

DEBUNKING SKINNER AUCTIONS' HEADLINED "OLDEST KNOWN WHISKEY"

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In April 2021, Skinner Auctions in Boston [announced](#) they had uncovered what was “currently believed to be the oldest known whiskey in existence.” With the help of a PR firm, the story of the “Old Ingledew Whiskey” was told on major media outlets from [CNN](#) to [Forbes](#) to [Maxim](#). “We assess that the whiskey was produced circa the late 1700s,” Skinner proclaimed. That would mean the whiskey dates from the era of George Washington. No known whiskies are even remotely that old.

Three months later, an undisclosed U.S. bidder paid \$137,500 for the bottle, setting a record for American whiskey pricing.

However, the auctioneer’s assessment was fraught with problems. And information not explained in the bottle’s press release is concerning.

The now famous announcement featured no third-party whiskey experts in support of the bottle’s dating. Only the auctioneer’s “whiskey specialist” was quoted, commenting on who was “thought to be” a previous owner of the bottle. After the announcement was made, at least three whiskey experts spoke against it. Mike Veach was one, a leading American whiskey historian, who gave skeptical quotes to the [New York Times](#). Second, [Whiskey Advocate](#) published a wary critique by Jonny McCormick.

The third expert was me, also quoted in the *Times*. This report explains the significant problems with the auctioneer's assessment, from the obvious to the scientific, and concludes with the potential dangers.



Headline and photo from Skinner website

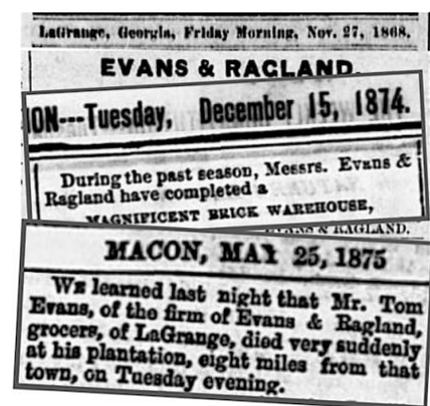
QUICK FACTS AND BACKGROUND

Bottle, dating, and original sale. The bottle has no original paper labels. The glass is embossed only with “Old Ingledew Whiskey,” “LaGrange, GA,” and “Evans & Ragland.” Newspapers [record](#) the merchant Evans & Ragland in LaGrange, Georgia from 1868 - 1875. In 1877 a new dealer is listed as taking their place.

Therefore, we can identify the glass bottle itself as made and sold circa 1868 - 1876.

Dating claim. Skinner assessed “the whiskey was produced circa the late 1700s.” The crux of that announcement was a lab analysis showing an “81.1% probability” that the spirit in the bottle might date from 1763 - 1803, which was revised to 53.1% after the auction started.

Radiocarbon dating was the lab test at the core of Skinner’s assessment. I’ve done six such tests myself using two different labs, and spoken at length with two highly respected carbon dating scientists in research for this report.



