

DEFINING MOMENTS  
PROHIBITION



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*Omni*graphics

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# Chapter Six

## THE MOB



“If I break the law, my customers, who number hundreds of the best people in Chicago, are as guilty as I am. The only difference is between us is that I sell and they buy. Everybody calls me a racketeer. I call myself a business man. When I sell liquor, it’s bootlegging. When my patron serves it on a silver tray on Lake Shore Drive, it’s hospitality.”

—Al Capone

Organized crime and Prohibition were made for one another. In his book *The American Mafia*, Joseph L. Albini notes that in the United States, criminal syndicates “have existed only as a means of providing illicit goods and services.” Thanks to Prohibition, an extremely popular substance—alcohol—became one of these illicit goods, providing organized criminals with more income and power than they had ever had before. To understand how the criminal gangs operated during Prohibition, there’s no better place to look than the city that became synonymous with mobsters and machine guns in the 1920s: Chicago.

### Organizing the Criminals

Prior to Prohibition, the criminal gangs of Chicago specialized in other illegal services, primarily gambling and prostitution. When Prohibition began, an Italian immigrant named “Big Jim” Colosimo was the most powerful figure in the Chicago underworld, operating a chain of popular “roadhouse” resorts in small towns surrounding Chicago. He was assisted by his wife’s nephew,



Mobster Johnny Torrio (center) was an underworld mentor to Al Capone.

Johnny Torrio. Big Jim failed to appreciate the opportunity that Prohibition presented—partly because he was distracted by a new woman in his life, a young, aspiring opera singer named Dale Winter. Johnny Torrio, on the other hand, recognized the fortune that could be made in alcohol, and in the early months of 1920 he urged Colosimo to take action.

Big Jim hesitated. He had other things to think about. In March he divorced his wife, and three weeks later he married Winter. “This is the real thing,” he said, when he told Torrio of

his new love. “It’s your funeral,” Torrio replied. Shortly after returning from his honeymoon, Big Jim was gunned down in the lobby of a restaurant he owned. Though the murder was never solved, most experts believe that Torrio ordered the killing so that he could move into bootlegging in a big way.

In addition to the Colosimo-Torrio operation, several other Chicago-based criminal syndicates rushed to carve out a share of the lucrative alcohol business for themselves. Early on, Torrio recognized that the best way to maximize profit and avoid problems was to divide the city between these powerful gangs. In this strategy Torrio was similar to business titans such as J. P. Morgan. These business leaders felt that competition was a bad thing because it endangered profit. In Torrio’s case, it also endangered lives, because the gangs usually settled matters with guns. A skilled diplomat, Torrio convinced the other mob bosses that cooperation was the road to riches, and their uneasy alliance held from 1920 to early 1923. The plan was aided by Chicago mayor “Big Bill” Thompson. Notoriously corrupt, Thompson’s administration allowed the gangsters to buy complete protection from prosecution. Distilleries ran around the clock, making no effort to disguise their activities, and fleets of beer trucks traveled regular routes with no fear of arrest.

In 1923 Thompson decided not to seek re-election because he faced almost certain defeat. When William Dever became the new mayor of Chicago, he proved less compliant than his predecessor. Determined to enforce

Prohibition laws, he worked to dismantle the corrupt relationship between city hall and the criminal syndicates. Police protection arrangements were thrown into chaos, and the mayor began closing many of the “soft-drink parlors” that served as thinly disguised speakeasies. Intent on offsetting these sudden losses of income, gangs made brazen incursions into one another’s territory. Predictably, these forays were met with violence. With the age of diplomacy over, Torrio invested more authority in a trusted lieutenant who was known for ruthless action. His name was Al Capone (see biography on Capone, p. 107).



Chicago Mayor William Hale Thompson.

Of the various outfits involved in Chicago bootlegging, two had emerged as rivals to the Torrio/Capone organization. The first was the so-called Terrible Gennas, a group of Sicilian brothers who specialized in distilling industrial liquor. The other was the North Side Gang, a mix of Irish, Polish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants headed by Dean O’Banion, a longtime street tough who also had a great love of flowers. He operated his own floral shop on North State Street.

O’Banion proved the most predatory. He hijacked several large shipments belonging to the Gennas, and he masterminded a devious scheme that led to the arrest of Torrio at a Chicago brewery. Because this was Torrio’s second alcohol offense, he faced the possibility of jail time. Torrio and the Gennas decided that drastic action was called for.

