

Emil Mayer: Out of Cincinnati and into the Harem

Special to the Ohio Swirl

By Jack Sullivan

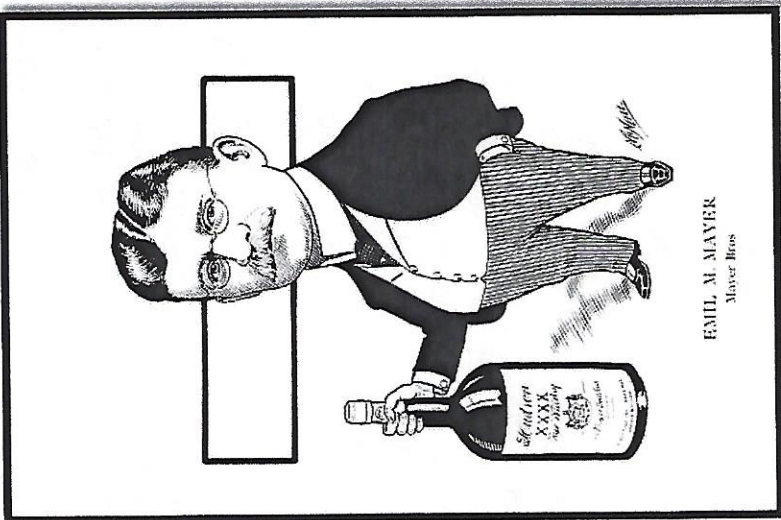


Figure 1

Truth was, in that prudish age it was possible to display nudes so long as they had a background that suggested that they were from a time long ago or at least far away. This was the age of Orientalism when many American artists were painting scenes of the Near East, focusing on the sensuous elements. As one writer has put it: "The exotic element of harem life...reinvented on canvas appealed outwardly staid Victorians whose inner life welcomed paintings that stimulated the senses and encouraged desire."

We can assume Mayer was among them. His Mayer Bros. & Co. picture, reproduced either on tin or heavy paper, long has been considered one of the gems of saloon art. (Figs. 2, 3) It shows two Middle Eastern men,

Shown here in caricature (Fig. 1), Emil M. Mayer looks like the average Midwestern stogy businessman of the early 1900s, formally dressed with a spacious stomach beneath his vest and coat. Thoughts of the exotic or perhaps even the erotic, however, were running through his mind. They told him he should take his Hudson Rye whiskey out of Cincinnati and into an exotic Middle East setting.

dressed in robes and attended by a black servant, ogling a seated young woman. We are in a Middle Eastern market whose merchant has displayed a number of jugs and calabashes and, yes, a nubile young woman whose only garment is a kind of shawl.



Figure 2

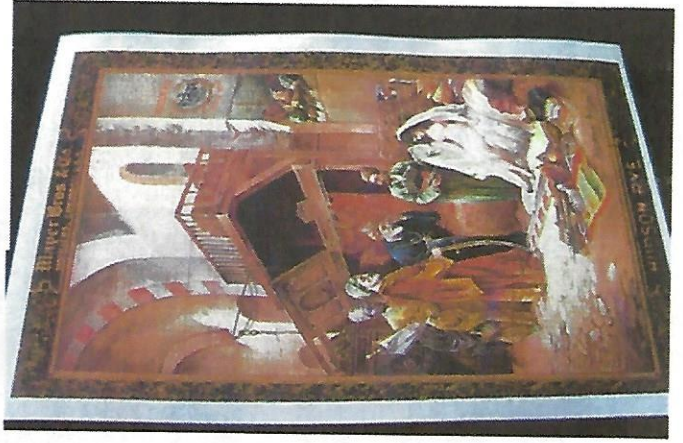


Figure 3

There was other evidence of the distiller's fascination with the exotic. Note here a Mayer Bros. trade card for the firm's flagship, Hudson Rye (Figs. 4,5). It is in two modes. The first image is of a snuff box with an invitation to "take a pinch." Sounds innocuous enough, but when the lid is pulled back it reveals a harem girl, a bare breasted "odalisque," as the

East was his naming one of his whiskey brands, "Alhambra." The Alhambra is a Moslem palace and fortress complex located in Granada, Spain. It was constructed during the mid-14th Century by Moorish Arab rulers. It is an exotic locale, noted for its architecture and fountains. Once again Mayer in his national advertising was taking his Kentucky-made whiskey into the realm of the exotic.

The firm first appears in Cincinnati business directories in 1882, located at 38 Main Street, under the name of Isaac Mayer, its founder. The company was listed as a liquor wholesaler. Within a year, the name was changed to Isaac Mayer & Sons, as the father took his boys, one of them Emil, into the firm. The company also moved to 34 Main Street. The following year brought another change as a new partner, E. M. Harris, was added to the firm and its name was changed once again to Mayer, Harris & Co.

