



Nothing Heavenly in the Angel's Share



Whiskey fungus in West Louisville



Photos by Meghan McCumbers.

Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey is one of the prides of our state: much is manufactured right in our city and sent out across the world for millions of people to enjoy. Yet even in Louisville, most of us do not consider what goes into producing bourbon, or what comes from manufacturing the alcohol itself. But in West Louisville, the impact distilleries have on communities is impossible to ignore.

Driving through Shively, everything seems a bit overgrown. A black growth covers stop signs, trees, homes, and cars at every turn. Some may think this growth is a moss or grimy mess, others may not think much at all, accepting the black sheen as part of their natural environment.



In reality, this black sheen is nicknamed "whiskey fungus," and is a preventable fungus brought on by what is known as the "angel's share," the small portion of alcohol, or ethanol, that evaporates into the air during the distillation and aging process of whiskey.

The name suggests that this distilled alcohol floats away to a better place, but there is nothing heavenly about it when you live under the fallout. And in Shively, whiskey fungus is particularly noticeable, as two large distilleries, Brown-Forman and Stitzel-Weller, exist within blocks of each other.

"...[T]his black sheen is nicknamed 'whiskey fungus,' and is a preventable fungus brought on by what is known as the 'angel's share,' the small portion of alcohol, or ethanol, that evaporates into the air during the distillation and aging process of whiskey."



Photos by Meghan McCumbers.

Seeing how whiskey fungus covers nearly everything, residents in the area wonder what sort of impact this stuff could have on their health. Not much research has been done into that question.

If whiskey fungus exists in our air, surely it exists within or irritates our airways as well. Without conclusive answers, people in Shively are shut out of the conversation about this invasive presence. Potential health risks should be a bigger concern for the distillers to address. Instead, these concerns are neglected and left in the hands of the community members.



Whiskey companies are in a position to continue pumping their runoff into the air, falling back on federal law that exempts them from much accountability. There is a bitter irony that the "Clean Air Act" allows distilleries to continue, as a clause within the legislation allows for bourbon manufacturers to emit air toxins within certain limits. But better solutions exist.

Technology known as a thermal oxidizer can be implemented to remove ethanol from the air. The most expensive oxidizers can run around \$500,000. Half a million is a large figure, but nothing compared to the reported nine billion dollars generated by the bourbon economy in Kentucky. So, if thermal oxidizers could be used in bourbon warehouses to diminish the "angel's share," whiskey fungus could be effectively eliminated.

Residents should not have to wait until it may be too late to have anything done about a black, mold-like substance covering their homes and businesses, posing potential health-risks not known to the public. With pressure put on these companies, their corporate partners, and the businesses who benefit from their products, change is possible. The people of Shively deserve better than to exist under the sinister reality that is the "Angel's Share."



Photo by Meghan McCumbers.