SEA ISLE CITY HISTORY

-- PROHIBITION, SEA ISLE STYLE --

World War I was over. The Armistice had been signed on November 11, 1918, and the Treaty of Versailles endorsed six months later. The Roaring Twenties were set to begin – fueled by the infamous Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution which prohibited the manufacture, transport, and sales of spirited beverages. The country went officially "dry" on January 17, 1920.

New Jersey's position on the subject was pretty clear. It was the last state to ratify the amendment, and it had managed to hold off until two years after it actually went into effect. (Rhode Island never did ratify it.) One candidate for New Jersey governor in 1919, Edward I. Edwards, exclaimed, "I am as wet as the Atlantic Ocean." He won.

Speakeasies, Stills, and Bootleggers

Prohibition was understandably terrible for business, but many enterprising souls fought back. The answer was the ubiquitous "speakeasy." In his remembrance of Townsend's Inlet in the 1920s,[1] Jim Doyle recalls the existence of a shed at the southwest corner of 86th Street and Landis Avenue with a sign above the door advertising "Fresh Fish." The seafood must have been excellent because the patrons exiting the place seemed very happy.

That small building to the right (north) of Busch's Hotel in this 1928 photo was probably the speakeasy referred to by Doyle.

At the other end of town, rumor has it that Twisties in Strathmere actually began in 1929 as a speakeasy, although it wasn't called "Twisties" at the time. The windows were covered up for obvious reasons. It's also rumored that Al Capone once stopped in, and the proprietor's wife, Gert Charleston, loaned Mrs. Capone a dress so that she could go fishing.[2]

Even Cronecker's, Sea Isle's iconic hotel and restaurant, got into the act. There's a story that Grandma Cronecker, when she heard the inspectors were coming, scooped up all the whiskey bottles in her apron and headed out the back door. And Margaretta Pfeiffer, who took over ownership in 1951, is reported to have said, "This bar has never been closed."[3]

Meanwhile, the government had been anything but idle. Federal agents were kept busy intervening in any establishment where a whiff of whiskey was in the air. Vansant[4] tells of the raid of a rooming house at 36th Street and Pleasure Avenue by the Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Division. The feds arrested everybody in the place, confiscated more than two dozen containers of the good stuff, then proceeded to dump the contents into a convenient gutter, where it all somehow ended up in the meadow west of town.

The story becomes a bit confusing. Vansant suggests that the raid took place at the long rooming house shown below at the right, while the original photo caption states that a whiskey still was raided at the Rex Hotel, shown at the left. Maybe both.

Pleasure Avenue, near 36th Street

Sea Isle gained its share of Prohibition infamy in an article in The Cape May County Times of January 29, 1932. The headline read:

"*Mastermind of Giant Still Eludes Officers; Kidnaps Pair Guarding It.*"

The still in question was located in a three-story house at 43rd Place and the canal. It was capable of producing hundreds of gallons of illicit alcohol a day. Sugar was imported in two-ton loads, and coke, used to fire the huge steam boiler, was brought into town by the truckload. The man behind the enterprise was said to be "a powerful Philadelphia gangster." A few hours after the still was uncovered, it mysteriously disappeared, along with the two officials guarding it – so with the evidence gone no one could be charged with a crime. (The kidnapped guards were later released, unharmed, in Ocean View.)

And so it went. It's not clear just how many illegal speakeasies, stills, and attendant bootleggers thrived in the neighborhood around Sea Isle, but the answer had to be "Plenty." It was reported that dozens of stills were uncovered in the northern part of the county, where farmers would bring their moonshine to speakeasies in resort communities buried underneath a load of apples or vegetables.[5]

Sea Isle seemed never to be enamored with the restrictions of Prohibition. In the only survey available (1926), 88 percent of those poled in the town favored repeal – the largest majority in Cape May County.

