

Miami's Bootleg Boom

by Patricia Buchanan*

The United States House of Representatives was entangled in one of its periodic debates over appropriations of funds to enforce national prohibition when Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia from notoriously wet New York announced to his colleagues, "There are more prohibition law-breakers in Florida than in my state." When challenged to prove it the peppery LaGuardia answered, "Oh, I have been down to Miami." Florida's Representative R. A. Green immediately requested five minutes to answer the New Yorker's charge. In defending his state Representative Green told the House, "Florida is as dry as the Sahara Desert." The Floridian's rebuttal was extremely short. An *Associated Press* dispatch from Washington explained:

When Representative Green likened his state to the Sahara, he found his words drowned out by laughter and returned to his seat.

In the prohibition decade of the 1920's Florida was a bootlegger's paradise. With its long coastline and liquor supply bases nearby in the Bahamas and Caribbean, Florida won the dubious honor of being one of the leakiest spots on the country's legally dry border.

Miami's response to the national experiment in instant salvation was well established in the first few months of 1920. Less than thirty days after the country went dry, the *New York Times* reported:

Miami is agog with tales of smuggling in every club, hotel, restaurant and cafe . . . and as they talk they drink. . . . Civil and state authorities are not against the smuggling and they agree with the people that the nation should be wet.

Although the stage was set in 1920, it took a couple of years for Miami's bootleg bonanza to get underway. When it did it was sparked by an influx of money in the hands of free spending tourists responding to a spectacular land boom and a high pressure publicity campaign directed by promoters who lauded the climate and were not shy about suggesting that Miami had all but repealed the Eighteenth Amendment. Scores of clubs and casinos scattered throughout the Miami area provided enter-

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tainment for thirsty natives and tourists while at the same time produced a steady market for local rumrunners. Most of the hotels served drinks quite openly. An English visitor found wines and spirits were even served at official city functions, and recalled "at least two proper old-fashioned saloons" located not more than 200 yards from Miami's police station. At the time of his visit he concluded, "Prohibition in Florida has quite definitely collapsed."

In 1920 Miami had hoped to meet the challenge of national prohibition with the same cheerful determination it had earlier coped with local and state dry laws—it would simply ignore the whole thing. But it wasn't quite that easy. When the Magic City blossomed into an Eden for tourists and land speculators, it also sprouted a bootleg boom that no one could ignore. The liquor smuggling operation began on a modest scale—a rumrunning game played in the spirit of good natured competition between smugglers and enforcers. But in the latter part of the decade the game was played with bullets. Men died and citizen's emotions ran high as some of the violence spilled into the streets. Local newspapers reported stories of hijacking and murder, corruption in public office and plots to smuggle aliens as well as liquor. Occasionally there was even the whisper of traffic in narcotics.

This was not what Miamians anticipated in 1920 when they declared their intention to disregard national prohibition. Like thousands of other proper, peace-loving, and thirsty Americans, Miamians had pronounced bootlegging a "respectable crime." But midway in the prohibition decade the rumrunning game got rough. When the bullets began to fly in earnest some of the local "liquor traders" abandoned the highly profitable but risky business believing that deadly gunfights had no place in the proper activities of respectable smugglers. Bootlegging had changed from a friendly competitive sport to a fierce conflict between hunters and hunted. To Miamians and local bootleggers alike it appeared that somebody had changed the rules in the rumrunning game.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Miami accepted the "noble experiment" with high good humor in 1920. Prohibition was here but enforcement wasn't. The eighteenth Amendment was not expected to produce any problems that would disturb enterprising Miamians who were busy building their city and their future.

Bootlegging was as much a natural tourist attraction as palm trees and sparkling Atlantic beaches. The *Miami Herald* was quick to point out that tourists should be handled with care as far as the Volstead Act was con-

cerned. "Officers Carry Out Enforcement of Prohi Amendment in High-handed and Autocratic Manner" read a page one headline in the June 22, 1920 issue. The story explained that officials had searched the car of a teetotaler on his way to Miami for a dental convention, and the *Herald* warned, "This might affect tourist travel next winter." In addition the paper pointed out that the traveler "had also invested heavily in Miami real estate on previous visits."

Miami's first significant prohibition case came in the early spring of 1921 when New York millionaire, Harry S. Black, a part owner of the Flatiron Building, was arrested at the swank Royal Palm Hotel. He was charged with having anywhere from 20 to 53 cases of liquor aboard his private railroad car, the "Bayside," on a siding at Coconut Grove. The *Miami Herald* reported that ninety bottles were produced as Exhibit A at the trial; four members of the six-man jury tested the evidence; Mr. Black was acquitted in five minutes.

