“Beauty and the Booze”: Prohibition-Era Female Bootleggers and the Making of the Modern Woman

by

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Abstract

While prohibition endures in memory as a period of partying, bootleggers, and gangsters, seldom do we exclusively examine the women who engaged in these activities. By focusing on female bootleggers, this investigation explores how women both engaged with and challenged notions of femininity during the early twentieth century to carry out crime. Through primarily utilizing newspapers contemporary to the era, it can be seen that female bootleggers played into gender roles and conceptualizations of femininity in an attempt to circumvent law enforcement. In plenty of cases this method proved to be successful, as federal agents reported female bootleggers to be more "dangerous" than their male counterparts. On the other side of the coin, female bootleggers defied gender stereotypes by forcing American society to confront the capability women had for doing crime and combatting it. Female bootleggers, despite breaking the law, were part of a larger movement that ushered in new perceptions of femininity and helped produce the "modern woman."

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“I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and femininity.

And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be.”

– Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

On an October day in 1922, on the border between Quebec, Canada, and Fort Covington, New York, two nuns belonging to the Sisters of Mercy drove along, looking to cross into the United States. Autumn leaves swayed on the trees as the nuns' car rumbled down the road, headed south into New York State. As the United States was two years into the prohibition of alcohol, a checkpoint had been set up by the Internal Revenue Department to prevent the smuggling of liquor from wet Canada to dry America.[1] As the nuns pulled up, an American revenue officer appeared in their line of sight. Presuming nothing suspicious of the two holy women, the officer went about his business; that is, until he heard one of the nuns utter, "This is certainly a hell of a place for a blowout."[2] Taken aback by such a crude comment from a purportedly pious woman, the official did a double take and took a glance in the back of the car in front of him. To his shock, he spotted multiple cases of liquor, altogether worth an estimated amount of "between $10,000 and $20,000."[3] These women were not nuns at all but were instead female bootleggers who attempted to use the disguise of a habit for conducting illegal business.

This incident, as unbelievable as it may sound, was a small reflection of a larger trend the United States faced during prohibition: more women were engaging in the activity of

[1] In order to better enforce the Volstead Act, the Internal Revenue Department established free-standing revenue offices at border checkpoints to specifically prevent the travel of alcohol into the United States; "Prohibition Unit Bureau of Internal Revenue U.S. Department of Treasury 1920-1926," Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, accessed November 12, 2025, https://www.atf.gov/our-history/historical-articles/prohibition-unit-bureau-internal-revenue-u-s-department-treasury-1920-1926#:~:text=Andrew%20Volstead%2C%20a%20leading%20Republican,alcohol%20by%20volume%20as%20alcoholic.

[2] "Women Bootleggers Use Sister of Mercy Garb in Rum Running," *The Evening World*, October 23, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/85476615/.

[3] "Women Bootleggers Use Sister of Mercy Garb in Rum Running," October 1922.

bootlegging, and they were utilizing aspects of gendered expectations to get away with it. In the midst of prohibition, some female bootleggers emerged as prolific criminals that were notoriously difficult to catch, simultaneously frustrating law enforcement and capturing the attention of the media. As these women only continued to grow in both number and proficiency, newspapers began reporting that it was the very fact they were female that made it possible for them to operate with such ease. According to these newspaper articles, and the agents that pursued them, female bootleggers played into various gender norms in order to hide in plain sight. Through the virtue of their femininity, most women were not perceived as capable of scheming, as this would go against the parameters of the box twentieth-century women were meant to live in.[4]

Though pretending to be a nun is on the more extreme end of the spectrum, the female bootleggers who donned Sisters of Mercy outfits took a chance by masquerading as some of the women who were supposed to fully personify a specific version of feminine morality the most. Since the role was conceptualized, nuns acted as symbols of purity, righteousness, and integrity, essentially providing a blueprint for what other women might strive for. This made the two women bootleggers' subversion of the position all the more obscene to Americans of the 1920s.

Whatever their contemporaries might have thought of their crimes, these two women had, until then, manipulated gender norms to go forward with their smuggling. The article recounting these events stated that this was not, in fact, the first time this pair of bootleggers

[4] Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1992): 192-215, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713040; described as having a natural inclination to piousness and religion, virtuous women supposedly would not have found themselves likely to engage in or formulate criminal activity.

used this disguise. As it turned out, the two women had created a prolific rum-running operation through the use of false nuns' habits, and were able to "get considerable liquor across [the border]" before being detected.[5] According to newspaper reports, had one of the women not made such a revealing remark, this crossing could have been a success too. For many other female bootleggers, particularly those who did not try their hand at such a blasphemous deception, the use of gender expectations and perceptions of the female experience proved to be an effective means for flying under the radar. By leaning into femininity, many female bootleggers became perceived as dangerous by both the media and justice system because they weaponized the gender norms of the early twentieth century to avoid detection. The threat posed by these women furthermore caused American society to reevaluate its perspective on female capability and criminality. Subverting the gender expectations that had been long-standing on femininity and female ability, female bootleggers pushed the United States to recognize that women could not only act as canny criminals but were also opening doors for women to fulfill roles regarded as masculine.

The scholarship surrounding the interwar period, in which prohibition is included, is robust, and mainly prioritizes exploration of the politics and social life of a rapidly advancing world.[6] Understanding the context of prohibition's time, and the women that lived during it, is crucial to this investigation and to creating a more nuanced picture of modern America. Nathan Miller's *New World Coming* is one such work that did this, examining the political and cultural

[5] "Women Bootleggers Use Sister of Mercy Garb in Rum Running," October 1922.
[6] The interwar period refers to the years between World War I and World War II, 1918-1939, respectively. The decade of the 1920s and the Prohibition Era were completely encompassed by the interwar period, so any time the phrase is mentioned, it is in reference to the larger context in which prohibition occurred.

shifts at the end of World War I through the 1920s that shaped the decade as we know it.[7] Miller determined "money, mobility, and celebrity" to be the defining characteristics of the 1920s, each of these affecting the United States and its entire spectrum of citizens.[8] Each of these three factors can connect to prohibition in some fashion. Fears of Bolshevism and the first Red Scare developed suspicion nationwide and contributed to the creation of a surveillance culture, both of which were employed by law enforcement during prohibition.[9] In a time most remembered for its prosperity, the nation still saw millions unemployed, a status that led some to turn to bootlegging in order to make ends meet.[10] The emergence of new technologies such as the automobile allowed for the transport of people, and liquor, to move faster, and the popularity of authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald exposed that drinking culture was still very much a part of life. Though Miller's book is not distinctly focused on prohibition, his investigation into the America of the 1920s is a comprehensive work that provides necessary nuance to this project.

The discussion surrounding bootlegging and alcohol-related crimes during prohibition is also quite large, though many of the works contributing to it take regional or localized approaches to their investigations. Such is the case with Allan S. Everest's *Rum Across the Border*, in which the smuggling of alcohol across the New York-Quebec border is detailed.[11]

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[7] Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America*, Scribner, 2003.
[8] Miller, *New World Coming*, 10.
[9] Miller, *New World Coming*, 34-36; for more on surveillance culture during Prohibition and its impact on American state building, see Lisa McGirr's *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*, W.W. Norton, 2015.
[10] Miller, *New World Coming*, 91; for more on changes to social life and American culture at the turn of the century through 1930, see Lewis A. Erenberg's *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*, University of Chicago Press, 1981.
[11] Allan S. Everest, *Rum Across the Border: The Prohibition Era in Northern New York*, Syracuse University Press, 1978.

