

# The Bootlegger's Nephew Supplement



Prohibition in Central Illinois

Sarah Wisseman

# The Bootlegger's Nephew Supplement

## Prohibition in Central Illinois

A companion to the historical mystery

**The Bootlegger's Nephew**

(Hilliard and Harris 2012)

**Sarah Wisseman**

*Disclaimer: The following non-fiction document was produced by the author in 2010-2011. Any omissions or mistakes are hers and hers alone. For updates and additional website addresses, go to: [www.sarahwisseman.com](http://www.sarahwisseman.com)*

The Roaring Twenties was an intensely interesting period, with a great many references available in both print and online. Like most writers, I used only a tiny fraction of my research in the fictional novel to “set the stage” and provide local color.

I chose my hometown (Champaign-Urbana, renamed “Big Grove”) in east Central Illinois as my setting because so much has already been written about Chicago and I wanted to set my story in a less well-known region. My research centered upon three major themes: Prohibition, early medicine before the advent of antibiotics, and archaeology in its “Wild West” era before it became an academic discipline. I was also fascinated by the changing roles of women during the early 1920s and by the negative attitudes toward immigrants, especially Germans. Martha Junker knew firsthand what it was like to be a German immigrant in the Midwest, and Anna Junker came of age at a time when women could vote, drink and flirt in public, wear short skirts, and behave in ways their elders found offensive and immoral.

*The Bootlegger’s Nephew* is set during the fall and winter of 1923, a mere three years after women achieved the vote (1920), just after the discovery of insulin (1922), only a few years after the great flu epidemic (1918-1919), and a year after the discovery of the Pharaoh Tutankamun’s tomb in Egypt (1922). A few more items to set the stage for 1923: Calvin Coolidge was president, *Time Magazine* was founded that year, and the Ku Klux Klan held a huge rally in East St. Louis at Cahokia, Illinois. Prohibition was in full force throughout the U.S. A quart of beer cost about 80 cents, while a quart of gin was \$6. A single drink could range in

price from under a dollar (beer for 25 cents a bottle) to \$1.50 or more, depending on the source of the booze.

The actual historical events of that year only touch on my story; it is important to keep in mind that some of the material culture and language portrayed in *The Bootlegger's Nephew* carry over from the previous half-century. For example, my fictional doctor Illinois Junker was born in 1883, trained in medicine ca. 1903, and served during World War I as a practicing physician. His father, Thomas Junker, was born in 1848 and trained in medicine during the 1860s just after the Civil War. The attitudes, slang, book learning, tools, furnishings and so forth of the earlier period persist into the 1920s to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon the age and background of each character and where he or she lived and worked (e.g. rural vs. urban setting). Thus, older farm equipment, gas lighting, the use of home remedies and elixirs, and 1880s slang are still present or in use in 1923 when this story begins.

References are listed in the text and at the end of this supplement.

#### CHAMPAIGN COUNTY:

The county is located in east-central part of Illinois, between the Sangamon and Salt Fork rivers. It is quite flat due to being scraped by glaciers; our county is the southern end of the Wisconsin glacial episode in Illinois. This land is good farming country now, but used to be a malarial swamp. Nicknames for the county's low, marshy ground included "slough" and "liquid mud." Serious drainage work not begun until 1870s, so getting around the county during the rainy season before that time must have been very difficult. Just east of modern Champaign-Urbana are salt springs (between the towns of Oakwood and Danville) that drew first pioneers during the early 1800s.

Native Americans (called “Indians” during the 1920s) remained in the area until just after the Black Hawk War of 1832. Then they moved west. The name “Big Grove” is the Indian translation for “Mashaw Montuck” or “big woods,” designating the area north of town now partly occupied by Busey Woods and Crystal Lake Park.

