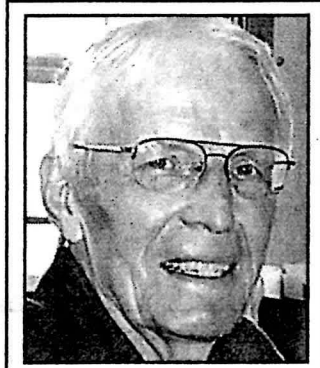


# Prohibition: Moral reform gone awry CJ 8/5/10

The long drive to close the saloons culminated in 1914 when Washburn went dry. Bayfield and Ashland eventually followed but Iron River remained stubbornly "wet," providing what the Times called an "oasis" for Washburn imbibers. While the anti-saloon movement had won the war, its victory was continually challenged. In the April 1915 election the pro-saloon people's proposal to resume granting saloon licenses was narrowly defeated, while in the following years they were unable to secure enough signatures to have the saloon licensing issue placed on the ballot.

The evils that would be bred by national prohibition, which had been predicted by prohibition opponents, were presaged on a smaller scale under Washburn's local prohibition. The major problem was the so-called "blind pig," or illegal saloon. There were many arrests for "blind pigging," some of them brought about by detectives hired by the city. One difficulty was that much of the liquor being sold in the "blind pigs" was "moonshine," produced right under the noses of the authorities. Another problem was that there was no prohibition of the consumption of alcoholic beverages in the home, so the line between a private home, in which liquor was being consumed by a number of people, and a "blind pig" was blurred.

In December 1917, Congress sent to the states a proposed constitutional



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amendment for national prohibition. After a tumultuous national debate, the 18th amendment was ratified by the 36th state, Wyoming, on January 16 1919. The adaptation of the 18th amendment was the culmination of a long struggle by the temperance movement to eliminate what it considered to be a root cause of many grave social problems and the sad toll of personal degradation, illness and death. In October 1919, Congress approved (over President Wilson's veto) the Volstead Act, providing for the enforcement of the amendment, while the Wisconsin legislature passed the Severson law, providing for the enforcement of prohibition at the state level.

Although Washburn did not experience the intrusion of outside criminal elements, city and county law enforcement authorities spent much time and resources, tracking down and arresting small-time "moonshiners" in the area. One of the most exciting episodes that occurred in August 1921,

sounded like big city crime but involved only local, petty criminals, began when the Bayfield police raided a moonshine party. Three armed men escaped, but after a running gun battle were apprehended near Houghton with the assistance of the Washburn police. This was the only reported instance of violence associated with the efforts to stamp out moonshining, however. The moonshiners went to great lengths to conceal their stills. For example, in November 1921 prohibition agents raided "a still where liquor was being made in wholesale quantities" in a building at Big Bay on the east coast of Madeline Island. The building was so well camouflaged that it could not be seen until approached within a few yards.

In January 1926 "moonshine places" were operating "more or less openly" in the city. To "curb the evil," The mayor appointed a new chief of police, with orders "to go the limit" in ridding the city of the moonshine evil." A month later the Times reported that according to the chief, "At least four places, where moonshine is said to have been sold, have closed during the past month," while "One place that has become somewhat notorious through the bringing in of lewd women is also being closely watched." A year later "Bayfield county's hard hitting sheriff" carried out a series of raids throughout the county that were successful in discovering and

breaking up several moonshine operations. But whatever successes enforcement officials achieved through their raids, many operations went undiscovered. There was always someone ready to take the place of those who were "busted" because the moonshine business was highly profitable with a ready market for its product. Typically, the men who were arrested by local authorities were treated leniently by the county court, if they pleaded guilty, receiving fines or short terms in the county jail. Those apprehended by state or federal enforcement agents usually received tougher treatment with heavy fines or long prison terms.

Intended to raise the moral tone of society, by ridding it of the evils associated with the use of alcohol, prohibition instead made criminals out of law-abiding citizens, giving birth to organized criminal gangs and big-time crime. The excitement of illegal drinking, provocative dances, stimulating music widely available on the radio or the phonograph, the automobile, the "newly liberated" woman, the breakdown of traditional sexual mores, and money made available by prosperity, created a "fast," life style, particularly among the younger generation, earning these years the appellation of the "roaring twenties."