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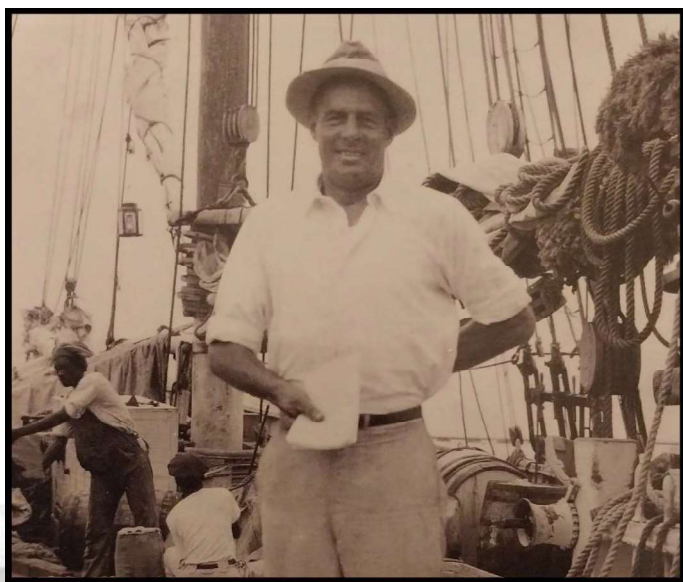
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Bill McCoy (“The Real McCoy”) Prohibition’s Celebrity Rum Runner

by Randy Jaye



Rum Runner Captain William F. “Bill” McCoy – ca. 1921. (Public Domain.)

William Frederick “Bill” McCoy was born in Syracuse, NY on August 17, 1877. His father, William, served in the Union Navy during the American Civil War, participated in blockading major ports of the Confederacy, and served time in a Confederate prison.

Bill McCoy chose a life at sea and was trained aboard the school ship *U.S.S. Saratoga*, and graduated first in his class from the Pennsylvania Nautical School in 1895. He spent the next few years serving as mate and quartermaster on various ships including the *SS Olivette*.

Around 1898, the McCoy family moved to Holly Hill, Florida. Bill and his older brother Ben went into the boat yard and taxi boat service businesses in Holly Hill and Jacksonville. They specialized in

building large shallow-draft power yachts for many of the nation’s wealthiest families, and gained a good reputation.

Around 1918, Bill and Ben McCoy found themselves in financial trouble due to a sluggish economy and failed investments. When Prohibition (the legal prevention of the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States, lasting from 1920 to 1933, under the guidelines of the Eighteenth Amendment) went into effect, Bill, a teetotaler, thought it was a ridiculous infringement on personal freedoms. When the brothers were propositioned by a rum runner to sail a shipment of illicit liquor into the U.S. from international waters they decided to try their luck in the rum running business after considering their needy financial predicament.

The Beginning of Rum Row

In early 1921, the McCoy’s gathered up their assets, around \$20,000, and purchased a 90-foot schooner named the *Henry L. Marshall*. The schooner was reconfigured for liquor smuggling operations, and could now haul hundreds of cases of liquor instead of several tons of fish. Bill



Barometer from Bill McCoy’s *Henry L. Marshall* ship. (Collection of the Halifax Historical Museum, Daytona Beach - Photograph by Randy Jaye - April 2023.)

handled all the business at sea and sailed to the port of Nassau, Bahamas and purchased 1,500 cases of Canadian whiskey. He smuggled the shipment of booze into the U.S. at St. Catherine's Sound, Georgia and sold it for \$15,000, making a huge profit. At this point, McCoy was hooked on the illicit rum running trade and began thinking of ideas to flout the law in order to make even larger profits.

By the summer of 1921, people began sighting shadowy boats and ships anchored off the shorelines of Florida, and elsewhere along the Atlantic coast. It was soon known that these vessels were loaded with liquor and located beyond the maritime limit of the U.S. (three miles prior to April 21, 1924, and twelve miles thereafter), and this became known as Rum Row. Rum runners would sell alcoholic beverages to smugglers from their anchored freight ships at Rum Row. The smugglers would then illegally sneak into U.S. ports in contact boats (small high-speed vessels) and resell their illicit alcohol cargo, usually making good profits. This lucrative rum running business during Prohibition had many dangers including being shot at by the U.S. Coast Guard, and being victimized by violent crimes including hijacking and murder.



Binoculars once owned by Bill McCoy. (Collection of the Halifax Historical Museum, Daytona Beach - Photograph by Randy Jaye - April 2023.)

Rum Row was initially established off the coast of Florida where rum was smuggled in from the Caribbean. As the smuggling of Canadian and European liquor increased Rum Row locations were extended to all coastlines of the U.S., by far the busiest was the coast of New Jersey.

McCoy is often credited as the founder of Rum Row. He was a pioneer rum runner as he used his experience as a mariner and his familiarity with domestic and international maritime laws to his advantage. He established his company in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and documented the *Henry L. Marshall* schooner under a British flag. He also arranged for legal British documents to be written that stated he was transporting liquor from one legal port to another (outside of the U.S.). This arrangement allowed him to operate beyond the reach of U.S. jurisdiction as long as he remained in international waters.

