THE RUM RUNNERS

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Prohibition was instituted in the United States in1920 and lasted until December 1933. After 1919, it was illegal to make, buy, transport, or sell alcohol such as beer, gin, rum, whiskey, and wine. To those who wanted liquor, they were going to drink regardless of the law, thus giving rise to the time known as the rum-running era. This proved to be a most colourful part of the history of the early 20th century.

Looking back at the history of this rum-running era, the thing that fascinates me was that it came to an end. Everyone was having a grand old time making money at it, including those against it, who were making money holding lectures against the subject and receiving very good fees for participating in these gatherings. Those doing the rum running were anyone and everyone. Those in charge of the rum running, apparently in a lot of cases, were also the ones in charge of trying to stop it.

Rum's cheapness made it a low-profit item for the rum-runners, and they soon moved on to smuggling Canadian whisky, French champagne, and English gin to major cities like New York City, Boston, and Chicago, where prices ran high. It was said that some ships carried $200,000 in contraband in a single run.

Boats of all types and sizes, either took to running liquor or were on the other side, that of trying to prevent it. The islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon (French possessions) on the south coast of Newfoundland, and the islands of the West Indies, were the major ports on the Atlantic coast where liquor was loaded. There was also liquor being manufactured in Canada for export. The majority of this was shipped in vessels that should not have returned for months, but returned to port a few hours after leaving. With all the Customs Officials in on the racket, what more could one expect? Looking at the records left, you will find everything in order. Anything that might hold something against anyone has merely been left blank. Any signatures were nothing more than unintelligible scrawls. The crews of the rum running vessels were definitely breaking the law. To say they were criminals would be stretching the term criminal to the limit. One has to realize that especially during the depression, which became world wide during this era, a job of any description was very hard to find. Most of these men were glad to have the work in order to make an income of some description. Quite often they did the rum running until they were able to find work on one of the patrol vessels. This was true with the radio operators and a number of them got their start in the “rum runners” and then crossed over to the government side.

All the coast stations handled messages from the “rum runners” that had licensed radio stations. The messages transmitted were coded and copies of these messages were given to the government officials. It was not long until the government officials broke their codes and were able to “read the mail”.

Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, was one of the larger rum running ports and a center for a good portion of the rum running activity, and a certain individual there made a good living installing radio stations for the rum running vessels. These stations were illegal and communicated with illegal coast stations. The authorities complained in the press that they were never able to find these illegal coast stations. A typical example was one station at Saint John, New Brunswick. The Manager of the Bank of Nova Scotia in Saint John approached the Officer in Charge of Saint John Radio VAR, wanting to know if he would consider taking on a part time job, transmitting messages to the rum runners. He stated he was not interested but would mention the job to his operators. One of them jumped at the opportunity. That meant the individual from Yarmouth went to Saint John and installed a station in the attic of the home of this operator. Therefore this

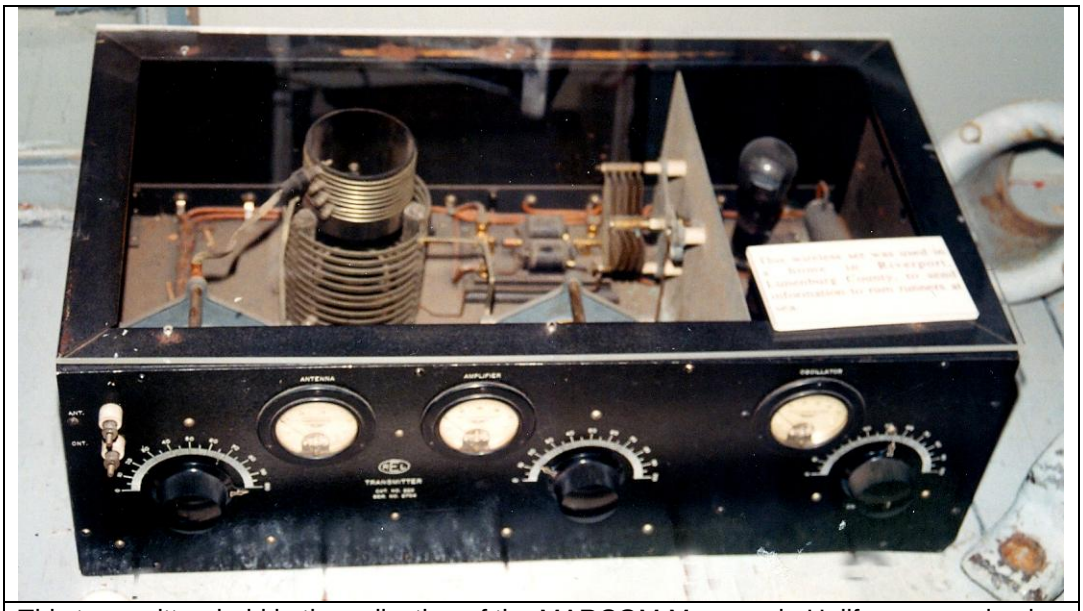
operator was communicating with the patrol vessels during his normal working hours and communicating with the “rum runners” during his hours off. An excellent set-up and no wonder the authorities could not find the illegal coast stations.

