

Rumrunning on Lake Superior: The *Arbutus* Story

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The Lake Superior basin to outside folk can be viewed as a relatively isolated part of the Great Lakes system. However, during national Prohibition in the United States (1920-1933) rumrunners traveled Lake Superior carrying their highly demanded but illegal alcoholic beverages to the United States. There are even stories of pilots flying booze into northern Wisconsin from Port Arthur. This is a story that has been by-passed by many historians because of a lack of readily available information. A search of newspapers and a few published sources tell us a different story of what happened on this northern border. The saga of the Canadian tug, *Arbutus* is the subject of this study, which will shed some light on an aspect of this era.

Prohibition in Michigan began in May, 1918, two years before national Prohibition in the United States. This unfortunate experiment, which tried to change American society's drinking habits, turned into a failure due to the fact that moonshine was distilled in the country and rumrunners brought quality British and Canadian whiskeys illegally from Canada into the United States. In the Midwest, the better-known route was across the Detroit River from Windsor, Ontario to Detroit, but there were other routes across the Canadian border. In the Lake Superior Basin liquor entered the United States from communities like Thessalon and Blind River along the North Channel of Lake Huron; across the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie; across Whitefish Bay from Bachawana Bay to Whitefish Point; and across Lake Superior from the small fishing villages of Port Arthur and Fort William, now Thunder Bay.¹

The quantities of liquor that were sent south never rivaled the hundreds of thousands of cases which passed to Detroit, but thousands of cases of booze crossed Lake Superior. Americans had a long tradition of making moonshine or home distilled whiskey and during Prohibition this was a major business activity in the Upper Peninsula. However, affluent Midwesterners wanted fine British and Canadian whiskeys like Johnny Walker scotch. The destinations for this select liquor were the many resorts located to the south of Lake Superior. There were homes of wealthy Midwesterners on Les Cheneaux Island and on Mackinac Island with the Grand Hotel in the eastern Upper Peninsula; the resorts in northwest Michigan from Harbor Springs to Traverse City; on the Door Peninsula and in northern Wisconsin. If the resorts were not a sizeable market,

liquor once it landed along the south shore of the lake, was trucked southward to Milwaukee, Chicago, and other midwestern urban centers.

On September 1, 1916, Ontario went dry but a unique prohibition experience was set into motion. In Ontario it was illegal to sell liquor to bars or for home consumption, but it could be manufactured and exported. Canadian bootleggers decided to cash in on the liquor trade. One of these was the Bronfman family, immigrants from Romania where their name in Yiddish meant, “whiskey dealers.” They started out in Saskatchewan exporting liquor to other dry areas of Canada and then after 1918 into Michigan and then into the United States. Aiding them was the Canadian Pacific Railway that ran from east to west along the northern route through these towns and cities, thus providing easy access to imported liquor from other provinces. The fact that a member of the Bronfman family owned a large hotel near the waterfront in Port Arthur facilitated the work of the rumrunners.

Rumrunners were active in western Lake Superior with the advent of Prohibition and it became part of the Coast Guard’s work not only to rescue fishermen, but also to intercept whiskey smugglers. The Coast Guard patrolled the waters while customs agents were in charge of the land entry points.² In 1919, the fishermen at Grand Marais, Minnesota sought Congressional assistance to have a Coast Guard vessel stationed in western Lake Superior to provide rescue service. The World War I sub-chaser, *Cook* was stationed in this part of the lake.³ During the summer of 1920, Captain Benjamin Trudell said that they had caught a band of rumrunners on Isle Royale. Trudell, returned in a small motor boat carrying thirty cases of Canadian-made liquor. He also arrested three men who were later tried in Duluth’s federal court. However this was the only seizure by the vessel reported to customs officials. For Captain Trudell the romantic stories of chasing whiskey smugglers on Lake Superior were those of “space writers dreams.”⁴ In reality the vast expanse of water and limited communication technology, the Coast Guard was ill equipped for the task at hand.

When studying the illicit happenings during Prohibition it is difficult to get accurate documentation. Successful rumrunners seldom left a record of their illegal activities. A few have survived in newspaper stories as is true of the *Arbutus* incident, which follows. It also provides insights into how federal enforcement agents tried to handle the rum-running situation, the first of its kind in this part of the country.

