

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**, a new exhibit at the **Onondaga Historical Association**. The show accompanies, from a different perspective for, a larger exhibition, **Fashion after Five**, which features 22 cocktails drawn from the holdings of the association and **Syracuse University's Sue Ann Clark collection**. Arranged on realistic mannequins, the gowns date from the 1920s through the 1950s.



Fashion after Five, featuring 22 cocktail dresses from the holdings of the OHA and SU's Sue Ann Genet costume collection (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 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 the law 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 and 18th centuries, beer and hard cider were considered safer drinks than water 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 beer and rum and other intoxicants had become much too widespread. They argued that it caused hardships for families, especially for women and their children as husbands drank



E.C. Stearns poster with modern liberated woman of the time on the popular "Yellow Fellow" model in 1896

Taverns bred gambling, vice and prostitution, th

This "Temperance Movement" coincided with th century's great religious and moral revival—the s that created the anti-slavery and women's rights movements—and it persisted, right into the early

American cities like Syracuse, teaming with new had grown into large urban centers. Their saloor breweries became symbols to some citizens, usu living in rural America, of a growing moral deca At a local level, temperance advocates began to towns and smaller cities to adopt "dry" laws, ba within their borders. **By 1916, 10 of Onondaga towns had such laws.**

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

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

Speakeasies sprung up all over Syracuse, from small backroom operations i elaborately decorated upper floors in the heart of downtown. These classier s would evolve into the nightclubs of the 1930s and 1940s, after the end of Prohibit

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 evident in their dress, with the image of the “flapper girl” in her short hair and ankle-revealing skirts.



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

But the anonymity of the speakeasy also supported another facet of this liberating era for women. Somehow, women seemed more at ease drinking in a hidden speakeasy, in secret, rather than publicly, in the old male-dominated saloon. Plus, the speakeasy needed their business to survive. For the male customers, the already naughty nature of the speakeasy 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. A flavored cocktail was often preferred by the increasing numbers of women customizing 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 Or 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 floundering stunts in breaking into speakeasies. Syracuse was not Chicago, however, and there was less violence.

Syracuse police, Onondaga County sheriff’s deputies and federal agents made many arrests, but some were dismissed on technicalities. Even if bootleggers were found guilty, penalties were not always severe. A common dodge for speakeasy operators might be lack of a search warrant or insufficient evidence. 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 in the city 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 in 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.**



Wood Building Speakeasy next to Mizpah Towers. Photo courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association.

Working on a tip that “many young girls of the city, some unescorted” were seen frequenting the building, 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, “gentlemen, but only members are admitted here.” Seeing a glass transom above the door, Kavanaugh broke the glass, crawled through and unlocked a heavy metal door to allow police officers enter. Meanwhile, Anklin had run up to his speakeasy and was doing his best to dispose of all the liquor.

When Kavanaugh and the other officers reached the third floor, the local press reporters were “amazed at the scene which met their eyes.” The décor was fancier than some of the 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. There were private rooms off the main lounge. If there was any doubt about its function, the prominent display of the menu of drinks and cocktails erased that uncertainty.



In the press. A newspaper reports on the reaction after the raid on a speakeasy in the Wood Building, in the 200 block of East Jefferson Street. Courtesy of OHA.

While keeping an eye on Anklin, who was wearing his coat and hat, the police began a search for more incriminating booze. A few quarts of Canadian ale were among the several bottles of Canadian ale that were the largest quantity was noticed lying on a nearby lower roof of the adjacent Church and Mizpah Hotel. It had clearly 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 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 cold sweats. But they were not to worry. Because Kavanaugh did not have a search warrant, the raid 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 wrath of Clausen, who began a crusade against the place. Continuing attention by the press, in part by Clausen, eventually forced Mayor Rollie Marvin to exert pressure on the building's owner to evict Anklin and his "private club." Anklin left, and it was assumed he moved to some other, undisclosed location.



*Cocktail Dresses on display at
Onondaga Historical Association.
(Michael Davis photo)*

The Wood Building still stands, along with its neighbors, the former First Baptist Church and Mizpah Tower. Well known for its landmark status and long-standing search for a successful re-use, the Building remains anonymous – perhaps as Anklin would have wished in 1931.

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 and including designs that might have once graced the most notorious speakeasy.

Dennis Connors is curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

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