



Text Version of Audio Story: Molasses

The United States Alcohol Company of Boston produced alcohol for various applications, chiefly to support the war effort, as alcohol was a key component of munitions used for World War I. And secondly, of course, they produced alcohol for consumption by the general public. Molasses was their most important fermenting agent.

Molasses, of course, is a byproduct of sugar production. Molasses is what is left over after sugar cane is boiled down and processed. Molasses is an ideal source for alcohol. Ferment it, distill it, and presto, you've got booze.

The United States Alcohol Company of Boston needed a way of storing the molasses they were importing from places such as the Dominican Republic. The molasses came in by the barge load, so they needed to build a pretty large tank. They figured about sixty feet high, ninety feet around — all in all, a tank that would hold well over two million gallons of molasses.

Company officials went to local government and requested a building permit. Local government said, "Well, it's a tank, not a structure. You don't need a building permit, you need an engineering permit. Go see the Department of Engineering."

That department said, "Something that large is a structure. You don't need an engineering permit, you need a building permit."

So, in essence, because no one could agree on what kind of permit they needed, U.S. Alcohol just went ahead and built the tank. The plans for the tank were poorly conceived, poorly executed and fell under the guidance of, by of all people, not an engineer, but the company accountant.

It was the nineteen-teens — 1914, 1915. Shortly after construction, it became apparent that the tank was structurally flawed. Molasses started to seep through the joints and from around the rivets. To alleviate the fears of the workers, the outside of the tank was painted the same color of the molasses, so that one would no longer be able to see the oozing.

In January 1919, with the realization that Prohibition was about to be enacted, U.S. Alcohol filled the tank to full capacity with molasses. They wanted to make

one last batch of rum and dump it on the market. Demand was high; people wanted to stock up.

Barging in from a more temperate climate, the shipment of molasses was warm. The existing molasses in the tank was cold — Boston in January. To compound the problem, in a matter of a couple of days, the weather changed. Boston had been in a deep freeze but quickly experienced a January thaw.

Temperatures rose by nearly forty degrees. It was more than the tank could take. The rivets started to pop. It sounded like machine-gun fire. The pressure was so great it tore the metal sides off the tank like sheets of copy paper. Shrapnel flew through the air. One piece of the tank was hurled through the air and landed a far distance away in a playground. Another piece rocketed down the street and knocked the elevated train tracks right off of a monstrous trestle.

Molasses roared down the street of a poor, Italian immigrant Boston neighborhood in waves up to forty feet high and at speeds calculated at thirty-five miles per hour. The great Boston Molasses Flood enveloped and suffocated the life out of every man, woman and child unable to escape its torrent.

In all, twenty-one residents of the neighborhood would perish. The clean-up task that would follow is indescribable. Sightseers tracked molasses with their shoes, back to every part of the city. All of Boston became sticky. U.S. Alcohol tried to avoid blame by saying the tank was bombed by anarchists.

So, the next time you hear someone say, “slow as molasses in January,” tell them the story of the Great Molasses Flood of 1919.

I'm the American Storyteller.