

REMUS VOLSTEAD RESERVE

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Many of you know that among my many vices, I enjoy good cigars, good wines and good bourbon. Recently I discovered that I had become something of a bourbon snob. While intellectually I knew bourbon whiskey didn't have to be made in Kentucky to be called bourbon, I just thought that any good bourbon whiskey had to be made in Kentucky. That all changed several months ago. A client brought me a gift; a bottle of whiskey. While admitting she didn't know much about bourbon, she was quite proud as she presented the bottle to me. It was beautifully packaged in a box that splits open from the top revealing a gorgeously crafted bottle. But when I looked at the name on the bottle, I didn't recognize the name. In today's bourbon market, that's not particularly uncommon. The growth of small batch bourbons and small distilleries has been exponential in the last 10 years. New bourbons are continuously being released and it is increasingly difficult to keep up with all the new names and brands.

So as I looked at this previously unknown, beautiful bottle I immediately searched for the distillery name. It was distilled by the G. Remus Distilling Company. That didn't ring a bell with me...and then to my horror, I read that it was distilled in Lawrenceburg, Indiana! I hope my initial disappointment wasn't

apparent as my inner snobbiness quickly reared its ugly head. Ah well, my client was very kind and well intentioned and I thought she simply didn't know any better. Little did I know. So I oohed and aahed about the beautiful gift and thanked my client for thinking of me.

That night my curiosity led me to research just what the heck this was. As it turns out, "what this was" is a commemorative edition of a 14 year old straight, 100 proof, bottled in bond bourbon whiskey released on the 100th anniversary of the Volstead Act. It is one of only 6000 bottles released. Each one is numbered and carries a manufacturer's suggested retail price of \$200! Well, that got my attention. It also piqued my curiosity about the G. Remus Distilling Company and who or what is a "Remus".

Well, Remus and the distillery are named for George Remus. And let me tell you, therein lies a story...for George Remus was known as "The King of the Bootleggers".

Remus was born in Germany in 1878. He and his family immigrated to the United States in 1882 and moved to Chicago in 1885. At age 14, Remus supported the family by working in his uncle's pharmacy because Remus' father was unable to work. After graduating from the Chicago College of Pharmacy at 19 years of age, Remus became a certified pharmacist and bought his uncle's pharmacy at the

age of 21. Within five years Remus had expanded, buying another pharmacy. However, he soon tired of the pharmacy business.

Remus decided to become a lawyer and attended the Illinois College of Law (that later merged with DePaul University College of Law) and was admitted to the Illinois Bar in 1904. Remus specialized in criminal defense, especially murder cases, and became quite famous, due in large part to the highly publicized William Cheney Ellis murder case in 1914. It was in this case that Remus pioneered the “transitory insanity” defense that would evolve into what is now known as the “temporary insanity” defense. By 1920, Remus was earning \$500,000 a year (approximately \$6.3 million in today’s dollars).

Following the ratification of the 18th Amendment and passage of the Volstead Act, on January 17, 1920, Prohibition began in the United States. Within a few months, Remus realized some of his criminal defense clients were becoming very wealthy very quickly through the illegal production, distribution and sale of alcoholic beverages. Remus was not satisfied with the enormous fees he was making and decided to cash in on the incredible amounts of money being made by his criminal clients...essentially deciding to become a criminal himself and to use his knowledge of the law to escape prosecution.

Remus studied the Volstead Act and found a loophole which allowed him to buy distilleries and pharmacies to produce and sell “bonded” liquor for

“medicinal” purposes under government licenses. If you’ve ever wondered where the term “bottled in bond” comes from, it comes from a license from the government issued to distillers and the liquor they produce evidencing that it is made under strict requirements for ingredients and proof (or percentage of alcohol). For example, bottled in bond bourbon must contain at least 51% corn in its mash bill and be 100 proof (or 50% alcohol content).

Since George Remus could already legally produce and sell alcohol, he came up with the clever idea to increase his sales and his profit. Remus would have his own employees hijack his own shipments of liquor and then turn around and sell the hijacked shipments illegally at a much greater profit. It was at this time that Remus realized that Chicago was too tightly controlled by the mob and moved to Cincinnati, where 80% of America’s bonded whiskey was located within a 300-mile radius and bought up most of the whiskey manufacturers (thus the Kentucky connection). Within 2 years he had bought and sold one seventh of the bonded liquor in America. In less than three years, Remus made about \$40,000,000 and had about 3,000 people working for him. He owned many of America’s most famous distilleries. In addition to serving the Cincinnati community, many small towns, such as Newport, Kentucky, became drinking towns where gamblers opened small casinos to entertain their patrons.

