

American Prohibition, the banning of purchase, consumption and manufacture of alcohol in the US, except for medical reasons from a licensed Doctor was a defining historical, political and social event in the US. Starting January 1, 1920 with the enactment of the 18th Amendment through the Volstead Act, it was a constant game of wits among law enforcement agencies, rum runners and thirsty Americans.

A little known fact or forgotten fact is that Ontario was also in a period of prohibition. Alcohol consumption was illegal in Ontario up until 1927 based on the Ontario Temperance Act. However, the Ontario government did not take away manufacturing rights only that it could not be sold in Ontario. It was a very profitable tax collecting enterprise for the government as well as providing employment for thousands upon thousands of Ontarians.

Almost every family in St. Clair Township has a story related to prohibition somewhere in their family history. It was a wild and crazy time and very profitable for some people.

Many involved in the business of supplying thirsty Americans a source of spirits would be tight mouthed about their manner of doing business. There were lots of rum runners and almost as many hijackers

An article from the Port Huron Times Herald from October 3, 1924, done as investigative journalism enlightened many people on the ins and outs of making this business work. The article is summarized below.

Port Lambton was identified as the hotbed of beer export along the entire St. Clair River district. With a narrow width to cross the river and a closeness to the St. Clair Flats with its many channels and islands and utter darkness, it was a pretty safe for beer runners to make easy money

Seven international brewing companies owned distribution stations in the village and there were nine large beer scows along the waterfront that stored the booze as it arrived by train or by ship.

The beer scows were rectangular in shape with box like structures that could hold a minimum of a 1000 cases of beer. The largest was a former ice scow which could hold 25 000 cases of beer.

Labatts, Carlings, British American, The Regal, Walkerville Brewery and Distillery, The Brant Spring Brewery and Kunz were set up in Port Lambton. They exported Labatt's Bohemian Lager, Rob Roy Ale, Cincinnati Cream Beer, and Regal Lager. The Walkerville Distillery also provided Canadian Club whiskey. Seagrams was available. They also brought in wine and other spirits. In the summer of 1924 it was determined that over 3000 cases of beer and 100 cases of whiskey were exported each and every day from Port Lambton

A case of beer cost \$3.75 in Canada and there was a \$1.00 delivery charge per case. A case of Seagrams left Canada at \$39 a case and Canadian Club was \$52 plus a \$5.00 delivery charge.

The captains piloting the rowboats or sailboats or small motor boats checked in with Canada Customs. There they gave a name, any name and a destination to which they were heading. It could be anywhere but the US, thus Cuba was often a popular choice. Some hard working captains made two or three trips a night to Cuba and back. It was of no concern to the officers where you were going and how often you

went. On many occasions some captains could make more money by short circuiting the trip to Cuba and circle back and sell to equally thirsty Ontarians who were happy to pay. Now it was illegal.

On the retail market thirsts were quenched for 50 cents a beer and 7 to 10 dollars for a bottle of whiskey.

Some enterprising Rum Runners filled their boats with beer and booze and anchored in Canadian waters and served as a drive up depot for Americans and Canadians. No risk for the seller, all the risk for the buyer. The shallows of Stag Island and Fawn Island proved to be ideal locations for this type of operation

Other headlines from the Times Herald reveal the risk and danger of being involved in exporting booze to the US.

“Rival Gangs shoot it out at Marine City”

“Runner Loses Car and Beer”

“Federal Judge Releases Sombra Man in Rum Case”

“Body of Drowned Rum Runner Found Near Port Lambton”

“Ferry Men report saving rum runners at Fawn Island”

“Murder Trial Leads to Sarnia”

“Shots Fly on Liquor Border”

Over the course of the 13 years that America found itself in this social quagmire, the US government was constantly upgrading enforcement laws and providing more funding to combat the illegal liquor trade. Finally by 1933, within the throws of the Depression, the US Government repealed prohibition and the St. Clair became quieter.

Ironically, today there is again a booze pipeline across the St. Clair River, though this time it is all legal . Every year thousands of people take the Sombra Ferry to Marine City. After clearing US Customs they walk back 20 feet to the duty free store, buy from their alcohol shopping list and return to Canada. Upon arrival they enter the Canada Customs Office and pay the appropriate duty and head home for a cold one.

Imagine the bewilderment on the faces of those rum runners back in the 1920's.