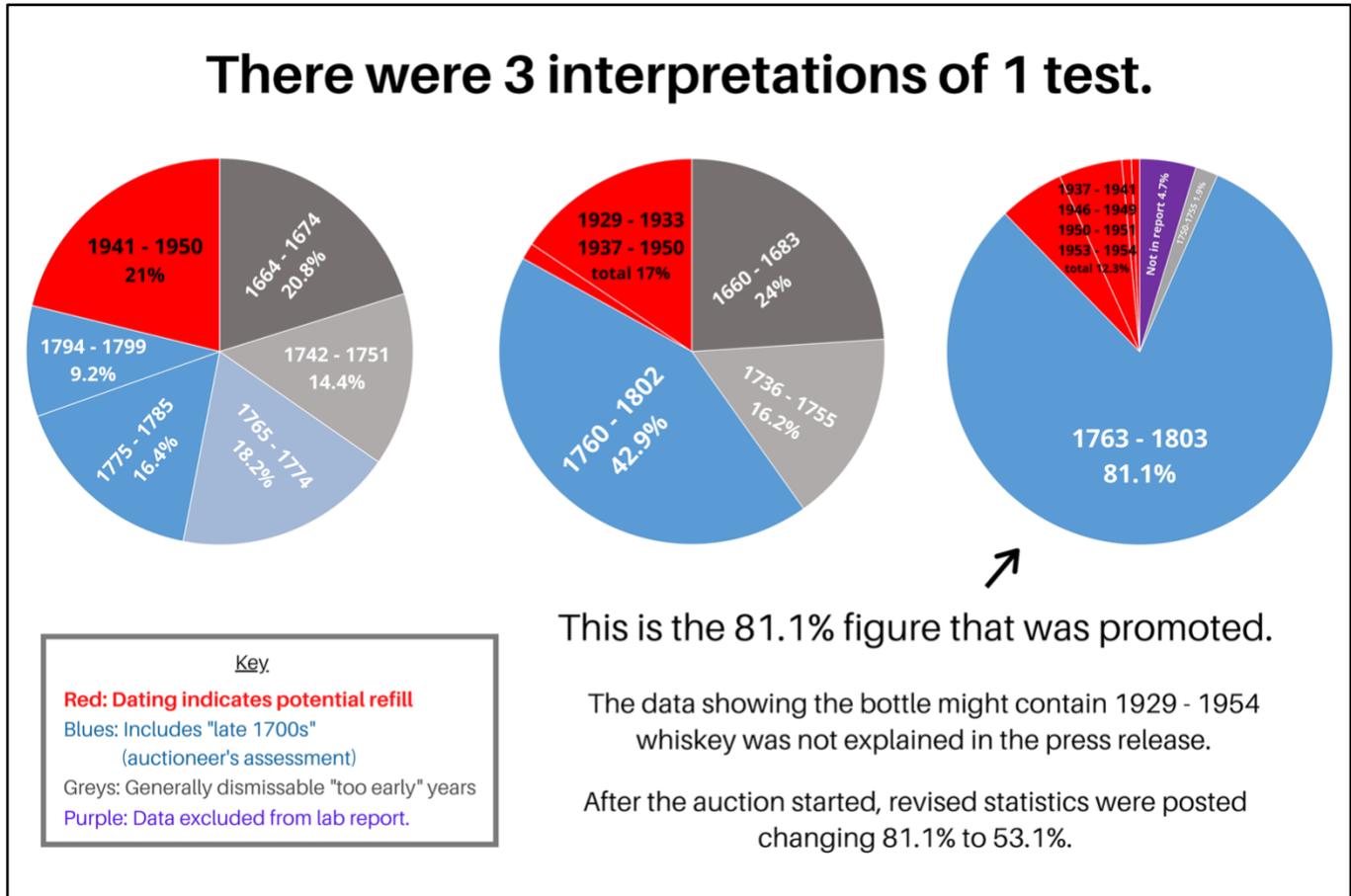
THERE WERE ORIGINALLY THREE DIFFERENT DATING INTERPRETATIONS

A lab report is like a doctor explaining a test result.

The test itself merely gives a number. For instance, the level of something in a blood sample. A doctor has to *interpret* that number: “Given your health, this 65 means you’re at low risk for heart disease.”

Carbon dating tests also give a number. For the Ingledew, it was this: 97.6 ± 0.17 .

That number had to be interpreted. The interpretation gives various dating options: “The whiskey might have been distilled during these years, maybe these years, or these years.”



To clarify: there were not three *tests*. There was *one* test with *three different interpretations* of that test. (Plus a late-announced fourth, which we’ll discuss in a moment).

The bottle’s publicity spotlighted the big 81.1% number from the third interpretation. But the second interpretation gave about half the same chance for virtually the same dating (42.9%). And Skinner’s widely reported announcement did *not* explain the data represented in red: the chances the bottle contains 20th century whiskey, completely incongruous with a bottle produced and sold circa 1870. Which if accurate would indicate the bottle has been refilled. (A careful eye would note some of the 20th century statistics were in a scientific chart Skinner published with the press release).

To clarify, **red** and “refill” mean if the corresponding dates are correct, then the whiskey actually dates from 1929 to 1954. In the whiskey community, any bottle for sale that looks sealed and original – but with non-original contents – is abhorred. That’s because even an innocently-refilled bottle can be forgotten

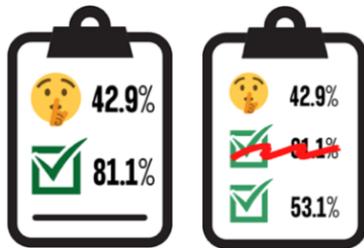
about, misunderstood, or the owner can pass away. Which means the whiskey can get resold and traded among collectors as being completely original, since nobody knows the difference. Refills are an anathema to the integrity of whiskey collecting.

