rumrunning: an Island tradition

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Who doesn't love a great drinking story? For the final episode we go back to the late 1800s when prohibition was first introduced on PEI. Although prohibition lasted for 70 years on the island, you could still get your booze... if you knew where to go. From rumrunners to moonshine makers to speakeasy bars, we discover just how inventive islanders were in skirting the law for a good drink.

Features guest interviews: Dr. Heidi MacDonald, Reginald "Dutch" Thompson, J. Clint Morrison and Ken Mill.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes
Italics = sound effects
Regular = my narration

Background street noises. Conversation. House and wagon going by. Clip Clop noises. Door opening and closing. Birds. People walking.

Imagine this: it's the year 1850. You're out for a stroll when I stop you and declare I have the solution to almost every problem in our society: violence against women and children, unemployment, moral and religious impurity, disease, and poverty. You stop and listen because hey, that sure sounds like a one-size-fits-all solution.

That solution is alcohol, or actually the lack of.

I'm a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and I'm advocating for prohibition.

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Theme music introduces.

Welcome to the hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name's Fiona Steele, and I'll be your host for this journey.

music swells up for a moment.

The Devil's Drink. Giggle Juice. Booze. No matter what you call it, PEI has more than its fair share of drinking stories.

Here's one: Urban legend says that the first House of Assembly meeting in 1773 took place in the Crossed Keys Tavern in Charlottetown. Politicians drinking on the job? It may be more common than you think in the 1700s.

Despite this promising start, booze didn't always have official approval on the island. In fact, for almost 70 years, alcohol was illegal on PEI. You wouldn't know it today judging by our many bars, liquor stores, and even a moonshine distillery. But from 1878 until 1948, different laws kept many islanders from getting a drink.

Well, a legal drink. Illegally, many Islanders knew where to go, or how to make their own alcohol. And I think those are the some of the best drinking stories hidden in our history.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the 1820s when whispers of prohibition began. Island churches helped spearhead a movement to eradicate this "evil" liquor from society. And you know, alcohol abuse was definitely prominent back then. People believed prohibition might solve some of society's problems.

Here's a frame of reference, so you can understand: By 1825, the island had around 25,000 people. According to official statistics, in one year those islanders consumed: 54,000 gallons of rum, 2,500 gallons of brandy, 3,000 gallons of gin, and 2,000 gallons of wine. Oh, and beer wasn't counted in the official statistics.

Sound of bottle opening and pouring.

I'll leave it to you to decide if that's a lot but remember that the official statistics were spread over the whole population – which included children.

Moving on. This idea of alcohol abstinence continues to gain traction until the 1850s when a temperance bill is brought into the provincial legislature**.** PEI Premier George Coles rejects it, saying that it infringes on the rights of individuals and society at large. George Coles is a brewer himself, so maybe he was a little biased in his decision-making. But that's just my two cents.

But people against alcohol consumption don't give up. By the 1870s, prohibition isn't just a whisper. It's a pounding knock on your door, or a stern lecture in church, determined to make you change. By now there were countless organizations against alcohol: churches, the Sons of Temperance, the British Order of Good Templars, Reform Clubs, the YMCA and the Women's Christian Temperance Union – just to name a few.

Women were crucial in making sure prohibition was enacted, even though they couldn't vote or become politicians at this time.

Heidi: The Women's Christian Temperance union is the largest women's organization in Canada at the time by far. Yep. And there were many branches in Prince Edward Island.

That's Heidi MacDonald, Dean of Arts with UNB Saint John. She's originally from PEI, up west. I asked her how prohibition and women's suffrage on PEI were related. In case you don't already know, women's suffrage began in the mid-1800s, and was a movement advocating for the right of women to vote in elections.

When Heidi talks about the Womens Christian Temperance Union, they're also known as the WCTU.

Heidi: They weren't originally in favor of suffrage, the WCTU. For their first approximately 15 years they spoke against suffrage. That wasn't their point. Their point was temperance and prohibition. But they eventually, in 1891, they did take on a pro-suffrage stance, and the rationale was that until women had the vote, they wouldn't be able to vote for prohibition. And they argued that male politicians were never going to pass a bill to make prohibition required. Only women would do this. This was the rationale behind the WCTU taking a pro-suffrage stance in 1891.

If you know your prohibition history already, you'll remember that PEI was dry of alcohol beginning in 1878. That doesn't add up if the WCTU was still lobbying in 1891. Well, 1878 saw the introduction of the Canada Temperance Act, which was a federal bill.

In this bill, a federal riding had to vote-in prohibition through a plebiscite. There were four federal districts on the island: Kings County, Queens County, Prince County and the capital city of Charlottetown. Each would choose to enact or avoid prohibition. Even if they voted in prohibition, three years later the citizens could vote it out. And the cycle would repeat. This happened twice in Charlottetown. In 1891 and 1897, they voted prohibition out.

