

**GIGGLE WATER ON THE MIGHTY NIAGARA:
RUM-RUNNERS, HOMEBREWERS,
REDISTILLERS, AND THE CHANGING
SOCIAL FABRIC OF DRINKING CULTURE
DURING ALCOHOL PROHIBITION IN
BUFFALO, N.Y., 1920–1933**

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*D*uring the nighttime hours of Monday, April 6, 1925, the *Arcadia* vanished without a trace from its location along the Niagara River.¹ The crew had allegedly stocked the ship full of illegal ale. As a result U.S. officials blocked the passage of *Arcadia* into the country. The U.S. Coast Guard observed the boat heading toward U.S. shores from the city of Fort Erie, Ontario, on Saturday, April 4 at 3 p.m. A standstill ensued when the U.S. Coast Guard set up a blockade to force the boat to drop anchor. During the evening of the sixth a thick fog set in over the Niagara River. The *Arcadia* dimmed its lights and escaped to an undisclosed location. Two U.S. Coast Guard ships, commanded by Captain John J. Daly, followed the *Arcadia* downstream. With his own ship among the fastest of the U.S. Coast Guard Captain Daly assured the Buffalo

populace that he would catch the missing ship. Captain Daly continued trailing the rum-runners to prevent them from reaching U.S. soil but he described his pursuit as an ongoing game of “cat and mouse.”²

If the crew of *Arcadia* succeeded in docking on U.S. soil, its contents would reap high profits. Due to the transition of alcohol from a legal to an illegal substance under the Eighteenth Amendment, its price on the open market skyrocketed. Daly estimated that the crew of the *Arcadia* was smuggling in some 1,050 cases of ale, which, he guessed, would take at least two trips across the Niagara River.³ Despite his best efforts to stop the crew of the *Arcadia* during a forty-hour search, when Captain Daly caught up with the ship it had no ale on board. The one mistake Daly had made was docking on U.S. shores to sleep on the foggy night of April 6. This was the break the smugglers needed, and when Daly fell asleep, the *Arcadia* docked and unloaded its ale.⁴

In spite of the declarations of innocence by *Arcadia*'s commanders, Captain Daly and his men continued to search for the missing cargo. They never found it. This is a typical story of Prohibition enforcement gone awry, a regular occurrence in Buffalo.⁵ Stopping rum-runners from smuggling alcohol across the border was rarely successful. The American people were willing to pay bootleggers top dollar for alcohol, which allowed the industry to continue to prosper despite federal legislation that made it illegal.

The Eighteenth Amendment passed into law in 1920, making the sale, transport, production, and importation of alcohol illegal in the United States. Enforcement of Prohibition was regulated by the Volstead Act. Despite these federal laws, the alcohol industry continued to flourish in Buffalo, New York. Alcohol became readily available from bootleggers who participated in the illegal alcohol trade in a variety of ways. Rum-runners smuggled beer, ale, wine, and liquor in from Canada. Homebrewers produced alcohol in stills at various locations throughout the city and suburbs. And redistillers altered the alcohol content of common beverages and transformed common industrial products to make the alcohol in these liquids suitable for consumption.

Prohibition literature contains both national and community studies. National studies examine themes such as the success or failure of Prohibition and the way the Eighteenth Amendment changed the existing drinking culture.⁶ In addition, some community studies focus on regions such as Lake Erie and Northern New York, while others examine Prohibition in cities such as Butte, Montana, New York City, and Philadelphia.⁷ Community studies are important because they contribute specific regional experiences



FIGURE 1: Buffalo Lighthouse. This lighthouse is a central feature of the Buffalo waterfront, illuminating the shoreline of the city at the Erie Basin Marina on Lake Erie. (Author's personal collection.)

that broaden the historical knowledge of Prohibition. In her examination of Butte, Montana, Mary Murphy argues that Prohibition paved the way for women to drink alongside men when in previous years this was a social taboo. Prior to the Eighteenth Amendment, women who drank with men at area saloons were perceived to be promiscuous or even a prostitute. The new national law eroded this image by creating an environment where men and women came together in new drinking spaces. Furthermore, in his analysis of Prohibition in Philadelphia Paul Frazier argues that the story can be pieced together through coverage in newspapers and through legal issues. While local newspapers embarked on a romanticized quest to pinpoint a mafia “king’ of the bootleggers,” the city was not dominated by a single person or gang. Prohibition in Philadelphia is more a story of individuals who fought to make money from the illegal alcohol trade.⁸

This analysis presents a unique case study on Prohibition. Despite the best efforts of enforcement agents, the citizens of Buffalo continued to

consume alcohol and some made enormous profits. This story of Prohibition provides strong evidence that while falling short of the goals of enforcement, Prohibition had a significant social and cultural impact on drinking. While organized crime contributed to the story of Prohibition in Buffalo, this analysis focuses primarily on the common citizens who participated in the trade. Many historians have argued that Prohibition revolved around the mafia in New York and Chicago but this analysis adds more complexity to this story. As the rum-runners, homebrewers, and redistillers filled the coffers of thirsty Buffalonians, the ways in which the buyers and sellers evaded enforcement helped in the creation of new environments for drinking for both men and women. As a case study the tale of Prohibition in Buffalo supports these arguments while adding more regional details and experiences to the literature.

Essential to the study of Prohibition in any region is some consideration of the geography. Buffalo is located in western New York, approximately three-tenths of a mile from Fort Erie, Ontario; much of the city limits are separated from the Canadian province of Ontario by a short stretch of the Niagara River. Canada is so close to Buffalo that it can be seen in plain sight from the American side of the Mighty Niagara. This proximity allowed Buffalonians to get top-quality booze from their northern neighbors who produced liquors and ales. The Canadian supply supplemented locally produced alcohol. Prohibition in Buffalo built on a solid history of smuggling at this international crossroads, which gave life to a unique enforcement experience.

