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BOOTLEGGERS IN THE BACKWOODS: PROHIBITION AND THE DEPRESSION IN HERNANDO COUNTY

By Richard Cofer

The popular image of the Prohibition era consists of gangsters with tommy guns racing around city streets in big cars. In fact, it seems that much of the historical literature on the 1920s centers on large urban areas and the organized crime element. However, Prohibition also provided rural Americans with an opportunity to make money in the illegal effort to quench the great thirst for alcohol. As one study of Prohibition points out, "Prohibition brought some prosperity to the backwoods. Sharecroppers, tenant farmers, fishermen of the bayous, dwellers on the mud banks of the Mississippi, all found the tending of stills or the sailing of rumrunners more profitable than the cultivation of the overworked soil.... The illicit liquor trade became almost decent as well as profitable."¹ Hernando County, Florida, was one backwoods area that benefited from rumrunning, especially after the onset of the Great Depression.

Florida was made to order for bootleggers. The state has large tracts of dense forests, a long coastline with many inlets, and a close proximity to Cuba and the British West Indies, where alcohol was readily available. Summarizing the attitude of many Floridians toward Prohibition, state historian Charlton Tebeau observed: "Local authorities proved indifferent if not outright hostile to enforcement, which was left to federal agents of whom there were never enough. Floridians resented federal interference with individual freedom and feared that enforcement would harm the tourist industry." The state's economic life became deeply involved in taking advantage of the dry laws. In frustration, one Coast Guard man charged with patrolling Florida's coast exclaimed, Floridians "would stagger to the polls and vote Dry."²

Hernando County lies on the Gulf coast midway up the state, some forty miles north of Tampa. In the 1920s and 1930s, the county's natural appearance had not altered much since the first settlers had arrived. The coastal region was predominantly marshland, laced with hundreds of bays, bayous, creeks, and rivers. The coastal region was accessible from the Gulf through a small fishing community, Bayport, which had a relatively deep water channel and a road leading inland. The county seat, and indeed the only community with enough size to be called a town, was Brooksville, located in the county's center. The rest of the county was covered with hardwood forest, sand hill scrubs, and swamps. The natural thickness of the vegetation, combined with a tough, independent, pioneer-like population, gave the county the right character for the illicit liquor trade. A post-Prohibition tour guide of Florida made special note of the region's many moonshiners in the Volstead era.³



Raymond Cofer, the author's grandfather pictured in the early 1920s, recalls the rumrunning era.



James Cofer, the author's father shown in a 1930s picture, remembers the period.

In many ways Prohibition proved a boon to Hernando County. The county had no points of interest to maintain a tourist trade. Real estate speculation had fallen from boom to bust. There was no other source of economic stimulation. By the mid-twenties the logging industry had depleted itself, the citrus industry was small, the rock mining industry had not yet been developed, and truck farming was minimal. Interviews with people who resided in Hernando County at the time confirm that there was not much money available, and many transactions were made in the form of bartering.

There were two kinds of illegal liquor activity in Hernando County during Prohibition. Residents engaged both in the manufacture of local moonshine and in the importation of foreign liquor along the coastal regions.

According to one local citizen, whiskey was made in "nearly every other house." Another resident recalled: "There were so damn many moonshiners in Hernando County they had to sell to each other to stay in business." The entire county's social and political structure was infused with the illegal liquor trade. An eye witness related:

Everybody, damn near everybody in Hernando County had a hand in it. I don't care who they were or who they are now. They were my friends and all, but I say nearly everybody. The game warden would come down to get his hand out, the sheriff, the deputy sheriff, everybody would come down to get a handout. People you wouldn't think about. Why I could go to town [Brooksville] and say, "Sheriff I need a drink." He would tell me, or sometimes go with me, to go to the drug store and get an empty bottle and go on down to his house. His wife would go in the pantry and fill that bottle up.⁴



A moonshine still in the Tampa area, 1920. Photograph courtesy of Florida Photographic Archives, Florida State University Library, and Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

Cooperation between shiners and local law enforcement officers was typical. "The law, from judges on down, was inclined to look the other way where Prohibition enforcement was concerned. It was a situation made to order." Not only did law enforcement officers collect payoff money, but they actively frustrated the efforts of federal Prohibition agents. Charlton Tebeau claimed that "Federal agents frequently found themselves hauled into court, and though never convicted, they often suffered considerable embarrassment." In Hernando County whenever federal agents would make an appearance or plan a raid, "The sheriff would notify moonshiners to move, to get out, and 'the revenooers' would come in and maybe tear up the still but find nobody there," according to one resident. The local paper in the county, the *Brooksville Journal*, provided a typical account of this kind of tip-off. In April, 1930, the paper reported the capture and destruction of a large still between Sparkman Lake and Gold Lake. The still had been captured after several weeks of labor by agents, but the raiders "failed to catch the operators of the place and no arrests have as yet been made."⁵

In examining newspaper reports of court cases in the county, one becomes aware of what is noticeably missing. Surveying the *Journal's* coverage of local courts for the years 1929-1933, attention was paid to the published records of the County Grand Jury, the County Court, and the Circuit Court, but there was little activity found related to enforcing Prohibition.