The population of Champaign-Urbana increased ten times during the decade 1850-1860 after the railroad was built by the Illinois Central Railroad (McCollum 2005). Champaign, originally called “West Urbana,” gained its current name and a new post office when the depot was built in 1854. That year, the train ride from Champaign to Chicago took eight hours; now it takes a little over two hours (depending on the freight trains who share the track and always take priority over passenger trains).

By the turn of the century, Champaign-Urbana had its own water company, sewer lines, and electricity (including electric street cars) in town. In 1918, many rural roads were still unpaved and travel was hampered by mud and flat tires. Although the 1920s saw extensive road construction projects, I have assumed that Doc Junker would still encounter unpaved roads and that some farmhouses would still be lit with natural gas or kerosene lanterns.

#### PROHIBITION:

The temperance movement, led by organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, led to referenda that forced change in many parts of the U.S. by the early 1900s. However, enforcement of anti-liquor laws was spotty and inconsistent, and “dry” (public sale and consumption of liquor prohibited) communities existed side by side with “wet” (public alcohol permitted) towns or counties. The twin cities of Champaign and Urbana became “dry” for the first time in 1907, but the two towns passed their

referenda about a week apart so Urbana drinkers were forced to visit saloons across town while local businessmen stockpiled booze to get through the dry spell. A side effect of going dry was that Champaign lost so much revenue from liquor licenses that the city had to lay off police and firemen and turn off every single streetlight for most of the month of October, 1911. Local Prohibition laws were approved again three more times, in 1910, 1912, and 1916 (Kacich 2011).

It wasn't until late 1919 when Illinois legislators ratified the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, popularly known as the Volstead Act, that Prohibition existed throughout the state. This peculiar law (nationwide by January 1920) prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transport of liquor, but not the possession or consumption of it. The effect of this law (and the earlier local referenda) was to drive drinking underground all over America. Former dens of iniquity (saloons) morphed into speakeasies (named after either a required password, "speak-easy," or the need to speak softly to avoid attracting agents who would close down the bar). "Blind pigs," drinking establishments hidden behind storefronts ranging from laundries to ice cream parlors, ranged from minimally equipped bars to full service restaurants. Many "speaks" were rooms in private homes or apartment buildings, often ingeniously disguised by moving walls and hidden doors. The more elaborate speakeasies, particularly those serving food, also added "powder rooms" to attract women.

The descriptions in *Bootlegger* of speakeasy furniture and arrangements for quick hiding of booze are partly real and partly made-up (the one featuring a tube through which the youngest member of the household dispensed liquor from upstairs is based on a true story from Cincinnati Ohio. See Singer 2005). The tunnel under the streets in *Bootlegger* is also based on a real tunnel (one of many that still exist): the one underneath the Old Main Book Shoppe between Market and Walnut streets in downtown Champaign (Bloomer 1999). Most of the speakeasies were

located near the railroad depots, on or near the sites of earlier saloons. In downtown Champaign/Big Grove (where most of the action of this novel takes place), this meant Main St., N. Market St., and Taylor St.

High quality, expensive whiskey, gin, rum, etc., continued to be available during Prohibition and was imported over the porous Canadian border or from Europe and Jamaica via the East Coast. However, cheaper diluted or counterfeit liquor rapidly took over the market. Whiskey was diluted with raw alcohol and water, colored with caramel or creosote, and rebottled and relabeled for transport to thirsty Americans. Small boats of every description smuggled cases of booze from “Rum Row” (large ships lurking just outside U.S. waters) onto American soil from Maine to Florida (Okrent 2010).

