

University

BOOTLEGGERS AND RUM-RUNNERS AMONG WOMEN
DURING THE PROHIBITION IN THE UNITED STATES

Student's Name and Surname

Course

Professor

Due Date

Bootleggers and Rum-Runners Among Women During the Prohibition in the United States

Today, when a little less than a century has passed since the end of the Prohibition Era, the period remains understudied in the academic community and little is known about it within the general public. As a result, conventional attitudes towards the Prohibition are full of myths and stereotypes. One of the most common, yet superficial perceptions of the Prohibition refers to its representation as a period dominated by powerful, violent, and insolent male criminals like Al Capone, Bill McCoy, and George Remus. Such an interpretation has more in common with a legend rather than empirically proven facts. In particular, the Prohibition had a substantial 'female side' shaped by bootleggers and rum-runners among women. Due to the particular legal and social circumstances, female bootleggers were often more successful compared to their male companions.

The overall historical background of the period is necessary to understand the specific economic and social factors underlying the Prohibition Era. The beginning of the twentieth century in US politics was marked by the domination of Progressivist views in the social, economic, and cultural lives of the nation. Adherents of Progressivist views believed the mass consumption of alcohol to be the reason underlying most of the social problems challenging US society at that time. Eventually, in 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was adopted, declaring the production, transport, and sale of alcohol illegal throughout the US territory. However, this prohibition led to results opposite to the those expected by Progressivists. Criminal gangs quickly reinforced control over the illegal alcohol industry, becoming one of the most influential and dangerous groups in the US.

The smuggling syndicates' recruiters highly demanded female bootleggers due to several

specific reasons. First of all, in many states, it was not allowed for police officers to search women.¹ Therefore, in most cases, female alcohol smugglers used to hide bottles on themselves, taunting officers to search them. Also, due to superficial perceptions of women as incapable of using violence and organizing sophisticated smuggling operations, the courts were particularly reluctant to prosecute women for bootlegging—especially ones with children. As a result, female rum-runners were substantially less likely to face legal sequences compared to male smugglers. A thorough look at the social and legal context of the Prohibition Era indicates that gender inequality was lying at the core of the nation's life in the 1920s. Paradoxically, it was also the gender-based stereotypes and discriminating legal provisions that enabled women to become successful smugglers and bootleggers.

Even if female bootleggers were caught, the probability of substantial punishment was still insignificant. In this regard, Fred Minnick fairly notes that, for women, "bootlegging was good money with little punishment."² Subsequently, Minnick provides an illustrative example of a female smuggler from Milwaukee who was illegally earning \$30,000 per year and was sentenced to a month in jail along with a \$200 fine after being caught. Undoubtedly, the incompatibility between the punishment and crime became another factor reinforcing the activities of female bootleggers. At that time, national law enforcement agencies were focused primarily on dreadful male gangsters, like Al Capone and George Remus. The latter were mystified in American society, while the role of women in the illegal alcohol industry often remained underestimated. The fact is that some female bootleggers' biographies were not less

¹ Fred Minnick, "Women's History Month Spotlight: Women Bootleggers," *The Huffington Post*, May 10, 2014, accessed August 21, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/fred-minnick/womens-history-month-spot_b_4927284.html.

² Fred Minnick, "Women's History Month Spotlight: Women Bootleggers," *The Huffington Post*, May 10, 2014, accessed August 21, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/fred-minnick/womens-history-month-spot_b_4927284.html.

adventurous and impressive compared to their male counterparts.

Speaking of the most landmark bootleggers and rum-runners among women, Maggie Bailey is worth being mentioned. Bailey was not accidentally referred to as the “Queen of the Mountain Bootleggers.” Born in the state of Kentucky, Maggie Bailey started bootlegging at the age of seventeen. Despite being caught several times, the court never issued a genuinely strict punishment for Bailey. Besides the mentioned legal and social factors, Bailey also managed to escape punishment due to her status in the local community. In particular, Bailey was known for giving food and financial help to the poorest families in the area.

Stella Beloumant was another notable female bootlegger from the state of Nevada. The story of Beloumant is particularly illustrative in terms of understanding how complicated it was for law enforcement agents to catch female smugglers. An entire task force was established to arrest Stella Beloumant. The operation team involved the US Attorney General, the Prohibition Bureau’s second commander, as well as a district attorney. Subsequently, catching bootleggers and rum-runners among women was hardly possible without the involvement of top specialists and high officials in the law enforcement hierarchy. It is also illustrative that most female smugglers ended their bootlegging career in fatal accidents rather than after being caught. In this regard, an example of an African-American smuggler, Bertie Brown, may serve as an illustration. Brown produced alcohol, and her moonshine was highly praised for its quality. Eventually, Brown—who was never caught by the police—died from burns she received after her still exploded in 1933.

Bootleggers and rum-runners among women during the Prohibition had different social and financial backgrounds. For instance, some women began smuggling because of extreme

poverty, like Nora Gallagher who was a widow left alone with five children. Eventually, having no money to provide for a living, she was forced to start smuggling. In contrast to Gallagher, some female bootleggers initiated the illegal business being already wealthy. Gloria de Casares was a wife of a rich Argentinian businessman. Subsequently, De Casares used the connections of her husband to organize the supplies of elite alcohol from abroad. In a similar way, Edna Giard married a smuggler to get access to criminal connections that were necessary for her to benefit from the tremendous demand for prohibited alcoholic beverages.

All things considered, the Prohibition Era also had a substantial 'female side' that remains largely understudied. Moreover, due to specific legal and social factors, bootleggers and rum-runners among women often turned out to be more successful in escaping justice compared to male smugglers. The true fact is that the biographies of female bootleggers were not less bold and adventuresome than the lives of Al Capone, Bill McCoy and George Remus. In this regard, the stories of Maggie Bailey, Stella Beloumant, Bertie Brown, and Gloria de Casares may serve as particularly convincing examples.

Bibliography

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