The Eighteenth Amendment and Volstead Act went into effect at 12:00 a.m. on January 16, 1920. Buffalonians learned about the sternness of Prohibition when the *Buffalo Evening News* reported on a public statement made by John F. Kramer, the Federal Prohibition Commissioner. Just one day after the Eighteenth Amendment became law Kramer warned the public that all violators should expect to be punished for breaking the law.⁹ However, Kramer's prediction of enforcement did not come true. The Prohibition Bureau headed enforcement efforts and it suffered for a number of reasons, the most severe being inadequate funding. Without enough money to support investigations the bureau could not effectively enforce the law. Another setback stemmed from the position of the agency's placement within the federal government. Making the bureau a part of the Department of Justice would have connected it to the resources it needed to maximize its abilities. However, it became part of the Department of the Treasury due to the fact that the Internal Revenue Service enforced alcohol excise tax law. Politicians believed that by placing the Prohibition Bureau in the

Department of the Treasury, it could connect with the officials who had already been enforcing laws regulating alcohol. However, this move seriously limited the bureau's capabilities by denying it access to the resources and manpower it desperately needed.¹⁰

Some additional elements further obscured the inadequate resources of enforcement. The legislative body that created the bureau did not offer much in terms of specific guidelines for enforcement. The bureau expected local authorities and citizens to assist their agents. However, their efforts were hampered because none of the parties involved in enforcement knew their precise roles. This caused mass disorganization and confusion within the enforcement campaign.¹¹ Additionally, as in several other American cities, local authorities often worked with bootleggers.¹² For instance in 1921, five enforcement agents were sentenced in Buffalo to serve a jail term at the Atlanta federal penitentiary for assisting and accepting bribes from bootleggers. Enforcement agents in Buffalo aided the bootleggers' sales by turning a blind eye to violations and at times engaging in the illegal activity themselves.¹³ This combination of inadequate financial resources and government support made the bureau highly ineffective, which became very plain in Buffalo in the early stages of Prohibition.

Those enforcers who did not engage in illegal activity faced another obstacle. Since many Buffalonians drank alcohol, the majority of the public held the bootleggers in high esteem. This made whistle-blowing very unlikely. In fact, most people in Buffalo did not support the Eighteenth Amendment. The most profound evidence came in 1921 when Francis X. Schwab ran for mayor of Buffalo on an anti-Prohibition campaign. Before he ran for mayor, Schwab had been the president of the Buffalo Brewing Company and a successful beer salesman.¹⁴ Schwab was one of the few politicians in Buffalo to take on the issue. He called for the law to be changed to allow for the sale of wine and beer with low-alcohol content in what he called a restoration of "sane liberty." Schwab cited unregulated alcohol sales as well as the unhealthy composition of alcohol served at establishments throughout Buffalo as a major problem that demanded immediate rectification. Prior to his campaign, Schwab had been investigated for violating the Volstead Act when agents discovered that Schwab was producing beer that exceeded the legal limit on his property. Since Schwab was under investigation, many Buffalonians were reluctant to cast their vote for a bootlegger. However, through his anti-Prohibition efforts Schwab appealed to many sectors of Buffalo's population and he won the mayoral race by several thousand votes. With an alleged bootlegger as mayor, the

local government became increasingly sympathetic to the buyers and sellers of alcohol rather than enforcement agents.¹⁵

While some of the Buffalo public disapproved of having an alleged bootlegger as mayor, a substantial portion of the population supported his anti-Prohibition stance. Schwab borrowed his political philosophy from his predecessor, former Buffalo mayor and president of the United States Grover Cleveland. He believed that “Public Office is a Public Trust” and many viewed Schwab as “one of the greatest real public servants the people of Buffalo ever put into office” who had been “nominated and elected directly by the people and against the wishes of all professional politicians.”¹⁶ It was through this philosophy that he was able to cash in on the anti-Prohibition sentiments in Buffalo and get elected. Schwab’s tenure as mayor lasted until 1929 and his administration was marked by an uncooperative attitude toward enforcement. Without cooperation from the public and some Buffalo government officials, enforcers had to dig deeply to find the bootleggers, which further drained their already scarce resources. Faced with mounting adversity, the bureau was highly ineffective in Buffalo but remained optimistic about catching violators.

The hunt for liquor and beer did not begin in the immediate aftermath of the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. Rather, Americans had from midnight on January 16 until February 1 to move their purchased liquor to their homes. While keeping booze in public places was illegal, Prohibition law allowed Americans to keep a private stock of alcohol in their homes. Citizens moved the liquor post haste because, as the *Buffalo News* warned on February 1, the nation would soon adopt a strict search and confiscation policy on public properties where some still attempted to sell liquor.¹⁷ Many Buffalonians took advantage of this period of amnesty to stockpile their personal reserves of alcohol. Once this phase passed, alcohol came under government scrutiny as the Prohibition Bureau attempted to flex its muscles—muscles that ultimately proved to be lethargic and feeble.

As Buffalonians began to polish off their last bottles of liquor they began to explore new methods to replenish their stock. Smuggling from Canada proved to be an effective way to get alcohol while others made alcohol through homebrewing and redistilling. If they did not make or smuggle it themselves, civilians tapped into the rich supply of illegal booze by purchasing it at various locations within the region. This liquor market did not come without sacrifice. Smugglers took great risks to bring liquor in from Canada, sometimes at the expense of smugglers’ or enforcement agents’ lives,

but gunfire was exchanged only in rare occasions. More commonly, officials peacefully served small fines. Many overlooked this penalty because of the immense financial upside. The smugglers knew that if they completed the illegal deed it would bring them a large return that would more than pay for any fine, due to the high demand for alcohol in Buffalo.

The city of Fort Erie became a lucrative hub for alcohol smuggling during Prohibition. Trading between Buffalo and Fort Erie dates back to the 1700s when merchants exchanged a variety of goods. Fort Erie received its first custom depot in 1798, but before this time a system to regulate trade did not exist. Regularly smuggled items included whisky, foodstuffs, boots, nails, coal, shoes, oil, and even people, including former slaves to safety north of the border through the Underground Railroad, as well as illegal Chinese immigrants into the United States after the enactment of the Exclusion Act of 1882.¹⁸ This longstanding history of smuggling earned many locals a living while it provided a model to be used by bootleggers for alcohol.

