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RUMRUNNING IN THE MID-CAPE AREA



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Even today, rumrunning is a topic that some people don't like to talk about because the subject may be too close to home. In many ways, this is similar to the hesitancy of naming Tories during the Revolution by the early local historians of the 19th century. Fortunately, some of the rumrunners, including Manny Zora and Bud Cummings, have been interviewed and have given some hard (no pun intended) facts to this shadowy business. Rumrunning became big business because people didn't trust bootleg liquor. If liquor wasn't bottled and sealed, it was often cut by 75%, flavored with glycerine or fuel oil, and colored with creosote or iodine. Rum Row provided a more reliable liquor. Coast Guard historians estimate about 1/3 of liquor came by sea, 2/3 by land from Canada.

Donald Trayser, noted Barnstable historian, called it the last age of maritime commerce in Barnstable County, which enlisted schooners, steamers, launches—especially fast ones—in a spectacular enterprise of daring seamanship and human greed. The bays, inlets, and rivers became ideal ports for the cargoes of prohibition.

In early days, liquor carried by the rumrunners was packed in wooden boxes. Later, it was packed in straw inside burlap bags. 12 one-quart bottles would fit in a sack. This made it practically indestructible and easy to handle. (Capt. Manny Zora and Bud Cummings)

Although the 18th Amendment banning alcohol started January 17, 1920, it wasn't until May of 1921 that the first rum ships (the mother ships carrying liquor) appeared off of Long Island. At the height of rumrunning, nearly 100 vessels were in the rum line which ran from Maine to Florida.

Vessels beyond the 3mile limit were known as rum ships. These ships from Canada or the Caribbean discharged their cargoes at night. In 1922, Roy Haynes, the Prohibition Commissioner, declared that hundreds were anchored off of Atlantic shores. In 1924, there were international agreements made whereby those nations agreed that seizures could be made as far out as one hour steaming distance. The 12 mile limit was based on most vessels being able to go 12 mph. However, some cases, the Coast Guard figured if the rumrunning vessel could go 20 mph, they would seize a vessel 20 miles from shore.

The Coast Guard efforts can be divided into those up until 1925 and those after. Until 1925, Coast Guard operated on same force level as before Prohibition started. After 1925, a "quantum leap" in numbers of vessels and men became operational, making for much more aggressive enforcement. In May of 1925, the first great enforcement took place. At least 50 mother ships returned to Canada.

Many tactics were used by Cape Codders running the alcohol from the rum line to shore. Some sent phony distress calls to get CG to another area and then ran out to mother ship and back. Other vessels produced a heavy cloud of black smoke by mixing and burning kerosene and motor oil on the hot manifolds of their engines. This produced a thick smoke screen making the boat hard to follow. If the Coast Guard got too close, coils of rope with a section of 2x4 tied to one end were thrown off the stern in hopes of fouling Coast Guard propellers.

Sometimes, it is hard to determine fact from fiction during this age of mass violations of the law. However, Coast Guard historians believe that rumors of a submarine of German design thought to be operating as a rumrunner off Cape Cod are false. Supposedly it carried German ale and beer as well as French wine. Rumors of the German Passenger Liner *Freidrich Der Grosse* being 15 miles off shore, offering a floating bar and cabaret complete with movies and a jazz orchestra are also lacking in truth.

The mid-Cape area was a favorite landing place of the Boston syndicate. Capt. Manny Zora who sometimes worked for them often unloaded their liquor on the bay shores of Cape Cod. There were some favored spots. The freezer plant at Central Wharf in Yarmouth had recently shut down and gone bankrupt. The plant was auctioned off to outsiders in 1922. (It was torn down about 1926 but the power house and chimney were not torn down until 1966.) Its wharf was still useable during prohibition times, and the channel had been dredged. The wharf was enormous: 75 feet wide and 100 feet long. No wonder that traffic was often heavy on Wharf Lane late at night.

Author Haynes Mahoney talked with Guido Perera in 1980 about rumrunning. Perera recalled an incident involving the freezer plant. "I remember early one morning in 1922, a friend and I were launching our skiff at Wharf Lane near the Freezer Plant to row to Sandy Neck for some duck shooting. Although it was still dark, we could easily see a rumrunner at the wharf of the Fish Freezer plant. It was a big boat, 75 feet, a former navy subchaser. It was unusual for them to come in; they usually stayed offshore and sent the stuff in by a small boat. We were uneasy about being there, but we weren't disturbed. They could come in to the wharf because of the deep channel dredged for the freezer plant fishing boats."