The *Arbutus* was a sixty-three foot, wooden hull, Canadian-owned tug, built in 1887. Rumrunners preferred older boats because if they were seized or had to be scuttled there was little loss involved. In mid-November, 1920 the *Arbutus*, commanded by Captain George Stitt sailed from Port Arthur with a cargo of seventy cases of liquor consigned to a Houghton man. On the voyage across Lake Superior the captain and his crew decided to imbibe in their cargo and accidentally landed at Copper Harbor. On the morning of November, 20 the lighthouse keeper, Charles T. Davis, rowed over to the *Arbutus* and learned from one of the crewmembers that they were carrying “a lot of wet goods.” Realizing that this was a rumrunner, Davis drove the dozen-mile to Delaware, Michigan where he called the collector of customs at Hancock and alerted him of the smuggled goods.⁵

At 10:45 a.m. the *Arbutus* weighed anchor and headed southward hoping to reach Houghton, its destination. However, heavy seas and an exhausted coal supply forced the tug to seek shelter at Eagle Harbor. In an effort to carry as much liquor to the United States as possible its coalbunkers was filled with twenty-two cases of Scotch whiskey and forty-eight cases of rye. Seeing that they were not going to make Houghton and land their illegal cargo and now warned that agents were on the way to seize the tug and its captain and crew, Captain Stitt left with a former Copper Country resident, McEachern and traveled to Houghton where they got a room. Stitt registered using his own name, but apparently as an afterthought erased the name and wrote “George Phillips, Duluth” but the “Capt. Stitt” he wrote first was still plainly visible.⁶ By the next morning they were nowhere in sight, having left on a morning train probably towards Sault Ste. Marie, because authorities at Duluth had been warned to watch for them.

Almost immediately complications arose. The presence of the tug in Eagle Harbor placed it under the jurisdiction of Keweenaw County officials, but there were two problems. First, the tug was not docked but anchored in the harbor and thus county officials could take no action. Furthermore, it was Canadian-owned and this created international complications that would have to be handled by the federal government. Without any direction, county officials sat and waited. Neither the captain nor the crew were arrested and all quickly fled.⁷

Now the federal government took action. Chief enforcement agent, Leo J. Grove in Marquette sent his most qualified agent, John Saul to Eagle Harbor to take over the investigation.⁸ Saul, along with the Prosecuting Attorney of Keweenaw County, Nels A. Ruonavaara; Undersheriff Heikkila; and Deputy Sheriff

Roy Trudell headed for Eagle Harbor. They arrested John Dowd, a passenger on the tug and the shipper of the liquor. On the evening of November, 23 Justice Richards of Mohawk, Michigan arranged and placed Dowd in Eagle River's county jail.

Later that afternoon, Saul and the collector of customs, hired a small boat and were taken to the tug. When they boarded the vessel they found only the engineer, James Dampier, who had remained on board the vessel and claimed ownership. Maritime law held that anyone could seize a vessel in an abandoned state. According to Dampier's sworn testimony, the *Arbutus* sailed from Port Arthur with thirty cases of illegal whiskey, although later the number rose to seventy cases. Dampier said once the captain fled and he realized the boat was to be seized, he decided to throw the remaining twenty-one cases of liquor overboard.⁹

As with many enforcement actions during Prohibition the law was vague, especially in this case. Saul concluded to a reporter, "I am not sure what I will do next" after he seized the tug. He sent a full report of the seizure to enforcement officials in Chicago and Grand Rapids and awaited a reply. The report stated that John Dowd who had been arrested owned the liquor and Captain Stitt knew the liquor was on board.¹⁰ According to licenses found on board, Samuel Wright of Fort William owned the vessel.¹¹

A diver was hired and men with grappling hooks searched the twenty foot deep harbor, but to no avail. What Dampier did not say was that when he threw the liquor over board someone in a motorboat alongside of the tug retrieved it, brought to shore and sold the alcohol. All the while, Dowd being held in the county jail, made a written confession to the prosecutor. Federal district attorney, M.H. Walker informed county officials that federal warrants for transporting liquor were issued for both Dowd and Dampier.¹² However, Walker wanted the investigation expanded. The *Mining Journal* reporter wrote that this action "may result in the implication of several persons, some of them prominent in the Copper Country, on charges of smuggling and conspiracy against the government." Federal officials claimed that they had evidence that the liquor was consigned to Houghton citizens and they held a telegram with pertinent information they did not share with the press.

The federal government claimed the vessel was worth between \$4,000 and \$5,000 and according to Federal statutes she could be released if her owners furnished bonds for double her value. Canadian interests who held mortgages on the tug hired a Copper Country attorney to deal with the issue. Matters became even

more complicated. Marquette's enforcement agent, Grove, received information that persons holding mortgages on the tug are not inclined to furnish bonds for her release inasmuch as in the event of her sale the court must recognize the lieu of the mortgage holders.

The reporter concluded that it might turn out that the vessel will be a "white elephant" on the hands of federal agents. The tug was reported leaky and not in good condition, keeping in practice of rumrunners using dilapidated vessels such as the *Arbutus*. The Federal agents did not know what to do with the tug if she was not released. They finally concluded that they would have to hire a licensed pilot to bring the tug to Marquette.

