

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Chatham Rum Runners

by Spencer Grey

During the latter part of the 19th century, evangelical Protestants began speaking out about the dangers of drinking alcoholic beverages, resulting in the formation of groups such as the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The most prominent member of the WCTU in the early 20th century was Carrie Nation, who felt that she had been called by God to enforce temperance. She is best known for destroying liquor bottles in saloons by throwing rocks at them, or even more so for attacking bars with her hatchet.

The temperance movement gained in adherents and influence to the point where it became the prime mover behind the passage of the 18th amendment to the Constitution that effectively banned the production and distribution of liquor in the United States.

Chatham was not without its own prohibitionists, even before it officially began on Jan. 16, 1920, as for many years early in the 20th century town meeting often voted to forbid the sale of alcoholic beverages in the town. But once it was no longer available even in nearby towns, many residents of Chatham, long accustomed to the wine from Madeira or rum from the Caribbean brought back by local mariners, took action.

With its exposure to the ocean on both the east and the south, as well as its many harbors, coves, and inlets, Chatham was an ideal location for rum running. When we add to these topographical assets the prevalence of fishing boats and other small vessels, it is not surprising that many local men could not resist the temptation to go out beyond the three-mile limit to what was known as "rum row." There ships stocked with all manner of liquor waited to sell it to all comers. Local fishermen engaged in rum running primarily because at the time it was more profitable than fishing, but also because it provided them with their own supply.

The greatest challenge to rum runners was avoiding the Coast Guard boats that kept a sharp eye out for any boats that might be trying to land their loot. To do this, they had to have colleagues who could keep them alerted to any Coast Guard presence. Residents along East Main Street frequently would see the flashing signals exchanged between the incoming boats and automobile lights on the shore. The same was true at Stage Harbor, where cars would be stationed on top of the hill overlooking the harbor to provide the necessary signals. People living in houses along those shores knew what was afoot when they saw lights flashing across Harding's Beach and the answering ones from their accomplices on top of the hill.

The many fishing shanties along the eastern shore provided places for temporarily storing the contraband, as did others at Buck's Creek in South Chatham or on the Oyster River. Another known storage location was the conveniently located Harding's Beach lighthouse, where the keeper hid the contraband under the floor in the walkway between his house and the light. On one visit from the lighthouse inspector to determine the condition of the building, he commented on the loose floor boards as he walked through the area, but fortunately only suggested that the boards needed some attention.

Rum running was known as the "silent profession," as no one wanted to risk admitting that he or anyone in his family was engaged in it. It is probably for that reason that there are few, if any, firsthand accounts of the activity.

One of the most famous of the rum running boats was the Nola, known as the "queen of the rum fleet." Reportedly it was protected by steel armor plates on its sides, but when it finally met its end in a fight with the Coast Guard off of Martha's Vineyard, it had a load of liquor on top of the deck which caught fire from the pursuer's bullets. For those engaged in rum running, it was a profitable, exciting activity but ultimately very risky.

Of course it came to an end after the election of Franklin Roosevelt, who made a campaign promise to repeal the 18th amendment, and he had no trouble doing so once elected because it had become both ineffective and unpopular.

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