During 1920 and 1921 Miamians were amused by newspaper reports of local grapefruit shipped to Detroit which "did not comply with Mr. Volstead's well know law," and they read about federal agents who pulled the corks on 240 bottles and 25 gallons of moonshine which they "poured into the sewer through a manhole behind the post office . . . under the horrified eyes of a hundred men and women." There were newspaper headlines of "Big Booze Haul in Coconut Grove"; a story of the "largest and most complete still ever seized in Dade" some five miles west of Perrine, and the sad tale of two Miamians who were captured by prohibition agents with 37 cases "just as their little gas launch, V6837, was chugging merrily into a sequestered cove near Cape Florida."

Some enforcement efforts were clearly accidental. Railroad employees reported "wet spots" surrounding a trunk in the baggage room at the local Florida East Coast depot, and baggage smashers discovered two cases of "leaky tools" that turned out to be Haig and Haig Scotch whiskey. Minor auto collisions on Miami's streets also occasionally netted material for the prohibition agencies. The sheriff's department acquired about twelve sacks of bootleg liquor from a fisherman who had hauled them out of the water near Key Biscayne after harassed rumrunners had apparently pitched the load overboard. When the fisherman threw a party with his loot the rumrunners appeared and demanded their merchandise back. The disgusted fisherman turned it over to the sheriff saying he'd "rather give it to Andrew Volstead."

Local newspapers dutifully reported attempts of officials to dry up soggy Miami. In the fall of 1920 they recorded the first major skirmish

between local Wet and Dry forces. Like major cities all over the country Miami had discovered collusion between law enforcement officials and the bootleg fraternity. The Miami Mayor announced, "We are determined to get rid of bootleg policemen." The force behind the cleanup in the police department was the Dade County Ministerial Association which was determined to break up an alleged "ring of officials who make it possible for liquor and kindred crimes to flourish unchecked." The Association carefully pointed out that there had been only two convictions out of fifty-two liquor cases filed since the beginning of national prohibition. It was also noted that the brother of the prosecuting attorney for Dade County had been arrested in Savannah in connection with a \$40,000 boatload of liquor illegally "imported" from the Bahamas. The upshot of this Wet-Dry battle was the removal of six policemen from the force on charges ranging from graft to collusion with bootleggers. Two were dropped for drunkenness. The *Miami Metropolis* explained, one case was the "plain variety" but the other was "somewhat spectacular" as the ex-policeman had "roused the neighborhood of Waddell Street and Avenue C by firing his revolver every time a chicken crowed."

When local efforts to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment proved more amusing than effective, Washington decided to take a hand in the matter. Miamians got word of the federal government's plan for their city when a "liquor and drug smuggling drive on the Florida coast" was announced in Washington February 4, 1922 by Colonel L. G. Nutt of the Internal Revenue office. A special smuggling squad with Miami as its headquarters was to operate along the entire Florida coast. Colonel Nutt was placed in charge of the federal forces gathering in Miami and on March 20 they struck. The forty agents were divided into eight squads and by 4 p.m. on the first day they raided twenty-two places including everything from Jack's Chili Parlor at the entrance to Elser Pier, to the Hillcrest Inn off Dixie Highway and an old fish dock near the south Miami bridge. The news which was probably most startling to Miamians was the *Metropolis'* banner headline on March 20 which read, "Bankers Involved in Booze Trade" with the sub-head, "Col. Nutt's Forces Unearth Sensational Evidence." Prohibition agents who had been working undercover prior to the drive charged that bootleggers gave local bankers as references, made arrangements with the bankers to hold the purchase price in trust until the liquor deal was completed and signed contracts to that effect. The next day the vice president of the Miami National Bank was arrested on a charge of conspiracy for allegedly having signed an agreement to hold four \$1,000 bills and one \$50 bill until a liquor cargo was delivered.

In the *Miami Herald* Colonel Nutt stated he was amazed at the ease

with which his agents obtained evidence. In his report to Washington he gave this example of the typical proposition by a Miami bootlegger:

We will contract for all the liquor you want, Scotch, Irish, champagne. We will go and fetch it in 24 hours and deliver it to the railroad station if you wish it shipped, will attend to place it in cars and will buy the necessary grapefruit or tomatoes to cover it up. That is all that is necessary; just pile it into refrigerator cars, with a camouflage of fruit or vegetables, and with the cars sealed the shipment will go wherever you wish.

Colonel Nutt's report stated that Miami runners obtained liquor in Bimini, Gun Cay and Nassau for about \$18 a case. They sold it for twice that amount in Miami and as high \$100 a case in northern cities. According to Colonel Nutt, they also made a nice profit on the fruits and vegetables.

In the first two days of the campaign it appeared that Colonel Nutt's flying squads were making real progress, but on March 22 the *Metropolis* carried this startling banner headline, "Prohibition Raids Prove Failure." Colonel Nutt admitted that when he raided the liquor establishments the proprietors and employees had frankly told him they had been tipped off. He also complained that he was getting no help from the Anti-Saloon League or the Ministerial Association of Miami, and they complained because he had gotten only the small operators and had not touched the "big fellows in the liquor game." Only twenty arrests were made and eventual convictions amounted to less than half a dozen. The Miami National Bank's vice president was cleared by a United States Commissioner who declared, "He was but a stockholder and not a principal in the plot." Several months after Florida's first prohibition drive had ended the *New York Times* summed up the results. Colonel Nutt and his prohibition squad left Florida "before it was laughed out of the state," said the *Times*, "but not before the snickers were audible."