Men and women (and quite a few teenagers) searched for—and found—even cheaper options, including local moonshine and “bathtub gin” created in their own homes. Raw alcohol in some form could be readily obtained, as could malt, sugar, bottles, caps, miniature stills, and labels from local stores and pharmacies; the problems arose when amateurs used industrial alcohol made for non-drinking purposes. Grain alcohol (ethanol) is the base for most liquor, but wood alcohol (methanol) is dangerous because it can cause blindness. Many wood alcohols found their way into bootleg liquor. Some producers also incorporated early forms of antifreeze (ethylene glycol), which could cause kidney damage, or other toxic substances such as iodine, embalming fluid, kerosene, furniture polish, liquid residue from grain silos, and sulfuric acid. Using cheap or recycled metal pieces such as car radiators with lead coils for the condenser made brews that contributed to anemia and nerve damage. Since contents were unregulated, homebrews of gut-busting strength and the ability to damage, paralyze, blind, or kill depending upon quantity consumed were created. A host of slang terms cropped up to describe some of

these lethal concoctions: “panther piss,” “white lightning,” “coffin varnish,” “tarantula juice,” “busthead,” “rotgut,” etc. By the late 1920s, thousands of deaths were attributed to various kinds of alcohol poisoning.

Pharmacies ordered and provided special stocks of high-quality liquor for physicians and dentists to dispense. Many doctors believed whiskey was medicinal, a “nerve tonic” or “cure-all,” and willingly prescribed it for their patients, ironically using government prescription forms. Individuals were allowed to ferment fruit juices for home wine production up to two hundred gallons per year. Another popular source of booze was “sacramental wine” supposedly reserved for churches and synagogues (Okrent 2010). Alliances were formed between speakeasy owners, grocers, druggists, bootleggers, and police, and bribery was commonplace to persuade federal agents to turn a blind eye to the sale and public consumption of bootleg liquor that occurred all around them.

Bootlegging gangs were active all over the state of Illinois. The dominant gangs, who also engaged in prostitution, gambling (slot machines, dogfights, cockfights), included Capone’s outfit in Chicago and the Shelton Brothers and Charlie Birger in “Little Egypt” (around Cairo, in southern Illinois). The Sheltons and Charlie Birger began as allies until their spectacular falling out in 1926. Although the Shelton Brothers (Carl, Earl, and Bernie), began their notorious careers in southern Illinois, they moved their operations north to East St. Louis and Peoria—making Peoria the wildest town between Chicago and St. Louis during World War II.

#### MEDICINE:

This novel takes place just after the terrible flu epidemic of 1918-1919 and shortly after the end of the Great War (WWI). Although physicians during the 1920s understood germ theory



and the need for sterilized equipment, the medicine they practiced was hardly advanced according to modern standards. Probably the most crucial difference between modern times and 1923 was the lack of antibiotics: penicillin not invented until 1928. This meant doctors like Illinois Junker (and his father before him) had limited options when dealing with patients with life-threatening infections. Most of a physician's practice consisted of family care in a semi-rural community: childbirths, farm accidents, broken limbs, abscesses, etc., along with the peculiar ailments of the time: over consumption of alcohol, drug abuse (cocaine was legal), and shellshock (now referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder).

Medical training was not standardized, although it was being reshaped after the 1910 Flexner Report that set new requirements for doctors. In Thomas Junker's day, a college degree was not required to become a doctor, and medical "school" consisted of less than two years of medical lectures with little or no practical instruction in clinical settings. Illinois Junker fared somewhat better, having acquired a B.A. first and then attended a medical college affiliated with the University of Illinois in Chicago ca. 1900. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, doctors who could afford to often went to Germany (Berlin, Vienna, or Zurich) for additional study.

Forensic science was just beginning in the early twentieth century, and coroners were not required to be MDs. A coroner was often a funeral director, but he could also be a sheriff, a newspaper publisher, or a café owner. Medical Examiners (MEs), however, were generally required to be licensed physicians after the 1940s, and gradually MEs replaced coroners in most jurisdictions.