On October 19, 1933, the *Journal* reported that a man appearing before the Hernando County Grand Jury confessed to the possession of liquor and was subsequently sentenced to one year of hard labor at the state prison in Raiford. In the four years under examination this was the only

liquor case found on the grand jury's docket. And it should be noted that within a month of this fellow's conviction, the State of Florida voted to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. Only once was this lack of activity by the Grand Jury exposed. During the March, 1929, Grand Jury meeting, County Judge Willis M. Russell was absent due to illness. However, the judge released his charge to the Grand Jury, which read in part:

It has indeed become of the most serious importance in the enforcement of these laws, when boys of the tender age of 14 and 15 years are able to purchase all of the moonshine liquor they want from mercenary and unprincipled bootleggers. On many occasions the liquor is taken into cars driven by these youths, who have as their companions the girls of our county. Under conditions like these it is only a question of time when the chastity of our girls will be threatened and the manhood of our boys will be destroyed.

I am sure that with the support of the law-abiding citizens of our community this condition can be stamped out, and with this support you can rest assured that you will obtain the wholehearted enforcement by the officers of the law.

Despite this plea, the Grand Jury found very little to investigate, and it soon adjourned for the term without bringing forth any indictments whatsoever.⁶

The Circuit Court was little more effective at enforcing laws related to liquor. During the period 1929-1933, the Brooksville *Journal* reported no convictions in the Circuit Court. In fact, there was only one mention of Prohibition by the Circuit Court. In its spring term of 1930, the court reported:

It has been brought forcibly to the attention of this body by the personal observation of some of its members that great and needless damage is being done to the person and property of our citizens, and the lives of our people are needlessly and seriously endangered by the reckless operation of automobiles by drunken drivers. We desire to recommend in strongest terms that the officers of the law as well as the proper courts take such steps as may be necessary to abate this nuisance, and punish all persons caught operating automobiles while under the influence of liquor.

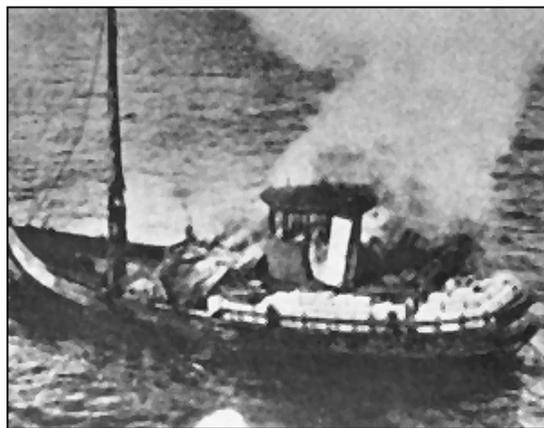
In all other matters excepted as above stated, the enforcement of our laws since our last session appears to have been unusually good.⁷

What the Circuit Court failed to mention is of interest. Driving while intoxicated could only be a problem when several other illegal activities were taking place, such as the manufacture and sale of liquor.

Only the County Court made any measurable attempts to enforce dry laws, but these could only be considered halfhearted at best. For example, in 1929, four liquor-related cases were tried before the County Court. One defendant charged with driving while intoxicated was found guilty. A possession charge ended in a mistrial. A person accused with the possession of materials to manufacture liquor (corn mash) was found not guilty. A man accused of possession



A woman loading liquor on a rumrunner in Nassau.



A rumrunner burning in the Gulf of Mexico.

was found guilty, but his conviction was overturned in 1930. The man convicted of driving while intoxicated faced a fate typical of those convicted on liquor charges before the County Court. He was fined and given a light probation.⁸

The smuggling operation on the Gulf coast of Hernando County involved considerable efforts by individuals outside of the county. It was organized and run by men from Tampa. The leader was a man named "Sam." His last name cannot be remembered by local residents, but he was considered a gangster. Just what his real role was in organized crime is uncertain, but it is clear that to Hernando County residents he was a "big shot."

Rumrunning followed a set pattern. As often as several nights a week, Cuban fishing boats would stand off the coast, outside U.S. territorial waters. If all was clear, signals would be flashed to them from offshore. Even today several landmarks, such as Beacon Rock and Lantern Rack, are known by their rumrunning names. After an exchange of signals, the fishing boats would close toward shore, and the whiskey would be unloaded onto barges. The barges were then hidden behind the dozens of marsh islands scattered along the coast. One such island is still named Drunkard's Rest. The barges were then brought to the small fishing village of Bayport where they were unloaded. The bottles were wrapped in an arrangement called "hams." Herbert Asbury describes these as "a package containing six strawjacketed bottles, three on the bottom layer, two in the middle, and one on top. The bottles were sewed tightly in burlap. Liquor packed in this way required a third less space in the hole of a vessel than when shipped in the ordinary, bulky, wooden boxes."⁹

