

**CHASING THE GOOD OL' BOYS AND GIRLS
OF WILKES COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

CHASING THE GOOD OL' BOYS AND GIRLS OF WILKES COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

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In the 1950s, Wilkes County, North Carolina, was known as the “Moonshine Capital of America,” a reputation of dubious distinction. Through integrated qualitative, empirical, and primary evidence, including personal interviews with former bootleggers, moonshiners, and their descendants, this thesis traces Wilkes County’s ingrained culture of distillers from its late 18th century Scots-Irish settlers, through state and federal prohibition of the early 20th century, and finally to its diverse characters in “dry” Wilkes during the glory days of the 1950s.

Wilkes’ moonshine culture developed from the Blue Ridge Mountains in the west, across the Brushy Mountains and through the piedmont to the east, crossing all socio-economic boundaries. As these resourceful moonshiners faced both natural and economic hardships through the centuries, they used the distilling resources available to them and the crops they raised, and perfected methods to preserve and transport their harvest. For men and women, blacks and whites, producing and selling distilled alcohol, without paying rigorous taxes, meant the difference between material poverty and economic survival.

Less well known is the “unwritten code” that effectively discouraged violence between revenuers and bootleggers during the 1950s moonshining zenith. Although many wild chases between revenuers and bootleggers occurred, this thesis provides evidence of an exceptionally peaceful moonshine culture in Wilkes County during the lively heyday. Viewed through an interdisciplinary Appalachian Studies lens, this moonshine Mecca is studied with a new perspective, understanding, and appreciation.

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This thesis project would not have been possible without assistance from many instrumental people. First, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Stewart for showing amazing patience with my slow progress and his sage advice to “check the newspapers” – which provided great material for my thesis. Many thanks to Dr. Keefe who guided my oral history project in Wilkes and reminded me to take field notes; these records were invaluable when remembering conversations over a year old. Thanks to Dr. Beaver for always being positive, encouraging me in this project, and for sharing stories about Cratis Williams, who, like many in Wilkes, was raised by distillers.

Thanks to the Appalachian Studies Program, namely Dr. Katherine Ledford and Debbie Bauer for keeping me on track when I felt overwhelmed. Thanks to Dr. Fay Byrd and the rest of the Wilkes Community College staff for connecting me with perfect interviewees for my thesis project. Thanks to John Shepherd for his wisdom and insight into the 1950s and for his friendship, which I cherish. It would be a grave sin if I did not acknowledge my wonderful Aunt Mary and my tireless mother. Without their help, this thesis would have never materialized.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to every moonshiner, bootlegger, and revenuer who abided by the unwritten code and made Wilkes a special place during the moonshine heyday.

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INTRODUCTION

Like many boys from Wilkes County, Dorman Mikeal began working in his father's moonshine operation as soon as he was able to help. By the age of 12, he helped his father by carrying heavy bags of corn and sugar, essential ingredients in moonshine, to the distillery site. On the return trip, he "toted" the heavy five-gallon "jackets," or containers, full of illegal hooch back home. Boyce Mikeal, Dorman's father, needed his son's assistance because the farm produce and the \$100 monthly disability check were not enough to provide for his wife and three sons.¹ Therefore, he turned to distilling some of his corn into whiskey and sold the moonshine (untaxed whiskey) to a bootlegger to supplement his family's income. In 1955, during the zenith of moonshining in Wilkes County, federal revenueurs stationed in Wilkesboro pounced on his distillery, but not before his wife alerted him by delivering a "shotgun warning" that allowed Boyce to escape to the sanctuary of their home. Alas, he realized his "old red bib cap" had fallen off during the chase and, if found, would be the only evidence associating him with the illicit distillery. Sure enough, the federal revenueurs picked up the hat and asked around the community for the owner until they stopped by a local grocery store. The lady behind the counter, who happened to be Boyce's aunt, replied, "Yes, that looks like that old red cap my nephew owns." That night, the agents came to the Mikeal house and arrested Boyce, although they failed to find any moonshine in the house. Dorman's grandfather paid his son's bail and Boyce was given a two years suspended sentence and three years' probation if he paid a \$3,000 fine at the Federal Court in Wilkesboro. In the letter written to his niece, Kimberly Mikeal, a student at Appalachian

¹ Boyce Mikeal was a World War II Veteran where he sustained injuries before returning home to Wilkes.

State University, Dorman Mikeal concludes, “Well, guess how Dad paid off the \$3,000 fine?” – a less than subtle hint that Boyce Mikeal’s illicit and esoteric work paid off the moonshining fine.²

This story reveals facets of moonshining that complicate the conventional dichotomy between the drunken violent moonshiner and the magnanimous “G-men” or “tax investigators” who enforce the federal liquor tax. The senior Mikeal became a moonshiner to make ends meet and preserve his farm, family, and his way of life. The determined revenueurs tracked the evasive Wilkes County moonshiner by any legal means necessary. Interestingly, Mikeal’s seemingly innocent “old red bib cap” was likely a felt hat used by responsible illicit distillers to filter their whiskey for a better and cleaner final product. To a federal revenueur, a felt hat was essentially a part of the illicit operation and was, therefore, incriminating evidence. Because of the hat, the federal government caught another tax evader or “moonshiner.” The offender received the punishment the law demanded, but the man’s arrest would not put an end to his blockading activity.

Although Dorman and Kimberly fondly remember their family roots, they, like other Wilkes residents in recent generations, have chosen legal careers to earn a living. Moonshiners’ giving their sons and daughters legal opportunities through distilling or bootlegging is a living legacy of Wilkes County. Looking back now, good guys and bad guys are impossible to categorize.³

While this story is original, it is just the “tip of the iceberg” as most Wilkes’ natives can relate to this anecdote with colorful stories of their own. Rooted in a culture of farmers, commerce, and distillers, Wilkes County’s history has naturally caused many natives and people who had any contact with the “good ol’ boys” to look at Dorman Mikeal’s situation with

² Kimberly and Dorman Mikeal, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

³ Jim Cothren, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. To Jim Cothren, a “bad guy” would be a moonshiner who physically abused his wife. Jim’s tone indicated this man was not another “good ol’ boy,” as he had lost the solid status earned by most moonshiners.

sympathy and not antipathy. By the 1950s, moonshiners became a vibrant element in many communities within Wilkes. In most cases, the determined revenueurs are also remembered with respect and admiration, largely because they were honest and did not get rough with the moonshine men and women.

Jim Cothren, a former moonshiner arrested twice for illicit distilling, illuminates the paradox of memory. During his interview, he stunned me by describing his captors as “good people” because they always “treat ya nice.” The man who caught Jim, as well as hundreds of other tax-evaders, was a local World War I veteran and revenueur named Charles Felts. The Wilkes community considered “Charlie” Felts a local hero and trustworthy citizen who kept still “leads” or “tip offs” anonymous. Felts would then outsmart the moonshiners by sneaking up on the distillers undetected, but was also able to outrun the average moonshiner, if he needed to.

Cothren recalled a funny story that perfectly reveals how strong this “hooch” really is. When he was twelve years old, Jim and his buddies discovered some hidden moonshine in a neighbor’s yard and, after two sips, he “took one step forward and five steps back.” Jim no longer drinks and rarely drank from his own moonshine. Looking back now, he gave every revenueur he knew a good name.

The Mikeal, Cothren, Shepherd, McGrady, and Felts interviews revealed unique phenomena previously undocumented in research into the moonshine culture of Wilkes County during the mid-twentieth century. Moonshining thrived as a family business with women working as observant lookouts and home bootleggers – not often as transporters or still hands. Children, especially boys, helped carry heavy ingredients to the still and learned the moonshining skill from their fathers, as distilling becoming a way of life and a source of necessary income, even in the 1950s. Although patently illegal, moonshining represented an acceptable vocation for many struggling families in Wilkes County. For many individuals, moonshining represented a way to ascend the social and economic ladder. To others, moonshining was a sin and a pesky

problem. However, moonshining was not just a white man's occupation. Young girls, black men, and women also participated as moonshiners and haulers of mountain dew. Families united and divided because of moonshine and some individuals, particularly the haulers, made an incredible amount of money by selling large quantities of hooch to the nearby Piedmont towns such as Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, and Charlotte. Some of these haulers, like Junior Johnson, began hauling moonshine in their teens, rigging their cars and hauling moonshine to nearby cities before and after they started racing in NASCAR.

An exceptional moonshine culture existed in the 1950s because whiskey distilling was a Wilkes tradition that has lasted almost three centuries. Many Wilkes County residents continued to produce homemade liquor through the burgeoning temperance movement of the late nineteenth century and through local, state, federal prohibition, and even after the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933. As North Carolina was the first state in the South to enact statewide prohibition and Wilkes County delayed permitting an Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) store until 1965, the county had a distinct economic incentive to become the moonshine Mecca in the 1950s. The absence of a local ABC store meant Wilkes County bootleggers had a perennial local white and red liquor market, and fewer ABC officers chasing them.⁴

My research submits the reason for the stubborn persistence of moonshining is not "backwardness," "degeneracy," or even "lawlessness," but the undeniable economic need of many families in Wilkes County, especially in the rough Blue Ridge mountain terrain of western Wilkes. This thesis will provide a well-rounded review of Wilkes County's distilling culture by mixing scholarly sources into a narrative viewed through an interdisciplinary Appalachian

⁴ White liquor refers to "moonshine, mountain dew, hooch, rotgut, sugar head, pop skull, thump whiskey," et cetera. Red liquor specifically refers to "bonded" or "government liquor" that is labeled and has been federally taxed. Because Wilkes County did not have a legal liquor store for most of the twentieth century, bootleggers were able to exploit this local and regional black market.

Studies lens. Qualitative, empirical, and primary evidence will enhance the historical understanding of Wilkes County and its remarkable moonshine culture in the 1950s.

When Vance Packard, a journalist for the *American Magazine*, came to Wilkes County in 1950, he characterized Wilkes County as “The Moonshine Capital of America.” His article and the loud complaints from Wilkes boosters subsequently shifted the focus of the illicit business from Franklin County, Virginia, the center of moonshining in the 1930s and 1940s, to Wilkes County.⁵ Packard’s negative undertones and suggestions of a conspiracy drew the ire of many Wilkes natives. For example, Packard reported that moonshine barons carried on a vast conspiracy with the cooperation of thousands of people in the county to outsmart the “feds.” By criticizing the moonshine culture and ignoring Wilkes’ history, culture, and poverty, Packard portrayed the community and its citizens as backwards.⁶ If he expected the illicit business to wane after his publication, he was mistaken. If the reader is to infer Wilkes County must have been a violent, corrupt, and dangerous place to live during this “heyday” of the 1950s, then once again, this is an unfounded notion. Indeed, even Packard reported what the local Alcohol Tobacco Unit (ATU) emphasized, “This tendency to shoot, I’m told, has always been exaggerated.”⁷

Tom Wolfe’s “The Last American Hero,” an article published in a 1965 issue of *Esquire Magazine*, conveys the antithesis of Packard’s tone and sentiment. Wolfe lionized local moonshiner, bootlegger, and early NASCAR superstar, Junior Johnson. He took a sympathetic, if not endearing perspective, on the local moonshine culture found in Wilkes County and coined the now common phrase “good ol’ boy,” epitomized by a respected moonshiner/bootlegger. More

⁵ See Charles Thompson Jr., *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011). This book details the extensive, but corrupt political system involving countless Franklin moonshiners and many state agents.

⁶ Vance Packard, “Millions in Moonshine,” *American Magazine*, September 1950. Packard even notes how “barefoot women still plow the fields.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

importantly for this study, Wolfe writes of an “unwritten code” between bootleggers, moonshiners, and revenueurs where all parties abide by an unwritten moral or cultural code not to shoot at each other, but rather to chase and be chased. This unwritten moral code evolved from centuries of interaction, outlaw versus the law, until it reached a point where both sides developed ground and road rules for a competitive chase and avoided deadly shootouts.

Moonshining and bootlegging enabled families in Wilkes County to retain their independence, land, and lifestyle by allowing them to participate in the market economy. In reality, however, without moonshining income, many families could not pay their property taxes. Junior Johnson recalls that he could make as much as \$450 a night hauling moonshine to the Piedmont in the 1950s.⁸ Even a mill worker could earn around \$40 a week, far more than a farmer could make during the same length of time.⁹ While many contemporary historians and scholars reflect on moonshiners with a clearer understanding of the economic necessity and distilling tradition, no academic study has singled out Wilkes County’s exceptional moonshine culture. Charles D. Thompson, Jr.’s *Spirits of Just Men* (2011) depicted a corrupt “pay for protection” scheme in Franklin County where state and local agents blackmailed moonshiners during Federal Prohibition, while Joshua Blackwell’s *Used to be a Rough Place in them Hills* (2009) covered the clannish and violent nature of the nineteenth-century moonshine trade in the so-called “Dark Corners” of Appalachian South Carolina.¹⁰ Dan Pierce’s *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* provided a scholarly and informative review of NASCAR’s early roots and connection with Southern bootleggers. In contrast, this research

⁸ Junior Johnson, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring, 2011. Junior Johnson is Pierce’s NASCAR source.

⁹ Charlie Aaron Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring, 2011. Charlie Aaron Felts said his dad, Charlie Felts, made around \$2500 a year from the Federal Government.

¹⁰ See Joshua Beau Blackwell, *Used to Be a Rough Place in Them Hills: Moonshine, the Dark Corner, and the New South* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009).

bridges gaps in previous reports on Wilkes County to reveal an incomparable, nonviolent, and exceptional moonshine culture during the vibrant heyday of the 1950s.

Despite the effect of Packard's inflammatory article, the Alcohol Tobacco Tax Unit, the local prohibitionists, and the furtive informers, many Wilkes County families continued to manufacture moonshine and retained the respect of their neighbors and community. One must drop the stereotypical image of the drunken, violent, white, and bearded male figure popularized by a posse of local color writers in the late nineteenth century and cemented in the nation's mind through Snuffy Smith and Hollywood to understand the complex reality of Wilkes' moonshine culture of the 1950s. This study follows the lead of other historians such as Bruce Stewart and Wilbur Miller who uncovered diversity in the distilling business, noting the participation of women and African-Americans. These minorities were accepted by moonshiners as people who also had an inherent right to make a living.¹¹ Wilkes County moonshiners and bootleggers became established members of the community through their respect for the distilling legacy of Wilkes, their reliable product, and their peaceful means of conducting business during the 1950s heyday.

¹¹ See Wilbur R. Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners: Enforcing Federal Liquor Law in the Mountain South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Bruce E. Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists: the Battle Over Alcohol in Southern Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

CHAPTER 1:
THE EARLY ROOTS OF WILKES COUNTY'S MOONSHINE CULTURE

In order to appreciate the impact and significance of Wilkes County's moonshine culture, it is essential to look at its roots in the Scots-Irish tradition of whiskey-making, as well as the vital contribution that distilling corn and rye made to mountain economics during the antebellum period. A greater understanding of this intriguing culture can be gained by examining the factors that led to the general decline of both legal and illicit distillers' reputations in western North Carolina, which ultimately led to the enactment of state prohibition in 1908. It is critical to note that despite a growing stigma against moonshiners and their clientele, alcohol distilling continued to be a lucrative profession for many highlanders before and after 1908, and undoubtedly remains a popular tradition with remnants and powerful icons still around in 2013.

Distilling and Drinking in Antebellum Western North Carolina

The origins of Wilkes County's lively moonshine culture of the 1950s date back to the inception of the whiskey distillation process in the Gaelic nations. Around 500 A.D., the Scots discovered the revolutionary step of distilling mead from cereal mash and honey to produce grain whiskey.¹² By the seventeenth century, the British government levied excise taxes to control the popular whiskey trade in the country. Resistance to the tax quickly emerged from the Irish, Scottish, and border English residents, all of whom had developed an increasing resentment

¹² Jess Carr, *The Second Oldest Profession: An Informal History of Moonshining in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 5.

towards the London “gauger” and the tax on their national drink.¹³ Many of these distillers would leave the British Isles for America, where they enjoyed the freedom to distill and sell during the colonial era. The moniker “moonshiner” probably derives from “moonlighter,” a term used in England prior to the 1700s to describe the nocturnal English brandy smugglers who traversed from France and Holland and along the British coast.¹⁴

Scholars Horace Kephart (1913), Jess Carr (1972), and Joseph Dabney (1974) have recognized the diaspora of the proud Scots-Irish of the Ulster plantation, a crafty people who eventually carried their prized but oppressed distilling tradition into Appalachia.¹⁵ By the mid-1700s, these Scots-Irish freely distilled alcohol on the rich soils in America, adopting corn as a new ingredient, thanks to neighboring indigenous tribes. For the next hundred years, whiskey-making existed as a self-evident right of all citizens, an occupation free from the government’s jurisdiction. Early American distillers used the common pot still, a copper contraption shaped like a “large teakettle with a round lid and an extra-long spout” that conveyed the spirit to the “flake stand” or “worm box” in the distiller’s argot, essentially a box with cold creek water running around a spiraling copper “worm” or tube that condensed the alcoholic spirit into liquor.¹⁶ Colonists also acquired a taste for whiskey around the mid-eighteenth century. Well-equipped plantations and mountain homes included distilleries, and the early American custom of serving whiskey at weddings and funerals prospered.¹⁷

During the eighteenth century, western North Carolina was part of the American frontier, a region where European settlers survived by borrowing and molding different traditions,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ See Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of Life Among the Mountaineers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984); Jess Carr, *The Second Oldest Profession*; and Joseph E. Dabney, *Mountain Spirits: A Chronicle of Corn Whiskey from King James’ Ulster Plantation to America’s Appalachians and the Moonshine Life* (New York: Scribner, 1974).

¹⁶ Bruce E. Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists: The Battle Over Alcohol in Southern Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 14.

¹⁷ Daniel J. Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina: 1715-1946*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 6.

including Native American, to create a “hybrid” culture.¹⁸ Local residents and historians commonly attribute early Scots-Irish, English, and German settlers as the first European immigrants to introduce the art of manufacturing alcohol to Wilkes County.¹⁹ These men and women often shared their distilling knowledge because of its many practical uses, including medicine for colds, consumption, snakebites, wounds, and other ailments.²⁰ In a tradition that continues in Wilkes County to this day, early distillers, through trial and error, cultivated their own recipes and medicinal concoctions and passed them on to their sons, daughters, and sometimes friends and neighbors.

Formed in 1777 from Surry County and the Washington District, Wilkes County is named after John Wilkes, a distinguished English Statesman and Member of Parliament known for his vehement advocacy of independence from Great Britain.²¹ Wilkes’ official motto, “Imperium Intra Imperio,” proclaims a “state within a state,” suggesting that although Wilkes is a part of North Carolina, it is also “very much an entity to itself, bearing a proud sense of independence that has shaped and colored much of its history.”²² Wilkes County, for instance, provided intrepid leadership and soldiers in the pivotal 1780 Battle of King’s Mountain during the American Revolution.²³ This victory pushed Lord Cornwallis east of Charlotte and ensured the soldier’s right to distill and sell spirits freely.

Prohibitionist and scholar Daniel Jay Whitener discovered that alcohol distilling and consumption embedded itself in the culture of Colonial America. Indeed, during the Revolutionary War, Patriot soldiers often received liquors as a part of their daily rations; without

¹⁸ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 1.

¹⁹ W. O. Absher and Nancy W. Simpson, *The Heritage of Wilkes County* (North Wilkesboro, NC: Wilkes Genealogical Society in cooperation with Hunter Publishing Co., Winston-Salem, NC, 1982), 2. In 1753, Moravian surveyors entered the county and may have been the first people to distill alcohol in Wilkes.

²⁰ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionist*, 69.

²¹ J. J. Anderson, *North Wilkesboro: The First Hundred Years, 1890-1990* (North Wilkesboro, NC: North Wilkesboro Centennial Committee, 1990), V.

²² *Ibid.*, IV.

²³ John Crouch, *Historical Sketches of Wilkes County* (Wilkesboro, NC: Printed by J. Crouch, 1902), 1. Crouch estimates one-half of the American forces were from newly formed Wilkes.

such a provision, soldiers were regarded as “unfit” for the army.²⁴ Historian Jeffery J. Crow notes that distilling formed a “principal industry” in colonial America where rations of whiskey and rum were issued to slaves and other laborers. Liquor also flowed in abundance during elections, militia musters, weddings, funerals, and other social gatherings.²⁵ In fact, three of the first five United States Presidents (George Washington, James Madison, and James Monroe) owned distilleries. But this free and romantic era of alcohol would not endure for American distillers and their clientele.

Whiskey emerged as a valuable commodity in antebellum western North Carolina. There, residents often made long journeys to Wilkesboro, Salisbury, or Charlotte to trade their homemade liquor in exchange for important luxuries such as sugar, salt, cloth, coffee and other commodities not found in the mountains.²⁶ Local historians have revealed that Wilkes was connected to the national economy, noting that “as early as the late 1700s, merchants in Wilkes had done business with wholesale houses in New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.”²⁷ As such, recent scholars have begun to debunk the “isolation” myth, arguing that western Carolinians engaged in a “market-oriented farming community” where “networks of roads, trails, and rivers enabled [them] to participate in the market economy.”²⁸ Wilkesboro, just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was not an exception. By 1800, it had also developed a “thriving commerce” and served as a gateway into and out of the highlands.²⁹

Wilkes County’s earliest residents distilled whiskey as a cottage industry. One of the first public records of Wilkes, for instance, involved John Witherspoon’s will which bestowed “both

²⁴ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 6.

²⁵ Jeffrey J. Crow, “The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina.” *North Carolina Historical Review* 66, no. 1 (1989): 6.

²⁶ Patricia D. Beaver, *Rural Community in the Appalachian South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 17.

²⁷ Anderson, *North Wilkesboro: The First Hundred Years*, 36.

²⁸ Bruce E. Stewart, “‘The weather-cock ukases’ of the IRS: moonshining, Klan violence, and the politics of liquor taxation in western North Carolina, 1865-1876” (master’s thesis, Western Carolina University, 2001), 11.

²⁹ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 33.

his grist mill and his whisky still” to his son.³⁰ Using the natural resources of cold and clear mountain headwaters and locally raised corn and rye, distillers would invest or inherit a copper distillery as capital to make a living in the barter economy.³¹ Unlike elsewhere in the state, roads in western North Carolina were “almost impassable” for half of the year.³² Too often, corn cultivated and transported to distant markets by mountaineers would not endure the tortuous journey and still be sold for a profit. Therefore, to ensure some profit margin, many highlanders distilled their corn malt based beer into whiskey before transporting it to market. By the 1790s, the demand for pot stills was so high that merchants like the trader James Patton, an Ulster Scot who migrated to western North Carolina in the 1790s, added stills to their inventories.³³ In response to the widespread popularity of pot stills, the new federal government soon recognized an opportunity to generate revenue without riling the political elite.

In January 1790, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton called for a duty on imported and domestically distilled spirits to pay off the national debt. This proposed excise challenged not only the storied history of opposition to internal taxes, but also threatened to destroy an essential industry of the mountain economy. Appalachian Studies scholar Cratis D. Williams wrote that the U.S. Congress originally planned to tax property, but wealthy and privileged land speculators on the East coast and in the cities blocked the proposed levy on their capital.³⁴ Historian Jeffrey Crow argued that in North Carolina, opposition to any excise tax “was uncompromising and unambiguous,” forming a cultural seed of reactionary action and organized defiance to the federal liquor tax. A coalition of Southern congressman representing agrarian interests and congressman from the western frontier successfully stymied the first proposed

³⁰ Jane Ogburn, “The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County” (Unpublished article, North Wilkesboro, NC: Wilkes Public Library, 1985), 2.

³¹ Distillers would need to malt their corn and rye and once it was dry they would take it to the miller for crushing, thus establishing a steady job for millers.

³² Crow, “The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina,” 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ Cratis D. Williams, “Moonshining in the Mountains,” *North Carolina Folklore* XV, no. 1 (May 1967): 11.

excise tax. By December 1790, the North Carolina General Assembly advised the state's U.S. Senators to oppose all excise taxes and preserve the "republican economy."³⁵

Rowan County congressman John Steele, a Federalist who usually supported Hamilton, feared that the tax would harm small distillers in North Carolina. He complained: "This [bill], I confess, appears to me to be a *wild goose chase* after revenue...[H]ave gentlemen consider[ed] the extent of this country, the number of counties? The inundation of excisement and reptile collectors that must be let loose upon the people?"³⁶ North Carolina congressman John Sevier, who had once led the separatist state of Franklin, bluntly declared that the tax could not be enforced in the frontier areas and that the mountainous region would actually benefit by selling their cheap moonshine in eastern markets where distillers had to pay the onerous tax.³⁷ Despite the wisdom of these observations, the U.S. Congress passed the liquor tax on March 3, 1791. Crow noted that the vote split along economic and geographical lines with the agrarian South and the frontier representatives, including Anti-Federalists Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, on the losing end, and Federalists from urban mercantile districts on the coast and in the Northeast forming the majority.³⁸

Not surprisingly, opposition to the new whiskey tax became widespread throughout North Carolina and other parts of the American frontier. In "The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina," Crow argued that only Moravians seemed willing to pay the excise in North Carolina.³⁹ In fact, according to Crow, the collection of the excise in western North Carolina's Fifth District, which included Wilkes, became impossible as residents there did not respect the gauger and refused to pay the tax. Faced with such widespread opposition, the U.S. Congress in May 1792 attempted to placate the whiskey "rebels" by lowering the tax on small or "country"

³⁵ Crow, "The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina," 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

distillers and providing a monthly license option. Congress also lowered the tax on stills with a capacity of more than 400 gallons with the hope of lowering the overall tax on richer distillers who made large quantities of high proof whiskey.⁴⁰ But this tactic failed to convince mountaineers to accept the federal liquor tax. In June 1792, South Carolina congressman Daniel Huger, while visiting North Carolina, overheard a shocking episode of a distiller holding a gauger hostage for three days “on water only” after allowing the officer into his home. The distiller aimed to scare the officer, and bluffed that “he must submit to the mild punishment of having his nose ground off at the Grindstone,” which never actually happened.⁴¹

Trench Coxe, the Federal Revenue Commissioner, often noted the “violent” disposition of North Carolina residents in the Fifth Collection District, which he considered the most rebellious region, “except No. 4 in Pennsylvania.”⁴² Indeed, opposition to the liquor tax in Wilkes County led Hamilton to consider making North Carolina “the test case” for the new federal military to send a message to the blockaders.⁴³ President George Washington disapproved of this idea, believing that the area was too inaccessible and inhabited by some of America’s finest and most determined soldiers.⁴⁴ Instead, Washington issued the “Whiskey Insurrection Proclamation” in September 1792, warning moonshiners to stop their illegal activity. Hoping to make liquor law enforcement more efficient, Coxe and Hamilton also remapped the five North Carolina districts. The troublesome and large Fifth Collection District was reduced from twelve to five counties, with Wilkes remaining. Nonetheless, Coxe continued to have trouble mustering willing revenueurs to work in North Carolina.⁴⁵ One reason Commissioner Coxe could not recruit inspectors was that the job spelled “political death” for aspiring office-seekers such as Richard

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

King from Rowan County who suffered defeat at the polls where he was mocked as “Dick the Gauger.”⁴⁶

By 1794, many mountain distillers had enough of the “pesky” revenueurs interfering in their business. In western Pennsylvania, men organized and rebelled against the federal government, assaulting revenueurs and laying siege to several small towns, including Fort Pitt.⁴⁷ At Fort Pitt, they feasted and drank on the local elite’s whiskey until President Washington marched to the region with his own large federal force. Upon hearing the news, most of the rowdy and intoxicated rebels, including their leaders, promptly gave up and returned home. At the end of the flattened skirmish, only two mountaineers were convicted, both of whom President Washington would later pardon. The rebellion helped define federal supremacy in the states, but also molded a distinct memory and political culture characterized by a resentment of distant authority and taxation for centuries to come in western North Carolina.⁴⁸ The so-called Whiskey Insurrection defined the limits of federal authority in the new nation as the U.S. Congress exempted all stills under 400-gallon capacity from taxation in 1797. In the end, opposition to the federal liquor tax compelled President Thomas Jefferson and the U.S. Congress to repeal the duty in 1801. For the next six decades, the nation would enjoy an absence of an excise tax on liquor.⁴⁹

During the antebellum period, technological improvements in distilling and the traditional drinking mores of many Tar Heels increased the demand for homemade whiskey. In 1820, the invention of the alcohol testing vial allowed distillers to test for proof by observing the position of small bubbles that rise to the top when the glass vial is tilted. This feedback allowed moonshiners to perfect unique recipes and proofs and produce the perfect spirit for their clients.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Fort Pitt would later become the city of Pittsburg.

