

Prohibition's twists and turns

By Jerry Bowen

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The idea of liquor being illegal throughout the country seems like small potatoes compared with the many serious situations that we face in so-called "modern-day" life.

It had been a long fight to get the Volstead Act of 1920 passed that started the wild days of prohibition. Crime flourished as opportunists seeking "easy money" rushed to set up shop and quench the thirst of those who were not teetotalers. Novel instruments and gadgets were developed to transport the wicked liquid.

Alternative means to get booze legally came into being under the guise of "for medicinal purposes" including a regular approved "prescription form." As soon as laws went into effect, it appeared that the dam had burst with a flood of imbibers believing they just had to find a way to get their fair measure.

Before national prohibition, individual communities and counties passed a jumble of their own laws against liquor. It was a pretty sordid time, but, it also provided fodder for a few interesting individual stories that probably weren't funny at the time but are mildly amusing today.

Bird's Landing tonsorial parlor owner, Shorty Long, who trimmed hair and scraped the stubble from the faces of the local male population as a regular occupation, indulged in a little extra-curricular work to supplement his income. He was dipping into the forbidden game of selling booze, or when in a particularly jovial mood simply giving away samples of his hooch to friends and neighbors when his troubles began.

One can argue that he made an attempt at remaining slightly within the laws, such as they were at the time, when individual communities made laws that more or less forbade the trade in "cups of cheer." But, one day he tripped over a legal mistake that landed him behind bars.

At first, Shorty pleaded guilty, and the Superior Court fined him \$50 and awarded him a 90-day all-expenses paid stay in the county calaboose on Jan. 17, 1913.

Shorty began serving his time on the same day of his sentencing. But the county clerk, the Superior Court judge, the district attorney and the sheriff just didn't think that being incarcerated for only 90 days was enough to convince him of the error of his ways. After a short meeting between themselves, they agreed that Shorty should have been

soaked a little harder by reason of his having been in trouble before over the Wyllie local option law. As far I can find, that particular law had something to do with prohibiting saloons near military installations . . . (in Bird's Landing?).

Any way, the next day Shorty was taken into court again and the judge changed his sentence to five months in the county jail and a fine of \$100.

Now that didn't set too well with Shorty, who had picked up a varied collection of legal education from somewhat extended experience and adventure, and this second sentence "disgusted" him (as he expressed it). He retained attorney Paul C. Harlan to see what could be done about it. Mr. Harlan tried habeas (which is Latin for "I want to get out," I understand) in the court that soaked Shorty the second time.

That first try failed, so he went up the line a little and resorted to the Court of Appeal in Sacramento and that failed. At last the Supreme Court was appealed to for relief. Finally, in early June 1913, five of the judges of the state's highest judicial tribunal decided that the Superior Court could not legally change Shorty's first sentence after he began to serve it, and Shorty who already had served the full original sentence, was released.

I guess we could say that Shorty may have learned his lesson, but the enterprising barber of old Birdtown soon had already been arrested on another charge of violating the anti-booze laws and had again been placed under arrest and was out on bail, plotting his next foray into the tangled technicalities of the laws of the time.

Even after all the fuss over prohibition, which ended in 1933, one would think the days of illegal stills would have become pretty nonexistent. Ah, but that is just turning your back on the reality of human nature!

Imagine the surprise on May 14, 1964, when Vacaville firefighters responded to a fire at the old A-1 Roofing building that was located on the east side of McClellan near the intersection of East Main Street.

The fire was coming from the back of the building and the firefighters had to force their way through large, heavy doors that were barred by hefty planks. After they finally gained entry they found several rows of cases labeled "Coca-Cola Syrup." The "Coca Cola" in the gallon bottles contained a clear liquid that burned with a nice blue flame when they accidentally broke some of the containers.

Next to the cases was an unusual "contraption." The firefighters still did not know what they were dealing with until either Don Barty or Ernie Oliver walked in and declared it was the "biggest still they had ever seen!"

The “contraption” consisted of an inverted feed hopper converted into a 400-gallon still for making moonshine. As it turns out, even after prohibition, the local constabulary still encountered many of the illegal contraptions. But . . . this particular rig was the largest one ever found in recent memory, and it was operating right in the middle of town! Apparently the man who was operating the still realized he was in trouble the minute it blew and he fled the scene immediately. Among the evidence found at the scene was a sandwich with one or two bites taken out of it, and a still-hot cup of coffee. To the best of my knowledge, the nefarious entrepreneur never returned to “fess up.”

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