

ABOVE: MANSION HOUSE AT ST. PATRICK AND WELLINGTON STREETS IN THE 1920S. THE BUILDING WAS RESTORED IN THE 1980S AS THE OLDE ENGLISH PARLOUR, AND IS LOCATED ACROSS FROM THE PRESENT LIQUOR STORE.

LEFT: BEER BOTTLES OF D. DEVLIN'S PERTH BREWERY AT ST. PATRICK AND BIRMINGHAM STREETS, CIRCA 1920.

Wet or Dry?

LIQUOR IN STRATFORD

The production and consumption of liquor has an interesting and unusual relationship to the history of the City of Stratford until well into the twentieth century. The mid- to late- nineteenth century, the period during which Stratford was settled and developed into an independent city, was the peak period for temperance movements and for drunkenness.

As the Canada Company started letting settlers in along the Huron Road to settle in the Huron Tract, the company needed a system of inns or taverns every few miles. The first three of these were built about 20 miles (about 32 km) apart in 1829. This was quite a long distance especially for travellers with wagons.

So in 1832, a number of others were built between them, including the Shakespeare Inn at Stratford, the first permanent building in town. The signboard (portrait of Shakespeare) provided by the Canada Company agent was the beginning of the Shakespearean connection of the town. It was a favourite place to drink, even in 1845, when it became the focus of election riots between Green (Irish Catholics) and Orange (Irish Protestants). Unfortunately, it burned to the ground in 1849.

By 1856, the town of about 2,000 had eleven hotels, a brewery and a distillery. During this period the first column on the first page of each of the town's newspapers had a heading "Hotels, Saloons, etc." By 1871, there were 25 hotels and taverns, four saloons and five liquor shops for 4,300 people. It was said that you could walk the four blocks from the corner of Huron and John Streets to Erie Street and pass fourteen places where you could get a drink. And James Kennedy claimed his liquors were so pure that the gallon jug he used as a measure never needed to be washed. Liquor provided an important economic sector for the town.

The distances to travel with wagons to market before motorized vehicles came on the scene meant that there had to be many hotels and saloons even in smaller villages, and half-way houses between villages along the main roads. It was commonly told of some farmers, that after a visit into town, the horse had to find its own way home.

It was therefore of great concern to the growing town as the temperance movement gained more support, led by the Methodist churches and rural women (who of course couldn't vote yet). When the County of Perth, to which the town belonged, began discussing holding a county-wide vote under the new Canada Temperance Act, the town was spurred into action to request incorporation as a city even though it was 1,300 shy of the required population of 10,000. As of March 31, 1885, Stratford became a city and separated from the county.

As it turned out, the county vote did not bring in temperance. This had to wait for another vote held in 1915 which passed by a narrow margin. It went into effect only six months before the whole province voted in favour of prohibition. Stratford and a number of townships still voted overwhelmingly wet in the 1916 provincial vote

(as much as 70%). A map published by the Ontario government at the beginning of 1916, showed that almost all rural and small-town municipalities in the province had gone dry on local option vote, mostly since the Conservative government came to power in 1905. In the middle was a very compact area of wet townships and towns in Perth and Waterloo counties, the largest concentration of "wets" in the province!

