Marley Blanchard

Culture Annotation

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**The Development of the Bootlegging Industry in the Blue Ridge Mountains, 1914**

Moonshining in the Appalachia can be traced back as far as 1791 when the newly found United States government imposed an excise tax on whiskey to pay for war debts incurred by the Revolutionary War. Because people wanted to avoid the tax, they secretly produced and sold the whiskey.[[1]](#footnote-1) After the collapse of the South’s economy during and after the Civil War, many farmers lived in poverty and struggled to survive in the post-war conditions. In the Appalachian Mountains, mainly in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, many men turned to the moonshining industry to provide for their families.[[2]](#footnote-2) Before prohibition, many distillery owners possessed a state license, and seventy seven distilleries operated legally in Franklin County, Virginia alone.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, a substantial profit in this industry did not appear until after Virginia declared a dry state in 1914. Since alcohol was now illegal, it could not be taxed. Therefore, bootleggers made a straight profit while avoiding paying taxes on their product. From this point until the end of prohibition in 1933, the illegal bootlegging industry became a highly profitable occupation, especially in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, although it was illegal and risky.

After the enactment of prohibition in Virginia in 1914 and national prohibition in 1920, demand soared for alcohol and the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages had to be done in secret. The term “moonshining” came from the process of making beverages at night so locals and law enforcement officers would not see smoke coming from the still.[[4]](#footnote-4) The mountainous areas of northern Virginia and western North Carolina served as a prime private location because distilleries could be hidden deep in the mountains miles away from development. Distilling thrived in the South because corn liquor brought higher prices than the unprocessed vegetable, it was marketable, and it provided a steady income in an economically unstable region. Furthermore, it was easier to transport long distances than corn bushels.[[5]](#footnote-5) The industry economically benefitted and employed many different locals other than the bootlegger, including sugar and grain suppliers, still hands, container suppliers, liquor transporters, financial partners, and law enforcement officers.[[6]](#footnote-6) Often, local law enforcement officials accepted bribes from distillery owners to ignore their alcohol production and allow their business to keep running. With the moonshining industry fully at work, higher crime rates, bribery, and violence were present in bootleg areas.

In the late nineteenth century, the liquor was transported by wagon or rail; however, the development of the automobile in the early twentieth century made distribution quicker and allowed for more privacy.[[7]](#footnote-7) The alteration of an average car’s engine, suspension, and tires allowed local liquor producers to outrun law enforcement and conceal a heavy load of liquor. Certain springs and shocks added to moonshining vehicles held the vehicles level to hide a large load of bootleg beverages from law enforcement. In most cases, the liquor transporter avoided acts that would draw attention such as speeding or driving a suspicious vehicle; however, some law enforcement officials would get tipped about a moonshine delivery, and they would set up a roadblock or wait by the side of the road for the vehicle to pass. In many instances, the moonshine, liquor, and brandy would be hauled to larger cities such as Roanoke, Lynchburg, and Chicago for delivery to supply urban bootleggers and speakeasies.[[8]](#footnote-8) Often, a large majority of alcohol illegally sold in Northern areas was produced in the South, mainly in mountain regions, and transported to urban gangsters. Therefore, the Southern moonshining industry affected the culture and lifestyle of Northerners.

The illegal moonshining industry during the prohibition era defined Southern culture, and many cultural symbols reference the moonshining legacy today. Many songs, works of art and literature, movies, and recreational activities emerged from the mountain moonshining practices and culture. Bluegrass, country music, and NASCAR all have illegal moonshining roots or reference moonshining in their work. Not only did the Appalachia moonshining industry provide alcohol to citizens around the United States illegally, it defined a strong culture still present in mountain and Southern culture today.

1. Foy, Jessica. "Moonshine and Moonshining." In *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, edited by Charles R. Wilson and William Ferris, 696-97. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sumich, Jason. "It's All Legal Until You Get Caught: Moonshining in the Southern Appalachians." Appalachian State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blue Ridge Institute and Museum. "Turning Distillers into Moonshiners." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sumich. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Foy, 697. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Blue Ridge Institute and Museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Blue Ridge Institute and Musem. "Moonshine- Blue Ridge Style: The History and Culture of Untaxed Liquor in the Mountains of Virginia." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sumich. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)