

Gaslight, Girlboss, Gatekept:

Pacific Northwest Women Bootleggers and Moonshiners During Prohibition, 1916-1933.

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By

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Abstract

During the Prohibition era (1916–1933), women in the Pacific Northwest played a significant yet understudied role in the illegal alcohol trade. Contrary to the prevailing narrative that bootlegging, rum running, and moonshining were predominantly male enterprises, women actively participated in manufacturing, transporting, and selling illicit liquor. Contemporary newspapers, such as a 1918 article in the *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, highlight how women moonshiners were not only common but also notoriously difficult to trace. Drawing from period newspaper reports and legal records, this paper examines how women leveraged societal expectations, employed clever tactics, and subverted gender norms to carve out space in the criminal economy of the era. By uncovering these women's contributions, this research challenges conventional understandings of gender roles during Prohibition and brings to light the overlooked impact of female participants in the Pacific Northwest's illicit alcohol networks.

Introduction

During the Prohibition era from 1916-1933, women in the Pacific Northwest were heavily involved in the illegal transporting, manufacturing, and selling of illicit alcohol, and they did so of their own volition. According to an article published in the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* in 1918, “Women Moonshiners are not uncommon, they are always the hardest to trace.”¹ Newspaper reports of the era speak about how women country-wide were prolific moonshiners,² who produced illegal liquor, bootleggers,³ who transported it, and rum runners,⁴ who smuggled it. From coast to coast, women’s participation in these illegal activities was an ongoing issue for federal investigators and local police departments.⁵

With their clever tactics they were able to make their mark in the criminal annals of the time. Despite the common misperception that bootlegging and rum running during Prohibition were dominated by men, women in the Pacific Northwest played a crucial yet largely overlooked

¹ Fredric J. Hasken, “The Spread of the Mountain Dew,” *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, Newsbank, September 12, 1918.

² Moonshining/ Moonshiners: The word is derived from the notion of the liquor being made and distributed at night, under cover of darkness, Makers of moonshine are called moonshiners, *Moonshine* most commonly denotes clear, unaged liquor that was made at home with a corn (maize) base and a high alcohol content, It has also been called rotgut, white lightnin’, white dog, and corn liquor, The word *moonshine* has been used since the 15th century, but it was first used to refer to illicit liquor in England during the late 18th century, Raikar, S.P. "moonshine." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 2, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/moonshine>.

³ Bootlegging/ Bootleggers: A person in the act of transporting illegal liquor by vehicle and on the body, “The word apparently came into general use in the Midwest in the 1880s to denote the practice of concealing flasks of illicit liquor in boot tops when going to trade with Native Americans”, Hence the term bootlegging, hiding the illegal liquor container on the person, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "bootlegging." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 15, 2024.<https://www.britannica.com/topic/bootlegging>.

⁴ Rum runners/ Rum running: Is smuggling illicit liquor by water and onto shore or across a border it was coined during Prohibition and is used interchangeably with bootlegging, “rum runner,” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rum runner](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rum%20runner).

⁵ “Officers Worried by Feminine Bootleggers,” *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, Newsbank, April 6, 1922.

role in the illicit alcohol trade. Through ingenuity, defiance, and strategic use of societal expectations, these women navigated legal and social barriers to manufacture, transport, and sell alcohol, challenging traditional gender norms while shaping the criminal landscape of the era. This paper uncovers the largely forgotten and unacknowledged history of these “pioneering” women.

The writing at the time of Prohibition about women’s experiences ranged the whole gamut. Reporters and writers of the time put out articles about the women’s leagues that aided in the visibility of early Prohibition that encouraged moderation of drink, as well as sensationalizing those women who lived on the illegal side of the laws.⁶ *The Tacoma Daily Ledger* published an article titled “Is It True That Boys are Better and Girls are Worse,” written by Polly Fergusson. She writes about how female delinquents brought to the courts have risen by thirty-nine percent whereas the male delinquents have lowered by twenty percent.⁷ The article goes into detail about the types of crime that women were committing versus the types that were typically committed by men.

Methodology

This paper utilizes newspaper articles and images to examine the lives of various women caught bootlegging and moonshining. Using sources like newspaper articles, court documents and photographs is a necessity given the limited records of women’s voices of the past. These

⁶ “W.C.T.U. to Observe Crusade Day in Program of Education on Alcohol Question,” *Oregonian*, December 21, 1933, *NewsBank: Access World News*; *Evening Star*, published as *The Sunday Star*, March 12, 1922; *Seattle Daily Times*, May 4, 1916, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

⁷ Polly Fergusson, “Is It True That Boys are Better and Girls are Worse,” *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, published as *The Tacoma Sunday Ledger*, July 26, 1925, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

articles provide details of these women and their crimes. Most of the accounts in newspapers are either stated bluntly with just the smallest number of details, such as in court records, or they are sensationalized for entertainment purposes, such as many newspaper depictions, but they still contain nuggets of truth that can be distilled from what little has been recorded. Sources like diaries, journals, and personal accounts are non-existent as far as what has been found. Despite the suppression and neglect of women's voices, which has limited the baseline of documents to newspaper articles and brief testimonies in court documents, the stories of these women can still be divined through sources that do exist. Using a bottom-up, interdisciplinary social historian lens allowed me to analyze newspaper articles, photographs, government documents and business records, so that these women's stories can still be told.