One day in the fall of 1924 three men walked into O’Banion’s flower shop to pick up an arrangement they had ordered for a funeral. O’Banion introduced himself and offered his hand. One of the strangers took it and did not let go. The other two produced pistols and shot the florist down.

Torrio and the Gennas had their revenge, but their triumph proved fleeting. Three months later, Bugs Moran, Hymie Weiss, and another member of the North Side Gang paid a visit to Johnny Torrio. Johnny was shot three times in front of his apartment but managed to survive. The attack marked

the end of his days as an active gang leader. A short time later he turned his operation over to Al Capone and retired to Italy (though Torrio would continue to operate behind the scenes). Torrio had always been known for his intelligence. Getting away from the bloody Chicago battles may have been the smartest thing he ever did.

## The Beer Wars

From 1925 onward, shootouts, bombings, and assassinations became the order of the day as the rival gangs took aim at one another. Known as the Beer Wars, these battles resulted in hundreds of deaths. Most of the victims were gangsters, though others were sometimes caught in the crossfire. As the killings continued, Capone emerged as the master of the game. Known as “the Big Fella” to underlings and “Scarface” to his enemies, Capone built a well-organized and ruthless operation. He destroyed the formidable Genna syndicate in a matter of weeks. Capone arranged a wave of assassinations that depleted the Genna leadership to the point that survivors fled Chicago entirely.

The North Side Gang proved more of a challenge. In one 1926 assault, the North Siders sent a convoy of cars to attack Capone’s headquarters in the Chicago suburb of Cicero. They employed the gangsters’ new weapon of choice—the Thompson machine gun, better known as the “tommy gun” or the “Chicago piano.” The mobile machine gunners sprayed Capone’s building with bullets but failed to kill Capone or anyone else. Capone retaliated one month later. Gunmen stationed in two separate buildings mowed down Hymie Weiss, the leader of the North Siders, as he crossed State Street. When Weiss hit the pavement, he was lying in front of the same flower shop where Dion O’Bannon had died.

Well aware of the dangers of a mob war, Capone took to surrounding himself with a large entourage of well-armed bodyguards. To enhance his safety when he traveled, he had an armor-plated car specially built by General Motors at a cost of \$30,000. Despite his well-founded fears of being shot, Capone dressed and lived flamboyantly and frequently appeared in public. Meanwhile, his operation became ever more lucrative. By the late 1920s he was bringing in an estimated \$50 million annually. This wealth enabled him to curry favor with Chicagoans devastated by the Stock Market Crash of 1929; he opened soup kitchens all across the city, and paid for the distribution of food and clothing to numerous ailing families.





A line outside one of Capone's Depression-era soup kitchens in Chicago.

In the meantime, the body count continued to rise. From 1926 to 1930, more than 300 mobsters were killed in various shootouts and bombings in the Chicago area alone. Gang violence also entered into several Chicago elections. In the Cicero mayoral elections in 1924, Capone's troops terrorized the polling places, seized opposition ballots at gunpoint, and abducted voters and election workers. The terror campaign worked: Capone's hand-picked candidate became mayor, giving the mobster practical control over the town. In a 1928 primary campaign for state attorney, the Capone mob set off bombs, murdered a supporter of the rival candidate, and engaged in election-day violence in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to lift its candidate to victory. Even in Chicago, a town with a notorious reputation for election fraud and violence, Capone's brand of intimidation and brutality was remarkable.



Gangster Al Capone at the height of his power.

## The Fall of Capone

The event that brought about Capone's downfall was the Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929. Up to that point, mob warfare had been quite bloody, but the gangland execution of seven unarmed men by Capone assassins created an unprecedented sensation. The story received widespread coverage all across the country, and large rewards were put up in hopes of solving the murders. The carnage also increased calls for authorities to do something about the situation in Chicago.

Other mobsters were among the first to realize that Capone had gone too far. The leaders of the biggest crime groups in the country—Capone included—gathered in Atlantic City, New Jersey, three months after the Valentine's Day killings. At this meeting, the other bosses threatened Capone with death if he did not adopt a much lower profile. Capone agreed. After the conference broke up, he stopped in Philadelphia, where, in a prearranged set-up, he was arrested for possession of an illegal firearm and sentenced to a year in jail. By temporarily removing Capone from the scene, the gangsters hoped that mounting public concern about organized crime would subside.

