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The Damnedest Town This Side of Hell: Tampa 1920-29 (Part 1)

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On New Year's Day, 1919, Tampans awoke on a cold and blustery morning to discover that their city had become officially "dry." The day before, crowds of people, expecting a temporary "dry spell," roamed the Treasure City searching for a package store that still stocked bottles of liquor. In a carnival-like atmosphere dozens of revelers, many of whom quickly consumed their coveted purchases, mockingly celebrated the death of John Barleycorn. Well aware of their customers' insatiable thirst and desperate condition, Tampa liquor dealers reaped incredible profits by inflating the
prices of their highly-sought-after "wet" goods. The buying frenzy did not diminish until every bottle of alcohol was sold; not even sour bitters remained on the shelves. As nightfall approached, a sense of depression descended upon Tampa as liquor stores hung signs reading "sold out." The Tampa Tribune captured this depressing mood when it wrote, "All over town it was the same, those [liquor] establishments looked much like a doomed person who was trying to do all he could to make the best of his last day."¹ The "Noble Experiment" had begun in Tampa.

Excerpts from a paper by Dr. Frank Alduino, Anne Arundel Community College, Arnold, Md., read before the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society, Tampa, May 11, 1990.

For the next 16 years widespread non-compliance of federal and state prohibitionary laws made Tampa one of the "wettest" spots in the United States. In fact, in 1930 there was reportedly 130 different retailers surreptitiously selling a wide variety of intoxicating beverages. While it is true that the Volstead Act curtailed liquor consumption, "the law fell considerably short of expectations. It neither eliminated drinking nor produced a sense that such a goal was within reach."² In Tampa Prohibition was a miserable failure. Besides raising the price of liquor and lowering its quality, the "Noble Experiment" exacerbated Tampa's wide-open moral conditions, corrupted law enforcement and other public officials, and fostered the growth of an emerging criminal element.

BOOTLEGGER ITALIANS

During the 1920s and early 1930s, Tampa received most of its illicit liquor from three sources: local bootleggers, rural moonshiners, and international smugglers. The first group, the local bootleggers, were predominantly Italian immigrants who engaged in the trade to supplement their meager salaries. Repulsed by nativistic attempts to regulate their drinking habits, many Italians overtly violated the Eighteenth Amendment and gravitated toward the bootleg trade. According to Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta in their book, The Immigrant World of Ybor City, the potentially large profits to be made, the nearly unlimited demand for and the acceptance of the illegal sale of alcohol by the public, and the Italian talent at manufacturing, supplying, and marketing... brought together economic opportunity and immigrant resolution.

Throughout the Treasure City enterprising Italians built crude but efficient stills that produced a variety of potent potables. This cottage industry that employed perhaps as many as 50 percent of Ybor City's families, supplied an eager and appreciative market. In fact, scores of restaurants, coffee houses, and speakeasies served as outlets for this local "alky cooked" liquor.

Prohibition brought tremendous sums of money into Tampa's Italian community, raising the socio-economic status of those engaged in the illegal trade. The "Noble Experiment" was also important because it brought Italo-Americans into Tampa's criminal underworld. Prior to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, organized crime was the near-exclusive domain of the city's Cubans and Spaniards. They controlled all major forms of vice, including the lucrative bolita industry-the Cuban numbers. Brought to Ybor City in the 1880s, this popular form of gambling began as a small sideline
business found in Latin saloons. It soon became the single largest illegal money-making enterprise in Tampa’s history.  

**BOLITA 'THROWING’**

By 1900 bolita had become a ritual in Tampa. Every night crowds of gamblers and curious onlookers gathered at one of the lavishly decorated sporting parlors to watch the daily "throwing." The lottery commenced when 100 ivory balls with bold black numbers were exhibited on a large table. This was done to ensure that none of the balls was missing, thus increasing the odds for the operators. After a brief inspection, all 100 balls were placed in a velvet sack, which was tightly tied. At this point the "throwing" began as the sack went from person to person. Finally the bag was grabbed by a "catcher," who held one ball securely in his closed fist. Once this was accomplished the operator tied a string around the imprisoned ball. He then cut the bag above the string and allowed the winning number to drop in his hand. 

As the Cuban numbers became increasingly profitable, many gambling brokers expanded their operations. In fact, there were few places in Tampa where one could not purchase a bolita ticket. Along with this expansion also came consolidation. By the 1920s, the bolita trade was virtually monopolized by an Anglo named Charles Wall. This gambling czar, with his brilliant organizational skills and powerful political connections, became the undisputed master of Tampa’s bolita empire and controlled it for nearly three decades. 