These interpretations are formally called calibrations, but “interpretation” and “analysis” are used here for ease of understanding. They are done by entering the test’s “number” into computer programs which return dating possibilities. (The first calibration above uses more a more restrictive date selection method than the others. Science folks, the first includes data at 1-sigma deviation, others are 2-sigma).

Two months after Skinner’s media campaign began, the auction went live online. But after the first few hours, the bottle’s description changed: the highly-publicized 81.1% statistic (supporting the dating assessment) was quietly replaced with a much lower 53.1%. A small thumbnail contained a revised “dating graph,” as image number thirty-one out of thirty-six.

1663 (27.4%)	1682calAD
1739 (6.9%)	1756calAD
1763 (53.1%)	1803calAD
1937 (3.6%)	1941calAD
1946 (3.5%)	1949calAD
1950 (0.5%)	1951calAD
1953 (0.5%)	1954calAD

Revised stats on 1st auction day



So to summarize: the publicity emphasized 81.1% while not quoting 42.9% for nearly the same thing. After the auction went live, 53.1% was posted.

Cherry picking data is highly unscientific.

The press release did *allude* to that 42.9% data: it said the first lab’s analysis indicated 1762 - 1802 dating “with the highest probability.” Because 42.9 was the highest number in that specific lab interpretation. But perhaps a clearer description would have been “worse than a coin flip.”

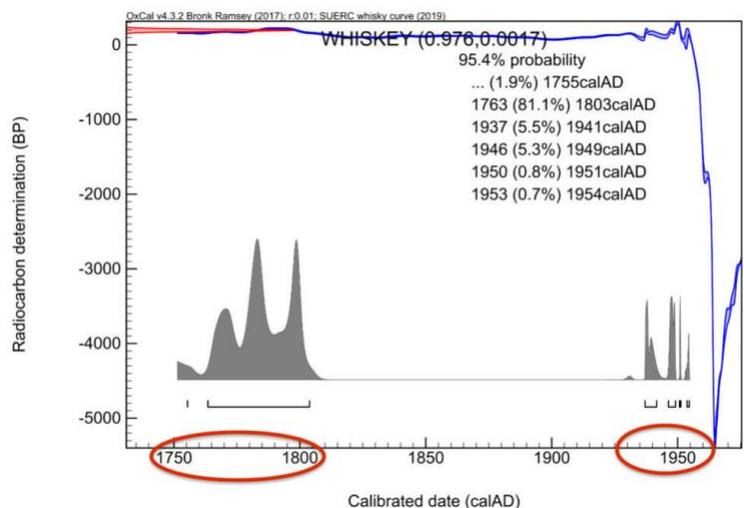
OTHER WHISKEYS CAN BE “DATED” TO THE 18TH CENTURY TOO, BUT ARE NOT

Other whiskeys have received 18th century dating results from the test Skinner used. But those results have always been rejected as too old to be believable. Skinner Auctions is the first to announce a whiskey dating belief based on embracing 18th century radiocarbon data.

A key point to understand is that radiocarbon scientists don’t issue a decision on the *whiskey itself*. They provide a computer-created interpretation full of possible dating “choices.” Whoever commissioned the test then decides how to apply those choices to their whiskey.

Back in March-April, whoever was reviewing the Ingledew’s results would have faced a quandary. No analyses showed the whiskey could be from the era of the glass bottle itself (c. 1870).

The graph to the right is the actual data/interpretation that contained Skinner’s favored 81.1% statistic. The cluster of grey spikes you see all the way on the *left* represent 18th century dating possibilities/choices. The grey spikes on the *right* are 20th century dating choices. (Red circles added for clarity).



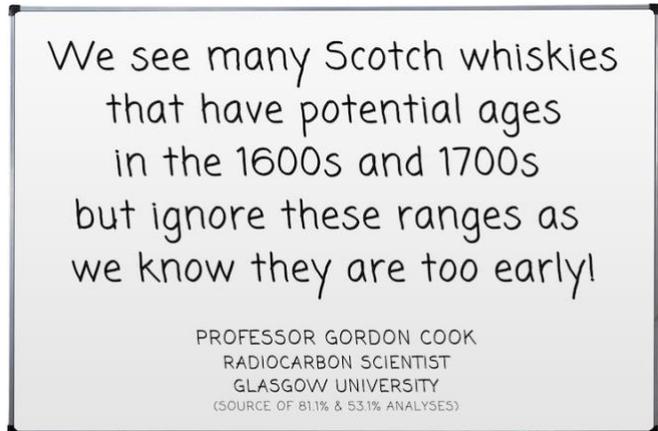
But no spikes overlap the years the glass bottle is from: the 1860s or 1870s. The graph shows no possible years anywhere near that time. Obviously, Skinner went with 18th century dating, and not 20th century.