Everest aimed to give the perspective of the people living in this area during prohibition, from border officers to bootleggers, through the use of oral histories. According to Everest, there were three groups related to the trafficking of alcohol from Canada into the United States: petty smugglers, rambunctious teenagers, and the professionals, the last category including those responsible for brokering deals and the drivers who transported the liquor. Most fascinating about these bootleggers is in the methods they used, or attempted to use, to get alcohol past border agents, which Everest went into in detail. One smuggler from Mooers, New York, had been using his cow to transport liquor, tying hay bales to its flanks and then claiming it needed to be bred in Canada. Once he tried to "breed" his cow one too many times, border officials caught on and found alcohol stowed amongst the hay.[12] In another case, bootleggers used a hearse to continuously cross from New York into Quebec, filling the coffin it carried with spirits. Wondering why the death rate suddenly saw a dramatic uptick, federal agents checked the coffins to find them full of booze, not bodies.[13]

In another examination of transporting alcohol into the United States, this time at the opposite end of the country, Lisa Lindquist Dorr investigated the rum running of liquor from Cuba into the American South.[14] Due to its geographic position, the Gulf of Mexico became the location of the largest source of smuggled alcohol, which made port cities such as Mobile,

[12] Everest, *Rum Across the Border*, 26.
[13] Everest, *Rum Across the Border*, 27.
[14] Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches: Smuggling Alcohol from Cuba to the South during Prohibition*, University of North Carolina Press, 2018. For more on the lead up to prohibition in the American South, see James D. Ivy's *No Saloon in the Valley: The Southern Strategy of Texas Prohibitionists in the 1880s*, Baylor University Press, 2003; Michael Lewis, *The Coming of Southern Prohibition: The Dispensary System and the Battle Over Liquor in South Carolina, 1907-1915*, Louisiana State University Press, 2016; Lee L. Willis, *Southern Prohibition: Race, Reform, and Public Life in Middle Florida, 1821-1920*, University of Georgia Press, 2011. For more on prohibition in action in the American South and how it affected social structures, see Brendan J.J. Payne's *Gin, Jesus, and Jim Crow: Prohibition and the Transformation of Racial and Religious Politics in the South*, Louisiana State University Press, 2022.

Alabama and New Orleans, Louisiana especially susceptible to bootlegging.[15] On one hand, Dorr showed that rum running within the Gulf of Mexico became so successful because smugglers were able to find a lucrative market through circumventing an unpopular law.[16] Southerners, and Americans by large, were unwilling to give up their right to drink, which led to a significant amount of support for and patronage of bootleggers. The preference to drink "real" spirits, not potentially dangerous homebrew with a dubious provenance, also made these coastal rum runners acceptable to the southern population. Dorr additionally argued that rum running operations are what helped modernize the South, as southerners engaged with and embraced wider national trends.[17] Due to its important position within the illegal alcohol trade, the South became a cornerstone in Americans' resistance to prohibition, and southerners were able to drink "despite the law, and even to spite the law" with the rest of the nation.[18]

Within the historical discussion of bootlegging, organized crime, and the wider examination of prohibition, women are noticeably missing from scholarship outside of explorations of the temperance movement or eventual repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.[19] The historiography of the "modern girl," the flapper, and sexual liberation is also quite robust, but where it highlights glamorous, trailblazing women of the era, it leaves out the women who might have carved out a path for themselves in less "respectable" spaces.[20] Studying female

[15] Dorr, *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches*, 4. For more information on bootlegging and rum running in the coastal South, see Randy Sanders' "Delivering Demon Rum: Prohibition Era Rumrunning in the Gulf of Mexico," *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 92-113.
[16] Dorr, *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches*, 17.
[17] Dorr, *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches*, 236-237.
[18] Dorr, *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches*, 236.
[19] For further reading surrounding prohibition and organized crime, see Patrick O'Daniel's *Crusaders, Gangsters, and Whiskey: Prohibition in Memphis*, University Press of Mississippi, 2018; Ellen NicKenzie Lawson, *Smugglers, Bootleggers, and Scofflaws: Prohibition and New York City*, State University of New York Press, 2013.
[20] For information surrounding the emergence of the "modern woman" during the 1920s, see Lucy Bland's *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper*, Manchester University Press, 2013 and Joshua

bootleggers and the way they interacted with the shifting gender expectations of the interwar period can provide a new layer in the understanding of how American society was forced to reevaluate its ideas of femininity, criminality, and the role of women in areas otherwise perceived as masculine. The historiography of bootlegging and policing during Prohibition has largely focused on male bootleggers, rum runners, and gangsters, skewing perspectives to only allow for one definition of criminality and what bootlegging during prohibition looked like. To provide a more holistic examination of the period, the role of women in the bootlegging space must be considered.

The argument of this investigation can only be constructed on top of the foundations of previous scholarship on female bootleggers, of which there is very little that explores the topic specifically and with detail. Some historians, though, have begun to make space in the discourse on prohibition to look at women involved with the illegal trafficking and consumption of liquor. Tanya Marie Sanchez's "The Feminine Side of Bootlegging" utilized newspapers, particularly the *Times-Picayune*, to convey an image of a "typical" female bootlegger in New Orleans.[21] A majority of the women Sanchez examined were from immigrant communities, and Sanchez's investigation reveals that many New Orleanian female bootleggers had turned to the trade out of necessity. Many of these women had children to provide for, some without the support of a husband, and the manufacture and sale of alcohol proved to be a lucrative business. In looking at women who were caught for bootlegging, Sanchez also factored their

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Zeitz's *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*, Crown Publishers, 2006. For a regional look of changing beauty standards and embrace of women's sexuality in the American South, see Blain Roberts' *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

[21] Tanya Marie Sanchez, "The Feminine Side of Bootlegging," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 403-433, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4233697.

treatment within the court into her overall investigation. While there is evidence to suggest courts were just as strict with some female bootleggers as their male counterparts, Sanchez concludes that the "desperate mother" or "obedient wife" argument often worked in swaying judges. To contribute to this conversation, and to take Sanchez's questions a step further, this project aims to determine how the actions and consequences of female bootleggers reported on in the media either confirmed or challenged American ideas of gender and crime during prohibition.[22]

Similar to Sanchez's work, historian Mary Murphy's article, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters."[23] Murphy centers on the shifting gender roles of the early twentieth century and those changes' eventual contribution to women embracing drinking culture. As women engaged more and more with alcohol, Murphy argued, they began to see its production and sale as a means for economic gain during prohibition. Murphy also asserted that women's involvement in bootlegging was a direct challenge of the gender roles ascribed in previous centuries. In a way, alcohol was a factor in creating the "modern woman." Overall, Murphy saw that female bootleggers and women's participation in drinking culture was a direct result of the altering attitudes of Americans during the interwar period. This is not to say that Murphy believed gender norms were completely done away with, but she did make it clear that overt female liquor consumption was one of the first indicators of turning tides. This investigation will build upon the groundwork Murphy has laid with her research but will go in further in determining how women navigated gender norms to the extent that they were utilized for

[22] For a look at the way newspapers, reporting, and advertising were gendered in the Prohibition era, see Simone Weil Davis' *Living Up to the Ads: Gender Fictions of the 1920s*, Duke University Press, 2000.
[23] Mary Murphy, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994): 174-194, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713337.

personal and illegal gains. By exploring how female bootleggers challenged the status quo of gendered expectations, new light can be shed on how women forced American society to reexamine its perceptions of what roles women were capable of filling. This shift can be seen in how the language of stories within newspapers gradually changed during the period of prohibition.

In how these women were discussed within newspapers, both the nation's comforts and anxieties were revealed through how female bootleggers' reputations and actions were spoken about. For this reason, the archive selected for this project is largely made up of newspapers contemporary to the era, focusing on articles that specifically relate to the prohibition period and any female bootleggers who gained enough attention to be reported upon. The press was undoubtedly some of the most outspoken on women bootleggers, relying upon them for a good story and consistent readership. Though many articles were certainly engaging in sensationalism, their tone and the very belief that female bootleggers would be a newsworthy occurrence is a reflection of how divisive their existence was to the status quo of early-twentieth century America. The women bootleggers challenging the typical order of society were not one homogenous group, though, but were a varied demographic that brought forth diverse experiences of femininity. White women have overwhelmingly been centered as the focus of studies on temperance, prohibition, and flapper culture, but this only allows for a narrow scope through which the female experience during the Prohibition Era can be explored. Women of color were also prominent within the bootlegging space and were a part of challenging gendered assumptions or breaking the law as much as their white counterparts.