⁴⁸ Crow, “The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina,” 28.

⁴⁹ The only exception during the six decades is from 1814-1817 when an excise tax was enforced to pay off debt from the War of 1812.

⁵⁰ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 16.

By 1825, James C. Crow, a Scots-Irish chemist and distiller in the Southern backcountry, began to use the hydrometer, saccharometer, and a thermometer to stretch the yield of a bushel of corn from two to three and a half gallons of whiskey.⁵¹ Wilkes distillers exploited this technology whenever it became available to them.

Whiskey making and selling also remained an essential part of many mountain economies. Nineteenth-century Wilkes County records include the licensing of “taverns and ordinaries in which a variety of beverages, including locally made corn whiskey, were sold.”⁵² Homemade whiskey became prevalent in Wilkes County because it was readily available, cheap, and, many residents, like their forefathers, preferred the taste to bonded whiskey. As a result, the average American drank nearly five gallons of liquor per year by 1830.⁵³ Wilkes County distillers, especially mountaineers, would supply the demand for the spirit to provide cash for buying goods and supplies.

The growing popularity of whiskey between 1790 and 1840 resulted in part due to technological advancements, but also from the social importance of alcohol during the antebellum era.⁵⁴ Before the Civil War, Americans often imbibed whiskey because it was cheap and safe. Moreover, whiskey, brandy, cider, and other intoxicants were staples of their daily diets. Around 1800, Alexander Wilson, a visiting artist and naturalist, was shocked by the customary drinking of brandy in North Carolina. He complained, “So universal is this, that the first thing you find them engaged in, after rising, is preparing the brandy today.”⁵⁵ Drinking communally in the highlands, in addition to sometimes becoming intoxicated, also had ideological overtones. Men verified their “worth and loyalty” to the community by consuming copious amounts of alcohol together, a ritual that included local politicians as well. Often

⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

⁵² Ogburn, “The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County,” 5.

⁵³ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁵ Crow, “The Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina,” 6.

politicians participated in this communal drinking in hopes of winning elections by demonstrating that they were committed to the local community.⁵⁶

Most highlanders accepted distillers as hard working entrepreneurs and respected members of the community. After all, these whiskey makers provided the community with medicine and the alcohol that flowed at dances, barn raisings, and militia musters.⁵⁷ Moreover, some antebellum farmers often made little distinction between work and leisure. They “freely mixed the two, turning elements of their work lives into social events.”⁵⁸ This care-free mixing came with setbacks, of course. When Benjamin Cleveland recruited friends and neighbors to help harvest his crop in the 1790s, they became so intoxicated that they never completed the harvest.⁵⁹

While maintaining economic connections to the Piedmont and beyond, mountain residents adhered to their own drinking customs and rituals. Cratis Williams detailed the drinking culture of his family and mountain community, roughly 200 miles northwest of Wilkes, complete with distilling whiskey: “It was served at meal time and flowed bountifully at christenings, weddings, elections, wakes, and funerals. Priests and ministers consumed it in large quantities and quoted scripture to convince doubters of its agreeable and salutary effects.”⁶⁰ Whiskey served as medicine, as a social lubricant during community gatherings, and as a substitute for water, a drink which many highlanders considered too “low class” to serve visitors. Indeed, it became an elixir for almost everything. Williams fondly stated, “It ails you no matter your ailment.”⁶¹

Most histories of Wilkes County have ignored the industrious and hard-working whiskey manufacturers of the community. Illuminating the general disregard for alcohol distillers, W. O.

⁵⁶ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁰ Cratis Williams, *Moonshining in the Mountains*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Absher and Nancy W. Simpson in *The Heritage of Wilkes County* recap, “In 1840, Wilkes County produced corn, oats, wheat, tobacco, cotton, and wool.”⁶² Ignoring whiskey and its distillers was easier than addressing the deep-rooted brandy and whiskey industry in the county.

However, Buford McGee’s autobiography details the very popular and widespread acceptance of brandy making in antebellum Wilkes County.⁶³ Nonetheless, county histories continued to marginalize the distilling tradition until journalist Vance Packard’s report in 1950 propelled the furtive industry into the national consciousness.⁶⁴ In addition, these histories covered up the fact that many NASCAR drivers had roots as nocturnal bootleggers. The sport’s concealed connection with moonshine ended with Tom Wolfe’s 1965 article, “The Last American Hero,” a chronicle of Wilkes bootlegger and NASCAR star Junior Johnson. The distillers for their part did not work hard to make history, but to make ends meet for their family and to provide a product that would please the customer.

During the late antebellum period, agriculture and distilling was primarily found in the rural part of the county. In town, Wilkesboro residents were adopting the new industrial and Victorian idea of temperance. By the 1840s, Wilkes County townspeople, primarily those belonging to the middle class, could enroll in local seminaries and colleges such as the Wilkesboro Male Academy that embraced education reform, temperance, and economic development.⁶⁵ The developments of these “progressive” or Victorian culture enclaves in Wilkesboro belie the “isolation myth” that many local color writers attached to the mountain region in the late nineteenth century. In contrast to the new and sober Victorian culture, Wilkes had seven registered grist mills that undoubtedly facilitated the production of whiskey before the

⁶² Absher and Simpson, *The Heritage of Wilkes County*, V.

⁶³ B. B. McGee, *Autobiography of B.B. McGee: The Country Youth* (Indianapolis, IN: Printing and Publishing House, 1874), 58-60.

⁶⁴ The 1935 raid that exposed Robert Glen Johnson’s gigantic supply of moonshine in Ingle Hollow also raised many eyebrows.

⁶⁵ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 36.

excise tax was once against levied against distillers during the Civil War. The cultural divide and political disagreements over the role of federal government in economic industries would only be exacerbated after the Civil War. The war's legacy would forever alter the status quo of the highlanders by bringing great changes to the mountain communities. Federal revenueurs and local informers replaced local rule. Ultimately, the Victorian ideal of a sober, rigorous work ethic maligned the distiller as an unwanted relic of the colonial past.

Historian Bruce Stewart notes that “the forces shaping anti-alcohol sentiment – expansion of the market economy, growth of urban centers, and rise of a middle class – encouraged many highlanders to reject the drinking mores of American society.”⁶⁶ Yet historians leave out the corollary incentive that these industrial and modern changes also made moonshining a vocation or a path to gain money and social prestige to obtain political office in Wilkes County, where the community generally did not view alcohol distilling as a moral violation. Indeed, if a moonshiner/bootlegger provided a good product and maintained a solid reputation, he could often win election and join the civil leadership. In antebellum Wilkes County, distilling and drinking played an important role in the region's economy and society. Whiskey manufacturers learned their craft from generations of experience and were regarded as legitimate entrepreneurs. With the advent of the Civil War, food shortages, and the excise tax of 1862, distillers' positive reputation would drastically plunge. However, their status quickly recovered as food supplies stabilized with the war's end.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 32.

The Rise and Fall of the Moonshiners, 1865-1882

During the Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed the 1862 Internal Revenue Act to raise money for the Union war effort. It required all alcohol distillers to purchase a deferral license and pay a tax on all liquor, and created a new agency, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, to enforce these measures. Following the Civil War, the federal government attempted to enforce the new liquor laws in the South. They quickly realized that many southerners, especially those residing in Appalachia where alcohol distilling continued to play an important role in the economy, opposed the tax. Not only did the excise irritate small distillers by reducing their profit margin, it also angered many temperance supporters who believed that the tax institutionalized the whiskey industry.⁶⁷

Many western North Carolinians began to distill moonshine because they believed that the federal liquor tax was discriminatory and too expensive. Once food supplies stabilized, these men and women would also receive the approval of their neighbors and political leaders. In his study of moonshining in western North Carolina during the late nineteenth century, Bruce Stewart discovered that many residents in the region who did not manufacture alcohol often supported moonshiners, viewing them as allies in their fight to defeat the federal government and restore “home rule.”⁶⁸ Between 1865 and 1867, President Andrew Johnson pursued reconciliation with the former rebels and did not enforce the liquor tax. He also saw the Bureau of Internal Revenue as an institution of political patronage. Consequently, illicit distillers in Wilkes County and other parts of the South united “in opposition to liquor taxation, making enforcement of the law more dangerous and nearly impossible.”⁶⁹ Historian Wilbur Miller believed that these moonshiners were rebels, but only because the federal government “criminalized part of their

⁶⁷ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 64.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

way of life by imposing a tax on home-distilled whiskey that they had produced for generations.”⁷⁰ The culturally incriminating whiskey tax spurred many mountaineers to see Reconstruction as a corrupt Republican scheme to expand federal authority into their communities. Consequently, it motivated many white western North Carolinians to vote for Democrats who condemned the Bureau of Internal Revenue and its agents as corrupt.⁷¹

During Congressional Reconstruction, many mountain residents and distillers linked their struggle against the Bureau of Internal Revenue with southern Democrats’ battle against the Republican Party. Results from the North Carolina’s 1868 November election suggests that mountain Republicans lost considerable ground to Democrats due to the mountain opposition to federal liquor law enforcement. In response, state Republicans portrayed themselves as the “party of economic and political reform by advocating for internal improvements, democratic reform, and free enterprise,” but to no avail.⁷² Unfortunately for mountain Republicans, newly elected President Grant in 1868 would intensify federal regulation of liquor production by sending more military troops and revenueurs to enforce the liquor tax in the Southern mountains.⁷³ By the 1870s, North Carolina Republicans and federal revenueurs’ reputation for “bayonet rule” deeply damaged their image among white highlanders.

The 1870s would forever alter the lives of moonshine farmers in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina. During that decade, traditional inheritance practices, a frenzy of land speculation, and population growth led to a decrease in soil fertility that undercut mountain farmers’ pursuit of economic independence.⁷⁴ To make matters worse, a national depression that began in 1873 increased mountain residents’ dependence on moonshining to

⁷⁰ Wilbur R. Miller, *Revenueurs & Moonshiners: Enforcing Federal Liquor Law in the Mountain South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 40.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

supplement their waning incomes. The average farm size in western North Carolina, for instance, shrunk from 365 acres in 1860 to 139 acres in 1880, pushing men from overcrowded farms to work in mills or coal mines in the Virginias or to begin their own distilling operation.⁷⁵ In addition, the advent of industrialization and urbanization, combined with the rise of rural Missionary Baptists and Methodists who embraced Victorian temperance, signaled the beginnings of a national trend that would eventually marginalize moonshiners in rural communities where distilling remained an economic necessity. While moonshiners were lionized by their clients and political supporters, the townspeople of Wilkesboro increasingly saw alcohol and “drunkenness” as a “source of annoyance to the citizens.” In 1873, for instance, town commissioners declared that they would no longer grant alcohol licenses to purveyors operating within one mile of the town.⁷⁶ Although progressives in Wilkes embraced temperance views on alcohol, moonshiners still found support outside of Wilkesboro in the more mountainous and rural townships.

Meanwhile in 1875, relations between moonshiners and revenueurs continued to deteriorate as five revenueurs were indicted on charges known as “spreading the account.” This practice increased the tax collected on whiskey by falsely reporting inflated amounts of liquor being produced by the distillers. A few of these revenueurs were also members of prominent Republican families and were acquitted in federal court. This only intensified mountain communities’ opposition to liquor taxation and increased the likelihood for violence.⁷⁷

Between 1876 and 1880, moonshine violence against the Bureau of Internal Revenue pinnacled with 25 agents killed in the southern Appalachian region.⁷⁸ Anthropologist Charles Thompson, Jr. noted that the federal government did not have to explain how the battle began

⁷⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁷⁶ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 124.

⁷⁷ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 110. The five revenueurs worked in western North Carolina’s sixth collection district, Wilkes’ district.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 132-133.

and that no one counted moonshiner deaths, showing indifference in Washington, D.C., towards mountain distillers.⁷⁹ While the number of revenuers' deaths and consequential media coverage portrayed moonshiners in a negative light, when compared to the death rates of deputy marshals in the frontier "Wild West," which averaged twenty per year, southern Appalachia was not as violent, at least statistically.⁸⁰ Four agents were wounded, one fatally, from battle with the blockaders in North Carolina's Sixth District, which revenuers considered one of the South's most dangerous regions during the late 1870s. Although there were only a few, the deaths of these federal agents soon drew political attention in the nation's capital.

In 1876, President Grant attempted to curtail moonshine violence by appointing Green B. Raum as Commissioner of the Bureau of Internal Revenue. That year, J.J. Mott, a popular revenuer working in western North Carolina's Sixth Collection District, informed the new Commissioner that conditions there were bleak. According to Mott, "the moonshiners were well armed and ready to fight and they had the support of most communities," including local sheriffs and state attorneys.⁸¹ Mott recognized that moonshiners had strong local support and that revenuers had to improve how they were perceived by the locals.

When Mott became head collector in the Sixth Collection District in 1876, he took practical steps to facilitate legal distilling and repair the Bureau of Internal Revenue's negative reputation. By 1880, he had weeded out corruption by appointing "men of character and honesty" and dismissing several revenuers "addicted to drinking."⁸² Mott further built cultural bridges by hiring several "highly qualified Democrats as agents," which successfully reduced Democratic

⁷⁹ Charles D. Thompson, Jr. *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 159.

⁸⁰ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 132-133. The local colorist would exploit this violence to depict an inherently wild and dangerous region which aided the prohibition cause.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 134-5.

opposition to federal liquor law enforcement in western North Carolina.⁸³ In 1878, Mott also convinced Commissioner Raum to lower the minimum capacity of legal distillers in western North Carolina from six to three and a half bushels of corn with the goal of encouraging small distillers to become legitimate.⁸⁴ One year later, 154 distilleries of five gallons or less were established in the district, suggesting that Mott's tactic had convinced many small distillers to become legal.⁸⁵

Raum also took steps to improve liquor law enforcement. In 1877, he instructed Mott to conduct the first of many seasonal raids in western North Carolina that focused on moonshine strongholds in Burke, Wilkes, and Polk counties.⁸⁶ Raum did not totally rely on force to convince moonshiners to become legitimate, however.⁸⁷ In 1878, for instance, he granted amnesty to all moonshiners who pled guilty in federal court and promised to stop making illegal alcohol.⁸⁸ With this promise of amnesty assured, "hundreds of moonshiners turned themselves into federal and state authorities," more than doubling the convictions for illicit distilling from 1877 to 1879 in western North Carolina.⁸⁹ But this relatively peaceful period, highlighted by an exceptional understanding between revenuer and moonshiner, would not last into the next decade.

Throughout Reconstruction, Democrats and some mountain Republicans denounced the Bureau of Internal Revenue and its liquor tax. By the 1880s, however, Democrats had won control of the Bureau of Internal Revenue's patronage and, ironically, declared their support for liquor law enforcement.⁹⁰ Consequently, liquor taxation ceased to be a partisan issue in mountain politics, much to the dismay of the moonshiners, who had now lost an important ally: local

⁸³ Ibid., 193.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 131-2.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 97.

Democrats.⁹¹ Revenuers' adjustment to mountain culture also improved relations with local residents. Western North Carolinians' fear of the Bureau of Internal Revenue's corruption and "bayonet rule" quickly subsided when Raum began to employ honest men from the community and prohibit the use of federal troops to enforce the liquor law.⁹² During the early 1880s, Mott further enhanced the Bureau of Internal Revenue's reputation in the region by heightening the qualifications for revenuers and requiring all candidates to receive an "endorsement from the citizens and well-known people of the neighborhood."⁹³

In 1882, Commissioner Raum, believing that he had suppressed moonshining in western North Carolina, proudly declared in his annual report that "the day of the illicit distiller is past."⁹⁴ Testifying before a congressional inquiry on revenue corruption that year, he boasted that the North Carolina's Sixth Collection District, which included Wilkes County, "has been lifted up from the attitude of fraud and resistance to authority into an observance of the law; and officers now can ride from one end of [Mott's] district to the other, without danger of being bushwhacked."⁹⁵ By the 1880s, moonshiners in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina could no longer use violence to maintain local solidarity against agents without losing support of their neighbors and communities. In fact, any use of violence would only perpetuate the violent stereotype of moonshiners and reinforce the belief that reform was needed in the mountains. Citizens increasingly began to see the revenue agents as the "defender of peace and legitimate enterprise rather than an oppressive tool of northern tyranny."⁹⁶ The increased revenue from the more efficient agents also made the excise tax America's leading source of internal

⁹¹ Stewart, "The weather-cock ukases," 97.

⁹² Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 97.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

funds, “rising from 30 percent of the collection in 1868 to 63 percent in 1884.”⁹⁷ However, growing support for prohibition in western North Carolina would jeopardize the federal revenue system.

The Rise of Prohibition in Western North Carolina, 1882-1908

Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Southern reformers promoted the creation of a “New South,” one in which cheap labor, industry, and agricultural efficiency would form the base of the region’s new economy. Appalachian people were assumed to be “unskilled” and inferior laborers. Although negative misconceptions of the mountains and its people existed previously, it was not until after Reconstruction that these fallacies experienced widespread reception among northern and southern townspeople.⁹⁸ With the national media’s coverage of the “Moonshine Wars” in the late 1870s, Victorian middle-class Americans internalized the local colorist constructed image of Appalachia as “the home of the hunter, the moonshiner, and the beasts of the forest.”⁹⁹ Consequently, outsiders would soon use this misconstrued stereotype for their own economic and political advantage.

While most historians have focused on the role that feuding played in the construction of the myth of violent Appalachia, new scholarship credits local colorists’ accounts of illicit distilling for sparking the nation’s fascination with mountain feuding and other forms of violence.¹⁰⁰ These writers, appealing to American literary magazines that catered to urban middle-class readers, perpetuated and reinforced the stereotypes of a violent, chaotic, and degenerate mountain region in their stories about moonshiners.¹⁰¹ With a curious and uninformed urban clientele, the goal of the local color genre was to foster magazine sales by concentrating on

⁹⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁹⁸ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 149-150.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 149.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the “peculiarities” of Appalachian people. Local colorists ultimately “discovered” a distinct but noble white “race.”¹⁰² Some of these writers also used the moonshiner to forge another conception of mountain whites as both violent and savage. This manufactured negative image of mountain moonshiners caused a stir in urban society because it served as a “threat to civilization.”¹⁰³

Northern capitalists embraced the myth of a violent moonshiner and his hostile region. Hoping to justify their economic exploitation, these opportunists rationalized that they were “saving” the mountain people. The savage hillbilly image also allowed middle-class Americans to “project their own fears about economic modernization onto a people they perceived to be different” and reminded these Victorians why they had adopted industrialization and “progress.”¹⁰⁴ Historian Anthony Harkins explains, “In an age of faith in American, and more generally Western, intellectual, cultural, and social superiority over the other “races” of the world...these [stereotypes] were designed to show not cultural differences so much as cultural hierarchy- to celebrate modernity and “mainstream progress.”¹⁰⁵ By the 1880s, “New South” politicians, local color writers, and northern capitalists would promote industrialization and sobriety as the elixir to the social and economic maladies of southern Appalachia.¹⁰⁶

Southern Appalachia also became the locus of mission outreach during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Encouraged by the myth of a violent and “unchurched” Appalachia, middle-class northern Protestants launched the “uplift” movement in the mountain region. Resentful over the failure to empower freed blacks in the South during Reconstruction, these northern “progressives” increasingly focused on reforming mountain whites, whom they

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁵ See Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 1978.

¹⁰⁶ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 160.

believed were “Americans-in-the-making.” According to them, the “primitive and violent” highlander had apparently rejected slavery, supported the Union during the Civil War, and remained racially “pure.” As such, these mountain people possessed “qualities which made them capable of uplift and improvement.”¹⁰⁷ Beginning in the 1880s, the American Missionary Association (AMA), the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and other religious groups organized schools and churches throughout southern Appalachia.¹⁰⁸ Whether they established social settlements, missionary churches, or industrial schools, these “uplift” organizations sought to usurp the “traditional” culture of Appalachia, which they “perceived as alien but malleable.”¹⁰⁹ One mountain trait viewed as harmful to the region’s economic and moral progress was highlanders’ supposed love for alcohol. Aided by the growing influence of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, these mission reformers aimed to “uplift” mountaineers by “sobering them up.”¹¹⁰

But these “outsiders” would not combat “King Alcohol” alone. In an effort to salvage and restore their own reputations, mountain townspeople, embracing the Victorian values of frugality, sobriety, and self-control, also increasingly characterized their rural neighbors as “a group of ignorant, drunk moonshiners” and embraced the “uplift movement” in the 1890s.¹¹¹ Local town reformers in western North Carolina concluded that economic decline was the result of the “traditional” culture of mountain residents that endorsed the use of alcohol consumption. Consequently, the alcohol manufacturer became a scapegoat, a symbol for what was wrong with the mountain South. These self-described “respectable” townspeople also urgently worked to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 173.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 175.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 151.

establish a New South and chastised outsiders for stereotyping the region as a place of violence, “a myth they had unwittingly helped create and perpetuate.”¹¹²

Contrary to what these local townspeople claimed, however, rural mountain residents also began to embrace temperance. By the late 1890s, subsidiary railroads from the east had begun to link Wilkes County with important markets such as Lincolnton, Statesville, Charlotte, and Winston in the foothills, ushering in an unprecedented era of economic growth.¹¹³ Like it had done to mountain townspeople, the expansion of industrial capitalism and commercial agriculture soon encouraged many rural residents to embrace New South rhetoric, endorse temperance, and develop a disdain for moonshiners, whom they blamed for promoting drunkenness.¹¹⁴ One way that they sought to eradicate alcohol consumption was by passing local option laws, which prohibited the sale and consumption in local communities. In fact, 58 percent of local option laws enacted between 1881 and 1890 in western North Carolina were in non-county seat townships or in villages with fewer than 100 residents, suggesting that rural inhabitants had begun to reject “traditional” drinking mores.¹¹⁵

Moreover, most evangelicals in western North Carolina increasingly supported temperance during the late nineteenth century. With improved roads, many rural people traveled to towns, which church leaders criticized for encouraging drunkenness and sin. Like temperance proponents elsewhere in the South, mountain evangelicals responded by forbidding congregants from drinking ardent spirits.¹¹⁶ Ignoring the fact that the mountaineers had been drinking alcohol long before the advent of industrialization, they passed local option laws in an attempt to protect the home and church from the sins of urban America.¹¹⁷ In fact, during the 1890s, 407 churches,

¹¹² Ibid., 170.

¹¹³ Ibid., 164.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 180-181.

¹¹⁶ John Shepherd, son of a moonshiner, provided Church documents detailing punishments for drinking.

¹¹⁷ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 186.

schools, and towns approved local option ordinances in western North Carolina, a 60 percent increase from the previous decade.¹¹⁸ As such, the temperance crusade in the region served as both a “secular reaction” to the industrial economy and an evangelical backlash “against the evils of urban society.”¹¹⁹ Miles apart in every socioeconomic category, these rural and urban temperance forces demonized the illicit and legal distiller, promoted temperance, and eventually made statewide prohibition in North Carolina a reality.

These local-option laws, however, failed to not only curb alcohol consumption, but also encouraged many highlanders to continue to manufacture moonshine.¹²⁰ The enactment of the local prohibition broadened the market and demand for illegal alcohol. It also allowed moonshiners to increase their profit margins. Without legal competition, these illicit distillers often raised the price of moonshine on thirsty customers who did not support local option. This blatant disregard for the law soon backfired on moonshiners in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina by angering mountain temperance supporters, many of whom began to support the enactment of statewide prohibition as the only way to eradicate King Alcohol and those who distilled it. Moreover, a nationwide economic depression in the 1890s made moonshining an economic necessity for many struggling farmers. In Wilkes County, many of these illicit distillers would ship their product to North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro, both of which, due to the arrival of the railroads by 1890s, had emerged as the county’s centers of trade.¹²¹ In addition, they steadily provided rural residents as well as laborers in the region’s burgeoning textile and mill towns with whiskey.

Large scale evasion of the law also forced the federal government to take action. During the mid-1890s, the Bureau of Internal Revenue intensified its attempt to enforce liquor taxation.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 201.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 181, 187.

¹²¹ Ibid., 202.

This crackdown on illicit distilling, however, soon led to violence in several western North Carolina counties where economic decline had encouraged many residents to distill moonshine.¹²² In Wilkes County, for instance, some moonshiners responded to their loss of status and economic rights by organizing “white cap” clubs. Between 1891 and 1896, these men operated a furtive “white cap” club to “protect their whiskey operations from federal and local officials.” More often than not, they targeted informers, whom they considered to be a threat to their economic interests and betrayers of the local community.¹²³ In March 1895, white cappers from the Roaring River section of Wilkes attacked an informer and his son.¹²⁴ Although rare, these attacks, publicized in the regional and state newspapers, further reinforced the stereotype of the violent, savage moonshiner and fueled the prohibition crusade in North Carolina.

Moonshiner violence, however, was the most visible, albeit ugly, sign of the cultural battle that had splintered Wilkes County into two camps: “progressives” and “traditionalists.” Following the incidents of moonshiner violence in 1895, many residents denounced the blockaders. The *Wilkesboro Chronicle* reported that white caps were “an energetic people in the cause of Satan.”¹²⁵ That November, an unnamed Wilkes County Democrat also implored President Grover Cleveland to send more Revenue agents “upon the distillers of Wilkes and knock the everlasting stuffing out of them forever and forever.”¹²⁶ Illicit distillers no longer had support from either party as more and more people accepted the federal revenueurs as a necessary part of mountain society.

