Demon Rum and a Dare: The Story of How Prohibition Inspired Stock Car Racing in the American South

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According to acclaimed American journalist Peter Carlson, “Getting drunk, plastered, loaded, tanked, sloshed, smashed, stewed, and stoned is an old American tradition.”¹ While many of the modern era would contentedly forget this somewhat crude attestation to American cultural values, those who dwelled in the America’s Appalachian wilderness during the early 20th century would have heartily agreed. This attitude can be attributed to the fact that, for centuries prior to the American revolution, European “knowhow [and] small stills [had been introduced to] the Shenandoah Valley and into the Appalachian highlands,”² and as a result, those living in these regions—most of whom possessed either English, Irish, Scottish, or German heritage—had founded a culture in which multiple aspects of daily life revolved around the manufacturing, transportation, and consumption of what was eventually termed “the water of life.”³ For American southerners who had established a lifestyle dedicated to maintaining this positive mentality toward the drink and cultivated a collective cultural affinity for its major societal implications, the stereotypical snub that the drink was almost as


“elusive and dangerous as the Hillbillies themselves” neither
dissuaded nor fazed them from continuing their whiskey traditions. Thus, the mentality that drinking was more than a mere social pastime but, rather, an extension of Southern heritage and values, soon established the drink as a sort of symbol of the Southern way of life. Indeed, there were “few things...as purely Appalachian, as purely from the mountains, as moonshine.” This prevalence of ancestral affinity and cultural propensity to the drink would make it hardly erroneous to suggest that the American South in the early 20th century was undoubtedly rooted in whiskey.

Inasmuch as whiskey was at the heart of Southern culture, it was no surprise that the implementation of nationwide Prohibition in 1920 only “increased [the Southerners’] thirst” for their favorite beverage and ultimately resulted in intensifying the preexisting cultural attitude of “undying hatred of excise laws [and] spirit of unhesitative resistance to any authority that sought to enforce such laws.” Soon after this act was passed, the cry of, “‘Give us licker, or give us death,’” spread like wildfire across the face of the rural

5 Adkins, 37.
6 Jaime Joyce, Moonshine: A Cultural History of America’s Infamous Liquor (Osceola: Quayside Publishing Group, 2014).
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South and caused many who extolled the Southern whiskey prerogative to “deny any positive effect of prohibition” and, instead, view the ban as a direct threat to daily life as well as a brutal laceration to the culture’s vitality. Thus, contrary to its intended purposes, better government regulation of alcohol did nothing to end the American drinking epidemic but rather allowed the demon rum industry to expand, thrive, and become what “was probably the freest large industry in America” at that time. One of the most influential voices at the time, American humorist Will Rogers, adeptly captured the ironic ramifications of the ban when he wittily observed that “Prohibition [was] better than no liquor at all.” Despite its seeming role as the sole generator of negative social consequences, Prohibition would soon prove that privative measures do not produce negative consequences. In fact, what would soon be deemed one of the most blatant failures of Federal policy and ultimate blunders of the 20th century would eventually “give rise” to one of the best loved and most lauded sports in American history.

The story of how Prohibition inspired stock car racing in rural Appalachia began when Southerners’ refusal to give up their

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12 Peck, 12.
13 Peck, 12.
whiskey—rebranded as “moonshine” due to the discarded liquor tax—allowed drinking to remain the most valued social pastime in rural society. Due to ceaseless violations of the ban, the Bureau of Prohibition dispatched a new branch of federal law enforcement officers to those regions particularly opposed to giving up what had zealously been dubbed “white lightning.” This new branch, exclusively trained “for tracking bootleggers and organized crime leaders” in the Appalachian hill country, roamed the wooded regions in their patrol cars looking for whiskey to confiscate, stills to destroy, and moonshiners to arrest.

Unbeknownst to the Prohibition officers when they were first dispatched, the primary threat to Prohibition in the Appalachia hills was not the moonshiners themselves. In fact, the group that posed the biggest threat had "neither the knowledge nor the desire to run a still." Despite this groups’ lack of moonshining knowledge, they were one of the most competent gangs of good 'ol boys at the time and the primary reason that whiskey remained the “drink of freedom” in the South. Although they specialized in smoothly executed missions, stealth was not part of their job description. In fact, those who excelled realized that success was only attained

14 Adkins, 28.
15 Adkins, 35.
18 Adkins, 49.
through chaos, confusion, and noise. In other words, the most important job requirement was a “wild driving style.”

These were the devils who dominated the county backroads and the reason that “the culture of moonshine never died out.” This group had many names, the most popular being bootleggers, rum-runners, or trippers. Employed by the moonshining moguls, the “crime bosses [of] America’s hill country,” these bootleggers tended to be young men for whom the “automobile provided both means and metaphor for freedom and power [as their] daily lives often lacked both.” As the “concepts of power and speed [were] dominant in the thinking of these young men who [had] created for themselves a most romantic self-image,” it was no surprise that their vehicles became “actually more important...than either medicine or dress.”

