

1901 – Scooters California Rye Whisky Begins Production

With the closure of the Barco mine, one of the mine workers approached the Smiths with a novel idea. For a few years, Scooter Stephenson a miner who had emigrated from Scotland had been quietly distilling and distributing his homebrew rye whiskey. Scooter was manufacturing his spirit using a small still he had hidden deep in the caves of Oasis Palms beyond the opening to the Barco Gold Mine.

Old No 5

In 1898 when the railroad came through to build the tunnel Scooter was forced to relocate his operation. Scooter negotiated a deal with the Santa Fe foreman to house his still in an old box car Santa Fe brought in to be used as a tool shed during the tunnel construction. Scooter daftly traded whiskey for rent and the box car provided a comfortable yet discrete location for his whiskey production. Once Santa Fe had completed construction on the tunnel Scooter, purchased the box car for \$5 and continued small-scale production in the cave. The Smiths were aware of the production but turned a blind eye as Scooter provided them with bulk whiskey at advantageous prices which they rebottled into tax-stamped bottles and sold in the restaurant of the Hotel California in downtown Oasis Palms.



Legal Whisky

In 1901 Scooter approached the Smiths and proposed they set up a partnership and obtain the proper permits (and pay the taxes) to establish the Barco Distillery and start officially manufacturing and distributing his rye whiskey.

For his whiskey production, rye grain and coal were delivered by trains unloading to platforms built along the tracks in the cave. But what made his whisky special was the 10,000-year-old virgin water that came directly from the Fenner Aquafer located deep in the ground below Oasis Palms. The water was piped into the cave from the town's water tower and a larger coal-fired still was constructed next to the No 5 boxcar. The barrels were stored and aged on racks "outside" in the caves which maintained mild temperatures and a relative humidity of 75-85% year-round. Four years later in 1905, the first batch of "Scooters Old No. 5 California Rye Whisky" was bottled and loaded on a train bound for Los Angeles. The missing E in the spelling of whiskey was to honor Scooter's Scotch Whisky distilling process which he brought over from the old country when he arrived in America on a boat named "Whisky Tango".

Scooter's whiskey was so popular, in the 1920s the Smiths built a staircase from the cave up to the Oasis Palms Hot Springs Resort Hotel which sat on the plateau directly above the distillery. The staircase was used to smuggle whiskey to the thirsty patrons staying at the hotel. Production at the Barco Distillery continued in full swing even through Prohibition when the Smiths were Bonded to produce legal "Medicinal Whiskey" that was conveniently prescribed locally and sold in the town's bars and restaurants.

Old-World Distillation

Scooter's distilling process was old-world. Specifically, he used a coal-fired still similar to the stills he saw as a child back home at [Glendronach](#). The weightier result of direct fire is related to the temperature inside the still. A still heated in this way will reach significantly higher temperatures (up to 650°C) helping to produce a different set of reactions in the wash. The intensity of the heat can then cause any residual particulate matter in the wash (dead yeast cells, grain husks, sugar compounds, proteins, and dextrans) to stick to the inner surface of the copper in the same way as steak placed on a hot griddle pan will start to brown.

Using this technique, Scooter produced an exceptional rye whiskey that rivaled many scotches in depth and flavor. But running a coal-fired still took great skill. With a coal fire, the Stillman had to think ahead and anticipate when the fire needed to be increased or dampened down and overheating was always a risk that could lead to disastrous results. His Stillman was Andrew McDowell, a fellow Scotsman and former Santa Fe "stoker" with extensive coal-burning experience running steam locomotives. Scooter and his best friend Andrew operated the Barco Distillery until their tragic passing in 1948.

The Still Explosion and Fire

On a fateful night in the fall of 1948, Scooter and Andrew were in the Old No. 5 box car bottling a 40-year-old barrel that had been put up in their first year of production together. A young apprentice fireman who was tending the still lost control of the heat and the coal-fired still overheated and exploded. The explosion lit the Old No. 5 box car on fire with Scooter and Andrew still inside. Legend has it that the barrel of 40-year-old whiskey was pushed out of the side door of the boxcar to safety but Scooter and Andrew were unable to escape and they passed in the fire. In addition to destroying the boxcar, the fire burned the staircase, and then the staircase lit the Oasis Palms Hotel and Resort building on fire subsequently burning it to the ground.

In their years of distilling, Scooter and Andrew built a loyal following of whisky aficionados and generated income that helped keep the Smith family and the town of Oasis Palms afloat for almost 50 years. After the fire, the Smiths replaced the Old No. 5 box car with a slightly larger out-of-service AT&SF refer which remained the bottling plant of the Barco Distillery until it ceased operations in 1969.