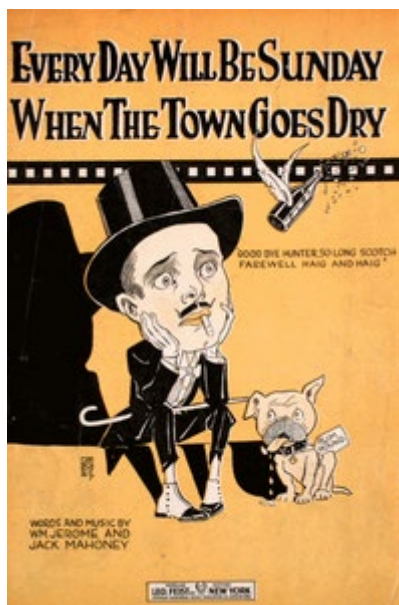


14. Whatever Happened at the Green Flash Boarding House?

The Green Flash Boarding House (also called the Green Flash Inn or just Green Flash) was a great source of discussion, rumor, and misinformation during Prohibition and for years afterward. It was originally the mansion for the Covenhoven Plantation, set back from Blawenburg Road (now Rt. 518) at Mountain View Road. The building had seen a lot of history as the Covenhovens and their ancestors tilled the fields and eked a living off their farm. Eventually, the farm passed from the Covenhoven hands as non-family members bought and farmed the property. Just before it was the Green Flash, the property was owned by the Lenhart family.



Then along came Prohibition, and it became illegal to produce, import, transport, or sell alcohol. It wasn't illegal to drink it though. From the turn of the 19th century, the momentum was building to curb society's ills caused by alcohol. Several states had already banned alcohol by the time the Volstead Act, the enabling legislation for the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, was passed in 1920. This was the start of a national thirteen-year enactment of Prohibition. It didn't take long, though, for people to find ways to violate the law, and stills sprang up all over the country to quench the thirst of a nation going dry.

*This is one of the many songs that emerged during Prohibition lamenting the loss of legal booze. Read the lyrics and listen to the song **Every Day Will Be Sunday**.*

The Lenhart Farm caught the eye of someone described in the Somerset Democrat as “a wealthy New Yorker.” He worked through an agent and remained anonymous when he bought the farm and leased it to Tony Sanson. It became the Green Flash Boarding House.

Immediately, the operation of the boarding house came under suspicion from locals. Unsubstantiated reports of it being a speakeasy (an unlicensed saloon) or a brothel abounded. The house sat back off Blawenburg Road down a tree-lined lane with a circular drive near the house. It was a large house, able to accommodate many people. While some local people lived there, on weekends, especially in the summer, many more guests arrived at Skillman Station by train from New York City for some country air, rest, and relaxation. No one knows for sure what else was happening in the old farmhouse. You might think of the Green Flash as a B&B with benefits.

But Sanson had bigger ways to make money, so he subcontracted the barn close to the house to some enterprising men who also came from New York. There apparently were many speakeasys in the city and they needed continuous, out-of-town suppliers to provide their alcohol products. On Saturday, March 29, 1930, the explosion that rocked Blawenburg revealed some illegal activity at the Green Flash.



**Explosion Reveals
\$10,000 Still On
Blawenburg Farm**

One Man Killed and Another
Badly Hurt When Large
Liquor Plant Explodes

**Two Men Received Full Blast Of
Steam From Boiler**

Still Had Not Been Operated
Long—Had Electric Buzzer to
Warn of Stranger's Approach
And Number of Farm Animals
To Deceive Snoopers

THE GREEN FLASH

by Jessie Havens

Yes, indeed. The tale is true. There really was a Green Flash in Blawenburg, a speakeasy or boarding house owned by "someone in New York City". A bootleg

still did blow up, and someone was killed. Quiet, peaceful, law abiding, church-going Blawenburg would hardly seem the place where people broke the law for a living. We have all heard of Prohibition and speakeasy bars, but the mayhem was in crime-ridden cities like Chicago and New York, not rural NJ, land of hard-working farmers.

It was 1930, and the bad depression years were still to come. Prohibition was 10 years old, and there were plenty of people with money to buy booze if they could get it. There was open contempt of the law and enforcement had become futile. Rural New Jersey, with only scattered barracks of State Troopers, was prime territory for bootleggers.