So, island prohibitionists wanted a stricter provincial bill that would force *all* of PEI to become dry with no easy way out. And women were at the forefront, with organizations like the WCTU advocating for women's suffrage in order to accomplish true prohibition on PEI.

But prohibition would come a lot sooner than the vote for women.

Heidi: In 1900, PEI had prohibition far ahead of any other province. And therefore, the WCTU other groups didn't have the leverage to say, we need suffrage in order to vote in prohibition. They already had prohibition, so that argument fell in on itself. And suffrage did take longer to get in PEI than in the other maritime provinces, so that I believe that that's a strong component. And there's something, a less tangible argument around that as well. And that's that because prohibition is associated more with women. It's true. Both men and women fought for prohibition, no question. But there's I think there's a stronger association with women. If women didn't say to themselves, 'well, we got prohibition without the vote. So maybe we don't need the vote, like maybe the vote isn't everything. Maybe we can continue to get what we want through lobbying our politicians and other strategies, informal strategies.'

The Prohibition Act came into effect in June 1901, and women wouldn't get the right to vote in provincial elections until 1922. Just a note here too, that I'm talking about white women. Many women of colour, specifically Indigenous women, weren't able vote until decades later.

In any case, prohibition came into full force. No buying, drinking, making or selling alcohol – unless it was to be exported. Any drinks over 2.75% were banned. PEI was the first province to enact its own prohibition law, but many others soon followed.

In PEI, prohibition remained in place until 1948. There were many amendments to the law over the years, but they're kind of tedious to understand. For time's sake, I'll be leaving that part out.

But here's the interesting part: prohibition wasn't well-enforced.

Sound of tape deck starting.

Dutch: My name is Reginald Dutch Thompson. And I have been going around, oh about 35 years or so, with my little tape deck and my microphone, interviewing folks born between 1895 and for the most part 1925.

I talked to Dutch for over an hour and I don't think we even scratched the surface of the stories he's heard about prohibition. He told me about a way some islanders would bend the law: they'd go to a script doctor.

Dutch: Script is short for prescription. And if you had bad nerves, you go to the doctor and you'd say, 'oh, bad nerves, I can't sleep at night, or I'm having problems, you know, concentrating.' And he would recommend that maybe two bottles of whiskey a week, or two bottles of rum a week, would solve your problem.

There were allowances in the law where doctors could write a prescription of alcohol for a patient. So while it was legal, not every doctor made sure the patient actually needed liquor for medical reasons.

Dutch: There was a doctor in Mount Stuart, in fact, he was known as a script doctor. And I had a friend, he was an older gentleman from Mount Stewart I interviewed, and when he was a kid in the 1920s, because that was a junction where the trains would come up from Charlottetown on the way to Souris, or then down on the way to Georgetown, or on the way to Murray Harbour. So there were several trains going through there every day, and one had had a conductor on it that when the train slowed down, this young fellow as kid would run along the train, and the conductor would pass him a $2 bill and a quarter. And he would run down to the doctor in Mount Stewart. And when the train stopped and was getting oiled up and watered up and whatever, letting the passengers on and off, by the time it was it was heading out, the kid had come back with the script from the doctor. The guy himself didn't even go – it was the kid who went and he would pass him the script and he would go to Souris and he would buy his liquor and the kid had 25 cents. And that happens three times a week because the train went through there three times a week. And so the kid made 75 cents a week, you know, doing that. So in some cases, you didn't even have to actually physically be at the doctor's and you were going to get your script anyway.

That was one way to cheat the system, if you could find a willing doctor. There were two other main ways to get alcohol on the Island during prohibition: rumrunning and homemade moonshine.

Clint: The rum runners were primarily responsible for bringing the liquor to the island. And then they would go off shore and local fishermen or whatever, whoever had a boat would go out and make their purchase and take it back to shore. You know, all the while being pretty careful because revenue officers and customs agents were always on the lookout.

That's Clint Morrison, author of a book titled, "Booze: A Social Account of Prohibition on Prince Edward Island." Clint said many fishermen joined the rumrunning industry, although for some it was a survival decision more than a desire to drink.

Clint: Of course, hard times hit the fishing industry in the 20s. And there was no money much to be made until prohibition in the United States started in 1920. And then it became very lucrative to sell the Americans liquor. And so that was the biggest reason that a lot of fishermen turn from fishing to rumrunning, or to working on rumrunners.

Here's how an evening with the rumrunners might go, based on what I read in Clint's book and heard from Dutch.

First, trick the authorities. *Phone ringing.*

Dutch: What they would do very often was phone the Mounties or phone the probation officers and say, 'I was listening in on the phone, on the party line, and they're gonna land a big load of rum you know down the road, probably nine o'clock at night. And so the Mounties and the probation officers would all roar down there and sit in the bushes and wait. Meanwhile, the actual rum was being landed 10 miles down the road at Campbell's wharf.

