

Prohibition in Stearns County produced a different cash crop:

MOONSHINE

Farmers turned to brew to lift spirits, pay bills during Great Depression

At the height of the Great Depression and during Prohibition, moonshine helped pay the bills for many Stearns County families. "It was a cash crop," said Urban Gaida, 77, of Sartell, who at age 12 began making moonshine on his family's farm near Holdingford. "When you could only get \$4 for a 200 pound cow, or \$3 to \$5 for a gallon of moonshine, it wasn't hard to see what was going to pay the bills."

Stories by Jerry L. Carter

Gaida's family was one of many in Stearns County that went against the law and made moonshine — a high grade of homemade corn, rye, barley or wheat whiskey.

During Prohibition, Stearns County became a large producer of moonshine, with a majority of the farmers in the area distilling spirits. Stearns County spirits made their way to Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chicago and Canada. The product was nicknamed "Minnesota 13" after the seed corn it was made from.

Gaida said he thought his family was better off than many other farm families in the Holdingford area during the Depression, but times were tough.

"When we went to school, all the other children had syrup sandwiches, and I had hard ones," he said. "We didn't really realize it, but we were all poor."

If it wasn't for moonshine, many families may not have been able to keep their farms.

"I heard my father say moonshine paid off a lot of farms," said George Platz, who lives three miles east of Holdingford.

Income was low, and many farmers had thousands of dollars of debt.

"Times were so bad that it would cost farmers more to ship a load of cattle than they would get for them at the market," said Elmer Elnet, Holdingford. "Instead of getting a check in the mail, they would get a bill."

Many farmers were glad to get rid of the cattle because they no longer had to feed them, Platz said.

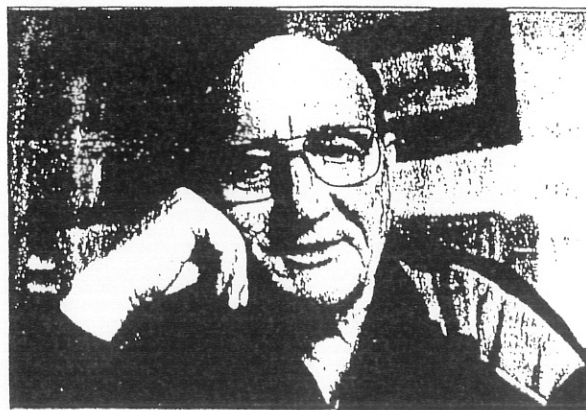
"There was money in moonshine, said Elnet, 67.

"People had to do something to make a living," said Jerome Winkler, who has researched Prohibition in the Holdingford area. "They weren't gangsters or drunks. They were just people trying to provide for their families."



PHOTO COURTESY BY JEROME WINKLER

Making and selling moonshine became a popular way to make money during Prohibition and the Great Depression in Stearns County.



TIMES PHOTO BY JASON WACHTER

Urban Gaida, Sartell, remembers helping operate the family still to make moonshine during the Depression.

Gaida remembers helping in the "special" building, which had 28 barrels of fermenting mash. "My brother and I would wrestle the 100-pound bags of sugar that went into the barrels to make the mash."

Added to each barrel was the grain, usually rye, a couple of yeast cakes and sugar.

"We let it ferment for about one or two weeks," Gaida said. "Every day we had to

stir it. The mash would float on top at first, and when it settled to the bottom, the mash was ready to be distilled."

In that same building was a copper still. The solid parts of the mash were strained, and the rest was put in the still, which had a cover with a copper hose coming out the top.

The mash was brought to a boil, which caused the alcohol to evaporate and travel through the copper tube. The tube ran through cool water, which made the alcohol vapors condense. The alcohol then was collected in bottles or wooden barrels.

"The hooch was so strong — about 120 proof — that it would have to be cut with distilled water," Gaida said.

Charred wood chips would be added to jugs of moonshine or placed in oak barrels that were charred inside for about two weeks. This colored the alcohol.

After all this, the shine was ready to sell. A truck would come in the middle of the night, and the shine would be shipped to many points across the country.

The mash could be fermented and distilled about four times before it had to be thrown out.

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George Platz
LIVES NEAR HILTINGFORD

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Urban Gaida

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