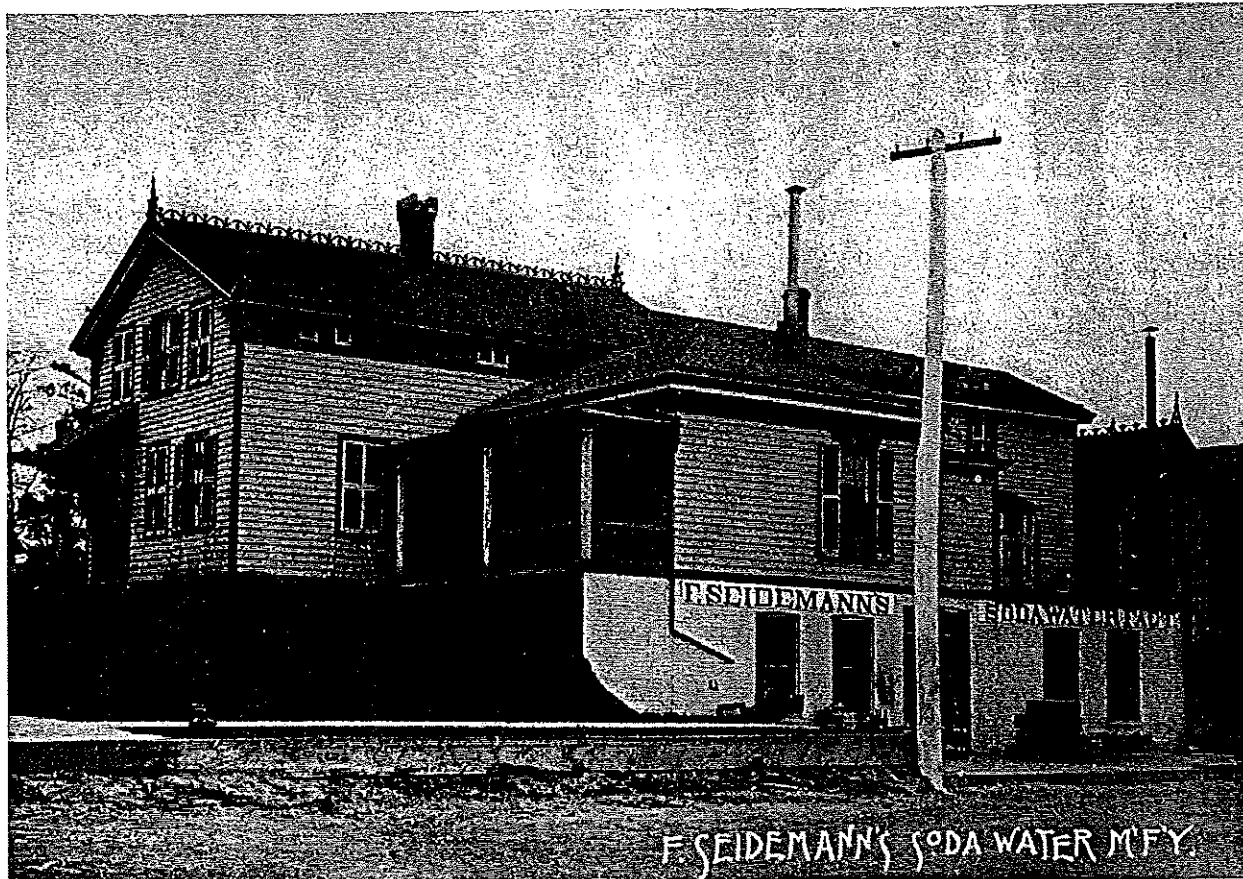


November 1, 2005

## Prohibition Arrives



January 16, 1920 was a dark day in Sheboygan history. Over the years our city has had its share of days that, as the poets said, "try men's souls". January 16, 1920 was one of those milestone days, it was the first day of prohibition.

In 1920, much as now a good many of Sheboygan residents could trace their ancestry back to a Germanic heritage, and Germans like their beer. Many German old-timers swore that they could not eat without a mug of beer nearby. Prohibition was unthinkable. Not only was prohibition unthinkable, it was a dismal failure across America, and certainly here in Sheboygan.

The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to our constitution was ratified January 16, 1919, and was known as the Volstead Act. Never in the history of our country has a law been passed that was so flagrantly violated. Illegal liquor and beer flowed freely. Organized crime stepped forward to supply the never-ending demand for beer, liquor and wine, with the end result being that millions of dollars poured into the coffers of hoodlums like Al Capone, Dutch Schultz and a dozen others.

In the 1919 Sheboygan City Directory there were listed 108 taverns. Not bad for a city of about 25,000 inhabitants. Then came prohibition, and with a few strokes of a pen in far off Washington D.C. politicians closed every tavern in Sheboygan. But then in 1920 after prohibition become law a strange thing happened. The good folks of Sheboygan suddenly developed a taste for soft drinks. A check of the 1920 City Directory showed that the 108 taverns had disappeared and in its place appeared 76 "soft drink parlors". It is amazing how Sheboygan residents lost their taste for beer and hard liquor and turned to soft drinks. The 1924 city directory listed 93 "soft drink parlors", in 1926-108, then in 1930-122 and in 1932, the last year of prohibition, 132 "soft drink parlors" were listed as doing business in the city.



