AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE PROHIBITION ERA, INDIANA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

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In the years before 1920, World War I and its immediate aftermath dominated the national consciousness. Front-page headlines and long columns featuring such luminaries as General John J. Pershing, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Woodrow Wilson, and Georges Clemenceau cast other persons and events onto the back pages of the country's newspapers. Yet another war — the crusade for virtue through abstinence — did receive coverage in the nation's press. Indications of an ensuing domestic victory for prohibition were becoming apparent. This ultimately manifested itself in the Eighteenth Amendment to the federal Constitution, the National Prohibition law, approved in 1919.1

After a tumultuous dry decade, the great expectations for the so-called noble experiment were replaced by a beleaguered optimism. The prohibition advocates were on the defensive by 1930, and public opinion was swinging in favor of repeal. This shift in attitude was engendered in part by the difficulties of law enforcement. A number of historians have isolated the enforcement problem as the key issue in focusing opinion on repeal. Indeed, from all appearances, the Eighteenth Amendment was openly flaunted nationwide; even the staunchest prohibitionists admitted there were serious problems as far as enforcement was concerned.

Norman H. Clark, in Deliver Us from Evil, provides a revised interpretation of the Eighteenth Amendment and its waning effectiveness. The author perceives repeal as arising from a change in prevailing societal values and not from flagrant violation of the Volstead Act, which had been passed in 1920 to bring about compliance with the Eighteenth Amendment. Clark's interpretation rests on a dynamic social residence pattern that brought about a new ethos

1 Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties (New York, 1964), 16.
complementary to the contemporary life style.² He understands prohibition to have worked exceptionally well save for pockets of unassimilated urban neighborhoods. Clark further states that, for the most part, Americans obeyed the law, and the majority of citizens never met a bootlegger.³ This theory is significant for its penetrating analysis, but Clark goes too far in asserting that prohibition legislation was successful.

The main focus of this article is to survey the response to prohibition and the Volstead Act (1920-1933) and recapture the reality of the prohibition experience among the residents of Indiana County, Pennsylvania. From a series of oral interviews, the picture of people’s activities that emerges casts doubt on Clark’s interpretation. It is not unfair to say that in Indiana County, at least, civil disobedience was part and parcel to prohibition and that a sophisticated and widespread system existed to circumvent the law. Violations were both overt and covert, with the majority being secretive activities conducted with the tacit approval of local public officials.

The early settlement and corresponding economic development of the county centered on general farming and the sporadic exploitation of natural resources, primarily hardwood timber and sedimentary minerals.⁴ A detailed rendering of the county’s growth is unnecessary for the present purpose, but it is useful to point out an economic watershed that occurred around 1900. At that time, the county’s bituminous coal reserves were judged to be worthy of intensive development, and company towns were founded at the sites of resource exploitation.⁵

Once the county’s economic profile assumed a decidedly industrial character, the composition of its population changed. Austro-Hungarians, Poles, Russians, and Italians arrived and took jobs as laborers in the booming subsurface mining industry.⁶ Contemporary opinion and scholarly interpretation have associated the newcomers with illegal liquor activities during the prohibition era. Yet, were such recent immigrants prone to imbibing in direct violation of the law?

³ Ibid., 145-46.
⁴ Frances S. Helman, “History of Indiana County,” in Sesquicentennial Celebration of Indiana County, 1803-1953 (Indiana, Pa., 1953).
A secondary aim of this study is to ascertain how closely associated various ethnic groups were to illegal liquor production and consumption.

The nature of the topic determined certain methodological considerations. The possibility of adverse judgments and public censure as a result of participation in the study was an obvious stumbling block to spontaneous and unguarded conversation. To preclude negative reaction and to allay apprehensions among the interviewees, anonymity was agreed upon as a ground rule. Informants, therefore, are identified by township and interview dates only.