By the turn of the twentieth century, western North Carolina had gone through massive cultural and economic changes. The rise of industrialization and urbanization had transformed the ways in which mountain residents, urban and rural alike, viewed alcohol and those who distilled

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 203.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 204.

it. Both constituted a threat to the region's economic and moral prosperity. Such attitudes against alcohol in western North Carolina and other parts of the state soon paved the way for the enactment of the Watts Law in 1903 which outlawed both the sale and the manufacture of alcohol (wines and ciders precluded) outside of incorporated towns. The new law also prohibited federal revenueurs from collecting the liquor tax outside of towns, and left only distillers in towns without local prohibition able to provide legal alcohol to make a living. Many Wilkes County farmers lashed out at the statute, complaining that it discriminated against "the poor class of people who are entirely dependent upon their fruit and corn crops for support."¹²⁷ Federal revenueurs sympathized with these men because the local prohibition would also eliminate their jobs. As such, revenueurs quickly criticized the Watts Law and often refused to cooperate with state laws and officials attempting to enforce it.¹²⁸ Whereas during Reconstruction, distillers relied on the support of local community and state courts to permit the distilling of alcohol, mountaineers now relied on the sympathy of federal revenueurs to allow their claim as legitimate distillers.¹²⁹ Alas, things would only get worse for distillers.

By 1903, even legal distillers suffered the wrath of mountain reformers. According to temperance supporters, these men, like their illegal counterparts, stymied the region's economic and moral prosperity by providing people with alcohol. That year, the *Wilkesboro Chronicle* complained that "[t]he average country distillery is the loafing place of the most worthless characters of the surrounding country." Two years later, it declared, "Every good citizen of all parties should hold up his hands in the heroic fight he is making to end the day when violators of the law conspire to defraud the government and make a reign of terror in the neighborhoods where they carry on their nefarious practice."¹³⁰ By 1908, temperance advocates had put

¹²⁷ Ibid., 211.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 209-210.

statewide prohibition up for popular vote, as they had done in the defeated 1881 referendum.¹³¹

Prohibitionists and anti-prohibitionists once again rallied their base and blamed each other for the social ills of society.

Mountain reformers increasingly accused distillers of promoting “drunkenness and violence” and argued that statewide prohibition was the only solution for eradicating the trade.¹³²

The region’s transition from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial Victorian community had sparked a rise in support for prohibition sentiment in western North Carolina.¹³³

In less than fifty years, mountain distillers in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina went from enjoying complete freedom to distill and sell liquor to a complete denial of their right to manufacture alcohol and make a living.

On May 26, 1908, 62 percent of North Carolinians voted in favor of statewide prohibition. Ironically for urban reformers, who often “depicted [Appalachia] as a land of intemperance and moonshining,” western North Carolina had voted with a higher percentage of “dry” votes than the lowlands.¹³⁴ With the exception of Alexander, Surry, Alleghany, and Wilkes, every mountain county endorsed the prohibition bill.¹³⁵ Moonshiners also aided the prohibition movement by defying local-option laws in their communities. Inevitably, prohibition would have failed without the allegiance of dry voters in these rural highlands.¹³⁶

The quick turnaround in popular sentiment and support for the local moonshiners symbolized the incredible societal changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and the

¹³¹ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 72. In 1881 the prohibition forces, led by women’s temperance societies, sought a state-wide ban on alcohol through a state referendum. The North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill forbidding the sales of alcohol except for medical, chemical or mechanical purposes. The proposition was to go into effect on October 1, 1881, if voters approved it in the August special election. Despite hard work by dry forces that included men, women, and black and white representatives, the referendum failed by a vote of slightly greater than three to one.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 216.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 168.

¹³⁵ Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 213.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

various reform movements that emerged in Appalachia during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. With the triumph of statewide prohibition, North Carolina progressives believed they had come one step further towards creating a more moral and sober society. But events in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina would soon convince them otherwise.

CHAPTER 2:
**THE RISE AND FALL OF PROHIBITION AND THE ADVENT OF THE ALCOHOL
BEVERAGE CONTROL ERA, 1908-1940**

The overwhelming victory of prohibitionists in 1908 marked a watershed moment in the history of the temperance movement in North Carolina. The forces of modernization and industrialization, along with teetotaler Christians (notably the Women’s Christian Temperance Union of North Wilkesboro), created a drier Tar Heel State, at least on paper. A new “enforcement” era had begun that sought to eliminate the manufacture and distribution of alcohol and, thus, forge a more temperate and moral society. But statewide prohibition, an idealistic forerunner to the national “Noble Experiment,” was doomed to fail as its political nature required large numbers of highly trained state and local enforcement officials. The General Assembly’s reluctance to sanction a state enforcement agency became a major pitfall for this progressive reform. To make matters worse, the loss of agriculture as a viable occupation in western North Carolina, combined with the embedded culture of whiskey production and consumption, resulted in a widespread and lucrative black market for alcohol in Wilkes County and other parts of North Carolina.

Far from rendering a fully dry state, prohibition’s only accomplishment was to require more creativity on the part of the imbiber to obtain intoxicants.¹³⁷ Although the sale of alcohol in preexisting retail establishments was outlawed, residents could continue to procure liquor at drugstores with a physician’s prescription or by mail. In addition, Catholics and Episcopalians

¹³⁷ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 170.

were assured that they could serve wine as a holy sacrament. Furthermore, statewide prohibition did not make the consumption of alcohol illegal, thereby encouraging the rich to stock up on liquor for personal use, a luxury most could not afford. A prosperous “red liquor” or bonded liquor trade developed between North Carolina and neighboring wet states before the advent of national prohibition in 1920. The mostly volunteer enforcement agencies were no match for the crafty and stealthy moonshiners and bootleggers of western North Carolina. The stereotype of the lazy, drunken moonshiner may have helped pass state prohibition, but carelessly accepting this image handicapped the teetotalers in their battle against distillers and rum-runners.

Prohibitionists had no idea that the drinker and the small distiller would only redouble their efforts to buy and sell alcohol. Creating a dry North Carolina was nearly impossible between the opposing wet culture and the subversive activities of distillers who occasionally resorted to violence in defense of their facilities.¹³⁸ Middle-class townspeople, evangelicals, and other North Carolinians who supported prohibition believed that all drinkers would eventually abandon alcohol once the benefits of teetotalism were revealed. However, many struggling farmers and families who relied on liquor distilling had no other economic means to make a living. The few low-paying jobs available in textile plants, manufacturing centers, sawmills, and orchards paled in comparison to what a farmer could earn in the moonshine market. Moreover, many impoverished North Carolinians, reacting to the pressures of this economic stress, actually increased alcohol consumption and supported the moonshiners. In short, prohibition ultimately increased the demand for whiskey and created a profitable black market, one that many Wilkes County residents would quickly embrace.

A major problem that advocates of state prohibition failed to address was the lack of a state agency to enforce the law. As Daniel Whitener explained, without a state enforcement

¹³⁸ “Work of Revenue Officers,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, January 18, 1908: “The life of Mr. Hendrix, the revenue officer held in such high esteem, was not sacrificed in vain. The price paid was a dear one, it will seem too many, but there is no doubt that the recent raids in that section will have a most salutary effect.”

cartel, enforcement trickled down to existing state law officers, county sheriffs, their deputies, and volunteers, most of whom were members of the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). Democratically elected county sheriffs and their deputies deferred to state law officers when it came to state prohibition enforcement.¹³⁹

In Wilkes County, where the prohibition referendum did not pass and the practice of moonshining had long existed, locally elected enforcement agents found themselves in a dilemma. Sheriffs and their deputies knew that they could be voted out of office if they arrested popular distillers and bootleggers. However, they also needed the votes of progressives and evangelicals who wanted prohibition enforced. Daniel Pierce, a historian of moonshine culture in western North Carolina, explains: “Since the local police, sheriffs, or their deputies had to live in the community and often knew or were related to many of the moonshiners, they usually limited their enforcement of alcohol violations to the occasional show bust to keep the respectable types from putting too much heat on them.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, it was not until May 1919, nearly 11 years after the enactment of statewide prohibition, that the *North Wilkesboro Hustler* reported the first illicit distillery ever being apprehended by a Wilkes sheriff.¹⁴¹ But even with such attempts to stop the illicit trade, massive quantities would continue to be made in and shipped from Wilkes County.

Declining Farm Values and Changes in Moonshining during Statewide Prohibition

Often living in rural poverty, illicit distillers and bootleggers found themselves with few options for changing their economic lifestyles. From 1910 to 1920, the agricultural industry changed dramatically due to increased crop yields through the introduction of hybrid seed corn

¹³⁹ “Sheriffs of State Do Not Enforce Law,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, June 10, 1910.

¹⁴⁰ Daniel S. Pierce, *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 20.

¹⁴¹ “Sherriff Woodruff Cut Steam Distillery,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 9, 1919.

and the invention of the tractor.¹⁴² By the end of World War I (WWI) in 1919, 85,000 tractors operated in America, but these expensive machines were not accessible to poorer farmers in Wilkes County and other parts of the Blue Ridge Mountains. While midwestern farmers started doubling and trebling their farm production, most Wilkes County farmers could not ride the wave of agricultural progress. Without tractors, these men and women could neither produce large amounts of corn nor compete with the national corn prices. Due to the economic challenges that many Wilkes distillers and farmers faced, moonshining became their best option and a new generation began to participate in the illicit trade.

By the 1910s, a stubborn resistance to statewide prohibition manifested itself among struggling Wilkes County farmers who wanted to retain ownership of their farms by making and/or selling illegal whiskey. Family and close friends were frequently caught at the still site, suggesting that liquor distilling and distribution continued to be a family affair in Wilkes County and other parts of North Carolina. It is noteworthy that this illegal trade was not confined to white males. Historian Wilbur Miller, for instance, discovered that one-quarter of bootleggers were black during the early twentieth century.¹⁴³ Like their white counterparts, these men distilled in order to make ends meet.

Wilkes County farmers, however, would soon find salvation. The invention of the “thumper keg” in the 1920s would enable these denizens to produce more alcohol by reducing the time that it required them to distill high proof whiskey. Placed between the still and worm box, the thumper or “doubler” maximized the liquor produced by essentially distilling the alcohol from the beer twice in one “run.”¹⁴⁴ Efficient distillers would put the low proof first run or “low vines” into their doubler for a second round of distillation. Some greedy moonshiners, often novices, learned to add lye or battery acid to stretch out moonshine, ultimately making a

¹⁴² Thompson, Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*, 135.

¹⁴³ Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*, 169.

poisonous liquid that resembled pure corn liquor.¹⁴⁵ Basically, the thumper keg provided these farmers with the opportunity to make their liquor faster and capitalize from statewide prohibition.

Despite the advent of the thumper keg, statewide prohibition continued to compel moonshiners to modify the way in which they made whiskey. The rise of demand for alcohol that accompanied prohibition led many distillers to cut corners, particularly by adding sugar to increase the overall proof of the whiskey. This adjustment compromised the quality and taste of the moonshine and created an inferior product for the consumer.¹⁴⁶ Bootleggers also diluted moonshine with water and sometimes used chemicals to increase the total volume of whiskey that they could distribute. In fact, some distillers stretched their spent mash with sugar or created a poisonous concoction by adding lye to their moonshine. Tradition and quality became history and the unregulated moonshiner's bottom line dictated what the new recipe would become during statewide prohibition.

North Carolina Politics Following State Prohibition

One year after the passage of statewide prohibition in 1908, anti-prohibitionists in the North Carolina General Assembly made liquor more accessible to mostly upper-class residents by legalizing the sale of alcohol in "social clubs." If these clubs paid an annual tax of two dollars per member, town officials were permitted to sell liquor to its members, but only on the premises.¹⁴⁷ Although procuring alcohol in bulk became difficult and illegal, owners of these clubs could turn to two sources for these products. They either purchased red liquor from neighboring wet states or white liquor from local bootleggers who bought alcohol from furtive

¹⁴⁵ Lye added to moonshine would create a "false bead" once you shook the jar. Connoisseurs knew that the "false bead" formed above the surface versus the "true bead" that was half above and half below the surface in the jar.

¹⁴⁶ See Thompson, Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*; and Vernon Marley and Clyde McGrady interviews by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 171.

moonshiners scattered around the state. The Anti-Saloon League (ASL) immediately pressured the General Assembly to repeal the new law.¹⁴⁸ By 1911, many North Carolinians who had cast their votes for statewide prohibition started to second-guess the movement, believing that the law was becoming too difficult to enforce and encouraging the formation of clandestine blind tigers (speak-easies) throughout the state. These fears forced the Anti-Saloon League to organize a prohibition convention in January 1912 in Raleigh to encourage politicians to continue to endorse statewide prohibition.¹⁴⁹

In 1913, North Carolina legislators responded by enacting the so-called “Search and Seizure” law that forbade the handling of liquor for profit and prohibited its possession for sale except by licensed druggists and medical depositories. This law made the ownership of more than one gallon of liquor or five gallons of malt liquor illegal.¹⁵⁰ Two days after the enactment of the “Search and Seizure” law, the U.S. Congress passed the Webb-Kenyon Act, which protected abstemious territories by making the shipment of liquor from wet to dry states illegal. Due to the fact that E. Y. Webb, one of the co-sponsors, was from Shelby, North Carolina, the dry forces of the state regarded the Webb-Kenyon act as a local law.¹⁵¹ Despite the closing of many loopholes, such as mail-ordered liquor and social clubs in towns, Whitener admitted that “liquor continued to flow” as doctor’s prescriptions were easily obtained and liquor sales at drugstores continued to multiply.¹⁵² When mail-ordering liquor became illegal, entrepreneurs found a niche by delivering bonded liquor or “red liquor” to dry territories, a practice called “jug trafficking.” Jane Ogburn, a Wilkes native and historian, discovered that temperance laws from 1908 to 1913 actually helped

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 172. The Anti-Saloon League (ASL) was a group of volunteer prohibitionists that lobbied the General Assembly for additional prohibition measures and recruited membership from their communities.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 177.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 178.

local distillers and bootleggers by creating new markets for moonshine whiskey, especially among those who had been ordering their bonded whiskey from Virginia and other wet states.¹⁵³

Much to the dismay of prohibitionists, strict enforcement of the law against blind tigers only further spurred the jug traffic and drugstore sales of alcohol.¹⁵⁴ Politics during the 1910s included the threat of a statewide referendum whenever a politician on either side of the prohibition issue thought his side had the public's favor. Although the North Carolina Speaker of the House had the ability to block bills opposed by his party, too often a wet majority passed stringent legislature designed to make prohibition "odious."¹⁵⁵ Statewide prohibition had passed because dry forces framed it as a moral issue; nothing could have been more political than legislating and enforcing state prohibition. If prohibition's only goal was to make it more difficult for drinkers to get alcohol, then it succeeded. Although the law changed and markets for moonshine shifted, the adaptive moonshine culture of Wilkes County remained constant during statewide prohibition.

World War I, the Great Flood of 1916, and the Beginning of National Prohibition

The commencement of World War I in 1914 had little impact on Wilkes County, as President Woodrow Wilson kept America out of the early years of the conflict. Focusing on the war in Europe, many politicians, especially "wets," became less concerned with enforcing state prohibition than preparing for the rising threat of the Central Powers against the Allies. But as America's involvement in World War I became more imminent, the distillers' needs were superseded by wartime demands. With America's entrance into the European battleground in 1917, the federal government and communities from across the nation focused on conserving

¹⁵³ Ogburn, "The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County," 4. Jug trafficking, meaning white liquor bootlegging, was practiced in states that were politically dry that still had demand for bonded liquor.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 181.

grains, sugar, and other foodstuffs for the war effort. These commodities were also essential for distilling whiskey. Consequently, a black market for sugar emerged and some distillers increasingly used galvanized steel distilleries, which made poisonous whiskey.

In 1916, Wilkes County experienced the worst flood in its history. Located on the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the county became a depository for excess rain that ran from the mountaintops, down various creeks, and eventually into the Yadkin River Valley which separated the commercial centers of North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro. Wilkes denizens along the many creeks and rivers were accustomed to perennial “freshets” or small flooding from the mountains, but no one was prepared for the monstrous flood that summer. The flood of 1916 stormed down the Yadkin River and washed away buildings and destroyed local businesses, resulting in \$2,000,000 of property damage and five deaths. The flood crested 32 feet above the normal level of the Yadkin River.¹⁵⁶ Coming in late July, most of the corn harvest of the season was destroyed as well as many grist mills and mountain homes. Undoubtedly, many unregistered distilleries in the mountains were also washed away, setting poor farmers and urban industrialists alike in dire economic straits.

Meanwhile, WWI deprived Wilkes County of young, able-bodied men who worked in agriculture, mills, factories, and local businesses. To fill the gap, boys, women, and older men had to pick up the slack as best as they could. Women, in particular, were empowered by their new status and pressed for the support of more progressive reforms such as national prohibition and women’s suffrage. If they were not already members, women entering the workforce for the first time often joined temperance groups that were supported by the mainstream churches and pushed for national prohibition as a way to win the war and foster a more temperate society. National prohibitionists exploited the wartime animosity of Germans by pointing out that many legal distillers and breweries were German-American owned, making prohibition seem patriotic

¹⁵⁶ Absher and Simpson, *The Heritage of Wilkes County*, 81.

and distillers as un-American. Such attitudes soon paved the way for the enactment of national prohibition.

National Prohibition and the Growing Moonshine Industry in Wilkes County

During World War I, federal liquor taxation, along with state prohibition, propelled the price of moonshine in Wilkes County to an astounding \$12 per gallon. This only encouraged more people to participate in the growing black market for alcohol. Even before the enactment of national prohibition in 1920, moonshine operations in Wilkes County continued to expand as demand and profit appreciated. In March 1918, for instance, a large still with 5,000 gallons of beer ready to be converted into moonshine was found by federal revenueurs in the Antioch section of Wilkes.¹⁵⁷ In fact, moonshining in the county had become so pervasive that one citizen complained that local church deacons “make it, sell it, ministers refuse to tell it.”¹⁵⁸ Moonshining ultimately established a solid foothold in nearly every North Carolina town, even in those situated along the eastern part of the state. As Eastern District revenueur J. W. Bailey complained in 1917, “We have more illicit distilleries than any other state in the Union or any other portion of the earth: and the number is increasing.”¹⁵⁹ Legislation seemed unable to significantly curb the amount of liquor being made or consumed in North Carolina.

Nonetheless, legislative efforts in Washington, D.C., continued to define, limit, and ban alcoholic beverages across the nation. While the ratification process for the 18th Amendment continued, the U. S. Congress passed the Wartime Prohibition Act in 1919, banning the sale of beverages having alcohol content greater than 2.75 percent. Before national prohibition officially

¹⁵⁷ “Revenue Officers Destroy Stills in Southeast Wilkes,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 19, 1918.

¹⁵⁸ “Deacons Make It, Sell It, Ministers Refuse to Tell It,” *The North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 8, 1918.

¹⁵⁹ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 190. The internal revenue collector for the eastern counties, J. W. Bailey, said that for the last six months of 1917 his force of nine deputies made ten raids to one made by the fifty-six sheriffs and their deputies, numbering in all about 500 men. Bailey claimed 4,000 people were connected to the business.

began on January 17, 1920, Congress also passed the Volstead Act. This act established a strict legal definition of intoxicating liquor and penalties for manufacturing and selling liquor. Three separate federal agencies were tapped with enforcing the Volstead Act: the United States Coast Guard Office of Law Enforcement, the United States Treasury Department's Internal Revenue Service Bureau of Prohibition, and the Department of Justice Bureau of Prohibition. The Volstead Act defined intoxicating beverages as anything with more than .5 percent alcohol which meant beer and wine were also prohibited from being made or sold. In December 1917, the U.S. Senate proposed the 18th Amendment, which became ratified by North Carolina on January 16, 1919, giving the amendment the sufficient number of states to be ratified nationally. The wording of the 18th Amendment also barred Americans from making and selling alcohol, but did not ban the possession, consumption, or transportation of intoxicating liquors. Once again, affluent imbibers stocked up on red liquor and other alcohol before the amendment went into effect as Americans were allowed to consume it in the privacy of their homes.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, poor farmers unable to procure liquor through these quasi-legal means continued to produce moonshine for their own consumption and to supplement their income, despite the threat of federal prosecution.

National prohibition increased pressure on the federal government to enforce the law and conduct more raids on distillers. Moonshiners in Wilkes County were now pursued by federal, state, and county officials, much to the delight of local prohibitionists. But even with such increased enforcement, moonshining proliferated in regions like Wilkes County, where moonshining remained an economic necessity and support for the illicit trade remained high.¹⁶¹ Without a legal retailer to buy liquor nationally, the price of moonshine as well as profits procured from it subsequently rose. The bootleggers' only competition, besides each other, came from Canadian and Cuban distillers transporting their bonded product into the United States. Like

¹⁶⁰ Thompson Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*, 16. A liquor store going out of business in Franklin County advised "Make hay while the sun shines."

¹⁶¹ Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 173.

their ancestors during the Whiskey Rebellion in North Carolina, the moonshiners' and bootleggers' battle against federal prohibition agents also represented the battle of federal supremacy versus the right to distill.

The lack of coordinated state enforcement played a major role in the decline of both state and national prohibition. The agencies responsible for enforcing anti-liquor legislation in North Carolina were the state government (county sheriffs and deputies), the federal government, and the Anti-Saloon League. Prohibitionist and scholar Whitener noted that failed efforts to unify the control/management of liquor laws under a state commissioner resulted in the administration and enforcement of prohibition falling to the federal level.¹⁶² As a result, little analysis of prohibition violations in Wilkes County is possible as the record of state prohibition violations being “unkept and little valued.”¹⁶³

The ASL existed as an unofficial loosely organized charity organization engaged in temperance and prohibition propaganda and in “pressure politics.”¹⁶⁴ The organization marketed itself as “non-partisan and interdenominational,” but temperance views and support for its propagation served as a litmus test for membership. Church “politics” combined in the ASL, resulting in a Missionary Baptist backbone and a leadership made up of the “most militant” of its Methodist members.¹⁶⁵ As a unique “charity” aimed at stifling alcohol by enforcing prohibition, the ASL relied on approximately 4,000 contributions. Most of these were usually donations

¹⁶² Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 184: “After national prohibition became effective repeated but unsuccessful efforts were made by prohibitionists to secure enforcement under a commissioner at least (state). These puny efforts for one reason or another were unsuccessful. The federal government should enforce the law, said some, because it had the power and the money. Despite the overwhelming prohibition sentiment in North Carolina, the enforcement and administration of the liquor laws came largely from the Federal authorities.”

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Nonpartisan and interdenominational, it was an organization largely of church going people who sincerely wished to remedy the evils of the liquor traffic. Church organizations and church “politics,” especially the Methodist and Baptist, stood squarely behind it. Perhaps the Methodist church and its individual ministers were most militant. The ASL was a charity organization that depended upon small free will contribution of churches and church members ranging in amounts from one cent to one dollar. Less than ten per cent came from wealthy men.

ranging “from one cent to one dollar,” collected after zealous prohibition appeals during church services.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, just as the anti-alcohol movement’s fundamental support came from middle-class progressives, the ASL relied on this core because “less than ten per cent came from wealthy men.”¹⁶⁷ Despite the ASL’s zeal and help from county and federal forces, North Carolina had no enforcement agencies to back the ASL, which played a major role in prohibition’s ineffectiveness. The democratically elected sheriff’s predicament in enforcing the unpopular law, the town police’s prerogative to focus on traffic violations, and the court’s “disjointed system” inhibited the ability to settle the swath of liquor cases processed during prohibition.¹⁶⁸ Existing enforcement agencies, especially the ASL, were no match for the “organized rum-runners directed by intelligent men and backed by wealth” who successfully evaded prohibition.¹⁶⁹

Diverse Elements at Work during Federal Prohibition in the 1920s

By 1920, the total value of crops cultivated in Wilkes County had reached its pinnacle. Due to a national agricultural depression in the 1920s that lowered market prices, Wilkes farmers, working with smaller farms and largely without tractors, were hurt even more when huge farm operators increased production to pay off their costly equipment.¹⁷⁰ While the number of Wilkes farms actually peaked in 1910, the county’s populace continued to steadily increase.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 181.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 186-187: “In many counties, through no fault of theirs, sheriffs were soon faced with an organized group of bootleggers who forced concessions from candidates in the elections, both primary and general. In addition, the sheriff was confined to a local area a ‘horse and buggy’ area. The town police were barely qualified to cope with the illicit traffic, being concerned chiefly with maintaining order. A few counties had special police, but they were usually instructed to let other agencies enforce the liquor laws. The courts were still the leisurely, disjointed system established piecemeal to deal with crime of a more fixed or permanent type such as affrays, murders, and the larceny of property.”

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 185-186. Except in a very general sense, the state had no enforcement agencies. The laws were passed for the entire state, but their enforcement depended upon the county sheriff, who was elected by popular vote usually for two years and who had four main duties- the maintenance of peace, serving court processes, keeping the county jail, and collecting taxes. Although the great majority were honest, conscientious public servants, they had except in rare cases, neither training, experience, time, nor power to cope effectively with the unorganized liquor traffic violations, to say nothing of the organized rum-runners directed by intelligent men and backed by wealth.

¹⁷⁰ Thompson, Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*, 12.

This rise in population made farm incomes inadequate to support the families, as the crops and livestock failed to bring in enough reliable funds. Naturally, many farmers, tenants, and unemployed residents increasingly opted to make illegal whiskey because the market price of alcohol had risen due to national prohibition.

Another factor that encouraged illicit distilling was the invention of the Ford Model-T. As scholar Horace Kephart predicted in the early twentieth century, the automobile, combined with prohibition, added the elements of risk and violence to what had previously been an essentially peaceful enterprise and made it more dangerous than before.¹⁷¹ The advent of the automobile played an instrumental role in expanding the transporter's moonshine market and allowed the greatest risk-takers to evade the law. While adding speed and mobility, the car increased the bootlegger's load, profit margin, and vulnerability. When a bootlegger evaded law enforcement at high speeds, he did so at the peril of losing his car, his illegal hooch, and his life. In 1922, the Federal Prohibition Commission of North Carolina placed the state "near the bottom" for enforcement, no doubt caused by the intrepid bootleggers who fearlessly charged the back roads in their new automobiles.¹⁷² That following year, local judges in Wilkes County warned the public of automobiles as "they are occasion of much immorality."¹⁷³ Indeed, local newspapers reported that bootleggers were spending profits on their cars and complained that "there is much sentimental sympathy wasted on lawbreakers," pointing out that purchasers were equally responsible for the crimes of bootleggers.¹⁷⁴

In addition to various law enforcement officials, moonshiners now needed to add to their watch list the most despised of actors: the informer. Local sheriffs and deputies would diligently find and arrest moonshiners without revenueurs present, but also increasingly collaborated with

¹⁷¹ Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders*, 189.

