



## COLONEL JOE, INVENTOR OF THE "GIN RICKEY"

When Your Editor was a crass teenager in high school, one of several nicknames I had to bear, was "GIN RICKEY." Perhaps, some others of you cousins suffered silently under the same sobriquet. I had only a vague notion that it was some kind of drink, and not the slightest idea that the beverage, and its inventor, played a significant role in my **RICKEY FAMILY HERITAGE**. In fact, the man who created this famous libation of the 19th Century, was my 1st cousin, 3 generations removed. In the latter third of the 19th century, he was widely admired as a suave lobbyist of almost unbounded political influence, not only in state capitals, but also in Washington, D.C. Today, he is chiefly recalled as the inventor of a drink that can be found all over the world, bearing our Family Surname.

"Colonel" **JOSEPH KERR (KYLE) RICKEY** (b. 11 Jan. 1842, Keokuk, IA. / d. 23 Apr. 1903, New York City, NY.), the 4th son in a family of 13 children born to **Dr. JOSEPH KERR RICKEY, Sr.** (b. 28 Apr. 1815, Allegheny Co., PA. / d. 28 Apr. 1900, Clarinda, Page Co., IA.) & **ELIZABETH McCLEARY** (b. 28 Aug. 1818, County Cork, Ireland / d. 9 Mar. 1902, Clarinda, IA.). Most of his boyhood years were spent in the Mississippi River town of Keokuk, where he found the allure of an adventurous, variegated life on the "Big Muddy" most appealing. There was no better way to pass the time on long trips drifting down to New Orleans than over a table shared with congenial companions, a cold bottle on the side, and a friendly game of poker. Those river days were made for gambling, and young **Joe Rickey**, with an amazing aptitude for cards, was awfully good at it. Legend has it that he played his cards well; undoubtedly now and then he lost, but if he did, no such score is on record. The cards generally favored **Rickey** and he raked in the chips.

His traffic with Southerners, sojourns at the river ports of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and his fancy for the leisure-filled easy life on the

riverboats, made him feel more at home with the South's cause. When the Civil War broke out, Cousin **Joe** got off a side-wheeler tied up alongside a Missouri wharf and joined the Army of the Confederacy. This, despite the fact that his father and two brothers served in the Union Army. For a time, he was stationed at Fulton, Callaway Co., MO. where he met and married **SALLIE HOWARD** on 12 Dec. 1865. They had five children: **HOWARD RICKEY** (b. 1867 / d. 1868, Fulton); **ALBY PRATHER RICKEY** (a daughter, b. 13 Jun. 1869 in Fulton; married **LESLIE BENTON HANCHETT** on 8 Apr. 1891 in Fulton); **NATALIE KYLE RICKEY** (b. 14 Apr. 1871 / d. 17 Jan. 1896, married **ROBERT H. SPENCER**); **JOSEPH KERR RICKEY** (b. 1873 / d. 1874, in Fulton); **WILLIAM HYDE RICKEY** (b. 13 Dec. 1874 / d. 9 Oct. 1907, Carson City, NV.).

After the Civil War, our subject entered politics as a "silent member," or lobbyist. It was now a few hours ride from Fulton to Jefferson City and the State Capital, and **Joe** was often present to see that certain proposals that interested him were passed by the State Legislature. He was described as a jovial and affable young man, with a smiling face, courtly manner, and a reputation for always keeping his word. Well liked by all the Missouri politicians, he easily made friends and was always ready to help round out a table of poker. And so, when a particular friend talked about some law or scheme that was deemed beneficial, **Rickey** would lend an attentive ear, and say he would see what could be done about it.

Cousin **Joe** soon found that silently guiding the destinies of legislatures was not an unpleasant business, and could be pleasantly lucrative. The main thing was to know the men who controlled the votes. This meant eating, drinking, laughing, and gambling with them; all things that suited his fancy and in which he excelled. Politicians, like most other people, liked a good story, and **Joe** already had a reputation as a fluent raconteur. He quickly drifted into the role of full time professional lobbyist, but soon realized

that guiding Missouri politics had its limits. The place to go for that game was Washington, D.C. and he saw no reason why his rising star couldn't shine just as brightly in the Nation's Capital.