The Customs Patrol Vessels flew this Canadian Ensign from 1921 to 1957.

The Rum Runners flew the regular Canadian Red Ensign (1921 to 1957) if they even flew an ensign or flag.

A common procedure for the illegal stations in ships to contact these illegal coast stations was the use of three letters. In order to describe this I will use my initials, S G R. The ship would send the letter S three times, then DE the separation signal, and then the letter G three times. The coast station would answer the ship with G three times, DE, and the letter R three times. That way both would know they were communicating with the proper station. The only way a preventive authority could be involved is if he had obtained this prearranged three-letter code.

Naturally many ingenious gimmicks, many of them are now memories, found a use for communications between these stations. The best of these rum-running vessels were small and very fast and in most cases better equipped than the patrol vessels. They relied mainly on speed in order to outrun the patrol vessel. The policy was for the larger vessels to lie off the coasts of either Canada or the United States, just outside the International boundaries, with their cargoes of illicit booze and discharge this to smaller faster vessels that would take it ashore. A favourite of the larger vessels was the schooner. Many of these schooners had their masts removed and were fitted with large engines, making them fast and very low in the water. This made them harder to see from a distance. The larger ones were fitted with a radio direction finder. Shortly after the coastal radio direction finders entered service these D/F’s were scaled down and fitted into ships. The smaller boats used one of the most ingenious navigational aids found. This ingenious navigational aid cost practically nothing to build but was sold by an individual in Halifax for around one hundred dollars. This was fitted in the small fast “rum runners”. It consisted of about six inches of pipe and contained nothing more than a condenser with the necessary pieces of wire to hook it up. This would act like a small spark transmitter. All the engines in use during this era used gasoline and when this unit was fitted into the coil lead of the electrical circuit of the engine it worked very well. Those operating these units knew the engine revolutions necessary for this thing to create a good signal (racket) on the D/F frequencies. Thereby the small pick-up vessel just sat in the water creating this racket while the loaded vessel sailed down to it, from the D/F bearings taken on this signal.



This transmitter, held in the collection of the MARCOM Museum in Halifax, was seized from one of the rum running boats. *(Photo by Jerry Proc)*

The first sailing ship to be fitted with wireless in Canada was one of the famous Canadian tern schooners, so numerous around the turn of the century. The word tern comes from the Latin word Terni. Terni means three for three masts and is not named for the bird which is quite popular on Canada's east coast. This schooner was the VINCENT A. WHITE that was built at Alma, New Brunswick, in 1918. She was registered in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia.