Instead he turned to a life of crime. Wall was born into a prominent Tampa family. His father, Dr. John Wall, was an ex-Confederate Army surgeon who directed the Richmond hospitals during the Civil War. He was also internationally recognized for his pioneering Yellow Fever studies. Although Charles’ early life was spent in comfortable surroundings, his teenage years were marred by tragedy. At the age of thirteen his mother died. Two years later, his father, while attending a medical conference in Gainesville, was suddenly overcome by illness and also died. Young Wall was subsequently raised by his stepmother, a woman whom he despised and would
eventually shoot and wound with a .22 caliber gun.\(^9\)

**EXPELITED FROM ACADEMY**

Following a brief stay in a juvenile detention center, Wall was sent to the Bingham Military School in North Carolina. His scholarly career, however, was short-lived; he was caught in a local bawdy house and promptly expelled from the academy. Returning to Tampa, the restless misanthrope gravitated toward the city’s budding gambling industry. Beginning as a courier, he soon became a bookie and planned to expand his power further. Wall’s preeminence in the city’s gambling fraternity was firmly established in the 1890s when he seized control of the *bolita* rackets, which had previously been run from the island of Cuba. It is highly probable that Wall was encouraged and even financed in his takeover attempt by Tampa’s elite business community, which did not like the idea that gambling revenues were leaving the city. Many wanted the money to remain in the Treasure City where it could be used to encourage new industries and other commercial ventures.\(^10\)

Despite a morphine addiction, which he overcame, Wall rose to become Tampa’s gambling czar. He maintained this position for over three decades by controlling the city’s "hot" voting precincts. When Wall could not purchase the necessary votes to win an election, he simply stuffed the ballot boxes. At the height of his power, few Tampa politicians won their elections without first securing Wall’s blessing. In fact, "Many observers staunchly believed that during these decades [when Wall ruled the city’s political structure] there was not one single honest election in Tampa/Hillsborough County."\(^11\) Wall also retained his title as Bolita King by eliminating his potential opponents. At least six rivals met violent deaths attempting to dislodge the city’s powerful vice lord.\(^12\)

**PHILANTHROPIC ACT**

Charlie Wall was a fascinating anomaly. A cold-blooded killer who did not hesitate to order the execution of anyone encroaching on his territory, Wall was also described as a "polite and soft-spoken"\(^13\) individual who frequently donated large sums of money to churches and assisted a number of working-class families facing economic hard-times. His most legendary philanthropic act occurred in 1910. In the midst of a brutal strike, Tampa’s Bolita King provided food for 900 cigarworkers and their families. Few Latins forgot Wall’s generosity.\(^14\)

Regardless of Wall’s lofty status in Tampa’s Latin community, by the early 1930s his undisputed reign over the *bolita* trade was increasingly challenged by Italian gangsters. During the Prohibition era, Italians engaged in the illicit liquor business earned a considerable amount of money and wielded growing power in the city. They were restless and no longer content with their bootlegging profits. Some hungered to crack the Wall-Cuban *bolita* monopoly, and were willing to utilize violence to achieve their goals. The first sign of destabilization in Tampa’s gambling community occurred on June 9, 1930. While standing in front of his garage door, Wall was ambushed by assailants in a speeding automobile. The Bolita King was not seriously injured (he received a minor shoulder wound), but the incident signalled the beginning of a bloody gang war between the Old Guard mobsters and upstart Italian gangsters.\(^15\)
Not all Italian bootleggers wanted access to Tampa's bolita rackets; many were content to operate their small cottage industries. The insatiable demand for liquor insured little rivalry and a high profit yield. The only competition the city's bootleggers encountered was found in the countryside. Moonshine was not only sold in rural communities, but also found in Tampa's poor sections.

MOONSHINE TRADE

The art of moonshining was practiced long before the advent of Prohibition. For generations federal tax collectors scoured the outskirts of Tampa looking for tax-evading moonshiners. Until 1920 the illegal production of alcohol was a small and relatively insignificant business. It was primarily produced for home consumption or sold to neighbors. With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, however, the production of moonshine grew into a large, commercial enterprise in the rural districts of Hillsborough and other surrounding counties.