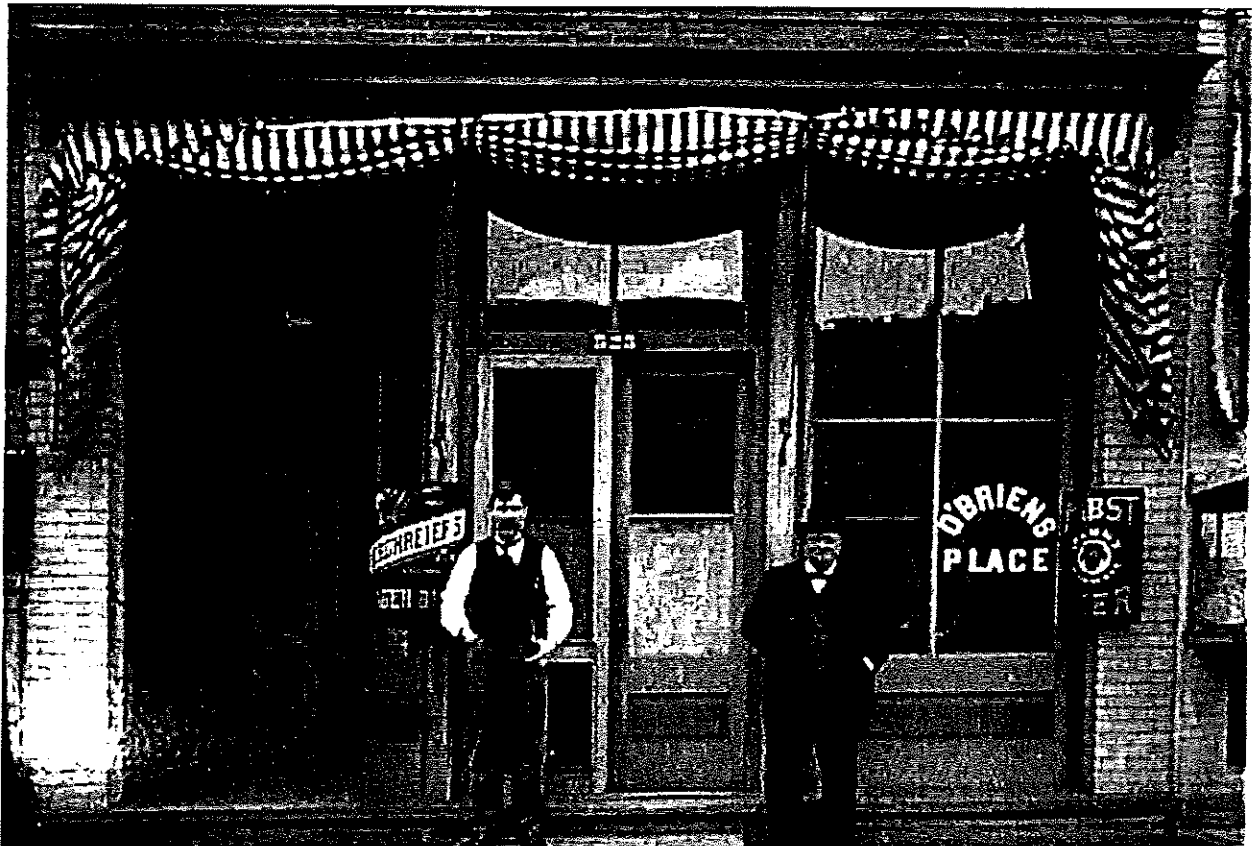
By 1933 prohibition was dead. It was a total failure. In fact, studies show that more alcohol was consumed during prohibition than before it. As an example, the 1933 City Directory shows that the city of Sheboygan's population was about 37,000 and that 141 taverns were doing business in Sheboygan.

There are many stories told by "old timers" of how openly the Volstead Act was disregarded. All over the city illicit stills were in operation cooking "moonshine" and making it available to eager customers. In fact, when prohibition federal agents came to Sheboygan, the first thing they would do is go to the gas company and check gas bills. In a day when the average gas bill was 8 or 10 dollars, a gas bill for 50 or 60 dollars would seem to indicate that the property owner was using an unusual amount of gas, maybe to cook mash and run a still? Or maybe they were just cooking a lot of soup! More than one Sheboygan resident ran afoul of the prohibition laws as they tried to quench the thirst of his fellow Sheboyganites.

In the county so-called "speakeasies" abounded. Federal agents would no sooner close them down when they reopened. Of course, the Sheriff's Department did their very best to uphold the law. Stories abound about bribes and "under the table" payments made to law enforcement officers to "look the other way". It may seem today as though law officers in the 1920s were corrupt, but they were struggling to try and deal with an extremely unpopular law, a law no one wanted enforced.

I wonder what ever happened to those 132 "soft drink" parlors?

**Today's tidbit:** During the "Roaring 20s", Al Capone, infamous Chicago gangster, is said to have passed through Sheboygan several times on his way to his northwoods hideout. The main highway to northern Wisconsin in those days ran right down Eighth Street.



O'Brien's Place, a typical saloon of the early 1900s.

