

"Corn Hooch Discovery"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Although Carroll County voted to be "dry" a few years before Prohibition, not everyone supported the ban on the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Cases on bootlegging were common throughout the 1920s and Prohibition remained a popular political topic. An article from the May 30, 1924 issue of the Democratic Advocate newspaper about the discovery of bootleg hooch provided the writer, Ira N. Barnes of Freedom, with an opportunity to comment on Prohibition:

"Corn Hooch Found Near Eldersburg"

Not very many days ago, Harry Kohler [sic], a well-known farmer of Freedom district, while doing some chores upon his farm, accidentally discovered a considerable amount of corn hooch securely inclosed within glass jar containers and concealed upon his premises. Mr. Kohler being a consistent member of the church as well as a strictly conscientious prohibitionist, was so severely shocked and horrified at the discovery of such unmitigated impudence, that for a few moments he was, so to speak, mentally paralyzed. But looking around, he observed, near-by, a very large ground-hog excavation; quickly regaining his normal equipoise he strenuously seized the accursed destroyer of health, homes, happiness and harmony and forthwith dumped the contents of the jars, one by one, into the secluded retreat of this elusive animal.

The next night following this eventful discovery, alone wanderer traveling down Morgan Run Valley was greatly surprised to observe by the light of the moon about a dozen ground-hogs engaged in a disgraceful tango, bunny-hug and turkey trot to the accompaniment of jazz music, furnished by a frog orchestra from an adjacent morass. A large number of sober animals ranged around viewing the performance were so completely scandalized at the affair that they were compelled to bow their head in shame, excepting a few old skunks, who had been thoughtful enough to bring along their shock-absorbers. The potent influence of this illicit hooch upon the denizens of the forest speaks very strongly for the ability of our scoff law distillers, and, doubtless, will be instrumental, in the near future, of bringing them a much larger and more remunerative trade.

Mr. Kohler retained a small portion of his discovery as evidence, which he gave in charge of Mr. Frank Ely, our local, brave and energetic prohibition agent, for the purpose of ascertaining its true alcoholic content; either by personal imbibition or laboratory test. It appears to be an established fact that since the enactment of the 18th Amendment more confiscated alcoholic evidence is imbibed by prohibition officers than ever was absorbed by all the old soaks and rummies combined for a similar period prior to prohibition. Before the advent of prohibition, evidence, as a general rule, was presumed to proceed from the mouths of witnesses, but now it is poured into their mouths. Such a method of procedure seems to be reversal of all our olden time conception relative to testimonial jurisprudence. Nevertheless, there is, at least one redeeming feature connected with seized alcoholic evidence and that is the fact that it does not cost much. There is also an old proverb, saying that even stolen water is sweet; if so, then stolen corn hooch should be much sweeter as well as very much more potential, both in influence and enthusiasm.

Our scoff-law distillers, long may they flourish,

Producing fine prices, destined to nourish;
Bringing forth elixir, productive of life,
Mandlin affection, combat and strife;
Causing some troubles, not on the lists,
Scrapping with fire-arms, with clubs and fists.
Seducing rich liquids from carrots and tomatoes.
Acorns, pokberries and rotten potatoes,
Still calmly reposing in grand sylvan shades,
Lovely green valleys and dark everglades."

The strong anti-prohibition sentiment expressed by Mr. Barnes was not uncommon in Carroll and Maryland. In fact, Maryland's popular Democratic governor, Albert C. Ritchie, consistently bucked Prohibition as an infringement on personal rights and Maryland's Attorney General absolved police from enforcing the law.

Photo caption: J. Harry Koller of Freedom discovered a stash of illegal corn hooch on his farm near Eldersburg in May 1924. Historical Society of Carroll County collection gift of Henry Koller, 1989.