

The Rum Runners

San Diego, San Pedro and Santa Barbara have become the focal point of the rum runners operating on the Pacific coast . . . It is believed that the bulk of the rum fleet will arrive in southern California waters, literally flooding this part of the state with booze of all descriptions.

--San Diego Union, May 12, 1925.

The “noble experiment” of Prohibition, which outlawed most manufacture, sales, and transportation of intoxicating liquor, began in 1920 with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. An assortment of unintended consequences accompanied Prohibition, including a stunning rise in organized crime.

One example was “rum running” from America’s “Wet” neighbors—Canada and Mexico. It was perfectly legal for these countries to import and sell liquor. Canadian imports of liquor grew six fold during Prohibition; Mexican imports grew eight fold. Most of this alcohol would be smuggled into the United States, across the border and by sea.

A visible symptom of Prohibition was “Rum Row.” Along both the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, scores of smuggler ships lined the coastline. These foreign-flagged “mother ships” brought tons of liquor to America, anchored in international waters (three miles off shore), and fed swarms of small “contact boats” that brought the contraband to shore.

The profits from smuggling liquor were enormous. A *Time Magazine* exposé in 1925 tallied the dollars: “a case at Rum Row, \$25; on the beach, \$40; to the retail bootlegger, \$50; to the consumer, \$70 or \$6 a bottle.”

Defending America against this Wet onslaught was the U.S. Coast Guard. Under-manned and under-funded, the Coast Guard attempted to protect a six thousand mile coastline. The job was mostly futile at first. But between 1924 and 1926, personnel grew by 50%. Scores of new ships were added to the service in an attempt to match the growing number of smuggling vessels. New international agreements helped. In 1924, maritime nations agreed to recognize a “12-mile limit,” which allowed the seizure of ships up to “one hour steaming distance” from shore.

In the summer of 1925, the Coast Guard went to war against the rum runners. Concentrating their forces against the major smuggler fleets off the New York coast, the service managed to capture some of the fleet and scatter the rest. It was considered a major success, but only for the East Coast. The rum runners relocated and redoubled their efforts elsewhere, particularly off the coast of Southern California.

As the Atlantic smuggler fleets declined, the Rum Row off Southern California grew. Breathless newspaper reports announced the arrival of each summer’s liquor armada: “A huge rum fleet,

REPORT 4 BOOZE BOATS OFF COAST

Rum Runners Said to Have
\$2,000,000 Worth of Re-
freshments on Board.

Four large rum-running vessels, the Gertrude, Prince Albert, Malahat and Marion Douglas, are reported by United States coast guard authorities as cruising along the southern California coast.

The combined liquor charges of the four ships is valued, according to coast guard officials, at about \$2,000,000.

Although the prohibition fleet has captured three small rum-running launches during the last few months, the liquor smugglers are believed to land a thousand cases of whisky and wine to one case that is captured.

San Diego Union, June 27, 1926

carrying cargoes valued at several million dollars, is lying off Southern California, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in May 1925. And the following summer: “Sixteen British, Belgian, Panamanian and Mexican rum-runners, the greatest mobilization of liquor-laden ships in the history of the Pacific rum-running, are hovering off San Diego.”

The usual practice was for the fleet of mother ships—the Rum Row-- to anchor many miles off shore (respecting the 12-mile limit), in locations ranging from the Channel Islands to Ensenada. A popular anchorage was the shallow waters of Cortes Bank, about one hundred miles west of Point Loma.

The best-known mother ship for the rum runners was the *Malahat*, an auxiliary-diesel, five-masted schooner from Canada. Capable of carrying as much as 60,000 cases of liquor, the schooner would arrive in the Southland with liquor loaded in its home port of Vancouver, B.C.

Sometimes the *Malahat* and other big mother ships like the *Mogul*, *Principio*, or *Marion Douglas*, would wait on Rum Row for freights of liquor arriving from Europe, Australia, Tahiti, or Mexico. The smugglers would then load smaller “intermediate” boats, which moved the cargoes closer to the coast. Finally, on dark nights, the speedboats arrived to carry the illegal booze to shore and to trucks waiting on the beach.

The Coast Guard could do little but annoy the rum runners. Their task was to watch the mother ships and intercept the movement of liquor to shore. Their only weapons were the Los Angeles-based *Vaughan*, an aging World War I sub-chaser; and the San Diego-based *Tamaroa*, an ex-tugboat so slow it was called “the sea cow.”

The smuggler boats were faster than anything the Coast Guard had. Many were powered with a popular war surplus airplane engine—the 400 horsepower Liberty V-12, which pushed the boats to speeds of 40 knots. The workhouse engine of World War I fighter planes became the motor of choice for the rum runners.

Shortwave radio communication linked the speedboats to the mother ships and to watchers on shore. A Coast Guard official observed: “The rum runners have perfected a system of communication that is little short of marvelous. There have been times when a fast launch loaded with liquor, broke down when nearing shore. In a very short time a rescue boat would appear, the liquor would be transferred and the crippled boats would sail into port for repairs.”

The local Coast Guard began to get some help in the mid-1920s. Fresh from success on the East Coast, the government transferred several fast cutters to Southern California. Ten new patrol boats armed with cannons were commissioned in San Francisco and sent south. Augmenting the Coast Guard fleet were several confiscated rum runner boats (including a speedboat called *Skedaddle*, reportedly built for newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst).

While victories at sea remained few, major successes against smuggling came on land. In November 1926, Federal investigators announced the breakup of a Vancouver syndicate known as the Canadian Consolidated Exporters, Ltd. Believed to virtually monopolize Pacific Coast rum running, the syndicate controlled most of the mother ships, including the flagship *Malahat*. With the syndicate exposed, Canadian authorities began their own investigations, which complicated business for the smugglers.

But the rum runners persisted. Sightings of liquor-laden ships off Southern California's coast continued into the late 1920s. Only the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 brought an end to the lucrative trade and the thirteen-year war against Rum Row.

On June 17, 1934, the *Los Angeles Times* would print an obituary for the smugglers: "The steamer *Mogul*, once the pride of San Diego's rum row, is now on her way home, to Vancouver, B.C., the loser in her long battle with United States customs officers and Coast Guard . . . Thus has California's rum row gasped its last breath."



The schooner *Malahat*. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, photo ID "Malahat 14".

Originally published as "Imported illegality poured in during Prohibition," by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, August 2, 2008.