For this group—many of whom were teenage boys as young as twelve years old—there were several incentives to securing the job as a moonshine runner. One of these incentives, of course, was the fact that “[rum-running] offered a level of excitement, an adrenaline rush, and a connection to traditional cultural ideals that ordinary life

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20 Joyce, 71.
22 Joyce, 71.
23 Miller, 24.
24 Maurer, 77.
25 Miller, 24.
on the farm or life in the mill village could not match."\footnote{Ibid., 21.} A second incentive involved the feeling of power behind the steering wheel which was “most satisfying to [those men who owned virtually] nothing.”\footnote{Ibid., 24.} Another incentive concentrated on how they, as the “brains and brawn”\footnote{Todd Gould, "Gold and Glory Sweepstakes: An African American Racing Experience," In \textit{Separate Games: African American Sport behind the Walls of Segregation}, edited by Wiggins David K. and Swanson Ryan A., (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 112, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1f89v0m.} of the era, had the opportunity to manipulate and conquer the mental, mechanical, and physical aspects of their environment.\footnote{Gould, 118.} A final motive was, of course, the irresistibility of “a fast car and the hazards of the chase.”\footnote{Maurer, 48.}

Because driving like a maniac to outrun the law required “a strong dose of audacity as well as driving skill,”\footnote{Miller, 28.} only the bravest recognized that these incentives possessed the flawless qualities of a perfect dare. Those willing to accept this dare learned quickly that their role as a driver “involved bridging the divide between [life as an] individual on one hand...and [their] role in a much larger economic and social framework on the other.”\footnote{Robert Buerglener, "Driving Ambitions: Charles Roswell Henry and the Changing Status of the Early Automobile Consumer," \textit{Michigan Historical Review} 37, no. 2 (2011): 82. doi:10.5342/michhistrevi.37.2.0079.} While this encapsulated the essence of what it meant to be a successful rum-runner, “for many young men...racing a stock [was] a perfect ‘outlet for the self-assertiveness and self-indulgence' that had been important features of their culture since childhood.”\footnote{Miller, 23.}
While bootlegging tended to attract more males than it did females, several women engaged in the illegal rum-running business, one of the most notable being Willie Carter Sharpe. Sharpe, a mountain girl from West Virginia who had married the son of a moonshine magnate, had a tremendously successful bootlegging career which financed a set of trademark diamond-studded teeth. In an interview conducted during her later life, she said, “It was the excitement got me’ [as she explained] the lure of leading liquor caravans on high-speed chases as federal officers fired shots at her tires.”

While it may seem strange that the threat of bootlegging to Prohibition was greater than that of moonshining, the explanation for this was fairly simple and originated, unsurprisingly, at the federal level. Due to a lack of federal funding, the law enforcers assigned to hunting in the Appalachian region were inhibited from buying faster cars and were constantly suffering defeat at the hands of their speedier prey. Thus, the only hope for these officers was that they would “confiscate enough such cars to engage in effective pursuit” and eventually outrun the liquor-toting hooligans whose “chrome-plated engines [had been] souped-up to outdistance any conventional factory model[s]” like those commissioned to the law enforcers. Thus, in the society “characterized by disrespect for authority,” the federals’ efforts to enforce the ban were often futile and ineffective against the powerful moonshining machine of the South.

33 Joyce, 83.
34 Ibid., 86.
35 Maurer, 75.
36 Maurer, 76.
Engaging in *and winning* the “deadly speed contests [with the] federal revenue officers”\(^{38}\) did not require the bootleggers to procure specific brands or types of automobiles. In fact, practically all vehicles with relatively spacious interiors for toting crates of moonshine—“Fords, Oldsmobiles, Pontiacs, Chevrolets, and Hudsons”\(^{39}\)—were employed in rum-running. Owning one of these vehicles propelled early drivers to the “forefront of social advancement”\(^{40}\) within their communities and established them as the dominating drivers of the early stock car races.

Because the “automobile[was] a ‘new frontier’ at that time...guys who worked in garages were always trying to invent ‘the better mousetrap,’ trying to come up with a slicker and better solution to make their cars run better.”\(^{41}\) This “extreme love and knowledge of automobiles and engines”\(^{42}\) was, then, a fairly new obsession with the youth of Appalachian society. Thus, as time went on and as “more and more Ford Model T’s and other cheap cars found their way to the used market or to junkyards,”\(^{43}\) affinity for the automobile world only increased.