Her first radio operator was Alfred K. Smith and he and the gentleman from Yarmouth, installed an illicit station in her in April 1922. This station consisted of a 1-1/2 inch spark coil transmitter and a carborundum crystal receiver. It was installed in Al's cabin, which was with the officer's quarters in the after house of the schooner. The aerial was the standard long wire strung between the main and mizzenmast, with the lead-in running down the mizzen stays. Right after this installation at Saint John, she made a voyage to Halifax and then on to Glasgow, Scotland. VINCENT A. WHITE remained a wind-powered schooner and was not altered by removing her masts and installing an engine. She was launched on August 7th, 1918, and was assigned flag call TNLC. The flag and radio call sign did not become one and the same until 1927. On January 20th, 1926, she changed her name to ESTONIA and her port of registry to Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. I was unable to locate any further information on her communication equipment after that date. This illicit station was licensed just prior to the name change, with call sign VGCN, as a receiving station only. This schooner had a most remarkable and fascinating career, if one could ever learn the full detail. As the ESTONIA she was definitely doing more Rum-running, than the legal trades of lumber and salt cargoes so common to these schooners. In 1926 she was under the command of Captain Spurgeon Geldert of Lunenburg. He was probably best known as the mate under Captain Angus Walters in the famous BLUENOSE. On October 25th, 1935, ESTONIA made her final voyage. She sailed from Turk's Island, West Indies, and encountered a heavy storm, losing her sails and rudder, and was abandoned in a sinking condition. The Norwegian tanker S.S. SOUTH AMERICA rescued her ten man crew, but I have no idea how SOUTH AMERICA found her. By this time the VGCN call sign was assigned to a Police Launch belonging to the British Columbia Provincial Police. Whether or not the radio station had been removed or used in this rescue is not known. The VINCENT A. WHITE was just one of many identical vessels with more or less the identical experience.

There were a number of vessels classed as patrol vessels. These belonged to the National Revenue Preventive Service of the Canadian Government, a branch of the Customs Department.

A number of them were of Ottawa design. In other words, they were fairly good boats but for the most part were only given sufficient power to enable them to maintain a speed of about half that of the rum-running vessels. The few patrol vessels that could work up a fairly good speed were pretty well restricted to a mundane life of that of a personal yacht for certain government officials. This way the “rum runners” were given a little better chance at not getting caught. One of these vessels was the MARGARET that was built at Southampton, England, and delivered to Customs in Halifax in April 1914. She was immediately taken over by the Navy for the war and returned to Customs at the close of the war. She was assigned wireless call sign VDW and the station was listed as having a range of 150 miles. It was the typical station of the day containing only three transmitting frequencies 300, 600, and 800 meters. MARGARET is the only Custom’s vessel listed in the Official List Radio Stations of Canada for July 31st, 1923. Shortly after this date two more vessels, the BAYHOUND and PREVENTOR, were added to the fleet.

At this time most countries started to assign four letter radio call signs to their ships. They had been assigning three letters only up until this time. Canada was to do the same and some interesting facts come forth, which make little if any sense. BAYHOUND and PREVENTOR were assigned CGPJ and CGPK respectively. A quick glance at the three prefixes of these calls will tell a lot, CGP – Canadian Government Police. In other words if the rum-running operator remembered those three letters he could then do a lot with his direction finder. If a buddy happened to be around with a direction finder and communications on one of their illicit radios, nothing more need be said. They knew the exact position of these ships from periodic D/F bearings. Assigning these distinctive prefixes definitely did something to the ego of the bureaucrat who authorized them, but there is no sense behind them.

The only other Customs Patrol Vessel fitted with wireless, on which I could find information, turned out to be the most interesting of the lot. Her official name was PATROL BOAT NO. 4 and she was assigned call sign CGPN. Most not only knew her by her former name STUMBLE INN, but they continued to call her by that name. There were two of these vessels, the second became a patrol vessel after these Customs Patrol Vessels were replaced with the Marine Section of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and explained later. These two vessels started out as World War I Submarine Chasers, but were built a bit late for the war. Somehow they took up the interesting job of running rum, and while doing this, had the misfortune of being caught. They then became a patrol vessel. The radio room was also the radio operator’s home, a bunk amongst his equipment that consisted of a cubby-hole at the best. Cec Foster was radio operator for a time in PATROL BOAT NO. 4.

