

# Windsor Went Wild in the Roaring Twenties

by Elaine Weeks, Issue #33, April 2003

From top right, counter-clockwise:

1. This smuggler's beer-laden truck was too heavy for the Lake St. Clair ice in 1933 (*The Detroit News*);
2. Jalopies were used to load contraband Canadian liquor from vessels in Lake St. Clair (*Dossin Great Lakes Museum*);
3. Detroit police at river patrol headquarters, foot of Riopelle St. 1932 (*The Detroit News*);
4. A waterfall of booze cascades out windows of a still on Gratiot Avenue (*The Detroit News*);
5. Rum runner leaving "export dock" at Amherstburg (*Detroit News*);
6. Rumrunner Jim Cooper's Walkerville mansion. Also pictured at bottom left are cases of liquor packed in jute bags; thrown overboard, smugglers could return to fish the bags out by booking the jute's "ears." collage by Chuck Ress

Canada and the United States were witnessing the dawning of the modern age. In the U.S., the 1920 census reported for the first time a majority of Americans living in urban areas. An explosion of new inventions and technological breakthroughs would soon transform North America. Jazz, Wall Street speculation, women's suffrage, radio, Hollywood, air travel, telephones, a shorter work week and increased wages would converge to a revolution in communications, transportation and recreation.

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the U.S. Eighteenth Amendment banning the sale, manufacture or transportation of "intoxicating liquor" took effect. An atmosphere of general lawlessness was bred by prohibition, bootleggers and gamblers. Gangsters fought to secure a share of the lucrative business and corrupt politicians turned a blind eye as mobsters like Al Capone terrorized entire cities.

Most Canadian provinces went dry at the same time the Eighteenth Amendment came into being. The Liquor Control Act in Ontario (LCA) forbid public or hotel drinking but did not prohibit the manufacture and export of liquor.

For border cities like Windsor, this loophole in the Act set the course for a wild decade not seen before or since. Opposite Windsor was big parched Detroit and beyond, the entire U.S. with its tongue hanging out. It didn't take long for enterprising businessmen in the Border Cities to set up "export docks" to supply thirsty Americans.

The docks were often simple frame sheds, which dotted the shoreline from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie along the Detroit River. Every inlet, every bank that would support a dock was used. It was the perfect setup to make a quick buck – or an easy million.

Liquor moved to the docks by trucks, protected by a "B-13 customs form," a document for liquor in transit. Consigned to parties in Mexico, Cuba, Bermuda or St. Pierre and Miquelon, liquor was loaded in speedboats or rowboats, which theoretically, then headed for Cuba or Mexico.



In reality, these boats made a short trip across the Detroit River where the booze was then easily smuggled into the U.S. Boats cleared for Cuba in the morning, and returned in the afternoon, only to clear for St. Pierre in the afternoon; nobody asked any questions.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Petit Cote, six miles downriver from Windsor was a quiet village where people spoke French and attended church on Sunday. On weekdays they cultivated their radish patches.

The radish-growers soon learned that if they rowed to Detroit with a bottle of whisky they could double their investment. Soon they were selling cases instead of bottles and travelled by launch instead of rowboat. They built big docks and imposing houses and even changed the name of one section of Petit Cote to LaSalle, which sounded swankier.

At one point, more liquor moved across a couple of miles of waterfront at LaSalle than across any other couple of miles on earth!

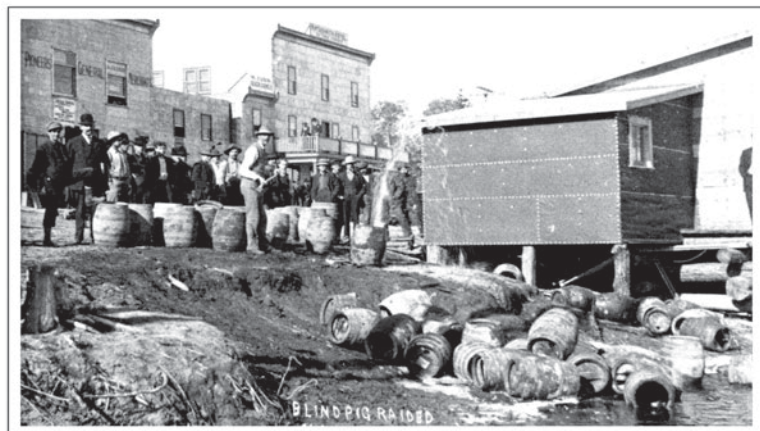
Local police were aware of these operations and it was their job to ensure that the liquor did not get “short-circuited” back to Windsor’s blind-pigs once it left the docks.