Although home remedies and "patent" medicines were not as prevalent in the early 1920s as they were in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they were still popular, especially in rural communities. Prohibition increased the consumption of bitters and liniments because of their

high alcohol content: e.g. *Sloan's Liniment*, *Balsam of Myrrh*, *Jamaica Ginger*, *Acker Remedy for Throat and Lung*, and *Atwood's Bitters*. Some of these replaced the extraordinarily successful *Mrs. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound* (20.6 % alcohol, popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) for closet home drinkers such as women who didn't care to frequent speakeasies.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt in 1922 infected people around the world with a fascination for archaeology. In the U.S., this enthusiasm for the past took the form of digging artifacts on private and public lands and forming private collections of arrowheads, axes, pottery, bones (especially human skulls), and stone pipes (mixed with fossils and geological specimens) in private museums in peoples' homes. Archaeology was not yet a scientific discipline in 1923, and the practice of archaeology varied from indiscriminate looting of graves and sites (including taking potshots at rival amateur diggers) to semi-systematic collection of artifacts and recording of finds using drawings and photography. Systematic excavation didn't really get going in Illinois until the University of Illinois' Illinois Valley Mounds Survey in 1927-1928, led by Warren K. Moorehead and J.L.B. Taylor (Farnsworth 2004).

Earl "Illinois" Snyder Junker is modeled after self-educated archaeologists who were usually professionals in another field (doctors, dentists, chiropractors, geologists, newspaper writers, etc.). In the Midwest, these "gentlemen" archaeologists included physician John Francis Snyder of Virginia (1830-1921), historian John G. Henderson (1837-1912), newspaper editor Ephraim G. Squier (1821-1888), and physician Edwin H. Davis (1811-1888). Snyder dug mounds in the lower Illinois Valley and published numerous scholarly articles that are still useful

today to professional archaeologists. He also operated a “country museum” next to his home that contained stone, pottery, bone, and human skulls (Farnsworth 2004). The team of Squier and Davis is best known for their careful surveying, excavations, and documenting of mounds in Ohio (they published *Ancient Mounds of the Mississippi Valley* in 1848).

Less gentlemanly characters such as William McAdams of Alton, Illinois (1835-1895) also left their marks on the landscape. McAdams was an amateur geologist, archaeologist, and private collector in Illinois and Missouri who wrote newspaper articles and books such as *Ancient Mounds of Illinois* (1881). He too had a private collection of “Indian relics” that he liked to exhibit. He was found drowned (after imbibing a large amount of liquor) in a creek in 1895.

Don Dickson, a chiropractor who lived in northern Illinois, was inspired by the discovery of King Tut’s tomb to dig Indian burial mounds near his home with his uncle Marion Dickson. Because of the public fascination with archaeology at this time, he decided to leave the burials and artifacts in place and build a museum over them. The result was “Dickson’s Moundbuilder Tomb,” an unusual display of uncovered, intact human burials until the display was closed in the 1990s (I note here while showing human bones in public and in home museums was okay during the 1920s, modern thinking and enforcement of the 1990 Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) makes such displays obsolete).

#### TRANSPORTATION:

The 1920s was the era of Model-T Ford or “Tin Lizzie.” By end of decade, many families had cars. Earlier brands, such as Pathfinders, were still in use. By 1923, most American cars had made the transition from the hard-to-use crank to an electric starter.

At the time *The Bootlegger's Nephew* is set, residents of Champaign-Urbana had a variety of transportation options. If they couldn't afford a private automobile, they could get around town using electric street trolleys and between certain towns such as Urbana and Danville using Interurban trains. Champaign-Urbana had many paved (often brick) streets in town, but unpaved roads persisted in other parts of the county.

#### HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES AND FURNISHINGS:

The 1920s saw an explosion in home appliances, gadgets, and laborsaving devices such as washing machines (no dryers yet), refrigerators (shorter and squatter than their modern counterparts), stoves, toasters, and "home motors" with various attachments (including vibrators). Everything from whole houses and kitchen appliances to curtains and underwear could be ordered through the *Sears Catalogue*, which was very much in vogue. Some popular items obtainable from Sears were Gladstone drapes, Bakelite plastic, linoleum floorings, and geometric-patterned rugs.