When the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, liquor sales were abolished in the county, but consumer demand remained high. Producers of illicit alcohol — bootleggers — prepared to sustain the supply of whiskey, beer, and wine. There were, of course, local residents who recognized the opportunity for profit from activities in violation of the law. This is not to say, however, that their motives were entirely criminal in nature. At the end of World War I, the industrial sector of the county's economy had suffered a downturn. Throughout the 1920s, bituminous coal production dropped to one-half its former tonnage. As employees faced wage cuts and company towns began to stagnate, individuals often looked upon the production and sale of alcohol as a form of work relief. A resident of Center Township described the growing bootleg business and the concurrent economic conditions:

Well, it [the Eighteenth Amendment] was an unpopular deal, very unpopular. And just at that time we had a depression. As a means of livelihood for a lot of these people, we had no such thing as relief, government subsidies or nothing. Right here in the Borough [Homer City] and in the Borough of Indiana, these people had cows, chickens, pigs, you name it, just as a means of livelihood. Now if they did have a job, the pay was marginal. [One] couldn't keep a family without these gardens or chickens or what have you. So, not that they were forced into this, people lived without it. But they made this stuff to start with, for themselves. ... And somebody would be visiting them and they'd give 'em a drink — a social deal — and the first thing you know, this person would go out and tell somebody, good drink of wine or something up there. It was considered wine. And then they'd go up there and offer to buy it and it mushroomed. Only natural. ... 8

The provincial manufacture of beverage alcohol was a domestic enterprise stimulated by economic hardship and buoyant demand. The degree to which it ameliorated the situation for struggling families is difficult to gauge. It was pursued concurrently with subsistence vegetable and livestock raising to maintain a livelihood. The depression of

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7 Ibid., 23.
8 Center Township, personal interview, Indiana County, July 16, 1979.
the 1930s began a decade early in communities existing on an economic base of agricultural or mining activities. The county's growth in the early twentieth century was due to the subsurface mining industry. With the decline in demand for coal after World War I, smaller wages and unemployment faced the county's working population with wage reductions and unemployment at a time when the national government claimed no responsibility for social welfare. Liquor sales seemed a feasible way of gathering money in times of hardship.

The spontaneous growth of the illicit alcohol trade in response to economic hardship continued throughout the decade. The producers of the contraband liquor plied their trade as either full-time or part-time entrepreneurs. Although a production and marketing chain did exist, complete with manufacturers, distributors, and retailers, the most common pattern was the consolidation of these specialized divisions into one unit. This was manifested in the neighborhood institution known as the speakeasy. Here, the head of the household, the husband or wife, entered the illicit alcohol trade to supplement the family income. Production took place within the home, in the kitchen or cellar, and in some instances in a more remote location. Whatever the beverage — beer, wine, or whiskey — the production process was managed by the head of the household, who also acted as the speakeasy proprietor. Children participated in the production process, performing routine tasks in the preparation of materials.

An added attraction of the speakeasy for the men of Indiana County was the opportunity it presented for conviviality with women. This had its attendant risks, however, for the customers. The following testimony from a Pine Township resident highlights the special favors of the hostess and the petty thievery that sometimes resulted:

There was competition between speakeasies. I mean, you know, maybe some of these homes would have young women, daughters, you know. Guys would go more, cater to those places rather than where they weren't. They would get so drunk, and a little touch here, a little there, you know. They thought it was a big thing and that was just to draw them back. That was the system. You know where the young girls were, I mean they made more business. Or the lady of the house might be a little attractive, you know. And she would kind of know how to bring the customers in. But gee, after a few drinks, you'd get stoned and they'd steal your money and you'd ask what happened to your money and they'd say, "Well, you spent it. You bought drinks for everybody." This and that and your money went.9

Patrons of the neighborhood speakeasy often recalled that their wallets were much lighter after leaving. An informant from Young Township remembered being shortchanged. "They had a speakeasy

9 Pine Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 1, 1979.
then, you know. We went in there and were drinking some wine. And I tell ya that I gave her a five dollar bill, see, but I [mistakenly] gave her a twenty dollar bill. And I said, 'Did I give you enough?' and she said 'Yes.' And I'll tell ya boy, oh boy, a twenty dollar bill. The next time, I watched, buddy.'" 10

