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The Ladies of Rum Row



More Than 25,000 Women Have Been Fined or Sentenced to Imprisonment for Violating the National Prohibition Law

By Jack O'Donnell

JUDY O'GRADY and the Colonel's lady have tossed their bonnets into the bootleg ring.

They—more than 50,000 of 'em—have closed their kitchens, shops and drawing rooms to engage in the manufacture, transportation, smuggling, sale and distribution of booze in technically dry America.

They range in age from six to sixty. They are recruited from all ranks and stations of life—from the slums of New York's lower East Side, exclusive homes of California, the pine clad hills of Tennessee, the wind-swept plains of Texas, the sacred precincts of exclusive Washington.

Some are bold, brainy and beautiful, some hard-boiled, hard-headed and homely, some are white, some black, some brown. All are thorns in the sides of Prohibition Enforcement officials.

There's hardly a city of importance in this country which hasn't turned up—or out—at least one "queen of the bootleggers" in the last four years. There's hardly a Federal or State court which has not been called upon to deal with at least one "fair defendant" charged with violations of the Volstead Act. Out of every 100 cases of alleged violation of the prohibition statutes twenty-five women are either defendants or witnesses. More than 25,000 women have been fined or sentenced to jail for fracturing the National Prohibition Act.

Prohibition Commissioner Roy Haynes says that the queens of bootleggery are

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a real problem and menace. His department has watched the development of the female bootlegger with anxious eyes. Special tab is kept on the number of cases in which women figure, and his agents have been warned against showing quarter to them because of their sex.

"The fact that they are women makes it easier for them in the courts," he says. "Juries are inclined to be lenient with them, but, fortunately, some judges insist that they pay the full penalty of law-breaking. Many of the women caught by the Federal officers are just silly persons who think it smart to peddle booze, but others are of the venturesome type who go into it for gain and excitement."

These venturesome women have written lurid chapters in prohibition history on land and sea. They have taken their turns at the wheel on rum smuggling schooners plying between the Bahamas and the United States; they have piloted high-powered motor cars over the booze trails between the United States and Canada; they have stood shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in trade and fought off hijackers, prohibition agents and "revenooers"; they have been jailed only to turn and laugh at locksmiths as they made their escape down drain pipes and improvised ladders. And they



have amassed fortunes while playing the bootleg game.

In the big cities of the country they are highly organized. In New York City, for instance, more than a thousand "queens of bootlegger" are regularly employed by booze operators as saleswomen. These women make maximum profits with minimum risks. They do not handle booze; they merely take orders for it. Here's the way they work.

THE most powerful rum baron in New York—a man recently indicted for alleged conspiracy to violate the Volstead Act—employs fifty saleswomen. Federal officials who have been on his trail a long time recently caught him with the goods. His methods are

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known to John Holley Clark, Assistant United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. This operator divides the city into zones and gives each woman a slice of territory. Each woman has a number which is used instead of her name. Number 37, for instance, is a girl from the Middle West, well-known to the writer. She came to New York to study art, but gave it up when her funds ran low. Her territory lies south of Fourteenth Street, in the Greenwich Village section. She is up and doing every morning (except Sunday, which she sets aside for church-going, letter writing and recreation) about the time the average business man is going to his office. She has a wide acquaintance among artists, writers and other Villagers, and makes her rounds or telephones her customers every morning. This done, she looks over the list of office buildings in her territory, finds one which she has not "worked" recently, makes her way to it and starts to work. She generally starts at the top floor of the building, going first to a customer she knows and trusts. Before she leaves, Miss 37 asks about the occupant of the adjoining office. "Is he all right?" she queries.

This question reduces the risk the saleswoman takes. As a general rule men in office buildings have a fairly accurate line on their neighbors, and are in a position to give reliable information concerning them. If Miss 37 is told that the man in the next office is a prohibitionist or a stickler for law enforcement she passes him up and goes to the next safe prospect.



SOMETIMES, however, saleswomen enter buildings they have not worked before. This is called "going in cold turkey," which is slang for unpreparedness. When this is done the saleswoman picks the office of a man with a foreign name, going on the theory prevalent among bootleggers that men of foreign extraction take a more liberal view of prohibition enforcement than do their Anglo-Saxon brothers.

Once she gets an audience she is brisk and business-like, but not too brisk nor too business-like. She tempers these qualities with her most charming smile. Then:

"Good morning! Have you seen our new price list?"

If her potential customer is wise to the ways of bootleggery—and most New Yorkers are—he'll probably admit that he hasn't, but that he might be induced to look it over.

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Dry sleuths are ready to admit that women bootleggers present a grave problem to the prohibition forces

Number 37 then hands him a neatly printed list of imported wines, liquors and cordials, together with quotations on domestic goods. While he glances over this list Miss 37 tells him all about the "latest shipment received" and how it was brought in. "And we guarantee the purity of every drop we sell," she adds. "If you are not satisfied with our goods we'll gladly refund your money or give you other stuff. Our firm is one of the oldest and most reliable in the business."