In addition, federal agents had little knowledge of the region, making the path from Fort Erie to Buffalo a very suitable journey for smuggling booze. This was one of the main weaknesses exploited by smugglers. With the confusion and the lack of support that hampered the enforcement campaign, bootleggers did not need to elude the local authorities. The smugglers had only to escape federal dry agents who lacked local law-enforcement experience. When local authorities got involved in enforcement chaos ensued as to which authority should enforce the law. Attempts at reforming Prohibition enforcement caused further disorganization that played into the bootleggers' hands.¹⁹

While enforcement agents struggled with the smugglers, some headway was made with those who sought to purchase booze in Canada. Initially, many Buffalonians traveled across the border to restock their homes with liquor with the help from their friends in Fort Erie. However, the bureau soon became wise to this practice and enacted a provision that required Americans to receive a vaccination if they planned to visit Canada. This discouraged thirsty Buffalonians from leaving the country to get booze because of the long lines for vaccinations. However, the progress made in preventing Buffalonians from buying alcohol in Canada and bringing it to their homes contributed to the problem of smuggling. With fewer people traveling across the border for spirits the lucrative alcohol smuggling industry was poised to pop.²⁰

Rum-runners smuggling through Fort Erie provided a huge amount of liquor to Buffalo and made tremendous profits. In 1929 the Association Against

the Prohibition Amendment estimated that at least 90 percent of Canada's liquor export was destined for the United States. The total known liquor export was estimated to be about \$30 million annually but the American liquor market spent nearly \$100 million on Canadian liquor alone in 1928. An average gallon of Canadian liquor, valued at \$16.20, could fetch nearly \$55 in the United States. Rum-runners brought a variety of Canadian liquors as well as European imports across the Niagara River to the United States including French champagne, Scotch whiskey, and English gin.²¹

Since alcohol smuggling was illegal, sources other than newspaper reports of police raids and court cases are difficult to find. However, several oral accounts from residents in Fort Erie on the smuggling that occurred in Buffalo provide some insight.²² The rum-runners were mostly common citizens from both sides of the border and came from a variety of backgrounds. Many used their profits to supplement their household incomes. Residents recalled that most rum-runners used rowboats to smuggle liquor across the Niagara River. Since the production of alcohol for export to other nations was legal in Canada, the smugglers were able to utilize the Canadian railways to transport their booze. Boxcars carried beer and liquor for the major Canadian distributors to Fort Erie where rum-runners loaded their vessels.²³ Quite often the rum-runners tried to disguise their alcohol as other products that normally passed across the border. In one instance, two men were detained by authorities for a week after trying to smuggle 500 cases of beer hidden among turnips.²⁴ Locals remembered that the docks in Fort Erie along the Niagara River were normally jammed with boating traffic, and among these boats were several liquor-laden vessels destined for the Buffalo region. Most of the smuggling occurred under the cover of night. Rum-runners placed bottles of booze in a net and tied a string to it that connected the nets to the rowboats. During the day nets were kept underwater to keep the liquor out of sight.²⁵

Smugglers eventually developed a system that made getting caught highly improbable. They hired teenage boys, fifteen or sixteen years old, to row liquor across the border.²⁶ Prohibition officials did not expect these adolescents to be smuggling liquor to the United States so this proved to be a very successful method of evading enforcement. Those who did not hire teenagers took the risk of getting caught willingly but they made so much money that they could afford to pay the fines.²⁷

Smugglers who could afford tugboats purchased them because tugboats could carry about 1,200 cases of beer. These cruisers coasted along the

Niagara River quite rapidly and, in some cases, the rum-runners outran enforcement officials. Since the tugboats could make several more trips across the Niagara in a single night, those who owned tugboats were able to make higher profits from smuggling than those with rowboats. A handful of people in Fort Erie and Buffalo grew very rich from this business venture.²⁸

Many smugglers armed their tugboats with guns. Some Fort Erie residents recall seeing bullet-holes in the docked boats along the Niagara River.²⁹ While violence did not occur with regular frequency it was present along the border. In one incident a man's ear lobe was shot off during a raid.³⁰ United States Prohibition enforcers had long carried weapons while on duty, and this increased in 1928 when the Coast Guard sent a fleet of ships armed with cannons and machine guns to Buffalo.³¹ While the Guard tried to stop the smuggling, officials had to admit in 1932, near the end of Prohibition, that they only stopped about one in twenty-five smuggling vessels.³² Several members of Congress called for the bureau to stop carrying weaponry, citing the fact that between 1920 and 1928 222 people had died from enforcement-related gunfights in New York State alone. Ships caught fire and sank while many smugglers and enforcers perished.³³ One local recalled an incident when a Buffalo police officer shot and killed his own son who was trying to make a fortune as a rum-runner.³⁴ Life as an alcohol smuggler was risky.

Once tensions over gunfire on the Niagara River began to fester, the Canadian government took action to ease this friction. The Canadian government was already making profits on the taxes it levied on exported alcohol, but it added a permit system for alcohol traders. Canada allowed the export of booze to nations where alcohol was legal. Previously the Canadian government gave tax incentives to liquor exporters, but under the permit system the government's policy changed, making these incentives more challenging to obtain. Excise taxes were waived if the trader could present the Canadian customs agent with a bond equal to double the monetary value of excise taxes and duties. The bond would be released when the merchant gave the Canadian Customs agent a landing certificate from the nation where the liquor was delivered. The Canadian government began making a greater profit in taxes on exported alcohol as this system came into practice. While this was a positive impact of the permit system for Canada, it proved to be largely ineffective in changing the smuggling that occurred across the Niagara River.³⁵

Most smugglers knew that the permit system was flawed and took advantage of this opportunity to rake in the profits. Instead of reporting that they intended to travel to the United States, smugglers indicated that they would deliver the liquor to Mexico or to the Caribbean island nation of Cuba. After the rum-runners obtained a permit to row to one of these countries they headed across the river to the United States. After selling their booze for steep profits they obtained false landing certificates from their contacts in the United States. Smugglers frequently made several trips to "Cuba" or "Mexico" in a single day. These trips raised some red flags with border officials. However, since the profit ratio was nearly three to one for the rum-runners, many of them disregarded this system since their profits outweighed the possible punishments.³⁶