The Prohibition Era is known to be a period rife with change, and this progression extended to gendered expectations and perceptions of femininity. At the turn of the century, gendered expectations of the nineteenth century still had a stronghold within Western society, including the United States. Informed by earlier ideals of republican motherhood and the "cult of true womanhood," American women were still beholden to established ideologies on femininity. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the core virtues of a "true woman" were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and the role of the wife and mother was deeply rooted in the female identity.[24] A key aspect of the woman's role, devotion to religion and the family, became powerful tools used by female temperance advocates' rhetoric in the later nineteenth century. Republican motherhood, a concept developed in the eighteenth century post-American Revolution, taught that women were the first and most important teachers of upcoming generations, and were thus responsible for imparting them with morality, manners, and a sense of civic duty.[25] In contrast to their husbands and sons, women and their daughters were taught to be gentle guides that "softened men's brutal passions."[26] To achieve true womanhood in the eyes of nineteenth century American society, a woman was intended to embrace her role as mother and wife and find contentment as a caregiver within the domestic sphere.

The conceptions of republican motherhood and true womanhood during the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century, were created according to the white female experience, notably leaving out Black women from finding an identity within these ideologies.

[24] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.
[25] Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother."
[26] Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother."

Under enslavement, Black women were prescribed roles that aligned with white enslavers' perceptions of them as property, not as women.[27] Following Emancipation, Black women had to assert their femininity in a society that had made white middle- and upper-class women the standard of beauty and virtue. As the Industrial Revolution progressed during the latter half of the nineteenth century and jobs outside the home extended to women, Black women had to navigate employment in "respectable" work and its relationship with femininity while being subjected to both racial and gender discrimination.[28] Despite their oppression and the exclusion from general conventions they faced, Black women made a space for themselves within their communities as pillars of morality, homemaking, and motherhood.

Perceptions of gender were not just born from the roles assigned to men and women but were also based on physical appearance and behavior. For women, looks and conduct have been rigidly aligned with presenting femininity, and the standards they were meant to achieve were being challenged as the world moved through the interwar period. No change more directly opposed the status quo of the past than the rise of the flapper. The flapper, a generally young and bubbly woman, was a foil to her Victorian mother. These women publicly drank and swore, and they found themselves enraptured with the social scene of their town or city. Flappers dressed in loose, knee-length dresses, rolled their stockings, bobbed their hair, and were not subtle in their application of cosmetics.[29] Celebrities like Clara Bow and Zelda Fitzgerald solidified the flapper look within American culture, and the new attitude of the

[27] Norma J. Burgess, "Gender Roles Revisited: The Development of the 'Woman's Place' Among African American Women in the United States," *Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 4 (June 1994): 391-401, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784560.
[28] Sharon Harley, "For the Good of the Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880-1930," *Signs* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 336-349, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174489.
[29] Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women*, 33-35.

younger generation began to be seen as the development of the "modern woman."[30] By the 1920s, the view surrounding physical femininity had shifted quite a bit from the beginning of the twentieth century. Cosmopolitan in her knowledge, daring in her actions, and free-spirited with her dress, the idealized flapper became the new standard by which women were measured as prohibition entered the stage.

Clara Bow (left) and Zelda Fitzgerald (right); *Vogue*; *Irish Independent*.[31]

Though the perfect flapper image might have been widely promoted in both film and print as the new definition of femininity, it would seem that many of the deeper, invisible traits that had been long associated with women still held strong. Womanhood still had roots in motherhood and morality, and even feminists and suffragists of the early interwar period demeaned flappers for their scandalous ways.[32] It was still a largely-held opinion that even if a woman had the right to vote or equality with men, it was still the "woman's natural role to

[30] Zeitz, *Flapper*, 6-10. For more on how the American view on women shifted during the 1920s and the emergence of the term "new/modern woman,", see Estelle B. Freedman's "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (September 1974): 372-393, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1903954.

[31] Laird Borelli-Persson, "Remembering the Original It Girl, Clara Bow, on Her Birthday," Vogue, accessed March 24, 2026, https://www.vogue.com/article/industry-icons-clara-bow-actress; Julia Molony, "2017 – The Year That Flappers Broke Out," Irish Independent, accessed March 24, 2026, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/2017-the-year-that-flappers-broke-out/35563253.html.

[32] Zeitz, *Flapper*, 105.

provide a stable, soothing home life for her husband and to confer an ethical education on her children."[33] Many of the newspapers from the interwar period contain these same sentiments, which will provide the backdrop for this project's examination of reporting on female bootleggers. By the Prohibition Era, it would seem that the American conception of femininity became a blend of the new and the old: the 1920s preferred the aesthetics of the flapper but still aligned womanhood with moral structures of decades prior.

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The United States' relationship with alcohol had a long history as a topic of debate amongst the American people. The nation's first temperance movement began in the 1780s under the leadership of Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, who advocated for abstinence from hard liquors and spirits.[34] Rush was one of the first in the States to speak heavily about the association between immorality and liquor, what he termed the "moral thermometer." To Rush, mild alcoholic beverages such as beer and wine encouraged health amongst its drinkers, but spirits only led to chronic drunkenness.[35] Because beer and wine did not cause the onset of drunkenness as quickly as hard liquors did, they were safe for regular consumption and were even a positive inclusion to an individual's diet. On the other hand, spirits and liquor had a tendency to be overused and dangerous and therefore needed to be done away with entirely. Despite Rush's efforts, the majority of the American public did not agree with his views and instead embraced all forms of alcohol as avenues of vitality, not vice. To many, the stronger the liquor the greater its benefits, and early Americans saw spirits as a balm for difficult work and

[33] Zeitz, *Flapper*, 108.
[34] David F. Musto, "Alcohol in American History," *Scientific American* 274, no. 4 (April 1996): 78-83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24989484.
[35] Musto, "Alcohol in American History."

pain and even used them medicinally to break fevers and treat wounds.[36] The American people largely continued to hold this idea well through the rest of the eighteenth and into the mid-nineteenth century, when alcohol's reputation experienced a shift after the conclusion of the American Civil War.

The end of the Civil War marked a turning point in the appeal for temperance. Drinking culture was prominent within both Union and Confederate camps during the Civil War, and this habit followed soldiers home after the gunfire ceased. Significant numbers of these men unfortunately developed alcoholism after turning to liquor to cope with the traumas inflicted upon them in war, which in turn affected the families they went home to.[37] This was the key issue that pushed women into temperance work in large numbers for the first time. Many began to pursue alcohol reform and temperance as wives aimed to appeal to the wider public through relaying the harm alcohol had caused to their marriages and children. The overwhelming call for temperance and prohibition led to the formation of vocal women's groups, most notably the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

The WCTU emerged in 1874 out of its precursor group, the Women's Crusade. The WCTU was one of the most active and vocal temperance groups within the nation, and by the early 1890s the organization had about 150,000 members nationwide across its various chapters, making it one of the largest groups in the country.[38] The WCTU was an overwhelmingly white group, with its members predominantly hailing from economically

[36] Musto, "Alcohol in American History."
[37] Dillon Carroll, "Manhood, Madness, and Moonshine," Nursing Clio, https://nursingclio.org/2021/10/14/manhood- madness-and-moonshine/#post-28595-footnote-ref-4, accessed December 2, 2025.
[38] Holland Webb, "Temperance Movements and Prohibition," *International Social Science Review* 74, no. 1/2 (1999): 61-69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41882294.

comfortable, Protestant families with Anglo-Saxon lineage.[39] The organization largely aimed to keep their membership white, initially beginning as an group with no members of color until Frances Ellen Watkins Harper became the only Black delegate to attend the WCTU's convention of 1881 and was later made the Superintendent of the Negro Section of the WCTU in 1888.[40] By the turn of the century, the WCTU had built a cause centered around alcohol reform at the very least and total abstinence at the most extreme. The most influential figure in the WCTU was none other than its president, Frances E. Willard. She embodied the essence of the organization, utilizing highly spiritual lessons in morality to condemn the vice of drinking. In one of her most famous speeches, entitled "Everybody's War," Willard railed against the alcohol industry in America:

> "I say there is a war about it [alcohol consumption] in America – a war about that sort of thing which changes men so that their mothers after a few years would not know them… I came here today through blocks and blocks of saloons and almost under the very shadow of great grinding distilleries. There are no insurance policies upon your homes, the rum shops have the free run of the whole place – the home of the American eagle… There is a war about this in America, a war of mothers and daughters, sisters and wives… There is a war between the rum shops and religion. They stand over against each other, insurmountable and unalterable foes."[41]

Using rhetoric that aimed to strike the hearts of her listeners, like this portion of "Everybody's War" does, Willard's speeches were the keystone of her temperance advocacy. The conception

[39] Marie L. Kreider and Michael R. Wells, "White Ribbon Women: The Women's Christian Temperance Movement in Riverside, California," *Southern California Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 117-134, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41171932.
[40] Margaret Hope Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity': Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 1 (January 1989): 21-43, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20092281.
[41] Frances E. Willard, "Everybody's War," Speaking While Female Speech Bank, https://speakingwhilefemale.co/temperance-willard1/, accessed December 3, 2025.

of morality at least partially relies upon emotion, and in recognizing this, Willard made sure her words carried poignant weight.