Literature Review

Selected secondary source readings reinforce the involvement of women in the illicit trade of alcohol, with a focus on women from other states in the union such as Montana and Louisiana.⁸ This further illustrates that women from coast to coast and urban to rural were participating in the crimes of Prohibition. Most of the secondary sources typically delve into women's involvement in Prohibition on the East Coast, Midwest, and the greater Chicago areas. So, the gap in historical scholarship is not only gendered regarding women but also regionally limited when looking at the Pacific Northwest. Not much has been written about Prohibition in

⁸ Mary Murphy, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1994): 174–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713337>.; Tanya Marie Sanchez, "The Feminine Side of Bootlegging," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 4 (2000): 403–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233697>.

Washington state, and what has been written is centered around men's involvement with little to no acknowledgment of the participation of women.⁹

Many events led to the enactment of Prohibition in the Pacific Northwest and nationally. Although men and women both played a role in its enactment. The literature over time, however, primarily relegates women to the role of instigator during Washington and the U.S.'s dry era. But more exploration within the literature and the events of the decade shows that women played many roles on both sides of the law. In fact, there is a wide range of a few sentences to whole chapters and articles written about the women who shaped the nearly two decades of law and excess.

Historians writing in the 1960s onward started to speak more about specific sections of the Prohibition movements like the anti-saloon leagues, the politics around the era, as well as centering their writings on specific pivotal people, mainly men, who benefited greatly under Prohibition, men of nefarious intent and character who created their fortunes selling illicit alcohol. Rarely at this time are prominent women featured in the articles at all, and if they are it is but a small mention.

Norman H. Clark, in his 1963 article "Roy Olmstead, Rumrunning King of the Pacific Northwest," centered upon one man, Roy Olmstead, who rose up as one of the most profitable rum runners in the Pacific Northwest.¹⁰ Clark lauds Olmstead as one of the popular heroes but with only the smallest mention of his wife Elise Olmstead, who played a significant role in the

⁹ Brad Holden, *Seattle Prohibition: Bootleggers, Rumrunners and Graft in the Queen City* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2019).

¹⁰ Norman H. Clark, "Roy Olmstead, a Rumrunning Kin on Puget Sound," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 54, no.3 (1963): 6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40487821>.

couple's illegal activities. Written in 1965, Clark's *The Dry Years*¹¹ is a case study of Prohibition in Washington state that explores how progressives attacked alcohol and how the 1909 legislature enacted a dry local option allowing cities and counties to determine how liquor policies were implemented. Clark shows that Prohibition was a long shadow across the state's history.

It was not until the 1990s that articles appeared about women's illegal activities during Prohibition, as in Mary Murphy's "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters."¹² She reveals how women in Butte, Montana, particularly mothers and daughters, navigated their participation in both bootlegging and the consumption of alcohol and demonstrates how Prohibition reshaped gender norms and allowed women to gain autonomy in public and private spheres, contributing to broader social changes to the country. Similarly, Marie Sanchez's 2000 article "The Feminine Side of Bootlegging" discusses women in Louisiana who bootlegged during Prohibition.¹³ This article uses an intersectional approach about the experiences of marginalized women that are often even more overlooked than others.

Fred Minnick's 2013 *Whiskey Women* details the involvement of women bootleggers and brewers during the era¹⁴ by examining the legacy of women brewers who immigrated from various countries throughout Europe and brought their traditions and knowledge of their craft.

¹¹ Norman H. Clark, *The Dry Years: Prohibition and Social Change in Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965).

¹² Mary Murphy, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1994): 174–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713337>.

¹³ Tanya Marie Sanchez, "The Feminine Side of Bootlegging," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 4 (2000): 403–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233697>.

¹⁴ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2013).

This informs the wider historical audience about the prevalence and frequency of which alcohols were brewed by women, speaks about regionality and personal preference, and shows how women continued to ply their trade to create empires after the repeal of Prohibition.

More recent books provide an excellent overview of Prohibition with a modern lens. While not focused on women's roles in particular, Rorabaugh's *Prohibition: A Concise History* is a great overview of Prohibition and does an adequate job of detailing all of the major milestones that created the Prohibition movement as a whole.¹⁵ It illustrates and helps us to understand the social mores, morals, and taboos of the era. Anne Funderburg's *Bootleggers and Beer Barons of the Prohibition Era* provides an up-to-date and thorough exploration of Prohibition as a primer for the U.S. as well as highlights specific states' involvement within the larger movement.¹⁶ It offers more details surrounding how people evaded the laws and what their tactics were in doing so. She also has an entire chapter dedicated to the role women played in Prohibition, detailing the different women's movements in different states.

Stephen T. Moore's *Bootleggers and Borders: The Paradox of Prohibition on a Canada-U.S. Borderland* speaks about the experiences of the Pacific Northwest and Canada.¹⁷ It illustrates how they were intertwined in their policies and how the Pacific Northwest was influenced by Canadian policies as well as how these affected its regional identity. Brad Holden's *Seattle Prohibition* offers a wonderful dive into the politics surrounding Washington's desire to

¹⁵ W. J. Rorabaugh, *Prohibition: A Concise History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁶ Anne J. Funderburg, *Bootleggers and Beer Barons of the Prohibition Era*, 1st ed. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2014.

