

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Thomas Sykes and Prohibition in Mount Clemens

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Mount Clemens was a hotbed of activity during the years of Prohibition in Michigan, 1918-1933. The city's location on the Clinton River, with easy water access to Canada via Sarnia and Windsor, made it a popular port of entry for illegal liquor. Outlaw saloons, or "blind pigs," were numerous in the area. As a result, Mount Clemens was "dry" in name only, especially in the early years of Prohibition.



The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Sykes

(Photo used with permission from First Presbyterian Church of Mount Clemens)

Bootleggers went to great lengths to keep the liquor flowing, including the use of underwater cables laid in the **Clinton River** to move crates of booze from one side of the waterway to the other.

A major figure in Mount Clemens during the Prohibition era was the **Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Sykes**, pastor of **First Presbyterian Church of Mount Clemens**. Dr. Sykes was a tireless campaigner for strict enforcement of the liquor laws. Not only did he rail against drink from his pulpit, he accompanied state police officials on rum raids in the area.

Frustrated with the hands-off attitude of local law enforcement, Dr. Sykes contacted federal authorities in the spring of 1923 to coordinate a clean-up of illegal saloons in Mount Clemens. Eighteen establishments were raided on July 24, 1923, and eleven were eventually padlocked. In a front page letter to the editor of the Daily Leader on January 26, 1924, the crusading pastor exhorted local officials to join the state police in clearing out the remaining saloons. He warned purveyors of illegal booze that "we have in the last few weeks served 79 warrants and just as soon as the courts digest these we have 79 more ready." He further chided Police Commissioner **Frank J. Kendrick** for the city's perceived blindness to offenders:

Don't forget, Mr. Kendrick, that we closed two breweries owned and operated by Mt. Clemens businessmen and bootleggers--one of them right beside the police and sheriff's office-- running without even a permit. It only took the state police 36 hours to get the trucks which left every morning loaded with beer--and yet the local officials could not see them.

I did not need to go to the police headquarters to find out if law was being enforced. Like other decent citizens I could use my eyes. You can't fool the people all the time. Come on and help us mop up the old town.

In March, 1924, an anonymous note was posted on the bulletin board of the Presbyterian Church, threatening to "get" Dr. Sykes and his wife, Florence, and warning them to leave town. The very same evening, Dr. and Mrs. Sykes became violently ill after drinking milk which was eventually discovered to have been poisoned with mercury or lead arsenic. The toxins had sunk to the bottom of the milk bottle and settled, however, thereby limiting the amount that was actually ingested. The couple recovered after lengthy stays at Harper Hospital in Detroit.

In response, the *Daily Leader* took to the front page with an editorial decrying the "attempted assassination" of Dr. Sykes. While acknowledging that the pastor had many enemies in Mount Clemens and that his methods were objectionable, the newspaper declared that the cowardly attempt on his life was a terrible blot on the honor of the city, and that the culprit must be brought to justice swiftly.

A local man was quickly arrested as a suspect because he had been overheard to say that someone was going to "get" Sykes, but he was found to have no connection to the alleged murder attempt and was released after a few hours of questioning. Despite an investigation by federal, state and local authorities, no one was ever charged with the crime.

Dr. Sykes resigned his Mount Clemens pastorate in September, 1931, due to the ill health of his wife and daughter. He subsequently served Calvin Presbyterian Church in Detroit.

Michigan citizens voted to repeal Prohibition and to establish a state liquor control commission on November 8, 1932. The legislature legalized the sale of beer and wine beginning on May 11, 1933, and the sale of hard liquor on December 30, 1933. The sale of intoxicating beverages resumed promptly in Mount Clemens.

For more information about Thomas Sykes and Prohibition activities in Mount Clemens, we recommend:

- "Under Prohibition: That's Where We Are," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 3, 1918, p.4, col.2.
- "18 Arrested in Federal Booze Raids in County: All Places Where Liquor Has Been Sold Will Be Padlocked For One Year," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, July 25, 1923, p.1, col.7.
- "Padlock For Eleven Mt. Clemens Drinking Places to go on Today: Federal Officials Ask Injunctions in Sweeping Crusade Charging Liquor Law Violations," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, December 20, 1923, p.1, col.7.
- "Dr. Sykes Tells Part in Big Raid," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, January 14, 1924, p.1, col.1.
- "Come, Boys, Help Mop Up, Says Sykes," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, January 26, 1924, p.1.col.1.
- "Dr. Sykes Gets Warning," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 24, 1924, p.1, col.3.
- "Dr. and Mrs. Sykes Ill From Milk," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 26, 1924, p.1, col.1.
- "The Attempted Assassination of Dr. Sykes [editorial]," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 27, 1924, p.1, col.6.
- "Poisons Settling to Bottom Saved Dr. and Mrs. Sykes," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March

28, 1924, p.1, col.1.

- "Five Raids Fail to Bring Clue in Sykes Poison Case," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 29, 1924, p.1, col.8.
- "Woman Figures in Sykes Poison Plot Mystery," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 31, 1924, p.1, col.8.
- "Smugglers Lose Big Booze Cargo to Customs Men: Beer and Wine Estimated at \$10,000 Seized at River's Mouth," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, June 27, 1929, sec. 2, p.1, col.4.
- "Women Consider Anti-Prohibition Movement Here," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, November 14, 1930, p.1, col.2.
- "Farewell For Local Pastor: Hundreds Attend Event For Dr. and Mrs. Sykes at Church," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, September 18, 1931, p.1, col.5.
- "Blind Pigs Begin Singing Their 'Swan Song' in Macomb County," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 12, 1933, p.1, col.4.