



Staff Photo by Glenn Rutherford

An old Early Times sign is just one of many items hanging on the wall of Bill Robertson's bar in New Albany, Ind.

Unusual sign has owner guessing on earlier times



Glenn Rutherford

Courier-Journal columnist

Nobody knows for certain the age of the three-dimensional "Early Times" wood and plaster sign above Bill Robertson's bar.

Bill's Dad had it in the bar on Spring Street in New Albany, Ind., before he went into semi-retirement about four years ago, and the Gib Eurtion family had it long before the Robertsons bought the place in '61.

"They'd had a tavern here since the end of Prohibition," the younger Robertson said Friday. "But to tell you the truth, I don't know how old that sign is or what it's worth."

Robertson has talked with "a lot of old-timers around here; people in their 80s and 90s," and he's come up with a story or two about the ornate sign, which shows a cabin still and an ox-drawn wagon loaded with barrels crossing a narrow bridge.

"They tell me that years ago, Gib had to buy three or four barrels of whiskey to get that sign," Robertson said. "Some of the guys also said that there weren't too many of this kind of sign around, and I suppose that's true."

Upstairs in a second-floor bar, Robertson has another Early Times sign, similar to the one below, but the paint hasn't worn off it and it's not nearly as elaborate.

"It also says 86 or 90 proof, and they quit making that kind of whiskey quite a few years ago."

A spokesman at Brown-Forman Distillers Corp., which produces Early Times whiskey these days, said she thought the original signs were produced "probably before 1930, and certainly before World War II."

Robertson, though, thinks they're much older.

"I don't know how long they've been making Early Times whiskey, but I'll be surprised if this one sign

at least wasn't made back around the turn of the century."

The Brown-Forman people say the Early Times name can be traced 124 years. But that doesn't say anything about the age of Robertson's big sign.

"My Dad said he's only seen two other ones like it," he said. "One was in New Orleans and the other in a bar in Colorado. Phoenix Hill (a Louisville tavern) has one like it, but it says 'replica.'"

But what the heck, said Robertson, if his sign is worth a lot of money, that would only tempt somebody to break in and steal it.

"Hey, I don't even know if I want you putting anything in the paper about it," he said.

Most people like his Fontaine Ferry Park sign better, anyway, he said. "I think they get more fun out of that than anything else on the walls."

And there are lots of things on the walls, including old Coca-Cola serving trays, photos of downtown New Albany when it was under water during the '37 flood, and an enlarged picture of an old boxing handbill.

The matches were scheduled for May 20, 1940, and sponsored by the old Sportsman's Boxing Club in Louisville at Columbia Gym on Fourth Street between Oak and Breckinridge streets.

One of the contestants, by the way, was a young heavyweight named Alex Watkins, who put down the gloves, picked up a badge and served as sheriff in Floyd County, Ind., for 16 years.

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