The Rum Runners

All the shenanigans described above took place on solid land, where bootleggers transported their product to market using trucks, automobiles (including high-powered Stutz Bearcats), and anything else on wheels. But it was on the water and on the beach that Sea Isle City really got into the action. The infamous rum runners were the ones who got the stuff to the bootleggers. And Sea Isle provided an Ideal playground for these ship-to-shore transactions.

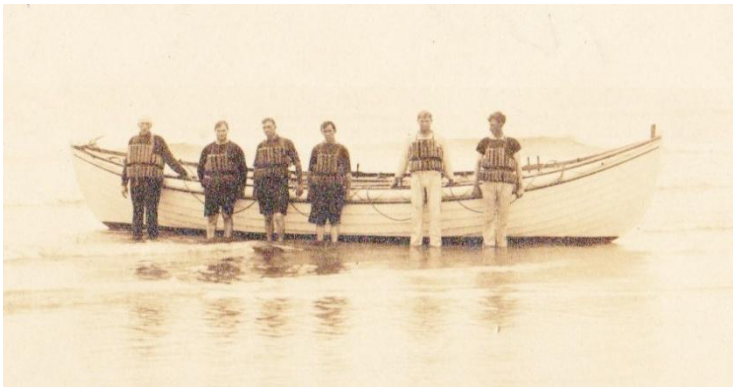
At the beginning of Prohibition, the limit of U.S. jurisdiction extended three miles from shore. Freighters and schooners carrying legal alcohol, mostly from Canada or the Caribbean, would anchor just beyond this limit and set up shop as floating liquor stores. Fast "contact boats" would tie up, tender large packets of cash, load up with product, then speed toward shore with their purchase. It became the job of the U.S. Coast Guard to intercept them.

Transferring the goods from a schooner
(photo: U.S. Coast Guard)

Coast Guard picket boat
(photo: en.wikipedia.org)

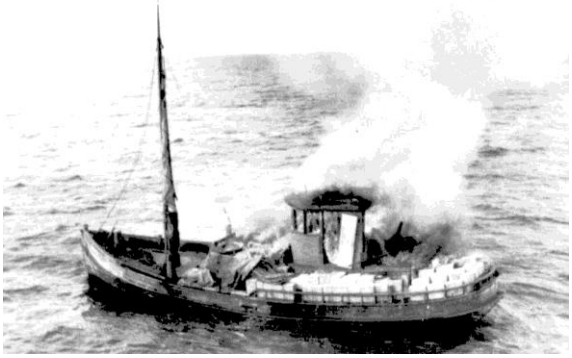
There were two major problems with this scenario. First, there were a limited number of Coast Guard picket boats along the Cape May County coast, stationed primarily at the county's many inlets. But it was estimated (by a rum runner himself) that it would have taken 60 such boats to do the job. Second, at least in the beginning, the Coast Guard craft were much slower, so they were consistently being outrun by the rum runners.

Life saving crews, such as that shown below at Townsend's Inlet, supplemented the work of guarding the shore, but they were simply overrun by the numbers.



To add to their already significant advantage, rum runners would employ some sneaky tricks. They'd send an empty decoy boat racing toward shore to divert the Coast Guard's attention. They'd use boats with hidden chambers and false bottoms. They'd tow alcohol underneath in waterproof containers. They'd hide their product in extraneous objects such as bibles and children's toys. They'd set their liquor adrift to float in on the tide and be scooped up by a waiting bootlegger.

The rum runners even invoked technology. Bottles were encased in salt and deposited in water near the beach. When the salt dissolved, the bottles bobbed to the surface into the hands of the bootleggers. And if all else failed, they could simply set their boat on fire to destroy the evidence.



The evidence goes up in smoke (photo: CG)

Meanwhile, back in Sea Isle:

> One day, Sam Vansant, Sr. was accosted on his pier by a man with a Thompson machine gun. A truck had been backed up to the pier presumably to load contraband liquor from a rum runner boat. Vansant was encouraged to get out of there and go fishing – which he did and never looked back.
>
> Then there was the time that a rum runner grounded on a sand bar and refloated his boat by throwing his cargo overboard. There must have been a lot of it, because the good times lasted in Sea Isle for at least a week.

