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Rumrunners on the Bay

BY NANCY SOLOMON

Few events raise as much curiosity on the bay than the stories of the legendary rumrunners, many of whom called Freeport and other South Shore communities home. When I first began doing fieldwork in the late 1980s in this area, some of the people I approached were still concerned for their safety in sharing their memories of the 1920s, when prohibition was the law of the land. On Long Island, many baymen earned extra money on the side, bringing booze from offshore boats that traveled from the West Indies to the waters off Long Beach. Their small garveys and skiffs were difficult to detect, especially at night, and waiting cars and trucks quickly collected the barrels and boxes of imported liquor.

Fred Scopinich was born in 1927 in Freeport, part of the third generation of a family of boat builders. They built fishermen's garveys and military boats during the two world wars, and rumrunners and Coast Guard boats in between. "I grew up in the boatyard—every day I would watch what was going on. There was nothing else I wanted to see except what the next day's progress was going to be."

According to Fred:

The boat, *Mauveen*, took five crew members out of the inlet. They got out to the Coast Guard boat that was patrolling the inlet, who stopped them and asked where they were going. They told them they were going mackerel fishing. As they said, these two fellows jumped off the boat with pistols and held up the Coast Guardsmen. They stayed in the Coast Guard boat, and the other boat went out, got its load of rum, went in and unloaded. Afterward, the Coast Guard sent a skiff out to pick up the two guys. The two guys who held them up hid \$200–300 dollars in the boat and told the Coast Guardsmen, "If you report us, we're reporting you that you took a bribe."

Some baymen played an indispensable role in rum-running, smuggling, via their bay houses, illegal booze from large cargo ships offshore to hotels from Brandt Point to Woodmere Bay. Fishermen and sportsmen,

like Carmine Marinaccio and Arthur Pearsall, frequently witnessed illicit activities. They kept many of their stories secret until recently, because of fear of retribution.

Jack Combs, a burly bayman, and his partner, "One arm Charlie," shared a bay house in the Haunts Creek area. The tale he told me: He and his friend had converted their booze into cash and deposited it for safekeeping in a cigar box and hid it under a cot. By the time they returned the next day, the extra high tide had soaked their "deposit box," the \$5s, \$10s and \$20s, now soggy with saltwater. Jack hastily went to town and returned with a box of thumbtacks. The two had just finished tacking the money on the walls to dry when federal marshals, gun in hand, kicked the door open, and gaping at the money hanging on the wall, shouted, "You are under arrest!" Jack stuttered and gasped, "What for?" "Possession of alcoholic beverages" came the answer. "Wa, wa, wa, we only got money; no booze," Jack protested. "Ain't against the law to have money." All the while, "One arm Charlie" was nodding in approval. "You have a point," admitted the officer. "We will be watching you," he cautioned as he left.

—Carmine Marinaccio,
September 1989

Arthur Pearsall remembers how, only a short distance from the mainland, stills dotted the marshlands. As a child, Pearsall sold scrap metal, which made the bootleggers' scrap metal stills very valuable to Pearsall. According to local legend, some baymen and bay house owners made substantial fortunes as rumrunners in the 1920s, enabling them to eventually retire in fashion.

Schoolteacher Lillian Chapin recalled an outing taken by her and some fellow teachers to Meadow Island, where several hotels co-existed with baymen and celebrities. She jotted down her memories in an illustrated poem:

Eight little maidens reached the Freeport dock.
For the ferryman, they waited half an hour by the clock.

Wet and laughing, joking, chaffing, to the bungalow repaired.
Dirty dishes, dirty floors, dirty mattresses and doors.
Sadly the homesick maidens eyed the feather bed,
with mental reservation. "Here I will not lay my head."

Then up rose the fair young boatman,
who had been our faithful guide, pointed out the hotel near us
where he thought we might abide.



This rumrunner was one of 25 built during Prohibition. Photo courtesy Fred Scopinich.

Then the maidens wandered. O'er the sand. . . Lou and Etta went in bathing while the others stayed on land. Thus passed by the happy moments, maidens feeling all was well. Little knew they at the time of goings-on at the hotel.

For nightly ran the host with bottles armed, while the ever thirsty crowd around the hotel and beaches swarmed. Daily in his tower sat a member of the Coast Guard crew. Though one hundred yards away, yet little of these things he knew.

Three days spent the carefree maidens, mostly lying near the shore . . .

. . . while their arms and necks and faces from the sun grew pretty sore.

Chapin and her friends stayed at Charlie Johnson's Hotel until Chapin married. The album containing this poem was passed down to Marylynne Geraghty, Chapin's great-niece, and then to Grace Remsen, a friend of Geraghty's. The Remsen family owns a bay house and run a killey-fish business that has been passed down in their family.

Further east, near Captree State Park, once stood the Wa Wa Yanda Club, along with bay houses that survived Superstorm Sandy. Several of the bay house owners recall this storied club. The islands were used primarily by commercial fishermen until 1885, when a



Meadow Island hotel circa 1921. Courtesy of the Remsen family.

group of recreational duck hunters and fishermen from New York City founded the Wa Wa Yanda Club, a private fishing and hunting club on the southeast tip of Captree Island. The club was well known among prominent Long Islanders and out-of-towners. Advertisements for the club could be seen in such magazines as *Gray's Sporting Journal*.

Capt. Charley Islein began a club ferry that ran from Babylon to Captree Island, which was originally a half-mile long and a quarter-mile wide. According to old-timers today, Captains "Windy" and "Shorty" ran the club's fishing boats so guests could fish for fluke, striped bass, and other finfish that were common in the surrounding bay waters.

"Old Lige Raynor" was the club's caretaker and best known for his entertaining stories. During the "Roaring Twenties" the club was a safe haven for those who enjoyed a drink now and then. Rum-running was a major activity at this and other island clubs and hotels.

There is scant visual evidence from this storied period of Long Island's history. Yet many residents are familiar with this chapter and the stories of Long Island's rumrunners, in part, because of the stories that have been told and published. One of the stories, shared by Bob Doxsee, is that Bill McCoy, a legendary rumrunner, brought booze through Jones Inlet, making sure the booze was high quality. According to Doxsee and others, the phrase "the real McCoy" was a reflection of McCoy's insistence that the alcohol be genuine. Like all traditional stories, there are those who doubt its validity. However, as I and other folklorists like to say, "why let the truth get in the way of a good story?" ▼



Bay Houses like this one were used for rum-running in the 1920s. It was destroyed by Superstorm Sandy. Photo by Martha Cooper, 1991.

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