After decades of anti-alcohol advocacy from Willard, her WCTU sisters, and other Americans of the same mindset, those pushing for temperance found their greatest success in the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919. This law prohibited the sale, manufacture, and distribution of all alcoholic beverages once it went into effect in 1920. To further strengthen the enforcement of the amendment, the Volstead Act, also known as the National Prohibition Act, was also passed in 1919, which more clearly defined what an "intoxicating liquor" was and further regulated the use of "industrial, medicinal, or sacramental alcohol."[42] For the next thirteen years, until the Twenty-First Amendment repealed the Eighteenth in 1933, the United States legally existed as a dry nation, key word being legally. Under the surface and in spite of the law, American drinking culture and habits only grew as people sought out speakeasies and homebrew. Prohibition might have been the official state of things, but the frequency with which people drank, partied, and overall ignored or joked about the Eighteenth Amendment revealed how important alcohol consumption had become within American culture.[43] Supplying the demand for illicit alcohol proved to be a lucrative business and gave rise to a host of criminal characters, from infamous gangsters to localized rum runners. The opportunity to cash in on this venture was appealing to many, including women.

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[42] Julien Comte, "Let the Federal Men Raid," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic History* 77, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 166-192, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/pennhistory.77.2.0166.

[43] One example of the levity with which prohibition was treated was indicated in a short newspaper article from 1926, which relayed the birth of a baby camel at the Central Park Zoo. The baby was named Miss Bootlegger, and her mother had already been known as Mrs. Prohibition; "New Baby Camel," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, July 14, 1926.

The skyline of Manhattan towered in the distance as a gleaming Italian ocean liner, the *Giuseppe Verdi*, eased into port in February 1921. Docked at Pier 25 of the New York Harbor, the ship's crew made work of tying lines and readied for passengers to disembark, while the passengers themselves bristled in anticipation to leave the ship after their time at sea. Per regulation, customs officials set themselves up to receive the arrivals and process each individual to give them entrance to the city. By all standards, this day was just like any other. Passengers would get off and eventually disappear into the swell of New York City, and those working at the harbor would complete their tasks until quitting time was called.

After the gangways were lowered and thick steel doors were opened, six women walked onto Pier 25, clearly in a group. Heads bowed together, steps measured and sure, the women were dressed fashionably, with clearly curated outfits and the latest hairstyles. It would appear that this group was as typical as the day surrounding them. Normal, except for the odd tinkling noise that followed them with every footstep.[44] Having caught the attention of two nearby customs agents reported as "Guards McNally and Cunningham," the six women were detained and taken to the United States Barge Office, where they were searched by a female inspector. It did not take long for her to find the source of the curious clinking – sewn "in long bags hanging around then women's waists and falling to their shoe tops" was twenty-one quarts of alcohol between the group.[45] Quickly whisked away for breaking prohibition laws, the women were brought to the Law Division of the harbor's customs house, where they quickly gave up their names and were let off with a fine of five dollars per bottle.[46]

[44] "Find 21 Quarts of Liquor Under Women's Skirts," *The Evening World*, February 11, 1921, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/79056345/.
[45] "Find 21 Quarts of Liquor Under Women's Skirts," *The Evening World*, 1921.
[46] "Find 21 Quarts of Liquor Under Women's Skirts," *The Evening World*, 1921.

These women were not the first to use their clothing as a smuggling system, and they certainly would not be the last. In fact, so many women around the country were crafting special dresses for the discreet transport of liquor that it became a widely reported phenomenon. In a *New York Herald* article from October 1921, the newspaper described a woman caught in Detroit, Michigan who was bootlegging alcohol with a "specially designed set of garments containing numerous hidden pockets to conceal the bottles."[47] Another article, this time from *The New York Tribune*, spoke of a discovery police made in Peabody, Massachusetts where female bootleggers were constructing tanks "like a baseball catcher's chest protector" to hold moonshine, which they could wear fitted under the waists of their clothing.[48] Equipped with little but clothing or a handbag, it is no wonder that female bootleggers would find their garments to be a natural place to hide some booze. It appears that female bootleggers were also not the only ones to think of this, as the *Los Angeles Evening Post Record* quipped, "[A] Fashion expert predicts the return of the hoopskirt. This will be good news for the woman bootlegger – she'll be able to carry around 20 gallons at a time."[49] Jokes such as this one illustrate the proliferation of cases that must have involved female bootleggers and clothing-related alcohol trafficking.

[47] "Bootleg Hunters Get 50,000 Women," *New York Herald*, October 3, 1921, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/471541136/.
[48] "Gallon Containers Worn by Women Bootleggers," *The New York Tribune*, February 16, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/469279280/.
[49] *Los Angeles Evening Post Record*, August 26, 1930, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/678295933/.

Photos of women hiding alcohol in clothing and in tanks on the chest like those described in newspapers, date unknown; Kentucky Distillers' Association.[50]

The six women at the New York Harbor, and the others mentioned in the additional articles referenced, were not simply clever in their attempts to avoid detection: Female bootleggers actively recognized the gender norms and expectations under which they lived and adapted them to carry out their criminal endeavors. Although the 1920s were a period of rapid change and modernization in some respects, the societal expectations surrounding women and the female body were still quite aligned with the stricter rules of prior decades. Close to the body, clothing was something that was both private to a woman and an indicator of her supposed respectability. Using this to their advantage, female bootleggers took the opportunity to hide in plain sight through subverting the expectations that governed them. By adhering to

[50] Fred Minnick, "How Women Bootleggers Dominated Prohibition," Kentucky Distillers' Association, accessed November 14, 2025, https://kybourbon.com/enthusiast-stories/how-women-bootleggers-dominated-prohibition/.

rules that were meant to ensure submission and virtue, female bootleggers ultimately asserted their own autonomy and tested the bounds of criminality. It is this action, choosing to deliberately play the damsel while being the cause of distress, that made female bootleggers such a threat to law enforcement and the prohibition laws of the period. According to the first federal prohibition commissioner, John F. Kramer, female bootleggers were harder to catch than their male counterparts.[51] It is because of their gender, and their clever use of gender norms, that women bootleggers and rum runners were "causing anxiety to the police chiefs of every large city in which State dry laws are effective."[52]

This notion was expanded upon in an article from the California-based newspaper *The Bulletin*. Salaciously titled "Wives Ride in Limousines to Bootleg for Husbands," the article detailed how women were frequently recruited into smuggling alcohol for the men in their lives because they were able to hide in plain sight through their gender. The article also explored the role of women in alcohol trafficking and the relationship between men and women within the space of professional bootlegging. The article focused on how gender impacted the way female bootleggers maneuvered within society and used the norms of the twentieth century to their advantage. The article made it clear that, at least in the early years of Prohibition, bootlegging was gendered and certain tasks were performed according to gender, stating, "The woman in this case fills in the gap between the office-broker, bootlegger, and delivery. Her specialty is delivery, according to Rutter [a federal prohibition agent]."[53] While there were women who certainly manufactured and sold alcohol on their own, there was some level of distinction

[51] "Bootleg Hunters Get 50,000 Women," *New York Herald*, 1921.
[52] "Bootleg Hunters Get 50,000 Women," *New York Herald*, 1921.
[53] "Wives Ride in Limousines to Bootleg for Husbands," *The Bulletin*, June 22, 1923, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/622991927/.

between a man's place versus a woman's place, even within the realm of criminality. Despite the transgression represented by participating in illegal activity, there were still accepted gendered expectations in play amongst rings of bootleggers.