To add another wrinkle, the percentages in these analyses aren't what they sound like. When carbon dating very old whiskey, the small probabilities can be the correct one. For instance, a paper in the journal *Radiocarbon* discusses a whiskey with a 74.8% probability of 1750 - 1821 dating. But the whiskey was identified as circa 1920, which the lab interpretation only assigned a 7.5% chance.

To show how bizarre carbon dating gets: one of the Ingledew's analyses showed a 24% chance of 1660 - 1683. But American whiskey making during that time was nearly nonexistent. There were only 75k - 150k settlers total, and whiskey made then wouldn't look like the Ingledew contents. It's just "way too early."

(The quote at right from Prof. Gordon Cook refers to his overall experiences with others applying his results and his working directly with [RareWhisky101](#)).

Given Skinner's assessment that the whiskey was produced circa the late 1700s (presumably meaning something like 1780 - 1799) it's difficult to fathom why or how such a whiskey would end up in a glass bottle made around 1870. So, they proposed an unlikely theory for how that could happen.



WHISKEY SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

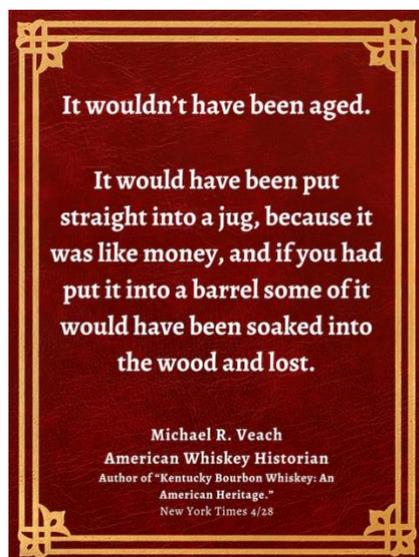
For the whiskey to be from the late 18th century, some very historically questionable scenarios are required.

- Back then, whiskey was an important commodity. It was made in small batches by farmers, who quickly traded or sold it. But the whiskey in the Ingledew bottle supposedly sat around for generations. (You may recall that the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794 was fought by farmers against the U.S. military, because they didn't want to pay whiskey taxes – the nation's very first tax on a domestic product – which threatened their key source of income).



Early U.S. farmers literally fought to keep every cent of the income they derived from converting their grain to whiskey.

- Whiskey rarely spent much time in a barrel in the late 18th century. Often it was unaged and clear, especially as we go back in that century. Barrel aging meant lost income as the whiskey soaked into the wood and evaporated. Yet this whiskey is barrel-aged and brown.



- Skinner's press theorized that after barrel aging, the whiskey was poured into "large glass demijohns" for storage. At the time, such demijohns were awkward, very large containers that could be easily broken. Yet, despite whiskey not being kept long-term during that time, these fragile, extremely heavy, high-cash-value containers supposedly remained unsold, un-drunk, and unbroken for the next eight or nine decades. Until...

- They were poured into new glass bottles somewhere in the 1860s or 1870s. This would mean that the whiskey was incredibly old *then*. "Very old" whiskey at that time was about 8 to 12 years old. For a

whiskey to be from 75+ years earlier would almost surely have made it “the oldest known whiskey in existence” even back then, by far.

It makes little sense that such an astonishing whiskey would not mention the age or importance, and just be embossed “Old Ingledew.” That name is so inconsequential that Georgia history appears to have no relevant records of it at all. Possibly it was just a whimsical brand name. Regardless, the problem is not what the bottle *does* say, but what it *does not say*.

- Regarding the demijohn scenario, as [described](#) in the *New York Times*, Skinner’s whiskey specialist Joe Hyman speculates that after filling, the demijohns could have sat forgotten in a barn or warehouse for decades. If true, then LaGrange, GA is a very odd place for such an historic whiskey to end up. LaGrange [didn’t remotely exist](#) in the 18th century. That future spot was within a huge region of Indian land, not opened to settlers until 1827.