Aside from transport by boat, many locals recalled that the people involved in the illegal alcohol trade distributed their goods through other methods. The Peace Bridge served as another means of alcohol smuggling across the international border. Connecting Buffalo to Fort Erie, the Peace Bridge spans the Niagara River, making travel over the Niagara River very simple. In fact the Peace Bridge became the major artery of alcohol smuggling after it was completed in 1927 because the bridge connects to the major roadways in Buffalo. This direct access point provided smugglers with easy access to their clientele. One local recalled that smuggling via automobile became so lucrative that smugglers removed seats in their cars for alcohol. Profits also came to individuals who dealt indirectly with smugglers. Several Fort Erie farmers rented out their barns as liquor storage units to rum-runners. Renters made a bundle and provided an unsuspecting storage unit for those motorists who had lots of booze to trade.³⁷

Since smuggling occurred so frequently the normal traffic across the bridge was delayed significantly while the inspectors checked vehicles for alcohol. This caused great unrest among Canadian tourists and businessmen who wanted to spend time in the United States. In order to speed up the process of inspection, the U.S. government added additional inspection officers on the Peace Bridge in December 1929. The government replaced all but four of the customs officers with new officials who had recently completed a civil service examination, bringing the total number of patrolmen to fifty. The government also assigned several agents to the Buffalo airport where alcohol smuggling had also been taking place in high frequency. The agents paid special attention to the planes that arrived from Canada and it was believed this action would deter some of the smuggling.³⁸



FIGURE 2: Peace Bridge to Canada. The Peace Bridge connects U.S. and Canadian roadways. Buffalo is on the left and Fort Erie, Ontario, to the right. The flurry of alcohol trafficking took place on the bridge and surrounding areas during Prohibition. (Author's personal collection.)

With the plethora of alcohol activity on the border, organized crime made some headway in Buffalo. Throughout the country, in cities like Chicago and New York, organized crime and alcohol trafficking went hand-in-hand. Alcohol trafficking also became a major focus of the organized crime community in Buffalo. Since Buffalo city government largely did not support Prohibition or the Prohibition Bureau, an unlikely contributor to enforcement efforts entered the scene to combat organized crime. The Ku Klux Klan, more specifically Buffalo Klan No. 5, conducted its own investigation of restaurants, saloons, and hotels connected to the illegal sale of alcohol. The Klan presented the results of its investigation to city investigators and waited for a response but no action was taken by city officials. In an effort to bring their investigation into the public eye, Buffalo Klan No. 5 leaders confronted Mayor Schwab at a speech he gave on building roads in the city. Schwab dismissed this intrusion as an attempt to get media attention but being a brewer himself Schwab had

little interest in their investigation. This example illustrates the way attempts to defeat organized alcohol trafficking in Buffalo were frequently downplayed or dismissed which allowed the smuggling to continue.³⁹

Buffalo's proximity to Canada enabled the city to become a thriving hub of illegal smuggling. A reporter in London dubbed Buffalo "the second wettest city in America" in which people evaded enforcement.⁴⁰ But it was more than just smuggling that made Buffalo a wet city. The rum-runners' constant movement of liquor throughout U.S. Prohibition stretched the resources of dry officials and, as a by-product, it contributed to the development of the city's illegal alcohol manufacturing sector. A reporter for the *New York Times* wrote that "Buffalo is full of beer" in response to a raid in 1922 where brewers were caught selling beer containing 4 percent alcohol.⁴¹ Alcohol manufacturing existed in a variety of ways in Buffalo and it proved to be another lucrative way to engage in the thriving illegal alcohol industry.

In order to understand why alcohol manufacturing triumphed in Buffalo throughout Prohibition, one must first consider the roots of the brewery in Buffalo. Prior to the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment, beer brewing had long been one of the city's core industries. The city's first brewery opened in 1830, and by 1840 the citizens' thirst for beer sparked a major enterprise. Demand was so great that many of the existing breweries expanded the number of kettles within their establishments or relocated to larger facilities. Meanwhile, new entrepreneurs invested in other brewing companies that soon became well-recognized names. Gerhard Lang, Magnus Beck Brewing Company, Ziegele Brewing Company, the Roos Brewing Company, and over twenty other breweries called Buffalo home. The capital investment of these breweries exceeded \$4 million, and they employed about 450 workers. By 1888 beer had become thoroughly engrained within the city's culture with nearly 117,000 barrels of beer sold that year in the Buffalo market, most of which was consumed at area saloons.⁴²

The brewing industry thrived due to the renowned malt and grain industries in Buffalo. Well positioned on the Erie Canal, the city became a huge center of shipping and trade by the end of the nineteenth century. Buffalo officials encouraged the development of the manufacturing sector, which made products from natural resources available through the Erie Canal. As a result the massive amounts of grain that passed through Buffalo sparked the malt industry that grew simultaneously with the brewing industry.⁴³ In the late nineteenth century more than twenty malting companies conducted business in the city.⁴⁴ The relationship between the abundance of malt and



FIGURE 3: Grain elevator. The grain elevators in Buffalo became a centerpiece of the city's thriving grain industry, which contributed to the brewing industry. (Author's personal collection.)

the abundance of breweries predate the homebrewers, but it foreshadows their rise to prominence during Prohibition.

After alcohol was outlawed Buffalo became a hotbed for homebrewing. When federal law officially shut down Buffalo's brewing industry it left behind a huge void. Beer had been a hallmark of Buffalo's culture, and homebrewers capitalized on the lingering demand for alcohol. As evidence of its popularity, in 1920 city officials thought about removing all books from the Buffalo Public Library dealing with the manufacturing of beer.⁴⁵

Homebrewing became widespread in many neighborhoods throughout Buffalo. The practice became so common that many families considered it a rite of passage for daily living. Some compared homebrewing to canning and preserving food. For many families across the city, the practice became a part of the family's weekly routines. While it grew to be a familiar undertaking, the families involved considered homebrewing a luxury that they savored. Furthermore, in keeping this practice within the family home many argued

that it resulted in men spending more time at home. Prior to Prohibition the saloon-going men had faced harsh criticism for engaging in the vices that the saloons had to offer. But with the rise of homebrewing, men became more involved with their families and took better care of their children. Drinking the beer they made at home kept them more in tune with their families during the nighttime hours.⁴⁶

The tale of the homebrewer can be pieced together by examining the police raids that took place during this time. Dry agents conducted frequent raids in homes and apartments, raids that were covered extensively by local journalists for the *Buffalo Evening News* and the *Buffalo Courier Express*. Many of these articles described the illegal items found, the punishment that homebrewers received, and other pertinent information. Media publicity provided readers with an understanding of how dry agents conducted their business in Buffalo. Such media publicity contributed to the survival of homebrewers, many of whom were successful at keeping their actions concealed.