Lest Miami's lackadaisical attitude toward the prohibition law seem too much a blot on the city's record, it can be pointed out that the national Congress in Washington was setting a perfect example of inaction by almost completely ignoring the problem of enforcement during the first four years of prohibition. And it was doing so with the approval of most of the nation's important prohibition leaders. The Dry forces feared that if an investigation showed casual and superficial enforcement was widespread the Wets would be armed with a new weapon. Reflecting this policy an assistant prohibition commissioner from Washington announced at the height of the bootleg boom, "The situation in Miami has greatly improved."

Touring the area he claimed, "I didn't see any evidence of drinking" or "a single man under the influence of liquor while I was in Florida." If the Congress in Washington and the nation's Dry leaders were satisfied with enforcement efforts, so was Miami. And so were the bootleggers. One optimistic rumrunner predicted in 1922 that bootlegging liquor from the Bahamas would "outstrip the real estate game as the state's leading enterprise."

Equally pleased with the situation were the liquor suppliers in the Bahamas. With the arrival of American prohibition more than twenty giant liquor concerns sprang up in Nassau almost overnight. Prominent in the ranks of liquor magnates were the names of well-known Bay Street merchants: Christie, Collins, Kelly, Sands and Symonette.

In 1920 the governor of the Bahamas had advised the startled island legislature, "The Colony's financial situation has been transformed." An expected deficit of \$154,000 had become a surplus of \$555,000. The *New York Times* commented, "Prohibition is the greatest opportunity for the Bahamas since piracy went out of style."

What interested Miamians most in the Bahamas was the little boomerang-shaped island of Bimini some scant fifty miles off the Florida coast. With Nassau as a source of supply, big warehouse boats tied up in Bimini's quiet harbor to supply enterprising Miami rumrunners scuttling back and forth to the Florida coast.

At one time there were nine liquor licenses authorized by the Bahamian government for this little island with its slightly more than 300 population. Competition kept prices reasonable and regular customers got a special discount. Bimini was described as a "supermarket" of wet goods where the runner went in and, with complete confidence in the quality of the merchandise, ordered his liquor "sight unseen." He would then have the cargo loaded aboard his boat at no charge by the liquor firm, buy gasoline for the return trip to Miami, and get a free lunch.

The cargo was packed six bottles to a burlap bag with straw and paper for padding. The package, called a "ham," was designed to insure safe transportation for the precious cargo on what was likely to be a rough boat trip. Although only extremely bad weather kept the runners in port, the "hams" were often tossed over the side if prohibition agents hove into sight. With a little luck they were retrieved later by the runner if they hadn't floated away or been appropriated by some eager local citizen. Miami youngsters in light skiffs scoured Biscayne Bay. One local lad combined a minor bootleg operation with his paper route, but the en-

terprise collapsed when the "authorities"—his older brother—discovered his cache under the house and "confiscated" the lot.

The Miami-Bimini liquor smuggling operation was carried on with just about every type vessel that could be kept afloat. There were old fishing boats with engines that coughed their way to the island and back, as well as millionaires' private yachts flying famous club pennants. There was even a flat bottomed sixteen footer with a converted automobile engine which regularly made the trip on a calm sea and a lot of luck.

On dark moonless nights fast little thirty and forty footers especially designed for the bootleg trade made the run. Some of the finest of these rum boats were produced by Louis Nuta, Sr. A slight miscalculation on the part of the federal government in World War I had proved a boon for this Miami boat designer, builder and marine engineer. Thousands of Liberty engines had been manufactured for World War I aircraft which were never produced; after the war the engines were available in large quantities for almost nothing. These were the engines that could power a rum boat from Bimini to Miami in two hours and outrun anything the Coast Guard had in the water. In Nuta's shop on the Miami River there was a long row of Liberty engines.

The boat preferred by his customers in "the trade" was a thirty-four footer with two Liberties which could make a top speed of twenty-five miles an hour fully loaded. The unfortunate boatman who found it necessary to outrun the Coast Guard or prohibition agents could, however, toss his cargo over the side and the little boat would slip away at forty-five to fifty miles an hour

A thirty foot boat was usually the minimum size for a profitable operation according to Nuta, but he remembers some as large as sixty feet. The Miamian who owned an old fishing boat and converted it for speed with Liberty engines probably made the most money in the long run. He hadn't invested much and stood to lose less if his vessel was captured and confiscated. A really fine rumrunning boat, built from the keel up in Nuta's shop, cost as much as \$12,000 to \$14,000. But prohibition officials often cooperated, Nuta recalls. "They'd let a local runner make enough trips to the islands to pay for his boat and *then* confiscated it."