The STUMBLE INN or PATROL BOAT NO 4 was involved in the capture of the rumrunner KROMBOUT. The KROMBOUT actually outran the STUMBLE INN and ran to St. Pierre and Miquelon. She had to be a fast rumrunner in order to outrun the STUMBLE INN. The St. Pierre authorities seized the KROMBOUT and held her until the Canadian authorities managed to arrive at St. Pierre and arrest the KROMBOUT crew. There are many such stories involved with rum running like this.

There were 440 of these Submarine Chasers, which were built and operated by the United States Navy, in service during World War I on both sides of the Atlantic. 121 crossed the Atlantic Ocean under their own power. The loss of two enemy submarines was credited to these boats. Since I have a special interest in boats of this size and type, I found the detail on these most interesting. They were 110 feet in length overall, and had a full displacement of 75 tons. They not only were equipped with radio during World War I but they shocked many that came near and heard them talking to each other over a primitive radiotelephone. Radiotelephone then, for all intents and purposes, was some distance in the future. Their main propulsion was fascinating. They had three 220 horsepower (at 500 revolutions per minute) gasoline main engines and were direct-coupled to three 39-inch propellers having a 57-1/2 inch pitch. The most fascinating part of this detail to me was that these engines were air started and were reversed by air. Each main engine was connected to an individual air compressor. All these boats were equipped with a 10 horsepower gasoline engine with a 4-1/2 kilowatt generator on one end, and a three-inch bilge

and fire pump on the other. PATROL BOAT NO 4 must have been a welcome addition to the Custom's fleet. She should have managed nine knots on one engine, ten and one-half knots on two engines, and twelve knots on all three. One would have to agree she was an interesting little vessel. This detail is recorded in the book Maverick Navy by Alexander W. Moffat, Captain, USNR (Ret.).

A few of the government patrol vessels managed to fire a shot or two at a rum runner, but this was very rare. If these vessels did have a gun which could handle ammunition that was available, no doubt the crews were only allowed one shot a month, and would have to purchase any additional rounds out of their own pockets. Several patrol boat skippers were told to get out of the way, in more colourful terms, from just behind the business end of a shotgun. Granted a few people got hurt, but on the whole the majority on both sides of the law, thoroughly enjoyed their experiences.

The four Custom's Patrol Vessels that carried radio operators operating in this area:

VDW	MARGARET
CGPJ	BAYHOUND
CGPK	PREVENTOR
CGPN	PATROL BOAT NO 4

I asked a few of the old operators who operated back at that time who was the operator in the MARGARET but no one knew who it was. No one had heard a transmission from her and claimed it was a political appointment of some description and that the MARGARET was pretty well restricted to the Saint Lawrence River as a private yacht for some government official.

In July 1927 the records indicate an RCMP Cutter BAYFIELD was instrumental in catching the rum running schooner NELLIE J. BANKS off Prince Edward Island. This was five years prior to the creation of the RCMP Marine Service and I believe this was simply a government vessel of that name in use by the RCMP.

George Lowe was one of the more colourful radio operators around this coast and there were many stories about him and the foolishness he became involved in. He was left at one of the northern stations and the officer in charge down south had not received any of the many reports he was to forward. This officer finally told one of the icebreakers to stop at this station and not leave until they had his reports. They stopped, rowed ashore and George told them he did not have the reports ready but to come back tomorrow and they would get their reports. They rowed back the next day and received several boxes. When these boxes were opened down south they contained all the old magazines lying around the station. One time George and an Eskimo friend got drunk and into a bit of trouble here in Halifax and George told the authorities at the court case that his friend spoke no English and George would have to translate. George simply mumbled a bunch of gibberish back and forth with this Eskimo. It was quite a performance but I do not have the full detail. I doubt a record of this court case survives. George did serve time as the radio or wireless operator in these customs vessels and the later Mounted Police Patrol vessels. One of George's commanding officers noted George's obituary in the daily newspaper and decided to go to his funeral. This commanding officer claimed it was the most pitiful funereal he attended because he was the only mourner.

EAST COAST CUSTOMS PATROL VESSELS

From the collection A. K. Smith VE1BY

This is Radio Operator Al Smith on the left with First Mate, Captain Olsen, at sea on the SV VINCENT A. WHITE, April 1922 on a voyage from Halifax to Glasgow, Scotland.

