

Washington Slept After Drinking This

Centuries Later, AppleJack Has Staying Power

By BILL FINLEY

COLTS NECK

CORPORATE headquarters is a medium-size Revolutionary War-era Colonial run by Larrie Laird; his daughter, Lisa; her cousin; and couple of secretaries. It sits just a few feet past the weathered sign telling motorists that this is where AppleJack has been made for a very long time.

There is nothing particularly fancy about the place, the people who run it or the products they sell. That has never been what Laird & Company, the oldest licensed distiller and 14th-oldest family-run business in the nation, is about.

Profits are important. After all, Laird & Company, privately held, reports average annual revenue of about \$45 million. But so is tradition, preserving a small family-run business, fending off conglomerates and producing the same sort of product for which Washington requested the recipe and that Lincoln sold at his tavern in Springfield, Ill.

"Probably one of the main reasons so many businesses don't continue is the almighty dollar," said Larrie Laird, president and chief executive of Laird & Company and the eighth generation of the Laird family to work for this central New Jersey distiller, which sells its trademark Laird's AppleJack, a mix of brandy and distilled spirits.

"A lot depends on your viewpoint, what your goals are and what satisfies you," Mr. Laird said. "There has been some tempta-

tion to sell this to a big conglomerate, but I have no need to be rich. I'm goal oriented, but my goals are more about keeping this business in the family and keeping it going."

The headquarters in Colts Neck also has a bottling facility behind the Colonial house where Laird & Company has operated since 1851.

William Laird, an immigrant from Scotland, probably had different objectives in mind when he settled in Colts Neck in 1698 and started making AppleJack — it was straight apple brandy then — for his own enjoyment.

By 1777, Robert Laird — William Laird's grandson — was operating the Colts Neck Inn (still about a mile west on Monmouth County Route 537), where AppleJack was a standard item on the menu. A 1780 entry in Mr. Laird's account book notes the commercial distillation and sale of AppleJack — the reason why the company today recognizes that date as the time when the company was founded.

During the early 1800's, AppleJack was a staple in many homes, and it was common for people to sip it with their breakfast. Before becoming president, Lincoln served it in his tavern for 12 cents a half-pint.

In 1851, after a fire at the original distillery — about a half-mile away and behind the Colts Neck Inn — the company moved to its current location, where it has produced AppleJack almost nonstop since, with a couple of notable exceptions in the 20th century.

During Prohibition, Laird & Company was given permission by the government to produce apple brandy for medicinal pur-



Photographs by Laura Pedrick for The New York Times



Larrie Laird's family has been distilling AppleJack since the late 18th century. Abraham Lincoln even sold the liquor in his tavern.

poses, allowing the family to get its product back on the shelves immediately after repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933.

World War II presented new obstacles. To aid the war effort, the company stopped producing liquor and instead dried and dehydrated apple pomace to make pectin, a gel-like food preservative.

Having weathered Prohibition and World War II, a potentially more serious problem began to develop in the 1970's — America was losing its taste for heavier brown whiskeys and brandies. In turn, the Laird family converted AppleJack into its current form, a lighter, blended version of the original product. Apple brandy has since been sold under different product names.

Step two was diversification. The Laird family knew it could not get by on apple products alone. "After Prohibition, through the 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's, we were AppleJack and that was it," said Lisa Laird Dunn, Larrie Laird's daughter and a company vice president. "That was the heyday of AppleJack, a hot brand at the time. In the 70's and 80's, the American consumer's love affair with brown whiskeys and brown goods

just stopped. That's when we developed other brands. We expanded our Laird's line to include vodka, gin, Canadian whiskey, and we acquired other brands. And with our large bottling facility here, we did a lot of contract bottling."

Then, for the first and only time in the company's history, the family could not resist the offers often made by larger companies. In 1972, 90 percent of the business was sold to outside investors, most notably Hiram Walker & Sons. For the next 21 years, the Lairds retained only a minority ownership. But by 1993 they were again ready to take on the industry giants, and bought back the interest that had been sold.

"We don't have the marketing power and the marketing dollars that the big companies have because we don't have those big, huge brands that are selling millions and millions of cases," Ms. Dunn said. "We don't have the budget to really promote products like AppleJack. There's been a lot of consolidation of distributors and there are fewer and fewer distributors in each market and they're all paying attention to companies like Allied Domecq, Diageo and the big com-

panies of the world.

"We are the little guy, so we have to come up with new marketing strategies all the time. It is difficult. But we've been through difficulties through all the years we've been in business and we always manage to find a way."

In a typical company more reflective of corporate America, AppleJack may not have survived. There simply is not a great demand for it anymore. Laird is the only company in the United States making AppleJack, and currently it accounts for only 5 percent of the firm's revenue.

Still, the Lairds have no intention of discontinuing the product, not now, probably not ever.

"In my lifetime, there has never been that temptation," Mr. Laird said. "It is our flagship brand and it bears the family name. It is the one connection we have to history. Could we exist without it? Yes, with no problem whatsoever. It's not maintained from a business standpoint as much as an emotional standpoint. It's what has been produced since the late 1600's by this family, and that's something we're very proud of."