Dry agents often raided homes where homebrewers conducted their business. On March 26, 1929, for example, federal agents raided a home in Cheektowaga, a Buffalo suburb. Prohibition agents discovered a functional brewery, a heater, filter, a gas gauge, fermenting equipment filled with beer, and an additional 24.5 barrels of beer.⁴⁷ In addition, raids by the bureau of homebrewer properties extended beyond households. On May 5, 1928, dry agents found two pints of whisky, an undisclosed amount of gin, and seventy-two gallons of beer at the Tupper Inn.⁴⁸

Agents from the bureau commonly found brewing equipment and alcohol in raids conducted at many other businesses across the city. This became so common that sometimes dry agents discovered homebrewers by accident. Perhaps the strangest came when officials discovered what appeared to be an intoxicated deer on December 18, 1928; their investigation led them to a shelter containing a brewery hidden in a valley.⁴⁹ Homebrewing in Buffalo also extended beyond the bounds of the United States. In 1929 the Bureau discovered a large-scale homebrewing ring with ties to citizens in the United States and Canada. Many citizens of both countries were arrested for their involvement. A grand jury investigation later indicated that this international homebrewing group's operation was worth over \$10 million. These incidents show the far-reaching implications that the homebrewing industry had upon the Buffalo region.⁵⁰

Similar to the homebrewers, the redistillers outwitted dry agents and prospered in Buffalo. Redistilled alcohol sometimes proved to be toxic. In many cases, it caused physical disabilities or even death. Several court decisions helped to define enforcement and provided a legal standard for redistillers to follow to ensure the continued survival of their operations. Likewise, media coverage of the raids conducted by federal agents on redistiller properties contributed to public knowledge about the way enforcement efforts were conducted. Similar to the homebrewer, then, media coverage and legal cases contributed to the success of the redistiller.

The Volstead Act outlawed beverages greater than or equal to 0.5 percent alcohol by volume but redistillers found a way around this legal limit. Early predecessors to the redistilling industry in Buffalo were the manufacturers of “near-beer.” Near-beer, commonly produced before Prohibition, contained less than the legal 0.5 percent alcohol. Making near-beer involved not allowing the beer to undergo the normal fermentation process. Most agreed that near-beer would not stay popular for long because it was not very appealing. Critics of the beverage claim that it had poor flavor, it was bought generally out of impulse, and that it was sold to mask the sale of the more potent liquors.⁵¹ Once the alcohol ban went into effect, several Buffalo saloons offered their customers a selection of near-beer but only for a short time. To appease the dry agents who closely watched establishments where near-beer was sold, saloonkeepers attested that they would sell near-beer until their liquor licenses expired and then close shop.⁵²

Redistillers chemically altered the alcohol contents of common industrial products such as isopropyl, diethylphthalate, quinine, brucine, and methylene blue to make them “suitable” for drinking. To make the drinks more appealing they added flavor, usually caramel, and labeled the liquid as Scotch or whisky. Some residents established false businesses to sell their redistilled products. They opened shops and sold products that required alcohol distillation such as soap, lotion, furniture polish, varnish, or cigarette manufacturing. It was under this façade that the many redistillers produced and sold their alcoholic beverages. The Volstead Act required business owners who distilled alcohol to obtain a permit but most operated without one. With the bureau’s resources stretched so thin in Buffalo, redistillers made profits from illegal alcohol sales.⁵³

Buffalo’s industrial sector successfully masked redistiller activity from dry agents. Between 1860 and 1910, Buffalo leaders enacted legislation that

encouraged the development of Buffalo's industrial sector. They encouraged businesses that made products from the widely available materials that came to Buffalo through the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. During these years, Buffalo developed lucrative furniture, tanning, steel, and building industries that demanded or produced products containing alcohol.⁵⁴ When Prohibition went into effect redistillers hid their illegal alcohol operations within this industrio-economic framework. This became a very proficient means of participation in the illegal alcohol trade.

The largest evidence of the presence of redistillers in Buffalo came from a raid by dry agents where the redistillers were caught without a permit. On December 30, 1929, dry agents seized 12,000 quarts of whisky and five fifty-gallon tanks in a private residential location in the city. However, residents living at this home were not indicted because the agents found equipment and liquor hidden in secret portions of the house. Instead, they were charged because government agents objected to the false government liquor labels that adorned the bottles of liquor. Other raids discovered similar distilleries and seized illegal equipment.⁵⁵

While economically successful, redistillers frequently dealt with unforeseen consequences as their booze sometimes proved to be toxic; consumers took the risk of permanent injuries or death. A common alcohol produced by redistillers was known as wood alcohol. While it is possible to consume wood alcohol without physical harm, in certain quantities this substance is very unsafe and even lethal. Several lawsuits surfaced in Buffalo during the 1920s where those who consumed wood alcohol sought legal retribution for the damages they incurred. In one case, for example, the plaintiff purchased redistilled wood alcohol during Prohibition from a redistiller in Buffalo. After consuming the alcohol, the plaintiff suffered severe damage to his nervous system and blindness. These problems became permanent and prevented the defendant from working. He decided to turn to the courts for help suing the defendant for \$100,000 in New York State Supreme Court. However, since the plaintiff's purchase violated federal law, the court ruled in favor of the defendant. The court ruled that the seller could not be held liable for the quality of his alcohol. Since the contract between the buyer and seller violated federal law, the New York State Supreme Court could not side with the plaintiff.⁵⁶

In Erie County Court in 1926, a redistiller was accused of first-degree manslaughter under common law. The redistiller sold liquor to a man with the label "Gordon Gin" on the bottle. However, the bottle contained wood

alcohol and other toxic substances. The man who purchased the gin from the redistiller consumed it, and died from the toxins a few days later. The defense argued that the redistiller was liable because he claimed the gin he sold was grain alcohol when it was in fact a toxic form of wood alcohol. Evidence suggested that the defendant determined the alcohol had been toxic prior to selling it and before the man had consumed it. The judgment in this case pivoted upon timing. Had the defendant found out *after* he sold the liquor that it had been toxic the jury might not have convicted him. However, since the defendant knowingly sold the poisonous liquor, the jury sided with the plaintiff. The evidence was enough to find the man guilty and the judge sentenced him to fifteen years in prison.⁵⁷ Court cases such as these set the legal boundaries in which Buffalo redistillers operated. By understanding and conducting their business within this framework, redistillers were able to continue their operations throughout the life of Prohibition.