If her prospect is a drinking man—and there are a number left—and his stock is low, he probably will give her an order. Men—big booze operators inform me—like to deal with women when purchasing liquor. They like, too, to take a woman bootlegger to their friends and say: "Meet *my* bootlegger!"

If the order is for a case of Scotch, which at the present writing is selling for \$65 to \$80, Number 37's profit will be from \$15 to \$25. She works on a flat rate of so much per case, depending upon the price she gets for it.

"The business arrangement completed, Miss 37 asks about "safe prospects" on the same floor and moves on. When she has received three or four orders she goes to a public telephone and calls up her office, gives the orders and directs when and where to deliver the goods. The main office in turn calls the warehouse, repeats the orders and delivery is made by a special messenger.

There are many pitfalls for the woman who employs the "cold turkey" method of approach, however, as Miss 37 will testify. One day recently she decided to visit her old home in the Middle West. Business at that time being none too good in her own territory, consequently profits being small, she determined to go off the reservation so as to make more money for her trip—invade one or two buildings further uptown. Accordingly, she left the Village and strolled up Broadway looking for a promising point of attack.

AT Madison Square she sat on a bench and gazed across Broadway at the buildings between Twenty-third

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At intervals of twenty-five feet throughout the business section of Anthony, Kansas, are sockets in which Anthony Tuttle Post will insert a staff and large American flag on Memorial Day and every other patriotic holiday

and Twenty-sixth Streets. Her eyes rested appraisingly on a tall-gray-stoned structure over the entrance of which was the number 1107. That number would have sent terror to the heart of a more experienced bootlegger. But it meant nothing in Miss 37's young life. To her it was only the Onyx Building, and pregnant with possibilities.

She crossed the street and entered. As she waited for an elevator two men came in and stood beside her. She paid no attention to them and all entered the lift together.

"Floors, please?" invited the operator.

"Top," answered Miss 37.

"Fifteenth," replied one of the men.

Miss 37 was standing back of the pair, but there was something familiar about that man's voice! She figured he might be an old friend. She moved over so she could see his face. She looked at him and his companion out of the corner of her eyes. Then she almost squealed! She recognized them as Moe Smith and Izzy Einstein!

Moe and Izzy—two of the most versatile and enterprising clown-sleuths in the Prohibition Department—had conducted a raid one night on a Greenwich Village cafe in which Miss 37 was a patron!

The pair got off at the fifteenth floor. Miss 37 rode to the top and then back to the street level. When she got out of the elevator she said to the starter: "Where is Prohibition headquarters?"

"Fifteenth floor, Miss."

But Miss 37 decided she'd hang on to her horseshoe. She went back to her own territory.

"It was a close call," she told me subsequently. "I don't know Yellowley or Herrick (two high Prohibition enforcement officials) and if I'd ever got to that floor I probably would have solicited business from one of them!"

"Women make the best salesmen," the employer of Miss 37 told me. "I have some who have made as high as

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\$350 a week. Men like to deal with them, especially if the girls are pretty and have a good line of talk.

"Where do they come from? Oh, everywhere. Lots of 'em got their training in cabarets or on the stage. Some are regular saleswomen who have deserted the book game for the bigger profits to be made in booze. I have one former school-teacher in the office. She can sell more stuff over the telephone than most men can on foot."

"Do they ever get caught?" I asked.

"Not if they're smart. Thirty-seven has been peddling the stuff for seven months without a slip!"

The Rose of Mulberry Street, as one of New York's most successful "queens" is known, hasn't always been as fortunate as Miss 37 in her dealings with Prohibition officials.

A few years ago Rose and her husband walked out of the Municipal Marriage Bureau with a marriage certificate and 25 cents between them. Today, according to her friends, she is worth \$300,000.

Rose started in the bootleg game on a small scale, as a saleswoman. She saved her earnings until she was able to "go on her own." She began by buying one case of Scotch. With the aid of water she made two cases grow where one had grown before. Gradually she built up her business until she was able to employ salesmen and saleswomen.

But despite the growth of her business she kept to her original method of making two cases out of one. Today she buys from 200 to 300 cases of Scotch a week. For this she pays the minimum market price. The goods are delivered to her "factory" which is a few blocks from her four-story apartment house—the house that booze built—where it is cut, doctored and re-bottled.

The Rose of Mulberry Street employs 30 agents who comb the lower East Side for orders. These orders are telephoned to Rose, but unlike the majority of dealers in booze, she takes care of her own deliveries.

But The Rose's path has been thorny. She has been arrested and fined, and forced to pay lawyers big retainers, six or seven times. But she isn't worrying. She has sent approximately \$100,000 back to her folks in Italy, owns a four-story apartment house on New York's lower East Side, and is about ready to retire—as her husband did when she joined the newly rich.

The woman who loves adventure and is willing to take a big chance for a big profit gets into the smuggling business. There are scores of them operating along the Canadian and Mexican borders. Some of these play a lone hand while others take a man along to

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look after car trouble or relieve them at the wheel during the long night rides. Alice Cyr, of New Bedford, Mass., was one of the latter. Miss Cyr was doing a profitable business smuggling booze in from Canada when she was "knocked off" by Federal Prohibition agents near Boston last Fall. She told the Federal officials that she was forced into the rum running business by illness. She bought a car, engaged George Ficara of Concord to drive it for her, and was making regular trips to Canada and back when caught.