¹⁷ Stephen T. Moore, *Bootleggers and Borders: The Paradox of Prohibition on a Canada-U.S. Borderland*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

go dry.¹⁸ While historians, including those above, have often written about all manner of topics within the broader topic of national Prohibition, few have written about the experiences of Washington state. The topic of women's involvement in Prohibition in the past has mostly been centered upon their involvement within the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and women's newly established right to vote.¹⁹ But rarely have historians written about the women who fall outside of those categories, those who participated in the illicit side of Prohibition: the women who sold, manufactured, and participated in the larger illicit trade surrounding alcohol. This paper reveals the unacknowledged accomplishments of those who dared to live on the illicit side of Prohibition.

Influence of Canada in Washington

The history of Prohibition in Washington state starts across its northern border in Canada. Prohibition as an institution was introduced to the U.S. through the temperance movement that first gained traction in Canada, the Canadian Temperance Act or the Scott Act of 1878. Prohibition was first officially enacted in 1901 and by 1920, most provinces repealed the law. Canadian Prohibition law stated that liquor could be legally produced in Canada but not sold in retail establishments for domestic consumption, yet it could be exported out of Canadian ports. Distillers, brewers and others with the proper license could sell outside of the provinces.²⁰

¹⁸Brad Holden, *Seattle Prohibition: Bootleggers, Rumrunners and Graft in the Queen City* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2019).

¹⁹Holden, *Seattle Prohibition*, 21; Clark, *The Dry Years*, 28; Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, 26.

²⁰ *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Prohibition in Canada," Canadian Encyclopedia.

Western Canada's Prohibition acted as a catalyst that helped further Washington's early adoption of Prohibition.

Temperance movements gained traction due to their organizational achievements but also through rural voters who were tired of rowdy saloons that overtook their small towns. These movements were spearheaded by the local politics being divided between the two factions of "Open Town" or "Closed Town." According to Historian Brad Holden, "Open Town proponents believed that alcohol, prostitution, and gambling were normal human activities and should be permitted as long as they were regulated and restricted to a certain part of town. Closed Town advocates including local clergy and temperance leaders, lobbied that no such conduct should be permitted at all."²¹

Washington State voters passed Initiative 3, in 1914, which went into effect on January 1, 1916.²² This law restricted the retail sale and manufacture of alcohol, forcing local saloons to close up shop. Initially, personal consumption within the home was still permitted, with an allowance for residents to purchase alcohol with a permit that could be obtained through state government paperwork, or with a medical prescription from a licensed doctor. This brought around many people who suddenly had chronic body pain and sleep disorders to obtain prescriptions.²³ However residents still had the right to purchase out-of-state alcohol for household consumption, though this was eventually removed by The Volstead Act of 1920.

²¹Holden, *Seattle Prohibition*, 22.

²² Ibid., 32.

²³ Ibid., 35.

The Road to Prohibition

The Wartime Prohibition Act, also called the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act, was a temporary federal measure enacted on April 2, 1917. It provided that no foodstuffs could be distilled. Beer was exempted and hard liquor that was in storage could be sold but new spirits could not be made. In December, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation cutting the amount of grain that could be brewed by 30 percent, and stipulating that beer be only 2.75 percent alcohol which was one-third to one-half below the then-normal strength.²⁴ In July 1918, he cut brewers' coal allotments by 50 percent.²⁵ This was presented at the time as a war effort to support the troops but also had anti-immigrant, especially anti-German, undercurrents. Newspaper articles supporting the effort appeared, such as one which asked, "Shall the many have food, or the few have drink?"²⁶ When the U.S. Senate refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the U.S. and Germany technically remained at war and as a result wartime Prohibition continued until the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect in January 1920.²⁷

Rorabaugh explains the laws in detail: "In September 1919 Representative Andrew Volstead and the Anti Saloon League drafted The Volstead Act that took effect in 1920.

²⁴ Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, 53.; Woodrow Wilson, "PROCLAMATION. To the People, Asking Ten Million Members for the American Red Cross.," *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, Woodrow Wilson*, ed. and trans. James D. Richardson in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, Woodrow Wilson Original Sources*, accessed April 23, 2025, <http://www.originalsources.com/Document.aspx?DocID=WV8D58LR9A2EM7Q>.

²⁵Ibid., 53.

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 57.

It defined the terms and provided the details left out of the Eighteenth Amendment.”²⁸ The

Eighteenth Amendment reads as follows:

After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited. The Congress and the several States shall have concurrent power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.²⁹

The language of the Eighteenth Amendment was too vague; it banned but did not define what intoxicating liquors were, making it impossible to enforce. Its language called for Congress to pass enforcement legislation, which was The Volstead Act.³⁰ The Volstead Act, defined an intoxicating liquor as anything that contained 0.5% or greater alcohol by volume. Rorabugh explains this framework of the law: “This percentage was set because it was the lowest amount of alcohol that could be detected; it had nothing to do with intoxication. Today, such products are sold as non-alcoholic beer.”³¹

In contrast, Canadian Prohibition laws set the limit at 2.5 percent. This further defined that the production, sale, transportation and possession were punishable by civil and criminal penalties for violation of Prohibition. The Act also granted federal Prohibition agents the power to enforce these structures throughout the nation. The Volstead Act allowed licenced

²⁸ Ibid., 59.

