

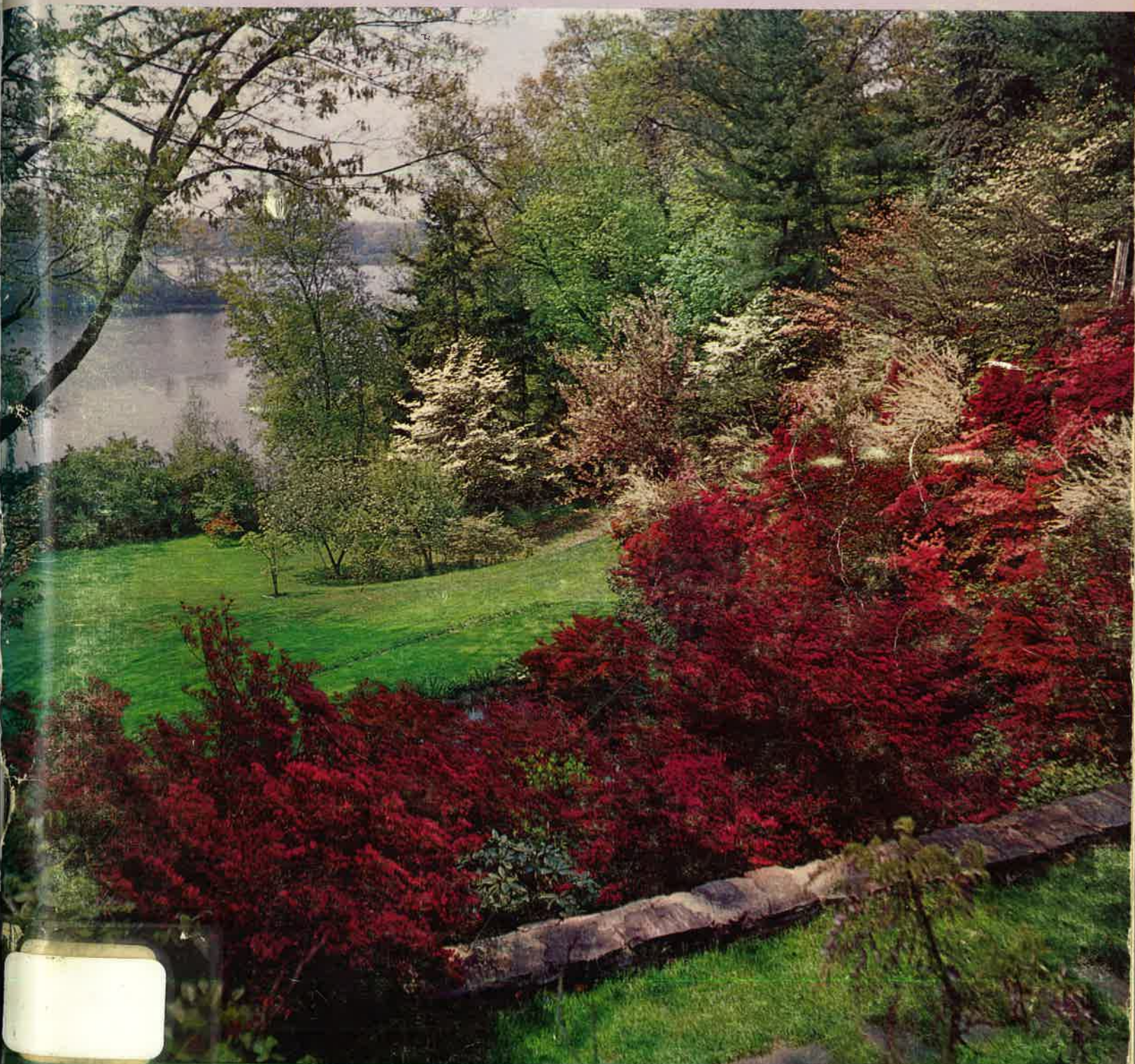
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# RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



In This Issue . . . The Cranston Story . . . The First Blow For Freedom . . .  
Newport-Birthplace of Championship Tennis . . . Rhode Island Art and Artists . . .  
The State Ballet . . . History Section — The 20th Century Part I

# The Noble Experiment

BY CALEF M. BURBANK

**T**HEY came to town one week in 1926, and their ostensible job, on federal pay, was to clean up the wettest state in the nation. Rhode Island was it. In fact, it was the only state whose legislature, in both branches, completely refused in 1919 to ratify the 18th (prohibition) amendment. In Connecticut, one house failed to ratify.

Rhode Island, furthermore, appropriated \$25,000 to send its Attorney General to Washington, to make a useless fight in the U. S. Supreme Court, to prove that the whole idea of a national prohibition amendment to the constitution was itself unconstitutional. How wet could a state be?

Then came the two aforesaid gentlemen to try and cram down, not too delicately, a law nobody wanted in most of the state's 39 cities and towns. They were Moe Smith and Izzy Einstein. One of them was described at the time by a *Journal-Bulletin* columnist as follows, as he was observed spying on one of many speak-easies along Dyer Street: "A man wearing a pair of pants looking as though they had been bitten by a hound-toothed dog, and mended by a longshoreman whose wife had left him . . ." entered a wide-open bar and bought a shot of whiskey.