A group of prominent Chicagoans, however, expressed dissatisfaction with Capone's brief incarceration. They recognized that his reign would only be terminated by death or a long prison sentence. Led by Frank Loesch, who headed the Chicago Crime Commission, this group appealed to President Herbert Hoover for help. Hoover agreed and turned the matter over to the Treasury Department.

The entrance of treasury officials into the effort to nail Capone reflected a strategic shift in the U.S. government's pursuit of prominent criminals that were defying Prohibition. Rather than pursuing them for alcohol violations or other offenses, the government was learning that it was easier to snare the criminals with charges of income tax evasion and other financial crimes.

This strategy proved especially effective in the case of Capone. Although he had engaged in bootlegging, murder, and other crimes, he had been careful to leave most of the dirty work to others, so it was difficult to prove such charges. For tax crimes, though, the government had a somewhat easier task. Investigators simply needed to prove that Capone had earned a substantial amount of money that he had failed to declare as income.

Like most mob leaders, Capone was careful to conduct most of his transactions in cash, so there were few paper records to implicate him in wrongdoing. When he emerged from his year in jail, Capone was aware that federal authorities—the so-called “Feds”—were after him, but he remained unconcerned.

Capone’s confidence proved misplaced. The treasury agents built their case carefully. The primary evidence of income came from ledgers that had been seized from one of Capone’s gambling houses as well as from the testimony of a former employee. In March 1931, the mobster was indicted, and later that year he was convicted of five counts of income-tax evasion. He was sentenced to eleven years in prison and required to pay \$80,000 in fines and court costs. Capone’s days as a crime boss were over. His criminal organization lived on, however. So did the old North Side Gang, which had survived the Valentine’s Day Massacre. Both groups continued to haunt Chicago long after Prohibition came to an end.

### **New York: The Young Get Stronger**

Chicago provides the most colorful example of how organized criminals operated during Prohibition, but mobsters were present in all the major cities. As in Chicago, they came to dominate the bootlegging industry because they were well organized, had well-developed “protection” arrangements with the authorities, and were willing to eliminate anyone who challenged them. As in Chicago, the biggest problem faced by the gangs in other cities was competition amongst themselves.

This was certainly true in New York City. Inter-gang warfare occurred there, but it was less brazen than in Chicago. There were fewer raging gun battles in the city streets, and fewer spectacular murders that were documented in the press. Another major difference was that, in New York, the gangs eventually negotiated treaties that brought relative peace to the underground. These agreements were maintained in one form or another by the city’s organized crime syndicates for the rest of the twentieth century.



The body of a gangster lies on a New York sidewalk, a victim of the violent underworld struggle for control of the illicit liquor trade.

New York's mobster conflicts were a tangled web during Prohibition, but the most important struggle in the criminal underworld was between veteran "traditionalists" and a younger stable of bold, innovative mobsters. The older generation included gang leaders such as Giuseppe "Joe the Boss" Masseria and Salvatore Maranzano. These old-school veterans were bitter rivals who eventually went to all-out war with one another in 1930. This bitter blood feud, which came to be known as the Castellammarese War, degenerated into a vicious cycle of retribution that eventually claimed the lives of more than sixty people.

The younger generation of bosses, meanwhile, included men such as "Lucky" Luciano (see biography on Luciano, p. 115), Vito Genovese, and Arthur Fleganhiemer, alias "Dutch" Schultz, who controlled much of the city's illegal alcohol trade in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These men were allied with the older generation, and even took part in the battles waged by the elders. But the younger mobsters shared a different vision of the future. Like Johnny Torrio in Chicago, they favored cooperation among gangs—even among gangs from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, although Luciano was born in Italy, he was close with Jewish gangsters Ben "Bugsy" Siegel and Meyer Lansky, among others. They reasoned that if they were not distracted by battles with their fellow mobsters, they would be better equipped to establish and maintain smooth-running, efficient, highly profitable operations.

### Playing Cards with Lucky

It was Lucky Luciano who broke the deadly stalemate between Masseria and Maranzano. Luciano had risen to prominence thanks to Masseria, who had made Lucky his top lieutenant in 1927. By 1931 Masseria had developed doubts about the depth of Luciano's loyalty, but officially Lucky was still on the Masseria "team."

One spring day in 1931, Luciano and his boss had lunch together at an Italian restaurant on Coney Island. After eating, the men played cards for several hours while the restaurant emptied out. At about 3:30, Lucky left the table to use the bathroom. As soon as he was gone, four men walked up behind Masseria and put five bullets into him. According to legend, he died clutching the ace of diamonds. Moments after the gunmen fled, Luciano returned from the bathroom. He pretended to be shocked. “Why would anyone want to kill poor Joe?” he asked.