While talent on the road was extremely pertinent to maintaining the moonshiner lifestyle, aptitude inside the auto-mechanic shop was just as crucial. In other words, the illegal

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\(^{38}\) Hall, 632.


\(^{40}\) Mitchelson, 54.

\(^{41}\) Shackleford, 312.

\(^{42}\) Miller, 24.

transportation of the precious cargo relied just as heavily on the expertise of the Southern mechanics, those making the cars, as it did the bootleggers. One of the more famous mechanics was Red Vogt, who operated out of Atlanta, Georgia, and who specialized in building fast engines for both bootlegging and cop cars. Among Vogt’s distinguished patronage, in fact, were Frank Mundy and Raymond Parks, both of whom were early Southern stock car racing kings.\textsuperscript{45}

One obvious rum-running vehicle modification was, of course, the reconstruction of its interior to allow more storage space. It is important to note, however, that “beyond storage capacity...it was a car’s engine that mattered most to a whiskey tripper.”\textsuperscript{44} While many bootleggers relied on the strength of Ford V-8’s to outrun the cop cars, the most coveted piece of rum-runner machinery was the Cadillac engine. Unfortunately, this engine was only installed in ambulances; thus, the only way to procure one was if “an ambulance crashed, or somehow or other ended up in the junkyard or for sale by the city.”\textsuperscript{45} Of course, in addition to engine transplants, mechanics took various other actions to ensure outstanding vehicle performance.

“Often three carburetors were lined up on the engine head, the last one delivering raw gas at speeds over 100 miles per hour. Gear ratios were modified, and an extra battery replaced the generator in order to send the entire horsepower of the engine to the drive shaft. This power in tum was increased phenomenally by expanding the cylinder bore and installing oversized pistons.

\textsuperscript{44} Joyce, 100.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
The back seats were removed or removable so that the trunk and the back seat became a continuous compartment capable of holding up to 100 gallons of whiskey. The front seats were welded in and oversized tires were desirable. Usually oversized shock absorbers or load lifters were installed over the rear axle to prevent the car from riding low when loaded. These cars were notoriously hard to start. They sputtered and limped along in urban traffic, but once on the open road their performance at high speed was amazing.”46

In addition to vehicle modifications, which included measures such as the installation of “fake police lights and bumpers that easily fell off when law enforcement attempted to use specially designed devices to grab [the back of their cars],”47 bootleggers introduced several driving innovations that are still employed in modern racing culture. For instance, the driving technique now known as the power-slide but initially dubbed the Bootlegger U-turn48 was first employed by moonshine-runners who quickly learned that they needed to use their speed to their advantage instead of letting it only serve as a distance propellant. This technique was polished by trippers who were tired of their fast driving becoming obstructed by the curvaceous mountain roads, frequent road blocks, and occasional forced detours which ended in federal ambushes. Put simply, this

46 Maurer, 76.
47 Miller, 28.
move involved applying one’s brake just enough to allow the car’s back to swing around in order to round sharp corners smoothly without flipping—sometimes a full 180 degrees—to pass tailing cops.

The “roar of race cars disturbed humid afternoons”\textsuperscript{49} in the South long before the formation of organized racing events. In fact, it was not uncommon for off-duty moonshinerunners to participate in small, “‘informal races’”\textsuperscript{50} on weekends which promoted those “traditional southern conceptions of honor and manliness”\textsuperscript{51} as they were regarded by enthusiastic attendees. For many of these bootleggers, “staging amateur races in pastures and cornfields to see whose car was faster and which driver the most adept”\textsuperscript{52} provided the inspiration many needed to continue racing after Prohibition ended\textsuperscript{53} and there was no more need to spin tires and spit dirt at cop cars. Eventually, what was “almost a neurotic attachment [to their] automobile[s], coupled with their preoccupation with speed and their superb driving”\textsuperscript{54} skills led many of these former bootleggers to participate in the earliest organized stock car races. Interestingly, some of the earliest “distinctions between true stock cars and modified racing machines”\textsuperscript{55} in these races featured vehicle modifications such as open cockpits. As the years progressed and stock car racing became more popular, it became obvious that liquor had provided a purpose for the racing but only those who had “caught the racing bug”\textsuperscript{56} were imbued with that ineradicable passion.

\textsuperscript{49} Hall, 634.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 635.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 655.
\textsuperscript{52} Joyce, 91.
\textsuperscript{53} Peck,14.
\textsuperscript{54} Maurer, 76 & 77.
\textsuperscript{55} Hall, 649.
\textsuperscript{56} Miller, 36.
to pursue some of the most distinguished racing careers in the sport’s history.