A bit closer to the present:

> The year was about 1990. Mike Monichetti (of Mike's Seafood in Sea Isle) was walking along the beach on a cold, bright January day. He and his companion were admiring the seascape when they spotted what seemed to be a mass of golden objects glittering in the surf – objects which turned out to be unopened liquor bottles of all shapes and sizes, with names like Coon, Golden Wedding, and Lincoln (pictured sitting on a horse). A rum runner's 60-year-old cache had floated to the surface, along with what might have been the scattered wreckage of his boat.
>
> They managed to salvage 66 of these bottle relics, were in the process of loading them onto Mike's truck, when one accidentally shattered and deposited its fetid contents all over him. He was not happy, but appeared to be okay – until he got into the truck.
>
> When he turned the heater on, the vapor began to be released from his soaked clothing. He became nauseous, then violently ill until his companion shoved him

from the truck and stripped off the offending clothes. Mike recalls that the temperature was about 14 degrees.

But that wasn't the end of it. Mike gave two of his bottles to friends, and when the bottles warmed up, the expanding vapor had nowhere to go – so they proceeded to explode and spew their contents all over the place. But science came to the rescue when Mike punched small holes in the caps to allow the gas to escape. He still has a dozen or so of these Prohibition souvenirs tucked away in a storage locker. He also donated a pair of the bottles to the Sea Isle City Historical Museum. The photo below shows Mike with two of the bottles he discovered.

The Twenty-First Amendment

As Prohibition moved beyond the mid-1920s, the tide began to turn. The Coast Guard used faster motor launches. The U.S. extended its maritime limit to 12 miles. The Supreme Court ruled that American-flagged ships with illegal liquor could be seized up to 34 miles from shore.

The Navy turned over 20 destroyers to the Coast Guard to combat the rum runners. The photo at the right shows two of these, the Tucker and the Cassin, as part of the "Rum Patrol" c1930.
(photo: en.wikipedia.org)

The steps the government was taking worked to an extent. The number of cargo carriers was reduced significantly – but the beat went on. Organized crime still flourished. And when the stock market dive hit in 1929, bringing with it the beginning of the Great Depression, tax revenue became desperately needed. There was only one way out of this unpopular and unenforceable mess, and it would require an amendment to the Constitution. It will have taken 14 years to make that happen.

After the usual politicking, the Twenty-First Amendment was finally ratified on December 5, 1933. Section 1 simply states: "*The eighteenth article of amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed*." That says it all.

Folks could imbibe again without looking over their shoulders. Rum runners were out of business. Bootleggers and other criminals, the ones not already in jail, were forced to look elsewhere. Doctors could stop prescribing "medicinal whiskey." And the Coast Guard could go back to guarding the coast.

New Jersey had once again made its preference clear; it was the fifth state to ratify the amendment. The vote was 202 to 2. In Cape May County, the vote for delegates to the Constitutional Convention ran 78 percent in favor of repeal.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt put it pretty succinctly when he said:

"*What America needs now is a drink.*"

To learn more about the 1920s era in Sea Isle, and to browse through our collection of photos, literature, and artifacts, please visit the Sea Isle City Historical Museum at 48th Street and Central Avenue. Access our website at www.seaislemuseum.com. Call 609-263-2992. Current hours are 10:00am – 3:00pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday; and 10:00am – 1:00pm Saturday.

References

1. Townsend's Inlet in the Twenties (Memories of a Childhood) by Jim Doyle, c1992
2. TwistiesTavern.com
3. The Evening Bulletin, 8 August 1951
4. The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet by Samuel A. Vansant, Jr., 1993
5. Down Memory Lane by Bill Robinson, Herald Newspapers, 20 April 1994

This "Spotlight on History" was written by Sea Isle City Historical Society Volunteer Bob Thibault. Unless otherwise noted, photos were provided courtesy of the Sea Isle City Historical Museum

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