

PENINSULA PAST

Rum smuggling and gun fights on the shores of Palos Verdes

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto
Special to the News

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution banned “the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors” beginning in January 1920. The noble experiment of Prohibition began.

Not long after this, smugglers, hijackers and other assorted criminals exploited the rugged coastline and secluded coves of Palos Verdes to reap ill-gotten gains from forbidden cargoes of bootlegged booze.

The smuggling of popular alcoholic beverages continued a centuries-long tradition of illicit trade and violence that continues to this day along the area’s shoreline with human trafficking and drugs.

According to the book “Rum War at Sea” by Malcolm F. Willoughby, strong demand for liquor along the Pacific Coast during Prohibition was centered chiefly around the coastal areas of Puget Sound, Seattle, San



Palos Verdes Library District Local History Room Photo Collection

Portuguese Bend, 1926

Francisco, San Diego and Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles area played a central role in Southern California to meet this demand.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1922 that about half of the illicit cargo of the Southland coast landed at the wharves of Los Angeles Harbor with the remainder landing along the coastline from Point Vicente to Point Fermin.

The isolated coves of Portuguese Bend were a favorite landing point during

Prohibition. Smugglers also would land locally at Point Dume, Wilmington, Long Beach, and the Playa del Rey and Malibu piers.

Liquor smuggling was no small industry; it reportedly ranked as one of the leading industries in the state, with Scotch whisky the most prevalent smuggled beverage. By 1926, the *Times* reported that 150,000 cases of Scotch whisky valued at more than \$10 million were imported annually into Southern California.

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Not surprisingly the rise of organized crime and violence including shootouts grew along with the rise in

profits, and the Palos Verdes area received its fair share.

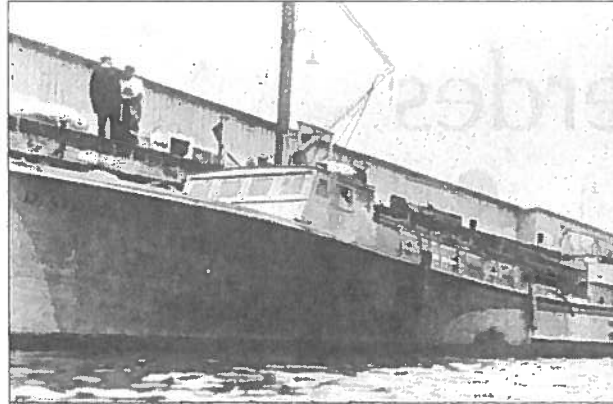
In June 1922, a 100-foot smuggling vessel signaled to allies on shore and attempted to land a small boat at Portuguese Bend, but the

“mother snip” extinguished its lights and fled after police from the Los Angeles Harbor were notified and hurried to the scene.

On Sept. 10, 1924, according to the *Times*, investigators from the county’s District Attorney’s office fought a “spectacular gun fight” with rum runners on the beach at Portuguese Bend. The smugglers were caught red-handed loading liquor from a speedboat into their automobiles. Shots were exchanged for several minutes until the smugglers jumped into their cars and fled toward Point Fermin.

Portuguese Bend was in the news again just months later when 1,500 cases of booze fell into the ocean from a foundering vessel in a botched smuggling attempt.

During Prohibition, rum runners generally purchased the alcohol from syndicates based in Vancouver, British Columbia. Then large ves-



National Archives image from 'Rum War at Sea' by Malcolm F. Willoughby

Captured rum runner *Diatome* at Los Angeles Harbor, 1931

sels laden with their illicit cargo sailed south and plied the shores of the West Coast before returning to Canada to resupply. Liquor was also smuggled in from Mexico.

Smuggling incidents along the Palos Verdes Peninsula were typical of operations along the California coast: steam-powered mother ships would wait until nightfall to unload hundreds of cases of liquor onto smaller fast “contact” boats that stealthily sped to their favored landing points on shore.

Once the speedboats arrived onshore, their cargo was unloaded onto

tarpaulin-covered trucks. Portuguese Bend was favored particularly by smugglers because of its seclusion and because there was a road that ran from Portuguese Bend through the hills that connected to Redondo Beach at one end and Pacific Avenue in San Pedro at the other.

In the early years of Prohibition, hapless authorities complained that they didn’t even have a rowboat to combat the speedy rum runners. A local smuggler told the *Times* in 1926 that only about one boat of liquor was caught for every 100 delivered ashore.

It fell to the U.S. Treasury Department and its subdivisions to try to enforce Prohibition, with the Coast Guard charged to interdict the flow of alcohol. Sheriffs and the police did their best locally to assist.

Efforts to repeal the increasingly unpopular Prohibition rose after the stock market crashed in October 1929. The ban on alcohol led to years of increased corruption, the rise of organized crime and swamped courts from liquor cases.

Finally, on Dec. 5, 1933, the 21st Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. Prohibition was over.

Rum runners fled Palos Verdes and moved on to other criminal activity now that the transportation and sale of alcohol was legal. But maritime smuggling of other kinds along the shores of Palos Verdes continues to this day.

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