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WHISPERING WIRES: The Tragic Tale of an American Bootlegger

By Philip Metcalfe
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By Bill Andrus
Northwest Books

OK, maybe not so tragic, but certainly fascinating. The central figure of this period piece, Roy Olmstead, was a cop who became Seattle's king of bootleggers during prohibition. He became a Christian Scientist later in life and lived to a ripe old age.

Philip Metcalfe was a Portland author who died in 2002 shortly after finishing this history of the Northwest's colorful prohibition era. The story is populated with likeable bootleggers, ambitious rumrunners, cops on the take, corrupt politicians and zealous federal prohibition agents.

That's where the strength of this book lies. By bringing the characters to life, Metcalfe brought the whole period to life. The Northwest, with its proximity to Canadian booze and its hundreds of miles of waterways and coastlines, was a smugglers' paradise. The demand for alcohol was enormous and unscrupulous entrepreneurs like Olmstead were quick to take advantage.

Fast boats, much faster than the police and Coast Guard vessels detailed to catch them, raced down Puget Sound with huge loads of whiskey and beer bound for Seattle's clubs and nightspots. Protection money flowed from bootleggers to cops and politicians. Most of the country had little use for prohibition, but it was the law and it had a devastating effect on the criminal justice system, corrupting police, courts and politics throughout the country.

Seattle was no different. Officials from the mayor down to the beat cop were on the take. Federal officials struggled to enforce the law and take down the bootlegging rings, but many, such as a young man named Al Hubbard, were playing both sides of the street. Hubbard became an associate of Seattle bootlegging kingpin Olmstead, then sold him out when he went to work as an undercover agent for the Prohibition Department's Seattle chief, William Whitney.

Most of the key figures in Seattle's bootlegging scene, including the enforcement officers, ended up in court before prohibition was repealed in 1933. At the center of those cases and at the center of the book is the story of how federal agents gathered evidence by tapping the phones of suspected rumrunners and bootleggers. It quickly became an important enforcement tool as agents eavesdropped on conversations about shipments, deals and drop locations.

When officials finally brought Olmstead to trial, much of their case was based on volumes of notes and transcripts from those phone conversations. The courts struggled to determine how to handle evidence

gathered through this new technology, and the justice system still is wrestling with the issue in today's explosive era of technological change.

All but forgotten in the last 80 years of momentous events, Metcalfe showed prohibition's legacy is still with us, even in the language with words such as "hijack." A lot of source material has been distilled into this story to create a complex historical account, at times somewhat heavy on the details, but mostly informative and entertaining. The kind of book one can relax on the beach and read with a nice, cold drink in hand.

A minor quibble is use of the term "Queen City" in almost every reference to Seattle, which is often. I guess that's what Seattle's promoters called it in those days, but it was distracting. Don't the folks in Seattle call it the "Emerald City" now? That's even more annoying.