¹⁷² Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 191.

¹⁷³ "Against Liquor Traffickers," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, August 8, 1923.

¹⁷⁴ "Patronize Bootleggers and Get Your Rating," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, August 29, 1923.

Federal Prohibition Agents. Families adapted their warning systems as technology developed and used their shotguns, telephone, radio, and car horns to warn moonshiners of incoming revenuers. These tools were also used to inform on a neighbor or competitor in the illicit business.¹⁷⁵

In spite of the fact that many persons were caught selling and buying alcohol, most lawbreakers did not end up behind bars during the 1920s. The moonshine industry during national prohibition created scenarios of violence, but the hostilities that erupted were not directed at the authorities. More often than not, violence broke out when men combined drinking and business or when two drunken men decided to settle their quarrel in a deadly shootout.¹⁷⁶ When a popular moonshiner and distributor went to court, a jury of his peers often found him “not guilty.” Popular cases would “overcrowd” the courts with voyeuristic observers, supporters of the defendant, and influential family members. Local judges might also be acquainted with the blockader, making it further difficult to prosecute alleged lawbreakers. When a store clerk who sold too much sugar or an affable bootlegger was sent to prison, the warden often saw no reason to keep these entrepreneurs locked and chose to let them help run the prison.¹⁷⁷ Even during national prohibition, who the defendant was and why he was arrested mattered more than the law when determining the guilt of an offender.

¹⁷⁵ Vernon Marley and Jim Cothren, interviews by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Marley, who moonshined and bootlegged from the early 1920s to the early 1930s, mentioned the use of a “shotgun warning” by women to stay safe. Jim Cothren mentioned that the telephone was used to warn moonshiners or inform on them.

¹⁷⁶ “Serious Shooting at Lomax Post Office,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, Oct 29, 1924; and “Corn Liquor and Murder Sunday on Reddies River,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, Feb 11, 1925. The first example involves an argument over a liquor sale and the second seems to be two drunken men arguing and engaging in an “honor” duel.

¹⁷⁷ See Pat Hadley Davis, *The Good Old Boys and Memories Unraveled: Stories of the Lives of the Citizens who made Wilkes County Great* (North Wilkesboro, NC: Self-published, 1990); Ogburn, “The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County”; and Vernon Marley, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

Changes in Wilkes County Farm Status and Law Enforcement Efforts in the 1920s

By 1925, a growing number of Wilkes County farmers found it more difficult to make ends meet. Hoping to stay on their farms, many of them diversified and took advantage of any potential markets. In addition to crops and lumber, Wilkes farms sold cattle, mules, swine, horses, and dairy. In 1925, 78.1 percent of the county's land use was in the 5,208 Wilkes farms. The remainder of the county included several developed towns and over 17,000 acres recognized as "idle of fallow."¹⁷⁸ In addition, 26,290 denizens lived and worked on the farms which averaged around 50 to 99 acres, while 4,333 whites and 253 blacks resided on tenant farms.¹⁷⁹ The number of farms and the value of all crops peaked between 1910 and 1920, but population and cost of living continued to climb. Unfortunately, the total value of Wilkes crops in 1924 was \$1,797,082, almost a half million dollars in value less than the total value of crops in 1919.¹⁸⁰ Although farmers showed extreme dexterity in adjusting to fluctuating market prices by adding more industries to their "economic quilt," agriculture became decidedly unprofitable by 1930.

As pressure increased on owners and tenants who relied on the farm's waning productivity, converting surplus corn and rye into whiskey seemed a natural response to the plight that plagued Wilkes County's rural economy. Of the many agricultural industries in 1925, corn production for grain and forage topped the list, as almost 5,000 Wilkes County farms sold corn at market.¹⁸¹ Almost a third of farms produced rye, a proportion much higher than the state average and Wilkes' neighbors.¹⁸² The rye industry undoubtedly sprung from Wilkes County's moonshine production, which traditionally included rye in its recipe for its distinct taste.

¹⁷⁸ U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1925. *Vol. 1, Reports for States, with Statistics for Counties and a Summary for the United States: Pt. 26 North Carolina*, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1925/01/26/1925-01-26.pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Value in 1919 was \$2,212,793.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* This phenomenon occurred while undoubtedly a significant amount of corn and rye converted to moonshine for the farmer, and never saw the legal market.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

In 1926, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina (M.D.N.C.) was created in Wilkesboro by an act of the U.S. Congress. President Calvin Coolidge appointed local civic leader and ardent prohibitionist Johnson J. Hayes to serve as its first Federal Judge.¹⁸³ The Middle District encompassed the western North Carolina counties of Ashe, Alleghany, Watauga, and Wilkes; Judge Hayes oversaw two-week court sessions in May and November. The national government hoped that placing a federal court in Wilkes County would curtail the illicit activity of moonshining, but this approach did not succeed. It only expedited the judicial process for moonshiners and bootleggers. In fact, convictions from liquor cases increased threefold between 1920 and 1929.¹⁸⁴ Once released from jail, these lawbreakers often resumed their distilling because of the unavailability of jobs in towns. The scale of moonshine operations also rose drastically. In 1925, revenueurs confiscated a still “250 steps from the Boone Trail Highway” in Wilkes County that contained 1,200 gallons of beer and 1,600 pounds of sugar, a sign that local moonshiners had begun to replace quality for quantity.¹⁸⁵

By the end of the decade, many events would trigger the end of national prohibition. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 sparked a national depression that left the ASL and federal coffers in need of funds to continue their battle against the sophisticated bootlegging operations. The commonly cited “Wickersham Prohibition Report of 1929” reported the following findings: solid rapport in North Carolina between state and federal agents, a surprising conclusion that drinking decreased during Prohibition, and a split vote over whether blacks or whites were more engaged in bootlegging. This last conclusion confirmed the racial diversity in moonshining.¹⁸⁶ Although

¹⁸³ Ogburn, “The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County,” 3. Johnson Hayes held this office from 1927 to 1957.

¹⁸⁴ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 190. After 1920, under federal prohibition, the swing was unmistakably upward with the number of convictions tripling or quadrupling by 1929. After federal repeal, the decline in the Superior Court was rapid, but the inferior courts reported an increase until 1938.

¹⁸⁵ “Distillery Destroyed at Lewis Fork,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, February 25, 1925. This still was located only 250 steps from the Boone Trail highway.

¹⁸⁶ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 191-192. The Wickersham Prohibition Report on cooperation between state and federal authorities was described as “very good” or “more than formerly” or “splendid.” On the subject of “drinking-increase or decrease,” the report recorded the opinions of about twenty officials,

the report accurately depicted the growing cooperation of enforcement agencies, its optimism about temperance belied the plethora of moonshine convictions in the federal courts and marginalized the significant number of moonshine operations discovered by the enforcement agency. Due to economic woes, ASL donations started waning in 1929, making it difficult for the organization to operate against the rum-runners by 1931.¹⁸⁷

Between 1929 and 1930, the M.D.N.C. experienced a massive increase in the number of liquor violations. In 1929, for instance, the court meted 241 total years in sentences, compared to 225 and 99 for the eastern and western districts, respectively. The M.D.N.C. in Wilkesboro also imposed \$41,681.00 in fines, more than twice the amount levied by Western District Court of North Carolina.¹⁸⁸ The 1930 statistics for the middle North Carolina district reflected increased disregard for the liquor laws as the number of prison years sentenced nearly doubled from the previous year; and, in Wilkesboro alone, fines were increased to \$45,124.00.¹⁸⁹ That same year, the *North Wilkesboro Hustler* reported over 200 liquor law trials in the November session alone.¹⁹⁰ Thus, it was clear that though the laws were being aggressively enforced, moonshiners did not find this to be much of an impediment to their illegal activities.

The Precarious Early 1930s and Onset of the “Charlie S. Felts Enforcement Era”

By 1930, the Great Depression had limited many Wilkes County citizens’ abilities to earn a decent living. To make matters worse, the region’s population continued to increase, while the number of farmsteads declined as a result of a decade of decreasing crop values. Largely due to

fourteen of whom thought that drinking was decreasing, and six believed it was increasing. Two thirds of the latter’s opinions came from state and federal solicitors. As to whether the white race or colored race furnished more of the prohibition offenders, three officials answered white, and two answered colored.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁸⁹ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 192. Eastern District Court of North Carolina imposed 447 years, middle 438, and Western District Court imposed 203 total years.

¹⁹⁰ “Many Sentences are Meted Out,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, November 25, 1931.

economic woes and the expansion of moonshining, Americans began to question the value of national prohibition and saw an institutionalized revenue system as a better option. Local authorities and federal prohibition agents alike faced significant opposition from illicit distillers, some of whom used guns to evade capture. In the midst of these challenges, prohibition agents Charles (Charlie) Sylvester Felts, a Wilkes native, and L. G. Trexler formed a strong enforcement partnership that fostered an exceptional culture in the 1950s.¹⁹¹

In 1930, the federal government transferred prohibition enforcement from the Internal Revenue System (IRS) to the Justice Department. Charles Felts joined the Justice Department's Prohibition Unit in 1931. That same year, North Carolina's Middle District Justice Department moved from Raleigh to Greensboro, enabling prohibition agents to conduct raids in Wilkes County with more efficiency. With the support of Deputy Administrator J. L. Osteen, Felts and Trexler quickly began to conduct raids in Wilkes County.¹⁹² In October 1931, they apprehended between 40 and 50 violators of the prohibition laws in Wilkes County alone. The *Wilkesboro Hustler* described this raid as the "largest ever staged in the Middle District."¹⁹³

Before the repeal of national prohibition in 1933, friction between prohibition agents and moonshiners increased as the Great Depression continued to encourage many farmers to break the law. Local newspapers and interviews reveal that violence erupted between blockaders and revenueurs during the early 1930s. Bootleggers, popularly called "haulers," now had many years

¹⁹¹ Charlie Aaron Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Charlie Sylvester Felts joined the Prohibition Unit in 1931, leaving his job as a public high school principal in Wilkes. His son cites his growing family and the five-fold increase in pay after joining the Prohibition Unit as the reason for the career change.

¹⁹² "Chase Ends in Arrest," *Wilkes Patriot-Journal*, October 13, 1932. Felts and Trexler continued to make headway with a spectacular arrest that gained respect for law enforcers in Wilkes County. On October 13, Felts and Trexler initiated chasing a bootlegger's car, with Trexler in his customary driver's seat. The rum-runners drove off at high speed towards the Iredell County line, and then dashed from a main highway to a country road. Trexler followed the trail of dust and caught up with the haulers who proceeded to jump out of their car and run into the woods. Felts and Trexler closed in on the lawbreakers "at a distance of about 150 yards" when the bootleggers split up. A footrace commenced. The lawmen won the chase and captured the haulers and their 45 gallons of hooch. Moonshiners and temperate citizens took notice of the duo and began approaching them directly about stills and bootlegging operations.

¹⁹³ "Prohibition Agents Swoop into Wilkes," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 9, 1931.

of experience rigging and driving “hot-rod” cars full of white lightning. These haulers developed a “nothing to lose” attitude towards evading enforcement agents and often used “smoke screens” or sprayed oil behind their car to slow down their pursuers. In his study on moonshining in Wilkes County, Pat Hadley Davis revealed that “some haulers would carry a box of tacks and a hammer in their car when it was loaded, just in case the revenuers started chasing them. They would knock the rear window out with the hammer and throw tacks out to tear up the revenuers’ tires.”¹⁹⁴ In March 1931, for instance, the *Wilkes Journal Patriot* reported that moonshiners fired on revenuers as they approached an illegal still. As was often the case, however, these shots served only “as a warning” and did not hit the agents.¹⁹⁵

Prohibition agents responded with tactics of their own. Before haulers managed to derail the pursuing enforcers, agents installed steel “railroad ties” to their front bumper to knock haulers into the ditch.¹⁹⁶ Law enforcers also began to place large logs on a country road to force haulers to stop or make an abrupt turn when being pursued. Felt’s son, Charlie A. Felts, remembered his father’s story about staging a sneak attack by placing logs in the road to stop a bootlegger’s car. When Felts approached the car, its “suicide doors” flung open hitting Felts’ bicep and tearing several tendons, an injury that would ail the agent for the rest of his life.¹⁹⁷

Despite law enforcement efforts, moonshine operations escalated in size during the early 1930s. Vernon Marley, a descendent of Wilkes County distillers, confirmed this phenomenon, adding that in order to meet increased demands, 90 percent of moonshine made in Wilkes during the 1920s and 1930s was “sugarhead” whiskey.¹⁹⁸ In 1931, two revenuers destroyed “what [was]

¹⁹⁴ Davis, *The Good Old Boys and Memories Unraveled*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ “Stills Destroyed near Spurgeon,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 26, 1931: “Four men take to heels as officers approach scene... Shots were fired as they approached, probably as a warning.”

¹⁹⁶ Charlie Aaron Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Charlie A. Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Charlie, the son, said that his father received a government “disability” check for the injury he sustained that night, but Charlie S. Felts never let any of his injuries stop his intrepid pursuit of federal law breakers.

¹⁹⁸ Vernon Marley, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. “Sugarhead” whiskey meant an abundance of sugar was included in the mash (and recycled mash) or beer that enabled the

believed to be one of the largest stills since prohibition” in the Edwards township in Wilkes County. There, these agents confiscated 125 gallons of liquor as well as 7,000 gallons of beer, which the moonshiners had planned to distill into moonshine.¹⁹⁹ Throughout the 1930s, newspapers also reported that black and white citizens were routinely apprehended and that women were also involved in the illegal trade, sometimes serving as haulers.²⁰⁰ A corollary development to the escalation of moonshining was the increased role of the informer. Moonshiners sometimes “informed” on their “buddies” because of a grudge or to reduce competition. Because they trusted Felts, hundreds of families started mailing or personally informing the agent about possible still operations.²⁰¹ Bootleggers who received huge profits from their runs to the textile and mill cities to the east would often pick up a new girlfriend, and their old girlfriend would inform on them out of spite.²⁰²

Politics and Prohibition

In 1932, Democratic presidential nominee Franklin D. Roosevelt campaigned to end prohibition and reinstitute the revenue system. President Herbert Hoover, in August of 1932, also sought to woo “wet” votes by supporting the repeal of the 18th Amendment in order “to remedy present evils” that had developed under the law.²⁰³ Hoping not to alienate prohibitionists, both candidates agreed to prevent the return of the saloon and to protect dry counties. Most Wilkes County residents approved of the candidates’ stance on national prohibition. That September, local papers reported a significant revenue drop in the state coffers and that longtime

distiller to make more money. Mr. Marley also said that he imported “enzymes” that extracted more sugar out of his grains thus allowing a more potent spirit to be made.

¹⁹⁹ “Biggest Still,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 16, 1931.

²⁰⁰ “Dry Agents Make Successful Raid in County; Many Caught,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 16, 1931 and “Woman Caught With Auto Load Liquor,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 29, 1932. These articles included a report that a black man from Statesville was found with 10 gallons in Wilkes County.

²⁰¹ Charlie A. Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

²⁰² Jim Cothren, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011.

²⁰³ “Hoover Advocated Change in National Prohibition,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 15, 1932.

prohibitionists had begun to question the “Noble Experiment.”²⁰⁴ Instead of symbolizing “moral uplift,” the dry forces found themselves accused of being a “subversive element.”²⁰⁵ Hoover’s announcement and the continuance of the Great Depression became the first nail in national prohibition’s coffin.

That year, two developments in Wilkes County also played a role in the demise of national prohibition. The first was a “revolutionary” drink mixer invented by C. W. Gilliam Jr. and William A. Stroud, a clerk of the Wilkes County Superior Court, in October 1932. Clearly, the invention of this alcoholic drink mixer at this time signified that Prohibition was on its way out. That the device, dubbed “one of the outstanding inventions of the year,” was developed by a clerk of a Wilkes court is ironic and prophetic.²⁰⁶ The second phenomenon of national importance occurred following Roosevelt’s election and the change to the Volstead Act. In December 1933, Wilkes native Johnson B. Hayes became the first federal judge to acknowledge that national authorities no longer had jurisdiction over liquor laws. This local ruling, known as the “Hayes Decision,” was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1934 and absolved 13,000 defendants accused of violating federal Prohibition.²⁰⁷ Judge Hayes cemented his popular legacy in Wilkes with his liberating decision.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ “State Revenue Showing Drop,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 8, 1932.

²⁰⁵ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 202.

²⁰⁶ “Drink Mixer will be Exhibited in Hall at Carnegie,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 17, 1932: “The new drink mixer invented by William A Stroud, clerk of the Superior Court for Wilkes County and C. W. Gilliam Jr. is to be put on display in the exposition hall of Carnegie Institute. The invention completely revolutionizes the method of mixing drinks at the drug store. It is said to be one of the finest things of its kind ever manufactured.”

²⁰⁷ “Appeal in Two Liquor Cases Will Go Direct to Supreme Tribunal,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 14, 1933. Judge Hayes held the National Prohibition Act or Volstead Law to be “inoperative” and “obsolete” since repeal of the 18th Amendment to the federal constitution. He maintained that the power previously conferred upon the federal court to try defendants for alleged infractions of the national prohibition act has been effectively withdrawn from the courts which now are without any power whatever to proceed to trial or to impose sentences for violations of a law which no longer exists. “Hayes Decision in Liquor Cases Upheld by [Supreme] Court,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 8, 1934. This decision decided once and for all that the Volstead Act and the 18th Amendment were null and void, thus freeing 13,000 defendants across America.

²⁰⁸ Wilkesboro Federal Court Building was named after him (1972).

The Twenty-First Amendment and the ABC Era in North Carolina

On February 20, 1933, the 21st Amendment was proposed by the U.S. Congress. Before this amendment to repeal the 18th Amendment could become law, three-quarters of the 48 individual states had to ratify it. On December 5, 1933, Utah became the 36th state to pass the amendment by its state convention, thus passing the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This amendment remains unique for two reasons: it is the only amendment approved to repeal a pre-existing one, and it is the only amendment to the Constitution to be ratified by specifically calling state conventions and not via state legislatures. Support for national prohibition remained strong in Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina.²⁰⁹

In North Carolina, “wets” and “drys” scrambled to garner voter support.²¹⁰ Widespread backing of President Roosevelt in the state encouraged anti-prohibitionists to believe the state would vote to ratify the 21st Amendment. Likewise, State Senator Robert R. Reynolds appealed to voters to pass the amendment, arguing that it would eliminate profit for “the bootlegger and the racketeer” and bring in a new source of revenue to the state. On the other side, state prohibitionists rallied against the 21st Amendment by preparing a massive “dry” delegation to send to a state convention and by opposing all “wet” bills presented to the General Assembly.²¹¹ On November 9, 1933, an overwhelming number of North Carolinians cast their votes in opposition to the 21st Amendment. Whitener noted that the majority of wet counties were located in the east, while most dry counties, including Wilkes, were located in western North Carolina. Alleghany County, voting in favor of the end of Prohibition, represented the only wet citizenry in

²⁰⁹ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 205. His chapter on the end of Federal Prohibition highlights general support for prohibition in North Carolina and in particular in western North Carolina.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202. Whitener mentions how overconfident the wets went into the election and thus got smacked hard by the popular vote.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* Senator Reynolds asked people to “vote as you drink” and declared there were “400,000 illegal barrooms in North Carolina.” Pro-repeal would receive fewer votes than Reynolds’ speculative number of speakeasies.

western North Carolina.²¹² North Carolina's vote would not prevent the 21st Amendment's passage, but the General Assembly received the message that Tar Heel voters still mandated state prohibition.

Interestingly, the pro-Prohibition vote in Wilkes County was the first temperance support in its history and the vote seemed counter-intuitive because most Wilkes County residents had long opposed legal prohibition. However, when economics is taken into account, the moonshiner and bootlegger probably favored the profit of the black market over the benefits of a legal liquor option.²¹³ Ironically, prohibitionists and moonshiners/bootleggers allied to combat "wet" forces. Many rural evangelicals continued to support prohibition as a way to block the evils of modern society. This vote, combined with that of progressive townsfolk and the bootleggers/moonshiners, explains western North Carolina's strong support of prohibition in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the *Charlotte Observer* claimed that the 1933 dry victory had settled nothing and relegated the unwelcome 18th Amendment to the "limbo of 'noble experiments' with ignoble ends."²¹⁴ Even with the demise of the 18th Amendment, dry forces continued to try to prevent the manufacturing and distribution of legal alcohol in the state. Wet forces quickly responded. In 1933, the General Assembly, under political pressure from anti-prohibitionists, passed a bill that allowed for the sale of beer, porter, fruit juices, and light wines that did not contain more than 3.2 percent alcohol.²¹⁵ The battle between wet and dry forces in the General Assembly ultimately reopened political wounds that had been tabled for almost two decades.

²¹² Ibid., 205. Alleghany was one of only 13 counties to favor repeal of the 18th Amendment.

²¹³ Ibid., 206. The propaganda that the dry victory was won by the bootleggers, racketeers, and lawless groups is almost calumny. Doubtless the bootleggers did vote for prohibition, as they must have done in the states that voted for repeal. They did not keep wet states dry, and they did not decisively influence the dry victory in North Carolina. If the newspaper record of lawlessness in the US is to be taken as an index, North Carolina had no monopoly on the activities of rum runners, hijackers, racketeers, and Al Capone rings! Equally unworthy of comment is the story that the people of NC voted dry in order to get their whiskey without payment of federal tax.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 205. Whitener notes that the November 10, 1933, *Charlotte Observer* predicted that the "record-smashing victory" had settled nothing.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 206. This complied with the federal law that had been made.

With the ratification of the 21st Amendment, the Prohibition Office in Greensboro was replaced with the Alcohol Treasury Unit (ATU), relegating liquor from a moral to a tax issue once again. For Wilkes County revenuer Charlie Felts, little change occurred. He continued to do what he did best: busting up illegal distilling operations. Likewise, the prohibitionists' strategy changed very little as the United Dry Forces held a convention in Greensboro in January 1934, which Whitener depicted as a return of unity for prohibitionists.²¹⁶ However, the lack of a creative and effective enforcement scheme hammered another nail in state and local option prohibition's coffin. Basically, state and local prohibition continued to create a thriving black market for alcohol.

To make matters worse, ineffective enforcement of these prohibition laws made it nearly impossible to stop moonshiners from making alcohol.²¹⁷ In January 1934, Wilkes County officers destroyed an operation posed as a large-scale manufacturing plant, confiscating about 2,000 gallons of beer in the raid.²¹⁸ One month later, the arrest of a former prohibition officer discovered with twenty-two gallons of liquor as well as a complete steam operation in the basement of his home near North Wilkesboro further confirmed that moonshining remained widespread.²¹⁹

Relations between moonshiners and informers also took a violent turn. On May 27, 1934, Wilkes native M. S. Phillips, who had served as an informer for "several years," accompanied authorities on a raid in the Ferguson community. During the raid, Phillips was thrown into hot mash while trying to arrest a "moonshiner." Sustaining terrible burns that cost him most of his

²¹⁶ Ibid. Flanked by ministers and other leading churchmen within every county, the dry forces had at their command a militant group who had long served in the ranks of the prohibitionists.

²¹⁷ Ibid. Whitener showed that state violations crept up until 1937.

²¹⁸ "County Officers Cut Large Still," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 29, 1934.

²¹⁹ "Former Driver of Prohibition Agent Found with Liquor," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 1, 1934; and "Hayes Decision in Liquor Cases Upheld by Court," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 8, 1934.

fingers, hearing in one ear, and vision in both eyes, Phillips was hospitalized for a month.²²⁰

However, nothing prepared revenue agents for the 1935 raid on Robert Glen Johnson's country home of Ingles Holler. There, authorities made the largest inland seizure of blockade liquor in the United States up to that time, confiscating 7,100 gallons of moonshine, 9,150 pounds of sugar, four copper condensers, and five complete distilleries.²²¹

By 1935, most mountain farmers continued to live in dire economic straits and many residents continued to distill alcohol to earn a living. In fact, according to historian Charles Thompson, Blue Ridge farms during the 1930s "were in worse shape than the returning Confederates had found them seventy years earlier, as even greater numbers of offspring tried to crowd onto the same property."²²² Wilkes County resident Junior Johnson recalled that his dad purchased moonshine from family and neighbors in order to provide the distillers with money, then keeping it to sell when the economy improved.²²³ With agricultural market prices hitting all-time lows, many distillers no longer even attempted to grow their own corn and bought their cornmeal from country stores instead.²²⁴

By the mid-1930s, the dry forces' effective blockade of legal liquor bills finally collapsed through the creative and persistent efforts of wets in the General Assembly. On the last day before summer adjournment in May 1935, anti-prohibitionist legislators executed an "unexpected attack" when the House passed a liquor bill exempting New Hanover County from the Turlington Act. Although the Senate blocked the bill, the wets' persistence caused panic among dry

²²⁰ U.S. Senate. 74th Congress, 1st Session. (S.Rpt.662) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935.)

(Serial Set 9884, Session Vol. No. B). Mr. Phillips is paid 2,500 by the federal government for his terrific burns.

²²¹ Ogburn, "The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County," 6. Multiple sources note the Johnson house had a tilt due to the weight of the liquor. Junior Johnson, son of Robert Glen Johnson, reveals that due to the poor economy, his dad's benign service of a community co-op explained the high volume of moonshine; Junior also lionized his father for doing the time for the communities' liquor.

²²² Thompson, Jr., *Spirits of Just Men*, 210.

²²³ See Tom Higgins and Steve Waid, *Junior Johnson: Brave in Life*. (Phoenix: David Bull Publishing, 1999). Junior also remembers being so poor during the depression that their family could not muster a few cents for a traveling herbalist.

²²⁴ Cornmeal sold at country stores for moonshining is never with salt.

supporters and eventually spurred a “free-for-all, disorderly row.”²²⁵ However, before adjournment at midnight, wets passed a local option liquor bill. Upon a majority vote in favor of local option, a state-run Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) was created to legally sell liquor throughout North Carolina, with the exception of nineteen eastern counties whose representatives refused to endorse the bill.²²⁶ Although Wilkes County retained its county prohibition laws, the first liquor bill had passed in North Carolina since 1903 and the ABC Era had begun. No doubt red liquor surged with ABC stores in North Carolina and, in this case, bootleggers carried their loads from east to west.

In 1937, the General Assembly received a report from the ABC surveying the alcohol control in North Carolina’s prohibition and ABC counties.²²⁷ Although the data limited generalizations to the 82 prohibition counties, the survey revealed that the liquor bill cost these counties \$12 million a year.²²⁸ Drunken driving rates in the ABC counties shrank lower than the state average and 91.5 percent of all responses contended that the Turlington Act received insufficient support “to make its enforcement effective.” It noted that in the last ten years a “rapid increase in the consumption of whiskey and other intoxicants” had taken place in North Carolina.²²⁹ Most sheriffs in control counties said law enforcement was easier and 91.6 percent of them claimed that “bootlegging had decreased” since local prohibition ended.²³⁰ This damning

²²⁵ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 211.

