

## The Santa Barbara Historical Museum

# Speakeasy and Stills: Prohibition in Santa Barbara County

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**  
Special to CASA

**T**HE SANTA BARBARA HISTORICAL MUSEUM continues its entertaining new lecture series in the adventures of wine and spirits in Santa Barbara. The second lecture, on Thursday, October 13th, was on the subject of the history of Prohibition in Santa Barbara County. At the podium was local author and historian, Erin Graffy. In one evening, she took a solid shot of describing the complexities of the 18th Amendment, and how Santa Barbara played a major part in California bootlegging in the 1920s.

Prohibition began in 1919, with the passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. Sales and manufacture of alcohol, but not its consumption, were banned. Naturally, the desire to drink skyrocketed, along with the costs of getting booze and the profitability of selling it. At a time when the average weekly salary was \$50, a bottle of whiskey could sell for as much as \$70. Landing illegal goods in a major port was obviously dangerous. However, Santa Barbara County, with 125 miles of coastline, hundreds of secret sea caves, and few highways, was the perfect place to land a shipload of hooch. We had the most coastline of any county in the nation, a small population, and a small police force. So even if they knew where the ships or the rumrunners were, the law had a difficult time catching them. So, we became a major

landing spot for the stuff to be shipped up to San Francisco or down to Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, that made Santa Barbara a pretty exciting place.

Graffy also told us lots of delightful stories about the colorful local characters of the Prohibition era, from Sheriff James Ross to Pearl Chase. She also identified many of the locations where illegal stills resided, like “Happy” Canyon; and where old speakeasies still stand, like Casa de Sevilla, and Marymount School’s Tea House. All in all, it was a lecture to be drunk down with gusto.

After the talk, the audience adjourned to the museum’s secret backyard speakeasy. There, we had to sneak past two period police cars, and give the password at the door. Behind the door, teacups were handed out to taste the local ‘tea.’ Wines from Fiddlehead Cellars, Kunin Wines, Jalama Wines, Oreana Winery, and Santa Barbara Winery were secretly on offer. Also, in the very back room of the speakeasy was a tasting bar for scotch, whiskey, and corn liquor. Summerland’s own The Barbecue Company provided plates of savory light fare. Any speakeasy turns into a party, so a jazz trio was provided, as well as a fine player piano from 1923 that played tunes



Erin Graffy de Garcia and James Garcia

from the time. The next event in this series of lectures has not been scheduled, but should happen in spring of 2012. Call the museum for details. Tell them: “Joe sent me.”

The Museum is located at 136 East De La Guerra St. For more information call 966-1601 or visit [www.santabarbaramuseum.com](http://www.santabarbaramuseum.com).



**Amanda and Richard Payatt** combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.