Two badly scalded men were dropped off at the Princeton Hospital on the day of the "Green Flash Explosion". It took a lot of detective work to tie them back to Blawenburg, since no one was talking and the drivers were gone. It turned out that the old Lenhart place on Mountain View Road, once part of the original Covenhoven farm, was being set up as a major operation. The barn contained a thousand-gallon whiskey still, powered by a 50 HP boiler burning coke, not coal, so there would not be noticeable smoke. There were two vats in the cellar, three more on the ground floor, each with capacity of 2,500 gallons and 50 barrels of molasses just waiting to be used. The two men were trying to figure out how to start up the machinery when they mistakenly blew the place up.

The explosion was in a barn on the property. The "Green Flash" was the name of the nearby farmhouse, described by different newspapers as a boarding house or tavern. The tenant proprietor, Tony Sanson, claimed not to know even the name of the New York owner, or anything about what was going on in the barn. It was actually Sanson and a tenant from another house on the estate who heard the explosion and cries for help. They took the scalded men to the hospital, where one died. The survivor would not give out any more information, leaving people to speculate for years about what was really going on at the Green Flash in Blawenburg.

Jessie Havens has had a long writing career. She wrote a column in the Somerset Messenger Gazette called *Hindsight* as well as books about Somerville history and the Hall-Mills murder case.

This article was originally published in *Back to Blawenburg, Tall Tales and Then Some...* Van Harlingen Historical Society of Montgomery, Inc. 2012. Republished with permission of the author.



Illegal liquor is poured down the sewer in New York City during Prohibition. New York was the destination of choice for bootleggers because of the proliferation of speakeasys there.

The old barn was seriously damaged by the explosion with the south end being blown out. It was reported in the Somerset Democrat that shingles and timbers were hurled 100 feet from the barn.

The Green Flash Boarding House burned down, but probably at a later date, not due to the explosion. Several Blawenburg residents reported that the fire was in the mid-1930s. This was when the Great Depression really kicked in and Prohibition had been repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment. Ken Dorey, who lived across the street, remembered hearing about the fire but he slept through it. John Van Zandt, who grew up on the Broad View Farm, said "I remember Green Flash but not as an inn. It had a bad reputation during Prohibition, and we never had anything to do with it. I remember when it burned down and the Hopewell fire truck rushed past our place to try and save it." Bob Saums recalled the fire in an oral history. "I came down the road on my bicycle to see (Ken Dorey) and I see the smoke coming up out of the building, and I say 'What happened here?' During the night it burned down."

The Green Flash wasn't the only still in the area. Ken Dorey remembered that even though Prohibition was over and the Green Flash was history, "there were active stills up on Cherry Hill Road and on Burnt Hill Road." Maybe locals had acquired a taste for their high-test booze!

We may never know the full story of the Green Flash, who came to visit or what shenanigans were going on there. But that may be a good thing. Every village needs a few mysterious tales to perk up residents' imaginations and add some interest to their folklore. Blawenburg has its share of mysteries that may forever remain unsolved, and some of those will be discussed in future blogs.

Blawenburg Facts:

1. Three houses stand where the driveway and farmhouse of the Green Flash Boarding house were.
2. The Greenflash Farm remembers its past in its logo.

**Looking Ahead:****Blog 15. Blawenburg Tavern**

Blawenburg Tavern was the first house built in the village that was not a farmhouse. It served as a residence, tavern, stagecoach stop, and community meeting place just as Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike was being constructed.

Sources:

"Explosion Reveals \$10,000 Still in Blawenburg." *Somerset Democrat*, P. 1, April 4, 1930.

John Van Zandt email

Baker, Walter. *Reminiscences of Blawenburg and Other Memories with V. Leroy Skillman, Anna Drake Skillman, and Edward Terhune*, Oral History 98-05. Belle Mead, Van Harlingen Historical Society of Montgomery, Inc., 1998.

Baker, Walter. *Three Boys from Blawenburg with J. Kenneth Dorey, Robert (Bob) Saums, William (Bill) Terhune*, Oral History 04-15. Belle Mead, Van Harlingen Historical Society of Montgomery, Inc., 2004.

Havens, Jessie. *The Green Flash in Back to Blawenburg, Tall Tales and Then Some...* Van Harlingen Historical Society of Montgomery, Inc. 2012

Photo Credits:

Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries and University Museums – Every Day Will Be Sunday

Library of Congress – Liquor poured down the sewer

Somerset Democrat – Article images