

## EXCERPT

Throughout America cocktail parties sparkled defiantly through the dreaded first minutes of January 20, 1920. With morning would come the official start of Prohibition. It was easy, however, to keep the party going in Long Beach, California.

Though Long Beach had been “dry” throughout most of its history, illegal liquor distribution throughout the city was already “perfected” by the time the 18th Amendment, banning the sale of most alcoholic beverages, became law. Already in place were underground booze operations, secretive speakeasies and bootlegging, the perfect staging ground for murder and crime.

At the underground clubs, many centered around Long Beach’s amusement zone known as the Pike, inventive bartenders enjoyed new respect for disguising the taste of the day’s alcohol. They created a new generation of cocktails heavy on fruit juices to mix with the bathtub gin. There was the Bennett Cocktail (gin, lime juice, bitters), the Bee’s Knees (gin, honey, lemon juice), and the Gin Fizz (gin, lemon juice, sugar, seltzer water). At least those were the kind of drinks served at Long Beach’s classier joints. Down at the harbor or around the oil wells of Signal Hill seedier establishments might be serving a cloudy cocktail called Smoke, made by mixing water and fuel alcohol. The drink was blessedly cheap, fifteen cents a glass, and just about pure methyl alcohol.

Much of Southern California’s “best” liquor during the Prohibition era was smuggled in from ships anchored off the California coast. Naples and the Long Beach harbor area were favorite sites to unload the illicit brew. This “prime” cargo was expensive and catered to the wealthy, the powerful, the artists, and the politicians, giving illegal alcohol a kind of high-life image, an alluring, seductive glamour. Most of the alcohol, however, was moonshine, made from either grain (ethyl) or cheap, poisonous, wood (methyl) alcohol. It was affordable to the “common” folk, the oil workers, shop clerks, and farmers. And, after the stock market crash of 1929, to all who saw the world they once knew end.

As filmmaker Ken Burns pointed out in his film series on Prohibition:

“Prohibition turned law-abiding citizens into criminals, made a mockery of the justice system, caused illicit drinking to seem glamorous and fun, encouraged neighborhood gangs to become national crime syndicates, permitted government officials to bend and sometimes even break the law, and fostered cynicism and hypocrisies that corroded the social contract all across the country. Thugs became celebrities, responsible authority was rendered impotent. Social mores in place for a century were obliterated. Especially among the young, and most especially among young women, liquor consumption skyrocketed, propelling the rest of the culture with it.”

There was one component, however, that made Long Beach different from the rest of 1920’s and ‘30’s America. Almost eighteen months after Prohibition had become the law of the

land Long Beach was hit by a revolutionary discovery that would change the life of the city in many unforeseen ways.

On Thursday, June 23, 1921, around 5 p.m., the Shell Oil Company struck oil at its well at Temple Avenue and Hill Street on Signal Hill. Oil fever quickly spread. The lure of black gold brought countless newcomers to the Long Beach area, many eager for an illegal drink after a hard day working the oil fields. Amid all of this oil Signal Hill, which had been renowned for its scenic grandeur, productive soil and magnificent homes, was transformed. Building restrictions, paved streets and walks and curbs were supplanted by oil leases, oil stocks, derricks and drills. Palm trees and rose gardens were removed to make way for boilers and tool houses and speakeasies.

“Orgies of vice” catering to the oil industry, were said to fester around Signal Hill, the *Los Angeles Times* reported March 27, 1922. A recent raid of several so-called “hotels” had confiscated quantities of liquor, several pairs of loaded dice, decks of marked cards, a roulette wheel and other gambling paraphernalia “that made life in the old days of San Francisco’s famous Barbary Coast look tame compared with the activities in the vice dens of Signal Hill,” according to the same reporter. To make matters worse, at two of the places proprietors were armed with automatic revolvers, long-barreled rifles, as well as small-caliber pistols. Police Chief Ben McLendon vowed to keep the houses closed:

*“Long Beach itself is clean and there is no excuse for permitting such places as these just outside the city limits. I shall raid them or bring about raids on such places whenever possible.”*

McLendon and his successors certainly had their work cut out for them through the years of Prohibition. As you’ll soon find out there was much going on in Southern California and Long Beach during the era of the Eighteenth Amendment. 1920-1933 was an exciting time, indeed.