²²⁶ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 212. Upon a favorable vote in a local-option election within each county, the provisions of the Turlington Act would cease to apply therein, and the sale of liquor would begin legally at county liquor stores. These stores were granted a monopoly on sales. To guard against the return of the saloon, all sales were to be made in sealed packages, and the liquor must be drunk neither on the premises nor “on any public road or street.”

²²⁷ Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina*, 216. Starting in 1935, the commission sent questionnaires about the liquor situation to clerks of courts, sheriffs, chairmen of county commissioners in every county, to all daily/weekly newspapers, to judges, chiefs of police, and solicitors.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

report led to a 1937 act switching prohibition from a state policy with county enforcement to a county policy with state administration.²³¹

FDR's New Deal, Moonshining, and Wilkes' Persistent Teetotalers in the Late 1930s

During the late 1930s, many Wilkes County residents, especially farmers, remained unemployed and continued to distill moonshine to make a living. Hoping to end the Great Depression, President Roosevelt created several work relief programs to alleviate poverty and unemployment across the nation. In 1936, the federal "Blue Ridge Parkway" project employed 200 workers from Wilkes County to construct the tourist highway in the northwestern corner of the county.²³² From 1936 to 1937, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) also employed between 200 and 400 residents.²³³ Finally, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created opportunities for young, unemployed, and unmarried Wilkes County men. By early 1938, CCC camps in the county began closing, but luckily, the Laurel Springs Camp survived and aided Wilkes County residents during the summer flood in 1940.²³⁴ In 1939, 1,400 farmers earned payments for their farms via the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. This act, replacing the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was deemed unconstitutional in 1936, established farm subsidy policy and was the first to make price support mandatory for corn, cotton, and wheat, thereby helping farmers maintain a sufficient supply during low production periods. By 1940, 4,098 Wilkes farms had signed up with the federal program, becoming one of the top five

²³¹ Ibid., 218. With the passage of "An Act to Provide for the Manufacture, Sale, and Control of Alcoholic Beverages in North Carolina," any county could force the county commission to hold an election to establish or abolish ABC stores every three years after a citizen's petition was signed by fifteen percent of voters.

²³² "Number Employed by WPA in County about Half Total Helped a Year Ago," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 23, 1937.

²³³ Ibid. Although 390 was the county quota, only around 200 men were being used on county wide projects in 1937.

²³⁴ "300 CC Camps Will be Closed March 1," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 24, 1939; and "CCC Considers Closing Camps in State Soon," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 14, 1940. Director J.J. McEntee told Johnson at his request that CCC camps would discontinue 273 camps permanently beginning March 31, 1940.

counties in number and percentage of farms enrolled in North Carolina.²³⁵ As helpful as these New Deal programs were to Wilkes County residents, most families and farms continued to struggle and opted to distill and sell moonshine to earn more money.²³⁶

Moonshining and bootlegging showed no signs of slowing down during the late 1930s. Although illicit distilling occurred in towns and various townships, Windy Gap in the foothills of eastern Wilkes County earned a reputation for being a leader in the moonshine trade. As such, local sheriffs and ATU agents paid special attention to this township. Throughout 1937, Windy Gap authorities conducted several raids on “Charlotte Men” and laden liquor cars bound for that city.²³⁷ That December, Federal Agent Charlie Felts, Agent A. R. Williams, and a local deputy sheriff seized a still making “holiday spirits” in the Boomer section.²³⁸ In January 1938, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* admitted, “Despite continued raids and officers’ arrests...the moonshine industry continues to flourish according to information gained from officers and others who should know what they are talking about.”²³⁹ In February and March of 1938, these authorities halted eleven more operations in Windy Gap, but even these raids failed to dissuade law-breaking moonshiners in that community. Within a week of the last raid, illicit distillers had replaced the two confiscated stills and started running liquor, only to be shut down again by the local

²³⁵ “4,098 Farms in Wilkes Signed Up for Year,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 6, 1940. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was created to make price support mandatory for corn, cotton, and wheat to sustain a sufficient supply in low production periods along with marketing quotas to balance supply and market demand. It established permissive supports for butter, dates, figs, hops, turpentine, rosin, pecans, prunes, raisins, barley, rye, grain sorghum, wool, winter cover-crop seeds, mohair, peanuts, and tobacco for the 1938-40 period.

²³⁶ John Sheppard, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Sheppard claims that moonshiners sold jars to some of these public workers, especially those stationed at CCC camps around Wilkes County.

²³⁷ “Officers Capture Four Charlotte Men with 240 Gallons,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 11, 1937: “Federal revenue agents made a big haul in the Windy Gap section of Wilkes County Thursday night when they captured four men after a car chase and confiscated two heavily laden liquor cars.”

²³⁸ “Officers Making Successful Raids,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 23, 1937. Federal Officers A. R. Williams and C. S. Felts with Deputy Sheriff Odell Whittington cut a small 50 gallon still in Boomer.

²³⁹ “Officers Continue to Meet with Success in Raiding Illicit Stills,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 20, 1938.

sheriff.²⁴⁰ Enforcement of the local prohibition laws seemed nearly impossible for county and federal officers.

Despite the positive impact of successful local enforcers like Charlie Felts, moonshining operations increased in Wilkes County in the late 1930s. To meet market demands, moonshiners increasingly exported large vats of “sugarhead” whiskey, low quality alcohol made with an overabundance of sugar. In 1938, authorities estimated that seven still sites near Windy Gap used 10,000 pounds of sugar in the confiscated beer alone.²⁴¹ Unused sugar seized by officers was donated to the local welfare department for struggling families. Confiscated red liquor was also sold to ABC stores or donated by the revenuers. In 1940, local authorities also seized a tractor trailer hauling 169 cases of assorted liquors which were destined for Salisbury, North Carolina.²⁴² By 1940, moonshiners had adapted with the times and had continued to diversify their ranks as well as expand their intrastate markets.²⁴³

Alarmed at the increase in moonshine traffic, temperance supporters resumed their assault on illicit distillers, blaming them for promoting vice and violence. During the late 1930s, these men and women, aligning with local churches, lobbied once again for statewide prohibition and continued to spread warnings about the ills of alcohol. In 1937, for instance, the *Wilkesboro Journal-Patriot*, a longtime opponent of intemperance, reprinted a speech by a New York City physician, Edward Cowls, who claimed that alcohol killed “more than cancer” and “few people realize how many persons die every year from alcohol or go into insane asylums, never to come

²⁴⁰ “Seven Stills Near Windy Gap,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 18, 1938; “Bad Week for Moonshiners,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 3, 1938; and “Still Replaced After Raid,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 14, 1938.

²⁴¹ “Seven Stills Near Windy Gap,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 18, 1938. With 100 pounds of sugar to the 100 gallons of beer, it is estimated that 10,000 pounds of sugar was used in the beer destroyed at the seven sites.

²⁴² “Tractor Load of Whiskey Seized,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 18, 1940.

²⁴³ “16 Year Old Girl Held for Running Moonshine Still,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 15, 1940.

back.”²⁴⁴ Wilkes County reformers also bemoaned North Carolina legislators’ adoption of ABC dispensaries in 1935. By 1937, still “indignant over action of the House in regard to the county option plan,” they considered any liquor bill to be a harmful and misguided because it placed “revenue above the moral and common welfare of the people.”²⁴⁵ That same year, the United Dry Forces initiated an annual field day at the Wilkes County Baptist Church, where three local residents delivered speeches against alcohol and those who distilled it.²⁴⁶

Throughout the late 1930s, the Middle Court of North Carolina remained busy as Judge Hayes meted out hundreds of sentences every year for federal revenue violations. In the November session of 1937, the docket had over 100 cases, thanks to successful ATU raids in the district, with over 90 percent involving violations of the federal liquor laws.²⁴⁷ The normal court session lasted two weeks, but the November session in 1939 lasted nearly a month due to the long queue of liquor violators on the docket.²⁴⁸ Most male violators of the federal liquor laws went to prisons in Chillicothe, Ohio; Atlanta, Georgia; Petersburg, Virginia; or Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, while convicted women were imprisoned at a federal female reformatory in Alderson, West Virginia.²⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the revenuer’s job remained dangerous. Some moonshiners often toted guns to the still site and sometimes resorted to violence to evade capture. In one bizarre episode in early 1938, a moonshiner shot another moonshiner in a freak accident at an illicit distilling

²⁴⁴ “More than Cancer,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 1, 1937: “Dr. Edward Spencer Cowls, director of Park Avenue Hospital in New York City, reported these ‘facts’ to members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science recently in session in Atlantic City, New Jersey.”

²⁴⁵ “Local People to Attend Hearing on Liquor Laws,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 8, 1937: “The dries of this section feel that the liquor question is not one to be madly rushed through the legislative halls to place the state among those states which they say place revenue above moral and the common welfare of the people.”

²⁴⁶ “United Dry Forces Planning Annual Field Day in Wilkes,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 4, 1937.

²⁴⁷ “Violators of Liquor Laws to be Tried in Federal Court November 15,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 11, 1937.

²⁴⁸ “Start of November Session,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 23, 1939; and “Federal Court Ends Yesterday,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 22, 1939.

²⁴⁹ “Violators of Liquor Laws Get Prison Terms in Court,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 18, 1939. Margaret Fost was given a year at Alderson, West Virginia.

operation. Statements made to authorities alluded to the fact that these men “were not quarrelling” and that one man shot at the other “in a playful manner.”²⁵⁰ In another case of violence in 1938, the shots were not from a friendly source. That December, revenuer Charlie S. Felts and other agents raided a distillery when Wilson Shew, a Wilkes County man, fired a shotgun at Felts, who protected himself by hiding behind a tree until Shew fled the scene. Shew remained at large until he was arrested in Salisbury in March 1940 and charged with assault.²⁵¹

By the 1940s, however, the moonshine industry in Wilkes County would begin to decline. Bootleggers had a lucrative market in Piedmont cities and continued to cater to this clientele throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, although legal ABC stores began to erode the moonshiners’ market. Local papers reported the best November sales ever in 1939, when the 27 ABC counties sold nearly \$800,000 in liquor sales during that month. Cutlar Moore, the Alcohol Beverage Chairman, believed that ABC stores had “pushed bootleggers and moonshiners into dry counties leaving wets with only legal liquor.”²⁵² Despite the widespread repudiation of legal alcohol of any type in Wilkes County and the dry forces to shut them down, 28 legal beer dealers retailed in the county in early 1940.²⁵³ As evidence of the preference for moonshine and legal liquor in North Carolina, the average Tar Heel adult consumed less than three gallons of beer while the average American consumed twelve and a half gallons of beer.²⁵⁴ The prevalence of marijuana began to make headlines. In 1940, the *Wilkes Journal Patriot* showed that a Reverend M. A. Adams from Rutherford County made the startling comment that “the greatest menace to the schools in this state is marijuana, and it is present in all the high schools I have visited.” Rev.

²⁵⁰ “Man Died of Wound Received at Distillery,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 7, 1938.

²⁵¹ “Man is Held for Officer Assault,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 7, 1940.

²⁵² “Liquor Sales Soar to New High,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 14, 1939. Cutlar Moore, the State ABC chairman, announced that the 27 ABC counties in North Carolina sold \$788,710 during November 1939 alone.

²⁵³ “Wilkes County has 28 Beer Dealers,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 8, 1940.

²⁵⁴ “North Carolina Lags in Sale of Beer-Ale,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 19, 1940: “Despite the 12 percent increase in consumption, NC still lags in consumption as compared with other states according to the brewers and North Carolina beer distributors committee.”

Adams, whose visits to Wilkes High Schools led him to denounce “the prohibited sex drug,” concluded: “I am quite certain that this drug is more prevalent in North Carolina than the average person is willing to admit.”²⁵⁵ The developments of marijuana cultivation, ABC stores, and poultry farming would eventually replace moonshining as the main occupations in Wilkes County. However, these “problems” of moonshining and marijuana production would pale in comparison with what residents would suffer in August of 1940.

²⁵⁵ “Marijuana Law in State Explained,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 27, 1940.

CHAPTER 3:

THE GREAT 1940 FLOOD, WWII AND THE RED LIQUOR INDUSTRY, VANCE PACKARD, AND HOW WILKES BECAME THE MOONSHINE CAPITAL OF AMERICA

1940-1941: The Great Flood and the Pre-War Moonshine Industry

On August 13, 1940, copious rains of a category one hurricane doused western North Carolina and the Blue Ridge Mountains, steadily creating massive swells in Wilkes' Reddies and Yadkin Rivers and flooding the Wilkesboros. By the next day, the rivers had destroyed farmers' tobacco, corn, rye, apple trees, and livestock before ravaging the industrial centers in the Wilkesboros by flooding retail stores, overturning boxcars, and causing five million dollars of damage to Wilkes County alone.²⁵⁶ In all, the raging Yadkin River destroyed at least 150 homes and several businesses. The flood claimed a total of 30 lives, but miraculously only one Wilkes denizen. The 1940 flood constituted an unparalleled disaster in Wilkes County's history as the Yadkin River rose four feet higher than the terrific flood of 1916 and created vulnerable economic circumstances in the region.²⁵⁷

Because many Wilkes County moonshiners and bootleggers were also farmers, the flood caused catastrophic damage to their capital investments and seasonal crops. Several grist mills and countless distilleries washed away in the flash floods, and many bootleggers lost their prized automobiles to the flood. The flood also claimed railroad tracks, roads, and bridges that would

²⁵⁶ This is 5 million in 1940 dollars. Adjusted for inflation this is almost \$82,000,000 in 2012.

²⁵⁷ "50 Years of Taming the Mighty Yadkin," *Winston-Salem Journal*, September 9, 2012. http://www.journalnow.com/news/state_region/article_a8aefa38-8e44-534a-a39a-a073da9326a2.html. Wilkes citizens immediately petitioned all levels of government for a dam to prevent future flooding from the western Blue Ridge river ways.

take years, even decades, to replace, particularly in the marginalized mountainous parts of Wilkes County. The loss of infrastructure brought relative isolation for many mountain communities and inhibited hundreds of Wilkes families from selling their crops and livestock to the popular markets in the Piedmont.²⁵⁸

One week after the flood, local newspapers wrote that Wilkes County citizens “maintain high spirits” as many agencies, including the American Red Cross and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), helped in the disaster relief and rebuilding process.²⁵⁹ Many citizens, including former moonshiners, worked in the CCC camps until the camps closed in 1942. Through another facet of government assistance, in 1941, Wilkes County farmers received a total of \$37,604 from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which paid farmers not to grow crops, a practice meant to lower supplies and raise crop values. Indeed, these programs provided important relief as the 1940 census showed the average value per farm in Wilkes was \$2,647, down from \$3,018 in 1930, and reflected a sharp decline in the average per acre land value in the county from \$45.75 in 1930 to only \$39.09 in 1940.²⁶⁰ Ultimately, lower farm and crop values would bind many citizens to the moonshine business which enabled them to rebuild their farms and their communities. During these tough times, farmers had to choose between receiving a government check, working in a CCC camp, or selling illegal whiskey.²⁶¹

The flood also toughened the resolve of evangelicals, prohibitionists, and civic circles to push for prohibition and promote a Christian community with a “go back to church” campaign.

²⁵⁸ “Traphill Road to be Constructed Through to US 21,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 15, 1949. Over nine years later roads in western Wilkes were not repaired. Moonshine became even more important because it was easily transportable, in high demand, and had a profitable economy of scale.

²⁵⁹ “Flood Stricken Residents Maintain High Spirits Here,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 19, 1940.

²⁶⁰ “Census and Farm Value Information,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 8, 1940; and “New Federal Programs and Aid Amounts,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 13, 1941. Wilkes County individuals received \$422,331.69 in social security benefits between December 1940 and February; old age assistance of \$156,530; unemployment compensation of \$193,661.81; aid to dependent children of \$53,623; and aid to the blind of \$18,516.88.

²⁶¹ Price V. Fishback, *Government and the American Economy: A New History* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 403. AAA grants are shown to have been exploited by larger farms which hurt the small farmers competing for the same grants.

In September 1940, civic clubs petitioned for a ban on all illegal games and “indecent” shows in the county.²⁶² Notwithstanding a backlash in the moonshiners’ reputation, economics would consistently propel many citizens into the illicit business of moonshining or bootlegging before the introduction of World War II’s rationing program.²⁶³ Despite all the concerted efforts of the churches, county prohibition, federal revenues, and local law enforcers, moonshiners and bootleggers would conduct their illicit business until World War II’s strict sugar rationing and “pleasure driving” bans went into effect.

By October 1940, a 20-person liquor ring made headlines that shocked North Wilkesboro residents. A group of eight black men, 11 white men, and one white woman from western North Carolina ran a “1000 gallons a week” moonshine distributing operation by hauling the white lightning from Wilkes and selling it in Winston-Salem.²⁶⁴ This integrated operation was, according to a local newspaper, “one of the biggest alleged conspiracies to violate federal liquor laws ever uncovered in Winston-Salem or [the] vicinity.” This would be only one of many “conspiracy trials” that filled the Middle District’s federal court in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, moonshining and Wilkes County shared a bizarre relationship as headlines such as “20 gallons of liquor [found] in school toilet” were reported in local newspapers.²⁶⁵ As the federal court was busy twice a year prosecuting those in the conspiracy trials and scores of other moonshine cases, illicit distillers, adapting to modernity, constantly exploited contemporary technology to make more moonshine and increase their profit margins.²⁶⁶ By December 1940, Alcohol Tobacco Unit

²⁶² “Civic Clubs Asking Ban on All Illegal Games and Indecent Shows in County,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 5, 1940. Also, several beer outlets lost their license because they were deemed substandard by state standards.

²⁶³ The nation’s Home Front Movement consisted of volunteer and mandatory rations for the duration of the war, 1941-1945. Starting with tires, national rationing covered meat, sugar, and petroleum, even most durable goods were hard to buy, as the nation’s economy transformed for the War effort.

²⁶⁴ “Wilkes People Charged Part of Big Liquor Ring,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 14, 1940.

²⁶⁵ “20 Gallons Liquor in School Toilet,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 4, 1940.

²⁶⁶ Unfortunately, technology did not often enhance quality of liquor made and sold. An eighteenth century recipe would have much less sugar and probably made a better product for customers.

(ATU) officers found a huge distilling operation fired by “six horse power boilers” with 2,100 gallons of mash ready to distill and sell to thirsty customers in the region.²⁶⁷

By January 1941, the organized prohibitionists had successfully made liquor a political issue in the North Carolina General Assembly. Caleb K. Burgess, President of the “United Dry Forces,” confirmed their “considerable legislative support” and called for a statewide referendum on the liquor question designed to prohibit spirits, fortified wine, and even beer.²⁶⁸ By the end of February, a liquor bill petitioning for a statewide referendum vote, along with a bill banning importation of liquor and wine, were introduced to the state legislature, but neither passed.²⁶⁹

Throughout the first half of 1941, local officers arrested several bootleggers on the road and confiscated over 100 gallons of white liquor, although many more evaded the authorities.

That April, a sixteen-year-old Wilkes County boy made headlines when he was arrested in Hickory, North Carolina, carrying 160 gallons of moonshine in his 1940 Ford Coupe.²⁷⁰

Culturally, young boys and even girls helping their parents or family moonshine and bootleg were common and not new in Wilkes.²⁷¹

In late May 1941, the county sheriff and deputies conducted surprise raids on local establishments, making a dent in the liquor business, but also exposing its connections to the illicit trade within the corporate limits of North Wilkesboro. The North Wilkesboro’s *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* reported that the sheriff and deputies found considerable quantities of illicit and

²⁶⁷ “18 Sentenced in Federal Court on Conspiracy Charge,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 19, 1940. This operation was one of the biggest illicit outfits ever found in the county. Traphill, a mountainous community near today’s Stone Mountain State Park, would provide thousands and thousands of gallons of moonshine for bootleggers to distribute. 2,100 gallons of mash would produce around 210 gallons of moonshine.

²⁶⁸ “Liquor is Going to be an Issue of This Legislature,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 9, 1941.

²⁶⁹ “Liquor Bill and Other Measures are Introduced,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 27, 1941.

²⁷⁰ “Arrested with Load of Booze,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, April 28, 1941.

²⁷¹ Dorman Mikeal, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Mr. Mikeal, my first formal interviewee, talked about helping in his daddy’s moonshine operation. Two other Wilkes natives talked about being around moonshine operations, helping make stills, or carrying wood by ten years of age. Women would serve as lookouts, take meals and messages to the operation, and some women bootlegged from home.

tax paid liquor at all eight establishments.²⁷² During the Middle District’s first 1941 Federal Court session, Judge Johnson Hayes had such a “large number of cases” involving “violations of the liquor tax laws” that it took from May 19 through May 29 to complete them.²⁷³

The moonshine culture connected the backwoods distillers with town businessmen and new technology increased the distiller’s liquor yield. Along with adding efficient steam boilers to their operations, revenueurs found one ton of coke, a smokeless and resourceful fuel, at a large distillery in June 1941.²⁷⁴ Despite the persistent moonshine problem in Wilkes County, small steps were being made to mend infrastructure damage from the 1940 flood. The Curtis Bridge, a major link between the Wilkesboros, was repaired in late February, but Pearl Harbor, World War II, and its peripheral status prolonged the repair of many rural roads and connecting bridges until after the war.²⁷⁵

1942-1945: The World War II Years and the New Bootlegger

With America’s entrance into the Second World War in December 1941, enormous national transitions affected Wilkes citizen’s lifestyle in many ways. The two most significant changes for the county were the immediate refocus to a war economy centered on industrial and agricultural production, and the loss of hundreds of able men who served their country in the war effort. The war created a demand for food production, conservation, and eventual national rationing of precious foodstuffs, sugar, gas, copper, and rubber: all items needed in the production and delivery of moonshine. Historically a patriotic group, most Wilkes citizens heeded the call to conserve supplies and stop making moonshine, though exceptions occurred. Only a few months after the United States entered World War II, newspaper accounts depicted a

²⁷² “Liquor Sellers Gather in Big Raid Saturday,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 26, 1941.

²⁷³ “End of Long Docket in Federal Court,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 29, 1941.

²⁷⁴ “Big Steam Still Taken this Week,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 5, 1941.

²⁷⁵ “Curtis Bridge is Replaced,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 20, 1941.

budding and sophisticated “red liquor trade” in “dry” Wilkes that kept the county and state forces busy throughout the remainder of the war.²⁷⁶

Although sugar was difficult to acquire in the quantities needed to make moonshine, “bigger stills” were discovered by the ATU in late February 1942. Federal sugar quotas allotted 12 ounces of sugar per person each week, but were soon reduced to eight ounces. The sugar rationing system limited the ability of moonshiners to acquire sugar legally, yet this program ultimately led to a lucrative black market for sugar holders.²⁷⁷ Despite the sugar quotas, illicit distillers found ways to make moonshine, such as using candy for sugar, as well as going back to the “grain and chop” recipe.²⁷⁸ Two boys were arrested at a 300 gallon still in July 1942 and a giant 34-person moonshine conspiracy case made headlines in April 1942. However, the story of the year was the new red liquor business that exploded onto the Wilkes County scene.²⁷⁹

The red liquor industry emerged from the unique economic market that existed in Wilkes County. By 1942, Wilkes had voted to be a “dry” county, making it free of a legal liquor outlet. Yet in August 1941, the furtive “red liquor” business amounted to roughly 6,000 gallons of tax-paid liquor being sold, and by April 1942, the red liquor business trebled with over 18,000 gallons being distributed via Wilkes.²⁸⁰ Tom Bost, a journalist from Raleigh, North Carolina, exposed the burgeoning bonded liquor trade, declaring that “Wilkes is selling a lot more (liquor) illegally in certain houses than 37 legal houses are doing in Cumberland County,” a county much

²⁷⁶ Because federal taxes had been paid on all red/bonded liquor, only local and state agents could arrest these bootleggers.

²⁷⁷ “Felts Catching Moonshiners in Bigger Stills,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 23, 1942; and “Salvage Important Materials,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 5, 1941. The article bemoans that the sugar used for North Carolina moonshining in 1941 would have supplied all homes in the state with sugar for one month, according to the ATU.

²⁷⁸ “Officers Tell the Court of Still,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 18, 1943.

²⁷⁹ “Wilkes, Rowan People in Big Conspiracy Case,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, April 23, 1942; and “Federal Officers Get a Huge Still,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 22, 1942. A 300-gallon still was found between Clingman and Ronda in Wilkes County with 18 mash boxes with 4,000 gallons of grain and commercial syrup mash ready to distill.

²⁸⁰ “Dry Wilkes Sells More than Wet Raleigh County in Red Liquor Counts,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, July 1, 1942.

more populous than Wilkes. A July newspaper reported that dry Wilkes sold more red liquor than wet Raleigh County.²⁸¹ Bost also noted a nineteen-year-old Wilkes County “boy” who received nearly 19,000 gallons of bonded liquor “on record,” and forewarned, “It is not on record that in some of the worst bootlegging areas of these dry counties, boys of good families are paid rich wages for their work and that it is difficult to get them interested in other jobs.”²⁸² Indeed, the lucrative liquor trade would keep many Wilkes County denizens in the bootlegging business during the 1940s and 1950s, before waning in the 1960s.

By 1943, the federal government restricted all nonessential driving to conserve gasoline and rubber. A “pleasure-driving ban” began in Wilkes County, which hindered the ability of bootleggers to move any liquor. Furthermore, in North Wilkesboro, town boosters, religious leaders, and the newly formed chamber of commerce distanced themselves as much as possible from the nefarious red and white liquor industry. In August 1943, for instance, Wilkesboro Baptist churches collectively petitioned for and successfully won a Sunday ban on alcohol. Such restrictive measures covered up the furtive whiskey business with their polished image and laws, but they could not effectively stop the clever cadgers from distributing liquor in various secretive ways. Additionally, agents of the nascent State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) were required to work with local forces who often knew the charismatic bootleggers of Wilkes County. Enforcement, however, would prove difficult as the huge volume of red liquor cases opened the opportunity for mismanagement and corruption.

The federal government’s sugar rationing program, combined with Wilkes County’s lively bootlegging culture, led to bizarre circumstances and exciting chases between the hauler and the law enforcer. For example, Highway Patrol Sergeant Carlyle Ingle chased a bootlegger’s

²⁸¹ “Tom Bost Says Vast Amount Liquor Goes to Wilkes from one Wholesaler,” *Journal-Patriot*, April 27, 1942. Reporter Tom Bost became a whistleblower on Wilkes’ red liquor business and established Wilkes’ reputation as a bootleggers’ locus.

