

Helped a Bootlegger make Prohibition Booze in America

John Cave was born in 1905 and interviewed in 1996

When I left school I was due to go into the civil service but after the war the Government came along and cancelled the lot. No more youngsters to go into the civil service until the ex-soldiers were fixed up. I applied for one in Windermere as assistant secretary to the council. Four hundred and fifty people applied. I was in the final group but it was given to the young fellow who was there already doing it.

A friend of my dad offered me a job in Toronto, Canada so I went. There was nothing here. Marjorie followed later. It was money galore. Then the slump came. Marjorie had a cousin in St. Louis so we went there. When we got there, after a 250-mile bus ride, we discovered her cousin was married to a bootlegger. He was smashing a real gentleman but he's got muddled up with this bootlegging business. Prior to this he was a silk merchant but that was an expensive commodity even in America and so he took the easiest course and went into bootlegging.

He had a bottle of beautiful McKinnon's whisky, the real McCoy, which was his sample. He brewed his concoction in a barn and he used to sample bits out of it until it was quite ready. and then look up at it against the light and compare the two together and then he'd put it on his tongue and "Oh that's not quite right yet." Then he fiddled about with this concoction. He had stuff in a paper bag and he kept putting a little drop in and stirring up and then tasting it. Finally, he said "That's just what we want." He got twelve bottles and filled everyone of them. He had everything! He had McKinnon's labels, he had a bottling machine, he knew how to put the corks in and everything. You would swear it was the genuine article. Than he said "That's a good night's business." We can go to bed early.

The following morning we went to the centre of the city, near the Mississippi River, to a great big house. He said "It's the Police Chief of St Louis's House." He went round the back knocked on the door, handed it case over, said who he was, came back and said "We can go to the baseball match now."

Next morning there wasn't half a commotion in the street. Incidentally that street was several miles long, not unusual in America isn't that. The Federal agents had come in and believe me if there was one bootlegging shop down that street that we could see and I could see about a mile both sides I should think there must have been sixty. The Federal Agents came out in the street with barrels of beer and spirits and heaven knows what else, and they just spiked them. They had an instrument like a hammer, only it had a big spike on and went clean through the barrel, then they just left it to drain away down the gutters. The gutters were absolutely running with beer and people were coming out with ladling cans filling up.

Anyway the Agents were coming nearer and nearer and his wife, Marjorie's cousin, was nearly frantic. And he just sat and watched. He said, "Quite interesting isn't it?" I said "Aren't you worried to death?" He said "It's all right," just like that. They came next door but one and then the next one was about four or five doors away. The smashed the door in, they went in without any ceremony at all; broke the place from end to end; emptied the barrels out into the street. Next thing was they should have come to him but they walked right past and cleared the street. Didn't touch him at all.

He'd bribed the Police Chief with whisky, and The Chief had forgotten to put his house number on the list. I never saw such a mess after they finished. I've never seen anything like it before or since.

I did help him with making of the hooch. If I'd have been caught I'd have been put in jail without the option of a fine or anything.

We came back to Britain and I got a job with the Gazette for the rest of my working life. Ending up doing all the costings in the printing department.

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