Despite such incidents, the relationship between the speakeasy's clientele and its proprietors was generally amicable. The kitchen and/or dining room were utilized as barrooms. Service began only after the evening meal was over and the children were asleep. Chairs were set up, and, on occasion, smoked meats and various condiments were provided for the additional enjoyment of the guests. A relaxed atmosphere of conversation and tippling thus prevailed at certain private residences after the daylight hours. An exception to this tranquil weekday evening mood were the raucous times on Saturday nights when the neighborhood speakeasy provided the main source of diversion. A Pine Township man remembers that when the working week was completed, the recreation centered on the speakeasy.

People would go to these homes, private homes, speakeasies and raise Hell all night drinking. . . . You went there to get stoned, that was the main purpose. On the weekend, that was a big deal. Saturday and Sunday, there was music, playing finger games [Odd and Even] and cards. Yeah, you know, they'd have instruments, accordion, guitar, somebody singing, all makeshift stuff. Just individuals that learned how to play. And they'd go to these places [speakeasies] and make a few bucks. Guys would drink and say, Hey, play me this or that and give 50 cents or a buck. . . . There was action all the time. Boy, if you go through that town [Heilwood] say like on a Saturday night and there was a lot of commotion all right here on Saturday night. When Saturday came, that was all the miner had to do. That was his good time. 11

Because the speakeasy operated in disobedience to the law, the consumer's complicity was vital to its existence. The good will of the customer was important for protecting the illegal operation from law enforcement. When the relationship between host and guest was friendly, the speakeasy remained secure. But if the host acted less than cordial, the guest could retaliate. In this illustrative example from East Mahoning Township, a clash between a customer and a speakeasy operator resulted in a closing. "This guy would get loud, he even got loud in legal days. He just talked loud. To me, he wasn't objectionable at all. He was a rascal but I loved the rascal. . . . But anyhow, he'd get loud in this speakeasy. They'd warn him to pipe down but he wouldn't. And they'd give him the old heave-ho. So you could never guess what happened to that speakeasy. It got knocked off —

10 Young Township, personal interview, Indiana County, May 26, 1979.
11 Pine Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 1, 1979.
arrested. And there weren't any doubts as to where the information came from."  

Another group of illicit liquor dealers were the peddlers. These individuals bought moonshine liquor and then resold it for a profit. They made appearances at social gatherings where the demand for their goods was sufficient enough to make the enterprise lucrative. Dances, picnics, theaters, and other such outings could bring one into contact with a passing salesman. A retiree from Young Township related the activities of those engaged in liquor peddling: "Say some guy wants to make extra money and is a pretty good hustler. He'd go out and buy four or five gallons of moon, go around to certain places, you know, like a big dance going on or picnic someplace around here. . . . They'd have it all measured out in pints . . . and go around selling it, see. Oh, maybe, $1.00 a pint or 75 cents a pint — it just depends."  

The peddling business had a different economic structure than the neighborhood speakeasy. As a means of procuring supplemental income, it was more sporadic and more mobile, not being attached to a single fixed structure. Since such mobile operations did not foster the intimacy of the neighborhood speakeasy, the character of the peddler is hard to determine, although he appears most often as an unmarried male less burdened with familial responsibilities.  

An exception was an opportunistic man from Center Township. In addition to a kitchen speakeasy, he established a regular route for peddling. The operation was unique by virtue of its well-planned execution. In this case, the entrepreneur identified a potential market and made his product in anticipation of the demand.  

And all the time, people around here, they used to have tournaments [bocce ball] . . . Well, you had tournaments, you had crowds, you should sell wine, you know. My dad put a big tank in the cellar and he crushed all his grapes in there all night. Us kids all had to work. And that would produce about fourteen barrels of wine. Then we had, oh, a warehouse, had a floor dug out, 7 barrels on this side and 7 on this side [gestures with hands describing the layout]. And it was high enough you'd take a bucket of wine and pour it right in that funnel . . . and then right in the barrel. And the hole in the funnel was about that big [forms a small circle with thumb and index finger]. You wouldn't have to wait. Just pour it in there. That funnel would take the whole bucket of wine. Out we'd go again and get them filled up again and bring them in, two at a time. Then you age your wine in the cask until time to bottle in the spring: Uh, maybe before the first thunderstorm. That way, they claim that the wine would be all ready to bottle. And if you didn't, a good thunderstorm would work up all the sediment and it wouldn't be very clear. So you had to know all these things.  

