

DEFEATING THE DEMON RUM

That's how most patrons of Canadian saloons at the turn of the century were when they left for home. Pubs at that time were not so much places to go for a drink as they were places to go get drunk.

Payday was the worst time. Men, after a week of dawn to dusk toil, would pour into the taverns and start on monumental binges. The end result was usually either, a bar room brawl, an unconscious in a black alley or police cell, or a hazy walk home to face wife and children with an empty pay pocket.

It's hard to exaggerate the problems brought on by the drinking habits of Canadians in those days. Many women suffered regular beating at the hand of their drunken husbands. Children often went hungry because the head of the family had drunk the family's income. The public complained that arresting them was pointless -- most towns did not have a big enough place to lock them up in.

OPPOSITION GROWS

Given the horrors that too much liquor was causing it isn't startling that people started to talk about banning the stuff. Backed by the Protestant churches, the prohibition movement drew its support from all walks of life. In their thousands, people attended rallies and meetings attacking the evils of the demon rum. Gaining support everywhere, the prohibition movement was able to force provincial governments to put the question of whether or not to ban alcohol to the vote. By 1918 all provinces except Quebec had voted to ban the consumption of beverage alcohol. That, though the prohibitionists was that.

Indeed, many of the problems caused by alcohol abuse did get smaller. There was a dramatic drop in the crime rate, and in poverty

There was also a rapid increase in business activity, as money that had been spent on booze was now being spent on goods. Alcohol consumption dropped by 80%, but there was still a hard core of drinkers who would go to almost any lengths for a shot.

Happily for them, but unhappily for the prohibitionists, they did not have to work too hard to find a bottle of whiskey. It was one thing to pass a law to make it illegal to drink liquor, it was quite another to enforce that law. There were loopholes in the prohibition laws that were big enough to drive a liquor truck through. And the laws were almost constantly changing from province to province. By the early 1920s, some provinces, like B.C. and Quebec, were wet, some like Manitoba and P.E.I. were dry, and others were neither one thing nor the other. Ontario, for example, was supposed to be dry, but because of a strong grape growers lobby it was still illegal to drink wine. And what a wine it was -- 28% proof, with a kick like a mule.

One loophole that a lot of people found was the doctor. Despite the fact that any known benefits could be expected, most provinces allowed doctors to prescribe alcohol for their patients. Naturally there was an enormous increase of patients seeking and receiving treatment from a quart of whiskey. Stephen Leacock, the Canadian writer described how to get a prescription filled. "It is necessary to go to a drugstore . . . and lean up against the counter and make a gurgling sigh. . . . Often one sees these causes lined up four deep."

Another problem for the prohibitionists was the breweries. Because they operated under federal licences it was beyond the power of the provinces to close them down. So the breweries did their best to stoke the nation's thirst with a weekend province called temperance beer. In many cases, this could not be sold in the province in which it was made, but it could be shipped to another province for sale. The breweries could usually be relied upon to keep a few kegs of real beer in every carload of temperance brew.

And what about the police? Nobody seemed to know, or even care, whether enforcement of the liquor laws was the job of local police, the RCMP, or liquor inspectors. The result was that nobody took too much trouble looking for offenders.

Slowly the provinces drifted away from the ban on alcohol consumption and opted instead for sale through government controlled liquor stores. The strongest argument in favour of doing this was that the provinces could raise large amounts of money through liquor taxes. Those taxes were a lot bigger than thirsty Canadians could account for, and that was because of our neighbour to the south.

U.S. PROHIBITION

In January 1920 the Volstead Act became law in the U.S. It prohibited the sale of beverage alcohol anywhere in the country. As in Canada, the hope of the prohibitionists was that banning booze would stop people drinking. It just didn't happen that way. By 1929, there were twice as many illegal bars, or speakeasies as they were called. In N.Y. city there had been legal bars before prohibition. The demand for liquor remained high.

Canadians Benefited

Of course, there were plenty of people ready to break the law in order to satisfy the demand. Every crook in America quickly saw the potential profits to be made out of their hunch. And the profits were enormous. Prohibition in the U.S. took \$2 billion a year out of the hands of legitimate brewers and distillers, and put it into the hands of murderers, thugs and other criminals. It was the profit from prohibition more than anything else, that enabled organized crime to get its start.

And the money could be used to make sure the authorities didn't cause any trouble. The profits were so huge that judges and entire police forces could be bought off. As an example, between 1927 and 1931 there were 227 gangland murders in Chicago, but not a single conviction was made on any of them.

CANADIAN RUM-RUNNERS

Where did all the liquor come from to satisfy the thirst of 100 million Americans? Allot of it came from Canada.

Although prohibition existed in many provinces at the same time as it did in the U.S., there was no ban on exporting booze. So hundreds of liquor export houses sprang up along the Canadian border. They imported alcohol from Europe and then exported it to the states. No Canadian laws were broken, and Ottawa was happy to collect the huge export taxes generated by the trade. In the first full year

of U.S. prohibition whiskey imports from Canada grew from \$5 million to \$23million. And this is a time when Canadian consumption was rapidly dropping.

Getting the booze across the border was no real problem either. On the east and west coast it was loaded into fishing boats. These boats would then stand off the U.S. coast outside territorial waters, and then tranship their cargoes in the fast launches of American rum-runners for the final dash into quiet beaches and inlets. The U.S. coast gaud interrupted few boats, but the vast majority got through. And when a coast gaud was making \$127 a month, the offer of ten times that amount from the rum-runners was enough to make sure that most officers did not see anything illegal going on.

A fast launch across the Detroit river between Windsor and Detroit was the favourite way of shipping liquor across to our southern neighbour. Allot of the runs were made in broad daylight, in full view of U.S. customs officers whose job it was to seize the smuggled booze. But the supplies mostly got through. General Lincoln C. Andrew who was in charge of enforcing U.S. prohibition reckoned that less than 5% of the liquor smuggled was seized.

It poured across by land too. Private individuals would load up their cars and cross the frontier at lonely spots across the Prairies. Or gangs of crooks would run convoys of trucks across in the middle of the night.

Whatever the route chosen, the rum-runners were guaranteed a handsome return of their investment. By the time the customer in the speakeasy raised his shot glass he could be paying as much as ten times the pre-prohibition price. This, of

course, put the cost of a drink outside of the range of America's poor. They resorted to drinking rubbing alcohol, anti-freeze varnish mixtures and hair tonic. All of these are poisonous, you can't expect to escape its effects. During the prohibition in the U.S. thousands of people died or went blind on trying to get a high on drinking one of these poisonous mixtures.

Of course, the U.S. government tried to get Canada to help in stopping the flow of booze across the border. But for years, Canada ignored America's requests - the revenue from liquor export taxes was so high that Ottawa did not want to give it up.

However, after several years of allowing virtually unlimited amounts of liquor to be shipped out of the country, it dawned on the government that smuggling was a two-way street. The enterprising smugglers had not taken them long to figure that the return trap could be profitable too, if a load of textiles was brought into Canada. The situation became so bad that some industries were found to reduce production and lay off workers because they could not compete with duty-free smuggled goods.

Attempts were made to make the border more than a nuisance effect on the smugglers who had become highly skilled at avoiding detection. Canada had learned an important lesson. A nation that turns a blind eye when its citizens break the laws or a neighbour can expect the loss of respect for its own laws.