Drinking History: Elderberry Wine and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company

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By Matthew M. Thomas

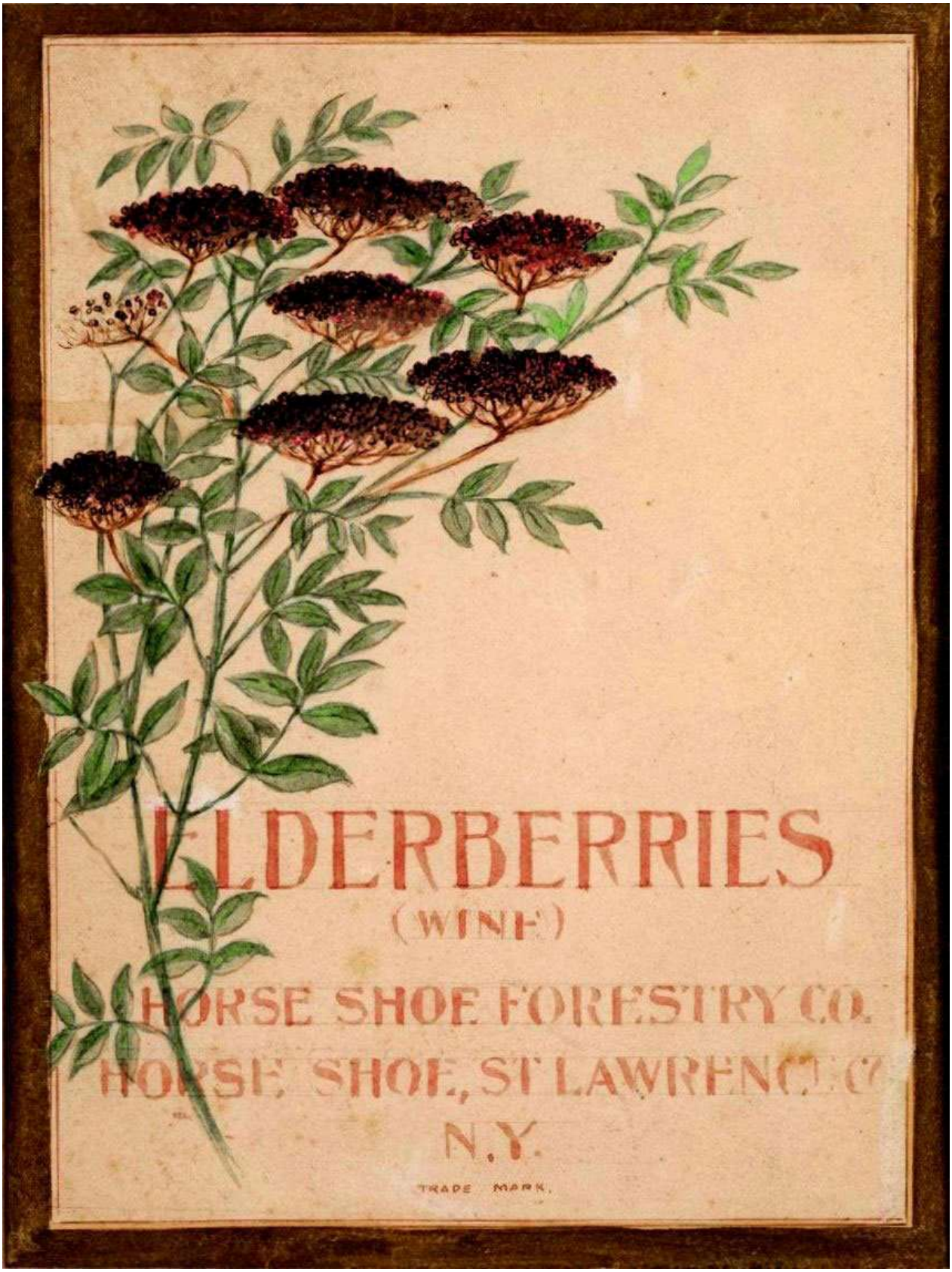
At the turn of the last century near the shores of Horseshoe Lake, New York City millionaire Abbott Augustus Low, Sr. created an industrial-scale maple syrup operation at the 45,000-acre reserve of his Horse Shoe Forestry Company. While the maple syrup operation is well-documented in the history of the Adirondacks, what is less commonly known is the forestry Company's work to produce fruit wine and preserves, most notably elderberry wine.