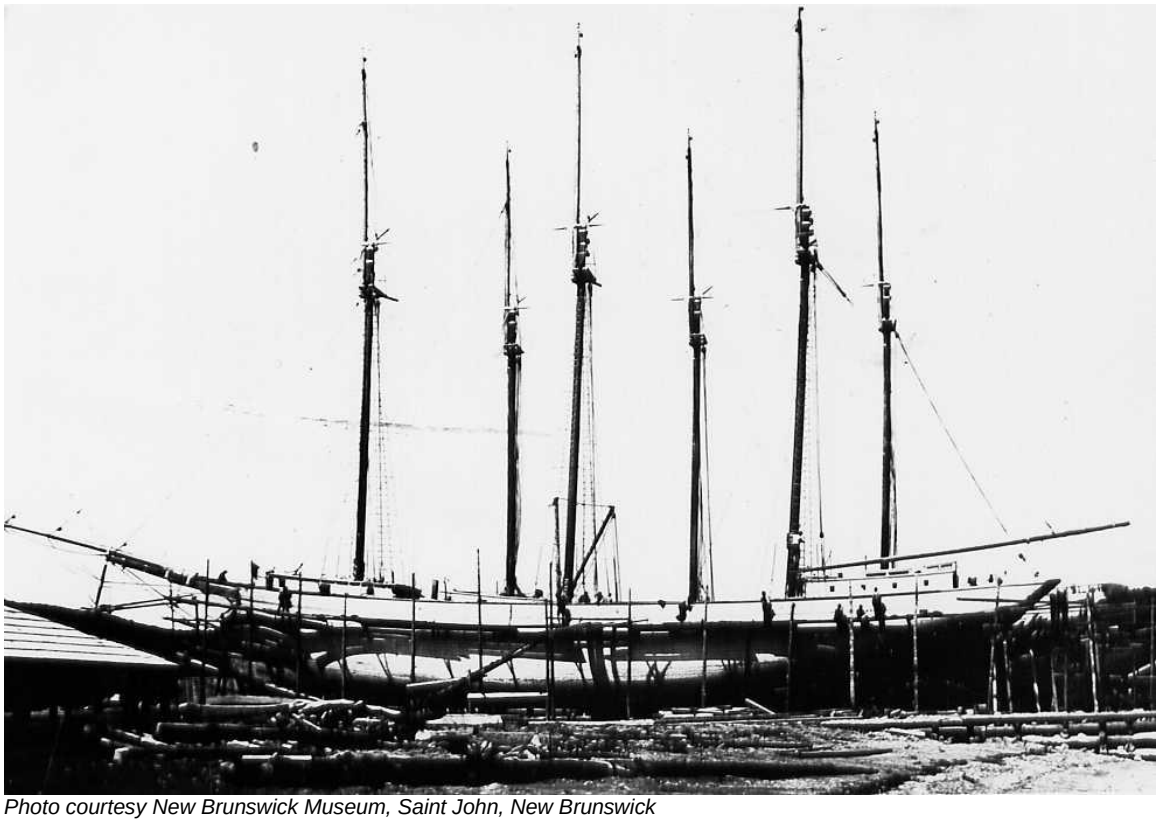
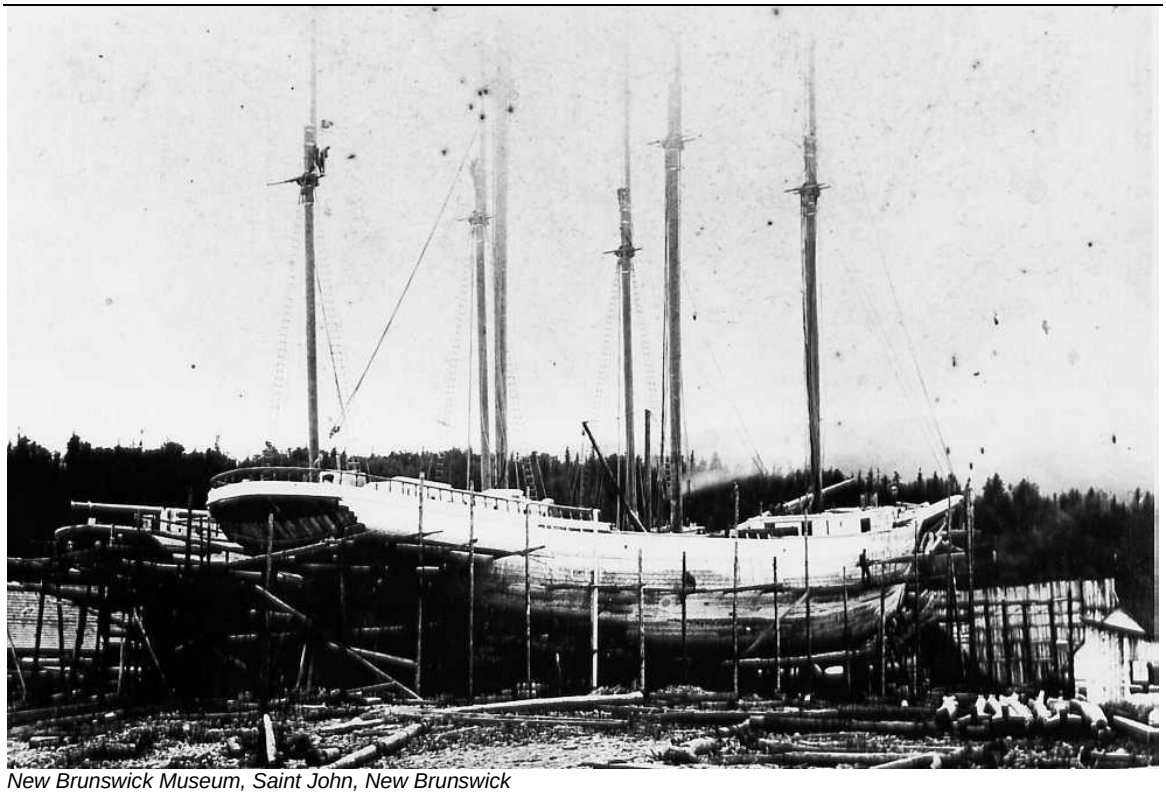


