

EARLY YEARS OF THE SSF POLICE DEPARTMENT

By Jacquelyne Kiouss

During the early decades SSF was a law abiding town with little need for policing even through the dramatic growth of the shipbuilding industry during WW1 which drew and employed thousands of people. In the 1890s the town was comprised mainly of young single men, most employed by Western Meat Company, who had little else to do but frequent saloons. The booming saloon business (the town's most profitable non-industrial enterprise), did not sit well with the town's trustees who in 1913 declared the town "overburdened with saloons" and proposed an ordinance that would restrict the number of establishments serving alcohol (*SSF Police Department 1892-2003*). Residents were outraged leading trustees to quickly back down with no disruption to the flow of alcohol.

It was 1922 when the first police officer, Louis Belloni, was hired. The department consisted of Belloni, working nights, the town marshal, working days, and one motorcycle. Belloni was named chief of police in 1924 and the three-person department moved into the recently completed City Hall.

Upon becoming chief Belloni had the impossible task of enforcing prohibition which made the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol illegal, except, apparently, in SSF. Residents considered the consumption of alcohol an absolute right. Belloni sided with residents having neither the will nor the staff to enforce prohibition. Stills operated all over town; SSF became known as one of the most notorious bootlegging sites in the state.

How did the town get away with seemingly ignoring the 18th Amendment to the Constitution? In reality, so did many other municipalities nation-wide as enforcement proved very difficult. "Just about everybody had a still in his basement, said the chief's brother, William Belloni. You couldn't put the whole town in jail." (*SSF Police Department 1892-2003*)

During a raid in 1924, federal agents complained that the crowd that had gathered threatened them as a police officer stood idly by. The town trustees, growing tired of the prostitution, gambling, and bootlegging, ordered the chief to clean up the town. Of course that was an impossible task but Belloni complied making several arrests. He was then fired. The trustees' contended Belloni's friendship with residents made it impossible for him to enforce the law. Belloni did get his job back after loyal residents, angry at the trustees and at the chief's dismissal, staged a recall election throwing out three trustees and reinstating the chief.

Illegal gambling, prostitution, and bookmaking remained big business into the 1950s.