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## DRINKING IN MÉTIS-SUR-MER

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Summers along the St. Lawrence offer multiple occasions for 5 à 7 and cocktails with friends and family. This has not always been the case in Métis-sur-Mer where attitudes to drinking have changed considerably over the past two centuries. Although the first settlers to arrive in Metis from Scotland in 1818 were likely too poor to afford to alcohol, Seigneur John Macnider kept a reserve for special occasions in his manor houses in Grand-Métis and Little Metis. We know this because Angélique Macnider's diary from July, 1822 describes her disappointment on her return to Metis to find the bottles of wine and port



Manoir seigneurial MacNider, à l'embouchure de  
la rivière Mitis, vers 1840.  
James Renwick

missing from their cellar or their contents replaced with water. The Macniders may have been the first to bring wine to Metis, but were not the last.

With the creation and settlement of parishes adjacent to Metis, Ste-Flavie in 1829, St. Octave in 1855, and Ste-Angèle-de-Mérici in 1868 and Baie-des-Sables in 1869, Metis was encircled by communities that were predominantly Catholic and French-speaking. In spite of profound differences in theology and occasional disputes over education and marriage, the *curé* of St. Octave and Presbyterian minister in Metis found common ground in the battle against drink. They used the pulpit to decry alcohol and formed (separate) temperance associations to encourage parishioners to take the pledge to refrain from drinking. They also encouraged government officials to clamp down on the trade in liquor and the ill behaviour that went with it.



Le Jolly Roger.  
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The construction of the Intercolonial Railway in the 1870s brought new realities – ready access to alcohol being one of them. During the construction hundreds of “navvies” lived in camps adjacent to the line or were boarders in villages. They worked hard for small wages - and showed a periodic need for drink. “On m’assure que des désordres ne régnaient pas ici

avant l’ouverture des travaux des Chemins de fer”, the Ste-Flavie *curé* reported in 1872. By the following year, the problem was worse. “Il y a deux hôtels non licenciés et dans l’un des quels on détaille des boissons fortes sans gêne et à tous les demandants... ensuite veillées, danses et réunions des jeunes gens des deux sexes surtout pendant l’hiver”.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol was bad, but it was made worse by its association with much greater sins, like sex before marriage or crossed the hard boarder that kept Catholics and Protestants from marrying.

Temperance was a cause that found supporters in Catholic and Protestant denominations alike. The Cercle canadien Lacordaire (founded in 1915) had many counterparts in Protestant Canada, like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. They were powerful organizations with a broad base of support and a significant influence on politicians at every level.

Metis was where various temperance advocates summered, including John Dougall, owner of the *Montreal Witness*, who used the pages of his daily newspaper to decry the evils of drink and promote the temperance cause. The village was also the summer home of at least three families with strong connections to the manufacture of beer and

alcohol, the Molsons, Dawes (brewers of Black Horse ale in Lachine) and the Seagrams (distillers from Waterloo, Ontario).

By 1918, the temperance movement had successfully obtained legislation across Canada to prohibit or limit the sale of spirits, wine and beer. Quebec proved to be the least enthusiastic province in legislating restrictions and finally created the Commission des liqueurs du Québec in 1921 to control the sale and distribution of alcohol as the province's response to the prohibition movement.

Metis prohibited the sale of alcohol within town limits. The community was also circumspect about who established there. This was even more the case when strangers began to take up residence without any apparent connection to the village. During the prohibition era that restricted the sale of alcohol in both Ontario and the United States, Metis became one of the battlegrounds. J. Arthur Mathewson, a Montreal lawyer and politician (he lost to Camillien Houde in the 1930 mayoralty election), was among those who kept a watchful eye on the community where his family had summered since the 1850s. He wrote in July, 1931 to the mayor of Metis, "Cecil Turriff sublet the Blue Cottage to some visiting gentleman who are reputed to be engaged in the bootleg business. Of course a stop has been put to that. I have just received a report that the situation has been dealt with in a satisfactory manner by the police."<sup>2</sup>

But newspaper reports suggest the bootleggers had established a foothold. In June 1931, Metis resident Sunny White and a sidekick from Matane named Wilson were involved in a shootout in Cap-Chat with two officers of the Service Préventif of the Commission des Liqueurs. They rained bullets on inspectors Alfred Bilodeau and Zéphirin Verreault and their parked vehicle. White was described as "chef d'un clan de contrebandiers". A seasoned criminal, he had several aliases and a long criminal record that included three years in Kingston Penitentiary. He was apprehended in Rimouski and his partner in crime at White's residence in Metis. They were charged with attempted murder but convicted of a lesser offence after a long trial in New Carlisle. They were sentenced to 25 years in prison.

Without a wharf, Metis was never a bootlegger's paradise. Baie-des-Sables and Grand-Métis had easier access for illegal trafficking. The neighbouring village of Price boasted several notorious bootleggers. Newspapers reported periodic seizures of alcohol in Metis from local barns, stockpiled for distribution and sale. A Massachusetts bootlegger was



Turriff Hall.

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captured in the village in 1932, fined \$300, and sentenced to three months in jail. Metis fought back by restricting the sale of liquor within its borders. In 1940, council denied an application from Mont-Joli entrepreneur Donat Falardeau to obtain a license from the Commission des Liqueurs to sell alcohol in his hotel at the entrance to the village. The Astle family, who owned several of the village's hotels, had their requests for liquor licenses for their dining rooms denied well into the 1960s. Bars operated on the fringes of the village. Some like the Jolly Roger thrived. The Hôtel Les Boules was popular with locals and youth alike. The temperance movement quietly faded into the background and lost its political force. The only surviving store in the village today sells beer and alcohol, at least in the summer months, to a summer community that hosts more than its fair share of events.

#### Notes

- 1 Archidiocèse de Rimouski – Sainte-Flavie : Annual reports, 1872 and 1873.
- 2 Letter of James Arthur Mathewson to W. R. Macdonald, July 14, 1931.