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Running Rum and Bootlegging Spirits

By South Brevard Historical Society

Huge profits and plenty of adventure supplied alcohol to thirsty Americans during the National Prohibition. In 1929, the first boat out of the just opened Sebastian Inlet was owned by Bill McCoy, a licensed sea captain. Bill and his brother were experienced boat builders who ran a coastal shipping business.

The destination as they sped to the Atlantic was to Nassau in the Bahamas, a frequent McCoy port of call. An old friend and business partner, Gertrude Lythgoe, kept a nightclub and warehouse there full of the top-quality English booze. Where else would you find the liquor craved by the alcohol-deprived Americans?

Because bottled cases of hooch on small vessels were bulky, noisy, and unwieldy to stow, the McCoy's developed an efficient shipping method. Five bottles wrapped in straw were pyramided and sewn in burlap, muffling the sound of clinking glass. The bundles looked like smoked hams, thus the title given "hams." A client could imbibe three "hams" for Christmas dinner and serve turkey.

Sometimes orders were dropped at West End or Bimini Island, close to Miami or West Palm Beach. A small boat would leave South Florida, pick up an order on Bimini, drop the load at a secret cove near the Florida East Coast Railway.

The vessel could then check back into the port of departure from their supposed unsuccessful fishing trip.

Florida sent boxcars full of produce to northern cities almost daily. Altered citrus boxes or barrels for shipping tomatoes or fish held a shallow tray on top for produce above the imported "hams" hidden below—a sort of ham and tomato sandwich. With lucrative side deals for railroad workers, the special cargo was bound for New York and Chicago.

The McCoy's, non-drinkers, were known for their honest dealings in quality merchandise. With their reliable reputation buyers were assured of the 'Real McCoy' and paid top dollar. Early in these escapades, neither the Coast Guard nor local sheriffs had boats fast enough to overtake the sleek craft redesigned or improved by the McCoy's. Each year brought escalating speed, agility, and maneuverability by both the bootleggers and the government boats.

Outside the American territorial waters, the liquor ships could be met, quickly unloaded to smaller boats, and rapidly depart. Since the Coast Guard had no aircraft, rum could be flown inland to grassy runways. Float-craft airplanes could land on the Indian River before docking in Melbourne Harbor. Souped-up cars ran night-time excursions to deliver "hams" and cocktail ingredients to the fancy casinos, hotels, and estates in the 1920s boom time Florida.

The deluge of underground cash soon caught the attention of Al Capone who created warehouses to store "stuff" before shipment. Fishermen had sheltered coves for protection from storms. Those near the railroad made transfers simple. Ⓢ