Then, you wait for the signal.

Dutch: And they would know that on Tuesdays and Fridays you are going to see the, let's say the Nelly J Banks, was going to be cruising by at nine o'clock at night. And the NJ Banks as an example, used to keep perfectly white sails so that they can hold a lantern up in the sail and then you could see it three miles inland, you know from your farmhouse and then you would know you could you now, putt putt out and get your booze.

Engine starting. Ocean waves. Boat moving through waves. So you start the engine in your dory, and head out to find the rumrunning boat. These vessels wouldn't dare dock because they knew authorities were waiting to catch them. But until 1928, any boat more than 3 miles out from shore wasn't subject to Canada's territorial agreement. That means the provincial government couldn't stop and search them.

Dutch: And so you would go out with your little fishing boat, the one with the make and break engine pipe. And you go out to the three-mile limit and you'd and you get your rum and come back in.

Ocean sounds continue.

Coming back in you had to be careful in case your tipoff didn't work and authorities were waiting.

Dutch: And there were a patrol boats, the one was the SS Ulna that went back and forth. It was actually stationed in Pictou, but it was over here on a regular basis. One of the problems with the Ulna was it was coal-fired. And so there was black smoke when they when they fired it up, you can see this, this this column of black smoke five miles away. And so that gave everybody a chance, if you were inside the three mile limit, you can sneak back over the line.

Ocean sounds fade off. In 1928, the law changed and that 3-mile limit became 12 miles. However, it only applied to Canadian-registered vessels. So if you could register your ship in Newfoundland or somewhere else not considered part of Canada, you could work around the law.

Dutch: By the time it was a 12-mile limit, things have slowed down considerably in the in the rum business.

Alright so you have your liquor. You can drink and get drunk. But you still had to find a way to hide it in case authorities searched your property. Even if you made moonshine, you had to ensure your homemade still – and the alcohol – couldn't be found.

I heard so many stories from Clint and Dutch about this. You'd hide a barrel of rum in a manure pile on a farm because no one wants to search through that. You'd put it in a trap door underneath an angry bull. Your moonshine still would be out in the woods, away from the prying eyes of your neighbor. But some people got even more inventive.

Dutch: One of the guys he used to have his wife they had a big flowerpot like a tire on the front on the on the front lawn and he had dug a hole underneath it. And that's where he used to hide his liquor and so the cops who come and they turn they night know that he had had a there was a load one of rum to come in and they figured he was one of the guys of getting liquor off it and so they search everywhere the barns and they do everything and there was and of course it was hidden. And when they're leaving, they say you have beautiful flowers Mrs. Beautiful flowers – not knowing it was hidden underneath the flowers.

Dutch: You know the one fellow he used to put all the liquor in a big barrel up in his attic. And then he ran a pipe down through the ceiling and if you unscrewed one of the bulbs in the chandelier it was the end of the pipe and the liquor came out that was one of the ways that he was hiding it so when the cops came to look they'd look all over the house they wouldn't bother going up and crawling through the attic.

So, let's say you didn't want to risk going to the rumrunning boats or even stocking liquor at home – whether that's moonshine or liquor imported illegally.

You could still find a drink at your local speakeasy, if you knew where the nearest one was. There were tons back in twentieth century, and they were hidden in plain sight.

Clint: Well, they called the liquor establishments, illegal ones, speakeasies. And you had to have a password to get in and hit a certain number of knocks, depending on where the establishment was. And there was always somebody outside keeping an eye out for customs preventive officers or police in case they were on rounds.

You know, all this talk makes it sound like no one followed prohibition. The problem is it's hard to get a clear picture because when you're doing it right, no records should exist saying you were making, drinking, or selling alcohol. I asked Clint and Dutch to give a ballpark of how many people cheated prohibition and kept drinking.

Clint: I would say that probably, at least a quarter of the population continued to drink after prohibition came in getting it illegally one way or another.

Dutch was a little bit bolder in his estimate.

Dutch: As many people as before and as many people after.

By the 1930s, every province except PEI had gotten rid of their prohibition laws. Islanders, however, persevered until 1948.

Clint: I think PEI has tended to be more conservative (small c) and the rest of Canada through time. And that's probably one reason why they held on to the law longer.

In any case, change did come eventually. Here's a few factors that may have contributed to prohibition's demise:

First, you had soldiers coming back from fighting in World War 2 in Europe.