Smokey Purser was one of the first to catch this racing bug. In fact, for years prior to his career in Daytona Beach, Florida, as a racecar driver and bar and grill businessman, he was a mountain bootlegger who disguised his bootlegging truck by painting “Fresh Florida Fish” on the outside and stinking up the inside with dead fish he threw in the back.\footnote{Ibid., 45.} Another example was Junior Johnson, who “claimed that the fastest he ever drove was in a 1951 Ford” when he hauled his father’s homemade whiskey through the Blue Ridge Mountains.”\footnote{Andrew J. Baker, “When the Engines No Longer Roar: A Case Study of North Wilksboro, N.C. and the North Wilksboro Speedway,” Thesis presented to the College of the Arts and Sciences of Ohio University, June 2005, \url{https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/ohiou1121271618/inline}.} Others included one of NASCAR’s finest, Bobby Welborn, who recalled toting around fifty gallons of moonshine a week in his bootlegging car, and “Curtis Turner, whom some claim to be NASCAR’s best driver ever, [who started] making the Charlotte bootlegging run by age ten.”\footnote{Mitchelson, 54.} Multiple other, including “Lloyd Seay and Roy Hall, both of whom got their start running homemade liquor”\footnote{Maurer, 7.} would also go on to become some of America’s first driving legends. Of course, while most Southern drivers took pride in their bootlegging backgrounds, there were a few who refused to acknowledge any former connection to the moonshine-running heritage. One of these dissenters was Lee Petty, an early NASCAR racer described by his friends as a twofaced, “churlish despot who would do anything to win” a race.\footnote{Havick, 132.}
Unfortunately, there were many who shared Lee Petty’s negative sentiments toward the sport’s origins. In fact, for years following Prohibition, many racing enthusiasts dismissed Southern stock car racing because it lacked respectability, a virtue at the “core of production-based racing and more established forms of purpose-built racing.” In fact, prior to the emergence of Southern stock car racing, “most of the officially sanctioned auto racing in the United States was open wheeled, costly, exclusive, elitist, largely northern, used professional drivers” and was modeled after the Indy 500. One of the most well-known voices of reproach to the moonshine influence in Southern stock car racing was Bill France, a northerner who founded NASCAR in Florida in 1948. His aversion to the smudge which moonshine had left on the Southern racing culture began NASCAR’s opening day when a Ford, owned by former moonshiner Raymond Parks, won the first race. France’s embitterment toward racing bootleggers worsened from that point on, and eventually, “consistent losses to moonshiners who...dominate[d] his sport” propelled his rejection of “much of the lore and origins of stock car racing” and encouraging NASCAR itself to obscure or sanitizing the moonshining portion of the organization’s history.

Despite its rocky start nurtured by decades of societal prejudice, perpetual rivalries between northern and southern drivers, and, in some regions, extended periods of outright banishment and exclusion of bootleggers and racketeers from local racing events, stock car racing, “with its noise, dirt, powerful cars, and

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62 Shackleford, 302.
63 Mitchelson, 54.
64 Joyce, 97.
65 Mitchelson, 55.
66 Baker, 3.
67 Mitchelson, 71.
68 Ibid., 55.
consumption of alcoholic beverages,’ became ‘a symbol of the southern way of living.”’

Gradually, it even evolved into a means of “reconciliation between the once antagonistic regions” and became of the most valued and shared social pastimes of northern and southern culture. In fact, today, it is “the country’s second-most popular spectator sport after football.”

While it may seem that the greatest promoter of stock car racing in the rural American South was the whiskey prerogative, the true inspiration behind the sport was Prohibition. This, however, does not mean that whiskey’s role in the sport should be completely dismissed. Instead, “rather [than being viewed as] an accessory to a tired and noxious stereotype, moonshine [should be considered the] part of a bedrock for a renewed Appalachian identity.” This fresh identity confirmed the South’s historical standing as an “inseparable synthesis of tradition and transition” as well as cultural embodiment of continuity and change.

Without Prohibition, there would have been no need for rum-runners to outrun the law. In other words, the need for high-speed car chases would not have existed. Advancement toward modern technological innovations within the automobile industry would have been unlikely to occur without the kickstart that the Prohibition provided, prompting early bootleggers to modify their cars and perfect driving maneuvers such as the power-slide. Without Prohibition, there would not have been weekend races featuring off-duty moonshiners nor would there have been the continuation of racing events after Prohibition ended. Furthermore, neither would there have been a profitable purpose for young Southern boys to start

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69 Hall, 632.
70 Ibid., 635.
71 Peck, 14.
72 Adkins, 44.
73 Mitchelson, 52.
driving or the promise of adventure as it was once found in the excitement of a speedy late-night moonshine run. Because of the declaration of war on demon rum, thousands of young bootleggers dared to inspire a sport representative of a community which had exchanged its suppressed cultural values for the formation of one of America’s most beloved pastimes.