Why would some quantity of extremely old whiskey be discovered far from LaGrange and sent there to be bottled around 1868 - 1876? That would mean transporting fragile, very heavy, very valuable, liquid-filled containers perhaps hundreds of miles, via circa 1870 means. Whiskey was not hard to sell. Why send it to the little city of LaGrange?



THE MISLEADING NOTE ON THE BOTTLE

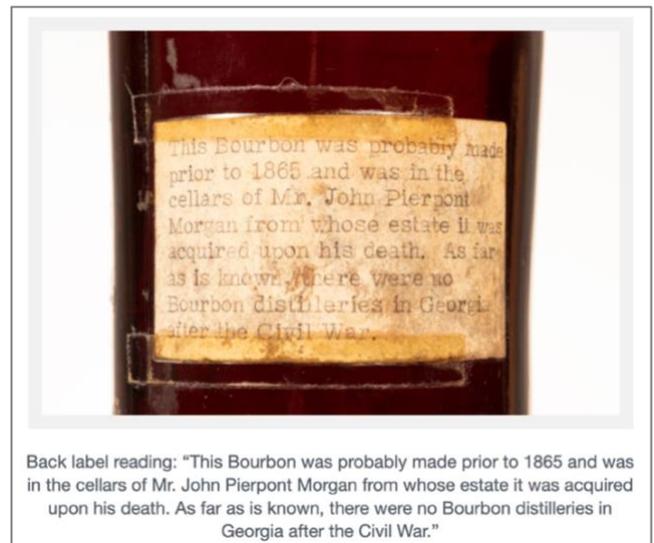
The *New York Times* explained “...a typed note taped to the [bottle’s] back suggested that the whiskey had been distilled before 1865, since there were no known distilleries in Georgia after the war that might have sold it to Evans & Ragland to bottle.”

Skinner’s press release framed the note, then repeated the note verbatim and unquestioned.

But the whiskey could have easily come from a distillery *outside* Georgia after the Civil War. While it’s very hard to conceive why rare, 1700s demijohns full of ancient whiskey would be discovered and sent to LaGrange, it’s easy to understand why modern (to circa 1870) barrels of whiskey would be sent there. That’s how new whiskey was distributed. Distilleries sold their barrels to grocers, hotels, and so on. Those merchants bottled it themselves. (Or most often, they filled whatever container a customer brought in). It wasn’t anything like today.

Evans & Ragland (merchant for the Ingledew) is first mentioned in their home-town newspaper in 1868, three years after the Civil War. But Skinner’s promotional [video](#) began with whiskey specialist Joe Hyman holding the bottle, stating: “*We have a bottle of Evans & Ragland, from prior to the Civil War.*” Prior. Had they simply believed the note? That video clip was shot before the whiskey was tested.

The other problem with the no-post-Civil-War-Georgia-distilleries comment is it’s wrong. There were certainly distilleries in Georgia after the Civil War, though the early ones were mostly if not all illicit (and fairly plentiful, judging from reports of arrests). The earliest record of a major, “noteworthy” postwar



Georgia distillery looks to be in 1873, three years before Evans & Ragland closed up shop. So it was indeed possible for the bottle to contain Georgia-made, post Civil War whiskey.

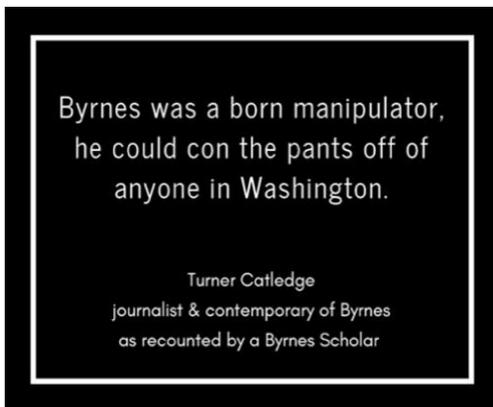
The note also states the bottle contains *bourbon*. But the bottle is clearly embossed WHISKEY. Not all whiskey is bourbon, like not all fruits are pears. This brings up the 20th century refilling possibilities. Did the note's writer actually know what kind of whiskey was inside? How? If that was only a guess, and "no Georgia distilleries" was also a guess, the question becomes if the whole note was guesswork.

The note makes the claim that the bottle came from J.P. Morgan's cellars. Skinner's press release likewise says the bottle "is thought" to have come from his cellar. This [Barron's article](#) even says, "The bottle was custom bottled for him [J.P. Morgan] at Evans & Ragland, grocers and merchants, in La Grange, according to Hyman."