While the differentiation between male and female bootleggers was how this article began, the heart of the reporter's writing was on how female bootleggers used their gender to their advantage. If the sensational description of the article is to be believed, female bootleggers relied upon and weaponized their gender to successfully conduct their business. In this article's particular scenario, the author painted a picture of a mother-daughter duo discreetly delivering liquor to a client in a hotel. The hypothetical mother, described as "A stylishly gowned, sedate, gray haired woman," and her daughter, "a miss in her teens, whose rosy cheeks and downcast eyes speak of girlish decorum," were disguised in plain sight simply by embracing the norms and stereotypes associated with women.[54] The privateness that surrounded the female body and articles on or surrounding her body provided a buffer between them male law enforcement, effectively providing an inherent cover for female bootleggers. Playing into these societal expectations removed any possible suspicion from onlookers.

The intentional utilization of gender as a shield led to female bootleggers becoming viewed as more dangerous and elusive than their male counterparts. Women did not pose more of a threat because there was a perception that they distributed lower-quality alcohol, or were more volatile than men, but because their gender allowed them to hide behind a societally imposed assumption of innocence. Up until this point, women had historically been

[54] "Wives Ride in Limousines," *The Bulletin*, June 22, 1923.

relegated to a degree of invisibility within the public sphere; female bootleggers, identifying this, shaped this dynamic to their advantage. Due to the strict expectations put in place around gendered behavior and interactions, female bootleggers were able to elude the detection and intervention of law enforcement in many cases. According to this article's author, female bootleggers were "the most difficult to apprehend and the hardest to approach… In other words, she is the most serious problem with which officials have to deal."[55]

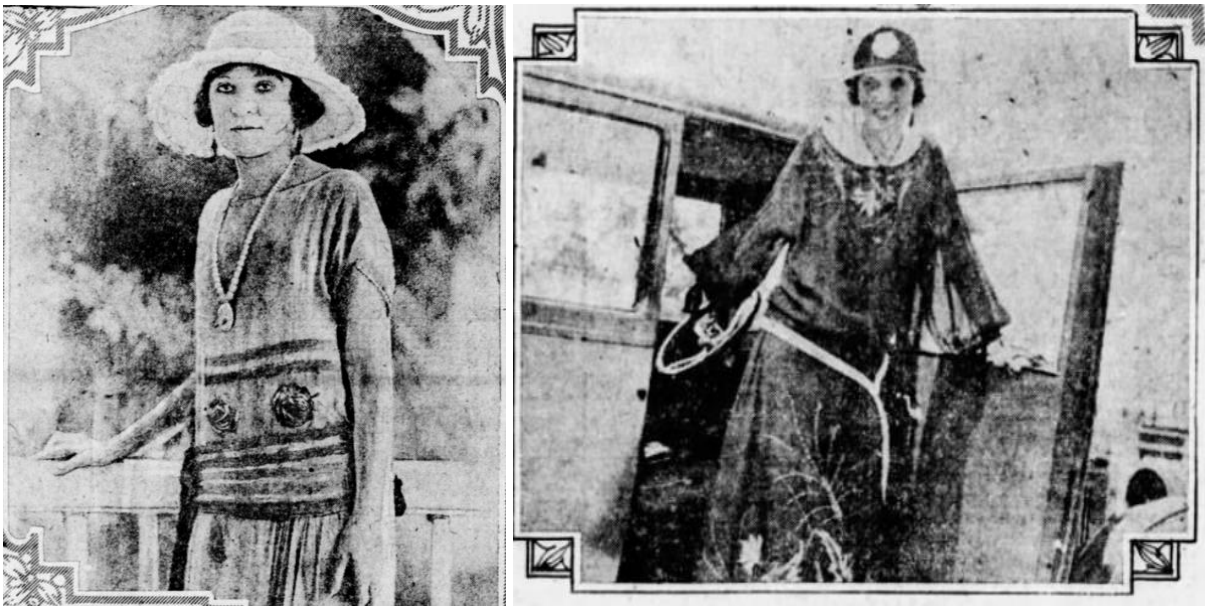

Fig. 2: Photos of notorious "rum-running queen" Gertrude Lythgoe dressed in the fashions of a middle- to upper-class woman in the 1920s, 1925; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.[56]

Female bootleggers could hide behind their femininity because of the expectations that were assigned to them, and at the core of these perceptions was the belief that gender was essentially a physical, outward expression of an individual's natural inclinations, morality, and

[55] "Wives Ride in Limousines," *The Bulletin*, June 22, 1923.

[56] "'Queen of the Rum Runners? Bosh!," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 20, 1925, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/140295643/; for Gertude Lythgoe's personal account of her time as a rum runner, see her autobiography *The Bahama Queen: The Autobiography of Gertrude "Cleo" Lythgoe*, Exposition Press, 1965. For details on Lythgoe's capture and arrest, see "Arrest Woman as Rum-Runner," *Covington Virginian*, October 16, 1925, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/796759961/ and "Former Rum Row Queen Haunted by Fear of Jinx," *The Register*, June 10, 1926, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/77161230/.

even guilt. For centuries, and into the 1920s, women were viewed as the reserved, moral guides of society, meant to act as a balance to the more reactive man.[57] For a female bootlegger, there was no better way to avoid unwanted attention than playing into society's inherent biases. In the case of the mother and daughter from this article, their efforts to appear respectable induced the perception that they were simply visiting a hotel with a suitcase full of clothing and toilettes, certainly not liquor.[58] As the author intended, the pair's hyper-feminine presentation was meant to invoke innocence.

The way so many women went undetected as bootleggers was through manipulating gendered expectations in a way that allowed them to use their womanhood as a disguise. At the core of these perceptions was the patriarchal notion that a woman's appearance was an outward expression of her virtue and role as a pillar of morality, a notion that was already being challenged as the young flapper grew in popularity. A female bootlegger using these norms for crime disrupted expectations and forced Americans of the time to confront what criminality looked like. To cope with this desecration of femininity, American society created new parameters through which they could measure if a woman was principled and righteous versus a woman who was corrupted and "fallen," all of this continuing to revolve around a woman's appearance and reputation. In a 1928 article from Los Angeles, a female bootlegger who allegedly led a young man into delinquency was described as having "peroxide yellow hair, gold teeth and a string of divorced husbands."[59] This representation was a calculated attempt at

[57] Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother."
[58] Toilettes were the products and tools used by women into the early nineteenth century for daily hygiene, grooming, and makeup routines. The word can also be in reference to the process of conducting the routine itself.
[59] "Mother Love Wins Mercy for 'Stray,'" *Los Angeles Evening Post-Record*, March 26, 1928, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/678437048/.

curating the image of a female bootlegger as one that outwardly implied indulgence and indecency. This woman's unnatural hair, false teeth, and clear disregard for the sanctity of marriage were all something a "respectable" woman would never engage in, and therefore indicated that her original, pure state had evolved into something immoral and impious. In the minds of both the article's author and much of its audience, these things had to happen in order for her to so blatantly disregard the law, move alcohol, and lead others to participate in crime.

It proved difficult, however, for female bootleggers to be painted in broad strokes of depravity when a great many were actually adhering to gender norms. Using their clothing to conceal contraband, the privacy of a bag to hide a quantity of liquor or playing into a man's general fear of offending a woman were all tactics employed by female bootleggers as they conducted their business.[60] The cleverness of these women was ultimately what caused law enforcement to adopt a new profile of the female bootlegger as being dangerous for hiding in plain sight.[61] People were now faced with a criminal who looked like the girl next door and a reckoning surrounding the ability for one to be guilty while appearing innocent was at hand. Out of this new reality, female bootleggers forced society to reevaluate what it perceived to be the relationship between gender and morality, female autonomy, and criminality.

