

They called her the *Nellie J. Banks*

Jack Searles

She had a humble beginning and an ignoble end. But, for many she epitomized a time and an age. For some she symbolized wealth and prosperity in lean times, for yet others she and her owners were the bane of their existence. The *Nellie J. Banks* you see was a Canadian barque that operated out of Prince Edward Island, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the Eastern Canadian Maritimes.

The *Nellie J. Banks* began early in the 1920's as a member of the cod fishing fleet operating out of Prince Edward Island. This vessel, like many others, was taken out of the cod trade when this market plummeted in the early 1920s. New owners had new ideas for the *Nellie J. Banks*. Early in 1927, Captain Dicks was contacted by several Americans who were interested in landing liqueur on Prince Edward Island for shipment to the United States via rail cars, hidden among a shipment of potatoes produced in quantity on the island. You see Prohibition was in effect in the United States. The *Nellie J. Banks* was destined to become a rum-runner and a smuggler of liqueur.

Prohibition in the United States formally began in January, 1920 and continued until 1933. On January 29, 1919, by proclamation the Secretary of State announced that thirty-six states had ratified the then proposed Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution and, therefore, this amendment became part of the Constitution. This amendment under Section 1 noted that one year from ratification of this article the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage,

purposes is hereby prohibited. Given this authority, Congress on October, 1919 passed the Volstead or National Prohibition Act.

With the passage of this act people were no longer allowed to market, purchase, consume and/or possess alcohol. Over time, people came to dislike Prohibition and many average citizens took to rum running and alcohol consumption.

To say that this act had significant economic implications is an understatement. Quickly, the smuggling of alcohol became exceedingly profitable and was ultimately controlled by organized criminals. Throughout this period, with increasing sophistication, many cases liqueur, then illegal in the United States, found their way cross the Canadian border into the United States. To quote one Prohibition agent “it is (was) impossible to stop liquor trickling through a dotted line.” So what was the source of much of this liquor? The French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, off of Newfoundland, Canada, of course. For the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon whiskey brought prosperity in hard times. Merchants on the islands bought alcoholic beverages from all over the world and obligingly sold it to eager customers willing to pick it up at their front doors. A small tax was added to the purchase price of the alcoholic beverages and almost everyone, including: the French Government, the merchants, the smugglers and the consumers were happy. For many on the islands this was a golden era with plentiful employment.

And the *Nellie J. Banks* was part of this activity. The role of the *Nellie J. Banks* and other ships like her was the transshipment of alcohol from St. Pierre and Miquelon to other areas like Prince Edward Island or Maine. Almost inevitably, these ships delivered their cargos onto smaller ships waiting outside the US territorial limit for the final delivery of the cargo to its destination.

As Prohibition wore on in the United States, pressure was

brought to bear upon Canada to curtail the smuggling activities of Canadians. This resulted in increased vigilance on the part of Canadian Revenue Cutters, government ships operated under the authority of the Customs Department. Conflicts were inevitable and “on July 22, 1927 whilst the crew of the said Schooner *Nellie J. Banks* were fishing codfish from the deck in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, on the high seas, outside British and Canadian waters...the said schooner *Nellie J. Banks* by and under the orders of Captain John C. McCarthy then being commander of the Canadian Revenue Cutter *Bayfield*...was rammed by the said cutter *Bayfield* and at the same time the said Schooner together with her said cargo were willfully seized by Captain John C. McCarthy...for an alleged infraction of the Customs laws of Canada.” The *Nellie J. Banks* was thus towed to the Port of Charlottetown and impounded. Thus began a monumental legal battle which resulted in a decision on May 8, 1928 that a settlement was granted to the owners of the *Nellie J. Banks* in the amount of \$5,550 for damages and \$700 in costs.

The *Nellie J. Banks*, once released, resumed its smuggling activities through the 1930s, always willing to deliver all kinds of liqueur close enough to the Canadian shore to be smuggled in via smaller boats.

But, 1933 brought with it the repeal of the 18th Amendment and the ending of Prohibition in the United States. In 1935, yielding to pressure from the United States and Canada, France agreed to stop “official” smuggling.

In 1988, after hearing many of the stories about the *Nellie J. Banks* that had become folklore, Dr. Geoff Robinson, a Prince Edward Island physician approached Canada about producing a stamp commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the *Nellie J. Banks*. The Canadian Government was not interested in this proposal. But, when approached, St. Pierre and Miquelon was interested in

issuing such a stamp. A design was agreed upon whereby the *Nellie J. Banks* would be depicted against crates of whisky, an item not generally carried by this ship but the chief export from the islands during Prohibition. This stamp was officially released on August 7, 1988 and is now known by stamp collectors as St. Pierre and Miquelon Scott #511. At the time, this stamp became the first Canadian vessel depicted on a foreign postage stamp.



Thus ends the story of the *Nellie J. Banks*. While she physically she met an inglorious ending, the *Nellie J. Banks* and her exploits were immortalized by the country to which she represented prosperity.

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