²⁹ U.S. Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Resources Constitution Annotated, congress.gov, Library of Congress. <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-18/>.

³⁰ “U.S. Senate: The Senate Overrides the President’s Veto of the Volstead Act,” n.d. www.senate.gov. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Volstead_Act.htm.

³¹ Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, 59.

manufacture, production use and sale for medicinal or religious purposes that were subject to state and local restrictions. The Volstead Act did not prohibit drinking and it allowed for the private possession and consumption of intoxicating liquors that had been legally acquired, what would constitute legally acquired alcohol was alcohol purchased before the ban, Medicinal use alcohol could be purchased at a pharmacy in a limited quantity with a doctor's prescription for bodily aches and pains, Religious purposes pastors priests could obtain a permit to purchase wine for the sacrament, and Industrial uses those working in industry that used alcohols they would be issued permits for those allotments.³²

Women are often blamed for the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment, which has no merit considering most women across the U.S. could not vote yet. Only ten states had made provisions for women's suffrage, and some of them were restrictive in their capacity of voting, being only able to vote in primary elections. Women's involvement within the Women's Christian Temperance Movement and Anti Saloon Leagues go beyond their personal relationship with alcohol and goes back to when women's suffrage was put up to Congress in 1910. At the time, liquor lobbies were lobbying against women's suffrage.³³ Due to the efforts of anti-women's suffrage groups, that bill was dropped and readmitted to Congress in 1920 as the Nineteenth Amendment with the support of Woodrow Wilson.³⁴ In fact, when the Eighteenth Amendment

³² "Volstead Act Constitution Annotated Congress.gov, Library of Congress," Congress.gov. 2025. https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt18-5/ALDE_00013845/#ALDF_00030319.

³³ Ames L. Brown, "Suffrage and Prohibition," *The North American Review* 203, no. 722 (1916): 93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25108710>.

³⁴ "Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment," National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage#toc-primary-sources>.

was passed in Congress there was only one woman in Congress at the time. It was Janet Rankin, congresswoman of Montana. She was the only woman who voted for Prohibition; everyone else in Congress was male.

Woman Bootleggers and Moonshiners

Despite the common misperception that bootlegging and moonshining during the Prohibition era of 1916-1933 was dominated by men, women in the Pacific Northwest played a crucial yet largely overlooked role in the illicit alcohol trade. Through wit, will, and the subtle art of subverting social norms, these women sidestepped legal and cultural barriers to brew, traffic, and trade in alcohol, challenging the era's gender roles and the criminal world alike. The public and the police alike saw how prevalent women moonshiners were during the era: an article by Fredric J. Haskin in *The Tacoma Daily Ledger* in 1918 states, "Women moonshiners are not uncommon, and are always the hardest to trace, according to the revenue agents...they make liquor to sell, fully aware that they are breaking the law and prepared to resist it."³⁵

Women played many roles in Prohibition. Some were on the illegal side and others were drawn to the legal side as police officers, Prohibition agents, or worked in the customs office, making sure women did not smuggle in alcohol from Vancouver or other locations on their vacation. These women featured in the newspapers tell different stories: some were trying to support their families, others had different motivations, but all were seeking to earn money for one reason or another.

³⁵ Frederic J. Haskin, "The Spread of the Mountain Dew," *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, Newsbank, September 12, 1918.

Many of the daring women who played their part in the years of Prohibition have been overshadowed by the larger-than-life men of the era. It was well known at the time that women brewed beer, wine, and vinegar within the home for their use and consumption since it was not customary for women to drink in public, as they were not allowed into saloons to imbibe.³⁶ During this time, public drinking was one of the most gender-segregated activities in the U.S.³⁷ As a result, a woman who chose to drink often had no option but to do so at home.

Once such woman who played a major part in the activities of Prohibition was Elise Campbell Olmstead and she played it from both sides of the aisle. Not only was she to eventually marry Roy Olmstead the most successful and most profitable bootlegger in Seattle wa. The scope of Roy Olmstead's bootlegging organization was so large that at one point during his most successful period he was one of the largest employers in the South Sound area, with his fleet of vessels, warehouses, accountants, salesmen, legal counsel, messengers on his payroll.³⁸ But she also worked as an informant for the Seattle Prohibition office.

She was originally from Britain but after WW1 in 1919, at the age of nineteen, she immigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia.³⁹ Sometime during King of the Seattle Bootleggers, Roy Olmstead's many trips to Vancouver to make liquor purchases for export for his bootlegging

³⁶ Jeremy D. Baker, "Repealing Gender Norms: Women and Prohibition," *Digital Commons*, Georgetown University (2006).

³⁷ Mary Murphy, "Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte Montana," *American Quarterly* 46, no.2. 174(1994): 174-94.

³⁸ Norman Clark, "Roy Olmstead, A Rumrunning King on Puget Sound," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 54, no.3 (1963).

