

The Noble Experiment in Minnesota

A Review of

**Elaine Davis, *Minnesota 13: Stearns County's
'Wet' Wild Prohibition Days***

(St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Printing Co., 2007), 176pp.

by

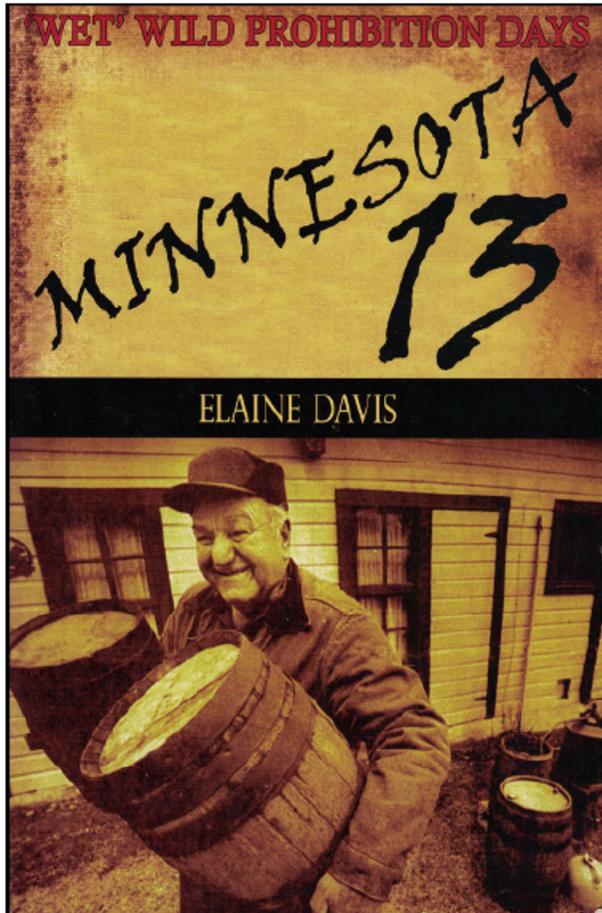
Thomas L. Olson

Minnesota 13, author Elaine Davis¹ tells us, is the name of an early hybrid seed corn developed by the University of Minnesota. And it's significant in her compelling story. Early Minnesota farmers typically planted corn varieties brought west by migrating easterners. Those varieties had 100-120 day maturities which were frequently too long for much of Minnesota's growing season. Because it matures in just 87 days, farmers in Stearns County, in "middle" Minnesota, quickly embraced Minnesota 13. The corn, moreover, had another important value—it was a high quality key ingredient in producing a "mash" of corn, sugar, water, and yeast. When fermented and then distilled the result was a rather fine moonshine.

During the years of alcohol prohibition, from 1920 to 1933, "bathtub gin," home brew, and wine were made throughout the state. But Ramsey, Hennepin, Winona, and Stearns counties were the centers of activity. St. Paul was well-known for its friendliness to prohibition-era gangsters and Minneapolis gave rise to Isadore "Kidd Cann" Blumenfeld and his liquor distribution syndicate. But, as Davis tells it, Stearns County was quite probably the hub of state distilled alcohol production (moonshine) and its wide distribution meant that the bottled result, Minnesota 13, became a nationally known and sought-after product.

¹ Elaine Davis is well-qualified to tell the story of Minnesota 13. Her family has deep roots in Stearns County. And she's a PhD., educator, and author of several other books. Importantly, she sought the advice of many others—people she has generously credited.

Why Stearns County? In an entirely rational blending, Davis explains that there were several reasons for Stearns County's prominence. To begin, with its high proportion of German immigrants and ancestry, the county throughout the years of temperance promotion had had little sympathy



for the movement. German families enjoyed alcoholic beverages which were a part of daily life, holidays, and Sunday picnics. Nor did the Catholic Church, in this predominantly Catholic county, object to alcohol consumption. Indeed, Catholic orders had often been producers of such beverages in order to be self-supporting. Because of these general views, when prohibition began local law enforcement showed little interest in enforcing prohibition and in cases that Davis mentions, actively worked against enforcement. Similarly, local merchants, grocers and hardware stores especially, whether in St. Cloud, Melrose, St. Joseph, or any of the several other towns in the county, were uncooperative with authorities

when it came to disclosing the sale of copper vats, tubing, sheet metal, sugar, and yeast (to name some of the necessities).

Who flaunted the law and why? In the main, the moonshiners were farmers who broke the law simply because they needed the money. What is often forgotten in histories of the Great Depression is that for thousands of farmers it began not in 1929 but in 1920 or 1921. There are several explanations but the plain truth was that debt was high and commodity prices low. As a result, Stearns County farmers in many cases turned to moonshine as a means of family survival and quite often bartered it locally for necessities.²

² Bartering moonshine for necessities—food, hardware store items, and such—was also important because moonshiners often were wary of depositing their

Also, and notably, moonshining was well-suited to rural America. The fermentation of mash produced an awful smell. Because of this it was important to either secret the mash vats in the woods or in hidden rooms in barns or close to other odiferous areas of farming. Distillation also required a steady supply of cool water for condensation of the distillate. Farms with creeks and abundant wells provided that. And, the entire process required much coming and going which was more safely done in rural areas and usually at night. Finally, there was experience and expertise. North Dakota became a “dry” state years before national prohibition began in 1920 and Stearns County moonshiners had played a significant role in providing that state’s wet goods. What’s more, the county was home to many people who possessed both brewing and distilling expertise and who were willing to experiment in developing the sought-after product that was Minnesota 13.

