



The Persian Terrace
at the Hotel
Syracuse in 1942.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY
OF ONONDAGA
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Of wine, whiskey and women: Prohibition had a long-lasting social impact

| BY DON CAZENTRE

You might not think a museum display on drinking, bars and saloons and the cocktail also would serve as a social history of the place of women in society.

Yet that is a theme running through the exhibit "Culture of the Cocktail Hour," at the Onondaga Historical Association through June 15.

"Through much of the 19th century, drink-

ing at bars, saloons and gentleman's clubs was predominantly, almost exclusively, a male activity," said OHA history curator Dennis Connors. "It was Prohibition, in the 1920s, that really changed things."

Connors created the exhibit — featuring old photos, historic records and artifacts — to complement the adjacent exhibit, "Fashion After ➤

Five,” a look at vintage and modern takes on the cocktail dress. The cocktail exhibit traces drinks in Central New York from the early 1800s to World War II and just beyond.

“Because Prohibition forced drinking underground, it was easier for women to participate,” Connors said. “They could do something hidden away that they hadn’t been able to do out in the open.”

And then, when Prohibition ended, women weren’t going to be denied their right to drink in public places. The real eye-opening aspect of the exhibit charts the growth of fancy hotel bars and other glitzy establishments that catered to drinkers of both genders.

Check out photos of the Rainbow Room Lounge at the Hotel Syracuse, for instance, or the Travel Room at the Hotel Onondaga (a long-gone landmark at the corner of Jefferson and Warren streets).

While the OHA has long had exhibits and artifacts related to the hugely successful beer industry in Syracuse, this display allowed Connors to dig into the trove of records relating the distilling industry, as well as a focus on drinking places through the years. You’ll see vintage photos of bars at such places as the Yates Hotel, and a stunning art deco bar built on Water Street in the 1920s (meant to anticipate the end of Prohibition).

Also fascinating are the displays related to Prohibition itself — such as the information of Charles Kress, Syracuse’s own version of liquor gang-buster Eliot Ness.

Connors is especially fond of the story about one of Syracuse’s most notorious speakeasies — located inside the relatively non-descript Wood Building on Jefferson Street adjacent to the Mizpah Tower/First Baptist Church at the corner of Montgomery Street.

It seems this speakeasy catered to a well-heeled and no doubt powerful clientele, and was therefore difficult for the authorities to shut down. But there was an unexpected raid one night, and the operator did his best to hide the liquor by throwing it out a rear window — onto a back roof of the Baptist church.

“The pastor (Rev. Dr. Clausen) was furious,” Connors said. “He was a Prohibition supporter, and these people had the nerve to operate next to



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF OHA

The Wood Building, next to the Mizpah Tower/First Baptist Church on Jefferson Street in downtown Syracuse, was the location of a speakeasy.

TRY OUR MIXED DRINKS

Franklin High Ball	50	Martini Cocktail	50
Old Colonial Blazer	50	John Collins	50
St. James Cocktail	50	Tom Collins	50
Maraschino Bourbon Cocktail	50	Club Cocktail	50
Bourbon Cocktail	50	Perfect Cocktail	50
Lafayette Cocktail	50	Low Tree Cocktail	50
Dixie Julep	50	Gin Sour	50
Kentucky Cocktail	50	Laurier Cap	50
Rochambeau Cocktail	50	Shanty Sour	50
Plantation Cobbler	75	Virgin Cocktail	50
Whiskey Gizz	75	Flying Dutchman Collins	50
Mammy Whiskey Sour	75	Olive	50
Whoopie Cocktail	75	London Club Cocktail	50
Manhattan Cocktail	75	Melchers High Ball	50
Haymarket Cocktail	75	Gin Hot Toddy	50
Clair Cocktail	75	Laurier Night Cap	50
Whiskey Hot Toddy	75	Cherries Flip	50
Tulace Gizz	75	Orange Blossom	50
Whiskey Punch	75	Harry's Favorite	50
American Flye Cocktail	75	Queen Mary Cocktail	50
Rock and Rye	75	Bronx	75
Red Wing Stirrup Cup	75	Clover Club	75
Sherman Mint Julep	75	Old Fashioned Gin Cocktail	75
Plain Gizz	75	Silver Gizz	75
Confederation	75	Golden Gizz	75
Louisiana Egg Nog	75	Richieu Cocktail	75
Old Fashioned Cocktail	75	Habitat Flip	75
Liquor Straight	50	Monte Carlo Cocktail	75
Bourbon Straight	50	Old Style Martini	75
Brandy 50 Scotch	50	Green Flip 50 Orange	50
Wine 20c	50	Martini Cocktail No 2	50
Prescription Liquor	75	Service Cocktail	75
Whiskey Sour	50	Gin Straight	35

BRANDY DRINKS

Side Car Cocktail	75	Brandy Cocktail No 1	75	Brandy Cocktail	75
Brandy High Ball	75	Brandy Cocktail No 2	75	Club Brandy	75
Brandy Cocktail	75	Brandy Gizz	75	Tom & Jerry	75

IF YOU DON'T SEE WHAT YOU WANT - ASK FOR IT!

The cocktail menu at the Wood Building speakeasy.



A whiskey flask and a 1915 ginger beer bottle.

his church, and dump their liquor on his property."

Eventually, that speakeasy had to move on. But the legacy of Prohibition persisted.

"It really was the glory days of the cocktail because the liquor was so bad, made in bathtubs and so forth, that they learned to mix in ingredients that really masked those flavors," Connor said. "So you had women, mixed drinks and a lot of creativity at that time."

After Prohibition, Hollywood helped glamorize the culture of the nightclub and its allure for wom-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LASSMAN

Law enforcement items from the era of Prohibition.

en — and Connors' exhibit uses photos of 1930s stars like Myrna Loy, Katherine Hepburn and Claudette Colbert to underscore that effect.

The OHA exhibit clearly demonstrates Syracuse's long love affair with alcohol, but Connors doesn't believe the area was more drink-happy than other similar cities.

"In the 1800s, the saloons thrived because the factory workers — the guys who did dangerous grunt work — had them as the places where they could go to relax — sort of like the modern man-caves," Connor said. "Then, as we move to Prohibition and beyond, times change and the culture of drinking changed with it." ♦

BELOW, the OHA has re-created a speakeasy dubbed the "Coffee, Tea and China Shop" in its basement.