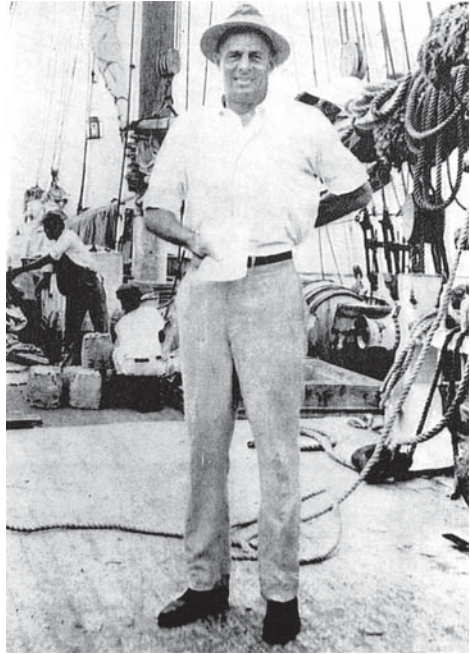
For a short time Salvatore Maranzano was allowed to believe that he was “boss of bosses,” but then Luciano and his collaborators struck again. In September 1931, four men killed Maranzano in his Manhattan office. According to some accounts, as many as fifty other “old-line” mafia members were killed on the same day—a purge of the elder generation all across the country. Other scholars, such as Thomas Reppetto in his book *American Mafia*, dispute this and suggest that there were only a handful of related killings.

Whatever the case, historians agree that Luciano became one of the top figures in organized crime after the death of Maranzano. Some contend that he became the new boss of bosses. Others believe that Luciano was content to manage his own operations and provide guidance to other syndicates as needed. Prior to his conviction in 1936 for running a prostitution network, Luciano helped foster an alliance among gang leaders in various parts of the country, especially in the Northeast and the Midwest. He also established a means of arbitrating differences between the mobsters, which helped avoid bloody conflicts. The alignment of the New York crime “families” that he oversaw still exists today.

From the 1930s onward, the government enjoyed some success in prosecuting prominent gangsters, including Luciano. But these convictions did not threaten the underlying organization of the mob in any serious way. By the end of Prohibition, organized crime had become a resilient and seemingly permanent part of the American landscape.

**Bill McCoy (1877-1948)**  
*Prohibition-era Rumrunner*

**W**illiam “Bill” McCoy was born in 1877 in Syracuse, New York. His father, who had previously served in the Union navy during the Civil War, was a bricklayer. During McCoy’s youth, his father often regaled him with naval war stories from his Civil War service. These tales sparked a lifelong infatuation with the sea in the youngster. When the family moved to Philadelphia, McCoy was able to experience the world of ships first-hand. “I started nosing about the wharves on the Delaware [River] as instinctively as a bird dog ranges a stubble field,” he later recalled. He soon became a cadet on the *Saratoga*, a school ship used to train sailors. McCoy graduated at the top of his class, then spent several years on steamships as a member of the merchant marine.



Around 1900 McCoy settled in Jacksonville, Florida, where the rest of his family was living. For the next twenty years, he and his brother Ben built boats and operated a motorboat transportation service between several cities in Florida. They did well for a time, but the arrival of motorized buses put the boat service out of business. By the time Prohibition began in 1920, the boat-building trade had also slowed. When an acquaintance approached McCoy about a new shipping enterprise, he was ready to listen.

### **The Honorable Tradition of Smuggling**

McCoy’s friend offered him \$100 a day to sail a boatload of contraband liquor from the Bahamas to the United States. McCoy declined the offer, but after learning the details, he decided to get into the business for himself. McCoy and his brother sold all of the small boats they owned and used the proceeds to purchase a ninety-foot schooner, the *Henry L. Marshall*. McCoy sailed it to Nassau, in the Bahamas, and his smuggling career began.

To that point in his life, McCoy had never been a criminal, but he was able to come to terms with his new occupation. “I have precedent right out of

American history for my rum-running enterprises,” he explained in Fredric Van de Water’s *The Real McCoy*. He considered independence hero John Hancock to be “the patron saint of rum runners” because Hancock had smuggled liquor past customs authorities during the colonial era. Though he was not a drinker himself, McCoy disagreed with the principle of Prohibition, and for him that was reason enough to defy the ban. “Americans, since the beginnings of this nation, have always kicked holes in the laws they resented,” he said.