Female bootleggers themselves recognized the importance of not just engaging with surface level gender norms but continuing to portray their inner morality to escape law

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[60] "Wives Ride in Limousines to Bootleg for Husbands," *The Bulletin*, June 22, 1923; "Bootleg Hunters Get 50,000 Women," *New York Herald*, October 3, 1921.

[61] "Women Skilful as Bootleggers," *New York Herald*, February 18, 1921, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/334687424/; "Sex Line in Occupations Not Drawn Even When It Comes to Bootlegging," *The Minneapolis Star*, May 2, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/178931352/; "Beauty and the Booze,"*Los Angeles Evening Post-Record*, July 18, 1924, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/678213346/.

enforcement or soften punishments if caught. In addition to utilizing the already prescribed perceptions of a delicate constitution, women bootleggers took their positions as the caregivers of society to evade suspicion or even invoke pity. One Honolulu-based newspaper wrote an article on the female bootlegger in court, bluntly claiming, "It seems to be the favorite pose of the female bootleggers to appear before the stern bar of justice carrying a babe-in-arms."[62] Whether this theoretical woman was a desperate mother or a free-spirited flapper, the baby in her arms was more than just a child; it was a physical reminder of the morality that was supposed to be inherent to her being.

Image of two WCTU members with a banner stating "Protect Our American Youth"; Women's Museum of California.[63]

Motherhood and the nineteenth-century concept of home protectionism were central to the WCTU's motivations and advocacy. Under home protectionism, women were responsible for running the home and raising children to be upstanding future generations.[64] As

[62] "'Hokum,'" *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 4, 1924, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/300142152/.
[63] "Women's Christian Temperance Union March on Washington," Women's Museum of California, https://womensmuseum.wordpress.com/2020/07/24/womens-christian-temperance-union-march-on-washington/, accessed December 4, 2025.
[64] Kenneth D. Rose, *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*, New York University Press, 1996, 11-12.

temperance movements gained traction, female advocates began to extend their definition of the home to include their wider communities, asserting themselves as protectors of "traditional" families. [65] Citing the increase in alcoholism after the Civil War and the effect it had across American society, female temperance advocates posited liquor, saloons, and drinking culture as a whole as dangerous. Well-known WCTU members, including Frances E. Willard, employed motherhood in their work. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper promoted republican motherhood within her writing as the ideal way for women to enact political and social change.[66]

Children were likely the biggest reminder of a woman's tie to morality, and this was no different for many accused and tried female bootleggers. For a significant number of women, their status as a mother earned them more leniency within the courts and made it more possible for their charges to even be dropped. Willie Fisher, a Black female bootlegger, found herself in this position in 1928. Fisher was arrested for selling a small quantity of liquor but was relieved of her charges when the "state of Tennessee… refused to take a woman [Fisher] away from her two children and put her in jail."[67] The attorney presiding over Fisher's case cited not wanting to leave her children without support, which suggests she was the sole parent the children had in their lives. Beyond that more tangible fact, though, is the underlying historical

[65] Rose, *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*, 14.
[66] Stephanie Farrar, "Maternity and Black Women's Citizenship in Frances Watkins Harper's Early Poetry and Late Prose," *MELUS* 40, no.1 (Spring 2015): 52-75, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24569953. For further reading on the connection between motherhood and temperance rhetoric, see Emma Liggen's "Not an Ordinary 'Ladies' Paper': Work, Motherhood, and Temperance Rhetoric in the 'Woman's Signal,' 1894-1899," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 613-630, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43663335. For more on republican motherhood and its development, see Linda Kerber's "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 187-205, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712349.
[67] "Children Win; Mother Freed," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, February 16, 1928, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/772101958/.

view that a mother's child was a physical manifestation of her intrinsically caring nature. Stemming back to the enduring idea that women were the virtuous guides of American society, participation in motherhood was the gold standard of adhering to gendered expectations, and this belief was undoubtedly a force, consciously or not, that played into courts' reasoning for allowing female bootleggers with children to go free.

A dimension that only added to some courts' gentler treatment of women bootleggers with children was the argument that some had only been selling alcohol out of necessity. A woman falling on hard times with multiple mouths to feed, with no way to make ends meet but turn to crime, was a story that was commonly presented to the law that could produce clemency for the defendant. A Chicago woman, Mary Zurak, pleaded before the court that she was forced to engage in bootlegging to keep her family together after her husband deserted her.[68] This unique plight also gained the pity of the public as well, and through their intervention even some convicted female bootleggers were able to go free. In 1925, a Sunday school class paid the fine for their teacher and got her released from jail after she was found guilty of bootlegging, a crime she supposedly only committed to provide for her five children and husband unable to work from ill health.[69] For these women, their children were not simply physical barriers preventing them from punishment, but the concept of motherhood was instead their shield. By claiming a state of such desperation, and by only making crime their last resort, these female bootleggers were able to keep their virtuous status intact. As the

[68] "Woman Becomes Bootlegger to Keep Family of Four Together," *South-Side News*, May 27, 1926, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/756723384/.
[69] "Sunday School Class Pays Woman Bootlegger's Fine," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 29, 1925, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/140287049/.

Prohibition Era wore on, women bootleggers with children found another facet of femininity to tap into to conduct illegal business and circumvent law enforcement.

Like the case described by the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, there were some female bootleggers who recognized the safety of a child when faced with the law and utilized that to avoid punishment or arrest in the first place. By claiming to be responsible for the well-being of a child, female bootleggers were overwhelmingly able to, in some cases, garner sympathy, as well as mold societal perspectives surrounding motherhood into a tool that would work for their benefit. One woman in Fresno, California, only described as "a wise little Chinese boot-legger," was let go by law enforcement after being caught when she exclaimed that she was "expecting the stork soon."[70] The newspaper article did not confirm if this woman's claims were true, but due to Sinophobia of the early twentieth century, pregnancy could act as a form of protection against more than just bootlegging charges. Whether the woman was truly pregnant was not the point of the article reporting on her, but it was rather a criticism of female bootleggers' ability to hide behind their status as mothers. Motherhood was meant to be virtuous, and law breaking was the total opposite. A pregnant woman, fulfilling her "duty" to have a child, was in contradiction to societal perceptions of criminality. Similar to using their own clothing or feminine reputations to avoid the law, female bootleggers also utilized motherhood and gender norms surrounding that institution to avoid going behind bars.

[70] "Boot Leg Babies," *The Ripon Record*, January 31, 1930, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image-view/749528618/.

Photo of female homebrewers with a little boy holding a liquor bottle in the front; Selkirk.[71]

While this method was not particularly used in order to evade overall detection of the law, it proved to be effective for many female bootleggers in avoiding convictions, arrest, or penalties. It also appears that the public, media, and law enforcement were key in perpetuating the gender stereotypes and expectations that allowed for motherhood to be used in such a way. Though there are some people that dissented this, there are more accounts of mothers receiving compassion from the law and courts for their circumstances. Beyond the general humanity of acknowledging the importance of a mother in a child's life, the public seemed willing to give bootlegging mothers more lenience because they were still able to somewhat fit into the framework of femininity society deemed appropriate. A female bootlegger might have committed a crime, but her offenses were often written off as less, or completely, if a child factored into her story. Motherhood meant these women were fulfilling at least part of the requirements of their gender "duties," and by allowing children to soften the images of

[71] "Prohibition Era Female Bootlegger Group Photograph," Selkirk Auctioneers and Appraisers, https://www.selkirkauctions.com/auction-lot/prohibition-era-female-bootlegger-group-photograph_7F646D0982, accessed December 4, 2025.

bootlegging mothers, American society could retain its comfort in its definition of what criminality looked like. As many other women would go on to show, though, this was not the case during and after prohibition.