³⁹Albert Gidari, *Elise Olmstead: The Myth and Mystery of Seattle's "Queen of the Bootleggers"* (Gidari Publishing, 2024), 26.

organization, they had met while she was a waitress. According to her testimony to William Whitney, Chief Assistant of Roy C. Lyle Prohibition Administrator of the Seattle office:

She came to Seattle in the early part of 1922 having been picked up by Olmstead in Vancouver where she was a waitress. He brought her over here and kept her as his woman although he was married to another woman. Elise had a five or six year old boy which she gave up to the Washington Children's Home.⁴⁰

Elise came to Seattle in early 1922 because Roy Olmstead had hired her as his bookkeeper, and in June 1922, he purchased a house in the University District for Elise to reside in.⁴¹ All the while Roy Omstead resided with his first wife Cottie and his two daughters. He would stay married to Cottie until 1924 when she sued him for divorce in January, although the divorce was not finalized until early August. Once the divorce was finalized, Cottie was granted full custody of their two daughters, and they moved to California, wanting nothing more to do with Roy.⁴²

After Elise's move in 1922, according to her testimony given as a witness in the United States v. Whitney case:

Elise became incensed at Olmstead, came to the Prohibition Office, turned in a freight car load of Omstead's whiskey, also a large amount of whiskey that he had in one of his cashes in West Seattle: about 20 cases. She made up with Olmstead, persuaded him to divorce his wife and his wife went south in 1923 and from then on Olmstead lived with Elsie. He established her in a fine home in Mt. Baker Park in March 1924, lived with her as Mr. and Mrs. Potter finally married her in August of

⁴⁰ United States v. Whitney Testimony of Witnesses, Charles P. Moriarty Papers, 3009-001.7 box 7 Folder 11, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

⁴¹ Gidari, *Elise Olmstead*, 31; United States v. Whitney Testimony of Witnesses, Charles P. Moriarty Papers, 3009-001.7 box 7 Folder 11, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

⁴² Ibid, 31.; Norman Clark, "Roy Olmstead, A Rumrunning King on Puget Sound," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 54, no.3 (1963): 6.

1924. Prohibition officers raided their home in November 1924. They continued living there until after his conviction in 1926.⁴³

As detailed in the article from the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* in 1924, Elise Olmstead was a volunteer informant and was feeding information directly to William Whitney, Chief Assistant of Roy C. Lyle Prohibition Administrator of the Seattle office, about the goings-on of Roy Olmstead's organization. She was an informant up until they were married in August of 1924. From the article from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* with the headline of Here's Roy Olmstead's Greatest Coup Officials Say He Wed Biggest Menace.

Two years ago one of the most frequent visitors at an office that was unknown to the public was the secret meeting place for local federal dry agents and their "undercover" workers...She was considered by the Prohibition men their most reliable volunteer informant on the operations and intended operations of Roy Olmstead and his men. She came and went covertly, and her comings and goings were carefully guarded by the agents to prevent her becoming known... During the period that the dry office had her confidence it is said she often sat for hours explaining minutely the schemes of the liquor ring and the information thus imparted resulted in a remarkably successful campaign against Olmstead and his operatives clearly in raided whiskey caches, seized automobiles and arrested men.⁴⁴

Many historians write about how Elise would fall in love with the King of Rum Runners Roy Olmstead and play a major role in his organization.⁴⁵ But from the two documents, the

⁴³ United States v. Whitney Testimony of Witnesses, Charles P. Moriarty Papers, 3009-001.7 box 7 Folder 11, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

⁴⁴ "Here's Roy Olmstead's Greatest Coup Officials Say He Wed Biggest Menace," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 19, 1924, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

⁴⁵ Norman Clark, "Roy Olmstead, A Rumrunning King on Puget Sound," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 54, no.3 (1963):6.

witness testimony⁴⁶ and the newspaper article,⁴⁷ and in light of her knowledge of the activities of Roy Olmstead's organization, it appears as though she was already a vital piece of Roy Olmstead's organization. Moreover, she was their bookkeeper and therefore already had a list of the people who worked for Roy. There is much more to this woman's life than what has been found. After their marriage in August 1924, Elise started a radio station in their Mt. Baker house where she and others put on radio shows, news, played new music, and read a children's story nightly.⁴⁸ But because of the sidling of women's lives, legacies and stories, there is little else to go on about what the rest of her involvement was within the Olmsteads' illegal business: the rest is speculation.

This was just the beginning of the era of women, booze and jazz. There would be countless more women that followed in the footsteps of Elise. The frequency of women bootleggers and moonshiners would continue to increase. The earliest record of woman arrests that have been found after Washington had gone dry was this article with the headline "Fine Woman Bootlegger." Although the title calls her a fine woman bootlegger, it doesn't go into detail as to why it calls her that:

Fine Woman Bootlegger, Mrs. Antoinette Rosin, the first woman prosecuted in Pierce county under the new Prohibition law, was convicted by a jury in Justice Linck's court last night. She was given the minimum sentence of \$60 and costs. Mrs. Rosin was arrested for illegal sale of liquor following the raid of two places in Old Town. This makes the sixth liquor prosecution without one acquittal.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ "Here's Roy Olmstead's Greatest Coup Officials Say He Wed Biggest Menace," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 19, 1924, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

⁴⁷ United States v. Whitney Testimony of Witnesses, Charles P. Moriarty Papers, 3009-001.7 box 7 Folder 11, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

⁴⁸ Clark, "Roy Omstead," 6.; Gidari, "Elise Olmstead," 62.