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12 Marion Center Borough, personal interview, Indiana County, May 9, 1979.
13 Young Township, personal interview, Indiana County, May 26, 1979.
14 Center Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 22, 1979.
Self-styled bootleggers could and did claim higher professional status in the illicit liquor trade. They established the larger speakeasies at the county seat and operated the roadhouses on the main highways leading away from Indiana Borough. These operations differed from the neighborhood speakeasy in several respects, the most basic difference being the full-time nature of the business. One can surmise, too, that individuals connected with these operations combined illicit liquor sales with other illegal activities to maintain their professional stature. They established connections with law enforcement officials to negate the risks of operating in the face of criminal penalties. A man residing in Indiana Borough related this incident:

I was in a speakeasy one night. There was a gang in there, probably 20 to 25 people. And there was some girls in there carrying on and a fellow came around and said, "Now everybody sit down and keep your mouth shut. Police is coming." I looked at my buddy. I said, "We better get out of here." "No," he said, "Sit down and keep your mouth shut." . . . Two borough policemen walked in, walked through, looked everyone over and never said a word, went on out to the kitchen, had their drinks, went out the back door and left.15

County residents produced wine on a cooperative basis. California grapes arrived by rail in communities in the southeastern part of the county. When a boxcar load of grapes came into the local station, pickup trucks and cars arrived under the cover of night to transfer the produce to private homes. Generally speaking, first- and second-generation immigrants from the Mediterranean region of Europe were adept in producing grape wine while the residents of the British Isles and the German states were well versed in the native fruits and berries. The period was characterized by a willingness to experiment with any materials that would ferment into alcohol. A White Township resident observed that "the wild berries were all picked during prohibition, now they all rot. . . . My mother made beautiful wine, dandelion blossom and elderberry blossom wine." 16

Home-brewed beer was also common. High demand, however, often forced the beverage out of its proper aging sequence, and an extremely effervescent product was the result. An East Mahoning Township informant, commenting on home brew, observed that

if business was real good, it hadn't had a chance to age as it should. It would be wild foam all over the place, you know. And standard procedure — there was a pitcher and you would uncap the bottle real fast. And put it upside down in the pitcher to empty. . . . If you were stupid enough, as I was once, to try to hold it with your thumb — you just turned [it] into a squirt gun on everyone.17

16 White Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 24, 1979.
17 Marion Center Borough, personal interview, Indiana County, May 9, 1979.
While the large full-time producers could depend upon an umbrella of protection derived from tacit agreements with local officials, smaller operators continued to rely primarily on their relationship with the consumer to provide security from law enforcement. The patrons of the illegal liquor producers did not perceive their transactions to be conspiratorial and were unlikely to expose the source of supply. In addition, the producers, both large and small, practiced a variety of cautionary tactics to protect their investments, but the danger of an illegal operator being arrested was nonetheless a possibility. Federal agents arrived periodically to enforce the law. At least some residents believed it was a citizen’s duty to report violators. For example, the tranquil coexistence of a producer and a public official in East Mahoning Township was disrupted in this peculiar functioning of law enforcement. A woman related the incident: “We had a neighbor who was a constable and he loved the stuff [whiskey]. And he use to come up when we was makin’ it and he use to taste it all the time. And he’d go home feeling good and he’d have a fight with his wife. And she would report it. And then the sheriff would come. So that’s where the trouble was.”