In Hernando County, located about thirty miles north of Tampa, the Volstead Act generated desperately needed money. Since its commercial forests were largely depleted and few tourists visited the area, the county neared total economic collapse during the Great Depression. In fact, many unemployed residents resorted to the barter system in order to obtain essential goods. Yet, this soon changed. According to one resident, whiskey was distilled in nearly every other home. "Everyone, damn near everyone in Hernando County, had a hand in it."16 Hillsborough County also had its share of moonshiners. Any farm or abandoned field was a potential distilling plant. Although the rural areas surrounding Tampa contained an untold number of stills, the "Daddy" of the early moonshiners was a colorful character named William Flynn. A cooper prior to the Eighteenth Amendment, by 1920 he had an impressive three-still operation that supplied much of West Tampa. Unfortunately for local retailers, this moonshining entrepreneur soon experienced some bad luck. On October 14, 1920, federal agents raided his business and destroyed the stills. Within days, however, other opportunistic "shiners" filled the void created by Flynn's arrest.17

The alcohol supplied by rural moonshiners was a cheap alternative to homemade wine or expensive liquor. Yet there was a potential risk for individuals who consumed this backwoods "shine." Every year during Prohibition poorly prepared moonshine killed or made seriously ill hundreds of customers. All too often small operators, with little knowledge of the distilling process, allowed poisonous leads and salts to seep into the mixture. Some moonshiners even used dead rats and rotted meat to give their liquor a unique taste. "The more juicy the garbage, the better the mash and the better the shine,"18 intoned a Prohibition director. Moonshine found a receptive market in Tampa's more notorious speakeasies, but most people preferred high quality imported liquor.

For those unwilling to experiment with poor quality and often dangerous moonshine, alcohol illegally smuggled into the United States from outside countries provided a popular alternative. Because of its geographical location and numerous inlets and coves, Tampa became a haven for smugglers during the Prohibition era. For 16 years scores of "black ships" operated off the coast of Tampa Bay bringing in unlawful liquor. Skillful sea captains, financed by both legitimate business concerns and
criminal organizations, risked possible arrest and the impounding of their vessels for high profit yields. The main source of Tampa's liquor supply came from Cuba and especially the Bahamas.

Prior to Prohibition, Nassau was an impoverished island. Yet during the 1920s, it experienced an economic boom. Wealthy businessmen benefitted from the American "Noble Experiment" by financing smuggling operations. The Bahamian working-class also participated in the economic bonanza created by the Volstead Act. Many gained employment as stevedores in the bustling ports, while others worked in the various liquor-related service jobs. Some even signed on as crewmen on rum-running schooners. The massive influx of American money brought the Bahamas into the twentieth century. The government which placed an import tax on every case of alcohol arriving at its port was able to build electrical plants, hospitals, roads, and other improvements on the island.19

OUTWITTING THE 'FEDS'

Once sea captains had secured their "wet" cargo and paid the necessary Bahamian tax, they headed for the waters off the American coast. Although the chances of being intercepted by federal authorities were slim, smugglers nonetheless took a number of precautions. For example, some captains simply concealed their clandestine goods in their legitimate cargo. They were well aware of the fact that custom agents lacked the resources to inspect more than a fraction of those vessels entering American ports. Other smugglers were more clever. "A popular innovation used by rumrunners was the submersion tank, a long cigar-shaped metal tank filled with liquor and keel-hauled and chained underneath a vessel. Enough air was left in one of those to cause it to rise to a level just below the surface when needed. One or more of these ingenious devices, carried by a rum ship, would be cut loose and towed ashore by small boats at low speed. In case of detection, they were easy to cast off and sink."20

Usually liquor-laden vessels anchored in international waters, twelve miles off the coast of Florida. There they were met by a fleet of motorboats that carried cases of scotch, wine, and other imported alcohol to a spot off the coast of Tampa. Waiting in the cover of darkness was the "Key Man" and his workers. A representative of a local gangster or perhaps a legitimate businessman, the "Key Man" was a vital link in the smuggling trade. This middleman not only supervised the exchange of liquor from schooners to shore, but he also transported the "wet" cargo to a central location in Tampa. Assisting the "Key Man" were friends, relatives, neighbors, and any other individual whose loyalty was beyond reproach. For those participating in the rum-running process, the job was quick and easy. If a small amount of liquor arrived, it was loaded in modified automobiles, equipped with high-powered engines to elude unfriendly police or hijackers. If a large shipment needed to be hauled, the "Key Man" utilized covered trucks. One former Tampa bootlegger recalled that in order to avoid suspicion, he and his cohorts borrowed trucks belonging to a local merchant. Bootleggers were well-paid. The "Key Man" usually received a dollar a case for his services, while his associates were given about $25 a night.21
OPERATES WITH IMPUNITY

Few of these rumrunners and their bootlegging allies ever spent time in prison for violating federal and state prohibitionary statutes. Although the *Tampa Daily Times* and *Tampa Tribune* were filled with stories about spectacular liquor raids and well-publicized trials, the lucrative rum trade operated with impunity in Tampa. Public hostility to the Volstead Act, widespread community involvement in the smuggling business, and most importantly, blatantly corrupt city and county officials, made Tampa one of the "leakiest" cities in the United States.