McCoy was also attracted to rumrunning by the potential financial rewards. His first trip from the Bahamas to Georgia netted McCoy \$15,000—a very large sum of money in that era. From there, his business grew. In 1921 he bought a larger schooner, the *Arethusa*, which became his pride and joy. He soon perfected the method of stationing his ships just outside the territorial waters of the United States and letting the buyers come to him, which greatly lessened his risk of arrest. This was the beginning of “rum row,” which soon included hundreds of boats selling alcohol all along the eastern seaboard and in the Gulf of Mexico.

“There was money in the game,” McCoy said of rumrunning, “lots of it—if you could keep it.” He soon found that holding onto his riches was the hard part. After obtaining the *Arethusa*, he decided to hire another captain to sail the *Henry L. Marshall*, figuring he could double his profits. It wasn’t quite that simple. In August 1921, on its first voyage without McCoy on board, the *Marshall* was seized by the Coast Guard when it strayed into U.S. waters. McCoy was ashore in Rhode Island when he heard the news. As the owner of the craft, he was indicted, but he slipped away to the city of Nassau in the Bahamas and avoided arrest.

As a wanted man, McCoy decided it was safer for him to stay in Nassau and leave the sailing to others. He added two more ships to his fleet, but they too landed in trouble thanks to their inexperienced captains. In the spring of 1922, one ship was seized. The other was badly damaged a few months later in a collision. These setbacks sapped McCoy’s savings and put him on the edge of bankruptcy.

McCoy decided that he could only trust himself. With the remainder of his money, he bought a half-load of contraband liquor and personally sailed the *Arethusa* to the waters off New Jersey. He sold his cargo in two days, which solved his immediate cash-flow problem. McCoy made several more trips over the ensuing months, and by the spring of 1923 he once again ranked among the leaders of the rumrunning trade. He specialized in buying high-quality whiskey from suppliers, and unlike some rumrunners, he never

“cut” (diluted) his alcohol before selling it. This decision proved a sound business strategy, for he became well-known in the industry for providing top-notch goods at fair prices.

### Coast Guard Showdown

In the fall of 1923 the Coast Guard stepped up its efforts against ocean smugglers. In November, U.S. authorities instituted a new policy of searching foreign vessels outside the three-mile limit. Just as this policy went into effect, McCoy was off shore in the *Arethusa*, trying to sell the last of his liquid cargo on the final voyage of the season.

On November 24, the Coast Guard cutter *Seneca* hailed McCoy’s ship, and an armed group of Coast Guardsmen boarded the *Arethusa*. The authorities had decided to test their new policy on rum row’s most famous captain. After a tense standoff, McCoy agreed to follow the Coast Guard ship into port. As they made their way in, however, McCoy made a final run for freedom. The Coast Guard responded by firing its cannons at the fleeing *Arethusa*. After several near misses, McCoy decided not to risk his life or those of his crew. He turned back and surrendered to the Coast Guard vessel. His days as a rumrunner were finished.

McCoy received a nine-month jail sentence, but he passed most of the time in comfort. A corrupt warden allowed him to stay in a hotel for part of his sentence, and during this time he was free to come and go as he pleased. Upon his release in December 1925, he returned to Florida, where he lived for the rest of his life. He was left with fond memories of his days as a rumrunner. “There was all the kick of gambling and the thrill of sport, and, besides these, there were the open sea and the boom of the wind against full sails, dawn coming out of the ocean, and nights under the rocking stars,” he recalled in *The Real McCoy*. “These caught and held me most of all.”

McCoy also retired with a significant bundle of money from his rumrunning days. He later claimed that legal fees exhausted most of his savings, but he was able to live comfortably for the rest of his life without working. He died on December 30, 1948, in Stuart, Florida.

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## Charlie Burns Recalls Running a Speakeasy

*In the following excerpt from John Kobler's Ardent Spirits, Charlie Burns recounts his experiences as a co-owner of illegal drinking establishments in New York City during Prohibition (material that appears in brackets is in the original text).*

In 1919, when I was eighteen, I went to the New York University School of Commerce to study accounting. Jack Kriendler was a distant cousin—our families had immigrated from Austria and we lived near each other on the Lower East Side—and he attended Fordham.... The year I graduated, 1922, Jack and a classmate named Eddie Irving bought a controlling interest in a type of place near the campus known as a “Village [*Greenwich Village*] tea room.” They called it the Redhead. In addition to food they sold liquor in one-ounce flasks, miniatures, which the customer could drink right there if they wished or take home. They asked me to keep the books. They couldn't afford to pay me a salary. So they made me a partner. Our only idea behind the enterprise at the start was to earn enough money to continue our education, I having decided to practice law instead of accountancy and Jack to become a pharmacist. The way things developed, neither of us realized his ambition.