The Coast Guard was also relatively cooperative, at least at first. When the Coast Guard captured a rumrunner and confiscated his vessel, the boat was often put up for auction and Nuta could buy it back for a fraction of what he'd spent to build it. Very shortly it would be out of his shop and back in the rumrunning business again. This curious circular

traffic came to a halt when Coast Guardsmen began hauling the confiscated boats to their Fort Lauderdale base and burning them on shore.

The Coast Guard made another move even more distressing to the rumrunners. Tired of being left in the wake of the fast rum boats, the Coast Guard began to use the confiscated vessels in their own fleet. Rumrunners then found themselves being chased by their own speedy little boats. After one experience like that, the rumrunners were back in Nuta's shop with the plea, "Louie, you got to make us faster boats!" And so more Liberty engines came out of stock.

Nuta still shudders a little to think of some of the would-be rumrunners who tried to get him to put four-hundred horsepower Liberty engines in boats that would be hard pressed to hold together powered by a three horsepower Sea Gull. But for the most part the men engaged in liquor smuggling were experienced seamen who knew the tricky Florida-Bahama waters and the myriad hiding places along the Miami shoreline. If a sixth sense told a rumrunner the Coast Guard was nearby he would stash his cargo in an mangrove swamp and suddenly become just another innocent fisherman.

These were the early years of the prohibition era. Rumrunners and enforcers played hide and seek in the mangrove swamps and on the high seas. The Eighteenth Amendment produced high profits for the adventurous, amusing stories for the local press, and it hadn't unduly inconvenienced any thirsty resident or tourist. But the undercurrent of violence in the rumrunning game was soon to explode to the surface.

RUM WAR WITH REAL BULLETS

The "King of the Florida Smugglers" was dead, mortally wounded by a Coast Guardsman's bullet in a chase up Biscayne Bay which ended in front of the Flamingo Hotel on Miami Beach right under the noses of scores of gaping spectators. The "King" was Duncan W. "Red" Shannon. His death on February 25, 1926 was evidence that what had begun as a friendly game of rumrunning in the early 1920's was fast becoming a deadly business of bullets. During the last half of the prohibition decade wild accusations and threats of violence were flung at Coast Guardsmen and prohibition agents, while at the same time some members of those agencies evidenced a decided tendency to shoot first and question later, or not at all.

At the time of his death, "Red" Shannon was under federal indictment for both whiskey running and alien smuggling. He had escaped capture by Coast Guardsmen on at least two previous occasions and his fast thirty foot motorboat, "Goose," was well known to them. On the day of his last

battle with the Coast Guard, Shannon and a crew of two left Gun Cay in the "Goose" with 170 cases of liquor headed for Miami. The Coast Guard's thirty-five foot patrol boat K-1445, a converted rumboat, was cruising near the county causeway south of Star Island when, just at dusk, crewmen sighted the approaching rumrunner. The "Goose" fled north heading for the yacht basin at the Flamingo Hotel which faced the bay at Fifteenth Street. The rumrunners refused to heave to and Coast Guardsmen opened fire as the vessels neared the docks. Hotel guests attending a tea dance rushed to witness the capture. An unconscious and critically wounded Shannon was placed on a mattress on the hotel lawn and then taken to Allison Hospital on Miami Beach where he died the following morning. The Commander of the Coast Guard vessel, Ensign Philip E. Shaw, is said to have recognized Shannon as a former shipmate who once sailed with him on a fishing schooner out of Boston. The two men captured with Shannon were Fred Walther of Miami and Addison Nickerson of Little River.

The big question from the local press was, "When were the shots fired?" The *Miami Herald* found witnesses who stated, "The Coast Guard fired after the men had raised their hands." The *Miami News*, no longer the spokesman for prohibition under S. Bobo Dean, was now owned by former Governor James M. Cox of Ohio. It said:

... it is known that Shannon, Nickerson and Walther ... had their hands above their heads in token surrender when guardsmen fired on them.

A few days after the shooting, Justice of the Peace H. W. Penney issued warrants charging Ensign Shaw and his four crewmen with manslaughter. The Coast Guard reacted strongly to the way things were going. When a constable appeared at the base to serve the warrants, a Coast Guardsman shot at him. This incident was closed with an apology from the Coast Guardsman involved, but Ensign Shaw and his crew were shortly indicted by a Dade County Grand Jury which raised the charges from manslaughter to second degree murder.

While this case went through a long two year legal process, Coast Guardsmen became involved in other incidents which produced even more explosive reactions from the local press and public. Less than six months after Shannon's death, Miamians picked up their Sunday papers to read about a gun battle involving Coast Guard patrol boat CG-297 and a rumrunner on the Miami River near the Granada Grill and Apartments at 150 Southeast Fourth Street. "Diners Flee Shots in Rum Chase" read the banner headline in the *Miami News*; "Rain of Bullets Strikes Terror

Among Women," the subhead reported. The paper described the scene:

Guests . . . ran terror stricken from their rooms and dinner tables as volley after volley of shots, fired from Coast Guard patrol boat 297, showered about them.