Compared to other wealthy great camp owners in the Adirondacks, like Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, or Webb; A.A. Low, Sr. took a little different approach to managing and enjoying the forests of his estate. As the Forestry Company name implies, Low was interested in making the forests productive and finding sustainable ways of extracting products from these natural lands. In addition to making maple syrup, newspapers such as the New York Times mentioned his elderberry wine making efforts alongside the making of other fruit wines and jams.

To assemble enough ripe elderberries to permit the preparation of barrels of elderberry wine, Low would pay residents of the western parts of St. Lawrence County to gather and ship thousands of quarts of the ripe fruit to Horseshoe Station during the late summer months of the early 1900s. Elderberries are known to grow well in the climate of upstate New York with cultivated commercial crops of elderberries currently found in various parts of the state. As far as we know, the elderberries used by Low were gathered from wild grown common black elderberry bushes (Sambucus Canadensis).

According to Low family history, one of Low's uses for his elderberry wine was to offer it to his dozens of workmen as an incentive to attend church on Sunday. Low himself was a religious man known to teach Sunday school at St. Michael's Protestant Episcopal Church when at his city home in Brooklyn. The Horseshoe townsite was not known to have included a church or chapel, nor are there any stories of a priest or pastor offering services at the townsite during the era of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company. It is interesting to consider the possibility of Low himself offering a service and preaching to his workers on Sundays. The nearest churches at that time that were easily accessible by rail were Tupper Lake, Piercefield, Childwold, and possibly Long Lake West, later named Sabattis. There is a story that John Hurd of Tupper Lake, the builder of the Northern Adirondack Railroad, offered free train rides in the 1890s on what became locally known as "the gospel mission train" for men wishing to attend Sunday services at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Tupper Lake. Perhaps, Mr. Hurd and Mr. Low had worked out their incentives together and for some men elderberry wine became the road to salvation.

As an experienced businessman, it was common for Low to attached legal protections to his ideas and investments, including registering hundreds of patents and trademarks under his name. True to form, an elderberry wine label was awarded to Low on October 6, 1900 with trademark number 35,355 under the title "Wine and Preserves". The graphic in the trademark was described as "the representation of a branch of an elderberry bush with the berries still attached." Later, a series of hand drawn pen and ink and water color labels were created using Low's trademarked images, including one for elderberry wine. However, outside of designs on embossed glass jars and bottles for packing maple products, there is no indication that the colored drawings for the wine or preserves labels were ever used in selling and marketing forest products made by the Horse Shoe Forestry Company.



Label for Horse Shoe Forestry Company elderberry wine. Photo courtesy of the Adirondack Experience.

The Horse Shoe Forestry Company and Abbot Augustus Low, Sr.'s maple syrup empire came to an end as a result of the destructive forest fires of 1908 which severely damaged the maple forest of the Low estate. AA. Low, Sr. himself died in 1910 and afterward the Low family began selling large blocks of their preserve in the 19-teens. The family retained ownership of the more southern acreage of their estate situated near Hitchins Pond and the building remains of the Bog River mill complex at the upper dam of the Bog River. A.A. Low, Sr. built the Upper Dam in 1903 holding back the waters of the Bog River, forming what is today known as Low's Lake. In the 1920s, the Low family, under the leadership of A.A. Low, Jr., converted and expanded the modest mill worker's boarding house located at the Upper Dam near the shore of Hitchins Pond, into a comfortable lodge to be used as their second camp giving it the name Hitchins Park. The Low family's original great camp of two dozen buildings on the shore of Lake Marian was sold in 1919 and remains in private ownership to this day as Camp Otterbrook.

Much of what is known of the production and bottling of elderberry wine at Horse Shoe comes from the recollections of the late Armand Vaillancourt, a longtime caretaker of the Low family's Hitchins Park camp. In 1926, at the age of nineteen, Armand Vaillancourt began working for the Lows, spending his entire career protecting and managing the properties of the Low family. After 47 years, Vaillancourt retired in 1973 when the Low family sold their remaining acreage and the Hitchins Park camp to the Suffolk County Council of the Boy Scouts of America. The Suffolk County Council continued to use the camp for another twenty years before selling the property to the State of New York to be added to the holdings of the Adirondack Park Preserve. In keeping with the forever wild clause of the state constitution, the Department of Environmental Conservation intentionally demolished the buildings at Hitchins Park by fire in 1995. Today, Bog River paddlers travelling along the portage between Hitchins Pond and Low's Lake stop to marvel at and explore the cobble stone remains of the foundation and terraces that were once the site of the Hitchins Park lodge.

