

“The Liquor Fixers”

The Police Department got the liquor, fixers got the money, and the Legionnaires laughed.

--Abraham Sauer, editor and publisher, the San Diego Herald

In mid-August 1929, the California posts of the American Legion gathered in San Diego for their eleventh annual convention. By boat, auto, and train, the “joyous, ebullient crowd of World War veterans” poured into the city, filling the streets and hotels of downtown San Diego.

The newspapers noted the “carnival spirit” brought by the conventioners. Although Prohibition was the law of the land, the Legionnaires seemed to anticipate a “spirit-filled,” good time in San Diego. Like most convention cities—San Diego was expected to ignore “the dry laws” on behalf of its visitors.

To ensure an ample supply of quality liquor, an “irrigation committee” of Legionnaires approached San Diego’s best-known bootlegger, Charlie Muloch, several days before the convention began. Muloch produced liquor from several local stills—from Pacific Beach to Lemon Grove—and dispensed his product from a “health clinic” on Fourth Street. Muloch agreed to supply the convention with “good, safe liquor,” cementing the deal by offering to donate \$1 to the irrigation committee for each gallon sold.

Security for the operation would not be an issue. The bootleggers had approached Mayor Harry Clark and Police Chief Arthur Hill before the convention and both officials agreed to “see, hear, and do nothing.” “I know how it is when conventions come,” Hill told the men. “I am not going to bother conventions, particularly the American Legion.”

With the law “fixed,” Muloch and several associates opened a storeroom at 858 Seventh Street—not far from the convention site, the auditorium of San Diego High School. Six telephones were installed to take orders. Everything appeared to be in order. But two days before the convention opened, on Saturday night, August 17, a police vice squad raided the room on Seventh.

Chief Hill may have known of the bootlegger’s plans but no one had bothered to inform Lieutenant George Churchman, head of the police morals detail. A tip from someone “sore at the Legion” had mistakenly gone to Churchman, instead of Hill. The conscientious lieutenant and his squad arrested five men at the scene and grabbed 4,500 bottles of gin and whiskey valued at \$27,000.

Three days later, the American Legion closed its “largest and best” convention with resolutions lauding San Diego as a host city. Presumably, the Legionnaires had found adequate alternative supplies of liquid refreshments. Vendors from Los Angeles and Tijuana had taken up the slack.

But for San Diego civic officials, the embarrassment a “liquor fixing” scandal was only beginning. The city’s three daily newspapers questioned the apparent openness of the liquor sales. Abe Sauer—editor of the weekly *Herald*—flatly stated: “somebody paid money to somebody in return for permission to violate the law.”

The city council loudly promised to study charges that “higher-ups” had protected local vice. Their inquiry would “take the stigma off many innocent officials,” Councilman J. V. Alexander pledged. Police Chief Hill was directed to “lend every possible aid to the investigation.”

The first serious probe of the scandal came from the county Grand Jury, which began grilling city officials and local Legionnaires in September. Little of the jury testimony was revealed but the newspapers reported that a local printer had testified about a leaflet printed before the convention, listing “trustworthy” telephone numbers “which the thirsty were advised to call.”

The local investigation stepped aside when the federal Grand Jury took up the case. Sixteen San Diegans were indicted on charges of conspiracy to violate the National Prohibition Act. Surprisingly, San Diego officials were spared, but a dozen bootleggers were indicted along with four men alleged to be the “fixers.”

Charlie Muloch was the star defendant when trial began in federal court on January 20, 1930. The bootlegger described how the “irrigation committee” from the American Legion had requested his services as a single-source supplier, to protect their conventioners from “poison liquor” from unknown vendors. Muloch had agreed to furnish good liquor at \$4.50 a bottle. The committee assured the bootlegger there would be no interference from the authorities.

Base of operations would be the supply room on Seventh Street. Business cards were printed with the phone numbers of the room. As protection against hindrance from police, tickets called “Buddy Cards” were distributed as get out of jail cards.

But then “the knock-over” came on August 17. Muloch and four others had been arrested and their booze taken. The Buddy Cards “did not function as expected,” Muloch lamented. When the bootleggers were taken to police headquarters at 732 Second Street, Lieutenant Churchman was standing out front. “They seemed confused and didn’t know what to do.”

Federal authorities had been more decisive and appropriated the liquor within hours of the knock-over. Muloch revealed that more government raids in the following days had cost him about \$100,000 in lost liquor taken from his other “plants” in the city. “I do believe there were some arrangements to fix the authorities,” he testified. But the protection had only been an assumption.

On January 24, the Federal grand jury announced guilty verdicts for six men. Another five defendants, including Charles Muloch, had already pleaded guilty. Sentences ranged from 20 days in jail to six months.

The un-indicted mayor of San Diego and his chief of police would soon be out of office. Harry Clark was defeated in a bid for re-election in April 1931. Arthur Hill would be demoted by the new mayor to the rank of Captain and assigned to the traffic squad. Lieutenant Churchman retired the next year at age 43 and drew a city pension until his death at age 95.



Police Chief Arthur Hill. *Courtesy San Diego Police Museum*

A shorter version of this article was published as “American Legion Drinkfest Didn’t Go as Planned,” by Richard Crawford in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, Sept. 30, 2010.