⁴⁹ "Fine Woman Bootlegger," *The Tacoma Times*, Washington State Library, February 5 1916.

In 1917, *The Seattle Star* reported, “Champion Lady Bootlegger is in Toils Again, Ella Wella Seattle’s Champion woman bootlegger is in custody again on her tenth arrest for alleged violations of the liquor law. Mrs. Wella has been convicted of illegal liquor traffic five times.”⁵⁰ The article reports that Mrs. Wella rented a house that she used as a liquor cache and that the neighbors complained about how for months mysterious packages and deliveries were made by darkened trucks around midnight. This was typical of a bootlegger: they would rent places to stash their contraband until it was time to sell. Sgt. George H. Comstock,⁵¹ who was the head of the Seattle Police Department’s “Dry Squad,” apprehended her one night as she was leaving this house. Sgt Comstock stated she was using the house as a cache and that she disposed of the liquor at the New Baker Hotel, where she frequently had been arrested. Mrs. Wella declared that the truck that visited the house that Tuesday night had in fact robbed her delivery of alcohol that had been delivered in a drygoods box to conceal the true contents. The police inspected the New Baker Hotel on Thursday and the dry squad arrested two men on liquor law violations. Both men and Mrs. Wella were released on bail of \$500 each.

The first woman offender to be prosecuted in Oregon was Mrs. Nettie Connett, first arrested on November 6 1919. She was tried on three counts and found guilty by the jury.

According to *The Oregonian*,

⁵⁰ “Champion Lady Bootlegger is in Toils Again,” *The Seattle Star*, Washington State Library, July 13,1917.

⁵¹ Sgt. George H. Comstock joined the Seattle Police in 1909. He became a sergeant in 1918 and was promoted to lieutenant in 1920. During the Prohibition era he became widely known as the head of the Seattle Police Departments “Dry Squad.” He became a captain in 1928. “George H.Comstock police officer,” *Seattle Daily Times*, July 12, 1968, NewsBank: Access World News Historical and Current.

the minimum penalties were applied, she was found guilty of distribution of liquor without tax, six months' imprisonment and \$500 fine; for the possession of a still, set up without federal registration, 30 days imprisonment or \$100 fine; for engaging in the distillation of spirits, without furnishing government bonds six months imprisonment or \$500 fine.⁵²

The testimony and evidence had shown that a large still had been in operation in Mrs. Connett's ranch home at Bull Run, though Mrs. Connett maintained that the plant had been operated by employees that were subsequently discharged, meaning that the court had alleged that Mrs. Connett had employees she would not name and that she had fired them. The wording of the news article implied that the court or the police did not believe she had employees due to her withholding their names and information, but that is minor speculation. Against this declaration was the testimony that Mrs. Connett had personally operated at least one still.⁵³

The Oregon City Enterprise, reporting on the same case, noted that the Prohibition officer remarked that this was one of the largest stills ever found and that they had to remove a wall of the building that housed the still so they could confiscate it. A room had been arranged upstairs for the mash and a pipe ran to the still in the basement. Mrs. Connett said that she did not know what the pipe was for but that the room had been made for drying fruit and she denied all knowledge of the purpose of the still, alleging it was there when she moved in.⁵⁴

Several other newspaper accounts provide details of Mrs. Connett's subsequent arrest for moonshining in April 1920. Then a few months later in September 1920, another still was found

⁵² "Jury Finds Woman Moonshiner Guilty Conviction First of Its Kind in District Offender Held on Three Counts," *Oregonian*, March 27, 1920.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Federal Jury Finds Mrs. Connett Guilty On Three Counts," *Oregon City Enterprise*, April 2, 1920.

on Mrs. Connett's property, but this time her moonshine still was in an underground bunker that she had created to hide her activity, and in this report she was dubbed the "queen of the moonshiners."⁵⁵

The *Oregonian* article provides a detailed description of her elaborate set up. Authorities discovered a still in a 16-foot square cave room about 10 feet underground. The underground room was carefully concealed. On the slope they had found a door to the cave room covered over with ferns to disguise it. Upon opening the door, they found a 13-foot tunnel, at the end of which was another door opening into the cave. Atop an old stove was a 90-gallon copper still; its source of heat for the distillation process was furnished by coal oil burners. Five hundred gallons of corn mash and 10 gallons of finished liquor were also found within that room. Water was piped to the cave from a stream 500 feet away. Mrs. Connett's full distillation set up that was confiscated was valued at \$1500 at the time, which in today's money would be \$24,000. But no arrests were made since no one was operating it at the time the still was found.⁵⁶

It was also common in jury cases that the guilty party was charged with tax evasion alongside the charges against the Prohibition laws. Not only were these women evading the local police department and federal Prohibition officers, they were also evading the internal revenue officers by not claiming their income derived from moonshining.