Clint: And liquor was everywhere there. It was nothing to go into a bar or a pub, or whatever, and get a drink. And so what? no big deal. But when they came back to Canada, attitudes toward liquor they took with them, and they said, "Well, this really isn't fair. This is not right. This is dumb, you know." And they were one of the largest groups probably that felt the control or the prohibition of liquor was, you know, was not right. And but then by this time, society in general was starting to change its mind too, not just return soldiers or veterans, but society in general was changing, and people felt that there was a place for liquor in society.

That's one reason. Another reason is money.

Clint: Government realized that it was a big, big source of revenue from liquor sales, if it was controlled. If they controlled it, let's put it that way. Because it was increasingly more difficult to control it the way it was, it was practically impossible in some cases to control the use of liquor. So, they thought, "well, let's get in on the act," basically. "And we will control the use and sale of liquor, and we will make the profit from selling it."

In any case, prohibition ended in 1948. However, you could still only buy a specified amount of alcohol. It wasn't until 1960 that the purchase limit was taken away.
Even when prohibition was done, bootleg bars and speakeasies were still common for decades. In fact, they were a secret everyone knew about. It wasn't until 2005 that the government cracked down on illegal bars and bootleggers. Dutch talked about the end of the speakeasy and shared a story about one notorious bootlegger.

Dutch: When they changed the law, I think it was $5,000. I could be wrong on that. But I think it went from being like, like $100 or $200 fine, which is just you just wrote that into your business. And you knew. And so when he was caught the first time, the cops went to him and said, "Well, the next time we come we're gonna have to with the new law, we don't have a choice anymore. We're getting a lot of pressure from the town council, and we're going to have to arrest you."

Dutch didn't tell me the man's name in this particular story for privacy reasons but maybe some listeners will know who he's talking about. His bootleg bar was one of the most popular ones in PEI.

Dutch: And he said, "I've been selling liquor since I was nine years old. I'm 90 years old. Now. I'm not going to stop." So that day, he was arrested. And he went into court and he stood before the judge. And she said, "I have to fine you, it's $5,000." He reached in his back pocket. He pulled out a wad of bills he counted off $5,000 and slapped it down on the table and he said, "I'll give you $5,000 more because I'm going home to sell liquor." And they say the judge was laughing. She's trying too hard not to and she said, "We don't want your money now. We'll deal with this later. Take the other $5,000 with you don't sell any more liquor." He said "I'm telling you what I'm gonna do." And I don't think he is now, I think he's finally stopped. There are still a couple of bootleggers very quiet where you really have to know your way around.

Although bootleg bars have been driven underground, you can now drink Island moonshine legally. Ken Mill is part-owner of Mryiad View Distillery, and they're the creators of Strait Shine, moonshine you can buy from them or at a liquor store.

Ken: One of the nice things down in the distilleries is what we call the retail area, the moonshine confessional, because we're getting these older guys and girls that are coming in. And they're, as soon as they see the place, and they look at the Still, the first thing is, "ah, what I could have done with one of them." And then you hear the stories of how things have gone well, or how things didn't go well.

So it you know, it's great to hear those old, old stories and, you know, it's like a moonshine confessional when people come through the door.

Although you can now legally buy moonshine, making your own is still an island tradition. Dutch, Clint and Ken all said they know or used to know of people who created shine. It's been this way for centuries. Prohibition didn't change that for everyone, but it sure created a good story or two.

Dutch: I've been lucky to taste shine from the western end of the island and from the eastern end of the island, and it all depends on the moonshine maker, but for the most part, you don't have to look long and hard to find a bad batch of shine.

I haven't been lucky enough to taste homemade shine on PEI, but I believe it's still around. Whether you hide it inside your barn, under a floorboard, or even tucked away in your kitchen cupboard, no amount of legislation can completely get rid of moonshine. It's just human nature, which is another thing Dutch, Clint and Ken all said. Even though prohibition was known as "the noble experiment" brought in with a lot of help from women, you can't change human habit.

So, think of that when you raise your glass tonight. Enjoy your beer and know that if you were born over a hundred years ago, you might have had a tougher time finding a drink.

Theme music.

The hidden Island is a production by the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation. I hope you enjoyed this episode – I know I had a ton of fun researching and putting it together. If you did enjoy it, find us on our social media or website at peimuseum.ca.

Thank you to our sponsors of the podcast: Nimrods and Upstreet Brewing.

I'd also I'd like to send out some thank yous to everyone involved in this episode: Heidi, Dutch, Clint and Ken, thanks for giving your time! Shoutout to Adam Gallant, who is responsible for our intro music and to Explore More Water Sports in Charlottetown, who let me record the sound of their boat.

Thanks for listening to season two of the hidden island!

ADDITIONAL READING

"Booze: A social Account of Prohibition on Prince Edward Island 1878-1949"
J. Clinton Morrison

"If You're Stronghearted" *Edward MacDonald*

"Bygone Days: Folklore, Traditions & Toenails" *Reginald "Dutch" Thompson*