Jacob Beam became distillers, whether for our company or others. It's a who's-who in whiskey and kind of flat-out amazing when you think about it.

Some families have lawyers in them, some have politicians; others have their share of writers, poets, or bankers. My family is full of distillers. Bourbon in our blood, bourbon in our bones.

JAMES B. BEAM
BARDSTOWN, KENTUCKY
December 7th 1933

Ass't Supervisor of Permits,
Bureau of Industrial Alcohol,
Louisville, Kentucky.

Dear Sir:

The undersigned, James B. Beam, President of the James B. Beam Distilling Co., located at Clermont, Ky., herewith is enclosing application for permit to operate a distillery at Clermont, Kentucky, said distillery to have a daily capacity of 600 bushels, producing approximately 3,000 gallons of Bourbon whiskey.

James B. Beam has been engaged in the whiskey business for forty years succeeding his father D.M. Beam in the year of 1894, since that time he has been general manager and part owner of the Clear Spring Distilling Co., located at Bourbon, Ky., also President of the F.G.Walker Co., located at Bardstown, Ky., and has had full control of the two above mentioned distilleries up to the time of prohibition.

Now, since repeal of the 18th amendment, I am desirous of re-entering the business and hope that your bureau will give the application due consideration in granting the James B. Beam Distilling Co., the permit as requested to operate the distillery as described above.

Thanking you for your attention, I beg to remain

Yours very truly

James B. Beam

James B. Beam
for
James B. Beam Distilling Co., Inc.

Letter Asking for Permission to Operate a Distillery After Repeal