

A RUM WAR ON LAKE ONTARIO



Fighting Prohibition's Rum Runners

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CANADA TO THE RESCUE, AMERICA IS DRY !

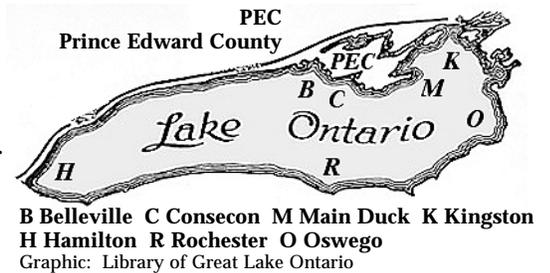
Prohibition hit the U.S.. Americans cried. Canadians cheered.
Their “Liquid Gold” flowed across the Great Lakes.
It was great for deprived “Yanks” - a headache for the Coast Guard.

Canada adopted Prohibition in 1916. Repealed it in 1920.¹
Not to be deterred, Province of Ontario passed its own prohibition. The Ontario Temperance Act (OTA, 1921-1927) outlawed the sale and consumption of any alcoholic beverage in Ontario. OTA did not restrict alcohol manufacture. It did restrict any distiller or brewer from selling their products within the province. Producers moved their sales operations to Province of Quebec.² This allowed products made in Ontario to be legitimately sold from Quebec, and then legally shipped to foreign customers from Ontario.

Americans were a thirsty bunch and Canadians were eager to oblige. Distillers could sell their products to international customers, but not to the U.S. prime market - that was illegal under U.S. law. America’s Prohibition was a sales obstacle. Solution: smuggling. Getting around Canadian customs and document inspections was a transportation obstacle.
Solution: rum running.

Lake Ontario became a superhighway to the United States. Cape Vincent, Oswego, Sodus Bay and Rochester, and Syracuse by way of Oswego River and Erie Canal, were all favorite destinations. Fleets departed nightly.

Boats filled with *Corby’s* whiskey of Belleville, and *Dow’s* ale of Kingston whisked across the lake. Starting at Main Duck Island along the eastern end of Prince Edward County Ontario (PEC) they headed to Oswego. Boats from Consecon³ on the western end of PEC, headed directly across to Rochester. Whiskey, bourbon and ale bottles, by the thousands, crossed over in twenty-five foot fishing boats and thirty-three foot cruisers. All were virtually unseen and uninhibited. Coast Guard records (U.S. National Archives) indicate that in the early years of Prohibition, “not one of the sixteen coast guard stations of the Ninth District had boats or equipment capable of stopping the whiskey and ale smugglers from Canada.” Canadian author, C W Hunt (*Booze, Boats and Billions*) also reports, that the coast guard saw products flow “into the Oswego area with nothing more than a few surfboats and a motor lifeboat” to stop them.”⁴



Solving alcohol smuggling was the responsibility of federal agencies.

Many municipalities chose to be blind towards the activity. Customs service, border patrol and Coast Guard were the primary deterrent to the rum running trade. After the deficiencies of the first years, the U.S. Treasury formed a task force known by folks as the “Treasury Men.” Booze and bullets became a chaotic mixture. As the “rum war” continued to expand, it grew beyond the feds and the runners. Hijacking of boats and cargoes by competitive runners moved the trade into a more violent and deadly phase. Countering this evolution required the U.S. to build a larger fleet of cutters and picket boats.



“36-foot Double-Cabin Picket Boat (CG-2318).”Source: U.S. Coast Guard History Program.

Congress appropriated funds to build 203 cutters and 303 picket boats.

The funding included a Coast Guard radio station in Buffalo (1924) to cover Lakes Erie and Ontario. Cutters were seventy-five foot vessels with a crew of eight, a cannon on the fore deck and a speed of fifteen knots. Picket boats were thirty-six foot vessels with a crew of three, a .30 caliber machine gun and a speed of twenty-four knots.⁵ Coast Guard Station Summerville (Rochester) received the new picket boat CG-2330 in April 1925, commanded by Chief Boatswains Mate Mason B McCune.⁶ McCune and CG-2330 soon became a major annoyance for Rochester bound rum runners.

Rochester had its characters in this history.

The list included Rochesterian, rum running, bootlegging Staud brothers; rum runner and Rochester police officer Fred Fricke; Mae Davis, a Rochester bootlegger and popular speak-easy operator; the Canadian smuggler Ben Kerr of Hamilton; and, the notorious Canadian “Wild Bill” Sheldon of Belleville.

Ben Kerr’s black-boat MARTIMAS ran the lake with thousand-bottle cargoes. Sailing out of Bay of Quinte Ontario, his destinations were Pultneyville, Nine Mile Point, Oklahoma Beach, and Braddock Point. During May 1925 alone, Kerr delivered eighteen loads of ale in MARTIMAS. It was a big cruiser, hauling cargoes across the lake even in winter. However, it was slow and could not outrun the new twenty-four knots picket boats. Ben Kerr was ambitious and always confident in his talents. He disregarded danger and the speedier picket boats like CG-2330. A frequent destination was a bootleg warehouse in Oklahoma just east of Genesee River. There he did business with Mae Davis. One run to Oklahoma was not his best day. Rumors spread by competing runners about Kerr’s delivery brought shore agents and CG-2330 to the area. Kerr was spotted. He sped into the lake. MARTIMAS was too slow and CG-2330 with McCune commanding overtook it. Shots were fired with no response until rounds pierced the hull. Kerr and his men dumped the remaining cargo overboard. Still, a good quantity of ale was retrieved and more was found in the warehouse. Kerr was arrested and MARTIMAS was seized.

