



# Spirited



“I asked my dad one time, ‘did grandpa ever show you how to make whiskey?’ and he said, rather sternly, ‘I don’t think that’s any of your concern,” laughs Keith Kerkhoff, Class of 1977.

In fact, Alphons Kerkhoff had never shown Keith’s late father, Meryl, how to make the ‘good stuff.’ Alphons was a second-generation American, the son of one of the first residents of the Carroll County, Iowa, town of Templeton, a German Catholic community founded in 1881, current population 300. During the harsh days of the Great Depression and Prohibition, he ran one of a handful of area stills that produced a rye whiskey known for its quality and supposedly favored by Al Capone.

Still, it came as a surprise to his family when one summer day in the mid 1970s Alphons decided to share. “My dad rapped on my bedroom door and said, ‘this morning, we’re going to set some mash – it’s going to be you, your grandpa, and your brother.’ Grandpa told us not to say a word to nobody. Some of my college friends today’ll be like, ‘gol’ dang Keith, you knew about this stuff and you never shared any with us?’ and my response is always, ‘you get into enough trouble without it.’”

Today, the company Keith and Meryl helped to found – Templeton Rye Spirits, LLC – has brought the family beverage back as a runaway success top-shelf whiskey – sold legally, of course. The story of Keith’s role in putting Templeton back on the map took him from the playing fields of Buena Vista University/College through the corn and bean fields of Carroll County.

“Coach Jim Hershberger said he’d help me as much as he could to play pro,” Keith says. “He was a fatherly figure to his players – stern, but well respected. Al Lewis (professor emeritus of health and physical education) was a great defensive line coach. He had great rapport and expected the best out of you. He was always encouraging.”

The BV football program was on a hot streak when Keith arrived in 1973

to join its starting line as a defensive tackle. The team went 7 – 0 in the conference and earned the conference championship that year, led by offensive guard Joe Kotval and offensive tackle Lyle Karsten, both of whom would sign with professional leagues – the Ottawa Rough Riders and Detroit Wheels, respectively.

“In tandem, they just annihilated people,” says Keith. “I was fortunate to start as a freshman, and during practice

I had to go against these guys. They were highly respected for their pulling guard tackle sweep.”

While the 1974 season had mixed results following Joe and Lyle’s departure, Keith is proud of the team’s accomplishments his junior and senior years, which include winning the Boot Hill Bowl in Dodge City, Kansas in 1975 and making it to the conference playoffs in 1976. In 1987, he was inducted into

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the BV Athletics Hall of Fame. Today, his 6'3", big-frame figure ("slightly larger today than then," he acknowledges) and gregarious voice readily display a strength and disposition that also served him well as a farmer and auctioneer.

"I got my first letter from professional scouts as a sophomore," Keith says. "One day I got home and my roommate was excited – 'Cornell Green (of the Dallas Cowboys) is coming to campus Tuesday to time you in the 40 yard dash!' The Cowboys were notorious for scouting small colleges at that time."

His senior year, Keith received two offers in rapid succession – the first from the Atlanta Falcons and another the following morning from the Dallas Cowboys. Keith opted to sign with the Cowboys, who, under legendary coach Tom Landry, had won Super Bowl VI (1972), played in X (1976), and would go on to win XII in 1978. Unfortunately, he got released at the 60th cut (the team took up to 40) and – in part due to injury – was put on a waiver. While he hoped his association with the Cowboys might help him to be picked up by another team, in the meantime he returned to Iowa to work at a soybean processing plant in Manning.

The following year he was similarly put on waivers with the Chicago Bears. In 1980, Keith settled into a more permanent life in Iowa. Like two of his six siblings and his father, he chose farming as his primary profession. In 1979, Keith married. In 1980 – following the collapse of a grain silo that shut down the Manning plant – he went to auctioneering school, shortly thereafter joining his father and uncle Dave in their part-time auctioneering business.

Auctioneering would provide supplemental income for Keith and his

family during the economic challenges of the 1980s farm crisis. Throughout the years, Keith estimates his income averaged two-thirds farming and one-third auctioneering, as he presided over farm, land, household and antique sales. Kerkhoff Auction Service ultimately would involve Keith, his father, uncle, and brother Marty.

Many folks around Carroll County who Keith did business with had been involved in the whiskey business during the Depression, though they were often reluctant to talk. "We interviewed my grandmother, Frances, when she was 92 years old," says Keith. "She recalled going to Carroll to get commodities and driving all the way home with her lights off – though for what, she wouldn't say."

"I know from my grandpa that she would usually give a drink to the hobos who would pass through the country. One time, after she took a hobo to the rye, he showed his badge. Grandpa took the rap, though years later he told me he wished he hadn't, because they never would have thrown a pregnant woman in jail."

That was one of three times his grandfather was arrested. So it was that in the early 2000s when a young entrepreneur – Scott Bush, who grew up in Wall Lake, Iowa – called Meryl Kerkhoff asking about his father's whiskey: "my dad thought he was a revenuer and hung up," laughs Keith.

Bush, who had worked in banking, was studying at the MIT Sloan School of Management at the time. He was looking to resurrect Templeton's famous rye as a legal brand, having been intrigued about the beverage from stories he had heard from his family. During Prohibition, bootleggers didn't keep black books or lists of contacts, but relatives and a chain of phone calls eventually led Bush to the

Kerkhoffs and their Prohibition-era recipe.