One of Remus' fortified distilleries was the so-called "Death Valley Farm" in Cincinnati. The outside world thought it was only accessible by a little used dirt road. The alcohol was distilled in the attic of the house and then sent by dumb waiter to the basement. A trap door located in the basement led to a tunnel. That tunnel led to a different access road. The bootleggers would push the carts of liquor along the tunnel to a waiting car or truck that would sedately drive away carrying its illegal booze. It is believed that this illegal distillery was one of the only locations never busted in the Cincinnati area.

In addition to being the "King of the Bootleggers", Remus lived lavishly. He lived in a mansion nicknamed the Marble Palace. He and his wife threw outrageous parties (no doubt with plentiful "medicinal" alcohol available). In 1922 Remus and his wife hosted a New Year's Eve party. The guests included a hundred couples from the most prestigious families in the area. As parting gifts, Remus presented the men with diamond stick pins and gave each guest's wife a new car.

As you might expect, Remus' extravagant lifestyle began to draw the attention of the authorities. In 1925, Remus' scheme to use his legal knowledge to evade the Volstead Act went awry. He was indicted for thousands of violations of the Volstead Act. At trial he was convicted by a jury in under two hours of deliberations and sentenced to two years in federal prison. He spent two years in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary for bootlegging.

While in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, Remus became friends with another inmate. He eventually confided in his friend that his wife, Imogene Holmes, had control over his money. The inmate Remus befriended was an undercover prohibition agent, Franklin Dodge, who was there to gather information of just this sort of thing. However, much like Remus himself, Dodge was not content with his current status in life. So, instead of reporting the information as to the disposition of Remus' ill-gotten gains, Dodge resigned his position as a federal agent (and leaving the confines of the federal penitentiary) and began an affair with Remus' wife, Imogene. Dodge and Imogene liquidated Remus' assets and hid as much of the money as possible. When Remus was released from prison, Imogene gave her husband only \$100 of the multi-million empire he created. But Dodge and Imogene weren't done trying to shaft poor old George...they attempted to deport Remus and, when that didn't work, they hired a hit man to murder Remus for \$15,000. The would-be assassin didn't follow through with the hit and instead told Remus about the plot.

In late 1927, Imogene Holmes filed for divorce from Remus. On the way to court for the finalization of the divorce, Remus had his driver chase the taxi carrying Holmes and her daughter (Remus' step-daughter) through Eden Park in Cincinnati, finally forcing it off the road. Remus jumped out of his car and fatally

shot Imogene to the horror of park onlookers. Remus was again in serious legal trouble.

The prosecutor in the murder trial was 30 year old Charles Phelps Taft II, son of Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and former President, William Howard Taft. Taft was seen as a man with a bright political future and thought the highly publicized trial would be just the thing to springboard his political or judicial career. The trial made national headlines for a month. With the assistance of lawyer, Charles Elston, Remus defended himself on the basis of... what else...transitory insanity. He argued that his distress at his wife's betrayal caused him to go temporarily insane! The jury deliberated only nineteen minutes before acquitting him on the murder charge. However the jury did find that Remus was insane and Remus was committed to an insane asylum. Ultimately, the prosecutor was thwarted in his efforts at justice as Remus was able to convince the asylum and state psychiatrists that he could now cope with his distress and was no longer insane. Remus was freed from the asylum after only 7 months.

George decided a more modest lifestyle was in order. He moved to Covington, Kentucky, married for a third and final time to his long-time secretary, Blanche Watson. He ran a small contracting firm until suffering a stroke in 1950. George Remus died on January 20, 1952 at the age of 73. Remus has sometimes been credited as the direct inspiration for *The Great Gatsby* (though he was more

likely one of several figures who collectively were the inspiration for the character). Remus is the subject of Craig Holden's 2001 novel *The Jazz Bird*. He was also featured in the 2011 Ken Burns documentary, *Prohibition*. And, of course, Remus is the namesake of a remarkable bottle of whiskey.

So now you know a little more about George Remus...but what about this bottle of bourbon whiskey? In short, it is delicious... notes of oak, leather, pecans and a hint of citrus. Very drinkable...but please, don't anyone think to mix this with anything with the possible exception of ice. As our fellow members, Matt Frerichs and Hollis White can attest, it was a clear winner in a tasting with 5 other more well-known bourbons. If you can get your hands on a bottle, please don't turn your nose up at it like I did. And to my client, thank you for opening my eyes to a whole new world of opportunities in bourbons!