

History Nook

Smugglers' Blues on the Salish Sea

By: CLARK MCABEE
ORCAS ISLAND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Time immemorial has been money. Never was this truer than during Prohibition and the whiskey war between the United States Coast Guard and smugglers. Early smuggling efforts on our shared border with British Columbia included such highly tarified items as wool, cigarettes, animal hides, opium and the illegal immigration of Chinese. Experienced sailors and smugglers like Old Man Jamieson and Larry Kelly in their swift sloops could out sail the few Revenue Cutters stationed in our region. Steam cutters like the USRC *Wolcott* and *Grant* were noisy, smoky and not very nimble having been designed for long distance cruising.

The biggest payoff available for smugglers in our region from the 1880s to Prohibition was contraband opium, highly taxed until made illegal before WWI. It was usually shipped in 5 tael cans (about 8 ounces) made primarily of brass, small and highly concealable. The Asian Exclusion Act of 1882 signed exactly 133 years ago today by Pres. Chester Arthur was an attempt to stop the immigration of Chinese to the U.S. Enforcement of the Act was problematic and this was highly exploited by human traffickers for decades. Successful smuggling of a Chinese citizen could net anywhere from \$50.00 in the 1880s to more than \$500.00 later on. The Orcas Hotel had hidden doors and vent spaces employed for this in the early 20th century.

When the Volstead Act of 1920 became law smugglers were quick to take advantage of the fact that people were still thirsty in the States and liquor was legal in

nearby Canada. Booze was easily shipped and smuggling literally exploded through and around the San Juans. Big Canadian, Seattle and Tacoma bootleggers took full advantage of our many passages, hidden coves and proximity to legal alcohol. War surplus high powered aircraft and marine engines were readily available. Boat yards like N. J. Blanchard and men with high horsepower engine expertise like Joe Patton combined to build fast rum runners whose construction was legal. The builders had no control over the ultimate use of the boats. The Coast Guard countered with new classes of 75 and 78 foot cutters modeled after WWI sub chasers. The sound of high speed engines named Liberty, Sterling, Van Blerck and occasional gunfire was not uncommon off Orcas shores in the dark of night during this period.

Charlie West of Orcas Island Distillery, orcasislanddistillery.com will discuss the powerful effect Prohibition had on Orcas Island's fruit industry at our next History Matinee May 17th 3PM at the East Sound Fire Hall.

Such are some of the intriguing themes of our upcoming exhibit: *The Smugglers' Blues-The Illegal, Immoral & Illicit on the Salish Sea*. Opening May 23rd with a Roaring 20s Prohibition themed gala at the museum featuring fun games, food, and live music in our own *Maggie V's* speakeasy from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Tickets are available at the museum \$35.00 each or \$60.00 for couples. Costumes encouraged so come as a flapper, a copper or your favorite gangster. Special prizes will be awarded for the evening's high roller and best costumed couple.

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