#### CLOTHING AND HAIR STYLES:

During the 1920s, both men and women were able to purchase ready-made clothing in department stores instead of relying on someone to sew garments at home. Women's fashion during this decade spanned the gamut from sedate and covered-up to bare knees and backs. Skirt length shortened from ankle-length to knee-length, and "flappers" (named for their habit of wearing unfastened galoshes that flapped) scandalized their elders by bobbing their hair short, using makeup, carrying liquor flasks in their boots or clothing, wearing makeup, and drinking and flirting in public. Female fashion included a variety of chemises (to replace the corset), early

forms of brassieres, silk stockings, long skirts, knee-high dresses, fur coats, cloche (bell-shaped) and brimmed hats (often with feathers and beads).

Men's clothing remained more consistent during the decade: caps and hats, golfers, Oxford "bags," (loose baggy trousers), and polo (camel's hair) or raccoon fur coats. While women experimented with short hairstyles (e.g. the Dutch Bob or Marcel Wave), men went for the movie-star look: slicked-back hair using oil or gel, parted in the middle.

MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT: Periodicals included *The Farmer's Voice*, *Time Magazine* (1923), pulp magazines such as *Argosy Weekly* and *Love Story Magazine* (1921). Although the "talkies", or talking movies, weren't invented in 1927, going to movie theaters was a popular pastime. Movies in the early 1920s were "silent," meaning there was no soundtrack incorporated into the film, but many films such as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) were shown with melodramatic live music (organ, piano) in the background. Popular movie stars included Mary Pickford, Theda Bara, Lila Lee, Clara Bow, Charlie Chaplin, and Rudolph Valentino, best known for his smoldering hero portrayal in *The Sheik* (based on the novel *The Sheik* by Edith Hull published in 1921). Other favorite books of the day were: Ethel M. Dell's *The Lamp in the Desert* (1920); Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) and *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920); and Emily Post's *Etiquette in Society* (1922). People enjoyed Zane Grey's westerns and Edgar Rice Burroughs' science fiction. Popular songs included Bessie Smith's "Down Hearted Blues," "Yes, We Have No Bananas," "Ain't We Got Fun," and "Who's Sorry Now." Radio was dominant in public and private places, and the first radio station broadcasts in the state of Illinois came from nearby Tuscola (1922). Many people gathered around radio cabinets in their homes in the evenings to listen to shows such as "The National

Barn Dance.”

A SAMPLE OF TWENTIES SLANG (*n.b. much of this can be found online*):

**Applesauce!** Baloney!

**Attagirl!** Well done!

**Bags:** as in “Oxford bags.” Men’s pants.

**Bee’s Knees:** excellent, first-rate (similar: “cat’s meow”)

**Blind Pig:** hidden bar, often behind a false storefront (laundry, barbershop, tobacco shop, ice cream parlor, etc.)

**Bootlegger, ‘legger:** someone who transports liquor illegally

**Bubs:** breasts

**Bushwa:** bullshit

**Butt me:** I’ll take a cigarette

**Dead soldier:** empty bottle

**Giggle water:** booze

**Gin mill:** speakeasy, especially a cheap one

**Goat whiskey:** Indian moonshine

**Hayburner:** gas-guzzling car

**Hooch:** booze, liquor

**Jack:** money

**Jeepers Creepers!** Jesus Christ!

**Juice joint:** speakeasy

**Let’s ankle:** let’s get out of here

**Moonshiner:** amateur booze producer. Often an individual or family operation near a stream  
(water was needed to cool the mash)

**Ossified:** drunk

**Rum-runner:** someone who transports liquor illegally, especially over state borders or by boat.

**Sap:** fool

**Sheba:** girlfriend (from the popular movie “The Sheik”)

**Sheik:** boyfriend (from the popular movie “The Sheik”)

**Spifflicated:** drunk

**Squiffy:** drunk

**Tomato:** sexually ripe female

**Tin Lizzie:** Model T Ford automobile

MORE slang: “The Internet Guide to Jazz Age Slang”

[http://www.csd509j.net/CVHS/staff/SherwiM/AP%20US%20Page%20Docs/1920s\\_Slang.htm](http://www.csd509j.net/CVHS/staff/SherwiM/AP%20US%20Page%20Docs/1920s_Slang.htm)

SELECTIVE AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY (*these are my favorites, and the list is by no means comprehensive*).

