

BOOZE IN MICHIPICOTEN

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Blind pigs or illegal bars have always been found in rough frontier towns, where liquor was outlawed. Young, hardy men, sweating from hard physical labour for railways, lumber and mining camps, sought liquor as a temporary solace and escape from the monotony and physical hardships of their daily lives. Separated from wives or families, men on the frontier found their recreation and social life revolving around the bottle.

The history of booze in Michipicoten is typical of most Northern Ontario towns. During the construction of the C.P.R. in 1883, the Mission, controlled by a notorious gang of boot leggers, distilled and shipped bad whiskey north to Missanabie for consumption by thirsty construction gangs. Exciting stories of whiskey running adventures must have abounded, as evidenced by the bones, pails, and shelter of an unknown man, discovered in 1897 near Manitouwik Lake, and believed to be the remains of a whiskey peddler. As the Wawa gold rush progressed into 1900, the Balmoral Hotel boasted of a large bar, reputed to bring in more money from drinking miners, than the gold mines themselves. A 'snake pit' with sawdust floor was provided for those 'under the weather'.

As the rush declined, so did Wawa, but drinking continued in the Mission. According to one writer, visiting this area in the 1920's the key characteristic of the village was the popularity of 'demon rum'. The Mission Self-Denial Club, noted for never denying itself anything it could get ahold of, possessed many smiling members whenever a 'crock' arrived in town.

With the revival of the gold mines during the early depression, high wines and spirits were smuggled into the gold camps from the Algoma Central Railway. Many a curiously heavy item such as chests of drawers that two men couldn't lift, were carried off the train. This practice declined with the opening of the licensed beer hall of the Parminace Inn, at Gold Park in 1937. Here many a good rousing Saturday night party extended itself into early Sunday morning. According to one miner, miners were generally friendly and peaceful, even under the influence of alcohol. The operation of the Wawa Lakeview Hotel during the 1940's switched heavy drinking back to the Wawa iron mining community. Many a Saturday fishing trip reportedly reached no further than the Lakeview Hotel.

Social workers today report heavy drinking per population in Wawa. Surprisingly though, the town's welfare bureau reports roughly the same proportion of alcoholics as most small towns.

Although drinking is a terminal activity, that should be replaced by more constructive ones, it has a firmly established place in social life of frontier communities. Only through the development of hobbies, clubs, and recreational opportunities, as alternatives to drinking, will the amount of liquor consumption decrease.

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