

# L.A. SHERIFFS' MUSEUM

By Chris Miller and Mike Fratantoni  
Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

## PROHIBITION IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY, PART 2

For a few months after the Volstead Act, also known as the National Prohibition Act, went into effect, not as many people were arrested for being drunk in public, and hospitals reported fewer patients with drinking problems.

In cities, homemade brews were secretly concocted in bathtubs, while in rural areas, moonshine was manufactured using stills. Prohibition was turning law-abiding citizens into lawbreakers. Undercover bars and speakeasies sprang up throughout the country, providing a gathering place in which to grab a clandestine drink of the now-forbidden nectar. Bartenders began charging a high price for salted crackers, then throwing in a drink for free. By not charging for the alcohol, they weren't violating the law.

Doctors could legally prescribe alcohol to their patients for medicinal purposes, but since pharmacies were only allowed to sell one pint of alcohol per person every 10 days, it was not uncommon for entire families to suddenly come down with a mysterious ailment that could only be cured by additional prescriptions for alcohol. Industrial alcohol used in products such as aftershave, antifreeze and embalming fluid was legal as long as the company obtained a license from the government. Fishermen found that transporting illegal alcohol, concealed in coffins or in barrels marked as sugar and flour, was a more profitable use of their time than catching fish.

## BOOTLEGGERS

Men who smuggled flasks of illegal alcohol under their pant legs and in the top of their boots were known as "bootleggers." The term "bootleg" is used today to describe any item that is pirated, such as software, music or clothing.

## EFFECTS OF PROHIBITION

Liquor was the fifth-largest business in the United States, so when Prohibition took effect, tens of thousands lost their jobs. Hundreds of thousands of workers in alcohol-related industries, such as truckers, barrel makers, grain brewers, bottlers, waiters and bartenders, were also out of work. Although some saloons went out of business, others transformed into what became known as speakeasies, where trusted customers, both male and female, were provided a password to gain entry. If unescorted women entered bars,



*Transporting illegal liquor*

taverns or saloons, they were considered prostitutes and arrested. However, since speakeasies were already in violation of the law, they didn't worry about other laws being enforced. Hence, women could patronize these establishments, enjoying their live bands and dancing without fear of arrest.

## PROHIBITION IN LOS ANGELES

With the exception of the cities of Compton and Vernon, Los Angeles County went dry in 1917, three years before national Prohibition. Unfortunately, whenever any major vice, such as gambling, prostitution or alcohol, is outlawed, the door is opened for organized crime to move in.

## EAST COAST ILLEGAL ALCOHOL DISTRIBUTION

When alcohol was outlawed, the demand for it skyrocketed. On the East Coast, illegal alcohol was transported, distributed and sold by gangsters who paid bribes to city officials and police.

## ILLEGAL ALCOHOL DISTRIBUTION IN LOS ANGELES

The entire illegal liquor operation in the city of Los Angeles was run by Charles Crawford and the City Hall Gang. Crawford, who owned casinos and bordellos in Los Angeles, was known for his connections and control of leaders in city government and the police department. Through

his corrupt police department connections, he provided advance notice of raids to the criminal affiliates and bootleggers who worked for him.

The other members of the City Hall Gang included L.A. Mayor George Cryer and his campaign manager, Kent Kane Parrot. Mayor Cryer was just a figurehead, with Crawford and Parrot running operations behind the scenes. Parrot was so powerful that he was able to run the Los Angeles Police Department without consulting the chief and even transferred personnel without the chief's approval.

Crawford, Parrot and Cryer coordinated the entire illegal alcohol operation. Parrot made sure law enforcement didn't target the gangsters who transported city officials' illegal liquor, but instead went after small-time operators who made gin in their bathtubs. They would smash bottles or use axes to chop up barrels, thus making it appear the police were taking action to stop illegal alcohol. East Coast gangsters were quickly shut down when they tried to expand their bootlegging business to the West Coast. East Coast bribes were unsuccessful, since the mayor and police chief were already being paid off by the City Hall Gang.



*L.A. Mayor George Cryer*

## GANGSTERS IN LOS ANGELES

Albert Marco and Tony Cornero were gangsters who operated in Los Angeles during Prohibition. Marco originally made his living through extortion, but after Prohibition began, he was paid to transport illegal alcohol for the City Hall Gang. Marco, however, was small potatoes compared to Tony Cornero.

Due to so many police chiefs and mayors being on the take, high-quality liquor was easily smuggled into the United States via Mexico and Canada. Caribbean rum was coming in through



Albert Marco's booking photo



Gangster Tony Cornero

Mexico, while Canadian whiskey was brought across the northern border. Cornero, being an entrepreneur, first provided high-end whiskey from Canada to the Hollywood elite and other wealthy L.A. area inhabitants. In later years, Tony gave up the freelance lifestyle and hired on with the City Hall Gang.

Cornero used his shrimping business as a cover to conceal his rum-running operation, transporting 4,000 cases of Canadian whiskey in one trip. He would anchor the boats off the California coast in international waters beyond the three-mile limit, then transfer the illegal liquor onto speedboats that were able to evade the short-staffed Coast Guard and bring the contraband ashore.

