

North Carolina Before and During Prohibition

As early as 1903 North Carolina began the process of controlling the making of liquor by enacting a law forbidding distilleries outside of chartered towns. The most famous of the in-town distillers is the Old Nick Whiskey Company of Panther Creek in what was originally Surry County and now in Forsythe. The Williams' place became Williams, N.C. and with the passage of more strict prohibition in 1908 the area reverted back to the old farm. Most of the stills and several hundred employees moved to Kentucky to continue the trade.

As with most laws there were exceptions made to accommodate a certain trade. For instance, the Watts Law of 1903 exempted wines and ciders as well as fruit and grape bandies. In 1908 it was stipulated that wines could only be sold at the place of manufacture. Garrett was wise enough to move his wine production to Norfolk prior to a tightening of the laws. His press houses continued in Weldon and Aberdeen.

When the rationing began to take affect, the bootleggers rushed in the fill the void. In 1919 the Collector of Internal Revenue for the eastern counties declared: "We have more illicit distilleries than any state in the Union or any other portion of the earth and the number is increasing." In 1920 of all the stills seized by Federal agents more than one fifth were in North Carolina. No one seemed stunned as this was an old story. As early as 1877 North Carolina was a leading area for illegal stills. In 1875 the N. C. State Fair offered a diploma for the best copper still, with worm attached, exhibited by a state maker.

While the percentage of moonshining among sand lappers and swamp angels was high, there is a strong likelihood the classic local was the upcountry.

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