SYRACUSE BOOZE TIMES

by Dennis Connors - Wednesday, December 18th, 2013

Eighty-two years ago, cops were chasing bootleggers in the Salt City
As an increasing number of states ease up on the once illegal use of marijuana, it is worth noting that it was 80 years ago this month that the great experiment to make alcohol Prohibition, was finally declared a failure.

The topic of Prohibition is explored, with a local twist, in *The Culture of the Cocktail* exhibit at the **Onondaga Historical Association**. The show accompanies, and gives perspective for, a larger exhibition, **Fashion after Five**, which features 22 cocktail dresses drawn from the holdings of the association and **Syracuse University’s Sue Ann Coffey collection**. Arranged on realistic mannequins, the gowns date from the 1920s through
Fashion after Five, featuring 22 cocktail dresses from the holdings of the OHA and SU's Sue Ann Genet costume (Michael Davis photos)

Prohibition of alcohol had become federal law in 1920 with the adoption of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution.

But instead of raising the morality of the nation, as its advocates had long argued it would, it led to increased lawlessness. This ranged from the violent activities of gangsters like Al Capone to everyday, formerly law-abiding citizens who were technically breaking prohibition by consuming a single beer in the backroom of a neighborhood club.

Liquor had been deeply woven into American social life since earliest colonial days. In the early 18th centuries, beer and hard cider were considered safer drinks than water drawn from unknown sources. Wine was regarded as a basic food. Some of Onondaga County settlements included a tavern from their beginnings.

By the mid-1800s, however, some people believed that the consumption of brown proof and other intoxicants had become much too widespread. They argued that these vices were a hardship for families, especially for women and their children as husbands drank...
Taverns bred gambling, vice and prostitution, the

This “Temperance Movement” coincided with the century’s great religious and moral revival—the same one that created the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements—and it persisted, right into the early

American cities like Syracuse, teaming with new industries, had grown into large urban centers. Their saloons and breweries became symbols to some citizens, usually the middle class, living in rural America, of a growing moral decay. At a local level, temperance advocates began to push for similar restrictions in towns and smaller cities to adopt “dry” laws, banning the sale of liquor within their borders. By 1916, 10 of Onondaga County’s 24 towns had such laws.

The Temperance Movement eventually achieved its goal with passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. The National Prohibition Act essentially turned the entire United States dry. It was signed into law in January 1919 and took effect a year later, making the production and consumption of all liquor illegal.

Enforcing the law, however, proved almost impossible. Most Americans, in little ways and, sometimes, violent ways often got around the ban. There was illegal smuggling from Canada, concealed stills in the countryside, secret hiding places in homes and the popular, speakeasy.

**Speakeasies sprung up all over Syracuse, from small backroom operations in tenements to elaborately decorated upper floors in the heart of downtown.** These classier establishments would evolve into the nightclubs of the 1930s and 1940s, after the end of Prohibition.
Ironically, women had achieved the right to vote in 1920, with the passage of the 19th Amendment. The decade of the 1920s became one of their liberation, perhaps most notably with the image of the “flapper girl” in her short hair and ankle-revealing skirt and dress.

Fashion after Five, featuring 22 cocktail dresses from the holdings of the OHA and SU's Sue Ann Genet costume (Michael Davis photo)

But the anonymity of the speakeasy also supported another facet of this liberating women. Somehow, women seemed more at ease drinking in a hidden speakeasy, in a hidden speakeasy, in public, in the old male-dominated saloon. Plus, the speakeasy needed their busin to discourage women drinkers. For the male customers, the already naughty nature of liquor was only enhanced by the presence of women.
And the cocktail thrived. New recipes became popular, such as the daiquiri, to help sometimes watered-down or poorly distilled liquor that might arrive at a speakeasy. Flavored cocktail was often preferred by the increasing numbers of women custom the speakeasy.

Local, state and national law enforcement agencies were supposed to stop all this illegal alcoholic consumption and production but never really succeeded. There were raids, bottles smashed and gallons of liquor dumped into sewers. But the illegal activity continued because the public demand was always present and there was money to be made.
Down the hatch. As police watch, men dump liquor into a Syracuse sewer during Prohibition. Courtesy of On Historical Association.