About this time, he acquired the title, "Colonel." In those days, and in his profession, a title was important, and Colonel was an especially pleasant one. It was never an earned military rank, but had some validity as he had once served in that capacity as an aide on a Governor's staff. His obituary, which appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on 24 Apr. 1903, said: "**Colonel**" Rickey was one of a quartet of famous Colonels who were known in nearly every city in the country - Col. William Hyde, Col. Broadhead, Col. "Gus" Prather, and Col. Rickey. He had a very wide acquaintance with members of Congress, and took an active part in promoting legislation. At one time he was the owner of the Shomaker Building, on Pennsylvania Ave., in the capital city.

Before long he was quite as popular in Washington as he had been in Jefferson City. He wheedled and traded with Congressmen and Senators with amazing deftness. When he asked friends for favors, he usually got what he wanted. One story illustrates his lobbying prowess. It seems that a large corporation had been entirely unsuccessful in getting its patents renewed. Finally, in despair, they approached "**Colonel**" Rickey and asked for his help. "Well, just wait and see," Joe said, and he was off. Just 30 minutes later he returned, carrying the patent renewals under his arm.

He was reputed to be the greatest of all gamblers. Joe would bet on anything; walking down the street with a friend, he'd even wager on the number of a still far-off but approaching streetcar. Our cousin bet on the first Grover Cleveland election, getting long odds, and won \$80,000. He lost more than that when Cleveland was defeated four years later, but he made it all back in a few weeks on sugar stocks. Supposedly he got his tips on sugar prices while in a poker game with several Senators.

At **RICKEY REVEL I**, in Diamond Springs, CA. on 23 June 1990, **ELIZABETH ANN RICKEY** (b. 11 June 1956, Lafayette, Lafayette Par., LA.), of the **Dr. Joseph Kerr Rickey Clan**, described some of the exploits of her great grand uncle. She said that **Col. Joe Rickey** introduced the "**GIN RICKEY**" at

the Planters Hotel in St. Louis, MO. during the Democratic National Convention of 1896. He mixed his now famous drink of limes and gin for some of his old political cronies. Among them was Marse Henry Watterson, Editor of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, who said: "**Joe**, I am christening the most palatable drink I have ever known — the **GIN RICKEY**." Cousin **Beth** told us that her ancestor later prepared his famous libation for Lord Dunraven in London, England; and dined with Sir Thomas Lipton, where he mixed it for him and the Dukes of Marlboro and Manchester.

Another of our **RICKEY FAMILY ASSOCIATION** cousins is former Tennessee State Senator, **ALBERT CLIFTON RICKEY** (b. 23 Dec. 1917, Memphis, Shelby Co., TN.), residing at 3779 S. Gallaway Dr., Memphis, TN. 38111. He advises that "**Col. JOSEPH K. RICKEY** (his great grand uncle) was a lobbyist in Washington D.C. for the silver interests in the 1870's and 1880's. There he owned the **Silver Dollar Saloon**, which had the first bar that was paved with silver dollars and covered with glass. There have been many of these silver dollar bars since, all imitators of **Col. Joe's** idea."

The *New York Times* obituary stated that our **Col. Joe** was a warm friend of **William Jennings Bryan**. The obit also quoted **Al Smith** (former mayor of New York City, later Governor of New York State, and Democratic candidate for President in 1928), who said: "**Joe** and I were boys together. He was the soul of honor. He was as square as a die, and if he were your friend, you could command his last dollar. He has given away a fortune to those he deemed in need."

Flamboyant to the end, "**Colonel**" **Joseph Kerr (Kyle) Rickey** suffered a mysterious death. On 23 Apr. 1903, he suddenly collapsed on the corner of Broadway and 25th Streets in New York City. A policeman assisted him to his home at 24 West 25th St., where he succumbed. A bottle of carbolic acid was found in his coat pocket. Although family members denied that he had taken poison, an autopsy revealed a small quantity of carbolic acid in his stomach. Widely known and loved by countless friends, his demise was reported as front page news by the *New York Times* and *St. Louis Dispatch*, and carried by many other newspapers from coast to coast.