The Redhead served good, solid, simple food—Jack had a natural culinary gift—and the best liquor we could find. We dealt with two neighborhood bootleggers who would deliver the merchandise to Jack's home on East Fourth Street. When we needed fresh supplies, Jack's kid brothers, Mac and Pete, would wheel it over, a few bottles at a time. Who was going to suspect a couple of kids that age? We never did discover the original source of our liquor, but it was always authentic, imported stuff.

We attracted a small but choice crowd, young people mostly from the schools and colleges, and an occasional tourist. We were a success. But even before we started, we had been approached by a group of Village gangsters who declared themselves in. Being innocent college boys, we refused to discuss the matter. A couple of weeks later they came around again. They told us unless we paid for certain protective services, they would wreck the joint. We remained unimpressed. A few nights later, as Jack and I were walking home, a

couple of them jumped us. We gave a pretty good account of ourselves, and they took a pretty good licking. The next time I wasn't so lucky. Jack survived in one piece; but my attacker had a razor, and I wound up in St. Vincent's Hospital with a dozen stitches in my throat. A third fight took place a month later, but again we managed to drive them off.

Meanwhile, we had become acquainted with the district police captain through friends in the James Heron Association. This was a very powerful Lower East Side Democratic organization. These friends let the captain know that Jack and Charlie were decent people who ran an orderly place, no book-making, no gambling, no hookers. He came to see us. "Why didn't you let me know about these things that have been happening to you?" he asked. Jack said: "We didn't understand how serious it was." "I'll see what we can do," he said. And nobody ever bothered us again the whole time we operated in the Village.

Every speakeasy had to make some arrangements with the cops to survive. In our case it wasn't exactly a shakedown, nothing on a regular basis, more like an act of friendship. We would slip the captain a \$50 bill from time to time and a box of cigars to the cops on the beat. They could always count on us for free meals and drinks, and at Christmastime, of course, we had a gift for everybody.

In 1925 we sold the Redhead (we had bought out Eddie Irving meanwhile) and opened a place we called the Fronton at 88 Washington Place, a basement nightclub this time with dancing and entertainment. Our star attraction was Al Segal, a great jazz pianist, who later coached performers like Ethel Merman. At the Redhead the door was always open. People just wandered in, paid a 50-cent cover charge on weekend nights and drank their miniature flasks. But the Fronton was a bigger, riskier operation. We felt we had to know our customers. So we kept the front door locked and looked people over carefully through the peephole before we admitted them.

The Fronton prospered, too, and it wasn't long before we heard from our gangster friends again. But we got an unusual break, thanks to a boyhood chum of mine. His name was Jimmy Kerrigan. His father once ran a saloon on Fiftieth Street and Broadway before the Capitol Theater was built there. I peddled newspapers in the area at the age of thirteen, and that's how my path crossed Jimmy's. Well, Jimmy grew up to be a revenue agent, which may explain why we never had any trouble with the feds back at the Redhead.

The minute I got word from those hoodlums that they were planning to visit us on a certain night, I got in touch with Jimmy. He arrived in a car with five of his fellow agents, parked across the street and waited. When the gangsters showed, the agents swarmed all over them. They held a long conversation out there on the sidewalk, and that's the last we ever heard from that particular group.

First a flood, then a flash fire hit the Fronton, and it taught us the importance of having friends in the fire department, as well as the police. Chief Purdy headed the fire brigade nearest us. Off duty he liked to drop in for a few snorts with the missus, and we never charged him anything. One spring day it rained so hard the sewers backed up. Our main room being below street level, the water started rushing up through the toilet bowls and flooding the place. Chief Purdy answered our distress call with powerful pumps and pumped us dry.

Not long after, the flash fire broke out. We never found out how it started. This time Chief Purdy and his men arrived with axes and started to wreck the premises. "Think of all the money you're going to get from the insurance," he said. "My God!" I told him. "We're not insured!" He felt terrible. "Never mind," he said, "we'll fix it all up." And they did, too.