The larger, wealthier male bootleggers and moonshiners would pay off the local police departments and would give them the small-time moonshiners and bootleggers so they could

⁵⁵ "Underground Still Found by Sheriff Cave Room Contains Equipment Costing \$1500," *Oregonian*, September 2, 1920.

⁵⁶ "Underground Still Found by Sheriff," *Oregonian*, September 2, 1920.

parade a raid for the papers and to appear as though they were effectively taking down the criminal element.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the women moonshiners and bootleggers were more quiet about their criminal activity, seeming to deny when accused and to feign ignorance when asked about the equipment found and with what it was used for, as can be seen by Mrs. Connett's testimonies.⁵⁸

The Tacoma Daily Ledger (Sept. 1922) reports that, Mrs. Ed Young was fined \$250 for possession of intoxicating liquor on their farm two miles northeast of Chehalis. Two stills were found each with 25 gallons daily capacity. The arrest was made by Federal Prohibition officers Crockett and Pickett of Tacoma and Deputy Sheriff John Shipley. "When arrested Mrs. Young, who[sic] disclaimed that her husband had anything to do with making the booze."⁵⁹

There was a dynamic duo described in The *Oregonian* by the names of Mrs. M Thomas and Mrs. Ed Hunter. They were operating a still within Mrs. Thomas's apartment at 1032 East Morrison street, Portland Oregon where police found a washboiler still fully equipped and steaming gally two days before Christmas, with 19 gallons of moonshine in the closet upon their arrest. "The officers had remarked that it was the neatest moonshining establishment we've run across."⁶⁰ Both women had insisted that during their operations of the still that Mr. Thomas was in the hospital and they alleged that he knew nothing of the duo's thriving business.

⁵⁷ Holden, Brad. "Prohibition in the Puget Sound Region (1916-1933)." Prohibition in the Puget Sound Region (1916-1933). Accessed March 19, 2025. <https://www.historylink.org/File/20904>; Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, 71.

⁵⁸ "Federal Jury Finds Mrs. Connett Guilty On Three Counts," *Oregon City Enterprise*, April 2, 1920.

⁵⁹ "Woman Moonshiner Caught," *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, September 24, 1922.

⁶⁰ "Women Get Heavy Fines, Two Found Operating Still Will Serve Time in Jail," *Oregonian*, December 28, 1922.

The headline of the article does state that they received “heavy fines,” meaning \$200 each and twenty days in jail. When comparing Mrs. Thomas’s and Mrs. Hunter’s fines with other women’s fines, theirs were of a lesser dollar amount than both Ella Well’s \$500 fine, and Mrs. Connett’s \$500 fine.⁶¹ An *Oregonian* article about Mrs. Connett stated that she was levied with the minimum penalties for her counts.⁶²

In Mrs. Hunter and Mrs. Thomas's case, it seems that the headline of receiving heavy fines was to sensationalize the article to sell more newspapers. An article by Jennifer Gonzalez touches upon the prevalence of women being levied with a lesser sentence for committing acts of Prohibition law: “In court, there are accounts of judges letting female criminals go or giving them very small punishments for their bootlegging crimes. Because of this, they were less inclined to get arrested or punished.”⁶³

A second duo had a different attitude going into business. They were dubbed Portland’s first moonshining queens. They made no attempt in district court to contradict the evidence found at 811 Sandy Boulevard showing that they had been caught operating a still and they accepted the sentence at once. Gladys Carson and Edna Harr were found by deputy sheriffs. The reporting *Oregonian* article does not state who the sheriffs were, but that the women cheerfully engaged in running their own distillery. The District Judge Deich asked them about how they came into

⁶¹ “Champion Lady Bootlegger is in Toils Again,” *The Seattle Star*, Washington State Library, July 13, 1917.

⁶² "Jury Finds Woman Moonshiner Guilty Conviction First of Its Kind in District Offender Held on Three Counts," *Oregonian*, March 27, 1920.

⁶³ Jennifer González, “Broads and Bootlegging: A Brief History of Women during the Prohibition Era: In Custodia Legis,” The Library of Congress, September 18, 2024.

business: “Oh, we just thought we would try our luck,” replied Gladys Carson.⁶⁴ The women also denied that they sold any of their products. But another curious fact was that initially when being caught they had false names and lied about their ages: they gave the names of Gladys Sanderson and Louise Snyder. The Carson woman had a son of 10 years old, but her age was given as 25, while Miss Harr gave 23.

Other times it seems that women moonshiners gained a lesser sentence because of being the main caretaker of their children. When the woman from Chehalis at the old union logging company camp was arrested, she gave her name as Mrs. Sarah Robinson and fully admitted to being the head of the operation which was going full blast with a 40 gallon still and 15 gallons of whiskey. “She was not brought to jail due to the fact that she had a very sick child at the still and other small children in her shack.”⁶⁵

Mrs. Elizabeth Martini was arrested for possessing liquor for distribution and the sale of liquor. The sheriff similarly suspended her sentence “for the sake of her children,” but he warned Mrs. Martini that if she was caught again, drastic punishment would result if she violated the liquor law again. What swayed him was that she stated, “It's all right [*sic*] with me your honor. But if I go to jail my six children will have to go also. They're all little and there's no one but me to care for them.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “Liquor Queens Taken,” *Oregonian*, December 14, 1923.