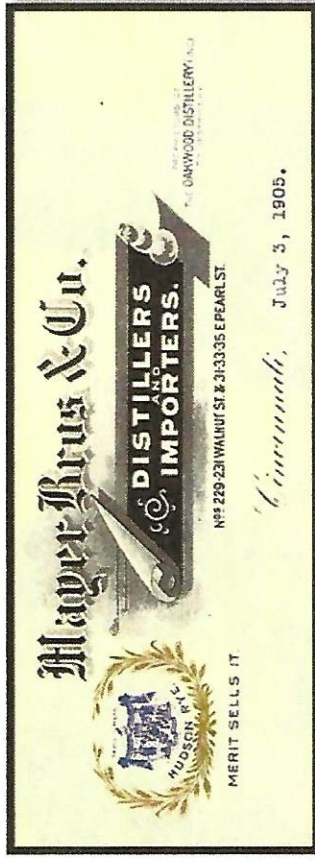


Figure 6

Two years later another major change occurred, likely with the death of Isaac Mayer. The company then became Mayer Bros. & Co. (Fig. 6). Another move occurred, this time to 5 West Pearl Street. Although Harris's name was no longer on the masthead, he appears to have continued to be associated with the business. Emil was now president and, though we know little about his personal life, it appears that he was married the same year, 1886.

Under his leadership the business flourished. Outgrowing its retail space the firm moved to 53 West Pearl. By this time the company had branched into rectifying whiskey, that is, taking raw product and blending

French would say, lying in luxury on a mound of pillows. We are told that the whiskey is the "best ever" and "beats 'em all for high balls," but we are given no clue as to where our pinching might be appropriate.

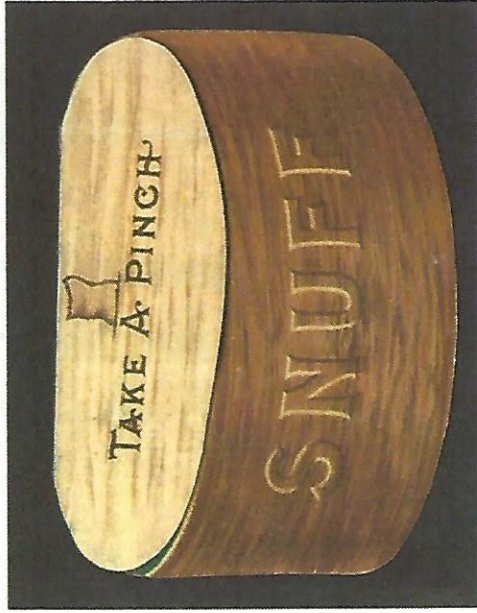


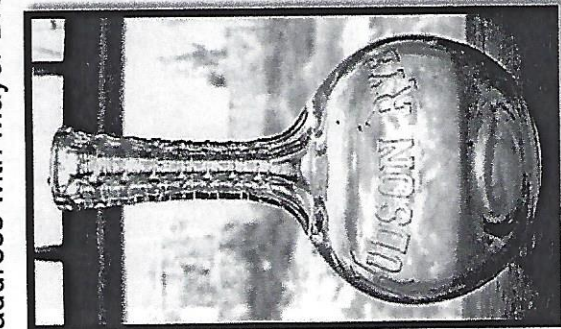
Figure 4



Figure 5

A third manifestation of Mayer's obsession with the Near

several whiskeys to taste. Like other rectifiers, Mayer may have had problems in obtaining adequate supplies of liquor for their operation. As a result in 1893 he bought a distillery he called the Oakwood Distillery Co. Located near Mayville, Kentucky, it shared a Cincinnati office address with Mayer Bros.



In addition to Hudson Rye, Hudson XXXX Rye, and Alhambra Whiskey, the firm featured such brands as "Oakwood Whiskey," "Antebellum," and "Original Frazier." It packaged these in glass bottles and featured an array of giveaways to selected customers. Items included back of the bar bottles, match safes and shot glasses (Figs. 7-14). Frequently the company slogan was "Merit Sells It," or a variation, "Sold on Merit."