In 1923, a shootout took place when Marco's gangsters tried to steal alcohol from Cornero's gang as they were unloading it from boats onto a beach near Wilmington. Sheriff's deputies who arrived at the scene afterward found Thompson submachine guns, but no victims. They assumed that if anyone had been killed, the bodies must have been dragged off the beach.

In 1926, Cornero was arrested with 1,000 cases of rum from Mexico. After being sentenced to two years in prison, he told reporters that he was only transporting the illegal rum to keep 120 million people from being poisoned.

### POISONING OF INDUSTRIAL ALCOHOL

Prohibition motivated gangsters and bootleggers to hijack government shipments of industrial alcohol to resell for a huge profit. In order to discourage this practice, the government began adding noxious chemicals to the industrial alcohol, making it unfit for human consumption. This was known as denaturing. After stealing truckloads of poisoned industrial alcohol, criminal syndicates

hired chemists to neutralize the poison and return the alcohol to a drinkable state. Since stolen and redistilled industrial alcohol provided a major source of liquor throughout the country, officials ordered manufacturers to add even more deadly ingredients. The purpose of adding poison to the industrial alcohol was not to kill people, but to stop the hijackings.

The government now added wood alcohol, rubbing alcohol and other poisonous chemicals to the industrial alcohol; however, even this did not stop its widespread theft by bootleggers who sold it as whiskey after attempts to redistill it. Some of this tainted liquor caused paralysis, blindness and even death. People around the country who drank from a certain batch of the tainted alcohol were poisoned and developed neurological diseases. Gangsters and bootleggers who stole and resold the poisoned alcohol without effectively neutralizing the poison were responsible for the deaths of up to 10,000 people.

### THE PROHIBITION BUREAU

Passing a law is one thing — enforcing it is another. When the Federal Prohibition Bureau



A Bureau of Prohibition Special Agent badge

was created, anyone could get hired and be issued a gun and badge. Wages were very low and, because of this, corruption was a problem. With only one or two federal Prohibition enforcement agents assigned to cover southern California, from Santa Barbara to San Diego, supervision was virtually nonexistent. It was not uncommon for agents to steal and drink the confiscated liquor. The bootleggers had a lot of power and money, which allowed them to avoid arrest by paying off politicians and law enforcement. In the first year after Prohibition took effect, half the agents were fired for taking bribes when they showed up to work sporting diamond rings, driving new cars and wearing mink coats (popular with men at the time). There was no way they could afford these extravagances on their meager pay.

### LIQUOR DETAIL

Unlike the chiefs of many other police agencies, Los Angeles County Sheriff William Traeger was not corrupt. To combat the illegal liquor business, in 1922, Sheriff Traeger created the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office Liquor Detail, which was federally funded to assist federal agents in raiding illegal liquor operations and dealing with the increasing crime caused by Prohibition. Eventually, the Liquor Detail's name was changed to Prohibition Enforcement, and the original six deputies were increased to 12.

Care had to be taken when entering illegal breweries, since the fumes were highly combustible and explosions could

A wanted poster for bootleggers

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*Captain Hartman and a deputy from the Liquor Detail*



*Deputies pour illegal liquor into the street.*

be disastrous. Whenever a raid was conducted, the contraband was brought to the Hall of Justice, where it was poured from barrels and bottles onto Temple Street at the top of Broadway. As the liquor streamed down, citizens and even deputies ran into the street with cups, scooping up as much as they could. Another alternative was to pour the alcohol down the drain in the basement of the Hall of Justice. This created several problems: It polluted the water in the spring that ran under the Hall of Justice, and it caused fumes to rise up into the building. To eliminate these problems, the bottles and barrels were transported to an ocean pier and the contents poured into the ocean.

**BRIBES**

Alcohol was sold everywhere, as police officers, district attorneys, judges and politicians

who didn't agree with the law took bribes and looked the other way.

During the 1920s, one in every 11 Prohibition agents was fired for theft, bribery, extortion or other violations. It was the federal agents not on the take who were the real threat to bootleggers. If they found any alcohol at all, they could padlock the front door of the business for a year without ever taking the owner to trial.

Sheriff Traeger was not on the take, and his deputies, working with a federal Prohibition agent, cracked down on bootleggers who brewed and transported illegal alcohol in Los Angeles County. Raids were conducted at large operations, one of which was owned by Albert Marcos, the "Godfather of Los Angeles." Although deputies raided some stills that were run by Los Angeles city politicians, they focused mainly on county areas. It was rare for bootleggers to offload their

boats in Los Angeles County, so most of the alcohol brought in for the City Hall Gang was taken to Dana Point in Orange County or near Oxnard in Ventura County.

