

[www.atlasobscura.com /places/nelsens-hall-bitters-club](http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/nelsens-hall-bitters-club)

Nelsen's Hall & Bitters Club

Rachel Rummel December 26, 2019 : 4-6 minutes : 4/10/2019

Nelsen's Hall, a tavern on Washington Island, at the tip of the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin, is the largest purveyor of Angostura Bitters in the world, selling more than 10,000 shots of Angostura annually. But the tavern's history might be even more interesting than its current claim to fame. Nelsen's Hall, open since 1899, is the oldest continuously-operating tavern in Wisconsin, getting patrons drunk right through Prohibition.

For a tavern to operate as a speakeasy throughout Prohibition is hardly remarkable. But to sell alcoholic beverages with the consent of the county court is, to say the least, unique. Such is the case for a stubborn Dane named Tom Nelsen, who founded Nelsen's Hall as a dance hall. His clients preferred to be called "islanders," and outsiders had to travel via ferry to visit the club.

The remote nature of this club is not the reason for its reputation of circumventing Prohibition, although it did help avoid detection at first. When the Volstead Act was passed on October 28, 1919, Nelsen wasn't going to give up his business. He had heard that alcohol could be purchased and dispensed for medicinal reasons. He wasn't a doctor, nor did he have access to grain alcohol, commonly prescribed to patients under the guise of a healing potion for ailments such as depression or anxiety. Instead, Tom Nelsen applied for and received a pharmacist's license, solely for the purpose of dispensing medicinal alcohol. Nelsen remembered that bitters contained alcohol and were sold at the local drug store in Sturgeon Bay, mainly to treat stomach disorders. He would prescribe and sell Angostura bitters, a Venezuelan concoction (now produced in Trinidad), whose recipe was a closely-guarded secret.

Bitters were never meant to be drunk on their own, at least not as an alcoholic beverage. But the high alcoholic content of bitters certainly helped, and Angostura bitters are about 45 percent alcohol by volume, or "90 proof," in tippie parlance. So Nelsen "prescribed" shots of Angostura bitters to patrons, thus retaining his islander clientele and saving his business.

That is, as the story goes, until a federal agent stopped at Nelsen's Hall and observed all the makings of a speakeasy, with a tipsy crowd doing shots of a strange substance. When he inquired what the people were drinking, he learned it was bitters. Wasting no time, the agent went to the county seat in Sturgeon Bay, and had papers drawn and served to

Nelsen. The tavern owner was charged with violation of the Volstead Act. He went to court, stubbornly determined to fight for his rights.

The state made their case, which was clear cut: Nelsen was serving alcoholic beverages, forbidden by law. According to legend, when Nelsen was called on for his defense, he produced a bottle of Angostura bitters and a shot glass. He cited this product could be purchased at any drug store and offered many medicinal benefits, including aiding digestion. Nelsen claimed the product was so foul tasting that it could not be considered a beverage and it must be strictly medicinal.

He also stated his hall had many community uses, as a dance hall, a dentist office, a movie theater, and, of course, a pharmacy. He then invited the judge to sample the bitters. After taking a sip and wincing, the judge ruled in favor of Nelson, agreeing no beverage worth buying could taste so bad. Thus Nelsen was able to continue serving his islanders bitters, now legally. He himself was reputed to consume a pint a day and downed his last pint at the age of 90.

While Prohibition ended in 1933, the ingestion of bitters at Nelsen's continued. In the mid-20th century, Nelsen's new owners founded the Bitters Club. The club continues today, and any person who can swig a shot of Angostura is inducted. The bartender will dunk a thumb into the patron's empty shot glass, and stamp a Bitters Club membership card with its dregs. This initiates the member as a full-fledged islander, "entitled to mingle, dance, etc. with all the other islanders," as the card certifies. Full-fledged islanders can chase their drinks with the tavern's signature [Angostura-infused Bitters Burger](#).

If the drinking activities of the Bitters Club aren't exciting enough, the most popular game for patrons is to try to tack a dollar bill on to the tavern's slatted ceiling. The bar staff take down the bills every year and donate proceeds to local charities.