FIGURE 4: City Hall. Completed in 1931, after Mayor Francis Schwab left office, Buffalo City Hall was open during the last few years of Prohibition. It remains one of Buffalo's defining buildings in its downtown district. (Author's personal collection.)

The experience of Prohibition in Buffalo was marked by a vast supply of alcohol and steep profits for bootleggers despite the federal law that banned its sale and production. This case study of Buffalo displays the inadequacies of enforcement. With rum-runners, homebrewers, and redistillers each contributing to the illegal alcohol trade, the resources of the bureau were completely overstretched. An examination of the bootleggers shows the high demand for alcohol from a seller's perspective. However, a study of the buyers adds another layer of complexity to the experience of Prohibition in Buffalo. Numerous social and cultural changes occurred as a result of Prohibition. As male-centered saloons had been forced to shut down with the onset of the Eighteenth Amendment, out of the death of the saloon came the rise of male and female environments where alcohol was served. Buffalo serves as a microcosm of this budding social and cultural change.

An examination of statistics in Buffalo sheds further light on the demand for alcohol among buyers. The onset of Prohibition did cause a decrease in the drinking rates in Buffalo, but this initial drop-off was short-lived. With the resources of the bureau overstretched and the continued commercialization of alcohol by Buffalo's bootleggers, the citizens of Buffalo shrugged off the federal ban as drinking once again became widespread.⁵⁸

The rates of cirrhosis of the liver, a common health problem developed from high alcohol consumption, were not dramatically impacted by Prohibition. Due to the variability in data collection, statistics cannot be taken at full face-value. However, trends suggest that drinking still occurred in abundance after the passage of Prohibition, which stood contrary to what supporters had hoped. The rate increased in 1928 to a rate higher than in 1918, two years before the Eighteenth Amendment became law.⁵⁹ This statistic shows that Prohibition did not lead to a dramatic decrease in consumption which illustrates the continued demand for alcohol in Buffalo.

In addition to health, crime rates have also been measured to determine the effectiveness of the Eighteenth Amendment. Proponents of Prohibition wanted to rid the nation of the problems that were associated with alcohol, including violent crimes. Such crimes initially decreased when the national ban on alcohol took effect, but it was short-lived.⁶⁰ A commonly studied violent crime in relation to alcohol consumption is homicide. In Buffalo the rate of homicide did not decline but remained nearly the same throughout Prohibition. Prior to Prohibition in 1918 the homicide rate was 5.50 per 100,000; in 1923 the figure was 5.16 per 100,000. In 1928 there was an increase, to 6.14 per 100,000; and at the end of Prohibition in 1933 there

were 5.21 per 100,000. These numbers show that Prohibition fell short of expectations in Buffalo as this legislation did not result in much of an impact with the incidence of homicide.⁶¹

While the Eighteenth Amendment left more to be desired for its proponents, the experience of Prohibition in Buffalo dramatically altered drinking culture in the city. In the 1920s Buffalo appealed to outsiders for many reasons. Buffalo had a reputation as a great place to raise a family. Prior to Prohibition Buffalo had undergone changes in its social welfare system. Organizations such as the Child's Aid Society worked with families to reduce cruelty and neglect. Meanwhile, the infant mortality rate declined significantly from 165 deaths in 1910 to 84 in 1926. The standard of living also increased allowing families to enjoy good food, clothing, and shelter with enough money left to purchase radios and automobiles and to see motion pictures.⁶²

Buffalo also became a huge tourist destination. The city attracted not only Americans from across the United States, but also Canadian citizens. For instance, many residents of Fort Erie came to Buffalo on a regular basis to enjoy what the city had to offer. When asked about the Queen City in the 1920s, a Fort Erie resident remembered, "Buffalo was the hub of the whole area, not Toronto. If you wanted some excitement, you went across the river, and then you could come back to the quiet little atmosphere [in Fort Erie]."⁶³ On weekends people attended local movie theatres to watch the latest films. Others came to Buffalo for shopping because products were cheaper in the United States than in Canada.⁶⁴ These attractions stirred interest in Buffalo and scores of travelers returned home with good impressions.

Many people began to call Buffalo their new home. The population gradually increased from fewer than 400,000 in 1908 to nearly 600,000 residents in 1933.⁶⁵ Buffalo's increasing population and tourism made this area culturally rich and economically prosperous. The population increase and tourist trade combined with the vast supply of alcohol primed the region for a vibrant nightlife. However, that nightlife changed as Prohibitionists set out to curb the immoral drinking behaviors by dismantling the saloon. Alcohol consumption had primarily occurred in saloons that were mostly frequented by men. The few women who were present in saloons were often prostitutes, and the men at the saloons partook in gambling and other vices. While proponents of Prohibition targeted saloons for extinction, drinking behaviors outside of the saloon flew under the radar.

Since alcohol and the saloons were associated with prostitution, consuming alcohol in the presence of a female had been previously viewed as immoral. However, as Prohibition law encouraged alcohol consumption in secrecy this dominant social taboo gradually eroded. Women increasingly began partaking in public drinking. One aspect of Buffalo's nightlife included private parties, which occurred in regular frequency. Women often tagged along with their male friends to the parties and soon they became accepted participants in this social scene.

As women became more enthralled within Buffalo's nightlife they began drinking with men in increasing numbers. One observer noted that the increase in women who drank during Prohibition was indicative of a larger trend. He wrote:

I do believe that more girls and young women drink than formerly. This, in some instances, is probably due to a reaction against national prohibition. But it is much more a part of the rapidly changing status of women, and their revolt against many prohibitions, of which the prohibition against drinking is only one.