The lives of fifty persons were endangered, said the *News*, as Coast Guardsmen "pumped hot lead after the 'rummy' as fast as they could pull their triggers."

Guests at the Granada Grill, who had ringside seats, described the affair to a *Herald* reporter. When shots rang out at about 7:30 Saturday evening they had rushed to the riverbank immediately outside the restaurant where they "looked down almost on top of the pilot of the rum boat." With the Coast Guard in hot pursuit, the rumrunner was "lying flat in his boat and stuck his head up only to steer." When he did, a Coast Guard rifleman went into action. A number of people were in the line of fire, the *Herald* reported.

Witnesses saw the rumrunner's boat dart under the Miami Avenue bridge which was too low for the big Coast Guard vessel. There was a "short delay" before the bridge was opened for the patrol boat, and in the meantime Coast Guardsmen commandeered a private vessel to continue the chase upriver. By this time a large crowd had gathered on the riverbank. When Coast Guardsmen lost the rumrunner and headed back downriver, "their vessel was object of cat-calls, boos and hisses," according to the *Herald*. "The crowd hooted the guardsmen and cheered the vanished smuggler," said the *News*.

The *News* also reminded its readers that this was not the first time the Coast Guard had endangered the lives and property of Miamians and their guests. Referring back to the Shannon affair, which it now termed an "ambush by Coast Guardsmen," the paper recalled that on this occasion Coast Guard bullets "tore through the rigging of yachts" and had "narrowly missed crowds that surged down to the Flamingo docks."

The manager of the Granada Apartments, T. M. Weiss, reported his guests "were incensed by the Coast Guard's action" and he planned to send complaints to the Coast Guard at Fort Lauderdale or Washington. By Monday other witnesses were voicing their complaints to a Dade County Grand Jury, and on Tuesday Coast Guard officials ordered the commanding officer at the Fort Lauderdale base to make a complete investigation. Heated protests against this "indiscriminate firing" were made to Washington officials by Senator Duncan U. Fletcher and Representative W. J. Sears.

One week after the incident the Dade County Grand Jury filed a report saying:

We denounce as a reckless, needless and uncivilized practice the methods used by Coast Guardsmen in Biscayne Bay and the Miami River.

Grand Jurors recommended their report go to the Treasury Department in Washington requesting officials to discipline Coast Guardsmen involved because their action "tends to create a prejudice in the minds of the public." They also wanted Washington to tell the Coast Guard to shoot only in self defense on Biscayne Bay and the Miami River. According to the Grand Jury, "Coast Guardsmen have become a serious menace."

Following an investigation, Coast Guard officials in Washington issued a formal report completely exonerating the officers and men of patrol boat CG-297. The report said Coast Guardsmen were merely doing their duty and that furthermore the shots fired totaled exactly five. Coast Guard officers in Washington were also a little piqued at the disparaging comments made regarding their men's marksmanship. "No shots went wild or struck other than the place they were intended," the report stated. Senator Fletcher "expressed surprise" at the report, according to the *Herald*, and he planned to "pursue the case further." The verdict from Washington "has met with pronounced disapproval by many citizens in Miami," the *News* reported.

The next time the Coast Guard got involved in a major shooting on the river, Miami's Mayor E. G. Sewell charged the menace from such activity was becoming "worse than a disease." This time witnesses reported machine gun fire from a Coast Guard vessel chasing a rumrunner upriver. More than 200 shots were fired, witnesses said, some of them tracer bullets which streaked through the dark morning sky. The rum boat was found abandoned near the Southeast Second Avenue bridge with 240 sacks of liquor aboard and one bullet hole. Some bullets hit a houseboat docked at the riverbank and others struck buildings on shore. One bullet pierced the six inch wall of the Gautier Funeral Home, some one and one-half blocks from the river, and was found lying on the chapel floor. (This story has improved considerably with age. By 1960 a newspaper feature story reminiscing about the 1920's reported the bullet had been found in the chest of a corpse.)

As a result of the machinegunning on the Miami river, Senator Fletcher asked for an official investigation; city commissioners sent a protest to Tallahassee and Washington, and the Coast Guard, which had already

lost the rumrunner, also lost its patrol boat's commander who was "requested to tender his resignation."

The "Red" Shannon affair returned to the headlines in February of 1928 when Ensign Philip Shaw and his four crewmen were tried for second degree murder in the death of this "King" of the rumrunners. An assistant attorney general from Washington, defending the Coast Guardsmen, obtained a special venire which excluded Dade, Broward and Monroe residents from the jury "because of Anti-Coast Guard prejudice in those counties." The case occupied the attention of Miamians for more than a week. The Miami judge who was to have heard the case "found it necessary" to leave the city to attend to other matters in Tampa so a vacationing San Francisco judge was assigned to the case. The prosecuting attorney, County Solicitor Robert Taylor, posed this question to prospective jurors, "Are you willing to give a citizen protection from over zealous officers as well as lawbreakers?" This was too much for the judge who ruled the question out.