In October, 1931, the Coast Guard was reported by the Brooksville *Journal* as having captured the *Sadell* with \$40,000 worth of liquor off Bayport. The crew escaped in a small boat. It was assumed that the *Sadell* was heading for Bayport.¹⁰

According to residents of the area, the leading Bayport resident involved in whiskey smuggling was a man named Henry. "Henry got two dollars a case for every case that landed at Bayport," claimed one Bayport resident who was active in the smuggling. Henry organized the local people, mostly fishermen and relatives, to run the barges, signal the Cuban boats, and unload the

liquor. "Old Henry kept a pile of palmetto brush piled up, and you couldn't go into Bayport at night without him stopping you. If the wrong ones was coming, he would put a match in them palm fans to give the warning. They could see the light of the fire and get out and hide." Another local resident added: "They would haul that whiskey away from here in Planters peanut trucks. Planters didn't know they owned those trucks, but that's what they had painted on them." The account is picked up again by a man who worked for Henry and, Sam:

They had it piled up there in the cemetery, the Bayport cemetery, two or three truck loads piled. Work for about 10 or 15 minutes and they would give you a ten dollar bill. They would give you all the liquor you wanted to drink. They would give me a drink and say, "Tex, that was the big shot from Tampa, Sam. Tex now listen. Anytime you want a drink there is a quart sitting where you can see it. You can drink all you want to, but don't take a drop with you. It's watched with a high powered rifle."¹¹

The flow of contraband and the desire to protect illegal income erupted into violence on several occasions. "Nearly everybody was into liquor somehow or another, and my God they would do away with you," recalled one resident. The most spectacular murder was the killing of the Brooksville City Attorney, Herbert Smithson, on October 12, 1931. The story is recounted by someone who was a young man at the time.

Smithson practiced law. He lived in Brooksville though he wasn't from around here. The government was using him as an agent. He dug up all of this evidence on these local people. Everybody in the county was in on it, well damn near everybody was getting a cut out of liquor. Smithson had arranged a meeting in Brooksville at the Tangerine Hotel, with all of his evidence. He was going to try to get indictments. He left his briefcase in his car. When he went out to his car to get the brief case someone drove by in an old Model T Ford touring car, with the top down, and shot his head off with a shotgun.

Smithson's murder occurred on the main street of Brooksville in broad daylight. However, no one was ever convicted for the murder despite the fact that Smithson's family posted a \$1900 reward for information leading to the capture of his murderers. Three men, including a deputy sheriff, were eventually indicted for the murder. The charges were dropped, however, for the three men maintained good alibies.¹²

The other known murder victim was a trapper remembered only by his last name, Bannaman. While trapping the Gulf region for furs and hides, Bannaman came across the smuggling operations, and he was killed by Sam and the boys from Tampa. A local resident gave this account:

Bannaman might have stole whiskey, but they got it into their heads that he was giving the federal men information. So they [the Tampa people] got a Cuban in here to kill him. That's what they would do if they wanted to kill somebody, they would send a Cuban over on a liquor boat. He would do the dirty work and then go back to Cuba. The Cuban killed Bannaman up Jenkins Creek, where Bannaman ran a trap line. Shot him with a ten gauge shotgun. Shot him right out of his boat.¹³



The main street of Brooksville, 1926. Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

With the end of Prohibition in 1933, a source of income dried up. When coupled with the economic crisis of the Depression, Prohibition had created an opportunity which some people in Hernando County were quick to take advantage of. Money from bootlegging flowed into many pockets. In a poor, rural area it becomes easily explainable why the manufacture, smuggling, and sale of illegal liquor became such an economic force. In Hernando County, to quote Ring Lardner, Prohibition had "sure been a godsend in a whole lot of ways."¹⁴

¹ Andrew Sinclair, *Era of Excess* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 289.

² Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 390; Harold Waters, *Smugglers of Spirits* (New York: Hastings House, 1971), p. 167.

³ Federal Writers' Project, *Florida, A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York: Oxford, 1939), p. 390.

⁴ Interviews with Raymond Cofer and James Cofer, April 1977, Brooksville, Florida.

⁵ Waters, *Smugglers of Spirits*, pp. 166-67; Tebeau, *A History of Florida*, p. 390; interview with Raymond Cofer; *Brooksville Journal*, April 17, 1930.

⁶ *Brooksville Journal*, March 14, 21, 1929.

⁷ *Ibid.*, March 13 ' 1930.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1929-30.

⁹ Herbert Asbury, *The Great Illusion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1950), p. 248.

¹⁰ *Brooksville Journal*, October 8, 1931.

¹¹ Interview with Raymond Cofer.

¹² Interviews with Raymond Cofer and James Cofer; *Brooksville Journal*, December 17, 1931, March 24, 1932.

¹³ Interview with James Cofer.

¹⁴ Ring Lardner quoted in Sinclair, *Era of Excess*, p. 331.