But illicit “stills” in Stearns County were not all or did not remain small-time mom and pop operations. A number of them grew production sufficiently in order for some farmers to acquire sizeable tracts of land, send children to college, purchase businesses, or retire comfortably. A few moonshiners produced in sufficient quantities and developed distribution “bootlegger” connections which enabled them to sell Minnesota 13 widely. Although there were local bootleggers, including one prominent county commissioner, distribution sometimes meant doing business with truly dangerous people, including Al Capone and Kidd Cann. That’s another part of the story that Davis tells particularly well.

Of particular interest to readers of The Minnesota Legal History Project will be the legal ramifications of Stearns County moonshining. When the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified and the Volstead Act signed, the production, distribution, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages became illegal under federal law. States, several of which had already become “dry”, were now forced to comply with federal law—and Minnesota did. Thus, prohibition was illegal under both state and federal law. Initially there were just 36 federal agents who were mostly “poorly trained and underfunded” to enforce the law in all of Minnesota and the Dakotas as well as half of Wisconsin. To be effective, enforcement, at least initially, depended upon the cooperation of local law enforcement.

cash income in banks which were sometimes a source of tattle-tailing to federal agents and keeping cash in their homes or on their persons invited robbers.

In Stearns County, many if not most of those in law enforcement were sympathetic to the moonshiners, not the federal agents. Indeed, local law enforcement was sometimes the source of tip-offs to moonshiners that a federal raid was about to occur. Tip-offs were even published in the local newspapers—such as this item in the *Melrose Beacon*: “Unknown sources have reported that federal agents will be working in the Avon area for the next few weeks.” When law-breakers were apprehended, sentences were initially mild fines or short stays in a local jail. But in the latter years of prohibition federal enforcement sent more agents to Stearns County, fines and imprisonment strengthened, and more of those convicted were sent to Federal prisons, especially to Leavenworth, Kansas. What’s more, the involvement of organized crime as well as rough stuff by both lawbreakers and federal agents frightened many locals. As a result, although there were instances of local moonshining into the 1970’s, production of Minnesota 13 in Stearns County declined sharply in the last years of prohibition.

Elaine Davis’ book is a well-written, entertaining, and enlightening read. Recent books such as Daniel Okrent’s *Last Call*³ have pulled together the national picture of prohibition. But national issues, rum-running from abroad, and gangsterism are far from the full story. That’s where Davis’s work shines. It brings the era to people any of us might have known and it tells us, in detail we need, how it all came about and what happened. Finally, Davis has benefited from a surprising surfeit of sources (which she managed admirably). The archival sources were helpful, of course. As was a thorough combing of the St. Cloud, Melrose, and other local newspapers. Best, however, was the CETA⁴ grant in the 1970’s which enabled Stearns County to undertake an extensive oral history project. That project resulted in interviews with many participants in Stearns County’s prohibition years—moonshiners, consumers, police, abettors, and

³ Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York, N.Y., Scribners, 2010).

⁴ CETA (1973-1982) was the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. It was administered by state and local government and intended to help the long-term unemployed gain marketable job skills. One provision, however, provided 12-24 month full time employment in public agencies and non-profits. In the hands of some state and local governments, CETA mimicked some of the most creative aspects of the New Deal’s WPA (e.g., The Federal Theater Project). Stearns County’s oral history project was undoubtedly part of that broad and creative mandate. Unfortunately, subsequent federal employment programs were far more constricted and the history of CETA remains to be written.

suppliers. Until Davis' work, those marvelous sources hadn't been worked into a meaningful narrative. Davis did that and the result is a book of which she should be justifiably proud.

Here's what's also important. Writing local history is just plain hard and time consuming. Whether microfilmed or as printed, local newspapers are seldom indexed. That means scanning endless pages. Collections of personal papers are rare. Where they exist they are usually the letters and writings of the community's leaders—the newspaper publisher, manufacturer, public official, or other community “leader.” Such sources belong often to the notion that “history is the story of the winners.” Where oral histories exist they too most frequently focus on the “winners.” What's more, local interviewers too often skirt difficult or controversial topics—the stuff which should most interest us. Thankfully, that didn't happen in Stearns County in the 1970's. Finally, there's context. To be meaningful, and Davis has accomplished this, the end result must be a readable text that looks beyond the local to relate to the larger issues of the day.

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Reviewer

Thomas L. Olson died on September 29, 2020, at age 78. He was born and grew up in Red Wing, Minnesota. He earned a bachelor's degree from Wisconsin State University at River Falls and a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Minnesota. He taught at Mankato State University and the University of Minnesota and then enjoyed a career in university administration and in philanthropic development for educational, arts, and health care organizations.

He is the author of “Blockbusters: Minnesota's Movie Men Slug it out with Studio Moguls, 1938-1948,” one of the most frequently downloaded articles on the Minnesota Legal History Project website.

His book, *Sheldon's Gift: Music, Movies and Melodrama in the Desirable City* (North Star Press of St. Cloud, 2009) recounts the stormy history of show business in Red Wing, especially its iconic Sheldon Theater. More than local history, the book addresses the unique predicaments of entertainment enterprises, highbrow and low, in small cities. The book also has a good deal of courtroom drama in relating the story of movie-related lawsuits in the 1930's and again in the 1950's that challenged municipal theater ownership.

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