It never worked. He bought the whiskey, and nobody went to jail. Moe and Izzy left for Brooklyn. Behind them was a long trail of professional rumrunners, hijackers and a multitude of drinkers. Herbert Hoover had said the constitutional amendment (and he was often misquoted) was an "experiment noble in purpose." There was nothing noble about the Rhode Island attitude. It was No. 1, thirst, No. 2, greed, and No. 3, the hell with it.

Now for a bit of history. Rhode Island itself had a prohibition amendment in its constitution from 1886 to 1889, when it was annulled. Small towns ruled. It was an era when Narragansett Indians were forbidden to vote, and anybody who wasn't taxed on \$134 worth of property could not vote for the Providence city council, nor in financial meetings in towns. It was against the background of domination in small and rural towns all through the nation that brought on prohibition.



*One Rhode Island bootlegger had an ingenious method of disguising his cargo . . . until he was caught.*



Journal photo

A typical hideaway for bottled goods that came ashore from the "rum fleet."

But in Rhode Island the waves of immigrant workers who came to industrial towns were not quite like citizens of the Bible belt. They wanted no part of interference with their personal eating, drinking and social lives. It was immediately reflected in extensive liquor manufacturing in cellars, barns and even old mills, but also in the appearance off the shores of the largest rum fleet on the East Coast.

Presence of this rum fleet, fast boats and schooners, was a natural for an area like Narragansett Bay, with its scores of coves and estuaries where fast speed boats of shallow draft "dropped" their cargoes at night.

Converted Coast Guard destroyers couldn't follow them in. Packard twin-six touring cars, their motors quieted, waited ashore at night to speed whiskey, rum and gin to Blackstone Valley, Providence, Newport and into Massachusetts.

One large operation at the Herb Cavaca Farm in Tiverton resulted in an attempted hijacking in June 1929. All one afternoon machine guns and other weapons sounded as the hijackers tried to get into a barn where liquor was stored. Sixteen of them later surrendered to a U. S. Marshal, bearing a total of 60 gunshot wounds, and each was fined \$750 plus suspended sentence.

Enforcement of the law was never very vigorous. How do you enforce a law practically nobody wants? The state in 1922 adopted the Sherwood Prohibition Enforcement Act. Repeated attempts were made both to abolish it and strengthen it. Mabel Willibrandt, national prohibition administrator, called it too weak anyway.

Meantime the federal Volstead Act was on the books, and federal agents worked as diligently as possible, but real convictions were few, an occasional still or cache being raided, and seized. Loss of the product was often the major penalty for the bootlegger. The first man in Rhode Island to be arrested for violation of the Volstead Act was Billy Goode (cq) of Newport, and that wasn't until 1924. He became somewhat famous as a martyr to a cause, and in his old age still runs a decent saloon in that city.

But while speakeasies ran practically wide open in the cities, notably in Central Falls, the great scandals and the amassing of profits came with Rum Row. In 1925, to fight the traffic, Block Island was made a "dry" headquarters for the Coast Guard.



Members of the "Prohibition Research Committee" which toured the country looking for "just one man whom prohibition had cured of the drink habit." Like Diogenes they never found one.

Journal photo

In no time, its fleet of converted destroyers and patrol boats was in trouble. Judges criticized them for recklessly firing on boats, including yachts. Then, in 1925, a wide scandal broke when more than a dozen Coast Guardsmen and rum boat operators were arrested on bribery charges, growing out of the way the guardsmen played in cahoots with islanders and others in the rum-running racket.

On Dec. 29, 1930 the Coast Guard overhauled the *Black Duck*, a loaded rum-runner and sprayed it with machine-gun fire. Three of the crew were killed. Outraged protests included one from the Rev. Roy Magoun of the Seaman's Institute in Newport, who said the men in the cabin of the *Black Duck* were "shot like rats."

All during prohibition the Fabre Line ran ships into Providence. Their fine liquors and wines were religiously sealed under the eyes of U. S. Customs inspectors. But somehow or another persons who had occasion to go aboard at the State Pier always wore raincoats, and coming down the gangplank they appeared stouter than when they climbed up.

The gangs that took over the multi-million dollar illicit liquor racket were involved in their share of shootings and murders, and of strangely missing men. One was Danny Walsh, South County "sportsman," who, the underworld always said, welched on some payments, was taken to sea, his feet frozen in a tub of cement, and dropped overboard.

A typical Rhode Island approach to the whole problem was taken in 1922 by a businessman attending an International Order of Red Men's convention on the West Coast. Came the usual politicking as to what city to go to the next year. The businessman clinched it. He said he could guarantee no money, there was no Chamber of Commerce subsidy, but: "Off our coast is the finest rum fleet in America." The convention came to Providence.

Cynics around Rhode Island always will say, despite the corruption and semi-madness that attached to it, that "prohibition was better than no liquor at all."