

Prohibition Raids Targeted Fairport's North Side

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution resulted in Prohibition, considered by many to be the most significant social experiment in the history of the United States. Commonly referred to as the Volstead Act, the production, sale, import and transportation of alcohol was banned from 1920 to 1933, when it was repealed by the 21st Amendment.

Enacting the law was one thing; enforcing it was another. Federal agents were woefully understaffed to meet the challenge. In addition, vast segments of the population despised the law and willfully defied it. New York and many other states enacted additional laws, intended to bolster the lack of enforcement of the federal statute. Rochester's New York State senator, John Boyd Mullan, partnered with fellow legislator Bert P. Gage to author the Mullan-Gage Act in 1921. The new law opened the door for local enforcement of Prohibition.



In an unidentified North Main Street basement, Sheriff Henry Morse poses for the photographer, surrounded by evidence of illegal alcohol possession

Soon after the Mullan-Gage Act went into effect, Monroe County Sheriff Henry S. Morse initiated a series of raids across Rochester and the surrounding communities. In Fairport, the sheriff utilized private agents from the A.B.C. Detective Service in the weeks prior to the 1922 raid. The agents entered selected hotels, cafes, storefronts, and a private home, and attempted to make purchases of alcoholic beverages. Based on the undercover activity, a raid was planned for Saturday, May 18th. Sheriff Morse and almost two dozen deputies quietly appeared in Fairport. Newly elected Fairport President Harry Tinney and police chief T.C. Heveron accompanied Sheriff Morse and his deputies on the raids.

Deputies dressed as workmen of various trades were stationed outside the targeted establishments, each of which was operated by proprietors of Italian or Irish descent. At precisely 9:00 PM, the undercover officers entered the six locations, produced search and seizure warrants, and began the hunt for evidence. All of the targeted establishments were located on North Main Street. The fact that the raids focused on working class immigrants was not unique to Fairport; a similar pattern of targeted enforcement was the norm in other nearby communities.

Across the country, minorities and immigrants were a primary focus of prohibition enforcement. A provision of the Volstead Act allowed individuals to possess and consume alcohol obtained prior to the law taking affect. Residents with the means to do so could stockpile Pre-Prohibition alcohol, while those less affluent risked arrest and prosecution.

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