



Prohibitionists' Domain and Smugglers' Paradise: Florida's Peculiar Status During Prohibition

| Lauren Sumners

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The U.S. Constitution's 18th Amendment had taken effect at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties. Then hailed as a "noble experiment" but later viewed as a colossal mistake that spawned all sorts of crime, the so-called "Prohibition Amendment" told a thirsty nation, "Don't drink!"

Millions of Americans chose to drink anyway, so the demand for booze had to be satisfied through illegal means that included bootlegging, smuggling, speakeasies, and the illegal production of alcoholic beverages ranging from moonshine whiskey to bathtub gin.

During this tumultuous decade,

Florida elected as its Governor a preacher named Sidney J. Catts, the candidate of the Prohibition Party, and became the 15th state to ratify the 18th Amendment in 1918. Ironic since Florida was also in the thick of the aforementioned illegal activities, gaining nationwide notoriety as a hotbed of smuggling. These illegal activities were highly profitable for the enterprising criminals who engaged in them. Many stayed in business by bribing corrupt officials to look the other way. The lucky ones also managed to avoid getting nabbed by honest lawmen such as Eliot Ness, whose relentless team of federal agents was later immortalized in *The Untouchables*, a popular TV series (1959-63) and a 1987 movie.

For drinkers and those who surreptitiously supplied them during Prohibition, the thrill of obtaining smuggled liquor was a quintessentially American custom. This act brought to mind the rebellious streak of the nation's founders and their defiance of the oppressive laws and taxes imposed by a tyrannical monarch. Floridians were not immune to the lure of smuggling. Freckled along the state's Atlantic seaboard, and extending out among the islands of the Bahamas and the Caribbean, lay bays and inlets ideal for the trade, which would famously become known as rum-running. It also helped that in the 1920 census, the

Florida counties along the 250-mile long stretch of coastline from Titusville in northern Brevard County to Florida City near the southern border of Dade (now Miami-Dade) County, had a combined population of only 82,843, with more than half of the population clustered in the Miami area. Today, incidentally, the seven counties along that stretch of coastline have a combined population of 7.9 million. (Smuggling has not come to a halt, but nowadays, the illicit cargo is more likely to be drugs than booze.)

Also helping the smugglers was the fact that the southernmost portions of Florida's Atlantic seaboard were not far from the Bahamas, then a British colony. Most of the rum and other illegal booze entered Florida through the Bahamas, where the sale of liquor remained legal. Nassau, on New Providence Island, further cemented its historic reputation as

a hub of piracy and crime by becoming the bootleggers' paradise during the 1920s. Nassau served as the depot for alcohol shipped there from all parts of the world. From Nassau, rum runners would transport their illegal goods to the infamous Rum Row, which was created by one of Prohibition's biggest celebrities, William "Bill" McCoy. McCoy, a Miami sailor, was a pioneer in the rum-running trade. His reputation for successful smuggling soared in 1921, when he

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managed to get a shipment of 1,500 cases of prime liquor from Nassau to Savannah, Georgia. McCoy returned with \$15,000 in his pocket and a vision for Florida's illegal liquor trade. Setting sail, McCoy anchored his boat just outside the U.S. territorial waters and established the beginnings of Rum Row.

Rum Row was a stretch of ocean that lay just beyond the U.S. territorial limits along the Eastern Seaboard. At that time, the territorial limit was a mere 3 miles off the coast. Long chains of vessels carrying liquor of every sort tossed their contraband to contact boats assigned to deliver the smuggled cargo to accomplices on the mainland, all while avoiding the interference of customs officials and other lawmen.

McCoy increased his productivity by repacking the liquor bottles into a clever form of packaging he invented called the "ham." To create the ham, straw was stuffed into the bottoms of burlap bags, and six bottles were arranged to form triangular sacs that were sewn shut. Hams could transport three times more liquor than wooden cases and better protect the illegal goods from damage during transportation. McCoy created an image for himself as a fair and honest dealer. His booze was never watered down or relabeled, and he never paid bribes for government protection. What customers saw was what they got, allegedly coining the famous phrase, "The Real McCoy."

Two of the best-known and most active ports involved in these covert operations included West End and Bimini. Sixty miles east of West Palm Beach, West End was home to nine liquor warehouses

and could welcome as many as 50 powerboats ready to receive orders and smuggle the booze. Bimini, about 50 miles east of Miami, received a lot of attention from rum runners because of its speedy boats, which became known as "Bimini boats" and were capable of reaching the Florida coast in a mere two hours.

From these two ports large barges loaded with thousands of cases of liquor would depart at sunset and travel toward their contact points in the dark of the night. They were often aided by fishermen who were bribed to serve as lookouts. Once ashore, the smuggled liquor, disguised as common legal goods such as citrus or fish, would be transferred onto vehicles awaiting the deliveries. Once the transfers were completed, the boats would head back to their home ports, returning by sunrise.

Clever methods of concealing their smuggled cargo helped the smugglers avoid raising the suspicion of customs officials. Submersion tanks were chained to the underside of vessels, and false bottoms were installed for ample storage of liquor in the underbelly of boats. While a portion of the liquor remained in Florida, most of it was transported north for distribution in the nation's more populous regions. The rum-running captains who thrived on the thrill of the trade were nothing short of local heroes to the people in their time. The economies of Florida and the Bahamas had grown reliant upon the revenue brought in by the illegal booze, causing even local officials to remain fiercely loyal to the rum-running trade and protect their "hometown business." Many lawmen could even see the line of rum runner vessels in nighttime's darkness, their lights bouncing

up and down on the waves, but left them alone.

Even Great Britain, a major producer of Scotch whisky and, through its Caribbean colonies, rum showed a lack of respect for the Americans' attempts to ban alcohol. Early in the Prohibition era, for instance, Britain largely refused to punish its colonial subjects who were involved in smuggling in the Bahamas and other colonies. However, in 1922 an Anglo-American Rum Running Convention was held, and by 1924 a new treaty was signed under which Britain allowed for the examination of papers and inspection of private British vessels once they reached a point within one hour's travel of the American coast.

If a ship was suspected of violating the Prohibition laws, it could be searched. If it was found to be in violation of those laws, it could be seized. This treaty, along with two new laws that Congress had enacted, was a major factor in the eventual demise of Rum Row. Moreover, after President Calvin Coolidge asked Congress to improve the Coast Guard's fleet in order to allow stricter enforcement of Prohibition laws, Congress appropriated the necessary funds and authorized the transfer of the desired vessels from the Navy. Torpedo boat destroyers, cabin cruisers, motorboats and mine sweepers now replaced the sluggish and easily outrun boats of the

past. By 1927, Rum Row had been put out of business, and from 1928-1930 the Rum War, an all-out attack on smugglers, quickly squashed the rum-running business.

The huge success of Florida's rum-running businesses helped to ignite the flames of the state's rapid growth in the 1920s. The Florida land boom was well underway, and its reputation as a safe haven for crime lords such as Al Capone gave the state that bit of edge many Americans found enticing during the Roaring Twenties. Despite the Coast Guard's vigorous attempts to shut down smuggling, the public's reliance upon the

revenue brought in by the smugglers, along with tourists flocking to visit perhaps the wettest state in the country at the time, caused many state and local officials to protect its liquid enterprise. Thus occurred one of the more brazen and

ironic chapters in Florida's checkered history. Perhaps Florida's officials even had this colorful chapter of the state's history in mind in 1986, when they adopted a controversial new slogan to use in the ads promoting tourism: "Florida. The Rules Are Different Here." ¶

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