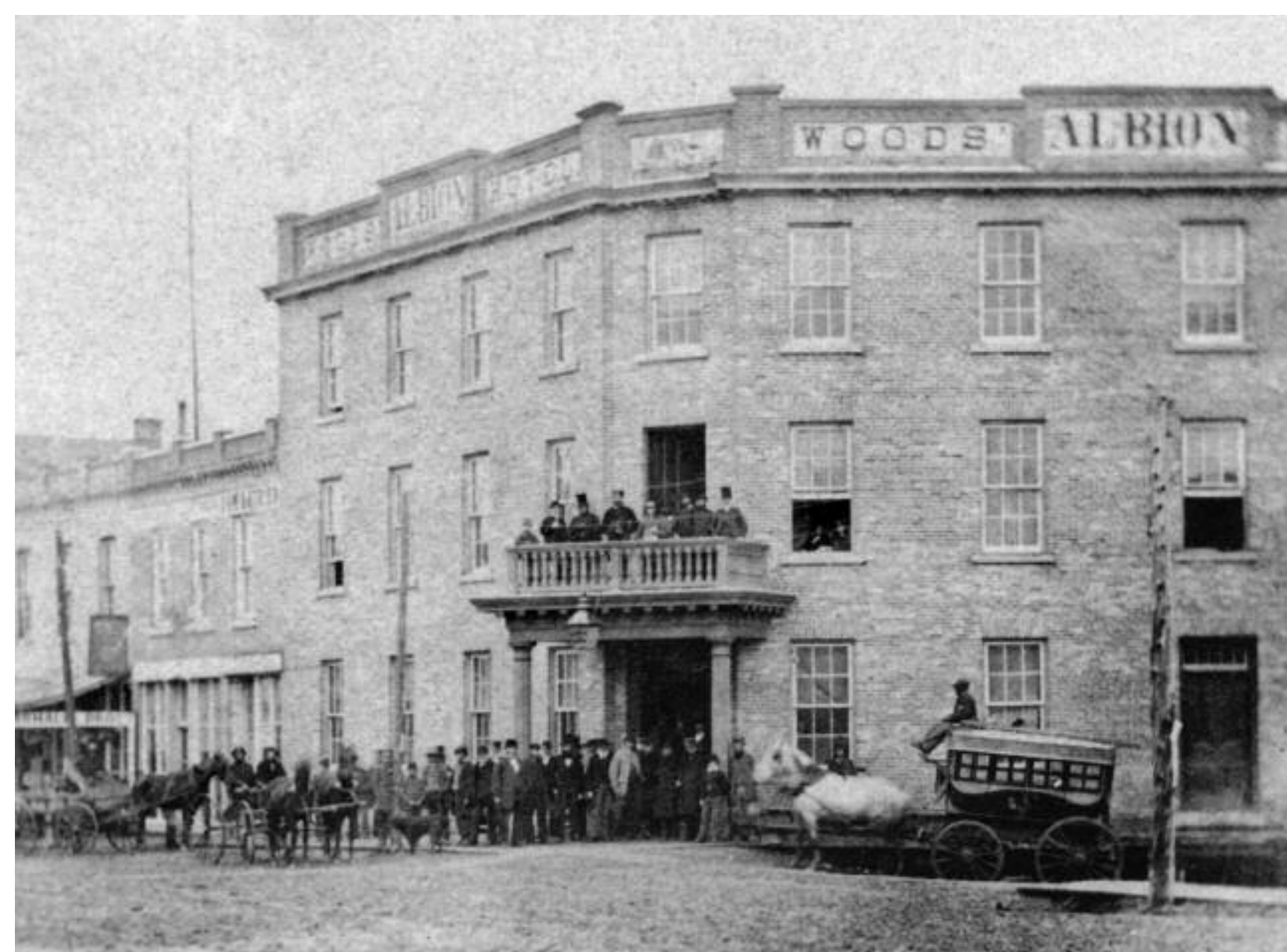
Provincial prohibition in 1916 put an end to most production and sale of liquor and beer. The local breweries switched to ginger beer or ginger ale among other non-alcoholic drinks, but many could not really survive the decade of prohibition with its increasing regulations. But the support for complete prohibition was not strong and much private distilling and bootlegging occurred.

By 1927, the provincial government rescinded prohibition in favour of liquor and beer control, seeing the establishment of two agencies, the government-owned Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) and the co-operative Brewers Retail, which still dominate the market today. Halls and restaurants were then licensed under the Liquor Control Act of Ontario, which is still in effect today. Each municipality could stay (or become) dry under local option by a 60% vote of the ratepayers. Only three townships in Perth County ever used this option and no area in the county is dry today.

As elsewhere near the border, bootlegging did continue during the depression to cash in on the demand for illegal liquor in the U.S. which continued with prohibition longer and more completely. Stratford stores also benefited from the 1946 decision of the Privy Council of the United Kingdom that the Canada Temperance Act was still in force in Perth and Huron Counties according to their votes before the 1916 provincial prohibition. This was quite a surprise to the county but it was not until 1959 that another vote was held to get rid of the CTA.

Today, the controls set up in 1927 are largely still in place, but the local option to be dry has lost its appeal in most places. In a city that relies so significantly on the tourism and hospitality industry, the sale of liquor and beer constitutes an on-going benefit to the local economy, but without the lack of controls that made temperance such a concern in the late 1800s.

BY L. RIEDSTRA, STRATFORD-PERTH ARCHIVES



ABOVE RIGHT: ALBION HOTEL AT ONTARIO AND ERIE STREETS IN 1864, ONE OF THE FIRST BRICK HOTELS BUILT ABOUT 1857. THE CONSERVATIVES ATTACKED THE PARADE OF THE VICTORIOUS LIBERALS IN THE ELECTION OF 1863 FROM THIS BUILDING – ON THE STREET, FROM THE BALCONY AND FROM THE ROOF.

RIGHT: BEERWAGON AT KUNTZ'S BREWERY, 423 ERIE STREET, CIRCA 1920. AFTER 1927, KUNTZ'S BREWERY BECAME THE FIRST BREWERS RETAIL.