The producers typically developed countermeasures to forestall unwarranted intrusions. A Center Township man remembered the standard routine of neighborhood speakeasies:

If they didn’t know you, you didn’t get in. They had dogs and everything around there. They had to know you first. They had bulldogs, big dogs, always big. They were chained but they were barking. And they warned the people that somebody was coming. They had lights, lots of lights around, lots of them. They recognized the car before you got there. Before you got up on the porch, the dogs would start to bark. That was the signal that somebody was coming.

There were alternatives to having canine footmen announce the arrival of guests. Some producers endeavored to minimize the visibility of their operations. This was especially true of the larger operators at the county seat. A White Township resident explained that business hours were after the second show at the movie house. He wryly commented, “That way you could be sure that the nosy people were off the streets.” The veil of darkness was conducive to maintaining the secrecy of operations. Home deliveries, made at this time, aroused little suspicion. Customers received the goods through regular channels of business, such as the taxi service. A cab would stop at a

18 Green Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 16, 1979.
19 Center Township, personal interview, Indiana County, July 16, 1979.
20 White Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 24, 1979.
residence and a transaction would be made without drawing undue attention. In other instances, rural producers desired to keep their exact location undisclosed. For example, an Indiana Borough woman described a circuitous route used for obtaining contraband liquor.

You would tell me where you got your last supply... so after dark that night, we drive down the road here three miles and turn off to the left and then we go down about one-half mile and turn off to the left again. And there'd be a house. And you would go around to the back door and knock and say, "Joe sent me." And he would say, "All right you go this way or that way." And you'd go the direction he told you. And slow up at a certain place and a package would be handed to you. And you'd go on, there was your booze.

The comfortable relationship between producer and consumer is evidenced in these procedural security measures. Sometimes a completely drawn window blind informed the customer that it would be necessary to use the back door to gain access. A partially opened blind meant the front entrance was available. Once entered, at least a passing acquaintance with the operator was required. A White Township man related: "I couldn't just say to a friend of mine, who wasn't known in a place, 'Here, go down to this place and get us a couple of bottles of hooch.' He would never have got it. He'd have been waltzed away in a hurry for insulting the man, to think that he would make hooch or sell hooch."  

If the first line of defense was somehow penetrated, the producer effected plans to obscure the evidence. Preferably, the apparatus and product were removed from the home, but in the suddenness of a raid time was not always sufficient to take such action. Therefore, a variety of concealment practices were used to give the home a normal appearance. Still were quickly hidden by placing them under the kitchen table and dropping the tablecloth longer. Bottles of moonshine might be placed among such cooking ingredients as vinegar and thus be rendered innocuous. Ginger ale and ice, the correct complements for serving alcohol, were kept because of their easy portability and legal nature. As a youngster, a Pine Township man created panic at a local speakeasy by spreading a false alarm; his account of the event also reveals some typical concealment tactics.

I know a particular house. They had a big operation... so we would go to this place here and tell 'em that the federal men were coming, that they're down the road, see. So... they would go out and hide their whiskey. Well,

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22 White Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 8, 1979.
23 Young Township, personal interview, Indiana County, May 26, 1979.
24 Green Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 16, 1979.
we'd be back in the background, in the woods someplace. We had an idea where they hid it but we didn't exactly know. So us kids would get back [in the woods] and they, the mother and daughters and everybody, would bring this whiskey out in gallon jugs. And they'd have holes dug into the lawn, a shallow hole, just enough for a gallon jug to fit in there and put a big bucket over the top and put the sod back on. We was watching from the woods, see, and when they went back in the house, waiting for the revenue men, we'd go up and take the whiskey and sell it and make a buck. That's the way it was. Things were rough. We use to do that many times.

A miner from the Coal Run area noted that some people made extra money when the federal men actually did investigate illegal activities. At such times, not as many producers would make whiskey, but others, willing to take the risk, had more chances to sell it.26

Time permitting, a speakeasy operator would make an orderly retreat with his materials to a remote location. Rural residents of the county were relatively self-sufficient compared to today, and many maintained small mines to meet their own requirements for fuel. These underground tunnels were used to hide stills, bottles and cappers, and beverages when investigating authorities were known to be in the locality. Evidently, law officers were not overly eager to press the search once they encountered the recesses of a small mine.