In 1953, Windsor Police Chief Carl Farrow recounted his experiences as a Provincial Constable in the late 20’s to the Windsor Daily Star. “One day you’d see a fellow rowing across the river from Detroit, in a small rowboat. He’d buy a couple of cases of liquor, and then row back. In a little while, he’d row back over to the Canadian side and buy three or four cases. Next day, when he came over, his boat would be powered with a shiny new outboard motor. He’d buy more liquor and make more trips. Then one day he’d show up in a big speedboat. He’d keep making his trips, then suddenly disappear. Months later, he’d come back with his rowboat and start all over again. This sort of thing was happening all the time.”

Farrow also described how things were done in the winter. “In Amherstburg, they’d take an old sedan, put chains on it, cut the top off it and load it up with whisky. They crossed the ice of Lake Erie and carried planks to help them across cracks in the ice – it would be black with cars... heading for the States. The highways all along the riverfront were just black with trucks carting liquor to the export docks.”

Constable Farrow recalls meeting two of the biggest Chicago gangsters: the notorious Al Capone and Bugs Moran. While they ran outside the law in their own country, they came to Windsor as two gentlemen in speedboats, conducting a simple business transaction.

Around Windsor, inns sprouted up overnight and were packed. This outraged Rev. Leslie Spracklin of Howard Avenue Mission whose impassioned speeches induced authorities to appoint him



*Top: A lookout on a Canadian dock with binoculars to spot the signal from the American side. A rumrunner is loaded and ready to cross the Detroit River. Photo courtesy Larry Burchell*

*Left: In Elk Lake barrels of the best Canadian whisky were destroyed when a blind pig was discovered. Photo Archives of Ontario*

## DETROIT MUG SHOTS

*The Purple Gang, as they came to be called, quickly rose to power and wealth. Law enforcement officials were powerless against the high-profile tactics of the gang.*

### Harry "Happy" Millman



Known as a hard drinking, fast living, hot tempered gunman, "Happy" Millman earned his nickname from his perpetual sneer. He survived several attempts on his life, and his car was blown to bits by dynamite. In eight years of crime, he was arrested 28 times for assault, armed robbery, kidnapping, extortion and murder, but never spent a single night in jail. He was assassinated in November of 1937 in a bold daytime attack in Boesky's Deli on Hazlewood and 12<sup>th</sup> Streets. His killers were reportedly the ruthless Murder Inc., of Brooklyn, NY, hit duo of Pep Strauss and Happy Maione. Cause of death: Lead poisoning (bullets!)

### Zigmund "Ziggy" Selbin



Ziggy Selbin was considered a loose canon in The Purple Gang. His speciality was extorting money from local merchants and hijacking blind pigs. Ziggy was known as a mean drunk. During one binge, he asked a patron for his ring. The man refused and Selbin beat him senseless. When Selbin couldn't remove the ring, he cut off the finger – ring and all. He was only 22 years old when he was shot in cold blood. Cause of death: Executed by mobsters.

### Abe "the Agent" Zussman



A killer for hire, Zussman acted as an agent for several prominent bootleggers during prohibition. He would follow victims into movie houses, take a seat directly behind them until a noisy scene and run his knife through the back of the chair. When the movie ended, house attendants would find a "sleeper" who never woke up. He was rumoured to have enjoyed his work so much that he would occasionally kill someone as a favour, free of charge. Cause of death: Unknown

*Photos & descriptions from "The Purple Gang – Organized Crime in Detroit 1910-1945" by Paul R. Kavieff*



In 1921, Spracklin and his men climbed through the windows of the Chappell House on the city's west end, and were surprised by Babe Trumble, the proprietor. After an argument, Spracklin shot Trumble dead. Charged with murder, he testified that Trumble had moved a hand as though reaching for a gun. He was acquitted on a plea of self-defense although it was clearly shown that Trumble was unarmed.

American crooks sought control of the export business and gang warfare broke out across the border, led locally by the Purple Gang. Things also turned nasty along the Windsor waterfront. Horace Wilde, a photographer for the Windsor Daily Star, was taking pictures at the Amherstburg export docks, when he was roughed up and his camera smashed. He was abducted, and shackled in chains and would have ended up at the bottom of the river, but was saved at the last moment. Constable Farrow arrested one of the men involved in the abduction (see story page 172).

The government soon cracked down on the exporters. There was debate over what "in transit" meant. Farrow participated in raiding parties and began seizing export docks and the liquor stored in them. On one occasion, he watched highjackers working from the river and boats, attempt to steal the stock at an export dock. The thieves tossed their guns into the river when police approached.



*Top: A blind pig at 917 Farmer Street, Detroit, is padlocked by a Detroit Police official, June 1924. Photo The Detroit News  
Bottom: Results of a state police raid on a Detroit speakeasy. Photo Michigan State Archives*

a "special temperance enforcement officer" with the right to carry a gun.

Spracklin swaggered around with armed bodyguards raiding inns. They once raided a private yacht without a warrant. The owner sued them for the illegal search and was awarded nominal damages by Mr. Justice Latchford of the Ontario Supreme Court, who commented that Spracklin and his pals, boarding the yacht, "displayed their pistols like veritable pirates."