As the Prohibition Era wore on, female bootleggers proved themselves to be an ever-present and growing obstacle in the path of both the justice system and conceptions of dignity. For centuries, the narrative that women were the moral guides of society prevailed within Western culture. Female bootleggers, now openly engaging in crime and redefining what a criminal could look like, forced the nation to confront what women were capable of. A North Carolina reporter lamented this new reality, stating, "Would one ever have dreamed of such in this country? In former days one rarely ever heard of a female bootlegger or bandit, but now, it seems, some of the very boldest and shrewdest of them are found among the female sex."[72]

Addressing the reality that respectable-looking women were bootlegging readjusted the paradigm of gendered expectations and female engagement in crime. Female criminals had obviously existed throughout history, but women were not perceived to be prolific offenders in the same way men were. Typical assumptions of criminality had associated a masculine image with crime, therefore making criminality into a gendered space. But during Prohibition, it became clear that women were participating in crime just as much as men were. Now that it was clear women were frequently engaging in illegal activity, the gendered space of criminality was challenged and faced a potential restructuring. To accept respectable women as criminals, society's understanding of morality and innocence were forced to shift. Alongside the more

[72] "Another Bad Girl," *Stanly News and Press*, February 28, 1928, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com /image/1009985311.

abstract understandings of gender, the more tangible gender roles and norms of the period were changing.

One of the greatest shocks to the public's view of female criminality was the violence female bootleggers were willing to engage in to preserve their lifestyle. The bootlegging industry was no stranger to rough and dangerous activity, but men were largely viewed as the perpetrators within these instances. Throughout the Prohibition Era, though, women bootleggers showed that they could be just as cold and calculated as male career criminals. In Pasadena, California, law enforcement were in pursuit of a man carrying a case of gin when a woman in an automobile, presumably with the man trafficking the liquor, hit the gas and ran over a Detective Sergeant Thomas.[73] The officer was not greatly injured, but the reporter relaying this story was quick to quote Detective Sergeant Thomas and his partner Detective Sergeant Beal on the "female of the bootlegger species" being "more deadly than the male."[74] Throughout the thirteen years of Prohibition, newspapers gave accounts of women engaging in shoot outs with the authorities or getting in hand-to-hand altercations, "using the time-honored weapons of her sex, teeth, nails and feet."[75] Beyond physical violence, female bootleggers also seemed to have taken the rough-and-tumble criminal persona to heart through the words they wielded as well, further tainting the delicate female image. In a shootout with the police in a New York City apartment, one woman yelled at her accomplice for not firing her gun, exclaiming, "'Gimme your gat, you blankety blank blank, I'll do it,'" before

[73] "Girl Liquor Suspect Runs Over Detective," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, June 8, 1925, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/608368143/.
[74] "Girl Liquor Suspect Runs Over Detective," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, June 8, 1925.
[75] "Sex Line in Occupations Not Drawn Even When it Comes to Bootlegging," *The Minneapolis Star*, May 2, 1922; "Policeman Shot in Fierce Fight with Two Women Bootleggers," *Daily News*, March 11, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/409600770/.

shooting and hitting a policeman in the shoulder. The newspaper's censorship of the female bootlegger's colorful language indicates a desire to protect the public's sensibilities surrounding acceptable behavior from women.[76]

The articles on female bootleggers who committed violent acts were the most scandalous stories run about them and certainly contributed to the larger-than-life image some of these women became known for. After exchanging gunfire with a sheriff in Kansas, bootlegger Louise Hornton was shot and killed, the paper stating that she "died in her diamonds and finery," then continuing to almost revere her, saying, "Her body lay in a mortuary tonight with a bullet wound, jewelled hands and fine clothes denoting the beginning and end of her dynamite life."[77] Piece by piece, the articles published in the newspapers revealed that women were highly capable of acting not just as criminals, but violent criminals. American sensibilities of the 1920s were now confronted in a way not previously experienced. As this form of female criminal became more commonplace in the papers of the public, people began to have no choice but to restructure their conceptions surrounding criminality and gender.

On a crusade against bootlegging and the women who participated in it, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) aimed to reassure society that women were still naturally rooted in virtue, and female bootleggers were especially notable exceptions to this rule. President of the Indiana WCTU Elizabeth T. Stanley publicly proclaimed that "some of the meanest bootleggers in America are women" and that female agents were needed to catch

[76] "Policeman Shot in Fierce Fight with Two Women Bootleggers," *Daily News*, March 11, 1922.
[77] "Accurate Fire Saves Life of Sheriff," *Press Telegram*, November 17, 1929, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/703340117/.

female bootleggers.[78] Women would not only be able to catch other women because they could think like them and shared a feminine experience, but should also be the ones to bring female criminals back into the fold of morality. As female bootleggers became an increasing problem facing law enforcement around the country, female "dry agents" were sworn in and deployed to track down their less-sober sisters.[79] This introduced a new facet of the question on female ability: if women could make it as federal agents, a position they were once barred from on the basis of their gender, what other masculine-associated roles could they occupy and thrive in?

Since the first female prohibition officer, Georgia Hopley, was sworn in, women dry agents proved to be proficient in their positions. Fueled by a zeal for temperance fostered by the WCTU, Hopley was ruthless in her pursuit of those in violation of prohibition.[80] Under Hopley's tutelage, a whole host of women became federal prohibition agents and demonstrated their gender to be an effective means of weeding out illegal alcohol from gendered spaces and in ways otherwise barred to men.[81] Through the work of a female dry agent, a "kindergarten" speakeasy, that is a speakeasy catered towards high school-aged boys and girls, posing as a tea room was discovered in New Orleans and subsequently shut down.[82] Tea rooms, geared towards the female sex, were gendered spaces in which the presence of a

[78] "Blame is Laid on Rich Women for Bootlegging," *The Daily Herald*, July 18, 1924, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/37219212/.
[79] "To Set Women to Catch Women in a War on Crime," *New York Herald*, March 2, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/37219212/.
[80] "Only Woman Dry Agent in U.S. Here to Carry on Work," *The Kansas City Post*, June 22, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/1024723448/.
[81] "Flappers Enlisted in U.S. Dry Army," *The Waco News-Tribune*, June 4, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/51416834/.
[82] "Tea Room Sold Rum to Children, Charge," *The Washington Herald*, May 31, 1929, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/1042799168/.

man would be more noticeable than that of a woman. It is because this dry agent was female that she was able to go undetected and garner inherent trust from the speakeasy's proprietors and patrons.

The crux of female dry agents' success was in the fact that they were women, and their gender allowed them to perform their jobs in two distinctly efficacious ways: they were able to enter female-designated spaces, and they could use their sexuality to discern information and evidence. Like the bootleggers they set out to catch, female dry agents made use of their femininity to fly under the radar, this time in the name of the law. Women prohibition officers eventually became an integral part of prohibition-centered task forces and were credited with taking down bootleggers of any gender and assisted with raids of underground establishments. A successful speakeasy raid in New York was due in part to female dry agents, who "in evening dress and escorted by immaculately attired male agents," took down a joint called the Jungle Club.[83] Proving their mettle, women dry agents quickly gained reputations for putting up a fearsome and canny opposition to bootleggers around the nation, undeniably cementing women's place within law enforcement. Due to the female dry agents who excelled at their jobs, more opportunities opened, albeit slowly, for women within the government and law enforcement across federal, state, and local levels. Eunice Hunton Carter is an example of one such woman, who, after working within the political sphere and with law enforcement during Prohibition, was appointed the first Black female deputy assistant district attorney of New York.[84] Just as women bootleggers were showing their ability to act as prolific and cunning

[83] "Female Dry Agents Secured the Evidence," *Republican and Herald*, February 17, 1928, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image-view/448044428/.

[84] "Eunice Hunton Carter Nominee in 19th A.D.," *The New York Age*, August 4, 1934, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image-view/40884419/; "Appointed: Mrs. Eunice Hunton Carter," *The Call*, April 17, 1936,

criminals, female prohibition agents demonstrated that women were capable of operating in high-profile, professional positions.

Photo of Eunice Hunton Carter in her position as deputy assistant district attorney of New York; The Mob Museum.[85]

No matter what side of the law they were on, women clearly proved they were more than pretty faces. Perhaps it was their showing of being equally as competent as men that led many courts to reevaluate the extent to which female bootleggers were disciplined according to the law.[86] As prohibition progressed, and women bootleggers continuously subverted gender roles, law enforcement grew increasingly hardened to excuses of female delicacy. A Texas judge, exasperated by the number of female bootleggers that came before him, put his foot down and stated, "'I'm tired of women appearing before me and begging for mercy simply because they are women… Women are now smoking cigarettes, holding men's jobs and acting

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image- view/1032089823/; Carter would later go on to serve an instrumental role in taking down infamous gangster Charlie "Lucky" Luciano.