The construction of the Sixth Avenue subway forced us to abandon the Fronton in 1926, and we moved uptown into a brownstone house with an iron gate at 42 West Forty-ninth Street. The main reason we chose it was that the Italian bootlegger who owned it and wasn't doing too well because he couldn't speak English agreed to guarantee our mortgage payments if we would buy all our stock from him. We found both him and his liquor reliable. In fact, if we overbought, he would always take back a few cases. We quickly established a reputation for our French and Italian cooking and our cellar.

Soon after we opened, a police captain from the Forty-seventh Street station came to pay his respects and explain that to protect himself, he had to make a friendly arrest—that is, to put it on the record that we sold liquor. "Now you just leave a couple of pints out in the open," he told us. "We'll have a man come by and pick them up. But don't worry. You'll go free on bail, and that'll be the end of the matter." Which is exactly how it worked out.

A certain group of federal agents presented a more serious problem. They were young men of good families, socialites, who saw a means of making some extra easy money by joining the Prohibition Unit. To put it crudely,

they were shakedown artists. The way we handled them, a number of us speakeasy operators in the neighborhood created a sort of informal association. John Perona of the Bath Club, who later founded El Morocco, was the main negotiator who spoke for us all. When one of those agents tried to make a case against us, we'd tell him: "You know John Perona. Call him. He'll tell you we're all right and he'll take care of everything." Then we'd square it with John. It cost us about a thousand a year, not including free meals and drinks.

Our Forty-ninth Street place changed its name every year in order to avoid continuity in the IRS records—the Iron Gate, the Grotto, 42, Jack & Charlie's, the Puncheon Club. One evening a Yale student named Ben Quinn came in, took a quick look around and cried: "My God, this is my old home! I grew up here!" He was right. The house had passed through several hands since his father sold it. Ben became a regular visitor, and the place was sometimes called "Ben Quinn's kitchen."

In spite of all the payoffs we did have one serious raid. It was ordered personally by Mabel Walker Willebrandt. Two things put her on our trail. First, the rumor that we were the only New York speakeasy in continuous operation that had never been bothered by city police or the feds. Secondly, a valued customer, a Southern gentleman, who didn't trust his local brew, telephoned to ask us to send him some of our whiskey. The employee who took the call stupidly sent it through the mail with the return address on the package. The post office spotted it, reported it to the prohibition authorities and made Mrs. Willebrandt doubly determined to get us, selling liquor through the mail being an additional offense.

It was a long-drawn-out case, but thanks to our able counselor-at-law we reached a compromise. We pleaded guilty to possession of liquor and paid a fine. Ironically, the raid turned out to be the best advertising we ever got. It made us. Because the confiscated liquor was analyzed by federal chemists, who declared it to be of the finest quality. The press cheered. H. L. Mencken wrote, as nearly as I can remember: "Why raid a place that is serving good liquor and not poisoning anybody?"

Although we owned the building on Forty-ninth Street, we only leased the ground, and in 1929 the lease ran out. By then the Rockefellers, who had bought up or leased a lot of land in the Forties and Fifties, including our location, were planning to construct Rockefeller Center. So we had to move again. We didn't want to leave the neighborhood, not after the good relations

we had established there with various prohibition agents. We considered several houses in West Fifty-third and West Fifty-fourth, but there were Rockefellerers living on both those streets, and they didn't like speakeasies. Nobody exactly liked to have a speakeasy as a neighbor, but some people were more broad-minded than others. We finally settled for the brownstone we've occupied ever since at 21 West Fifty-second.

The last night on Forty-ninth Street, which was not that long before a wrecking crew started to tear down the building, we threw a private farewell party for some of our favorite customers. Bea Lillie, for example. And Bob Benchley. We gave every guest a crowbar or spade and let them go to work breaking down the walls and digging up the floor. Then we all loaded the bottles, crockery, furnishings and so forth onto carts and wheeled them three blocks to our new address.

We weren't there very long before three hoodlums paid us a visit. They represented Jack "Legs" Diamond. *[Of all the gang overlords, possibly the most barbarous. The nickname derived from his fleet-footedness as an adolescent thief. It amused him, a kidnapper, as well as bootlegger, hijacker, extortioner and dope dealer, to burn the bare soles of his captives' feet with matches. He killed, or ordered to be killed, dozens of competitors. He himself was shot up so often that the underworld dubbed him the "Clay Pigeon."]* It was like the old days in the Village again. Diamond wanted a piece of our business. The doorman threw the hoodlums out. We were lucky. Before Diamond had a chance to strike back at us, he was shot to death.

