



## UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

### The Rumrunners of Davisville

When I was a child growing up in the Twenties, alcohol was of no importance in our house; we drank ginger ale, root beer, and sarsaparilla. The 18th Amendment and Prohibition were seldom discussed by my parents. House guests brought their own “hootch” with them.

But for many people living on the northeast coastline, rumrunning was an exciting but illegal way to make quick money. A steady supply of imported whiskies, Scotch, and wines was being shipped down from Canada on board schooners and power boats, then transferred to local fishing boats and yachts. Along the eastern coastline, the Coast Guard and the bootleggers fought it out.

My sister Ruth and I slept on narrow cots on the side porch. Every summer she had two friends visit, which made four cots in a row. I remember dozing one night, my eyes half-closed like a cat's, just open enough to see the Milky Way. I was totally relaxed, but comfortably aware of another small sound coming from the water. It sounded like oarlocks rhythmically creaking—but no one rows on Vineyard Sound at midnight. I accepted the sound and slept—but not for long. A stage whisper came from the porch window. I rolled over and saw Mother's silhouette. “Girls! Girls! Wake up!” Candlelight flickered behind her. “Come inside quickly. The rumrunners are here. Hurry!”

My sister and her two friends, Mable and Dorothy, hiked their long white gowns over their knees and stepped over the sill. I was nine and slid through feet first. Mother might have been the Statue of Liberty as she lighted our way up the steep stairway holding an old brass candlestick



*Top: Inscription on back of photo reads, “The ‘eyes’ of the Coast Guard. Lt. Com. Carl C. Von Paulsen pilot. Woods Hole 1926.”*

*Middle: Falmouth's coastline provided plenty of secluded landing spots for rumrunners, as can be seen in this aerial photo, taken ca. 1964.*

*Bottom: Postcard, ca. 1915, shows the rural character of the Davisville and Menaubant neighborhoods at that time.*

*Photos and postcard are all in the Museums' collection.*

aloft. In the parental bedroom, we five females lined up at the dormer window to see what we could see. Dad slept peacefully in the double bed behind us. Mother recounted the unfolding drama outside. “Someone in the first boat signaled with a flashlight when he came ashore. He flashed it three times. Then a truck down at the other end of the road blinked its headlights three times. “Hear that?” we girls hissed, poking elbows into each other. Heavy thudding sounds came from the beach, muffled voices—then a crash of glass breaking, curses, followed by snorts of stifled laughter. Our hearts pounded and we scarcely breathed. “Look!” Mother said as a large shape moved silently past our house, pushed from behind by two dim figures. “There must be someone in the front seat steering.” She continued to narrate the events, guessing by the sounds what was taking place near the beach.

“They’re loading the trucks now,” she whispered. “When they leave and the others row back to the ship, you girls can go back to bed.” We could hear the truck motor start up, and we watched silently as the heavy load inched its way past our house. When it reached the woods, we saw the headlights go on and heard the truck shift into second. The following morning, we ran straight to the beach. It was neatly raked, no footprints, no broken glass; only the strong odor of rum gave exciting proof that last night was real. And later, our bare feet found coins in the sand—rumrunner coins.

This was not the only night visit that summer. Our beach was ideal for an illegal rendezvous. In the 1920’s, our house was the only one on Davis Neck Road. Maybe the rumrunners knew that we had neither electricity nor telephone. Two summer cottages were soon built down the beach, and we learned that rumrunners used their garages off-season to stash their booty. When Mr. Glidden arrived one April and opened his garage, he was faced with a wall of Black Label Scotch and Irish beer. He did nothing about it and the following weekend the

D#53-#1

**WORLD'S TEMPERANCE SUNDAY**  
**PATRIOTIC SERVICE**  
 under the auspices of  
**The Woman's Christian Temperance Union**  
 Town Hall, Nov. 4, 1917  
 7 o'clock p. m.

**PROGRAM**

Song Service—(a)	The Fight is on. (2)	
	(b) Rally for Victory (24)	
	(c) The Home Guard (43)	
Scripture Reading		Rev. H. H. Smythe
Prayer		Rev. Elam Henderson
Singing—Flag of My Country		
Patriotism and Prohibition		
(a) For the Sunday Schools	Mr. S. A. Holton	
(b) For the Public Schools	Mr. Carl Holman	
(c) The Relationship Between	Patriotism and Prohibition	Rev. S. E. Cozad
Singing—The Tide Rolls in (11)		
From a War Standpoint		Rev. C. V. Bigler
The Reservists	W. P. Lennon, Chief Yeoman	
Solo and Chorus—Keep the Home Fires Burning		Mrs. I. H. Robbins
	Keep the Home fires burning, While your hearts are yearning, Though your feet are far away They dream of Home, Their hearts are still true, Through the dark cloud shading, They see no other land, But the boys come Home	
A Tribute to Our Boys		Mr. C. S. Burgess
Community Interests		Mr. R. F. Higgins
Our "Liberty Loan"		The Local President
Collection		
Singing		
	God save our splendid men, Bring them not home again, God save our men, Keep their rifles, Pistols and revolvers, They are no other men, God save our men.	
Benediction		Rev. S. E. Cozad
	—We stand the ground Who stand our men—	



Top: Flyer in Museums' collection. Prohibition drew many of its supporters from the ranks of progressives, who also advocated women's suffrage and labor reform. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union allowed many women to develop leadership skills, learn political tactics, and speak their minds in public debate. Local branches of the WCTU were a mainstay of social life in small towns like Falmouth.

Bottom: The WCTU sponsored a float in a parade to welcome home WWI veterans on August 11, 1919.

Both items are in the Museums' collection.

garage was empty except for a brief note, “Thanks for keeping your mouth shut.”

One summer afternoon, our family sailed across the Sound to Vineyard Haven with friends. Someone pointed to a boat in the distance. “Hey! It’s the Coast Guard.” What we didn’t see right away was a small boat in front of it. Both were heading our way. Dad stood up and looked through his field glasses. “I believe the Coast Guard is chasing a rumrunner,” he said. They were both high speed boats, but the smaller one kept its lead. It aimed straight for us. Our excitement turned to panic when the Coast Guard cutter opened fire. Dad shouted, “Everyone get down! Lie in the cockpit.” The small boat sped past our stern less than six feet away. Bullets whistled overhead. Young Chester and I watched in amazement from our nest in the jib. I even noticed the exultant expression on the faces of the two men standing in their open boat. It was exciting! They knew the Coast Guard couldn’t catch them. Chester and I came out of hiding babbling over and over, “Did you hear those bullets? They went right past our heads!” Our parents discussed at length the Coast Guard’s lack of common sense and their disregard of day sailors.

I recently asked an old friend if he had any rumrunner stories of his own. Well, not really, but he did remember going with his father in his Chris Craft from Menauhant to Gay Head. There they tied up to a lobster buoy, pulled up the trap and removed six bottles of Johnny Walker scotch. His father put a \$50.00 bill in a mason jar with a tight lid and dropped it in the trap. “I guess that’s a rumrunner story of sorts,” he added.

*Rene (Dillingham) Washburn  
(1915-2006)*

Learn more

[Watch a brief video on the rise and fall of prohibition](#)

[Read the history of the cutter \*Acushnet\*](#)



*Top: Coast Guard cutter Acushnet and patrol boats, Section Base 18, Woods Hole, ca. 1926. From Museums’ collection.*

*Middle: Wright’s Express livery service of Falmouth was called upon to transport seized liquor, ca. 1931. Scan in Museums’ digital archive.*

*Bottom: Green Pond bridge, ca. 1920. Postcard in Museums’ collection.*