For bold claims attached to an historic figure, verification is important. In this case that could be business records, cellar records, invoices – there is a literal archive of J.P. Morgan's estate. Yet no such documentation was in the auction. Withholding important evidence would make little sense.

To note, J.P. Morgan's bottles were known for having a professionally-printed "from the cellar of" label affixed. This bottle has only the typewritten note.

WHO WROTE THE NOTE?



The note was written by James Byrnes, a well known politician who owned the bottle during the 40s and earlier 50s (according to Joe Hyman on [WhiskyCast](#)). Byrnes was not just said to "con the pants off" his peers. He was also known for his drinking, pulling aside congressmen to share glasses of bourbon. Reportedly, Byrnes had converted a janitor's closet in the Capitol building for that purpose.

As told by Joe Hyman, Byrnes gave the bottle to his neighbor "pal" explicitly as a "conversation piece." Hyman says the neighbor never drank bourbon, only scotch whisky exclusively. That means the contents of the bottle weren't meant to be consumed. They could be anything, and nobody would know.

If the bottle were indeed refilled, that could be done by anyone whether intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps to conceal drinking the bottle's original rare whiskey, or just using the bottle as an antique decanter. Or merely topping it off. As long as someone had access to the bottle between 1930 to almost 1970, then those distillation "choices" of 1929 - 1954 (in the lab interpretations) make sense for refilling the bottle. It would have only a required a whiskey that was easily on-hand.

Whiskey was not treated during the mid 20th century the way it is now. And people forget things. Stories get conflated.

The only obstacle to refilling was a naked cork. In the past, Joe Hyman has carbon-dated the cork on old whiskey for auction. No test results for this cork were published.

If we are to put faith in Skinner's published lab analyses, then the bottle being refilled seems a much simpler explanation than the historical gymnastics required for 18th century dating.



SCIENCE BY PRESS RELEASE

Defined as "...promoting scientific 'findings' of questionable scientific merit (by people) who turn to the media for attention when they are unlikely to win the approval of the professional scientific community." - Wikipedia

Skinner announced a scientifically-based belief. "*Old Ingledeu Whiskey: Currently Believed to be the Oldest Known Whiskey in Existence.*"

But *who* believed that? No names were specified. In reviewing countless pages of Skinner media coverage as research for this report, I couldn't find a single person who declared that they truly believe this themselves.

The choice of the word *currently* to describe the "belief" is interesting. *Currently* applies only to the present. It implies something could be temporary. Was the announced "belief" expected to be short lived?

We might wonder if it served a purpose which is now over.

CARBON DATING WHISKEY IS NOT ACCURATE FOR "DATING VERY OLD WHISKEY"

Carbon dating can't accurately *date* old whiskey on its own, unless it's from after 1955.

I spoke extensively with Professor Gordon Cook, the scientist who runs the second lab Skinner consulted. I also spoke at length with Dr. John Southon, who is so respected in the radiocarbon community that even Prof. Cook reminded me of the importance of whom I was talking to. (To be clear: I'm not speaking for these scientists here, I am explaining what I learned from speaking with them).

Here is why carbon dating is very accurate for some whiskeys, but very *inaccurate* for others:

In 1955, the world's testing of nuclear devices rapidly increased. That affected the atmosphere in a way that makes it very easy for carbon dating to identify things as "pre-1955" or "post-1955."

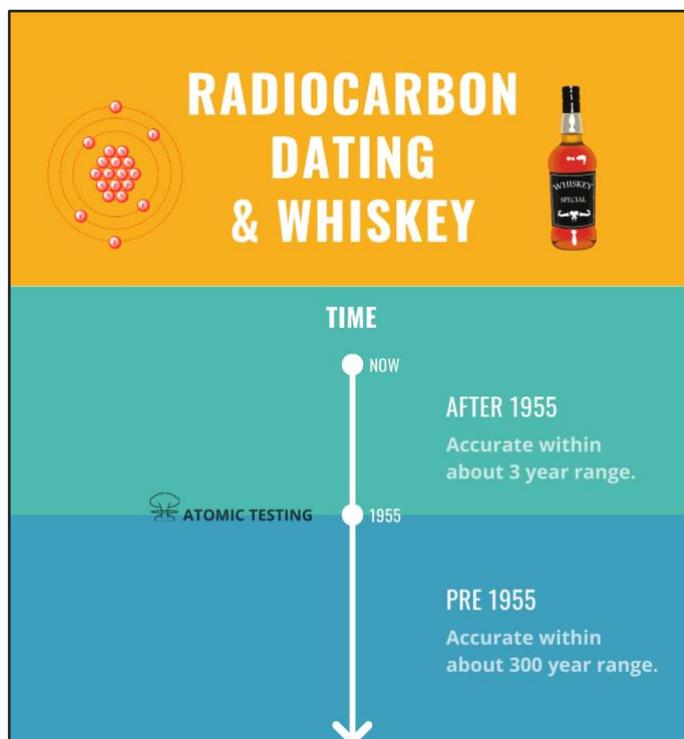
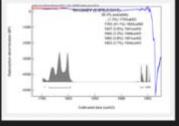
Specifically, the test can accurately identify if *plant material* was grown after 1955. Whiskey is made from plant material: grain. For whiskey distilled after 1955, radiocarbon testing can often date it accurately within a range of about three years.

