

"McGinnis Distillery Robbed" Part I

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The ratification of the 18th Amendment in January 1919, which made the sale of alcoholic beverages illegal, ushered in the turbulent era of Prohibition. While the proponents of Prohibition thought that the absence of alcohol would improve society, the demand created a new kind of criminal, the bootlegger, and crime wave. One local crime was reported in the January 8, 1926 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

"McGinnis Distillery Robbed

Seven Guards and Watchman Shackled--50 Believed In Gang--Five Trucks Hauled Away 71 Barrels and 32 Cases--the Value Estimated At \$90,000--Oldest Stock Taken--Ten Guards Stationed on Gorsuch Road--Handcuffs and Wire Used to Bind Prisoners--Telephone Wires Cut--

A band of between 40 and 50 men entered the government liquor warehouse of McGinnis Distillery, near Carrollton, owned by and conducted under the name of the Industrial Grain and Products Corporation on Saturday night and hauled away 71 barrels of the oldest whisky and 32 cases of bottled stock, valued at \$90,000 after tying up the guards.

Charles Thompson, the first guard attached, was not necessarily at fault in allowing himself to be surrounded by the robbers. There is an ice pond near the plant, frequented by residents of the neighborhood and they pass by the distillery property to and from the pond, it was settled. Thompson thought the men who accosted him were skaters.

Mr. Thompson is a Government guard and went on duty between 2 and 3 o'clock as was his custom and was standing on the railroad track alongside the warehouse when three men wearing old army overcoats approached him and spoke. One of them, he said, called him "Butch", a nickname by which he is commonly known by his more familiar friends.

After they had passed the men turned quickly and covered Thompson with revolvers. They then handcuffed him and took him to the boiler room where he was kept. The men then noticed Miles Long, aged about 80 years, at his home which is near the distillery and carefully planned and captured him while he was looking for his cat. His cat always makes a queer noise when strangers are around and as he walked out of his house to investigate he was overpowered and taken to the boiler room and handcuffed to Mr. Thompson.

Not long after the above Mr. Geo. Hughes, of Carrollton, was walking up the railroad on his way to Peter ?, near Tannery with a basket of provisions and he too was overpowered and taken to the boiler room and handcuffed.

Mr. Jacob Long, night watchman and his son, John, fireman, came on duty about 5:45 walking down the railroad and at the plant they parted. The father going around the plant to the government office, where he was ordered to hold up his hands while putting a shovel full of coal in the stove.

The son walked on down to a small shack, as was his custom and called "Butch" and received no answer called again. The guards over Thompson, Hughes and Long, instructed Mr. Thompson to call John and said "Come in the boiler room," where he was overpowered and handcuffed, after he entered.

The next on the scene was Frank M. Dowell, of Baltimore, another Government guard, who arrived on train No. 5, at Tannery, and was walking down the railroad track when he was covered by two men, handcuffed and taken to the government office. The last guard to arrive was Mr. Edward Long on the 1:55 train which stopped at the distillery. As soon as Mr. Long alighted from the train he noticed two men and started to run toward Tannery but was caught and thrown down on a pile of coal and handcuffed and taken to the government office.

The seven were divided and placed into two different parts of the distillery. John and Edward Long were each handcuffed and placed in the watchman's box along the railroad track with a guard. Jacob Long, Miles Long, George Hughes, Charles Thompson and Frank Dowell were parked in the government office with a guard. Dowell and Thompson were handcuffed together. The balance were wired up separately around the legs and arms.

About 5 o'clock one of the gang came in the government office with an arm full of pint bottles containing liquor and announced that it was a "gift to them," and informed the guard to come along and warned the men not to try to escape.

The men who engineered the job were no amateurs at the business as they used a swamp land of Mr. Edward Dreschler's which is almost a mire the year round, but the leaders used their heads and waited for a freeze that would make the meadow land passable. The ground was frozen to a depth of 8 inches it is said which just made the swamp right for the trucks which backed up to the platform at the old barrel house, leading from the warehouse which contained the liquor and made loading very accessible, as they could roll the barrels right into the truck.

Early in the morning, about 6 o'clock the prisoners heard the trucks leaving by the way of Miles Long's road and then started to free themselves. Mr. Hughes was the first to slip out of his wire entanglement and then proceeded to release the balance. The ones who were handcuffed were taken to the boiler room where Mr. Charles Long, who made his appearance about the delay of his father and brothers coming home, filed and cut the handcuffs from each.

Mr. Charles Long gave the alarm by notifying his brother, Robert Long, living at Tannery, who drove to this city to inform Mr. Maurice Doren, superintendent, of the distillery, of the hold-up. State's Attorney Brown, Sheriff Phillips and Deputy Gentzler were hurriedly summoned and went to the scene. There was not a lock on any of the buildings that was not broken.

Guards were stationed around Tannery and all roads entering to the distillery from Gorsuch Road. At Thomas Chapel a gang of 10 men were stationed to hold up anyone who attempted to pass.

State and Federal officials traced the route of trucks and automobiles that carried the stock away to Mexico, and were seen passing through Hampstead early Sunday morning. One stopped at Seak's store and replenished his truck with gasoline. The driver announced that he had a load of whisky.

The driver of one of the trucks lost his way and run up the road past the Catholic Church at Manchester, but was later turned and put back on the track again by one of their guards following in a car.

Included in the liquor haul, according to Mr. Doren, were thirty-five cases of whisky which had been bottled Saturday for shipment Monday. He said there were about 1,300 barrels of liquor in the warehouse at the time. About fifteen barrels of whisky, which the thieves apparently had been unable to take before daylight were found outside the plant on the runner platform.

Officials recalled that the same plant was robbed about two years ago under similar circumstances. At that time three guards were manacled with handcuffs, which Mr. Brown said were almost identical with those used last night. He thought it significant that the shackles were so nearly alike in the former robbery seven barrels of whisky were taken."

Part II will appear next week.

Photo Caption: The McGinnis Distillery near Carrollton, photographed in c.1910, was a frequent target of armed gangs during Prohibition. Robbers made off with nearly \$100,000 worth of whiskey in January 1926. Courtesy of Carl E. Ebaugh.