LAPD Detective Aldo Corsini spoke Italian and was able to translate during interviews when Italian gangsters pretended not to speak English. Sheriff's Detective Harry Brewster brought Detective Corsini in to assist with questioning gangster Salvatore "Dago Louie" Piscopo, who had been caught with a truckload of illegal liquor. They told Dago Louie they weren't interested in the booze, but in the murders of two men who had held up a mob-run liquor truck. The bodies, which were pulled from the L.A. River, had been found inside canvas bags wrapped in chains with cinder blocks attached. The men had been thrown into the river while still alive to die a horrible death. The mob wanted to send a message to anyone considering



*Liquor Detail deputies raid a still in Newhall in 1928.*



*Undersheriff Biscailuz and deputies dumping liquor in the Hall of Justice basement in 1927*



# The Chaplain's Notebook

By Chaplain Emery Lindsay  
Century Station

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Author and activist Bryant H. McGill is quoted as saying, "One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say." You are all well versed in listening on the job, and even have the ability to listen to things that are not said in interviews, investigations, etc. However, how often does that translate back to relationships that are outside of your job?

Over the years, I have had the privilege of riding with many deputies, sometimes in the middle of some very dangerous situations, to say the least! I have seen first-hand how you put yourselves in harm's way for the safety and well-being of the community, which means I have also seen first-hand how amazingly well you do your jobs.

I sometimes feel that the first folks to complain about cops are also the first ones to complain, "Where's a cop when you need one!" As a result, I have asked myself: What are some life habits respectable deputies seem to have? One that comes immediately to mind is resiliency. The ability to fail and yet get back up and rebound from adversity.

I know I am preaching to the choir when I say deputies face a lot of adversity.

There is pain and darkness on the streets. Sometimes pain and stress in the station, even at home. The question becomes not if we will deal with it, but how we will deal with it. Do we let that darkness overwhelm us, even in small ways (leading to anxiety, depression or burnout), or do we have the inner resources to recover? To go home to our families in a loving and healthy way? To find other sources of satisfaction in our lives (hobbies, exercise and so on)?

This is a good place to talk about the potential for faith and its healing power in our lives. Do we need a faith foundation? You are probably not surprised, but my answer is, "Yes. Absolutely!" Author Dinesh D'Souza says there are at least four clear benefits to having faith:

First, it gives us hope. There is less room for bitter or dark thoughts; less room for fear. With faith, death becomes a gateway to a new and better life. Second, "belief infuses life itself with an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose" and joy. Third, belief gives us moral hope, to live ethically,

to transmit morality to our children. In an after-life, we can see cosmic justice, good rewarded and evil punished. "Morality becomes both easier and more worthwhile in this framework." Finally, there is evidence that faith not only makes life better, but makes us better people. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt cites surveys that show, on average, those who have faith are just well and happier!

So if others stand to benefit from lives full of hope, purpose and charity, why not you? There will be dark hours, for sure. With faith, I believe we can master them with skill (as the Buddhists say). We can keep walking tough while supple and adaptable, professional while kindhearted. One more way to keep strong for the next life challenge or even the next traffic stop.

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea (Psalm 46:1-2).*

**How can I contact a chaplain?** Chaplains are available at their unit of assignment or by calling the Psychological Services Bureau (PSB) at (213) 738-3500. ☆

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robbing one of their trucks. The detectives warned Dago Louie that if he didn't tell them who was behind the murders, they would turn him over to Ralph Sears of the LAPD Gangster Squad. Dago Louie told them, "Oh, good, I haven't seen Ralph Sears for about a month. That's when he picked up liquor from me for Chief Steckel's party." That ended the interview.

### HALL OF JUSTICE

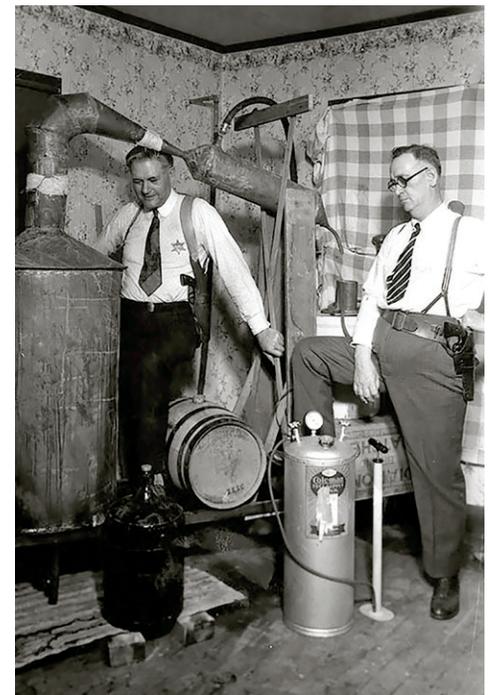
Deputies who worked the Hall of Justice during Prohibition told of a still that was kept on the roof of the building and maintained by jail trustees. This alcohol was consumed at the weekly dances held on the roof of the Hall of Justice and attended by personnel from the Sheriff's Department, District Attorney's Office and superior courts. With alcohol illegal on the streets, it became that much more desired and was sometimes smuggled into the jail.

This story will be continued in the next issue of *Star News*.

Edited by Jan Jenkins (ret. LASD). ☆



*The Liquor Detail raids an old dairy farm that was turned into a still during the 1920s.*



*Deputies confiscate a 100-gallon still.*