Figure 7

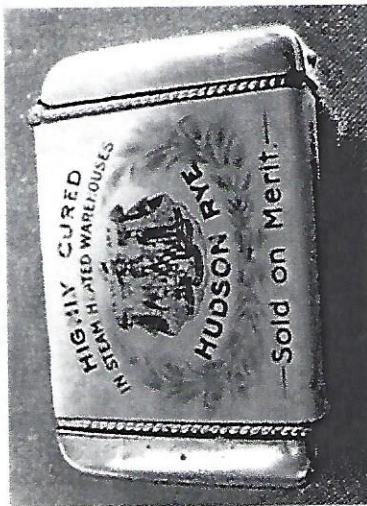


Figure 8

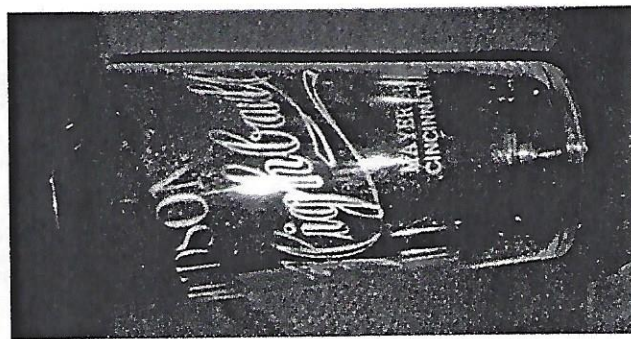


Figure 9

Emil and Mayer Bros. Co. appear to have enjoyed considerable success through the early 1900s. A letterhead from 1905 shows two locations, 229-231 Walnut Street and 31-35 Pearl Street. Their Oakwood Distillery was still an essential part of the business, its offices co-located at the Walnut Street address. Emil apparently believed things were going along well

enough in 1906 to take a two month second honeymoon to California on the 20th anniversary of his marriage. The trip was duly reported in a national trade publication. Several years later he brought his son, E. Millard Mayer, into the business. By 1914 Millard Mayer had replaced E.M. Harris on the firm's management team.

When Ohio voted in Prohibition in 1916, Mayer Bros. was finished. The distillery folded and the company closed its rectifying and sales operations in Cincinnati. For a year (1918) the company worked out of an office at the Masonic Temple and then disappeared from city directories. Because of a paucity of personal details about Emil Mayer and his family, it is not possible to say what their futures held.

As for the fascination with the erotic Orient, my guess is that it was one way that Emil Mayer could make a mark in the crowded Cincinnati whiskey market and the country beyond. His sign showing the men ogling the nude in the marketplace is ranked among the top saloon pictures of all time. Looking at how often they come up for sale, the numbers issued by the company must have been substantial. As is still the case, sex was good for sales a century ago. Just as important, Emil Mayer knew the censor could be kept away by presenting the erotic in an exotic setting.

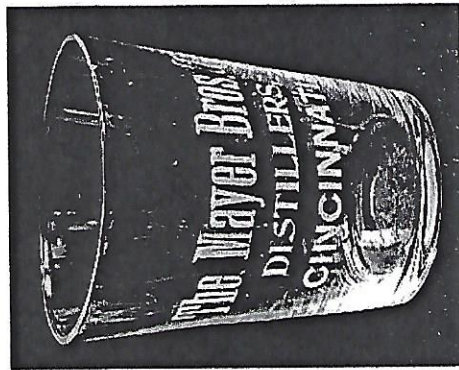


Figure 14



Figure 11

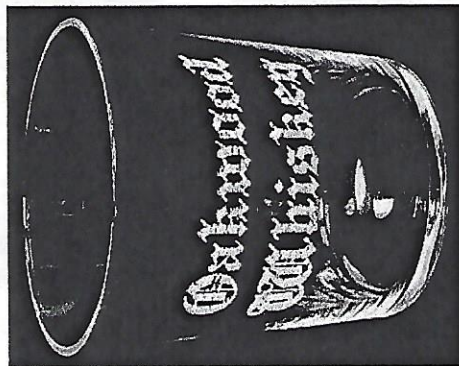


Figure 13



Figure 10

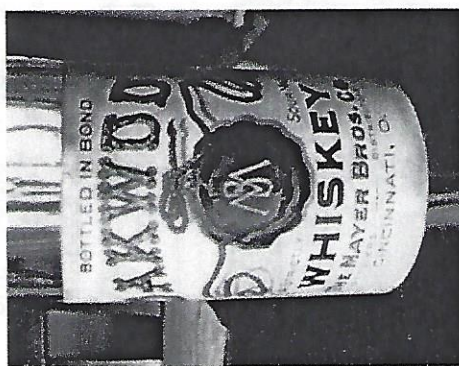


Figure 12

When the Bottled in Bond Act was passed by Congress in 1897 to help insure whiskey quality, Emil Mayer embraced it enthusiastically and advertised widely that his whiskey was in compliance with the legislation. Even with owning the Oakwood Distillery, however, Mayer seems to have had difficulty obtaining product. For example the label on the Oakwood Whiskey bottle shown here indicates it was distilled by the C. (Charles) M. Dedman Distillery of Mercer County, Kentucky.

Illustration:

- Fig. 1: Caricature of Emil Mave
- Fig. 2: Hudson Rye tin sign
- Fig. 3: Hudson Rye paper sign
- Fig. 4: Trade card closed
- Fig. 5: Trade card opened
- Fig. 6: Mayer Bros. letterhead 1905
- Fig. 7: Hudson Rye back-of-bar-bottle
- Fig. 8: Hudson Rye match safe
- Fig. 9: Hudson Rye highball glass
- Fig. 10: Hudson Rye shot glass #1
- Fig. 11: Hudson Rye shot glass #2
- Fig. 12: Oakwood Whiskey label
- Fig. 13: Oakwood Whiskey shot glass
- Fig. 14: Mayer Bros shot glass