²⁸² “Liquor Authorities Say Big Booze Loads Not Going to Small Places,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 16, 1942.

car carrying 400 pounds of sugar until the men bailed out of their car and “made their escape on foot.”²⁸³ Many other red liquor bootleggers would be chased and sometimes caught by local agents during the World War II, but nothing could prepare North Carolina agents for their raid on a charismatic kingpin with a stockpile of red liquor to boot: Phillip Yates.

On June 1, 1943, SBI officers and the state highway patrol arrived at Phillip Yates’ farm house with a search warrant, following a hunch that bonded liquor was on the premise. When questioned, Yates conceded that these officers would need “some trucks” to haul the massive amount of red liquor hidden in an outbuilding of his farm.²⁸⁴ Shockingly, Yates provided his own two trucks, helped load the nearly 700 cases worth \$30,000 into the trucks, and then drove one of the trucks into North Wilkesboro, where they were safely stored.²⁸⁵ This primary evidence of the “good ol’ boy” culture would continue as Wilkes denizens faded out of the red liquor industry and returned to producing white liquor and dodging revenuers.²⁸⁶

Yates’ red liquor distribution market indicated that multiple states were involved in the illicit business. The huge quantity of red alcohol was bought from liquor houses in Baltimore, Maryland, for the purpose of wholesale distribution throughout western North Carolina, and was not meant for county consumption. In fact, receipts showed 5,517 gallons of this liquor was to go to a former Wilkes County resident now living in Hudson, Caldwell County. The operation ultimately exposed the sophisticated network of liquor sellers in western North Carolina and the penchant of Wilkes County men to participate in this trade.²⁸⁷

²⁸³ “400 Pounds Sugar in Auto Taken,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 25, 1943. The newspaper also reports a “\$1,000 [red] liquor haul” made in Wilkes County. The car contained 567 pints of federal tax paid liquor, which was taken to be turned over to the county as the law provides for.

²⁸⁴ “Liquor Valued at \$40,000 is Seized,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 3, 1943.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* The large cache of red liquor was turned over to the county board of commissioners to be sold, as the law specified, to ABC stores.

²⁸⁶ Tom Wolfe coined the phrase “the good ol’ boys” in 1965 in reference to Junior Johnson and other bootleggers in the South. I submit Mr. Yates’ charismatic interaction with the officers indicated he was well respected enough to be trusted to drive one of the trucks in North Wilkesboro.

²⁸⁷ “Liquor Valued at \$40,000 is Seized,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 3, 1943. This article reported the large number of cases to be delivered to Hudson, North Carolina, to a man originally from Ferguson, a township of

The Yates' seizure should have been a major public relations boost to the effectiveness and cooperation of local and state officers, but several missing cases of whiskey created a statewide controversy that no one anticipated. A few weeks after the Yates episode, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* reported "\$3000 worth of seized liquor is reported missing" or roughly 60 cases of "the most expensive brands" were gone from inventory.²⁸⁸ A Wilkes grand jury convened and indicted Lieutenant W. B. Lents of the State Highway Patrol and Guy Scott, an agent of the State Bureau of Investigation, on charges of larceny in roughly 90 cases of high-priced liquor from the Yates raid. This case set off a major statewide scandal.²⁸⁹

Governor J. Melville Broughton immediately reacted to the indictment by charging three state agencies with the investigation into the case: the Highway Patrol, the State Bureau of Investigation, and the Attorney General's Office. Ultimately, the two officers were acquitted of the charges, as Yates suspiciously failed to appear at the trial to confirm the missing cases.²⁹⁰ Yates, however, had to wait until the December session of Superior Court before knowing his future.

In November 1943, the Federal Court was unusual in that only six illicit distilling cases were on the docket. Although reporting that illicit distilling remained on a "small scale" in Wilkes County, newspapers found it troubling that moonshiners still found ways to acquire sugar.²⁹¹ Interestingly, federal revenueurs discovered that many operations reverted to the "grain and chop" recipe, which took longer, but produced smoother liquor free of sugar.²⁹² Instead of

Wilkes. Ironically, Wilkes County schools benefited when the bootleggers were caught because the liquor was sold back to ABC stores and all of the money went to the Wilkes County school fund.

²⁸⁸ "\$3000 Worth of Seized Liquor is Reported Missing," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 24, 1943.

²⁸⁹ "Investigation into Liquor Cases is Demanded," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 23, 1943.

²⁹⁰ "Mystery Still Unsolved," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 4, 1943. Reports would later reveal that the indicted officers and Mr. Yates had lunch before the case, where the case was discussed, but Mr. Yates failed to remember any details from the furtive meeting.

²⁹¹ "Sale of Liquor Nets County \$17,747.00," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 18, 1943.

²⁹² The "grain and chop" recipe reverts back to the nineteenth century method of making whiskey by mixing malted "corn chop," rye, and sometimes yeast to make a beer from which to distill whiskey. This beer/mash base took longer to ferment and was not as potent, yet it made a quality sipping whiskey.

making quality liquor for little profit, the illicit distillers transitioned from producing and selling moonshine to selling Jack Daniels and other types of red liquor. Yates' infamous liquor confiscation and ensuing debacle over missing liquor cases featured prominently in state and local headlines for the rest of 1943. Perhaps due to the kingpins and corruption, concerned Wilkes County citizens organized a petition that October, eventually "placed before congress," protesting any type of prohibition in the county.²⁹³ In late November, a Wilkes County sheriff sold Yates' bonded liquor to a state ABC store for over \$17,000, money that eventually went to the local school system.²⁹⁴

The December 1943 session of the Supreme Court of Wilkes County proved unique. The docket included over 100 cases of violations of the county prohibition law.²⁹⁵ Out of the unprecedented number of red liquor cases, the Yates mega-bust and subsequent scandal resonated and created a local legend.²⁹⁶ Testifying before the court, Yates verified that there were about 60 cases missing from his original stock. Yates even admitted to a private dinner at the "Princess Café" with charged Lt. W.B. Lentz and Captain L.R. Fisher in which their case was discussed. Conveniently, when pressed for more details Yates said, "He could not recall the substance of the discussion."²⁹⁷ In the end, the missing cases remained unsolved: Yates received six months in prison and road work, a \$7,000 fine, court expenses, and a four-year suspended sentence by Judge J. Please Jr. who dubbed him a "one man revolution."²⁹⁸

²⁹³ "Wilkes People Protest Prohibition," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 4, 1943.

²⁹⁴ "Wilkes Received \$17,747 from the Yates and Phillips Raid," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 18, 1943. The sale was perhaps the largest ever made by a county under from the sale of seized liquor.

²⁹⁵ "Over 100 Cases on Court Calendar of December Session," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 9, 1943.

²⁹⁶ "Yates Gets Sentence in Court: Six Months, \$7,000 Fine and Costs, 4 Years Suspended," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 20, 1943: "By order of Governor Broughton, the special court against Lt. Lentz and Agent Scott convened, but Yates failed to show up in court for his own trial or as a witness for the state against the officials indicted. Judge Parker ordered a bond set at \$25,000. Officers could not find Yates until he voluntarily came in a few days ago and filled the required bond."

²⁹⁷ "Yates States Liquor Sixty Cases Short," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 16, 1943. Yates said that his wife had told him she saw liquor in the cars of some of the officers. Mrs. Yates testified during the trial of Lentz and Scott that she did not see any liquor taken away in the officers' cars.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The final years of World War II (1944-1945) saw a return of the moonshine business as another conspiracy trial headlined “one of the heaviest dockets in years.”²⁹⁹ Judge Johnson Hayes made it known in November 1944 that he “intended to crack down on these organized gangs engaging in liquor business.”³⁰⁰ However, Judge Hayes had no idea that, throughout his tenure, the liquor business would continue running full throttle via Wilkes and his district.

North Wilkesboro reformers made the full commitment to prohibition by banning wine and beer from all outlets in the city during the last year of the war.³⁰¹ By the end of August, two atom bombs delivered victory to the Allies and Americans’ income had doubled on average compared to before the war. Although some new chicken farmers in Wilkes County prospered, many other residents would continue to engage in the illicit alcohol trade to increase their income and make their mark in the modern world.

1945-1950: The Post War Years in Wilkes: The Making of the Moonshine Capital of America

Following World War II, Wilkes County entered a new and exciting epoch, one characterized by faster cars, white liquor, red liquor, the beginning of the suburbs, corporate poultry industries, and the zenith of the bootlegging era. Some returning Wilkes County veterans took up chicken farming, industrial work, governmental work, while others went back into *the* business as a way to make ends meet.³⁰² With sugar quotas lifted, men and women could once again procure large quantities of sugar for moonshine operations. Moreover, with local

²⁹⁹ “Federal Court Completes Job on Big Docket,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 13, 1944. The Bell Conspiracy went on trial at Wilkesboro federal court with eight people present including one woman who eventually was only fined. During the term which opened November 20, 1944, practically all of the cases involved alleged violations of the liquor laws.

³⁰⁰ “Heavy Sentences Imposed on Liquor Ring Members,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 13, 1944.

³⁰¹ “Wine Sales Out; No More Beer in City Pool Rooms,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, April 30, 1945.

³⁰² “Revenue Agents Eagerly Sought,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 17, 1945; and “F.S.A. Is Locating Farms for People in Wilkes County,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 17, 1946. Articles reveal new options for veterans, either being recruited as revenuers or receiving monthly checks to run a farm in Wilkes County.

prohibition in effect, bootleggers could sell bonded liquor at staggering profits.³⁰³ Much to the chagrin of the town leaders, Wilkes County emerged as a commercial center for white and red liquor with NASCAR and the North Wilkesboro Speedway symbolizing the county's indigenous roots in the furtive trade and its legendary drivers.³⁰⁴

In September 1945, the Bureau of Internal Revenue "eagerly sought" 5,000 agents and special investigators and "hopes to obtain many in this area" with a preference given to returning veterans.³⁰⁵ The establishment of Holly Farms changed the face of Wilkes County by facilitating farmers' attempts to raise and sell chickens. Many of these chicken farms were profitable and legitimate; others were a facade, as moonshiners often placed their still in a large chicken coop populated with a few token chickens.³⁰⁶ Undoubtedly, many Wilkes denizens found it worthwhile to work in the chicken industry and did not need to manufacture moonshine. However, *the* business remained and would draw much discussion as outside journalists published articles about the clandestine trade along with its handsome profits.

In February 1946, moonshiners stole 300 pounds of sugar from a bakery only to be spotted by the local police who eventually recovered all of the stolen sugar bags. One week later, seven other individuals would be implicated in a new moonshine operation arrest.³⁰⁷ While illicit distilling thrived, the red liquor business kept local forces busy. In late March, agents uncovered 367 cases of liquor, accounting for the second largest cache ever found by local forces. The liquor was worth \$26,000, but brought in only \$11,000 when sold back to an ABC store at retail

³⁰³ "367 Cases Liquor Seized Near City," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 25, 1946. One red liquor seizure yields \$11,000 worth of liquor which sells for approximately \$26,000 according to the caught bootlegger.

³⁰⁴ Wilkes moonshine is memorialized in the Wilkes Heritage Museum and includes a Junior Johnson replica moonshine distillery and NASCAR memorabilia. The Heritage Museum previously served as the old Wilkes Jail (c. 1859) and was built as Robert Cleveland's log home (c. 1779).

³⁰⁵ "Revenue Agents Eagerly Sought," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, Sept 17, 1945. The drive was conducted in cooperation with the United States Civil Service Commission.

³⁰⁶ Charlie A. Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Felts' father revealed to his son this trend of moonshiners hiding their moonshine operation by creating a chicken raising façade.

³⁰⁷ "Thieves Fail to Steal 300 Pounds of Sugar," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 28, 1946 and "Seven Tried, Including a Woman, on the Charge of Distilling Liquor," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 4, 1946.

prices.³⁰⁸ That May, the Federal Court also resumed, and the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* admitted, “With but few exceptions the cases involve alleged violations of the liquor tax laws.”³⁰⁹

Obviously, the control of moonshining and the liquor industry dominated the court’s docket.

In July 1946, the Wilkes County Chamber of Commerce released an 11-point plan detailing projects that would further integrate the county into the mainstream America, such as speeding up new home construction. Yet the Chamber’s program failed to address how to include the ever-persistent moonshiners and bootleggers in the plan for civic improvements. Nor was this marginalized group that turned to moonshining to supplement their inadequate financial resources limited to poor, white farmers. Three months later, two black men caught moonshining confirmed the reality that illicit distilling transcended race and, in other cases, gender. These two men would be formally charged and tried at November’s Federal Court date amongst the “many” other illicit distilling cases. As before, moonshining was a Wilkes County cultural phenomenon of economic necessity after the second Great War.

Between 1948 and 1950, many state and federal judicial decisions led to a profitable black market in white liquor, while county prohibition created a lucrative red liquor market. In March 1948, for instance, North Carolina’s Attorney General, Harry McMullan, ruled that merely owning a federal license to sell liquor rendered the holder culpable for possession of whiskey for sale.³¹⁰ Some Wilkes County cases influenced federal law as well. One Wilkes County federal trial, labeled the “Charlie Love Case,” was appealed all the way to the fourth United States Circuit Court. The court ultimately upheld Judge Hayes’ decision that a man could be sent to prison for possession of moonshine and a distilling device, even when the search warrant was not directed toward him.

³⁰⁸ “367 Cases Liquor Seized Near City,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 25, 1946. This raid was reported as the second biggest ever by “local forces.”

³⁰⁹ “Federal Docket Full of Liquor Violations,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 20, 1946.

³¹⁰ “How Many in Wilkes are Guilty?” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 17, 1948.

Newspapers reveal that alcohol remained a hot issue in the March 1949 state's General Assembly. Instead of discussing the growing bootlegging business, the issues ranged from "is beer intoxicating?" to "discussing the merits of corn whiskey compared with legal liquor."³¹¹ Concerned citizens also showed their respective support as dry proponents outnumbered wet (ABC) advocates. Although the wets were fewer in number, their agenda prevailed. The General Assembly blocked the teetotalism referendum bill, and even allowed 18 towns to have a referendum on the liquor issue.³¹² By June 1949, the state's ABC Board controlled all the beer outlets and set up a malt beverage division to regulate the sale of beer in the Tar Heel State.³¹³

As bootlegging increased in Wilkes County, authorities organized against the rumrunners, and public reports began depicting a huge bootlegging industry both inside and outside of the county. In June 1949, the Federal Court in Wilkesboro was filled with an "unusually large number of [illicit distilling] cases" with men sentenced to federal prisons in Chillicothe, Ohio; Atlanta, Georgia; Petersburg, Virginia; and Ashland, Kentucky. One convicted woman was sent to Alderson, West Virginia, for the one year one day sentence that was typical for second time offenders of the federal liquor laws.³¹⁴ In October 1949, Governor Kerr Scott convened an assembly with 500 state law enforcers to promote "cutting off the supply of liquor into the non-ABC areas – largely the heavily populated piedmont prohibition counties."³¹⁵ Although state officials generally cooperated and wanted to suppress the multi-million dollar

³¹¹ "Is Beer Intoxicating?" *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 16, 1949. Actions included killing bills calling for a state wide referendum and passage of compromise legislation allowing some 18 cities and towns to vote on ABC stores if their counties do not have a legal option. Big public support for both sides demonstrated at the General Assembly with dry forces outnumbering the wets with 2,300 total people. It was the first time the ABC backers had turned out crowds to publicly support the current system. Precedent had been set by the 1947 legislature, which allowed Asheville, Hickory, Louisburg, and Franklinton to hold town and city elections on the question of an ABC store.

³¹² No town in Wilkes County was given permission by the General Assembly to have a referendum on an ABC liquor store.

³¹³ "ABC Board to Control All the Beer Outlets," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 1, 1949.

³¹⁴ "Federal Court Findings," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 7, 1949.

³¹⁵ "Scott to Address Officers on ABC Law Enforcement," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 26, 1949.

industry, the 500 officers were “openly and blatantly skeptical that they could control Tar Heel bootlegging” without certain needs being met.³¹⁶

That same month, a detailed article ran in the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* depicting the massive amounts of red liquor coming into the state, with three-fourths of the volume going to the “dry” piedmont area. North Wilkesboro was named the “largest whisky receiving town,” getting 26,847 gallons or one-sixth of the illegal liquor transported to North Carolina. The article admitted that North Wilkesboro citizens did not consume this alcohol, but that the town served as a distribution center. Ronda, a small Wilkes community near Elkin, for instance, received 11,714 gallons, “very little of which was consumed in the town itself.”³¹⁷

The busy November 1949 session of Federal Court saw men go to the penitentiary and a boy caught moonshining was sent to the National Training School for Boys in Washington, D.C., for two years.³¹⁸ That same month, a publicized petition by a local schoolteacher in the mountainous western part of Wilkes County illustrated the desperate conditions of many families

³¹⁶ “Forces Marshaled to Fight Bootlegging in this State,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, Oct 20, 1949: “Governor Scott said 65 operators in this state had imported more than \$16,000,000 worth of whiskey in recent months. But nearly 500 hard bitten law enforcement officers were openly and blatantly skeptical that they could make a dent in Tar Heel bootlegging without 1) better cooperation from courts, 2) corrective legislation, and 3) public support, financial and otherwise. Sheriffs and police chiefs assembled also requested that Governor Scott call a similar meeting of judges and solicitors and name a special committee to study the bootlegging problem and report to the 1951 legislature on new laws needed to control it. As a measure of social support the State Highway Patrol will enter the battle and ABC enforcement officers will help fight bootlegging in the so called ‘dry’ counties. The State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) will also move in on bigger illegal liquor conspiracy cases and the illegal shipment of liquor into North Carolina.”

³¹⁷ “Vast Amounts of Illegal Liquor Come into State,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 20, 1949. Three fourths of the illegal whiskey poured into North Carolina in 1949 went to the “dry” piedmont area and one third of the liquor was consigned directly to the Greensboro-High Point-Winston-Salem area. State ABC chairman R. W. Winston reported in Raleigh that 99 % of illegal shipments of 151,624.5 gallons of liquor allegedly consigned to 30 operators in North Carolina during the first six months of 1949 were shipped to prohibition counties. North Wilkesboro was the largest whiskey receiving town, getting 26,847 gallons – one sixth of the illegal liquor traced to the state. The fact that the small town got so much whiskey does not mean that all of it was consumed in North Wilkesboro, which with many other small towns, was believed to have been a distribution center. Consignments of liquor to small towns near large cities were noticeable. Such distribution systems made it increasingly difficult for city police to disrupt bootleg networks across the state. A prime example of the system is Ronda, a small town near Elkin, which received 11,714.6 gallons, and “very little of which was consumed in the town itself.”

³¹⁸ “Federal Court Gives Pen Terms,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 24, 1949. The National Training School for Boys reminded me of American Indian schools set up to purge Native Americans of their culture just as this “training school” attempted to cleanse Wilkes youth of their proclivity to distill liquor without consent of the federal government.

whose needs were marginalized until their teacher fought for them. Nora Edmondson, a teacher of 22 rural children of the Lower Elk School, successfully convinced Governor Scott to repair the “road with 99 fords” that had been wiped out in the 1940 flood.³¹⁹ Amazingly, even though many of these children would walk three to five miles every day to go to school, Edmondson reported almost perfect attendance. Although this highway was a great victory for the mountain communities, the teacher’s letter embarrassed the state and county as she described the local conditions, stating that “primitive does not express it.”³²⁰

By the end of 1949, 323 illicit moonshine operations were raided in the Middle District of North Carolina with Wilkes County at its core, more still seizures than any other area in America.³²¹ Surprisingly, more impressive/embarrassing numbers would be tallied by the ATU as Wilkes entered the 1950s and into its “heyday” of the moonshine business.

1950-1955: The Heyday of the Business in Wilkes County and the Dubbing of the “Moonshine Capital of America”

During the 1950s, Wilkes County experienced its vibrant “heyday” in the moonshine business. At that time, the federal liquor tax stood at nine dollars a gallon, a price out of reach for most in the county, even if they had the right to distill spirits.³²² Transportation arteries damaged by the 1940 flood were finally rebuilt, giving thousands of mountaineers a decent road to the

³¹⁹ “Teacher Wins Fight for Road to Lonely School in Mountains,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 24, 1949. The road gets its name from the fact that it crosses and re-crosses Elk Creek many times as it climbs a steep gorge between Darby and Triplett. Since the 1940 washout it was little more than a mountain trail, virtually useless to the families who lived in the rugged mountain area it traversed. Weary of riding the two miles to school each day on a horse drawn sled, teacher Nora Edmondson wrote Governor Scott that it is possible to get within six miles of the school by car, and after that travel is by only truck or sled. She wrote, “They are darling children but do not have anything. Little huts up on a hill, seven or eight people sleep in one room. Primitive does not express it.”

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ “ATU Captures 323 Stills in 1949,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 9, 1950.

³²² Official records show a jump of distillery captured from 1949 to 1952. Oral records (Junior Johnson) place the “heyday” during the 1950s or beginning in the late 1940s. Nine dollars a gallon would only cover federal taxes; however, Wilkes was a dry county and no one could even have a federal liquor license.

Wilkesboros' markets, something they did not have for nearly a decade.³²³ As they had done in the late 1940s, moonshiners increased the size of their distilleries and alcohol output, and by 1950, four upright coke burners characterized their large furtive moonshine operations.³²⁴ Not only did the moonshiners and bootleggers bypass paying any federal taxes on their alcohol, their illicit distilling operations supported local businesses that sold sugar, jars, yeast, corn, and manufactured the actual copper distilleries which enabled the moonshine business.³²⁵ Most hooch made in Wilkes was sold in the bigger markets of Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and other Piedmont towns.³²⁶ By early 1950, the ATF and local authorities had piled up confiscated distilleries to the point where a local woman's club in western North Carolina agreed to convert the copper stills into "decorative items."³²⁷ While many townspeople in the Wilkesboros enjoyed economic success and viewed themselves as typical Americans, some rural residents continued to distill or transport whiskey in order to pay their bills. However, the self-image of Wilkes was about to change dramatically when a journalist from New York City reported on the Wilkes moonshine *business* in September of 1950.

Naturally, in the richest country in the world, the furtive world of moonshiners attracted national attention. Many stereotypical tactics attempted to demonstrate moonshiners' inferiority

³²³ The August 1940 flood took out roads that were not completely repaired until September 1950.

³²⁴ "Biggest Still is Destroyed," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 30, 1950. Article gave an example of the four "upright coke burning boilers." Junior Johnson says he used coke before using oil to steam his distillery. A typical, not professional, still in the early 1950s would have a 100+ gallon boiler/still, a "thumper" or "puker" redistilling the spirit, and finally the copper worm and the worm box. Moonshiners adapted with the times to make whiskey, but some took shortcuts and used radiators instead of proper copper worms to cool the spirits into liquor, thus poisoning the liquor with lead. "Professional" moonshine operations would be financed or "furnished" by legitimate businessmen who paid their workers hourly wages and court costs in exchange for silence.

³²⁵ Vance Packard talks about this relationship of suppliers not wanting to be associated with the ATU in his September 1950 *American Magazine* article.

³²⁶ Junior Johnson, Vernon Marley, et al., interviews by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Wilkes moonshine also went to Philadelphia and Indianapolis according to Junior Johnson, and Jim Cothren knew of moonshine that went to Portland, Oregon. Junior Johnson specifically mentioned Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Charlotte, Concord, and Kannapolis.

³²⁷ "Captured Copper Stills Used to Make Decorative Trays," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, March 30 1950. Many McDowell County women have always been interested in the number of moonshine stills captured by Sheriff Poole and his deputies in the nearby mountains. Various women's clubs transformed stills into useful and ornamental objects for their homes or to give as gifts.

and to entertain urban readers. Yet reporters made allegations that had merit. For instance, journalists alleged that many Wilkes County communities had a moonshine based economy. In fact, Ronda, a small eastern Wilkes town known for its red and white liquor ties, showed a significant population growth in the 1950 census.³²⁸ By September 1950, the new “Traphill Road” connected thousands of mountaineers and aided the moonshine culture and their communities by providing a direct route to the Wilkesboros. While the newspaper mentioned that agricultural production would increase with this road, the rural Traphill community would also use this road to haul thousands of gallons of fresh mountain hooch to the nearby growing Piedmont communities and beyond.³²⁹

In September 1950, journalist Vance Packard arrived in Wilkes to investigate the furtive moonshine scene and subsequently dubbed the county as the “Moonshine Capital of the World” in an *American Magazine* article. This report set off a firestorm of anger, resentment, and embarrassment from upstanding citizens in Wilkes County who never wanted their community associated with illicit distilling. Packard alleged that “500,000 gallons of moonshine” came from Wilkes County and that two million dollars in profits were generated in 1949 alone.³³⁰ Packard described a moonshine “conspiracy” as the “principal industry” of the region, ignoring the importance of furniture manufacturing, as well as the poultry and other agricultural industries in the area.³³¹ Refuting Packard’s article, the Wilkes County Chamber of Commerce demanded an apology to assuage the dreadful situation. Packard defended his research and refused to give an

³²⁸ “Census Reports Ronda has Substantial Growth,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 22, 1950.

³²⁹ “Traphill Road to be Important Highway,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, July 24, 1950. With the extension of the road to Highway 21, people in this area could use the highway for cross country purposes. As the most direct route from Wilkesboro to Roaring Gap, it meant that thousands of people in the western part of the county would have a direct route to the Wilkesboros. This road served a great agricultural area, which is productive and thus led to additional development with good highways.

³³⁰ Editorial, *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 7, 1950.

³³¹ Wilkes also could boast about its large furniture and mirror factories, its large apple orchards (which could also be made into cider or brandy), and a burgeoning poultry industry. North Wilkesboro also had a lively shopping district.

apology.³³² The article's aftermath drew the attention of North Carolina Senator Clyde R. Hoey, a native of Shelby, who insisted that an "injustice" was done to Wilkes County. In fact, Senator Hoey even had the Chamber's response to *American Magazine* inserted into the United States Congressional Record.³³³ Despite all the legitimate cries of "yellow journalism" and "sensationalism" about a few segments of the piece, Packard's article and the ensuing outcry ensured the moniker and reputation would persist, even into the twenty-first century.³³⁴ Tom Bost, a popular journalist in Raleigh, noted, "It is true that if nothing had been said about the article that not one per cent of the people would have known about it in this immediate part of the country."³³⁵ Vance Packard was not the only one to write about Wilkes County's moonshine culture, but the controversy generated over his text guaranteed neither he nor his notorious moniker for the county would be quickly forgotten.

In November 1950, Irvin Ross wrote "The Moonshiner's Still in Business," a much more comprehensive, albeit sensationalized, report about illicit distillers that focused more on southern bootlegging communities. His article chronicled the moonshiners in the Blue Ridge counties of Franklin and Patrick of Virginia as well as Wilkes County, detailing the social and economic dynamics of the moonshining. Ross' report concentrated more on the Virginian counties and observations of bootlegger's tactics in the commonwealth. For example, the "De luxe"

³³² "Wilkes Chamber, Officials Draft Article Reply: Asks Publication of Article to Give 'True' Picture of Conditions Here," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 7, 1950.