⁶⁵ “Dry Sleuths Nab Woman Moonshiner,” *Tacoma News Tribune*, April 6, 1928.

⁶⁶ “Woman Bootlegger Gets Suspended Sentence to Care For Six Children” *Seattle Daily Times*, October 19, 1924.

As can be seen, there were many different circumstances for these women but they all chose to make an income with moonshining or bootlegging.⁶⁷ In speculating about the frequency of women with children that took up moonshining, it seems to reason that for most women it would have been easier to distill whiskey in their kitchens than find someone to care for their children, so they took it upon themselves to be employed in some way, even illegally.⁶⁸ With others like the moonshine queens, it can be seen that they had thriving businesses when compared to their male counterparts of the time. They used similar tactics, but the women were more covert about their proceedings.⁶⁹ The Tacoma Daily Ledger article speaks about this, “Prohibition agents all over the country complain that not only do they find women difficult to detect.”⁷⁰ The moonshine queens took it upon themselves to cash in on the wide-open market of liquor sales.

Another mention in the Tacoma Daily Ledger, “Male bootleggers often find it difficult to compete with women, he said. Detectives say that women make ten sales to a man’s one.”⁷¹ Women were so ingenious in hiding their stock that officers rarely found evidence.⁷² This is astounding since there are so many articles in the newspapers about women bootleggers as well

⁶⁷ Tanya Marie Sanchez, “The Feminine Side of Bootlegging,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 4 (2000): 406. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233697>.

⁶⁸ Mary Murphy, “Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana,” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1994): 185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713337>.

⁶⁹ “Officers Worried by Feminine Bootleggers.” *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, Newsbank, April 6, 1922.; Polly Fergusson. “Is It True That Boys are Better and Girls are Worse”, *Tacoma Daily Ledger* (published as *The Tacoma Sunday Ledger*), July 26, 1925

⁷⁰ “Officers Worried by Feminine Bootleggers,” *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, 1922.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

as the men. It can only be imagined that there were so many more that were carrying on in the illicit trade that did not end up caught. Those written about were, perhaps, only those unlucky enough to get caught.

For as prevalent as the woman criminal unit was, and to the extent that women police officers needed to be hired as well as woman dry agents, it is a wonder how all of these women have been left out of the historical narrative for this long, considering in some locations they were the ones to pioneer distilling methods. For too long there has been a societal bias against women, portraying them as just cooped up within the home raising children and not making their names and creating an impact on current events that shaped history. Not only were they the family caretakers, but they were savvy business women brazen enough to distill liquor in the home as well as market to potential buyers in locations where they could imbibe, consequences be damned. They saw how easy it was to make money distilling and bootlegging, and quite obviously a thought that went through their own minds was how hard can it be if men do it, so why can't they?

Conclusion

Most of the accounts in my research are either stated bluntly with just the smallest number of details, or they are sensationalized for entertainment purposes, such as many newspaper depictions. But they contain nuggets of truth that can be distilled from what little has been recorded about these women. Within the field of women's studies, the literature speaks about how there has historically been a lesser value placed upon preserving the voices and power

of women.⁷³ Records also tend to only discuss the women who have noteworthy historical achievements credited to their name of the first in that field instead. Despite this suppression of women's voices, which has limited the baseline of documents to newspaper articles, court testimonies and a few photographs, the stories of these women can still be divined through sources that do exist. Much as these stories can still be told, there is a wealth of histories to be told that have yet to be uncovered.

By exploring the history of the everyday lives of women during these important and pivotal times in our shared history, this will hopefully not just shed light on their involvement. This research will also allow these women to live on instead of dying out of our collective memory and otherwise becoming a forgotten part of history. Hopefully, my research will inspire others to seek out more women's lesser-known stories.

⁷³ Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth*, University of California Press, 2(000).; Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975): 5–14.

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Appendix A

Women Bootleggers and Moonshiners

Ella Wella

7/13/17 violating the liquor ordinance, \$500 bail.

Nettie Connett

11/6/19 possession of a still fined \$100.

3/26/20 Distribution liquor without tax, 6 months imprisonment and \$500 fine; possession of still without federal registration 30 days imprisonment or \$100 fine; distillation of spirits without government bond 6

4/15/20 possession of a still, possession of moonshine whisky.
months imprisonment or \$500 fine.

9/2/20 90 gallons still found on property, 50 gallons of mash, 10 gallons of liquor. No arrest.

Mrs. Ed Young

9/24/22 two stills found, 25 gallons daily capacity, intoxicating liquor possession, federal charges.

Mrs. M Thomas and Mrs. Ed Hunter

11/22/22 possession of a still, 19 gallons of moonshine, \$200 fine and 20 days jail.

Gladys Carson and Edna Harr

12/13/23 possession of still, possession mash fit for distillation was dropped.

Elizabeth Martini

10/19/24 sale of liquor sentenced 60 days, suspended sentence "for the sake of the children"

Sarah Robinson

4/6/28 possession of 40 gallon still, 15 gallons of whisky, 400 barrels of mash not brought in
"she had a very sick child in her shack"

Theresa Brummer

12/7/28 selling liquor \$250 fine and 60 days in county jail.