Perera further recalled, "I was out duck shooting that day, although all we got was one Brant, one Black Duck, and one Double Eagle Rye. I still have the bottle, sealed in a secure can."

In May 1924, Officer Ernest Bradford, acting on a tip that liquor was stored at the freezer plant, organized a raid. Several cases of scotch and gin were confiscated, but much had been transferred before the raid.

Bass Hole was another area to unload liquor. In August 1926, the *Register* reported, “Old soaks were exuberant this week, with drifting cases as thick as porpoises in a school of mackerel More liquid found than you could shake a stick at Power boats put out from Yarmouth Sunday night came back loaded to the scuppers with crews to match.”

Local resident Sam Thacher, remembered a later incident. During an interview, he told Haynes Mahoney, “Before you go, there’s one thing I want to show you”, said Sam. After some loud noises of moving boxes in a back room, he returned to display a long, heavily sealed oblong tin, rusted about the edges but still shining with the printing, “perfect protection package—insures you against fraud—the contents of this package are guaranteed to be genuine”.... The rye whiskey was made by Distillers Corporation, Limited, of Montreal, Canada. “And this is the kind of bottle inside,” he said, showing me a square frosted bottle, empty, with the same label. “I picked them up from the marsh at Bass Hole.”

He then gave the background to the story. Coming home late one day in 1929, his brother asked him where he had been. “Get the truck and let’s get down to Bass Hole fast.” A motor launch had run afoul of the tides and got stranded near Lone Tree Creek. To escape the law, its crew had dumped its cargo—cases of the above whiskey—and it floated up Bass Hole and the other creeks in the marshes. Sam got 11 cases which he stored in the attic, and he sold it for \$50 per case. His wife disapproved of the whole shenanigan, and Sam felt uneasy every time the State Police passed by. Years later, when having his house renovated, workmen found a few bottles hidden away—of which this full one is the last. He gave it and an empty bottle to the Historical Society of Old Yarmouth as a relic. Both are still part of the collection, one still full and the other empty.

Haynes also talked to a young man working at Bray Farm in 1980. The young man told him the farm was actively used by the rumrunners. They supposedly buried some of their goods around the farm, and sometimes when digging or plowing the young man said that they thought they had hit some of their stuff. When the barn was renovated, he found a lot of guns and pistols in the walls. The men used to stick their guns in the frame of the walls to have them ready at hand. Evidently, when the walls were covered the guns were left in there.

Brewster was another favorite area. The *Mary*, a 70 footer with a crew of 6 or 7, occasionally unloaded along the beaches of Brewster. On one instance, ten trucks, half a dozen dories which could carry 20 cases at a time, and nearly a hundred men unloaded 2000 cases from the *Mary*. Manny Zora was one of those doing the unloading.

One Brewster selectman reportedly stored his whiskey in a fish weir off Robbins Hill Beach. Perhaps the bottle of Old Log Cabin Bourbon, found on outer flats off Brewster in 1994, came from his stash. It's unknown whether he started doing this after a rumrunner ran into a fish weir on the Brewster flats and had to throw overboard 500 cases in order to allow his vessel to escape.

Barnstable had its share of drop spots. The Harbor Point restaurant in Barnstable was a landing point for bootleg liquor. It even had a secret storeroom built inside near the chimney in case it was raided. In 1926, there was a major raid in Barnstable on traffickers after they had off-loaded their liquor. State Police Lt. Edward Gulley, Corporal McFarley, and Trooper Graham stopped a truck convoy at 3 AM. Included in the haul were 3100 gallons of alcohol, 500 quarts of scotch, 3 trucks, and two cars. While several of the rumrunners escaped, four were captured.

Sandy Neck was a busy place during this time. Margaret Rourke, writing in "The Ebb and Flow of Life on Sandy Neck, 1997", written by residents of Sandy Neck and compiled by Cheryl Nourse Einstein, "During the prohibition years, 1919-1933, Sandy Neck was involved in many ways with rumrunners. And Coast Guard playing hide and seek along its shores while "mystery men" were ensconced in some of the cottages at the Neck colony. The Sandy Neck kids used to play "spy" on them, then shake in their sneakers for fear they'd been seen and would get their feet put in cement and thrown overboard. Actually, they were quite safe and became good friends with CG242 that visited regularly." [The CG242 was a 75 footer called a "six bitter". 203 were built for service during prohibition.]