But for whiskey made *before* 1955 – like whatever appears to be in the Ingledeu bottle – accuracy is typically a range of about three *hundred* years.

"I'm not a scientist so I can't really interpret these kinds of things myself. What the percentages are, and how things are weighted, and statistics and stuff like that."

Joe Hyman
Whiskey Specialist
Skinner Auctions
WhiskyCast, May 3

"We assess that the whiskey was produced circa the late 1700s."
Skinner press release

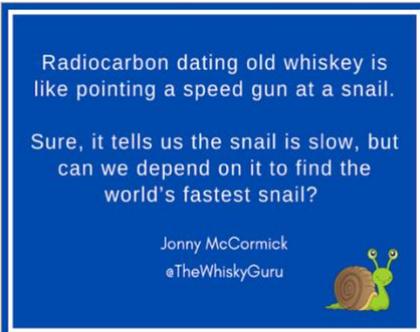


If the same whiskey is tested at a few different labs, and given various interpretations, the results will usually be dating “choices” spread over much of that 300 year range. From about 1650 up to 1954.

That’s why 17th and 18th century dating possibilities are common for old whiskeys.

WHY DO EXPERTS LIKE RAREWHISKY101 USE CARBON DATING FOR THEIR “RELIC” WHISKIES?

It’s used to detect modern-era fakes. For instance, a “1903” whiskey can be proven to actually contain post-1955 whiskey. (Because whiskeys after 1955 all have that distinct, post-atomic radiocarbon signature).



But you can’t use carbon dating all on its own, not for dating *pre-1955* whiskeys.

A difference of just 1% in a test result’s “number” can equal a difference of about 120 years in dating. And that 1% neighborhood of difference has been observed between two different labs testing the exact same whiskeys. Which makes it possible that Skinner’s results could be “off.”

WHY WAS THE PROMOTED 81.1% FIGURE LATER REVISED TO 53.1%?

When the data changed on the first auction day, I contacted the related lab for clarification. Their revision was issued because of a problem with the original 81.1% analysis. (It had to do with their computer-driven dating model, called a “curve.”). The problem was corrected, giving the updated results.

I do not know when the lab first told Skinner about the problem.

MY OWN POSSIBLE CONFLICT OF INTEREST?

Astute whiskey enthusiasts may point out that I own the genuine, rigorously evaluated and proven “oldest whiskey” distilled in 1847. Authentication took four years of working with Guinness World Records, independent whiskey experts from around the world, a US glass historian, rare book libraries, two carbon dating labs (Oxford and Glasgow) using double-blind and controlled protocols, and other research. I have never made a big deal about it, but for those seeking information a large illustrated essay has been quietly online for years. The things I like to “shout” about in whiskey are not that.

To that point: people who know the above will also tell you I’m one of the top experts on vintage whiskey dating. They know I’ve been calling out misdated bottles, outright fakes, actual counterfeiters, and other problematic whiskey issues for about a decade. Most recently I appeared on [Inside Edition](#) exposing counterfeit Buffalo Trace bourbons.



For the 1847 bottle, radiocarbon testing actually dated the whiskey to the 18th century too. That was “the highest probability” in the lab report. It was assigned the years 1715 - 1785 with a 44.7% chance. That’s more than Skinner’s original result of 42.9% for their assessment. And not much less than the 53.1% statistic that ended up being listed on the auction page.