[85] "Prohibition Agents Lacked Training, Numbers to Battle Bootleggers," The Mob Museum, https://prohibition.themobmuseum.org/the-history/enforcing-the-prohibition-laws/law-enforcement-during-prohibition/, accessed December 4, 2025.

[86] The female bootleggers being referenced did not have any indication that they had dependents, so are thus being examined separately from the female bootleggers who were explicitly expressed as having children.

like men and from now on I'm going to treat them as men.'"[87] Apparently, the courts were starting to wisen up, and if these ladies could dish it, they were now supposed to take it, too.

It is important to note, though, that when discussing women bootleggers who might have escaped the maximum punishment, newspapers almost exclusively referenced white women. In the case of Black female bootleggers, it seems that they had been receiving more severe sentences since the beginning of prohibition. When looking at first-time offenders who were charged and tried, more Black women were given jail sentences, whereas white women were more often fined.[88] Black female bootleggers were regularly sentenced to serve time in their local or county jails, and one woman was even told she would be staying thirty days at a workhouse before that particular portion of the sentence was dropped.[89] Though the interwar period was a time of a degree of female advancement, white women were the ones who saw the majority of these benefits. For Black women, they had to contend with proving their respectability as both members of the Black community and as women. This being the era of Jim Crow as well, Black female bootleggers faced systemic racism and violence both inside and outside the legal system. These factors undoubtedly led to the harsher treatment Black female bootleggers faced in court during prohibition.

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[87] "Police Wage War on Female Bootleggers," *Bristol Herald Courier*, July 20, 1929, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/585428966/.

[88] This is in reference to charges of simply bootlegging and does not include more extreme instances where customers were killed from drinking poisonous alcohol made and/or distributed by a female bootlegger of any racial background.

[89] "City's Liquor Raiders Have a Busy Saturday," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 15, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/605498650/; "Vernor Backs Police in Sentences Given," *Oklahoma Herald*, September 24, 1921, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/660444565/; "Stung Two Ways," *Waco News-Tribune*, December 15, 1926, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/51087086/; "Negro Woman Bootlegger Fined and Given Jail Sentence Tuesday," *Mexico Weekly Ledger*, January 26, 1922, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image /752384776/.

On December 5, 1933, the dry spell over the United States ended: The Twenty-First Amendment had been ratified and was now in action. With the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment, the Eighteenth was repealed, and the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol was no longer illegal. People all over the country celebrated prohibition's demise, and many publicly shared their excitement. In a newspaper article run nationwide, an obituary for the Eighteenth Amendment was shared, snarkily stating,

> "Miss Prohibition was born in 1919 of good parentage, her father being Mr. Anti Saloon League, and her mother Mrs. W.C.T.U. During her infancy and early childhood the deceased was highly praised for her beauty and promise of future usefulness. However, while still in childhood she unfortunately became involved in several scandals as a result of her associations with persons of questionable reputation, which ultimately ruined her career as well as her fame as a noble and lovable character."[90]

Sarcastically memorializing prohibition's tenure, this article ultimately conveyed that the United States was pleased with the end of the Eighteenth Amendment.

The success of repeal, though, would not have been as great without the involvement of women. Like their temperance movement predecessors, female advocates were the driving force behind the push to end prohibition. The Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR), established in 1929 by Pauline Sabin, was a powerhouse in anti-prohibition activism and a group that dedicated themselves to rallying the United States around repeal.[91] The WONPR, and women outside of the organization, argued that prohibition was actually harming American communities, as the outlaw of alcohol made it more likely for people to

[90] "'Obituary,'" *The Valley News*, November 30, 1933, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/742945744/.
[91] David E. Kyvig, "Women Against Prohibition," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1976): 465-482, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712541.

break the law and engage in unsavory activities.[92] Women took on the same home protectionist narrative that the members of the WCTU did and thus asserted themselves as figures of morality in a new political and social movement. Female anti-prohibition advocates found a way to assert their femininity to enact change.

Just like the women of the WONPR and the WCTU, female bootleggers found a way to harness their femininity to navigate prohibition. And just like these activist organizations, female bootleggers made American society reexamine not only the strength of women, but also what they were capable of doing to both preserve the home and move beyond it. For some female bootleggers and rum runners, their gender is what allowed them to operate covertly for a period of time. Performing outward signs of femininity, and playing up gender stereotypes when confronted, allowed women in the illegal alcohol trade to develop a reputation as more dangerous than male bootleggers. For other women bootleggers, their role within their families is what lead them to criminal activity, in which case they still satisfied the requirements of interwar gender roles. Using the money they made from distilling or selling liquor, mothers were able to care for their children and keep a household together. Whether they became criminals intentionally or out of necessity, women bootleggers drew upon their female identity and experience to conduct their business.

As the "problem" of female bootleggers grew in prominence the longer prohibition stayed in place, the government introduced a potential solution otherwise unheard of: female federal agents. It is because female bootleggers proved themselves capable of criminality that they also proved themselves capable of being able to stop it. Female dry agents showed their

[92] Rose, *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*, 90.

mettle throughout the Prohibition Era through conducting efficient raids and making arrests of men and women in violation of dry laws. Female agents could use their gender and femininity to enter spaces or glean information their male counterparts could not, gaining recognition for the invaluable assets they provided law enforcement with. Through both bootleggers and dry agents, and those in between, women of the Prohibition Era proved that femininity was an avenue for demonstrating one's capabilities. More than rouged knees, bobbed hair, or dancing the Charleston, that was the true makings of a twentieth-century modern woman.

Beyond discussions of temperance and the Prohibition Era, female bootleggers and federal officers play an important role in taking a fuller view of the 1920s, particularly the women who lived during the decade. Flappers are synonymous with the Roaring Twenties, and for good reason, but they are not the only examples of how mainstream femininity shifted during the period. In many cases, a female bootlegger or law enforcement officer represented the everyday woman, across different age ranges and classes, whereas the idealized flapper was perceived as young and likely from a comfortable background. Instead, female bootleggers and dry agents were groups made up from women of various backgrounds, which is more representative of 1920s America than the aspirational flapper. Female bootleggers and federal agents could be poor or wealthy, mothers or childless, immigrants or native-born. Their stories capture the wider communities they came from and pull back the glittering curtain of the Twenties to reveal places that might not match the enduring narrative of the decade.

Examining female involvement in prohibition, whether for or against, is also a beneficial way to gauge the political and social changes that occurred during the Eighteenth Amendment's thirteen-year enactment. Female bootleggers and federal agents alike

demonstrated the instrumental role women played in American society, not just as caregivers or homemakers, but as professionals and individuals. Female bootleggers and dry agents led society to recognize its reliance upon women, from business to justice and politics to economics, amongst an insurmountable number of other realms. In the illegal alcohol trade, female bootleggers exhibited skills and canniness that supposedly made them more dangerous than male bootleggers. Female dry agents also possessed incredible skill, this time in carrying out the law, with many gaining a reputation for the number of successful raids and arrests they conducted. Regardless of what side of the law they were on, both groups of women occupied positions that would have been quite restricted, or simply nonexistent, even a decade prior.

More than anything, the women of the Prohibition Era exemplify female endurance and persistence. Female bootleggers showed grit and determination to carry out their goals. The women bootleggers who were mothers illustrated the sacrifice of oneself for her children, doing whatever she must to keep food on the table and clothes on her child's back. For female dry agents, their strength and tenacity are what placed them in federal roles. Over and over female law enforcement officers verified that women were not just capable of succeeding in male-dominated spaces but could excel in them. The WCTU and WONPR both made themselves the voices of the temperance and anti-prohibition movements, and in modern memory endure as such. When the stock market crashed in October 1929 and the Great Depression set in, women proved themselves to be the backbone of families all over the nation. Some of these women were bootleggers, some law enforcement, but all were resilient. And it is that resilience that defines the women of the 1920s and onward. Criminal, law-abiding, or in some neutral

area between, women made it clear time and again that they would continue to assert their power, autonomy, and invaluableness.

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