Photo courtesy New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, New Brunswick

This is the VINCENT A. WHITE and another vessel, both under construction at Alma, New Brunswick.

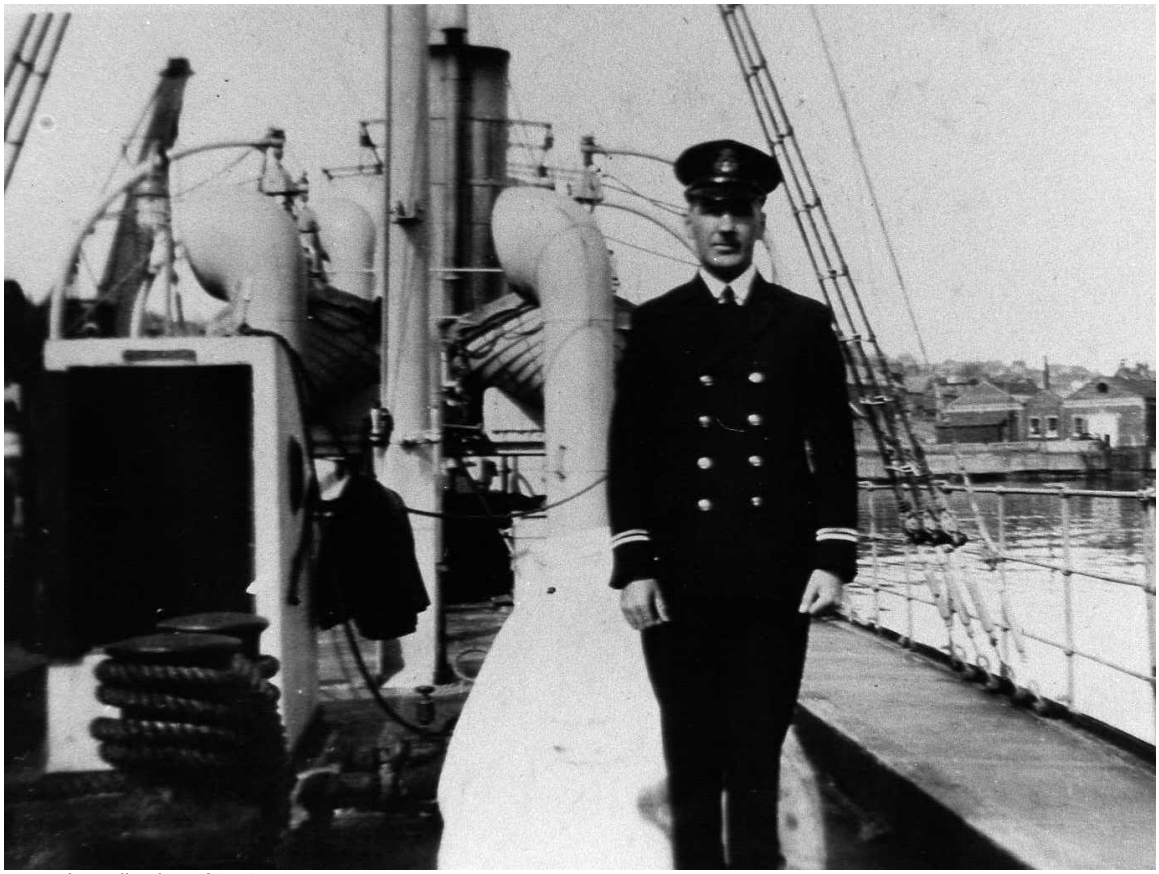


New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, New Brunswick

This is the VINCENT A. WHITE and another vessel under construction at Alma, New Brunswick.

Photo courtesy New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, New Brunswick

They are getting ready to launch the VINCENT A. WHITE, August 7th, 1918.



From the collection of C. C. Foster VE1AMF

This is Jack Sugden, radio operator in the Customs Patrol Vessel PREVENTOR.

