

Billie Brown's Back in Town *(1438 words)*

1920's and '30's, Logan County, WV

When the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution declared in 1920 there would be no sale, manufacturing or distribution of alcohol, my Granny Bill saw a great business opportunity.

“A girl's gotta make a living somehow,” Granny always said. “It's the government made criminals of bootleggers.”

In spite of the prohibition law, the drinkers didn't stop drinking. They just worked around the rules, managing to find speakeasies where they knew someone or poor people who'd sell them a jar of lightnin' here and there. There was no shortage of drinkers.

In the middle of Prohibition, with Black Tuesday and the onset of the Great Depression heaping coals on the fire, Granny's people were hard hit: they had to make a living or die trying. Several of her kin—from down in western Virginia, near the Tennessee border, and those who lived up in the hollows in Logan County—had learned from their fathers and grandfathers how to make moonshine, a common practice among the Scotch-Irish who settled the area in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Poor people needed a drink now and then just like the rich folks, Granny would say.

Long before I was born, bootlegging moonshine was a family business for Granny and my great uncles and aunts. Some made it and hauled it out of the mountains. Others drove or delivered it throughout the back roads of Logan County and beyond.

Granny managed the operation, which means she collected the money and, when it came to deliveries outside West Virginia, she was the one in charge. Through assorted distant relatives in Appalachia, she also had secured license plates from several states—Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois and Virginia among them—providing easy passage without drawing attention of the revenuers, government agents responsible for halting the distilling or “bootlegging” of alcohol.

With the smarts of a grifter, Granny used Prohibition to her advantage, keeping her family and many others out of the poor house for years. She understood people—what they wanted and what they were made of—which enabled her to best the bettors and fool the revenue men.

She'd never talk about those days with me, but answer my inquiries with, "Oh, them's just stories. Don't pay no attention."

Other relatives, however, could be encouraged to tell the stories. They were much more interesting than the *Bobbsey Twins* books I borrowed from the school library or even the *Crime Magazines* I found under Granny's mattress. This was real stuff: hiding out, keeping one step ahead of the law, being chased, outsmarting the feds. I was fascinated and proud of her.

Never a thought about this being wrong or illegal. After all, I'd seen this kind of behavior in the movies.

Granny loved movies and, as a child, I was her most frequent companion. We watched westerns and *shoot-'em-up* crime stories, and once, she took me to see *Gun Crazy*, a precursor of *Bonnie and Clyde*. I was as crazy about the movies as she was, and loved the excitement of brazen women outsmarting the men and keeping a few steps ahead of the law. For as little as a dime, we could experience a whole different world on the screen. As I heard the stories of her younger, bootlegging days, I imagined her as one of these super stars. I was proud of her past escapades.

I'm told that once, when she and her older sister, Helen, were trying to outrun the revenue men, they stopped their souped-up "shine" car, grabbed their extra license plates and ran down some railroad tracks, stuffing the plates into their bras and panties as they ran. The license plates represented freedom to them—the freedom to travel into Ohio and Illinois and not be flagged as someone from out of state, a "shiner."

This particular time, the revenuers saw the car, pulled over, and started chasing the two flappers down the tracks.

"Slow 'em down!" Granny is said to have yelled to her sister, Helen, and they began to take off their watches and jewelry, hold them in the air and throw them back onto the tracks. It slowed the revenuers down, all right; they'd much rather have the valuables than try to arrest one more bootlegger.

Granny's work took her to Chicago frequently, where she enjoyed the company of bar owners, mobsters and hotel concierges alike. Rumor has it that Helen's son, Preston, was part of Al Capone's *Murder, Incorporated*, a name given by the press to organized crime groups such as Capone's gang. But this rumor has never been confirmed in any way.

Granny and Helen once took my five-year-old mother to the big city and, to hear my mother tell it, my grandmother wore long, beaded gowns to high-style, high-swinging parties where black jazz musicians mixed in with the white crowd. A natural born wheeler-dealer, Granny enjoyed giving the drinkers what they wanted, loved the excitement and parties in Chicago, while tucking a substantial amount of their money in her ample bosom.

The image of her in the midst of this fast-paced society, making her own way, seemed so exciting to me as a young girl. It fueled my imagination and my desire to experience a larger world. If she could do it, why couldn't I?

There were very few stories about Granny's first husband, Chester Brownie, who was with her off and on during these years. All that people would say is that he went out for razor blades one day and never came back. He was around long enough to get her pregnant, but their son, Arthur, died in infancy around 1921. I've often wondered if she had been sad about his death. How would it have changed her life if he had lived? Was it this loss that contributed to her need for excitement and her willingness to take such big risks? Did she really not care what others thought?

Sometime after Chester Brownie disappeared, Granny dropped the "ie" from her last name, for reasons unknown to me. Everyone who knew her in the late 1920's and thereafter called her Billie Brown, until she remarried in the 1940's—to another Chester—and took her new husband's last name, Gartin.

No matter; most people I knew in the 1940's and '50's still called her Billie Brown.

Granny managed to escape the revenuers many times, once by diverting mash from the moonshine still into the pigs' pen, so the smell was camouflaged.

My mother recalled times when her Uncle Charlie would come get her out of grade school, take her home, remove one of the planks from over the stairs, and slide her down under the steps so she could pull out pints and half-pints for another haul.

“I was small enough to get in there,” Mother would laugh when telling the tale. Later on, she admitted it made her feel special and needed, something very important to her.

I may have grown up in a part of the country where Hatfield and McCoy lore ran deep, but nothing was more exciting to me than Granny’s early life.

Ultimately, in 1930, when my mother was eight years old, Granny was caught and sentenced to a year at the brand-new Alderson Federal Prison for Women, in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, near the Greenbrier River.

Years later, I read that most of the inmates housed in the dormitories of this minimum-security facility were relatives of famous mobsters and grandmotherly women who robbed or embezzled money from banks during the Depression. Granny admitted from time to time that she had learned a lot from the women at Alderson. That’s all she’d say. Nothing specific.

It made me wonder what she did learn. Did she learn about the intricacies of robbing banks? How to deal with lawmen and lawyers? Did the women housed there share their escapades or trade secrets? I wonder about the pecking order of women in that prison; who was in charge? Did Granny boss around people there, just as she did in real life? The women at Alderson weren’t pushovers, and I can only imagine the stories, the cunning and intrigue they shared.

It never bothered me that she’d been in prison. After all, she got out, just like the women in the movies we’d seen. According to my mother, Granny came out of Alderson in style, wearing a new suit and hat she’d made in one of the prison training classes.

I’m told that headlines in *The Logan Banner* that week read, “Billie Brown’s Back in Town.”