³³³ "Senator Hoey Says Injustice Done to Wilkes County," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 11, 1950.

³³⁴ Examples of sensationalism include references, such as "Daniel Boone Cabin," and the "Woman Plowing in the Field Barefoot with a Mule." During my research into Wilkes' history, I discovered everyone knew of Wilkes' secret business, including one student of mine from Wilkes County in my Introduction to Appalachian Studies course AS: 2410.

³³⁵ "Many Refute Untruths of Magazine Article," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, Sept 14, 1950; and "Senator Hoey Says Injustice Done to Wilkes County," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 11, 1950. Protests of Wilkes people to the unjust and biased publicity from Vance Packard's "Millions in Moonshine" article in *American Magazine* were far reaching. Veteran writer Tom Bost said Wilkes people should have ignored the slanting article and let it die a quiet death.

turnaround was known as the “bootleg turn” in Wilkes.³³⁶ Ross stated that a “strange amiability exists between the moonshiner and revenueur” where “an informal code regulates relations between moonshiner and revenue officer.”³³⁷ Fifteen years later, Tom Wolfe would come to Wilkes County and report a similar “informal code” amongst bootleggers and revenueurs. Indeed, one ATU agent in Wilkes County defended local moonshiners, stating that “most of these Wilkes county boys are very prompt about coming in when they’re out on bond.”³³⁸

That same month, authorities revoked one beer license in Wilkes County for “selling beer on Sunday and for selling whiskey” and suspended two other licenses.³³⁹ Violence subsequently erupted as “a pistol battle” between federal officers and alleged moonshiners left two men wounded, including one revenueur, in the Enola section of Burke County in North Carolina.³⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina was busy again with illicit distilling cases as “50 bills of indictment to the jury returned 48 as true.”³⁴¹ Although women were actively participating in the county’s major moonshining operations for at least ten years, it wasn’t until December 1950 that the first woman gained a “major office” in Wilkes County.³⁴² By the end of 1950, reports once again revealed that most North Carolina farmers

³³⁶ Ross’ article mentions ATU agents in SW Virginia usually abstain from handcuffing illicit distillers, something at least three Federal Agents working in Wilkes said. Charlie A. Felts revealed Charlie S. Felts would rarely if ever use handcuffs and would usually know the culprit and trust him to come back to the ATF station and pay bond. Tom Wolfe wrote about the “unwritten code” between bootlegger/moonshiner and revenueur in “The Last American Hero” focusing on Wilkes’ own Junior Johnson. Ross calls moonshine “popskull” and “sugarhead,” terms also used for sugar-laden Wilkes’ moonshine.

³³⁷ Irvin Ross, “The Moonshiner’s Still in Business,” *Reader’s Digest*, November 1950, 127.

³³⁸ “Story of Ralph Spicer, Jr.,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 7, 1950. Commissioner Charles E. Ader set Spicer’s bond at \$500 after Mr. Reece (ATU Agent) had told the preliminary hearing that “most of these Wilkes county boys are very prompt about coming in when they’re out on bond.”

³³⁹ “Beer Licenses Revoked,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 9, 1950.

³⁴⁰ “ATU and Violence in Burke,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 13, 1950: “Fred Mercer, 40 year old agent of the Charlotte office of the ATU, was felled with bullets in the chest and arm.”

³⁴¹ “Prison Terms Given,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 23, 1950.

³⁴² “Inauguration of Wilkes Officers Held Today,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 4, 1950. Miss Nora Caudill became the first woman to occupy a major office in Wilkes County and the only woman to hold the office of Clerk of Superior Court in North Carolina.

were not making enough money to pay income taxes.³⁴³ Wilkes County's major news publication, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, began to embrace its moonshine reputation, even making jokes in its news articles and editorials. While reporting on a Wilkes County farmer who had recently won an international competition on corn, an article noted, "Wilkes County corn (grain, not liquor) took three prizes in the international grain and hay show" in Chicago.³⁴⁴

Determined to stop bootlegging, in 1951, Wilkes County authorities launched surprise raids on local beer establishments, searching five locations in the first two weeks of the year for possession of tax-paid liquor, or "red liquor."³⁴⁵ Raids like this proved more successful than attempting to catch evasive bootleggers and, more importantly, gave the appearance of demonstrating that the authorities were not complicit in the bootlegging business. However, these searches and seizures would fail to deter the persistent blockaders. In a sign of the times, Wilkes County representative F. J. McDuffie introduced an ultimately unsuccessful bill that would have banned beer and wine establishments within a mile of the Moravian Falls Post Office.³⁴⁶

Although the image of a white male careening down the "back roads" to deliver hooch to Piedmont residents may be the bootlegger archetype, the reality in Wilkes was quite different. One surprising element of Wilkes County's moonshine culture was its diversity. Both young and old, white and black, male and female, rural and urban denizens were all involved in varying degrees and capacities in bootleg and moonshine operations, rendering the county a wet county despite its "dry" laws. While Wilkes people debated over dry laws, local officers found 142 cases

³⁴³ "Mann Says But Few Farmers Make Enough to Pay Income Taxes, After Expenses Taken," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 11, 1950. M. G. Mann, general manager of the Farmers' Cooperative Exchange, said the average Tar Heel farmer's income still leaves much to be desired even though farm prices have taken a turn for the better in post war years.

³⁴⁴ "Wilkes Corn Takes First Premium at International Show," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 14, 1950.

³⁴⁵ "3 Arrests, 20 Cases Whiskey Taken in Raid," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 4, 1951; and "Sheriff Billings Raids 2 Whiskey Places in County," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 15, 1951. Law enforcement had to be by local forces as possessing "tax-paid liquor" was only a crime under county law.

³⁴⁶ "New Bill Would Ban Beer, Wine at Moravian Falls," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 22, 1951.

of red liquor worth \$5,000 in a Wilkes garage business.³⁴⁷ In April 1951, one “attractive” Davidson County woman was cited for “hauling” 133 gallons of “white liquor” from Wilkes County to Forsyth.³⁴⁸ Although they were not as publicized as red liquor busts, Wilkesboro’s first Federal Court session in the county began in May and would oversee the trial of 65 cases of the violation of federal liquor laws.³⁴⁹

By May 1951, however, new events usurped the excitement of events in the Wilkes’ court as Bill France brought the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) to North Carolina. Since the first race on North Wilkesboro’s five-eighths mile speedway later that year, the sport would make North Wilkesboro an exciting Mecca for racing fanatics and would create stock car celebrities from local drivers, including Benny Parsons and Junior Johnson.³⁵⁰

As the sport of NASCAR grew, the moonshine and bootlegging business also increased in Wilkes County.³⁵¹ Both sophisticated and simple operations were put out of action by overwhelmed ATU agents who chased blockaders down the highways and moonshiners up into the mountains.³⁵² In Wilkes County’s Roaring River community, ATU officers discovered a “very large distillery” in a barn with a nearby well directly supplying the operation.³⁵³ In July 1951, revenueurs found a North Wilkesboro man running a “huge underground still” in Laurel

³⁴⁷ “Officers Locate 142 Cases Liquor in Raid Friday,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, February 24, 1951.

³⁴⁸ “Women Cited for Hauling White Liquor,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, April 9, 1951.

³⁴⁹ “Federal Court, Now in Wilkesboro,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 21, 1951.

³⁵⁰ “Bill France’s NASCAR Begins in North Wilkesboro,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 26, 1951. A 150-lap Grand National Circuit Race for late model automobiles held on Sunday, April 29, featured the 1951 opening of the fast 5/8 of a mile North Wilkesboro Speedway.

³⁵¹ Official Treasury figures show that Wilkes’ moonshine heyday was in 1951 or 1952. It can be argued that with technology and money earned from NASCAR, they all combined with each other to make a fascinating and hard-charging culture of bootleggers in and out of Wilkes County.

³⁵² Charlie A. Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Felts depicted a man that had to chase moonshiners/bootleggers for “miles” sometimes. Other ATU agents specialized in catching haulers on the road. To Wilkes’ credit, there were more savvy and furtive operations than asinine ones.

³⁵³ “Officers Locate Big Still in Barn,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 28, 1951: “ATU agents recently located a very large distillery in a barn of George R. Johnson’s farm in the Dellaplane community of Roaring River Route Two. The big still, along with material for liquor manufacture and a water system which supplied the still from a nearby well, was destroyed. Mr. Johnson has been charged with manufacturing illicit whiskey, but has not been taken in by the officers.”

Springs.³⁵⁴ Headlines like “Liquor Charge Face Wilkes Youth, Woman,” a case involving a 16-year-old boy and a 20-year-old woman caught bootlegging near Winston-Salem, and a case of two black men and one white man from Beckley, West Virginia, traveling to Wilkes on “business,” highlight the diversity in the trade.³⁵⁵

In May 1951, town boosters declared that “Wilkes’ farmers make good record paying their FHA payment,” an accomplishment which certainly was aided by a furtive moonshine business for many farming families.³⁵⁶ Likewise in July, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* raved that “North Carolina farmers pay loans faster than required,” though never hinting at why farmers in North Carolina might have the extra cash to pay back loans so fast.³⁵⁷ The *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, which had long supported “dry” laws, stubbornly resolved that “Legal or illegal, liquor is an evil which lead all other causes in broken and wrecked lives.”³⁵⁸ Despite town boosters’ condemnation of moonshining, the illicit business would continue to increase during the 1950s.

In November 1951, the federal liquor excise was raised from \$9 a gallon to a staggering \$10.50. This tax increase would raise prices on legal distillers and their customers, thereby galvanizing countless Americans to join in the moonshine and bootlegging business, at least as

³⁵⁴ “North Wilkesboro Man Runs a Huge Modern Underground Still,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, July 12, 1951; and Charlie A. Felts, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. The largest and most elaborate still ever located in northwestern North Carolina was destroyed by agents of the Wilkesboro branch of the ATU at Laurel Springs in Alleghany County in 1951. Charlie Felts was on the case of this “scientific still.” According to Charlie A. Felts, a “huge underground still” was found by his father after he saw a dodgy suspect peak out the house’s window. After uncovering a buried water line in the yard, Agent Felts got a federal warrant and discovered a secret trap door in the kitchen that led to a “monster still.”

³⁵⁵ “Liquor Charge Faces Wilkes Youth, Woman,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 6, 1951; and “Policemen Get Three Men with 42 Gallons Liquor,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, September 10, 1951. David Lavern Ebarell, 16, and Mrs. Larah Shew, 20, both of Wilkesboro, were arrested outside of Winston-Salem in a car loaded with 40 gallons of non-tax paid liquor.

³⁵⁶ “Wilkes Farmers Make Good Record Paying their FHA Payment,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, April 23, 1951. More than 2,000 families paid off farmer’s home administration operating loans in North Carolina in 1950 and increased their net worth, the value of everything they owned minus any indebtedness, from \$2,419 to \$3,218. This was an increase of 33 percent.

³⁵⁷ “North Carolina Farmers Pay Loans Faster than Required,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, July 2, 1951. J.B. Black, state director of the Farmers’ Home Administration noted, “Most North Carolina families who buy farms with home administration long term loans not only pay back faster than required, but also build up their livestock and equipment and make better use of their family labor supply.”

³⁵⁸ “Liquor Problem is Never Solved,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 11, 1951.

willing consumers.³⁵⁹ Wilkes, which remained a dry county, thrived as one of America's bootlegging capitals, hauling out thousands of gallons of shine while importing and re-selling plenty of red liquor around the dry region. It would be nearly 15 more years before Wilkes citizens could buy any tax-paid liquor in their county.

Largely due to the increased excise tax, bootlegging remained a way of life for many men and women in Wilkes County throughout the early 1950s. Two federal court terms in Wilkesboro kept local prohibitionist and Federal Judge Hayes busy in May 1953, as "all of last week was taken up with a trail of cases involving violations of the liquor tax laws."³⁶⁰ Bootleggers came from varied backgrounds, including one white woman arrested for selling "a pint of liquor" and tried in the Superior Court.³⁶¹

Bootlegging skills cultivated through Wilkes' moonshining trade proved useful in and outside the county – and not only on the NASCAR circuit. Four Wilkes County moonshiners, for instance, made Tennessee history in June 1953, when revenueurs "broke up the largest steam operated still in [that state] since the prohibition days" in Mountain City, Tennessee, consisting of a 750 gallon "giant" still capable of making 480 gallons of moonshine per day. Federal agents used "50 sticks of dynamite" to blow up the still, which had been discovered by a local officer from Wilkesboro who had followed the men from Wilkes County to Tennessee.³⁶² One

³⁵⁹ See Clarence Woodbury, "Thanks to Uncle Sam...the Bootlegger Gets a Break," *The American Legion Magazine*, February 1954. The article details the excise tax increase and the severe consequences the nation experienced in the two plus years after November 1951. The author details many urban markets for moonshine, and the easy access to illegal booze. This increase may have caused legal distillers to begin/increase their moonshine production to make ends meet.

³⁶⁰ "Federal Court in Second Week," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 27, 1953; and "Pen Terms Given in US Court Session," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 26, 1952: "Three persons received reformatory terms and heavy fines in federal court in Wilkesboro Friday and a fourth was placed on probation in a case involving 700 gallons of illicit liquor."

³⁶¹ "Big Still Found Near City," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, December 3, 1952.

³⁶² "Wilkes Men Run GIANT Distillery in Tennessee Mountains," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, June 10, 1953: "In Mountain City, Tennessee, the 'revenooers' had to use 50 sticks of dynamite to destroy the outfit. Four men from Wilkes were also found there. Charles Nickelson of Wilkesboro, who had trailed the men and the still from North Carolina to Tennessee, was in on the sweep. 'It was undoubtedly the largest steam operated still found in the state since Prohibition, more than 20 years ago,' said W. R. Shofner, Tennessee Chief of Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Unit."

seventeen-year-old girl, formerly of the Traphill community, was arrested in Yadkin County with 36 gallons of white lightning in tow.³⁶³ The November 1953 M.D.N.C. session was faced with another clogged docket due to the surfeit of illicit distilling cases. During that session, the *North Wilkesboro Hustler* reported that one woman was given a year and a day in the women's federal prison in Alderson, West Virginia, while another woman had her one year sentence suspended, but received two years of probation.³⁶⁴ Undeniably, Wilkes' moonshine culture continued to extend to a diverse population during the 1950s.

The year 1954 started off poorly for the county's public image when another magazine, *The American Legion Magazine*, published an article by Clarence Woodbury. In it, Woodbury argued that North Wilkesboro's economic success was based on the manufacturing and bootlegging of moonshine.³⁶⁵ Noting a nationwide boom in moonshine production, Woodbury reported that 80 percent of the moonshine from the eleven "wettest" Southern states was consumed far away from the local community. In fact, 10 percent of moonshine moved out of state, creating an interstate black market.³⁶⁶ Woodbury also highlighted the same phenomena recorded by Vance Packard, such as calling North Wilkesboro "booming" and referring to fast hauling cars as a trademark of Wilkes.³⁶⁷ Woodbury ended the section on Wilkes County with a sensational quote, "One ATU officer said recently that it would take two divisions of United

³⁶³ "Girl, 17, Arrested on Liquor Charge," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 21, 1952.

³⁶⁴ "Federal Court Report," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, November 25, 1953. "Nannie" was given a year and a day in Alderson, West Virginia reformatory and "Gorda" received the suspended sentence.

³⁶⁵ Woodbury, "Thanks to Uncle Sam," 60: "These cars (bootlegging cars) are the trademark of North Wilkesboro, and Wilkes County, in which it is located, for the truth is that moonshining is the main wealth producing industry of the whole region. The local chamber of commerce might deny it but many of the citizens are living off the profits of a multi-million dollar liquor racket. Day and night the year round scores of those 'souped up' cars often guarded by a pilot car and a tail car carry sugar and other supplies to stills hidden in the hills and deliver the produce of the stills north south east and west."

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Woodbury states, "North Wilkesboro is booming. You see massive banks, bustling retail stores, glittering new automobile emporiums, fine churches and hospitals. All this prosperity is hard to understand unless you happen to notice the unusually large number of high-powered cars with twin exhausts and rear-ends perched high in the air. They look that way because they have souped-up engines for hitting high speeds and extra leaves in their rear springs, so that they can carry heavy loads without sagging conspicuously."

States infantry, aided by the Air Force, to wipe out moonshining in Wilkes County. And if it were wiped out, it is such a profitable industry, that it would spring up again overnight.”³⁶⁸

Although North Wilkesboro was only the subject of a small part of the article, it was the ultimate example of a town with a connection to bootlegging and producing moonshine.³⁶⁹ Woodbury’s article proved another embarrassment to a community that had long endured negative publicity.

Woodbury’s article seemed well-researched, yet he never actually visited Wilkes County. The Wilkes Post of the American Legion found no record of his presence in the county and demanded a retraction of the article. The Post emphasized that it “wants Woodbury to learn that Wilkes is the leading poultry producing county in North Carolina, grows more apple than any other county...has thriving furniture, hosiery, and textile plants, the largest mirror plant in the world...” in defense of their homeland’s economy.³⁷⁰ Indeed, Woodbury used stereotypical imagery in describing the South and called those who preferred moonshine “unreconstructed Southerners.”³⁷¹ Unlike Packard, Woodbury and his slanted article would not dominate headlines after its publication.

Many other eye-catching headlines and stories revealed the colorful nature of the bootlegging business in the mid-1950s. In March 1954, for instance, North Wilkesboro police, acting on tips, caught two women with “white liquor” in their homes, resulting in citations for Mayor’s Court.³⁷² Later that year, Wilkes Sheriff Claude Billings began a vigil outside a suspected bootlegger’s house only to find out that liquor was stored underneath the stump he sat

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid. Woodbury states, “Let me take you to North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, for example, which is typical of a good many other towns throughout the south today. North Wilkesboro exists in the eastern foothills of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, but the rough country around it is not much good for farming. And there are no big industries in the vicinity, or other visible sources of wealth.”

³⁷⁰ “American Legion Magazine Story is Protested Here. Statements about Illicit Liquor are Labeled False,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, February 18, 1954.

³⁷¹ Woodbury, “Thanks to Uncle Sam,” 60.

³⁷² “Police Stage Two Liquor Raids,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 17, 1954.

on.³⁷³ In February 1955, ATU agents made a huge and unique bust near Traphill, finding 62,735 pounds of sugar, 10,000 pounds of corn chop, 235 cases of half gallon fruit jars, and 105 five gallon cases used to hold mountain dew.³⁷⁴ Obviously, the business was booming, and, when the worst frost “in 61 years” cost Wilkes their apple stock in 1955, more people joined the bootlegging business to pay their mortgages.³⁷⁵

Wilkes County’s federal court sessions remained busy in November 1954 and May 1955. One woman was sentenced to eighteen months at Alderson, West Virginia.³⁷⁶ Seventeen people, including four men from Wilkes, were also indicated in another “conspiracy case” in which several “carloads” of moonshine had traveled from Wilkes to Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, from 1951 through 1954.³⁷⁷ With the scale of moonshine production growing each year, Wilson Warlick, the federal judge of the Western District of North Carolina, declared that he would no longer waste the taxpayers’ money by trying “pint” cases and would instead only prosecute more “appropriate” ones.³⁷⁸

With so much money coming into Wilkes County from the red and white liquor trade in addition to its legal industries, local businesses prospered. By the middle of 1955, Wilkes County newspapers hailed that “business keeps on going up in Wilkes” based on a significant increase in

³⁷³ “Sheriff Sitting on Moonshine He was Looking For,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 10, 1954.

³⁷⁴ “ATU Agents Make Big Haul Near Traphill,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, February 16, 1955. Federal agents arrested a Traphill storekeeper on a charge of possessing materials to be used in violation of the internal revenue law. The alcohol tax unit operatives from Wilkesboro and Charlotte swooped down on a general store. Four trailer loads of stock were hauled away from the big basement beneath the store.

³⁷⁵ “No Apples This Year,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 30, 1955. In Wilkes and Alexander, forecasts predicted the worst frost in 61 years as the mercury dropped to eleven degrees.

³⁷⁶ “Marceline Hamby 18 Months in Women’s Prison at Alderson, West Virginia,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, November 24, 1954.

³⁷⁷ “Wilkes Men in Conspiracy Case in Federal Court,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, June 22, 1955: “According to the indictment, the illicit business was carried on during 1951, 1952, 1953, and up to mid-1954. Large quantities of non-tax-paid whiskey were transported from Wilkes County to the “Old Brown House” in Cabarrus County for storage and hiding, the indictment alleges. Shipments of whiskey totaled as much as three carloads a week and one delivery from the house near the Mecklenburg/Cabarrus County line was for 58 gallons, the grand jury charges. Eighteen persons were named in the indictment but one is still being sought. He is Bobby Foster, reported to be a resident of Wilkes County.”

³⁷⁸ “Will Try No More Pint Liquor Cases,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 5, 1955. Judge Wilson Warlick made the remarkable statement that fourteen pint liquor cases tried in Statesville that week cost the government around \$10,000 or about \$700 apiece.

retail sales.³⁷⁹ In July, a legal “white lightning” whiskey at 125 proof was placed on sale by North Carolina’s ABC board at \$2.25 a pint.³⁸⁰ Although Wilkes, a dry county, would not sell this legal version of moonshine, an enterprising bootlegger might acquire legal liquor from another county and sell it locally for twice that price – or offer genuine moonshine for an even *cheaper* price than the ABC. In either case, the bootlegger came out ahead and the customers’ thirsts were quenched. Amazingly, local boosters never connected the dramatic increase of retail sales as a sign that Woodbury and Packard might have had a point.

1956-1960: The Second Half of the Bootlegging Heyday in Wilkes County and the Battle for an ABC Store

By 1956, the demands of containing the illicit alcohol trade in Wilkes County and the rest of North Carolina begat the nation’s “second largest fleet of safety equipped police cruisers,” a visible sign that the state had a bootlegging problem.³⁸¹ However, Wilkes County blockaders would not make things easy on the patrol. For example, bootleggers would race at extreme speeds and, in one case, a cheeky bootlegger jumped out of his car *during* a chase, making a complete escape on foot.³⁸² Ten ATU officers, along with local authorities, would try to contain the trade, but they were simply outnumbered, out-financed, and, on some occasions, out-skilled.

³⁷⁹ “Business Keeps on Going Up in Wilkes,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 13, 1955. State tax collections, the gauge used to compute retail sales, showed business in Wilkes during May 1955 running far ahead of the corresponding month for 1954. Sales tax collections in Wilkes for May totaled \$43,442.16, a big jump over the \$35,571.19 for May 1954.

³⁸⁰ “White Lightning Placed on Sale by ABC Board,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 13, 1955.

³⁸¹ “State has Large Fleet of Patrol, Safety Cruisers,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, February 29, 1956: “The state highway patrol discovered today it operated the nation’s second largest fleet of safety equipped police cruisers, only California topping the tar heels in seat belt equipped vehicles. The Tar Heel patrol began in July 1954 to install seat belts in its cars.”

³⁸² “Car Without License has Cargo Liquor,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, February 5, 1956: “Patrolman R. G. Potts was patrolling the Traphill Road Sunday when he observed a car without 1956 license plates. The officer gave chase and overhauled the fleeing car. Before the car stopped and while it was traveling about 20 miles per hour, the driver jumped out and ran into the woods. Patrolman Potts found 12 gallons of white liquor in the car, but did not find the driver.”

As had become typical of the federal court in Wilkesboro, the May 1956 session was “composed mainly of liquor cases and is expected to consume a greater part of the week.”³⁸³ Despite infinite signs that county prohibition was not working, Wilkesboro’s Baptist Church, in conjunction with other churches throughout the state, petitioned the General Assembly to call for a referendum on the sale of liquor in the state.³⁸⁴ This time, however, the General Assembly refused to budge.

During 1957, moonshiners continued to operate throughout Wilkes County. In fact, that February, they were aided by “rainy weather” which gave the workers extra cover and opportunity to disappear quickly in the haze. Forty-one illicit “stills” were raided in Wilkes County that month, the second highest in North Carolina after Lumberton in Robeson County. However, in pure volume of mash (beer) destroyed, Wilkes was unsurpassed with 41,150 gallons confiscated, enough mash to distill roughly 4,100 gallons of illicit whiskey, and far ahead of second place Lumberton.³⁸⁵

In the summer of 1957, over 300 Wilkesboro residents signed a petition calling for a referendum on an Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) store within the town. After passing the petition to the town commissioner, the matter went to the state legislature. Because Wilkesboro

³⁸³ “Federal Court Term is Opened,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 23, 1956; and Vernon Marley, interview by Aaron Lancaster, Appalachian State University, Spring 2011. Vernon Marley’s father went to Mill Point in the 1920s and he has a picture of his father being picked up from jail holding a pint of whiskey.

³⁸⁴ “State Alcohol Referendum Meet Set in Wilkesboro,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 4, 1956: “A county wide (dry) meeting to launch a petition for a state referendum on the sale of alcoholic beverages will be held in the Wilkesboro Baptist church on Sunday July 8:20 pm, it was announced today by the Rev. Jenkins, Baptist associational missionary, and other church leaders. The Rev. Hauss, allied church league leader, will be the principal speaker. The announcement pointed out that the meeting is for members of all denominations and that all are urged to attend. The Wilkes meeting is part of a state-wide movement to ask the legislature by petitions from all counties to call a state-wide referendum on sale of liquor in North Carolina. Petitions already have been circulated in a number of counties.”

³⁸⁵ “Rainy Weather Aids Moonshiners as ATU Activity Cut,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 13, 1957: “According to the February ATU report for the state, only 271 stills were seized and investigators said they believed it was bad weather, more than anything else, which led to the reduced number. In January 1956 the investigators “cut” 401 stills...the center of moonshining activity in North Carolina as reflected in the total number of seizures was Lumberton where ATU men seized 48 stills during February. The Wilkes area ranked second in total number of stills destroyed with 41. In amount of mash destroyed, however, Wilkes ATU investigators ran far ahead of Lumberton with 41,150 gallons.”

only had 500 registered voters, this movement reflected a significant watershed moment in the dry county's history.³⁸⁶ Unfortunately for those who signed the petition, their dry opposition would not go away without a fight and another political battle soon commenced.

In early April 1957, Baptist pastors immediately rallied the teetotaler base, including the Women's Missionary Union, who protested against an ABC store referendum.³⁸⁷ Judge Hayes, who had now served on the federal bench for thirty years, used his considerable influence against a referendum that requested the opening of a liquor store in Wilkes County.³⁸⁸ With enough signatures from Wilkesboro to call for a referendum, local politicians had to choose a side on the liquor issue.