Fortunately for the 1847 bottle, that year was listed twice on the label, and the carbon dating results overlapped that year. (The documentation behind the bottle was also outstanding). Theoretically, I could have argued that “1847” meant something symbolic, and the whiskey inside was actually from 1715 - 1785. Of course, I didn’t do that.

TO BE CLEAR: I AM NOT SAYING THE INGLEDEW IS A REFILL

That statement is partly for Skinner’s lawyers, but for you as well. I have no idea if the bottle is refilled or not. We have been looking at the available evidence. It’s not unusual for pre-1955 whiskeys to receive carbon dating reports showing 1930s - 1950s possibilities, even if the whiskey is actually from earlier. But it is unprecedented to have a binary choice of only 18th century *or* 20th century dating, with an auctioneer specializing in whiskey making a decision and announcing that an 18th century assessment is the correct one.

COULD THE INGLEDEW WHISKEY ACTUALLY BE FROM THE 18th CENTURY?

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. There is no extraordinary evidence here.

However, it would be hard to *prove* that kind of dating is impossible in the same way we can’t prove other extremely unlikely things never happened. As a silly yet valid example, no one can prove that Thomas Jefferson never mixed neutral spirits with fruit extract and called it “Skinnygirl.” The Ingledew is like countless other pre-1955 whiskeys with no production dates. As long as there is no known way to identify when all of those whiskeys were *actually* distilled, we can’t *prove* any of those bottles don’t contain 18th century whiskey either.

Regardless, we can acknowledge that Skinner’s theory is a possibility, regardless of how implausibly remote it might be. The original distiller might have even called it “Pappy Van Winkle.”

ANOTHER POSSIBLE SCENARIO: CIRCA 1865

If I were approached out of the blue with the circa 1868 - 1876 Ingledew bottle, and if I could verify it was still sealed and original, then I would expect it to contain whiskey distilled somewhere around 1865. That simply “makes sense.”

As discussed in this report, results can sometimes vary in these radiocarbon tests. Brand new testing at other labs might give different results, which could overlap with a more reasonable and expected 1860s - 1870s distillation time. Presuming the other problematic dating eras could be reasonably ruled out, then the Ingledew would definitely be an extremely old whiskey. But, there are other whiskeys that old. It’s not the “earth shattering news” that Joe Hyman proclaimed.

IN CONCLUSION: THE DANGERS

Given the extensive discussion of carbon dating in this report, the dangers of the “Ingledew methodology” should now be clear: there are ways to “make” many old whiskeys “date” from the 17th, 18th, 19th, and pre-prohibition 20th centuries.



Pick a date, any date...

Anyone can send in their whiskey for carbon dating. The cost is a few hundred dollars. As long as the whiskey was made before 1955 and there is no knowable distillation info (like the Ingledew), then with a little bit of science, the spirit can be claimed to come from many decades before the bottle it’s contained in. Even centuries.

Pre-1955 whiskeys are not that hard to come by. Nor are very old glass bottles. Empty bottles of rare, more modern whiskeys are already bought by counterfeiters to create fakes – the bottles are refilled with a cheap substitute, resealed, and sold as new. An empty Pappy Van Winkle bottle can be “worth” around \$300. Because refilled, it can be sold for \$3000. Given the Ingledew’s \$137,500 price tag, if something like the “Ingledew dating method” becomes accepted by buyers, I’d expect the prices of antique, empty glass whiskey bottles to skyrocket.

In Skinner’s press release [video](#), after whiskey specialist Joe Hyman states he holds a bottle “from prior to the Civil War,” he then says, “*We are going to extract a couple of drops of liquid to send in for carbon dating to prove the authenticity.*”

The video concludes with the screenshot to the right. Was authenticity proven?

Was authenticity implied?

Joe Hyman, when discussing the way he assessed the Ingledew, said he hopes to “further this kind of authentication” with global trade organizations.



I'm hoping to coordinate SWA with DISCUS to further this kind of authentication

Joe Hyman, April 23

Lastly, there is [Skinner’s disclaimer](#), which speaks for itself. They make no “...warranties or representation or any kind or nature with respect to the property, and **in no event shall they be responsible for the correctness, nor deemed to have made any representation or warranty, or description, genuineness, authorship, attribution, provenance, period, culture, source, origin, or condition of the property** and no statement made at the sale, or in the bill of sale, or invoice, or in the catalog, or elsewhere shall be deemed such a warranty of representation or an assumption of liability. (Emphasis added).

My sincerest thanks to those who gave their time to read this.

Cheers all.

Adam Herz