Saul was a confident and diligent federal enforcement agent. He quickly concluded that Dampier had unloaded the liquor and found unmistakable signs on shore that a small boat had landed the cargo, which was dragged up on shore and loaded, into one or more automobiles. He unearthed clues as to the whereabouts of the whiskey and these clues led to finding some of the liquor and in the process wrung confessions from people. The agents were more interested in a "higher ups" involved in the smuggling process. He found that Dowd was merely the transport agent and not the purchaser. Saul was actually seeking the purchaser and the distributors. Dampier had been instructed to unload the liquor and then burn the *Arbutus*.¹³

The tug, now referred to as "the booze ship," finally loaded with coal sailed for Houghton and arrived on December 3. The tug was to continue to Marquette. However a check of its condition worried Captain Thomas Brown of Munising and he was afraid to venture onto Lake Superior until the fog lifted. An inspection of the vessel showed that the ship's compass had been broken during the excitement of the seizure, the original crew and captain familiar with the vessel were gone and the tug was reported to be leaking.¹⁴

When weather conditions improved, Captain Brown headed the tug for Marquette and federal agent, Joseph Pavlok oversaw the voyage. The tug made it to Marquette and was winterized at the Coast Guard station in Marquette. The Canadian owners of the tug convinced federal authorities that they were ignorant of the boat's mission to American waters and it would be returned.

The saga of the *Arbutus* did not end in Marquette. In November, 1921 the tug continued its odyssey on Lake Superior leaving Marquette and headed for Sault Ste. Marie. Due to heavy seas the *Arbutus* foundered some fifteen miles northeast of Grand Marais, Michigan. The Coast Guard rescued its crew, which consisted of: Captain E.A. Fader of Fort William, William Toms of Port Arthur, engineer J.A. Ranger, and Albert

William of Marquette.¹⁵ Can divers visit the hulk? This is probably not an option as this is one of the deepest areas of the lake.

The story could continue as an example of the many legal cases in the Copper Country who were tried in federal court. Most of them got \$500 fine for their involvement in this rum running venture. What sets this story apart is that it is one of the few examples of a rumrunner being intercepted by federal enforcement agents, mainly due to bad judgment on the part of the shippers in Port Arthur and the captain. It also shows how the prohibition enforcement agents and directions were difficult to administer. Although due to the persistence of John Saul, the violators were apprehended and got their day in court.

¹ Ernest Hemingway. "Rum-Running: Canuck Whiskey Pouring into the U.S.," *The Toronto Star Weekly* (June 5, 1920); reprinted: *Dateline: Toronto: The Complete Toronto Star Dispatches, 1920-1924*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002, pp. 54-56 and Andrew Lefebvre. "Prohibition and the Smuggling of Intoxicating Liquors between the Two Saults," *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* XI, No. 3 (July 2001), 33-40.

² Jan McAdams Huttenstine. *Remotely Yours: A Historic Journey into the White Point Area*. Paradise, MI: East West Press, 2010, pp. 129; Frederick Stonehouse. *Great Lakes Crime II*. Gwinn, MI: Avery Color Studios, 2007, pp. 145 and 150-151.

³ In a curious development, the *Cook* was originally to be stationed the Grand Marais, Minnesota however due to a clerical error she was stationed at Grand Marais, Michigan until 1925.

⁴ *Brainerd Daily Dispatch* 11-9-1920.

⁵ Copper Harbor Range Lighthouse Journal, Charles T. David reporting, November 20, 1920, Michigan Iron Industry Museum files, Negaunee, Michigan.

⁶ *Houghton Daily Mining Gazette* 11-26, 1920.

⁷ *Calumet News* 11-22 & 23-1920.

⁸ *Ironwood Daily Globe* 10-14-1921. Saul had an interesting career. He remained with the enforcement for over a year and resigned. Leo Grove and the local federal judge praised him for his diligence to duty and getting most of those he caught convicted. To that date he had served the longest in Grove's office: 1 year, 10 months, 15 days. He got a position with the city of Manistique and then worked for Munising. In his 70s he was serving in the state legislature when he passed away around 1941.

⁹ *Calumet News* 11-24-1920.

¹⁰ In the newspaper reports and captain's name is spelling "Stidt" and "Stitt."

¹¹ *Marquette Mining Journal* 11-24-1920.

¹² *Calumet News* 11-26-1920.

¹³ *Mining Journal* 11-29-1920.

¹⁴ *Calumet News* 11-30-1920; *Houghton Daily Mining Gazette* 12-03-1920.

¹⁵ *Ironwood Daily Globe* 11-29-1921.