Where women once were confined to areas far away from alcohol, during Prohibition they joined their male counterparts and became a mainstay not only at parties but also at social clubs.⁶⁶

One of the city's most prominent areas during this time, Elmwood Avenue, sprang to life with parties in its numerous mansions. Social clubs such as the Saturn Club, Twentieth Century Club, Tennis Club, Garret Club, and Buffalo Country Club threw frequent parties. Parties also took place in smaller homes. This setting provided the ideal and intimate environment in which homeowners who homebrewed or acquired booze by some other means could serve the alcohol to their guests. In the early years of Prohibition parties frequently were the site of business interactions. While the men conducted their business affairs, women interacted and often concluded that the men were not being lively enough. An onlooker later estimated the ratio of men to women at the parties to be around three to one.⁶⁷

The fact that women attended these parties indicates a shift in the social norms. As time passed from the onset of Prohibition, it became more socially acceptable to consume alcohol in front of a lady. Men and women soon came together in large numbers united by the allure of a good time and good brews. As women became more engrained within the social fabric of drinking

culture, parties became a social crux of male and female social interaction. The social elite attended the parties at the mansions on Elmwood Avenue in large numbers. Other party-goers frequented the dances at clubs such as the Dellwood, the All-High Dance Hall, and the Arcadia. Alcohol consumption became a main feature of these parties and many nonregular drinkers took part in this rebellious activity.⁶⁸

Regardless of one's class or social position, the fashion worn at the parties in Buffalo remained similar among partygoers and those who frequented area clubs. Women dressed extravagantly. Skirts before Prohibition exposed the ankle but the dresses of the 1920s exposed the leg from the knee down. In addition to their dresses, women often wore fox scarves—silver, red, white, blue, and gray were the most popular—along with T-strapped shoes that showed the toe and heel along with lavish jewelry. Men wore soft hats and derbies. Other popular fashion items for men included the “stiff collar” and the “stiff-fronted” dress shirt. Buffalonians read about the latest fashion in local newspapers and bought these garments in stores throughout the city. Partygoers dressed extravagantly to impress those that they met at social gatherings. The combined forces of alcohol, parties, and fashion created an exciting nightlife in Buffalo that many out-of-towners embraced.⁶⁹

A common consequence of these gatherings was drunk driving. The most tell-tale evidence of this is found in government statistics. While there is variance in the data collection and the reporting of drunk driving by police, trends within these statistics indicate that the problem did not evaporate during Prohibition. In 1922 there were 122 indictments of drunk driving in the city of Buffalo. There was a gradual increase through 1930 where the number peaked at 363 indictments. In 1933 the year Prohibition was repealed, there was a sharp drop with only 76 Buffalonians charged with drunk driving.⁷⁰ While Prohibitionists hoped to improve the social problems associated with alcohol consumption, the statistics portray the problematic nature of drunk driving in Buffalo during Prohibition.

Restaurants in Buffalo did particularly well during Prohibition but those that secretly served alcohol generated the most revenue. Numerous “soft-drink parlors” graced the landscape of the Queen City. The city of Buffalo proposed an ordinance in 1923 that required soft-drink parlors to obtain a license, prohibited parlors from conducting business during certain hours of the day, and required business owners to open their parlors to city inspectors who would check the beverages sold to ensure that the establishment complied with health codes. A local soft-drink parlor owner

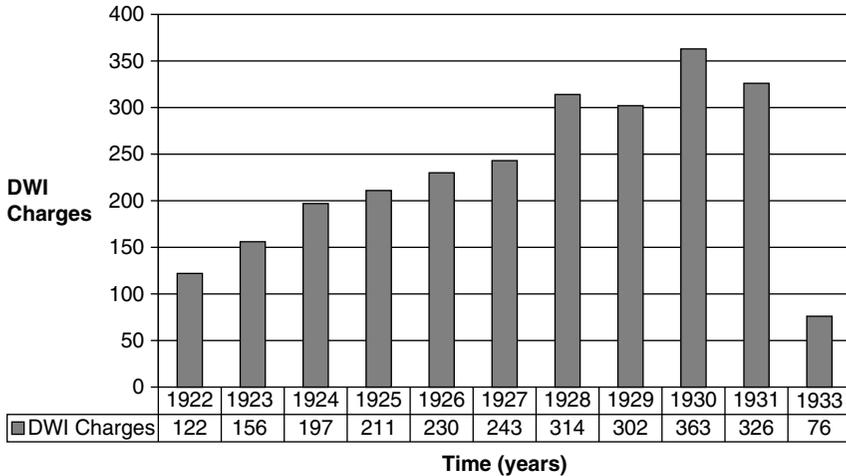


FIGURE 5: DWI charges in Buffalo during Prohibition. This graph shows the number of DWI charges in Buffalo during Prohibition. Rather than a decline with the onset of Prohibition as proponents of the Eighteenth Amendment may have hoped, the rates actually increased, except in 1933 when Prohibition was repealed. (This graph was compiled from *Annual Report of the Department of Police of the City of Buffalo New York*. Buffalo City Police Commissioner [Buffalo: Hammond Press. 1922–1933].)

challenged this ordinance on the grounds that it violated the illegal search and seizure clause of the U.S. Constitution. However, the Supreme Court of New York State later upheld the city's right to enact this ordinance.⁷¹ The city of Buffalo recognized that the soft-drink parlors were, quite often, fronts for illegal alcohol sale and distribution. After the passage of Prohibition, in fact, many former saloons registered their business as soft-drink parlors.

