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Lake Ontario Shippers & Travellers

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Intoxicating Tales of Lake Commerce. Smuggling Across Lake Ontario in the 1920s.

One of the most interesting periods of travel across Lake Ontario was the early twentieth-century. Tales of daring, and dangerous, lake characters can be found in the **1920s and early 1930s**; specifically in the period of US history known as **Prohibition**. These fascinating stories surround the activities of Prohibition's "**Rum Runners.**" The **US Prohibition Laws** were economically advantageous for these Lake Ontario entrepreneurs.

A little over one hundred years earlier, the War of 1812 was fought between American and British forces over economic issues on the lake. In the "roaring 20s," another economic war was being fought on Lake Ontario. This time between the US government and smugglers running "illegal" alcoholic beverages across the lake from Canada. This was not exclusive to Lake Ontario as there were many areas of the US where the same activity was going on.

The 1920s brought a conservative religious movement which politically permeated the US Federal Government with social reforms. This produced the federal ban on production and consumption of alcohol in the United States. Prohibition came into being with the **Eighteenth Amendment** to the **United States Constitution** ratified in 1919 and enacted as law in 1920. It outlawed the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages; and, prohibited the import and export of these beverages. Its thirteen year period brought significant criminal activity. The reader will recall names like Al Capone and Elliot Ness. An obvious failure by the government to force a cessation in production and consumption of "intoxicating beverages," resulted in the law being repealed by the **Twenty-First Amendment** to the US Constitution in 1933.

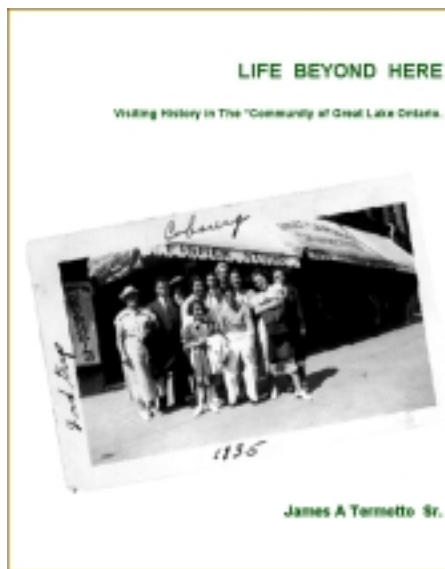


Within those thirteen years, a good deal of alcohol was smuggled across the lake, much of it coming from the **Bay of Quinte** region. The bay is a large but conveniently hidden body of water off the lake. Its entrances are east of Prince Edward County near Deseronto, and the Murray Canal between Brighton on the lake and Trenton on the bay. The former Corby's distillery in Corbyville Hastings County was notably one of the major producers. The bay gave good cover for Canadian lake runners who did not enter US waters until half way across.

Braddock's Bay on the New York side was a popular drop-off point for smugglers crossing Lake Ontario. Braddock's Bay, a marshy area west of Genesee River, contained a labyrinth of channels which easily hid boats running their nightly starlit lake crossings. Popular resort hotels near Braddock's Bay, the Elmheart and Odenbach's, were suspected of having been destinations. Other destinations in the Rochester area included the shores of Oklahoma Beach, Nine Mile Point and Pultneyville. To the west were the harbors of Wilson and Olcutt Beach, and to the east, Fair Haven and Oswego.

Over the thirteen years of Prohibition many an escapade on the lake occurred. This was not a romantic period by any means. It included a good deal of violence with gun battles, boat chases, arrests and court trials, drownings, a US Coast Guard armada, and a fleet of lake crossing speed boats.

The reader will find more information on this subject with these publications.



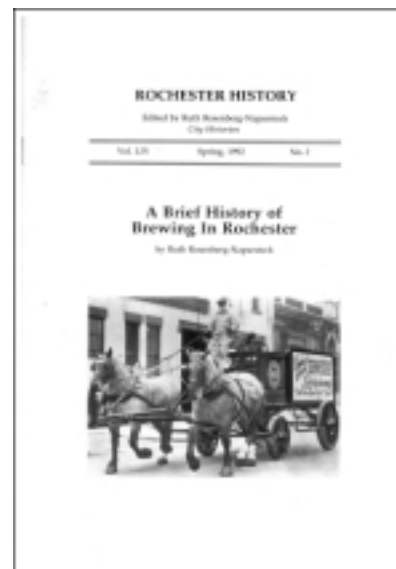
A short essay on Lake Ontario smuggling :

“Booze Boats into Braddock’s Bay,”
Beyond Here - 100 Years on Lake Ontario,
Chap. 3.4. J.A. Termotto.
(Online pdf found in the Library’s list
on the Resource Page of this site.)



A tantalizing expansive account
of smuggling on Lake Ontario:

Booze Boats and Billions
- smuggling liquid gold. C.W. Post.
(Toronto : McClelland & Stewart, 1988.)



A short history of brewing,
temperance and prohibition:

“A Brief History of Brewing in Rochester,”
Rochester History Quarterly,
Vol. LIV. No. 2. Spring 1992.
Ruth Rosenberg-Naparstek.
(Rochester : City Historian, 1992.)