Ben Kerr was not deterred, vowing he would never be captured again. He built the faster forty-two foot POLLYWOG. Smaller, with a reduced capacity, Kerr shifted his preferred cargo from ale to whiskey. Profits were higher. With POLLYWOG he made three lake crossings per week. Ben Kerr continued his trade until one fateful trip in February 1929. As often as he evaded capture, POLLYWOG was actually the cause of his ultimate demise. Heading out from Main Duck Island, he and his crew attempted to cross the lake in a winter storm. They never made it. An inquest determined they were killed in an explosion due to gasoline in the bilge.

The wily runner Wild Bill Sheldon was a bold character.

He was as interested in the joy of smuggling as he was in its profits. It seems he may have been more successful in the fun than in the money. He was caught, arrested and fined numerous times. Also known as Bill Sheridan, he would appear in different court jurisdictions as a first time offender⁷ - where his penalties were often less significant.

February 1925, Wild Bill and his boat DANCER were captured.

Federal agents caught him stuck in the ice off Braddock Point. He posted bail, and with his boat headed back to Canada to load and return. He was captured this time east of Rochester, arrested and fined. October 1925, he was again captured at Braddock Point and freed on bail, however, DANCER was seized. Sheldon's court date was set for May 1926.



“New Crew at Summerville
Coast Guard Station.”

l-r, Boatswain Mate Ira Norton,
Chief Boatswain Mate
Mason B McCune,
Motorman Archie L Lindsay. December 1924.
Source: Albert Stone Collection, Rochester
Museum and Science Center.

Wild Bill no longer had his own craft.

So he leased JIM LULU from another runner. Using that vessel he returned to Rochester in May 1926 for his trial. Not wanting to lose an opportunity, he came across with another load of booze. JIM LULU was a slow boat and no match for Coast Guard Summerville's CG-2330. On the morning of his court date, Wild Bill and his vessel were captured off Watumak beach by CG-2330, commanded by Archie L Lindsey.⁸ Shots were fired. JIM LULU was disabled. This time, the court set an unusually high bail which Sheldon could not meet. After sentencing he was jailed in the Monroe County Penitentiary for six months. Sheldon's career was over. So was that of JIM LULU. Instead of being auctioned off, as was the norm, it was put into Coast Guard service as CG-2380. Appraised at \$8800, JIM LULU was valued \$2000 greater than picket boat CG-2330's original cost. CG-2380 served in the fleet until it accidentally caught fire and burned to the waterline.⁹

A complete story of Rochester's bootleggers and the Canadian rum runners may never be known. For certain, Ben Kerr and Wild Bill Sheldon - and CG-2330 - became legends in Rochester rum running history and, in its citizens' quest to quench their thirsts.

NOTES

Cover Photo: Picket Boat (CG-2318). Source: U.S. Coast Guard History Program.

- 1) Following the 1920 repeal of Canadian Prohibition (established as a wartime policy, 1916), Province of Ontario passed the Ontario Temperance Act of 1921. It was repealed by the province in 1927, at which time the Liquor Control Board of Ontario was formed (LCBO).
- 2) Quebec's provincial parliament slowly disbanded Prohibition in each "riding" beginning in 1917, with completion in 1920. This opened the door for Ontario manufacturers to circumvent OTA laws by making Quebec a legal sales outlet for their products. Firms took paper possession of Ontario alcohol with delivery shipped from Ontario docks and consigned to foreign destinations. Mexico and Cuba were often listed, but the U.S. was the true destination. The joke of the system was that boats consigned for transport were too small to make trips to those stated foreign destinations.
- 3) Consecon, Prince Edward County Ontario is the birthplace of Rochester's famous Spiritualist Fox sisters, with their legend of talking to the dead.
- 4) Coast Guard Records, File 11100, US National Archives.
Researched by C W Hunt, Booze Boats and Billions, p95.
- 5) Picket boats were open cockpit, 36 feet in length, 8.5 foot beam, 30 inch draft, displacing 5-ton. Single cabin boats were numbered CG-2000 to CG-2229. Double cabin boats were numbered CG-2300 to CG-2372. All were in service by 1925.
- 6) Hunt's book refers to the officer in command as Boatswain Mason B McCune. However, a photograph, captioned "New Crew at Summerville Coast Guard Station," from Rochester Herald, December 1924 and March 1925, lists a Chief Boatswain Mate Nathan McCune. Other records show that Mason B McCune served as commanding officer of Station Summerville, later Station Rochester, from 1924-1935. Photo taken from the Albert Stone Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center, as posted on the internet by Monroe County Library System image archive.
- 7) Court records - Western and Northern District NY courts.
Researched by C W Hunt, Booze Boats and Billions, pp 147-148.
- 8) Hunt's book refers to the officer in command of the boat as Boatswain A L Lindley. Photograph, captioned "New Crew at Summerville Coast Guard Station," from Rochester Herald, December 1924 and March 1925, lists a Machinist Mate Archie L Lindsay. No other records verify either. Photo taken from the Albert Stone Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center, as posted on the internet by Monroe County Library System image archive.
- 9) Chart of seized rum runner vessels inducted into Coast Guard service and their dispositions. Rum War at Sea, Malcolm Willoughby, Appendix.

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