Abbot Augustus Low, Sr. standing on the platform of the railroad station at Horseshoe, circa 1900.
Photo courtesy of the Piercefield Museum.

When documenting his memories and history of work with the Low family, Vaillancourt noted in the early 1930s that they bottled at least ten, 50-gallon barrels of elderberry wine that was produced in 1900. One of the buildings constructed in the 1950s by the Lows at Hitchins Park was referred to as the wine cellar and was a simple concrete and asbestos shingled structure built into the hillside. Having a structure named and dedicated as the wine cellar suggests that there was always an ample supply of wine in storage, both homemade elderberry wine and wines from other regions. As late as 1969, Vaillancourt noted that they still had quite a few bottles on hand at Hitchins Park.

A few bottles of Horse Shoe elderberry wine have shown up from time to time in the greater Tupper Lake area, all the same long neck green glass bottle with a metal foil around the cork. A few even retain their original simple paper label with the words Elderberry, 1900, and Horse Shoe, indicating the type, vintage, and location of the bottling. When the Low family sold Hitchins Park and closed their camp for good, members of the Low family as well as Armand Vaillancourt each took home a stash of the remaining bottles of wine. A handful of these preserved bottles found their way into the hands of friends and acquaintances of Armand Vaillancourt and were gifted by Vaillancourt to people he knew that appreciated or were connected to the history of the Horse Shoe legacy.

The main lodge the Low family's Hitchins Park camp in 1922. Photo courtesy of private collection.

As a result of my research and writing on the history of the Horse Shoe Company and the Low family, I had the great fortune to be in contact with and meet a handful of descendants of A.A. Low, Sr. At such a meeting last year in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, William "Bill" Raymond, a great grandson of A.A. Low, Sr., presented me with a gift of an unopened bottle of Horse Shoe elderberry wine. As a unique and thoughtful gift, I knew that it was something that needed to be tasted and shared and not displayed on a shelf like an ancient artifact.

To bring the contents and history of this bottle to life, I organized an uncorking event in September in Tupper Lake, to share it with a group of Horse Shoe history fans whom I had met over the years as a result of my research. Members of the group had traveled to the event from across northern New York from their homes in Syracuse, Edwards, Plattsburgh, Cranberry Lake, Deferiet, Tupper Lake, and myself from California.

After a few introductory comments and sharing the story of how the bottle came to my possession, a corkscrew was inserted and the plug gingerly removed. The cork was a sad shriveled sight but it served its task admirably, holding the wine in and keeping the air out. According to Low's descendant Bill Raymond, who spent the summers of his

youth at the family camp at Hitchins Park, Armand Vaillancourt was known to have recorked the bottles of elderberry wine at least once since their original corking in the 1930s. That fact would explain why the bottle we opened was still full and had not evaporated or turned to vinegar.

Author speaking to gathering of friends and fans of the history of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company for opening of bottle of Horse Shoe elderberry wine. Photo by William Hill.

Tastings were poured for all in stemless glasses with the Horse Shoe Company elderberry wine label, specially created as mementos for the event. With glasses in hand, toasts were made to Abbot Augustus Low, Sr., and William Raymond for bringing this wine to this table. To all our surprise, the century old wine had not turned to vinegar, but instead smelled of fruit and strongly of alcohol. When tasted it reminded us of a light and fruity port. Suffice it to say, it was more than drinkable. It is not every day that one gets an opportunity to truly taste history and connect on such an intimate level with the past.

Matthew Thomas is a maple syrup industry historian and expert on the history of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company. He has written a variety of articles about the company and the Horse Shoe Lake area and has published one book, A Sugarbush Like None Other: Adirondack Maple Syrup and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company. You can read more of his works at his website www.maplesyruphistory.com.

Photo at top: Tasting 120-year-old elderberry wine and toasting Abbot Augustus Low, Sr. Photo by William Hill.