Books and Articles:

Bloomer, Phillip J. (1999), “Prohibition,” *The News Gazette* 6/28/1999 (*Urbana Archives: contains reference to underground tunnel in downtown Champaign*)

Blum, Stella, Ed. (1981) Everyday Fashions of the Twenties as Pictured in Sears and other Catalogs (New York: Dover Publications) (*good illustrations of men’s and women’s clothing, shoes, accessories*)

Drowne, Kathleen and Patrick Huber (2004) The 1920s (American Popular Culture Through History series). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. (*useful sections on literature and pulp magazines, appendix on cost of products during the twenties*)

Farnsworth, Kenneth B. (2004) Early Hopewell Mound Explorations: The First Fifty Years in the Illinois River Valley. Champaign: Illinois State Archaeological Survey (*special thanks to Ken and other archaeologists at ISAS for information on early archaeological practices*).

Kacich, Tom (2011) various articles in the Champaign-Urbana News Gazette on Prohibition (e.g. 10/2/11 “A Failure to Prohibit” and 10/9/11, “Champaign went without booze, then without lights”), around the time of the first airing of the Ken Burns “Prohibition” special on PBS.

Kyvig, David E. (2004), Daily Life in the United State, 1920-1940. How Americans Lived through the ‘Roaring Twenties’ and the Great Depression. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

Mandeville, Ernest W., “Detroit Sets a Bad Example,” *The Outlook*, August, 22, 1925, p. 612. (*Contains account of booze stored in caskets in a funeral home*).

McCollum, Dannel (2005). Historical Geography of Champaign County from the Distant Past to 2005. Champaign: Champaign County Historical Museum. (*Great background on east-central Illinois by a former Champaign mayor*).



McCutcheon, Marc (1995). The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life from Prohibition through World War II. Cincinnati: Writers Digest Books. (*Wonderful section on slang and booze-related glossary*)

Nolan, Jenny, "How Prohibition made Detroit a Bootlegger's Dream Town," *The Detroit News*, June 15, 1999. (*Good details on transport of illegal hooch*).

Okrent, Daniel, (2010) Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition. New York: Scribner. (*Incredible detail, very well written with many sources quoted*).

Singer, Allen J. (2005). "Brother, Can You Spare a Drink?" Book chapter from Stepping Out in Cincinnati, Queen City Entertainment, 1900-1960 (*The longer version of this chapter is online, <http://www.allensedge.com/prohibition.html> and contains wonderful details on disguising speakeasies*)

Time-Life Editors (1969, updated 1998) This Fabulous Century 1920-1930 (New York: Time Inc.) (*revealing and fascinating photographs of people, fashions, places*)

Zeit, Joshua (2006). Flapper: A Madcap story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women who made America Modern. New York: Three Rivers Press.

More Websites (check [www.sarahwisseman.com](http://www.sarahwisseman.com) for updates):

Hanson, D.J. (1997-2011) “Alcohol, Problems and Solutions,” (*wonderful article on bootlegging*) ([http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/Controversies/1091124904\\_6.html](http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/Controversies/1091124904_6.html))

Olsen, Dane (2006) “There’s Nothing so Bad for a Cough as Coughing!” (*great article on patent medicines*)

<http://www.uhh.hawaii.edu/academics/hohonu/writing.php?id=106>

Rapczynski, Joan, and Florence Zywockinski, “Prohibition as a Reform” (Yale University online course notes)

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1978/3/78.03.03.x.html>