The intensity of police and judicial activity varied greatly. Some officials were lax
questioning the wisdom of Prohibition. Undoubtedly, a few were bribed to look the other way. But several pursued their job with great energy, such as when federal agent Charles Kress was assigned to Syracuse. A federal agent detailed here in the late 1920s, Kress was the “Ness” of Syracuse, feared by bootleggers for his aggressive raids and sometimes flamboyant stunts in breaking into speakeasies. Syracuse was not Chicago, however, and there was little violence.

Syracuse police, Onondaga County sheriff’s deputies and federal agents made many raids, some were dismissed on technicalities. Even if bootleggers were found guilty, penalties were severe. A common dodge for speakeasy operators might be lack of a search warrant to enable raids on their establishments. And the speakeasy management was adept at quickly hiding or disposing of incriminating liquor evidence.

Speakeasy raids made good headlines, though, and one of the most notorious occurrences occurred on Feb. 7, 1931, when Syracuse police broke into one particularly elaborate speakeasy, just off Columbus Circle. It was described as one of the most lavish speakeasies ever to grace the city, with a posted menu listing 75 drinks and cocktails. This most ornate speakeasy was located on the third floor of the Wood Building, in the 200 block of East Jefferson Street.
Working on a tip that “many young girls of the city, some unescorted” were seen frequenting the speakeasy, Syracuse Police detective Martin Kavanaugh walked over from police headquarters near Clinton Square and rang a bell next to a locked door leading to the upper floor.

A man, later identified as Arthur Anklin, opened a peephole in the door and announced to the officers that only members were admitted. Seeing a glass transom above the door, Kavanaugh broke the glass, crawled through and unlocked a heavy metal door to the speakeasy. Meanwhile, Anklin had run up to his speakeasy and was doing his best to hide all the liquor.

When Kavanaugh and the other officers reached the third floor, the local press reporter was “amazed at the scene which met their eyes.” The décor was fancier than some high-class lounges in existence before Prohibition. There was a long mahogany bar, a large mirror, cozily furnished chairs, plush oriental rugs and softly shaded floor lamps in private rooms off the main lounge. If there was any doubt about its function, the price list of the menu of drinks and cocktails erased that uncertainty.

While keeping an eye on Anklin, who was trying to hide his coat and hat, the police began a search for incriminating booze. A few quarts of several bottles of Canadian ale were located on a nearby lower roof of the adjacent Church and Mizpah Hotel. It had been quickly tossed out a window. Anklin

The police also confiscated a list of the club’s “members,” which reportedly...
prominent local citizens. The case gained a great deal of attention because the speakeasy had been operating adjacent to a Baptist church and because the roof on which the liquor was thrown was just outside the study of its pastor, the Rev. Bernard C. Clausen.

Clausen was infuriated that such illegal goings-on had occurred in the shadow of his own church. The minister, upset by the emergency use of his roof, demanded that police release the club’s members. This must have given several of the speakeasy’s regulars a case of what Dr. Jekyll would call the “dreaded butterflies in the stomach.” But they were not to worry. Because Kavanaugh did not have a search warrant, his arrest was ruled illegal by U.S. Commissioner Edward Chapman. Anklin was freed.

The Wood Building speakeasy soon reopened, but its manager did not reckon on the minister’s crusade. Continuing attention by the press and, in part by Clausen, eventually forced Mayor Rollie Marvin to exert pressure on the city board of aldermen to evict Anklin and his “private club.” Anklin left, and it was assumed he moved to some other, undisclosed location.

The Wood Building still stands, along with its neighbors: the First Baptist Church and Mizpah Tower. While well known for its landmark status and long-standing use as an event venue, the building remains an intriguing piece of history. In search of a successful re-use, the building remains the subject of much speculation and rumor — perhaps as Anklin would have wished.

**A visit to the Onondaga Historical Association offers more colorful history of the cocktail in Syracuse with a chance to view styles of cocktail gowns of the 1920s, including designs that might have once graced the most notorious speakeasy.**

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Historical Association.