

Bootlegging in Old Grant

When the provisions of the Volstead Act took effect on January 16, 1920 Wisconsin lost 9,656 taverns. Milwaukee breweries employed 6,000 workers and other brewing companies scattered all over the state were shuttered or converted to the production of near beer. This was the beginning of the great experiment to improve man and society by regulating the use of alcohol. This was the summit of all the temperance work of over a half century. People would not become drunk and kill others: families would no longer linger in poverty because of an alcohol addicted breadwinner tossing his wages into the urinal; all of the criminality and societal decomposition laid to the devastation of brew and 'John Barleycorn' would end. It didn't work out that way. Legitimate enterprises which had supplied alcoholic beverages died and gangsters fought each other to control the illicit supply. This was the era of the mobster; the ruthless thugs who killed both the imbibers and each other. Alcohol consumption rose despite the lethal effects of bad booze. Grant County Deputy Sheriff George L. Hunt said in 1925 that most of the liquor available in the county was "poisonous". He based this on tests done by chemists for the Grant County Circuit Court. Twenty two of the samples tested, he said contained "sufficient poison in one pint to kill a person if that amount was taken in six hours."

The fact that much of the liquor was poisonous was not an accident. It was the policy of the government to order the poisoning of industrial alcohols manufactured in the United States so that it

could not be used by bootleggers who often stole these stocks to make the 'hooch' they sold to lower and middle class consumers who could not afford the "good stuff" smuggled in from Canada. This denaturing process usually involved adding methyl alcohol to the mix to make it unfit for human consumption. Still by the mid 1920's it was estimated that 60 million gallons of industrial alcohol were stolen annually and used for human consumption. The gangsters hired chemists to "renature" the toxic liquid. Many of these chemists were not successful, and other moonshiners created their own toxic brews. As a result thousands of speakeasies administered toxins to citizens all over the country. At least 10,000 died and unknown numbers suffered blindness or organ damage. It became an issue in congress and investigations of the poisoning policy ensued, but little was done about it. Powerful dry senators, like John Morris Sheppard (D) of Texas held sway. "Alcohol itself is a poison" he cried, "you can't poison poison!"

Grant County did not stand as a bastion of righteousness in those days. Teens and young adults were going to "country dances" where bootleggers waited in the parking areas administering their product by the shot. More respectable people visited hidden speakeasies to satisfy their thirst, or got prescriptions from their doctors for the "medicinal" drink. Local breweries, such as Cassville's (August 1924) turned off the near beer spigots and made true brew by night, hauling it out to cities all about. Probably the most popular area of Grant County for moonshiners to operate

was on the islands and river bottoms across from Dubuque. On the islands and in the marshes, stills were busily supplying the stuff, mostly for Iowa customers. For Wisconsin's German, Polish, Italian and Irish immigrants prohibition was anathema. Seventy eight percent of state residents "had an inherited wet predilection." Looking for quick money, locals entered the business. A guerilla war with the law ensued.

In March of 1927 a gunfight erupted north of the Eagle Point Bridge. A gang of bootleggers from Jo Davies County invaded the turf of a rival gang in Grant County to hijack a still. The "Smith Gang" failed to take the still but did kidnap several of the "Kirby Gang." Five of them ended up in the Grant County Jail and "a large amount of material for manufacturing of liquor was confiscated." This area was no stranger to visits by the Grant County sheriff. In the spring of 1930 Sheriff Joe Greer shot Edward Foht, a 36 year old war veteran in the head as he was fleeing arrest at a still site. Witnesses at a later inquest testified that Greer told Foht that he had aimed high and the bullet must have ricocheted, to which Foht replied "You're a lair. You shot right at me." Greer was not charged.

In April of 1931 over a thousand gallons of whiskey and alcohol were seized at a farm across from the "Two Mile House" outside of East Dubuque on the Wisconsin-Illinois border. Farmer Henry Vanderah, father of ten children was arrested. Agents found the still and whiskey in a cement basement under a chicken coop. In May of the same year Federal Prohibition agents R. H. Taylor and Barton L. Fry were fired on

in the bottom land on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi River near Dubuque. They never saw the shooter who missed them and fled. The Dubuque Telegraph Herald reported that "Hard times have placed a good many persons in the liquor business hereabouts. Now most of them (defendants in court) say they are in the business because they can get no other work and must make a living somehow." Fears of shooting wars with lawmen were expressed and it was pointed out that gangsters were looking hard for the informers in their midst, and were ready to "pop off." The agents were reported as having successfully located a "sizable liquor plant" in the area.

In August of 1934 the biggest operation of all was discovered four miles west of Hazel Green on the Frank Wilke farm. Agents accompanied by Sheriff Joe Greer swooped in to confiscate the stills, vats, and other equipment discovered. Apparently the farmer had allowed the bootleggers of a Cedar Rapids syndicate to convert his barn into a modern distilling plant. This plant was believed to be a primary supply source for Iowa and part of Nebraska. The daily output of the plant was estimated at 750 gallons a day. Agents said the product was of "fairly good quality." Inside the barn were four mash vats having a capacity of 6,700 gallons each – a total of 28,000 gallons. They also found a 3,500 gallon high line alcohol cooker turning out 130 proof alcohols, 1,286 gallon tins of alcohol, and 500 pounds of yeast. They did not find the 120,000 pounds of sugar they had tracked to the plant. The bootleggers had been tipped-off.

When the Twenty-first Amendment ended Prohibition, the big money in bootlegging was gone and it was left for smaller operators in the back country to practice the craft. Was prohibition a good thing? It certainly came of good intentions which envisioned a sober and more moral and industrious America. Human nature, however, got in the way and the nation was forced to live with the problems caused by alcohol abuse. The noble experiment had failed. John Barleycorn continues his encouragement of human stupidity.