The prosecution attempted to build a case showing the Coast Guardsmen had fired after Shannon's hands were raised. One of the star witnesses was Miami Beach developer Carl G. Fisher who owned the Flamingo Hotel and was standing alongside his private dock when the shooting occurred. Fisher skillfully maneuvered around the questioning reminding the court he was slightly near-sighted and didn't recall whether the men raised their hands before or after the shooting. The trial dragged on, the *News* complained, while competing attorneys "shoved small boat models over the courtroom floor." The prosecution claimed the Coast Guard had no right to fire on a man engaged in a mere misdemeanor, but the judge reminded the jury that "such is not the law." After four hours deliberation the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

Although Coast Guardsmen had won their round in court their enforcement efforts had hardly captured the enthusiastic support of local residents, nor had the service put any appreciable dent in the liquor traffic. Majority opinion placed the service on the wrong side of the Wet/Dry battle. Not even the murderous activity of the "Gulf Stream Pirate" could solidify the press and public opinion behind the enforcement efforts of the Coast Guard.

THE GULF STREAM PIRATE

"It's my personal hanging and I want to invite my friends to it," said Horace Alderman, a Miami based rumrunner who was to die August 27, 1929 on a specially constructed gallows at Coast Guard Section Base 6

at Fort Lauderdale. The murderous activities of this man, who became known as the "Gulf Stream Pirate," provided Miami with one of the most sensational cases of the entire prohibition decade. Although the man himself was far from typical of the local Florida rumrunners, his story is a fitting climax for a decade that began with good natured disregard of the law and ended in death and violence. It may also throw a little more light on the curiously ambivalent attitude of the local press and public toward prohibition lawbreakers.

The "Gulf Stream Pirate" told the story of his lawbreaking career in a document titled "Life Story of James Horace Alderman" which he wrote in prison while awaiting the decisions on numerous appeals of his case. His activities ran the gamut from poaching fish to liquor and alien smuggling, and ended with the slaying of two Coast Guardsmen and a federal agent. In his "Life Story" Alderman set out the details of his religious conversion while in prison, a factor which his attorney, R. A. Hendricks, used to win public support in petitioning higher authorities to commute the death sentence.

The incident that led Alderman to the gallows took place on August 7, 1927. According to his own account, he and a new crewman, Robert W. Weech, also a Miamian, left for Bimini about nine o'clock on the night of August 6. After some difficulty with a faulty engine they arrived at the island about daylight to be met by a boat piloted by Bimini's major liquor supplier, Bruce Stanley Bethel, who warned them a seventy-five foot Coast Guard vessel was in the harbor. Alderman anchored his boat outside the harbor leaving Weech aboard and used Bethel's boat to pick up his liquor supply. According to Alderman it was Bethel who warned him that Weech was not to be trusted, and it was Weech who insisted on making the trip back to Miami in the daylight rather than waiting for the safety of night. About noon or 1 p.m. on August 7, Alderman and Weech headed back to Miami with their liquor cargo.

At approximately the same time Coast Guard boat, CG-249, commanded by Boatswain Sidney C. Sanderlin left the Fort Lauderdale base headed for Bimini. In addition to the seven-man crew there was one passenger, Secret Service Agent Robert K. Webster. The Coast Guard vessel was taking Webster to the island where he was to investigate reports that counterfeit United States currency was being used in the liquor smuggling business. Some seventeen miles out of Bimini and thirty-four miles east of Fort Lauderdale Coast Guardsmen sighted Alderman's vessel, C 13997, and ordered it to stop. Several shots were fired across the bow before the rumrunner hove to. Alderman and Weech were then taken aboard the

Coast Guard vessel as was their cargo of twenty-one and one-half cases of liquor packed in the customary "hams."

What happened next depends on who's telling the story. According to Alderman, he fired in self defense, picking up a gun from among several on the chart table in the pilot house of the Coast Guard boat. The first man he killed was Victor A. Lamby, motor machinist's mate first class, then Boatswain Sanderlin and finally Secret Service Agent Webster. Another Coast Guardsman, acting ship's cook Jodie L. Hollingsworth, was shot in the eye.

The Coast Guard's story was that Boatswain Sanderlin was the first to die, shot in the back by Alderman with a gun he had managed to keep hidden. Lamby, who witnessed the murder, started aft to arm himself and Alderman immediately shot him in the back. Alderman then ordered the Coast Guardsmen to reload the liquor on the rum boat. With the cargo, the five remaining Coast Guardsmen, and Agent Webster all aboard the rum boat, Alderman ordered Weech to set fire to the Coast Guard vessel and thus destroy all evidence of the affair. He also supposedly planned to have his captives walk the plank. Weech flooded gas into the bilges of CG-249 but the vessel failed to ignite. On the rum boat Alderman was distracted by the faulty engine that had been troubling him all the way to Bimini, and the remaining Coast Guardsmen and Agent Webster rushed him. In the scuffle Webster was killed and Hollingsworth wounded.