Jean Fletcher recalled, "And the rum running days were exciting times. At that time there were very few boats coming into the harbor except local craft, so nearly every strange craft was a suspect, especially at night. No one ever traveled in a boat at night then. We would watch signals from the mainland and see almost silent boats slip toward a destination."

The South side was just as notorious. In November of 1924, a major raid took place on Great Island in Yarmouth. Four rumrunners, two power boats, two dories, and three autos, along with 400 cases of Honduran rum and whiskey were seized. All involved were reported to be off Cape people.

One rumrunner from Eastham, Bud Cummings, was interviewed by author Donald Sparrow. Cummings especially liked the West Dennis Breakwater as a place to unload liquor, as it was isolated and local officials were not too demanding. He reported that the off-loading crew sometimes included a few State Troopers who were not on duty, and the drop was owned by a local town official. Cummings and his crew got \$5.00 per case delivered. He estimated that in his years of rum running he landed about 40,000 cases.

Smaller transport vessels, often fishermen by day, were paid \$250 for the trip—cash on the spot. Drop spots on the south side included Bass River, the railroad wharf in Hyannis, and the Oster-ville jetty.

The Casa Madrid was an elegant Yarmouth speakeasy that served rumrunners' liquor. Of Spanish architectural style, it boasted a 40 foot mahogany bar. (It still exists as a private building at 137 Run Pond Road, about a ¼ mile north of Smugglers Beach. The *Register* ran an article describing its elegant interior and exterior, but not its prohibition history on December 31, 1987.) Many of its patrons were wealthy and influential citizens, and it advertised in the Boston newspapers. It was rumored that the town officials of Yarmouth tended to look the other way. During one raid on the place, a visibly stiff Mayor Curley of Boston was pushed out through a window by his bodyguards and rushed off so he wouldn't be apprehended. Interestingly, Mayor Curley's bodyguards were State Policemen. The Casa Madrid was owned and managed by Alex Finn. Finn once tried to bribe Coast Guard Lt. Donald Hesler, asking him to stay away from a certain near-by beach for several nights. Hesler refused. In a final raid in 1933, the State Police raided there while 200 people were inside. Jack Dempsey of Hyannis, was one of the State Police responsible for planning the raid. Some say it is this raid from which Mayor Curley escaped. Pandemonium ensued inside as the patrons tried to make themselves scarce. More than \$5000 in gambling money and several thousand dollars worth of liquor were taken as evidence. After the raid, Finn is reported to have served the State Police breakfast to show that there were no hard feelings. The Casa Madrid did not reopen as a speakeasy.

At least two Cape Cod lighthouses were rumored to be involved with rumrunning. The Stage Harbor light was a drop spot. The keeper's house and the light were connected by a short covered passageway under which liquor was often hidden.

Edward Rowe Snow wrote about a lighthouse keeper's involvement. "Fred told me there were rumors that one of the keepers [Sandy Neck lighthouse] of those later days was more or less active with the rumrunners, but Mr. Lang would not tell me whether the keeper favored the Government or the rumrunners."

One of the more apocryphal stories involved the State Police and a Mr. Wixon of Dennis. They knocked on his door, armed with a search warrant. They had a tip he had found a quantity of illegal liquor. His house was searched and a case of French brandy bottles found, all empty. When asked about the presence of a dozen empty bottles in his house, he replied, "I can assure you that I have never in my life brought an empty French brandy bottle into this house."

Even with the end to prohibition in 1933, stories continued which tied Cape Cod to this law-breaking time. In one instance in the 1970s, a leg bone was found under floorboards during the remodeling of one of inns on 6A in Yarmouth. Some speculated it was from a rum-running deal gone bad.

For those interested in learning more about this era, a good book to read about one specific rum-runner's life is *The Sea Fox*, by Scott Corbett, published in 1956. It's the story of Captain Manny Zora, who ran a rumrunning fishing craft from Provincetown. Other books include *Rum War at Sea* by Malcolm F. Willoughby—which deals with the Coast Guard during this era, *Rum Row* by Robert Carse, and *Smugglers of Spirits* by Harold Walters.