From the collection of Captain John H. Campbell

This is radio operator George Lowe about 1930.

WEST COAST RUM RUNNERS

Americans on the west coast were no less thirsty for booze than their counterparts on the east coast. As a result there was a flourishing business for the rum runners.

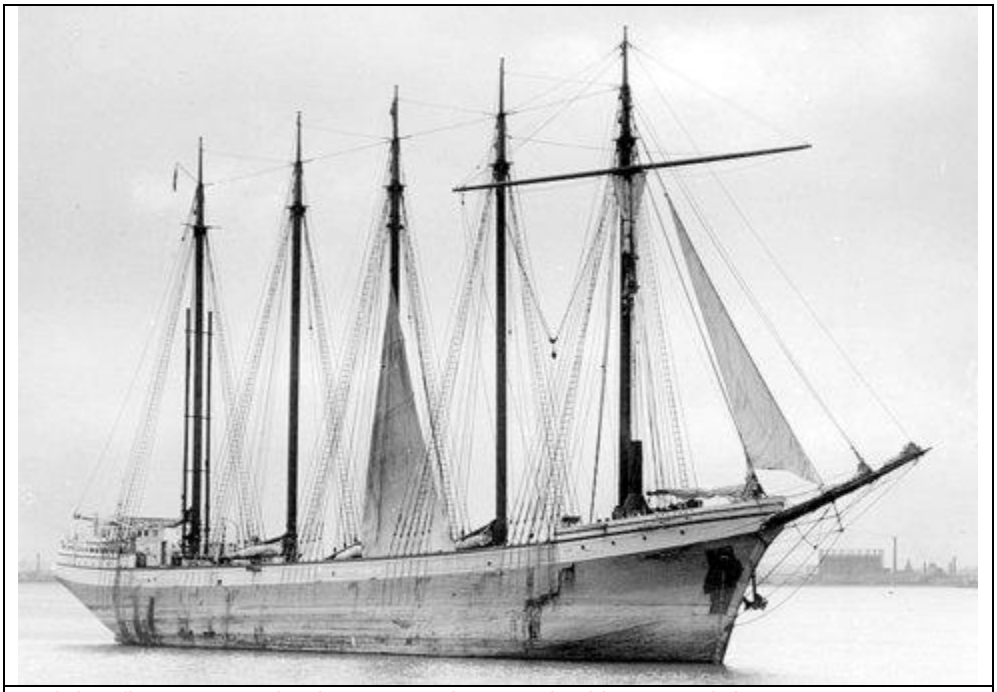
Captain Charles Hudson was a WWI British naval hero who immigrated to Canada, then failed at farming in Manitoba. By 1923 he had returned to the sea in Vancouver and became captain of the three-masted rum running schooner *Coal Harbour*. The next year he was hired by the General Navigation Co of Vancouver as the official rum running "shore-captain," or marine superintendent.