We continued on friendly terms with the prohibition agents. We also became quite friendly with some of the assistant U.S. attorneys, who would drop in for an occasional drink or when they needed a good bottle as a gift would ask us to help them out. But you could never be sure. You could never relax completely. Some new officials might be appointed to the New York district or the agents you took care of might be reassigned elsewhere, and the first thing you knew you got raided.

We had this engineer we trusted, and he installed a series of contraptions for us that worked on different mechanical or electrical impulses. For example, the shelves behind the bar rested on tongue blocks. In case of a raid the bartender could press a button that released the blocks, letting the shelves fall backward and dropping the bottles down a chute. As they fell, they hit against angle irons projecting from the sides of the chute and smashed. At the

bottom were rocks and a pile of sand through which the liquor seeped, leaving not a drop of evidence. In addition, when the button was pressed, an alarm bell went off, warning everybody to drink up fast. We once put too many bottles on the shelves and they collapsed under the weight. Another time a bartender pressed the button by mistake. But we had only one serious raid. The agents searched the building for twenty-four hours. They never found a single contraption.

The most important was the secret door to our wine cellar. [*Here Burns led the author down to the subterranean depths of the building. We paused before an alcove, its white walls bare, and he produced a long, thin steel rod.*] Unless you know where to look, all you can see are solid walls, no visible cracks of any kind. But there's this tiny aperture here. You'd have to have an eagle eye. [*He shoved the rod through.*] When I push this a little further in, you'll hear a noise. That's the tongue lock being released on the other side. It takes very little pressure on my part, even though with the steel frame support the thing weighs over a ton. It works like a trigger on a gun. Listen. [*I heard a sharp, metallic click, and the wall swung back on silent hinges, revealing bin upon bin of bottles cradled on their sides.*] This is the only entrance or exit. No other way in or out. If the mechanism broke, we'd have to dig through the concrete and pull out the whole lock. But that never happened. And no agent ever discovered the cache either. We still keep the contraption because people like to come down here and see the way things were in the old days.

# IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

**Lincoln C. Andrews**

Assistant Secretary of Treasury in Charge of Prohibition

**Anti-Saloon League**

Political-action group supporting Prohibition

**Association against the Prohibition Amendment**

Political-action group opposing Prohibition

**Baker, Rev. Purley A.**

General Superintendent of the Anti-Saloon League

**Borah, William Edgar**

United States senator from Idaho who supported Prohibition

**Busch, Adolphus**

Co-founder of Anheuser-Busch Brewery and opponent of Prohibition

**Cannon, Bishop James, Jr.**

Member of the executive committee of the Anti-Saloon League

**Capone, Al**

Organized-crime boss based in Chicago

**Colosimo, “Big Jim”**

Organized-crime boss based in Chicago

**Collins, Sam**

Prohibition Director of Kentucky

**Coolidge, Calvin**

President of the United States, 1923-1929

# CHRONOLOGY

**1893**

May 24, 1893 – Rev. Howard Hyde Russell launches the Anti-Saloon League of Ohio. *See p. 19.*

**1895**

December 17-18, 1895 – The Anti-Saloon League of America is formed at a meeting in Washington, D.C. *See p. 19.*

**1907**

Georgia and Oklahoma become the first states in the twentieth century to prohibit alcohol. *See p. 22.*

**1908**

Mississippi and North Carolina enact Prohibition laws.

**1909**

Tennessee outlaws alcohol.

**1912**

West Virginia adds an amendment prohibiting alcohol to the state constitution.

**1913**

February 28-March 1, 1913 – The House and Senate override a presidential veto to pass the Webb-Kenyon Law prohibiting shipment of alcohol into dry states. *See p. 25.*

November 13, 1913 – The Anti-Saloon League adopts a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment prohibiting the manufacture, sale, importation, exportation, and transportation of alcoholic beverages. *See p. 24.*

December 10, 1913 – A resolution for a constitutional amendment prohibiting alcohol is introduced in both houses of the United States Congress. *See p. 26.*

**1914**

Arizona, Colorado, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington enact statewide Prohibition laws.

August 2, 1914 – The German army invades Luxembourg, effectively beginning World War I. *See p. 26.*



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- Coffey, Thomas M. *The Long Thirst: Prohibition in America, 1920-1933*. New York: Norton, 1975. Narrative history that draws together the experiences of more than a dozen of the most important figures of the Prohibition era.
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