

Prohibition & Bootlegging in Windsor, Ontario



- ∩ Hiram Walker founded his distillery in 1858 in Detroit. He first learned how to distill cider vinegar in his grocery store in the 1830s before moving on to whisky and producing his first barrels in 1854. However, with the Prohibition movement gathering momentum and Michigan already becoming "dry", Walker decided to move his distillery across the Detroit River to Windsor, Ontario. From here, he was able to export his whisky and start to develop Walkerville, a model community that Walker financed to provide housing and services for his employees.
- ∩ On January 16, 1920, the U.S. Eighteenth Amendment banning the sale, manufacture or transportation of "intoxicating liquor" took effect. An atmosphere of general lawlessness was bred by prohibition, bootleggers and gamblers. Gangsters fought to secure a share of the lucrative business and corrupt politicians turned a blind eye as mobsters like Al Capone (a major customer of Hiram Walker Whiskey) terrorized entire cities.

- ∩ Most Canadian provinces went dry at the same time the Eighteenth Amendment came into place. The Liquor Control Act in Ontario (LCA) forbid public or hotel drinking but did not prohibit the manufacture and export of liquor. For border cities like Windsor, this loophole in the Act would set the course for a wild decade never seen before or since. It didn't take long for enterprising businessmen in Windsor to set up export docks to supply those thirsty Americans.¹
- ∩ The Detroit River, representing the border between Ontario, Canada and the United States, is one of the busiest waterways in the world.
- ∩ In the winter, traffic on the narrow flow (less than a mile across in some places) came to a halt as the river froze over.
- ∩ During Prohibition, bootleggers used the frozen river as an easy way to get booze from Canada into the United States. From Detroit liquor went to Chicago (where Capone sold it under his "Log Cabin" label), and beyond.
- ∩ Alcohol was also towed beneath boats, old underground tunnels were built, sunken houseboats hid underwater cable delivery systems, and even a pipeline was built.
- ∩ Although Ontario had outlawed the retail sale of liquor, the federal government approved and licensed distilleries and breweries -- of which there were 45 in Ontario alone in 1920 -- to manufacture, distribute, and export.
- ∩ It was a fact that if you were bringing a load of hooch across the Detroit River you had better show up armed - Detroit belonged to *The Purple Gang*, a group of killers and thugs as vicious and bloodthirsty as any racketeer in Chicago.
- ∩ Legend has it that the gang received its colourful name as a result of a conversation between two Hastings Street shopkeepers. Both men's shops had been terrorized, shoplifted and vandalized. One shop keeper exclaimed "These boys are not like other children of their age, they're tainted, off colour." "Yes," replied the other shopkeeper. "They're rotten, purple-- like the colour of bad meat; they're a purple gang."
- ∩ *The Purple Gang* were young. When the opportunity came along to "import" liquor from Windsor, *The Purple Gang* was organized and ready. They would soon dominate the business and connect with Al Capone's Chicago syndicate.



¹ Weeks, E. (2018). The Times - Windsor Went Wild in the Roaring Twenties. [online] Walkervilletimes.com. Available at: <http://www.walkervilletimes.com/33/windsor-wild-20s.html> [Accessed 18 May 2018].

- By the early twenties, the Purples had developed an unsavoury reputation as hijackers, stealing liquor loads from older and more established gangs of rumrunners. Anyone landing liquor along the Detroit waterfront had to be armed and prepared to fight to the death, as it was common practice for the Purples to steal a load of liquor and shoot whoever was with it.



The Purple Gang

- By the late 1920s, *The Purple Gang* reigned supreme over the Detroit underworld, controlling the city's vice, gambling, liquor, and drug trade. They also ran the local wire service, providing horse racing information to local horse betting parlors and handbooks, including many in Windsor.

- People drank everywhere, from speakeasies to private clubs, to established restaurants, to storefronts – and of course they drank at home. Cocktail parties were all the rage, and workmen wanted beer with lunch or dinner. One could buy a shot from a car in the parking lots of the Hamtramck auto plants or in one of the four hundred 'soft drink parlors' (speakeasies) licensed in that city in 1923.

Waterdown and Prohibition

Waterdown had speakeasies as well, including numerous pharmacies that would supply alcohol if you could produce a prescription from your doctor – MANY people suddenly started suffering from ailments that only booze could cure!

- Y Although the Purples remained a power in the Detroit until 1935, long prison sentences and inter-gang sniping eventually destroyed the gang’s manpower. The predecessors of Detroit’s modern day Mafia family simply stepped in and filled the void as *The Purple Gang* self-destructed.
- Y Walkerville was incorporated into Windsor in 1935, and Hiram Walker (under the label “Canadian Club” whiskey) is still produced there.

1. In 1939 Canadian Club created “Crown Royal Canadian Club Whiskey” to commemorate the first grand tour of Canada by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1939.
2. Canadian Club has received royal warrants from Queen Victoria, Edward VII, George V, George VI, and Elizabeth II. Queen Victoria started drinking the whiskey after her physician, Sir William Jenner, ordered her to cease drinking claret and champagne; he prescribed as a digestive Canadian Club Whisky and mineral water, in the proportions of four parts of water to one of whisky.²



King George VI

Prohibition – Winners and Losers

“Prohibition failed. At least, it fell short for the temperance societies, churches and fanatic evangelists who authored the legislation. But for the owners of blind pigs, the bootleggers, the rumrunners and gangsters, the roadhouse proprietors, the police, the magistrates, the spotters, the boaters and armies of others, it was a roaring success. It meant work. Employment. Easy money. Cash in the pocket. Good times. Shiny new cars. New suits.

... Little did enemies of moonshine and saloons realize that upon creating prohibition and putting liquor out of the reach of the general population, they had in effect created a monster.

For instead of society turning reflectively upon itself to ponder the common good, it reacted by plunging headlong into one of the wildest, most violent and colourful of times – The Roaring Twenties.”

from “The Rumrunners, a prohibition scrapbook” by C.H. (Marty) Gervais, published 1980, Firefly Books Ltd., Scarborough, Ontario

² The Times – Getting the Royal Treatment. [online] Walkervilletimes.com. Available at: <http://www.walkervilletimes.com/royal-warrant.htm> [Accessed 18 May 2018].