

## Prohibition Era, The

Hardly any media account during the period of alcohol prohibition (1920-1933) failed to have some comment about the eighteenth (prohibition) amendment to the constitution, some writers espousing the views of the “drys” and others those of the “wets”. No one was in the middle on this issue; you were either one or the other. The actual number of adults in the U.S. who were in favor of prohibition was quite small, but here we have a classic example of a small special interest group who mounted a vigorous campaign to rid the country of what they believed was a social evil. The majority opposition never became organized enough to mount the type of campaign necessary to present their viewpoint to a vote.

With the sale of all types of alcoholic beverages, including beer and ale prohibited, illegal sales immediately surfaced (or rather thrived just beneath the surface). The following is an article that appeared in the *Winsted Evening Citizen* in May 1929:

“MAKING OWN BEER WILL BE DIFFICULT UNDER NEW REGIME”

“Replacing present apparatus and even purchasing ingredients will call for some ingenuity; Dry Department will enforce law.”

“Washington, May 7 – Following up with the added weapon placed in the hands of the government through the Supreme Court decision legalizing the seizure of liquor making paraphernalia, the prohibition bureau today was planning to strike simultaneously in many cities against distributors of illegal equipment.

Prohibition Commissioner Doran planned a quick cleanup and indicated that for the next few weeks the attention of the Army would be concentrated against equipment dealers.

As to retail establishments, cappers and other beer making equipment and ingredients, Doran expressed the opinion they would voluntarily drop these lines of commodities as a result of the Supreme Court decision.”

“ ‘We shall not bother with that phase of the traffic until the big wholesale dealers are disposed of’, Doran said. ‘There are many of the wholesale bootleg supply houses in most of the large cities, which do a big business. If they can be wiped out, the retailers may lose their source of supply. Many of the wholesalers are so bold as to advertise and to send out circulars by mail.’”

“Doran and the decision would not have so much applicability to manufacturers of column stills and other devices used in the production of corn sugar alcohol. He said most of these plants are set up on the scene of an operation, frequently by the moonshiners themselves. They may be confiscated at once by the government when located.”

Normally, I would not have bothered to make special note of this article, as there were reams of material being written in those days on the subject. I was scanning the old papers searching for the accounts of the burning of several houses and barns on Beech Hill that took place sometime in the mid to late twenties. As the microfilm scrolled past on the monitor, certain unrelated headlines would occasionally catch my eye, and this particular one caused me to stop and make a copy of the article. The reason is that an event took place at our house that, although I was too young to remember it, I had heard told and retold for many years. Here is what happened:

My father had purchased several cans (about the size of a one-pound capacity can found today on any grocery shelf) that contained a powder. On the label, under the brand name, was a cautionary message, printed in red ink, stating something like this: CAUTION: Do Not mix the contents of this can with (and here was printed an exact amount of water). This was followed by a short list of additional ingredients, (all spelled out with great exactness) which under no conditions should they be added to the contents of the can. At the end was this statement: The resulting mixture would be BEER, which is an illegal substance!

We had a bottle-capper in those days that I had always supposed was for the express purpose of bottling root beer. I also thought that all those old soda bottles we had down cellar were for the same purpose. Well some of them were, as we certainly made our own root beer, and my memory tells me that it was very good. As I grew older however, the story that my parents told visitors on occasion made me aware that there was another purpose for which the bottling device and those empties were intended.

It seems that my father made quite a large batch consisting of the contents of those cans with their caution label printed on the side, and after capping them, placed the whole batch down cellar where they were to remain until needed. It was either that night, or perhaps the following one that my folks (I have no recollection of this) were awakened by the sound of breaking glass down cellar. Thinking that perhaps there was an animal down there, my father started to go down the cellar stairs to investigate. He had not gone more than a couple of steps when wham!, an explosion sent glass shards showering throughout the entire cellar. This was followed almost immediately by another blast, accompanied by more glass. Naturally, my father beat a hasty retreat and for the remainder of the night, exploding beer bottles disrupted the quietness of the night. Eventually the reports became fewer and more spaced out, until eventually they ceased. When he finally decided it was safe to investigate, a cellar floor completely covered with broken pieces of green and white bottle glass as well as a strong odor of beer greeted him. All but one or two of his entire batch had self-destructed!

Later, when the mess had been cleaned up, my mother took a hard look at one of the empty cans. I can hear her retelling this part of the narration as clearly as if she had just said it: "Paul, if you had finished reading the instructions instead of anticipating the end results, you would have read that the batch has to work in an open container for several days before it can be bottled; otherwise severe injuries may be caused by bursting glass containers!"

The house is gone now, but I will almost guarantee that if you were to dig down to the level of the old cellar, a few scraps of broken glass would turn up! Now you know why this newspaper article caught my eye!