The Secret Service also has its version of the story, and in this one Agent Webster is the hero. In a "split second move Webster lunged at Alderman knocking him off balance" and gave the Coast Guardsmen their chance to overpower the rumrunner. According to this version "had it not been for the heroic action of agent Webster, all hands aboard . . . would have perished."

When the rumrunners were finally overpowered, the Coast Guardsmen discovered their boat's radio was still operative. Another vessel, CG-2246, was summoned from Fort Lauderdale to assist the remaining Coast Guardsmen and take the now badly beaten and unconscious rumrunners to Fort Lauderdale. Alderman and Weech were put in the Broward county jail and four days later transferred to the prison at Jacksonville. The order for the transfer came from a judge of the United States District Court who explained that the action was taken "in view of the alleged threats to storm the Broward county jail."

Just who was planning to storm the jail is debatable. A Broward county police officer hinted at a lynching for Alderman and was quoted in the *Miami News* as saying, "The good people of Fort Lauderdale aim

to try him themselves." A later report from Jacksonville indicated the transfer was made to prevent "any possible liberation by friends of the pair who were reported to have planned a break from the Broward county jail."

At any rate at 9:30 p.m. on August 11 a "Black Maria with its siren screaming" tore through downtown Fort Lauderdale at fifty-miles an hour taking Weech and Alderman to a waiting Coast Guard vessel. Guarding the pair were twenty-five armed Coast Guardsmen, one United States Marshal, and three policemen "with revolvers in hand," according to the *News*. The prisoners were placed in irons and shackled to the deck of CG-248. With a Coast Guard plane circling overhead the boat carrying the two rumrunners headed for Jacksonville escorted by a second vessel, CG-247. At some point during the trip a large vessel suspiciously circled the government boats. Coast Guardsmen manned their three-inch guns but the mysterious ship went on its way without interfering.

At the time of the transfer federal officers were quoted as saying that fifty armed men from Miami were in Fort Lauderdale. It was inferred these men might attempt to free Alderman or perhaps silence him as there were vague hints that he was part of some vast rumrunning ring. Whatever the plot regarding the two rumrunners, if in fact there was a plot, the Fort Lauderdale base commander, Beckwith Jordan, summed up the Coast Guard's view when he said, "Thank God Alderman and Weech are safely away from here."

A Coast Guard Board of Investigation was convened at Section Base 6 to investigate the murders. The service made public the report of one of its investigators who pointed to the "deplorable state of affairs on the southeast coast of Florida" where it appeared that "decent elements in the communities have been overawed by the criminals." The Commandant of the Coast Guard maintained that the criminals infesting the waters surrounding Florida "have become increasingly desperate and will not hesitate at murder."

In September a Federal Grand Jury, called into special session at Jacksonville, indicted Alderman for first degree murder. According to the prosecutor the case "beats any dime novel in color and brazen defiance of the law." The trial, originally scheduled for November, was postponed until January 1928. In a Federal Court in Miami a twelve-man jury began hearing evidence against Alderman on January 19. The principal witnesses against him were the surviving Coast Guardsmen including Jodie Hollingsworth who had lost his right eye as a result of his encounter with the rumrunner. Alderman claimed he shot in self defense. On the witness stand he testified Coast Guardsmen had threatened him saying:

Now we have got you and we are going to do to you like we did Red Shannon. He was shot in the back of the head with his hands in the air.

After four hours deliberation the jury returned and the foreman, Fred E. King, announced the verdict, "guilty as charged" without recommendation for mercy. At 10:35 a.m. on January 27 Judge Henry D. Clayton sentenced Alderman to death by hanging. "It was the first time such a sentence had been passed on a rumrunner for murder of government agents on the high seas," reported the *Miami News*. The rum boat's crewman, Robert Weech, who had cooperated with authorities, pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to a year and a day at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta.

Alderman was taken back to the Jacksonville prison to begin a long period of waiting while his case was appealed. Before the United States Circuit Court of Appeals at New Orleans the government argued that Alderman was "a pirate and not entitled to mercy." On March 27, 1929 the Court refused his appeal and Alderman's attorney announced, "The only place left to go is the United States Supreme Court."

After ten months in the Jacksonville prison, Alderman was transferred to the new Dade county jail in Miami. Although there had been no unusual public sympathy for Alderman at the time of his trial, his well publicized conversion to Christianity while in the Jacksonville jail had won him some new friends and supporters in Miami. A woman pastor from a Miami church was in Washington to ask for a pardon or commutation for Alderman at just about the time the Supreme Court got his appeal. The high court refused to review Alderman's conviction and sentence, and his attorney announced on June 20, 1929 that he planned to appeal to the Department of Justice for commutation of sentence to life imprisonment. He based the petition principally on the fact that "Alderman had become a convert to Christianity and is a changed man," according to the *Herald*. The local press reported that Alderman had converted five others at the Jacksonville jail and held prayer meetings at both Jacksonville and the Dade county jail.