One of the smartest women in the bootleg game is a "young, stylish and beautiful" girl who operates between St. John, New Brunswick, and North Atlantic states. She is known to Federal authorities simply as Minnie. She has her headquarters in a farmhouse on the Bay of Fundy, about fifty miles from the Maine line. Before going into business for herself she was assistant to the chief of a Canadian bootlegging syndicate. In that position she learned the book of bootlegger from cover to cover. Starting with a single automobile, she later purchased for \$4,000 a two-masted schooner, built prior to the war, which had been out of commission in a Bay of Fundy harbor for more than a year. Today she has eleven schooners under her command, and deals for thousand case lots are not unusual in her young life.

The spirit of adventure is well developed in this young buccaneer. Up along the Maine coast they tell a story of her first trip to the Bahamas on one of her schooners. The ship was homeward bound and only a few miles from port the crew seized the vessel and attacked "Minnie." She locked herself in her cabin and defied the men to break the door. A rush was made, but when the two leaders fell back with bullets in their shoulders the others fled.

That night the entire crew engaged in a heavy drinking bout. At dawn Minnie emerged from her cabin and went on deck. There she found the captain and crew stretched out, helpless. The schooner was drifting close to a ledge. Although knowing nothing of navigation Minnie took the wheel and brought the vessel safely into Boston harbor, ostensibly lumber-laden.

In her time Minnie has seen all the color, all the swashbuckling, all the dangers of the rum smuggler. Those who know say it isn't entirely the big profits that lure her aboard her schooners when they point their noses toward Nassau. It is also the thrill of the game, the love of adventure, the joy of the night on a trim schooner in a choppy sea surrounded by swaggering,

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blustering sea dogs. It is Romance!

She isn't cut from the same piece of cloth as the mysterious and spectacular Louise Vinciguera, of Omaha, who openly boasted that she had "cleaned up \$30,000 a year" in the game. She is more like the women who help smugglers keep "the stuff rolling" down from the Canadian border into upper New York State and down into Washington, Oregon and California. These women go into the game on a fifty-fifty basis—half for profit, half for adventure. In view of the risks they take their pay is small. Nan Woods, of Atlantic City, for instance, told the New Jersey State troopers that she received only \$25 a trip for riding with a rum smuggler from the Jersey Coast to Collingswood, N. J.

Minnie differs too from the women who run thousands of speakeasies that dot the cities of the country. No doubt she would scoff at an invitation to enter, say, Mother's Club, which is in the heart of New York City, just off Broadway. Mother runs a quaint little place and caters only to members of the theatrical profession. There's a picture of Edwin Booth in every room. Mother is one of the thousands who once "played with Booth." She has two sons in the show business. One is with a circus in the summer. In the winter he kills time serving Mother's customers and gossiping with the many celebrities who go to Mother's for refreshments. Her other son is in vaudeville. He takes his brother's place as waiter in the early summer when his game goes dead and the circus business booms.

It's a nice little place as speakeasies go, but it wouldn't interest the Minnies or the Nan Woodses. And Mother, on the other hand, would scorn to sell liquor to minors as did Helen Sarett, of Oakland, California, one of the thousands of "small time" female bootleggers who have been caught in police nets since the start of prohibition.

Women in the bootleg game are becoming a great problem to enforcement officials. Prohibition agents, state troopers and city police—gallant gentlemen all—hesitate to embarrass women by stopping their cars to inquire if they are carrying hooch. The bootleggers and smugglers of booze are aware of this fact and take advantage of it. An instance of this was the arrest of two "sisters of charity" up at Malone, near the Canadian-New York border. For months the state troopers and the Federal agents had seen the two "sisters" driving their big car back and forth over the highways. Some of the men may have had suspicions, but no-

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body took the trouble to halt and examine the car. But one day, as the "sisters" drove into the town of Malone a tire "blew out."

The accident happened in the heart of the little city, and there was nothing for the "sisters" to do but drive to the curb. As they did so they failed to notice a Federal agent who was leaning against a telephone pole. They brought the car to a stop and one leaned out to see what damage had been done. Seeing a blowout the "sister" exclaimed: "Hell of a place to have a blowout!"

The Federal agent overheard the remark and thought it strange coming from a nun. He went to the car and asked if he could be of any help. Then he noticed that one of the "sisters" had a pretty heavy beard. His suspicions were further excited when he saw a Number Nine shoe sticking out from under the black robe worn by one of the "sisters." Further examination brought to light ten cases of perfectly good Canadian ale. The "sisters" are continuing with their charitable work—but the Government is getting the benefit of it. They are in jail.

How to block the activities of the Judy O'Gradys and the colonels' ladies is a problem to which Prohibition Commissioner Roy A. Haynes has devoted much attention in the last few years, but thus far his efforts have not been crowned with success.



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