At the urging of his father, Keith invested in the project. Making whiskey legally in the 21st century posed its own challenges, one of the foremost being: how do you decide how much to make of something that takes four years to finish? "You have to realize – what we're making now is for 2015, and what we make, we have to pay for and wait four years before we see any return on the investment," says Keith. "The first batch was 67 barrels and we thought we were very aggressive with that number. The second batch was about 150 barrels."

The positive response to Templeton Rye, however, was immediate. "My dad and I hauled 100 cases to the distribution center in Ankeny, and that lasted two days," says Keith. "Harry Ray, who works for the state distributorship, had told us that two years before we launched Templeton, there was a rye whiskey with 25 cases that at the end of the year still had 12 left. But at the time, he didn't know Iowa, and Templeton Rye, had a history."

That history – in addition to the whiskey's full, smooth flavor – has been integral to making the beverage a popular brand. "A guy I bought a farm from told me the first time he heard of Templeton Rye was when he was in the service in the Philippines," Keith recalls. "When someone asked him where he was from, he said Sioux City, and the other guy replied, 'that's Little Chicago'."

Growing word-of-mouth coincided with two twists of fortune. The first was a product shortage – the company and its supplier ran out of bottles after filling 20,000 – necessitating a four-month delay. The second was getting placed on state allocation in January 2009. In Iowa, all liquor is sold by suppliers directly to governmental agencies, which handle distribution. In the beginning, Templeton was sold 51 percent to Hy-Vee, 24 percent to Costco, and 25 percent to small liquor stores. With allocation, every liquor store in the state was allotted a small number of bottles.

"All these little communities would have people come into their liquor stores and ask, 'you got any Templeton Rye'? No? Well order some, I guarantee you'll



According to Keith, whiskey gets 60 percent of its flavor and 100 percent of its color from the charred oak barrels in which it ages. Throughout this interaction, sealed barrels lose about 2 percent of their volume per year to evaporation – or a gallon out of every barrel – called "The Angel's Share." Moonshine or 'white lightning' is un-aged whiskey. Keith estimates that Templeton Rye was aged one year during its Depression iteration.

Many of Templeton's barrels will eventually go to Scotland, where they will be used to age Scotch which, according to Keith, an American five-year-old whiskey is comparable to a fifteen-year old Scotch because the first distillation uses the barrels' best char. For a whiskey to legally be labeled rye, it must be made from at least 51 percent rye cereal grain. Templeton is over 90 percent rye.

get rid of it.' Our fan base quadrupled when these small retail stores began stocking our product."

Today, Templeton Rye is on its fourth batch. Keith estimates the company has 7,500 barrels aging, with 4,000 to 5,000 barrels to be produced this year. It continues to sell out quickly wherever sold. Keith knows a bar in Iowa City that sells it for \$12 a shot, and a high-end steak house in Chicago where a shot goes for \$18 – though he stresses that his company has not raised the suggested retail price in the last three years.

"You build a brand on premise in the bars and restaurants," Keith says. "If you have a bottle on a shelf, you have an opportunity to have 20 or 30 people taking shots. We're only in Iowa and Illinois right now, but we're sending a few cases to Brooklyn and San Francisco."

Today Lawrenceburg Distillers in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, handles the distillation, while the Templeton facility handles the bottling. Keith is still farming and occasionally auctioneers, while handling the Templeton Rye business part-time. Meryl – who started him on all three careers – died from cancer in 2010. "This business gave my dad five more years of life, because he was just so interested in it," says Keith.

The family tradition continues as Keith looks forward to his son Kody's return to the area. "Hopefully he can take over the farming and I can work more with Templeton," says Keith. Keith also has two other children: Kenzie, who works in technical support for a computer software company in Manning, and Kiley, a 2008 graduate who attended the Denison location of BVU's Graduate & Professional Studies program and now works for Renco Hybrids in Templeton.



"A lot of people ask – what was the label like during prohibition? Well, they didn't put labels on the bottles then!" Keith says. The current label on the Templeton Rye – based on an older Prohibition-era photograph used for the Rye's first batch – casts Keith as the bartender.

**KEITH'S FAVORITE JIM HERSHBERGER QUOTES**

The late Jim Hershberger coached football at BV from 1970 to 1989. Keith recalls some colorful phrases the Coach used to say to his players:

- ▶ "If you're five minutes early you'll never be late."
- ▶ "Judas priest, that was enough to make me puke!"
- ▶ "You know guys, I never split any atoms or graduated magna cum laude, but I'm smart enough to figure you guys out!"
- ▶ "That was atrocious!"
- ▶ "As a coach, I can't tell you to cut your hair, but if you're not playing you might want to look in the mirror."



**At the 2008 Los Angeles International Wine & Spirits Competition, Templeton Rye received four awards, three golds for the drink itself and a bronze for packaging. Templeton Rye will be featured in two upcoming documentaries – Capone's Whiskey: The Story of Templeton Rye, directed by Kristian Day of Des Moines; and Carroll County Cookers, directed by Dan Manatt of Washington, D.C. It is expected to appear in the upcoming season of HBO's Boardwalk Empire. Find out more at www.templetonrye.com.**