With the advent of statewide prohibition in Florida in 1919, local and county officials were given the responsibility of enforcing this unpopular law, a job they were ill-prepared to assume. Following World War I, Tampa's Police Department numbered only 27 patrolmen—one for every 6,166 people in the city. Complete areas were left without police protection. The Department's low pay scale was primarily responsible for the small size of the force. Tampa policemen made approximately $75 a month. Few capable young men were willing to accept these meager wages, especially since other city employees were paid as much as $50 a week.22

For these patrolmen willing to remain on the job, conditions did nothing but worsen. Beginning in early 1919, a terrible wave of post-War inflation descended upon Tampa and the rest of the nation. Underpaid patrolmen were forced to live in the midst of this inflationary economy with little hope of securing a desperately needed pay raise. Reacting to this situation, the policemen, supported by the city's leading businessmen, circulated a petition demanding an increase in salary. No doubt mindful of the Boston Police strike, the City Council abandoned its promise to maintain the current budget and transferred $3,610.20 from the general fund to the Tampa Police Department. Each patrolman was given an additional $5 per month.23

FLAMBOYANT POLICE CHIEF

Despite the slight salary increase, morale remained low within the ranks of the city's finest. This condition changed in February 1922 when the City Council named Major Frank Williams as Tampa's new police chief. Flamboyant and at times reckless, Williams appeared to be the perfect person to reorganize the department and instill pride in the force. Tampa's new Chief of Police achieved a brilliant record while serving in World War I, earning the Distinguished Service Cross, the French Croix de Guerre, and the Italian War Cross of Merit for leading his men "over the top" seven different times. Following his military service, he travelled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and later became a federal Prohibition agent.24

Upon assuming his position as Tampa's top law enforcement official, Chief Williams hired 20 additional police officers. He also restructured the entire force and initiated a sense of military-like discipline in the department. Williams' approach seemed to be paying dividends. Within a few months Tampa's finest conducted scores of well-publicized raids on liquor dispensaries and bolita operators. In fact, in the first half of 1921 the department arrested 2,202 people, compared to 3,566 for all of 1920. Among those caught in Williams' dragnet were 104 alcohol violators. A year later, in 1922,
Chief Williams was again commended by the community for his efficient and diligent crusade against the city’s underworld. The chief sent 121 liquor cases to the municipal court for trial, resulting in $4,410 in fines.25

THE HOCUS-POCUS

On the surface it appeared that Williams had made a remarkable effort to eradicatethe rampant vice found in Tampa. Yet the official police records are very deceptive. First, many of those arrested were habitual offenders. The prospect of arrest did not intimidate the city’s liquor violators because municipal judges rarely imposed more than token fines. Liquor dealers were fined on a regular basis and many were arrested twice or more within a week’s time. According to one policeman, “bootleggers made no bones of their business, smiled when arrested, paid up immediately, and continued to defy authorities.”26 To many bootleggers getting arrested was merely a slight inconvenience and a minor occupational hazard.

Secondly, many of those arrested selling alcohol gave false identities or distorted their names beyond recognition. Finally, the corrupt elements in the department often warned the city's underworld of impending raids. In order to appease the community's prohibitionists police periodically swept through Ybor City and Tampa proper and temporarily closed several speakeasies and coffee houses. Forewarned, the establishments scheduled to be raided secreted their high quality liquor and left only a case or two of cheap moonshine in plain view for Tampa's vice squad detectives to confiscate. Following a perfunctionary hearing before a sympathetic municipal magistrate, victims of these rehearsed raids usually resumed their illicit businesses within hours.

NOTES

1 Tampa Tribune, 1 January 1919.


6 Tampa Tribune, 11 June 1927; Oral Interview, Anthony Pizzo, Tampa, March 9, 1989.


8 Tampa Tribune, 21 April 1955.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, The Immigrant World of Ybor City, p. 54.

12 Tampa Times, 21 April 1955.


14 Tampa Tribune, 21 April 1955.

15 Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, The Immigrant World of Ybor City, p. 286; Tampa Times, 10 June 1930.


20 Ibid.

21 Oral Interview, Nick Longo, Tampa, November 12, 1987. "Longo" is a pseudonym.

22 *Tampa Tribune*, 10 May 1918.

23 *Tampa Tribune*, 6 November 1919.

24 *Tampa Tribune*, 10 February 1921.

25 *Tampa Tribune*, 25 June 1924; *Tampa Tribune*, 3 July 1921; *Tampa Tribune*, 18 October 1923.