Eleven of the twelve jurors who convicted Alderman were persuaded to sign petitions in his behalf. Even the judge who handed down the death sentence joined in the appeal with a letter to the Department of Justice recommending commutation. The *Miami Herald* quoted part of the letter from Judge Henry D. Clayton:

Alderman was raised in the primitive age of a new community with no opportunity for right training and education.

Both local newspapers agreed "hundreds of Miamians and residents of south Florida have signed petitions in his behalf."

The final appeals were made directly to the White House. One report indicated three separate appeals were made to President Herbert Hoover. On August 3, 1929 a headline in the *Miami Herald* read "Hoover To Let Alderman Die On Scaffold," and the *Miami News* reported Alderman's comment, "Hoover let me down but God is with me still."

The execution was originally scheduled to take place at the Broward county jail at Fort Lauderdale. On August 12, five days before the scheduled execution, United States District Judge Halsted L. Ritter indicated the hanging would be at the Fort Lauderdale Coast Guard base to comply with a law requiring the locale be the nearest federal reservation. The judge evidenced concern over the public sympathy for a convicted murderer and wondered publicly, "Why is it necessary to send flowers and puddings to him?"

On August 14 Alderman's attorney admitted he had "exhausted all steps" which could lead to commutation. His client, he said, was writing a book of his life. In this document Alderman wrote of his thoughts on the morning of August 15, two days before his execution, when he woke in the bright sunlight to recall a dream of salvation:

And as I was looking into the very brightest part of my dream the guard that is placed to guard over me these last three days handed me a paper and oh, it give the full details of the scaffold and just how it was built and where it was located, saying, James Horace Alderman will go to his death Saturday in the forenoon, August 17, 1929.

The *Miami News* reported public indignation that Alderman was "to be delivered into the hands of 150 Coast Guardsmen, most of whom hate him." According to this news story one of the topics of public discussion was:

. . . whether the rope used to hang him breaks under the convict's weight or is large and cumbersome slowly strangling him to death.

As Alderman was taken from Miami to the Broward county jail on August 15, the *Miami Herald* reported, "Alderman was smiling and wearing a red rose pinned to his tie as he told jail officials farewell." He left a Bible as "legacy to his family," and according to the *Herald* reporter

. . . it is to remind them of the husband, father, grandfather as

they last knew him, a Christian who had placed his future in the hands of his maker. . .

Both local newspapers were indignant at the order of Judge Ritter barring newspapers from the execution and "forbidding anyone connected with the hanging to make public any information concerning it." Alderman was denied his request that a "few friends witness his death" and that newspapers be represented "to publish a true story of the execution." The *Miami News* reported that those who had seen the place of execution:

. . . describe it as a ghastly place for a hanging even without the pall of secrecy that will deny the convicted the presence of his friends.

The police reporter for the *Miami Herald* was determined to circumvent this pall of secrecy. With the cooperation of a Miami undertaker, reporter Henry Reno planned to take over as the driver of the hearse and "roll right in and out of the hanging." A problem came up when someone remembered that every government man in the county knew Henry Reno on sight. Amusement editor Edgar Hay was recruited for the job. Although the plan went off as scheduled, publisher Frank Shutts, fearing a contempt of court charge, ordered the story withheld.

The *Miami News* produced an artist's drawing of the hanging with Alderman, two deputies and a minister climbing the steps to the scaffold. Under the sketch of the frame scaffold was the neat notation, "hangman under platform in rear".

The execution took place on August 17 inside a steel seaplane hanger where Coast Guardsmen had erected the scaffold. The interior of the hanger had been described in a story prior to the execution in these eerie terms:

High vaulted walls make the slightest whisper or handclap echo and re-echo. Lights throw shadows thirty or forty feet on the sides.

The time of the execution was 6 a.m. With either some assistance from a witness or perhaps merely the aid of a vivid imagination, the *News* reported, "Alderman helped to place the black hood over his head." The trap was sprung at 6:04 a.m., the *News* story continued, and at 6:19 a.m. Alderman was pronounced dead; his "choking struggles could be heard for two minutes within the gray light of early dawn."

The body of the "Gulf Stream Pirate" lay in state at the King Funeral Home at Miami where friends and the merely curious gathered to discuss

the merits of the case. "The chapel became an impromptu debating hall," the *News* reported. "The sentiment of some favored Alderman," the story continued, "others had not forgotten the three government men whose life he paid for with his own."

Some never came to a decision on the curious questions involved in the case of the "Gulf Stream Pirate." Did Alderman embrace religion as a true convert, or at the suggestion of a particularly astute attorney? If truly a repentant Christian, did this somehow entitle the Pirate to a special kind of leniency from the law? In his "Life Story" Alderman wrote, "I have left a record of two different men." A murdering rumrunner and a Christian convert. But which man went to the gallows? Miamians were unable to decide.

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