Leonard's Ballroom became one of the most popular restaurants licensed as a soft-drink parlor. The owner of Leonard's Ballroom took many precautions to evade Prohibition enforcement. Like other soft-drink parlors in Buffalo, he had a peep hole in his door and covered all the windows with thick curtains so no one could peer inside.⁷² Some places in Buffalo kept bells behind the counter that the manager rang if he became suspicious of dry agents trying to raid his establishment.⁷³ As happened at many other soft-drink parlors during Prohibition, enforcement agents eventually discovered the illegal activity at Leonard's Ballroom and forced the owner to shut it down.⁷⁴

Speakeasies served as another cog in Buffalo's thriving nightlife. A journalist in 1932 reported that there were over 4,000 speakeasies and gin mills in Buffalo that all had a large clientele.⁷⁵ This industry thrived on the large demand and supply of alcohol. Alcohol arrived at speakeasies in a variety of ways. One of the premier places in Buffalo, McVan's Restaurant and Nite Club, had a special way of receiving and storing alcohol common among clubs of this time in secrecy. In the basement of the club, a steel door marked the entrance to an enclosed walkway leading to the edge of the Niagara River. Bootleggers met the club manager at the end of this walkway on the river to hand him alcohol. The kind of booze the owner could get varied. He usually bought Canadian whisky for about fifteen or twenty dollars a bottle and beer for about one dollar a bottle. Regardless of the means, the liquor that McVan's Restaurant and Nite Club had behind the bar drew a sizable crowd.⁷⁶

For security reasons, many speakeasies instituted a membership and issued punchboards. Such speakeasies crafted a unique card for their patrons. Those who frequented many of the speakeasies in Buffalo would show off their card collection to their friends. These punchboards served as admission tickets to the best clubs in town. While this provided the club owners with some peace of mind that a dry agent would not enter their club, if dry agents caught someone with a lot of cards there could be trouble. Most cards featured false business icons on their face, but they gave the actual addresses of the speakeasies. Once the dry agents discovered this practice, they began to investigate and shut down several of Buffalo's speakeasies but this only put a small dent in the industry.⁷⁷

Speakeasies did their best to hide their illegal sale of alcohol, but some could not escape enforcement. While the bureau had several offices in Buffalo, it had to divide its limited resources to investigate rum-runners, homebrewers, and redistillers, as well as the buyers at various locations throughout the city. The federal government did not provide the bureau with adequate funds, but enforcers did their best to confiscate materials from clubs and shut them down. One raid conducted on March 25, 1932, shut down Allen Social Club. Someone living within the vicinity of the club tipped off enforcement agents and they acted quickly. During this raid the bureau not only arrested the bartender and the owner, but they also brought trucks and confiscated the entire establishment. Among the seized items were drinking glasses, chairs, coils, pumps, plates, booze, and even a piano. In most raids, dry officials confiscated only the items used in the sale or manufacture of alcohol and the liquor itself but on rarer occasion other

items were confiscated. Dry agents also raided twelve other properties on this night in Buffalo, its suburbs of Tonawanda and Cheektowaga, as well as properties in the nearby city of Niagara Falls.⁷⁸

A notorious raid occurred in one of Buffalo's most prestigious social clubs, the Saturn Club, which had a large membership by the Prohibition era. During this time some of its members secretly drank booze while enjoying the perks of membership. This practice took a hit on August 23, 1923, when an unmarked police car arrived at the club. The dry agents arrested a bartender and seized twelve quarts of whisky, twenty quarts of gin, a few gallons of grain alcohol, and several bottles of champagne. While this raid was to the delight of the Anti-Saloon League, it was met with scorn and disdain by many Buffalonians. During their raid, the dry agents went into the personal lockers of Saturn Club members. Not only were many Buffalonians appalled by the raid itself but some were further enraged by this foray on the lockers



FIGURE 6: The Saturn Club. This building, on Delaware Avenue in Buffalo, was the site of the infamous raid on August 23, 1923. The Saturn Club is still in operation today. (Author's personal collection.)

of Saturn Club members. They considered it an infringement of personal property, and this event contributed to the continued resentment and uncooperative feelings that many had toward enforcement efforts.⁷⁹

While dry agents did their best to enforce the law, opponents of the Eighteenth Amendment eventually had their day in the sun when Prohibition came to an end after more than thirteen years of failed enforcement. On December 5, 1933, the Twenty-first Amendment passed repealing alcohol Prohibition. Enforcement efforts came grinding to halt, the tension on the Niagara River finally subsided, homebrewers again could make their booze legally, redistillers abandoned the more toxic or watered-down inebriates while restaurant and speakeasy owners waited in line for their new liquor licenses. Fire sirens wailed in Buffalo to commemorate the end of the constitutional ban, and citizens celebrated by enjoying a night on the town where men and women came together for the first time without needing to hide their drinking.⁸⁰

The experience of the Eighteenth Amendment in Buffalo offers new complexity to the story of Prohibition. The story of this time period in Buffalo paints the failure of the bureau's enforcement efforts in a new color. Rum-runners, homebrewers, and redistillers thrived due to the way the efforts of each of these bootleggers combined to stretch the resources of the bureau. The bureau had difficulty due to the high demand of alcohol and subsequent lack of cooperation from the Buffalo public. However, through the inadequacies of the bureau a new and unforeseen social and cultural consequence was born. Age-old gender taboos began to erode with the death of the saloon and with the rise of male and female drinking spaces. While enforcement of the law itself was a failure, the Eighteenth Amendment was successful in destroying the saloon. Out of these ashes a new drinking culture emerged where men and women drank together.

Buffalo serves as a unique case study of Prohibition in which common citizens pragmatically navigated the legal restrictions on alcohol. Historical literature on Prohibition attributes this time period to organized crime, but this analysis shows how common citizens contributed to the illegal alcohol industry as buyers and sellers. Enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment failed but new environments were born where men and women could drink together and socialize. The case study of Prohibition in Buffalo adds further complexity to our understanding of the federal law's impact upon local communities which contribute to a broader understanding of this national ban on alcohol.

NOTES

1. In the course of researching, writing, revising, and developing this essay, I am so grateful to a number of colleagues and institutions whose help, encouragement, and suggestions made this article possible: Geraldine DeFrancesco, Carole Emberton, David Gerber, Patrick Grubbs, T. R. Hart, Andrew Hyland, Albert Michaels, Matthew Murray, Paul Douglas Newman, Sasha David Pack, Gail Radford, Jennifer P. Read, Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell, Melvin J. Tucker, Liana Vardi, Jason Young, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Fort Erie Historical Museum, Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association, the referees of *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, Port Dover Harbour Museum, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Temple University Department of History, and The State University of New York at Buffalo Departments of History, Psychology, Sociology and Research Institute on Addictions. A special thank you to David Herzberg for his outstanding mentorship and guidance, and to my friends and family, especially Irene, James, Kathleen, Lisa, and William Olewniczak, Eleanor Usiak, Alfred and Mary Ann Wojtowicz, and Lindsay Stotz.
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