Transportation was the weakest link in the security of the bootleg operation. The larger producers, those who were importing illicit beverages to the county, were often in unfamiliar territory. The operators were most vulnerable to investigation and arrest during intercounty travel. Even the small-time peddlers experienced anxiety once they took to the road; an informant from Young Township said: “I have delivered moonshine to places where you didn't want to leave your car setting for long. The Model T didn't lock well and anyone could run off with it.” 27

The reality of the prohibition experience in Indiana County raises serious questions about Norman Clark's thesis. Trade in illicit alcohol assumed three forms: the speakeasy, peddling, and the roadhouse. The first provided a domestic setting for illegal consumption and established an informal primary relationship with customers; the second was an individual who undertook sales on borough streets and at social gatherings; and the third was the roadhouse removed from the community setting and attracting consumers from a wider area than the neighborhood speakeasy. There is nothing in the oral testimony to

25 Pine Township, personal interview, Indiana County, June 1, 1979.
26 Young Township, personal interview, Indiana County, May 26, 1979.
27 Ibid.
Residents of West Lebanon, Indiana County, sample homemade wine, about 1920. Courtesy of the Coal Heritage Center, Johnstown, Pennsylvania.
indicate such operations were rare or isolated occurrences in Indiana County.

Testimony from participants suggests also that southern and eastern European immigrants undertook the production of illegal beverages more often than the population at large. The motives for doing so were the individual responses to economic hardship. However, the practice of distillation and fermentation was widespread and not limited to a particular ethnic group. A Young Township distiller unequivocally stated: "Not only Italians [but] Slavish, Germans, Johnny Bull, Irish, all nationalities made liquor. They all made liquor. They all did it." 28

The Eighteenth Amendment did receive a favorable reception from abstainers from alcoholic beverages. Many individuals, through personal preference, avoided the use of intoxicant beverages, and the national prohibition legislation required no changes in their personal habits. If some county residents were content to lead private lives of abstinence, others were more vocal. There was an activist dry tradition in Indiana County. Its adherents were men and women who actively pressed for liquor reform. These individuals joined local chapters of various national prohibition organizations and in doing so, they expressed a fervent desire to abolish the menace of liquor through legislation. Their goal was nothing less than the "bone-dry" prohibition of intoxicant beverages.

In the two decades before the Prohibition era, the dry adherents engaged in the twin stratagems of political action and public education. The local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was the most enduring reform-minded organization. Its membership, primarily Protestant, represented a well-disciplined voting bloc, ready to support the political candidates of dry persuasion. They also attempted to encourage complete abstinence by means of an educational program. Prevention was the watchword; the stalwart ladies tied white ribbons to the wrists of newborn infants, thus symbolizing a pledge by the mother to raise the child in a pure environment devoid of intoxicant beverages. 29

Dry activism was replaced by complacency when prohibition became part of the Constitution. Charles Merz, in The Dry Decade, commented upon the confidence of national prohibition organizations. Their leaders did not expect a smooth transition period but they were confident that America would become dry once prohibition was a

28 Ibid.
29 Indiana Borough, personal interview, Indiana County, Apr. 18, 1979.
national law. As Merz pointed out, the prohibition forces were unresponsive to the challenge from an increasingly well-financed and organized opposition. In retrospect, local members of the WCTU lamented the waning of the zealot spirit, but during the 1920s their own activities became less political and more educational. They thought a public well informed about the vile nature of alcohol would willingly uphold the Eighteenth Amendment.

At least as far as Indiana County was concerned, the drys' assumptions were incorrect. All subjects interviewed for this study agree that the law was regularly and frequently violated. Moreover, as enforcement waned, consumption apparently increased. Serving illicit alcoholic beverages at social gatherings became fashionable — and not just among the urban elite, but across a wide spectrum of the county's population. These findings, it would seem, indicate that the production and consumption of alcohol during the dry years was more extensive and more commonplace than some historians would have us believe.