In May 1957, Senator H. P. Eller of North Wilkesboro declared that he would "oppose any bill calling for a liquor store in the town of Wilkesboro," which pleased his many dry constituents.³⁸⁹ Conversely, Representative Claude Kennedy of Wilkesboro openly supported the liquor bill, insisting that he would do all he could to pass the bill and allow an ABC store in

³⁸⁶ "Wilkesboro Citizens Petition for Liquor Vote," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, March 27, 1957:

"Approximately 300 names have been obtained on a petition circulated in Wilkesboro which would call for a referendum on the local sale of whiskey within the town of Wilkesboro it was reported Friday by a person interested in the proposal. Over three-fourths of the approximately 500 registered voters in Wilkesboro have signed petitions calling for the referendum it was asserted. State law said that if 15% of registered voters petition for a referendum, then it will be called for, with the approval of the State's General Assembly."

³⁸⁷ "Baptist Pastors Plan Opposition to Liquor Vote," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, April 3, 1957.

³⁸⁸ "Judge Hayes States Opposition to Liquor Store in Wilkesboro," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, April 17, 1957:

"Hayes stated, 'In the first place the area to be served ... would be confined largely to the counties of Wilkes, Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga and other counties adjoining Wilkes, (and) would be more accessible to an ABC store already in existence. I am sure that the volume of sales would not yield the profits that the investors of the measure anticipate and I would seriously doubt if the ABC board would be able to employ more than one or two enforcement officers and that the distribution of the rest of the revenue would be in such small illegible (sums) that it's not worth considering. In the second place the prices of liquor in the ABC store are so much higher than the prices for bootleg liquor this competition would drastically cut down the sales of the ABC stores. Thirdly, ten ATU federal officers devote their full time in Wilkes County to the suppression of the manufacture, transportation, and sale of liquor it seems to me that the coming May term of court is destined to be the largest in point of numbers of defendants and the extent of violators of any term in recent years if eight or ten fed officers are unable to control the situation there, I am at a loss to see how one or two ABC officers can make much of a dent in the situation.'"

³⁸⁹ "Senator Eller is Opposed to Liquor Store Proposition," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 1, 1957. In addition to the typical "dry" constituent that abhorred the idea of liquor, many moonshiners and bootleggers also wanted to preserve the "dry" county to retain their profitable market in and out of Wilkes that would be threatened by a legal option."

Wilkesboro.³⁹⁰ Both politicians' stances reflected the mood of their constituents, more than moral principles, and, thus, was a tactic to get reelected. Many Wilkes County denizens prioritized local economics by keeping the county prohibition status quo, thus putting civil order on the backburner.

To be passed, the Wilkesboro liquor referendum had to make its way through the North Carolina House of Representative's committee which heard arguments for and against the bill. Proponents believed that the ABC store would "reduce the bootlegging evil" and create much needed revenue for Wilkes General Hospital, the county's civil government, and the local YMCA. Opponents argued that ABC stores would fail to eliminate bootlegging or its problems, and that the bill would give too much power to one town and negatively affect the other county communities. Representative Brantley Wemble of Wake County questioned the opposition's leader, T. E. Story, about Wilkes' title as the "Bootleg Capital" and Story retorted that 90 percent of the illicit liquor made in Wilkes was consumed in Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and other cities which had ABC stores. A Mrs. Elmer Lowe of Wilkesboro, advocating for the bill, admitted that Wilkes County had had a "liquor problem for years" and complained, "Why have all these people never taken a firm stand against present conditions before this?"³⁹¹ The only time Wilkes residents "had [risen] up in rebellion about this is when it [was] suggested we try to control liquor through legal stores."³⁹² The bill passed the House, but would now face the tougher chamber, the North Carolina Senate.

³⁹⁰ "Kennedy Strongly Favors Liquor Bill...Hearing is Set," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 8, 1957: "Wilkes Representative Claude Kennedy of Wilkesboro, who last Monday introduced in the legislature a bill authorizing an election in the town of Wilkesboro on a proposal to establish a legal liquor store, issued a statement here during the weekend in support of the bill and stated that he will do all he can to get the bill passed."

³⁹¹ "Wilkesboro Liquor Bill Argued Before House Committee," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 15, 1957.

³⁹² "ABC Bill, Wilkesboro Bill is Now in Senate," *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, May 29, 1957. The measure, introduced in the House by Representative Claude Kennedy of Wilkesboro, passed the house by decisive vote and was sent to the Senate.

After a quick delegation to the Senate committee, Democratic senators rallied behind Senator Eller, their Republican colleague from North Wilkesboro, and convincingly killed the bill 33-11. Two reasons were given for the vote: “senatorial courtesy,” meaning the respect Senator Eller garnered from his opposition translated into votes for his cause, and retaliation for “unpleasant” phone calls to senators from Wilkes County residents who vehemently supported the bill, yet showed no deference for the political process.³⁹³ Unfortunately for ABC advocates, they would have to wait nearly a decade before they had a legal liquor store in Wilkes County.

With the liquor bill off the table, many Wilkes organizations then turned their attention once again to the perennial problem: moonshine and liquor traffic in the county. In July 1957, Baptist pastors convened in Wilkesboro with John West, the head of the Wilkesboro Alcohol Tax Unit, and resolved to combat this illicit business together. The meeting resulted in a public statement declaring that all ministers would take an “open stand against the evil of liquor in our county.” Their proclamation encouraged Wilkes Christians to “cooperate with their minister” and “denounce the deplorable conditions” in Wilkes County, and, finally, urged all local, state, and federal officers and courts to discharge their duties to the “fullest extent of the law.”³⁹⁴

Re-energized by the support of local preachers and their congregations, ATU officers raided eight stills and arrested seven people on July 25, 1957, including two 1,260-gallon submarine stills in the Big Ivey section of Wilkes County.³⁹⁵ Seven days later, the ATU seized

³⁹³ “Senate Kills Wilkesboro Liquor Bill,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, June 5, 1957.

³⁹⁴ “Baptist Pastors Oppose Liquor Traffic Here,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 25, 1957: “The Wilkes Baptist ministers conference, which met Tuesday morning at the Wilkesboro Baptist Church, went on record with the following statement: Now therefore be it resolved by the Wilkes Baptist ministers conference in conference assembled and with an ATU officers present; that all ministers take an open stand against the evil of liquor in our county through preaching and cooperation with law enforcement officers; that we urge all Christian citizens of Wilkes county to rise up and cooperate with their minister to denounce the deplorable conditions existing in Wilkes county; that the sheriff and his deputies, the courts, and the ATU officers discharge their duties to the fullest extent of the law; and that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the *Journal-Patriot*, with request that it be published in the most prominent place.”

³⁹⁵ “ATU Sets Fast Pace of Eight Still Seizures and Seven Arrests,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 25, 1957: “Federal alcohol tax men here kept a fast pace of still seizures during the past week with a total of eight and

nine illegal stills and arrested six people during another raid. The largest operation consisted of a 679-gallon still, including 6,900 gallons of mash ready to distill.³⁹⁶ In September, the ATU raided two moonshine “factories,” where officers arrested four culprits. At the first, revenueurs found six 100-gallon boilers, one five-gallon boiler, welding equipment, seven mash stirring sticks, and other items used in the distilling process. The other setup was located in a shop furtively placed between two connected homes, where the lawmen found a 104-gallon still, 111-gallon still, eighteen 300-gallon fermenter boxes, one 270-gallon fermenter box, and tools employed in making distilleries. During that same week, federal agents arrested three store owners charged with selling sugar to moonshiners, one of whom possessed 1,600 pounds of sugar and 20 pounds of yeast.³⁹⁷

In late September, five men from Traphill were halted by an “undercover” ATU agent who had purchased wholesale quantities of moonshine from the bootleggers. The *North Wilkesboro Hustler* reported that two of the men turned themselves in when they heard the ATU was searching for them.³⁹⁸ The ATU conducted another raid in October near the Antioch church, where they stumbled upon a 385-gallon moonshine outfit.³⁹⁹ Later that month, the ATU uncovered two giant 1,260-gallon stills with 8,020-gallon mash capacity in the Stony Ridge

seven arrests. In the Big Ivey section of Wilkes Friday two 1,260 gallon submarine stills were captured, mash capacity of the two outfits was 2,520 gallons.”

³⁹⁶ “Fast Pace Set by ATU Men in Still Raids,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, August 1, 1957.

³⁹⁷ “Federal Agents Raid Still Factories, 4 Arrested,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, September 5, 1957: “Mr. West said the seizures were in line with current policy of getting at the source of whiskey making. The local ATU had recently cracked down on dealers in sugar which was alleged to have been used in the manufacture of nontax-paid whiskey.”

³⁹⁸ “Five Taken by ATU in Liquor Seizures,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, September 23, 1957.

³⁹⁹ “Second Still is Found at Site,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 3, 1957. Wilkesboro ATU men met at Antioch church to raid a nearby still and were surprised to find themselves at the site of yet *another* liquor still.

section of Wilkes County, but failed to apprehend any moonshiners.⁴⁰⁰ Raids like these confirmed the moonshine business was alive and well – fewer in number, but grander in size.⁴⁰¹

During the Wilkes County moonshining heyday of the 1950s, distilling operations continuously got larger and, toward the end of that decade, distillers began to conceal their setups from the ATU by moving them underground. Transitioning their fuel from wood to coal and then to coke, operators of the large submarine stills now fueled eight-horsepower generators with propane gas to distill their moonshine. Bootleggers “souped up” their cars with the latest technology from Detroit, incorporating the same technological advances NASCAR drivers employed to maximize speed. The 1955 Pontiac was a favorite vehicle during the late 1950s and a popular modification installed in the bootlegger’s automobile chassis was an extra set of springs above the back wheels to keep the car trunk from sinking suspiciously. Junior Johnson explains that bootleggers availed themselves of communication radios as soon as the revenueurs did, and immediately started eavesdropping on the law.⁴⁰²

By fall 1957, the ATU intensified their efforts against the many wooded operations and the large underground operations with a large “saturation raid” involving 30 ATU and ABC officers.⁴⁰³ This saturation raid collected 28 illicit stills and 13 arrests and significantly curtailed the moonshiners’ business. Mr. John West, Chief of the Wilkes ATU Division, noted the

⁴⁰⁰ “No Arrests Made in Liquor Raids,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, September 10, 1957.

⁴⁰¹ ATU records show that the heyday of the 1950s was in 1951 and 1952. In 1951, 494 stills were destroyed, 9,944 gallons of moonshine was seized, with 265 people arrested. By 1959, 324 stills along with 7,288 gallons were seized, and 228 people were arrested. However the size of the average operation had increased by 1957.

⁴⁰² Wolfe, “The Last American Hero Is Junior Johnson,” 7: “The radios didn’t do them any good,” Junior says. “As soon as the officers got radios, then *they* got radios. They’d go out and get the same radio. H’it was an awful hard thing for them to radio them down. They’d just listen in on the radio and see where they’re setting up the roadblocks and go a different way.” On bootlegger’s tires, Junior says, “They were jacked up a little in the back and had 8.00 or 8.20 tires, for the heavy loads.”

⁴⁰³ “Saturation Liquor Raids Net 28 Stills, 13 Arrests,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, October 30, 1957. Saturation raids were rare, but huge, coordinated raids on suspected areas. In this case, John West, Chief of the Wilkesboro ATU office, said no special techniques were used in making the seizures, but his men “divided into crews and combed the areas.” Junior Johnson said when local distillers heard about a saturation raid, they would halt moonshining and would simply buy moonshine and bootleg out of Tennessee.

effectiveness of the crackdown on wholesale sugar sales as they found several stills where desperate moonshiners had resorted to using two pound bags of sugar.⁴⁰⁴

In November 1957, Judge Hayes oversaw 90 cases, 85 of which involved violation of the internal revenue laws. During that court session, Hayes complained that no matter the length of the sentences he doled out, there would always be a long line of liquor cases for him at the next bi-annual court session.⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, in mid-December, ATTD agents increased their attacks on illegal distillers and even used dynamite in arrests of 14 persons in ten liquor and brandy raids.⁴⁰⁶

The year 1958 began with cold weather and *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* headlines that moonshiners took a “vacation” during this cold stretch. The ATU seized only one still because the weather was so cold the corn mash would not ferment outdoors.⁴⁰⁷ Despite the moonshiners’ short vacation, Wilkes Federal Court sessions would be full of liquor cases, but presided over by the first new judge in 30 years: Edwin Stanley.

Judge Edwin M. Stanley of Greensboro ascended the bench in Wilkesboro in 1958 and would oversee the end of Wilkes County’s bootlegging heyday. Like Judge Hayes, his predecessor, Stanley spoke strongly and doled out harsh sentences, but the moonshiners would usually resume the business within a year of being released from prison. Judge Stanley discovered Wilkes County’s liquor problem immediately in his first session. All cases tried were violations of the federal liquor tax laws, principally for manufacturing illicit liquor, and included the trials of two women, “Lucy” and “Stacy.”⁴⁰⁸

In 1958, Wilkes County also appointed Joe Carter of Stanley County as the new ATU Chief of the local Wilkesboro Division. Carter wasted little time enforcing the law. That May, he

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ “November Federal Court in Wilkesboro,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, November 14, 1957. This was the last docket judged by Hayes and included 90 cases, 85 involving liquor violations.

⁴⁰⁶ “ATTD Agents Arrest 14 in 10 Liquor and Brandy Raids,” *North Wilkesboro Hustler*, December 12, 1957.

⁴⁰⁷ “Moonshiners Take Vacation in Cold Weather,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, January 6, 1958.

⁴⁰⁸ “US Court in Session this Week in Wilkesboro,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 22, 1958.

arrested seven men in four still raids. In another busy week, he and other ATU officials broke up a huge still with 1,198 pounds of sugar on site.⁴⁰⁹ Judge Stanley's first November court docket was laden with 80 total cases, 67 cases involving liquor violations and 115 defendants involved in the moonshine business. After eight long court days, Judge Stanley had still not cleared the near record docket and opted to postpone sentencing for the remaining defendants until the next May's court session.⁴¹⁰

In May 1959, the ATU toppled twelve illicit stills and made two arrests in rapid succession. That month also witnessed the trials of 80 defendants in Federal Court, most of whom had violated liquor laws.⁴¹¹ Junior Johnson, along with his mother and two brothers, headlined May's session due to Junior's celebrity status on the NASCAR circuit. Johnson, who had previously served 18 months in Chillicothe, Ohio, for moonshining and had been on parole since early 1958, now found himself on trial once again. Junior Johnson managed to escape punishment, unlike his co-defendants. Johnson's mother received a heavy fine of \$7,500 for her role, and his brother was sentenced to 30-months in jail.⁴¹²

November's heavy Federal Court docket also included the case of a man and woman who were caught making liquor with a 90-gallon still at Shepherd's Crossroads.⁴¹³ Additionally, over

⁴⁰⁹ "Seven Men Arrested in Four Still Raids," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 22, 1958; and "ATTD has a Busy Week; Many Arrests," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 29, 1958.

⁴¹⁰ "80 Cases are Set in Federal Court," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 13, 1958; and "Federal Court Term Adjourns," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 1, 1958: "Calendar not cleared, but the rest will be tried in May."

⁴¹¹ "80 Defendants on Docket, Most are Charged with Violation of Liquor Tax Laws," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 13, 1959; and "12 Stills Raided, 2 Arrested by ATTD in Last Few Days," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 14, 1959.

⁴¹² "Conspiracy Case Is Near Completion," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 28, 1959; and "Prison Terms Given," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, June 1, 1959: "The case consumed four days of court. A jury of eight men and one woman returned the verdict Thursday afternoon, at which time Junior Johnson was acquitted and the other defendants were guilty. Junior Johnson's principal defense was testimony by officials of NASCAR, the national racing association, in which his record as a race driver was given in detail covering the period in which the investigation took place in 1958. The defense contended that he was away from home too much of the time racing to have been so extensively engaged in the manufacture and distribution of illicit liquor. But the other five defendants in the case, including Junior's mother, two brothers, and two other men, were convicted."

⁴¹³ "Two People are Arrested in 3 Liquor Still Raids," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 12, 1959: "Joe Carter said they were Mrs. Bonne Hawkins and Roy Anderson. Also taken were twenty gallons of whiskey and 210 gallons of mash."

100 defendants were tried and Judge Stanley sentenced men to facilities in Chillicothe, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia. Convicted women went to Alderson, West Virginia, while juveniles went to reformatory facilities.⁴¹⁴

In early 1960, the moonshine trade began to wane significantly in the county. Moonshine operations concentrated into a few large operations that pumped out large volumes of hooch. Many independent moonshiners could not find a bootlegger because they were considered too small. Some bootleggers found legal work while others invested into more profitable drugs like marijuana. Federal Court had merely 50 liquor cases for Judge Stanley. After sitting for only two days on the criminal court, Superior Court Judge Craven declared, “The people of Wilkes have quit sinning.”⁴¹⁵ Wilkes’ red liquor trade had become more furtive, or more likely unprofitable, as more ABC stores served central North Carolina and as Tar Heel residents began to develop a taste for the regulated bonded liquor. Federal Court had fewer liquor cases, but meted out heavy fines. One moonshiner from Traphill, who had four counts against him, received a suspended sentence and a \$10,000 fine that he would inevitably pay from his liquor operation profits.⁴¹⁶

By 1960, Wilkes’ moonshine heyday had ended and a new decade characterized by smaller county and federal court dockets commenced. In 1965, an ABC store in Wilkesboro finally opened. Nonetheless, larger moonshine operations would remain, mostly large submarine stills, which produced a form of “rotgut” hooch. Perhaps the most prominent image remaining in people’s minds is of the small mountaineer blockader running pure mountain dew out of his granddaddy’s modest copper still. The real moonshine history of Wilkes County centered on

⁴¹⁴ “Fall Term US Court Begun,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 16, 1959.

⁴¹⁵ “Federal Court Begins Monday, 50 Liquor Cases Set for Trial,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, May 12, 1960; and “Judge Craven Says Wilkes People Quit Sinning,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 14, 1960.

⁴¹⁶ “Heavy Fines Levied in Federal Court Session,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, December 1, 1960: “The largest fine at \$10,000 was meted out to a Walter of Traphill. On four counts he was given five years concurrent prison sentences suspended for a period of five years’ probation on payment of the \$10,000 fine.”

much larger and sophisticated operations run by “good ol’ boys” – and sometimes girls – from diverse racial and economic backgrounds. Their legendary blockading activities kept federal revenueurs and judges busy decade after decade. Yet notwithstanding the legality of their trade, these resilient people remained true to their roots, and their exploits during the epic moonshine days in Wilkes County became legendary.

EPILOGUE

In the early 1960s, the ATU utilized “spotter planes” that effectively located illegal operations from above and forever changed the typical moonshine operation. Even before the advent of these aerial tactics, the moonshine trade was already on the decline. While *the* business still lived on in 1964, the ATU found abandoned still sites around Wilkes County, but the revenuers also discovered large submarine operations.⁴¹⁷ The aerial tactics drove many moonshiners to convert to large underground “submarine stills” that produced illegal hooch with a “bad reputation.”⁴¹⁸ However, in 1965, the same year that Wilkes opened its first ABC store in Wilkesboro, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* reported that the county was no longer the “moonshine capital of the world” after local ATU agents assisted a Northern Georgia station, where they helped “cut” over 270 stills in a two week stretch. Wilkes County’s moonshine operations were historically larger as an agent clarified “most of the [Georgia] stills were small...but there were a lot of them.”⁴¹⁹ Although the heyday was over, the memories and lore of the “good ol’ boys” was just beginning.

In 1965, Tom Wolfe journeyed to Wilkes County to investigate the moonshine and NASCAR culture of the area through the exciting life of its native son: Junior Johnson. Along

⁴¹⁷ “Four Arrests Made when Stills Raided,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, October 21, 1965: “Two 900 gallon submarine type stills with were raided Monday.”

⁴¹⁸ “Arrests are Made in Raids,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 8, 1965: “Three were arrested Monday while four 900-gallon submarine stills, located at the same site, were in operation. Agents arrested three brothers...all of the Traphill section. Two of the men were arrested at the still, and the third was caught nearby as he ran. Destroyed in addition to the still and related equipment were 1400 gallons fermenting mash and 168 gallons whiskey.”

⁴¹⁹ “Local Agents Help Raid Liquor Stills,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, November 8, 1965: “Reports of the raids were still coming in when the Wilkes agents left Georgia. At Wilkesboro today, one of the agents said he estimated 400 stills have been cut in Georgia during the raids and the raids were continuing.”

with lionizing Johnson in “The Last American Hero,” Wolfe described an “unwritten code” where “neither the good old boys nor the agents, ever did anything that was going to hurt the other side physically.”⁴²⁰ In accordance with this code, bootleggers would refrain from using smoke screens on the road and revenuers would not use tack strips, which sometimes flipped the blockader’s car. In this tit-for-tat culture, moonshiners would go peacefully when caught and revenuers would not draw their guns – nor would they handcuff apprehended moonshiners.⁴²¹ In particular, Wolfe’s chapter devoted to Junior Johnson flipped the typical paradigm of violent moonshiners and illuminated the unique moonshining and bootlegging culture of Wilkes County.

In 1974, Joseph Dabney’s *Mountain Spirits* detailed the decline of the independent moonshiner in the South and the rise of the “moonshine mafia” in its stead. At the time of publication, Dabney named Wilkes County one of three former moonshine capitals of America and that although “it is still a production point... the output is considerably down from previous days.”⁴²² Dabney explained the transition of “big liquor making” from the mountains and foothills to metropolitan areas around Atlanta, Charlotte, Chattanooga, and Birmingham due to larger consumer markets, especially in the poor black ghettos. Once spotter planes detected stills from the air, more illegal operations went in or under large homes, chicken coops, and barns, requiring ATF agents to obtain search warrants before entering.⁴²³ Dabney emphasized increased size of these facilities from those in earlier times and noted that the “real (modern) moonshiner” was “the man who is not there – the man behind the scenes – a financier who lived in a nice home and fit in affluent society.”⁴²⁴ The typical moonshiner in the 1950s could sell directly to a

⁴²⁰ Wolfe, “The Last American Hero,” 8.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 7. Agents never used their guns. Charlie Aaron Felts also confirmed that his father rarely had to use his handcuffs and although he had to bring a pistol, he never had to use it.

⁴²² Dabney, 136.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 217. Cratis D. Williams in “Moonshining in the Mountains” also described the financier (“furnisher” in Wilkes) of these large operations as a well to do man who might be a high standing member of a local church.

bootlegger or a customer; by the 1960s a consolidated black market meant bootleggers only wanted to buy huge quantities of moonshine.

Dabney noted that distillers were purely a “cog” in the “modern-day moonshine mafia.”⁴²⁵ In this scheme, the moonshiner is “merely a hired hand” making from twenty to thirty-five cents a gallon.⁴²⁶ The numerous large underground operations changed the ATF’s focus from the smaller local distiller to “massive major violators,” inter-state operations that pumped out rotgut to the Southern cities.⁴²⁷ Dabney’s “devastating indictment” cites the poison content of the mega-operations moonshine. Much of the distillate produced from the massive stills of the 1960s and 1970s contained metallic salts, such as lead salts, that leached into the liquor through the lead-solder seams of the still or from operations that used old car radiators to condense their liquor.⁴²⁸ Over time, these impure ingredients caused blindness, paralysis, or even death. Although radiators were used by some moonshiners in Wilkes County during the 1950s, no reports were found detailing poisonous moonshine. By 1965, according to former Wilkes ATU chief Bob Powell, roughly half of all confiscated whiskey had lead salts in it, and half of contaminated liquor had dangerous amounts of the salts.⁴²⁹ In 1979, the lack of moonshining activity due to poisoning fears, sugar restrictions, effective enforcement, the existence of ABC stores, and the introduction of new problems such as prescription drugs, cocaine, and marijuana, resulted in the closure of Wilkes County’s ATU office.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid. Thirty-five cents was “not bad money for a man who probably is uneducated and unskilled in anything else, particularly if he can turn out a few hundred gallons a day, which is not unusual.”

⁴²⁷ The interview with my anonymous revenuer “Andy” also reports a targeting of “16-wheeler operations” or “the big guys” who were running in and out of Wilkes.

⁴²⁸ Dabney, *Mountain Spirits*, 223-224.

⁴²⁹ Ogburn, “The Moonshine Industry of Wilkes County,” 8.

⁴³⁰ John Hubbard, “The End of an Era –That’s What the Closing of the ATF Office Here is Being Called,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, July 19, 1979: “Better economic conditions, high prices of sugar and labor, better enforcement methods have made moonshining an unprofitable enterprise...There were as many as 14 ATF agents assigned to Wilkes County at one time...There were some legendary agents, and perhaps the most famous of these was Charlie Felts. He raided hundreds of stills and sent many a Wilkes man to prison...It was an unwritten but strict code that the moonshiners didn’t shoot at ATF agents, and the agents didn’t pull their

Wilkes County is a unique place on earth with an engrained identity with moonshine. What makes it exceptional is not the title “moonshine capital,” but *how* it became a moonshine Mecca. Unlike the prevailing stereotype, Wilkes County moonshiners are known for their hot rods, creativity, charisma, and mountain dew, not for their violent or ignorant ways. Indeed, in a goodwill gesture, Junior Johnson, with the help of the widow of Benny Parsons, organized the first “Moonshiners and Revenuers Reunion” in October 2009. Here, revenuers and moonshiners “buried the hatchet,” exchanged stories, shared laughs and a barbeque dinner, while entertaining people who were interested in their colorful history. Wilkes County’s unwritten cultural code allowed their history to be competitive but not violent. One retired agent who worked in this environment, Bob Gram, recalls the battle between moonshiners and revenuers as self-regulated, saying: “It was like a game. No guns involved. It was a chase.”⁴³¹ Fifty years after the county’s illicit distilling heyday, the good old boys could finally relax and laugh about the moonshine game and their adventures in the land of Wilkes.

guns... We’re a better place because the era of moonshine is vanishing, yet there is some nostalgia, some exciting times to be remembered.”

⁴³¹ Monte Mitchell, “Moonshine Memories: Bootleggers and revenuers get together on Wilkes County farm to recount their rivalry,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, October 15, 2009. http://www.journalnow.com/news/local/article_6ceb29f1-923435-50fe-93c2-55baf1e2dc76.html. One element of the heyday missing from the special reunion was the diversity of distillers and bootleggers.

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Vita

Aaron Lancaster was born on July 9, 1986 in Bedford, Virginia, and grew up in Lewisburg, West Virginia. He graduated from Greenbrier East High School and earned his Eagle Scout Rank in June 2004. That fall, he matriculated as a freshman at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in June 2008. He began his graduate work for a Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, in the fall of 2010.

Mr. Lancaster possesses an interest in the history, folklore, linguistics, and culture of the Appalachian Mountains and enjoys home brewing and wants to distill whiskey in the future. He is an avid hiker and traveler, has visited all 50 United States, and has a growing interest in South America, especially their *pisco* and *cachaça* spirits. His parents are Joe Lancaster and Sally Lane of Lewisburg, West Virginia.