General Navigation was the biggest of Vancouver's four rum running syndicates, and the *Chief Skugaid* was one of several vessels contracted by the company. Hudson, co-ordinated the recruiting and schedules for some sixty contract crews and vessels of different sizes and functions. He also administered purchase and delivery of all fuel, food, equipment, and medical supplies.

Hudson also developed a crucial improvement in ship-to-shore radio communication. His system enabled confidential shortwave contact between smuggling vessels and his home in Vancouver's Point Grey neighbourhood. The young woman who helped operate the shortwave radio was Hazel Stone, sister of Vancouver's longest-serving rum runner: Captain Stuart S. Stone of the mothership *Malahat.*

To combat this, the Coast Guard established a series of listening stations, which intercepted ship to shore radio traffic. This information was relayed to cryptanalysts who would determine whether or not the message contained a hidden code. As the 1920s continued, the US Coast Guard installed radio direction finding equipment on patrol boats, the first recorded use of such technology. By 1927, they were intercepting approximately 60% of alcohol coming in across the 12,000 miles of US coastline. At the end of prohibition, only a fraction was getting through.

Malahat, a large 5-masted lumber schooner from Vancouver, BC, was known as "the Queen of Rum Row" in her day. She became famous (or infamous) for rum-running on the US Pacific Coast between 1920 and 1933. The Vancouver Maritime Museum says that Malahat delivered "more contraband liquor than any other ship."



Malahat first saw service in 1917 and was retired in 1944. *(Photo courtesy Wikipedia)*

Surprisingly, Malahat managed to smuggle rum for 13 years despite the efforts of the U.S. Coast Guard. Apparently this was possible in part because Captain Stone's sister-in-law, who lived near Jericho Beach, Vancouver, received information from "sympathetic coastal vessels" and transmitted coded radio messages to the ship regarding the Coast Guard's whereabouts. Evasive tactics included dropping burlap bags of sand over the side as a decoy, and marking the site as a cache of liquor, in order to distract the Coast Guard's attention while the ship sailed off to another location.

Elizebeth Smith Friedman (August 26, 1892 – October 31, 1980) was an American expert cryptanalyst and author. She has been called "America's first female cryptanalyst. During the Prohibition era, while working for the U.S. Coast Guard, the Bureau of Narcotics, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, the Bureau of Prohibition and Customs, and the Department of Justice, she solved over 12,000 rum-runners' messages in three years.

Radio historian Tom Brent writes, “Texada Island (northwest of Vancouver and in the Strait of Georgia) where I now live, was the site of the largest illegal still north of Vancouver. It was so large, a 3-storey building had to be built to enclose it. More precisely it was located on the shore of remote (at that time) Pocahontas Bay. In 1928 , the still was discovered by an RCAF flying boat on patrol and that was the end of it. The stream that flows into the bay now bears the official name “Whisky Still Creek”.

References and Credits:

1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rum-running
2) http://www.chiefskugaid.org/1923-33-rum-running.html
3) https://www.warhistoryonline.com/history/unknown-history-us-coast-guard-intelligence-operations-m.html
4) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizebeth_Smith_Friedman#Government_service

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