In less than four years, he became the most notorious rum runner of them all, a household name, and an international celebrity (dubbed “Rummy McCoy” by 1920s contemporary press). McCoy followed a few basic rules that made him successful: “Stay true to your contract, stay clear of the government’s notice, stay well offshore, and stay vigilant to avoid Coast Guard cutters.”

“The Real McCoy”

The term “The Real McCoy” is an idiom and metaphor which is now used to mean “the real thing” or “the genuine article.” It most likely originated in 1856 where the phrase “The Real MacKay” was documented in a Scottish poem, and was later refashioned into the term “The Real McCoy.”

Bill McCoy ran his rum running operations very honestly and sold liquor unadulterated, uncut, and in original sealed factory bottles. This is how Bill McCoy's nickname of the "Real McCoy" during Prohibition most likely originated.

McCoy's "Smugglers Ham" Innovation

In addition to McCoy's innovative Rum Row, he reportedly developed the creative method of storing, moving, and transporting illicit liquor bottles aboard vessels. The U.S. Coast Guard called this method "smugglers ham" or "burlock." This method wrapped 6 bottles tightly in straw and burlap in a pyramid shape: 3 on the bottom, 2 in the middle, and 1 on the top. These bundles could be stacked top to bottom, were able to withstand rough handling, and were easy to load, transport, and unload from vessels. They also took up about one-third the space of the standard wooden cases that held a dozen bottles. Some rum runners stuffed salt into the these "smugglers ham" bundles, and if their vessel was in danger of being boarded by law enforcement the bundles would be thrown overboard and sink out of sight below the surface. After the salt dissolved the bundles would float back to the surface where they could be retrieved by the rum runners.

The U.S. Coast Guard's First Major Illicit Alcohol Seizure During Prohibition

With a loan from some gangsters, and profits from using the *Henry L. Marshall* schooner, the McCoy's decided to purchase a larger ship called the *Arethusia*, which could hold 5,000 cases of liquor. The *Arethusia* was reflagged as the *Tomoka*, and Bill McCoy became her captain. McCoy was very proud of the *Tomoka* and she became his favorite ship. McCoy appointed his former first mate, Carl Anderson, captain of the *Henry L. Marshall*, and left written instructions aboard the schooner for a delivery of 1,500 cases of liquor off of Atlantic City, NJ in July 1921. Captain Anderson broke McCoy's rules and sold the cargo to another buyer at a higher price.

During an interview with a reporter onboard the *Henry L. Marshall* Captain Anderson disclosed many secrets of rum running operations. The *Henry L. Marshall* became a prime target of the U.S. Coast Guard.

The U.S. Coast Guard sent the cutter *Seneca* (CG-85) to investigate these rum running activities. The *Seneca* sighted a vessel flying a British flag and fitting the *Henry L. Marshall*'s description, and claimed the schooner made illegal exchanges with contact boats from the U.S., which constituted an illegal act. A boat was launched from the *Seneca* with a boarding team. The *Seneca* recorded her position as five miles off Little Egg Inlet, which was outside U.S. territorial waters. This placed the *Henry L. Marshall* beyond U.S. jurisdiction; however, the Coast Guard had legal authority to board her due to the suspected illegal activities. After boarding the schooner, the Coast Guard discovered that it was concealing its name and homeport under canvas covers.

The boarding team determined that the vessel was indeed the *Henry L. Marshall* and her homeport was Nassau. The Coast Guard also found 1,250 cases of scotch whiskey onboard the schooner. The lack of documentation for a legal transfer of the *Henry L. Marshall*'s flag to Great Britain gave the Coast Guard sufficient justification to seize the schooner.

After arriving in New York, additional papers aboard the *Henry L. Marshall* were found, which fraudulently allowed the schooner to enter the United States after delivering her illicit cargo. This confiscation was the Coast Guard's first major illicit alcohol seizure during Prohibition.

McCoy's handwritten instructions to Captain Anderson were also found, which identified him as the owner of the *Henry L. Marshall*, and the mastermind behind its rum running activities. Within a few days, Prohibition enforcement agents arrested the *Henry L. Marshall*'s captain Carl Anderson, and her first mate, C. Thompson. Warrants were issued for John G. Crossland, the broker of the illicit liquor deal, and Bill McCoy, the owner of the *Henry L. Marshall* schooner. Crossland was quickly arrested, but McCoy eluded Prohibition enforcement agents and continued his rum running activities.

Bill McCoy was now a wanted man and the focus of intensive law enforcement investigations.

The Federal Government's Main Target



Mabel Walker Willebrandt (1889-1963) was an Assistant U.S. Attorney General from 1921 to 1929. She was known to her contemporaries as the "First Lady of Law." (Public Domain.)

As McCoy's celebrity grew so did the U.S. government's efforts to capture him. He was making a mockery of the inept ability of the Coast Guard to capture him as his rum running operation grew to a reported five boats with dozens of crew members.

Mabel Walker Willebrandt, at 32 years old, was appointed Assistant U.S. Attorney General in 1921 by President Warren G. Harding. She became the highest ranking woman in the federal government, and was burdened with one of the heaviest responsibilities of any appointed official during the Prohibition-era. She was head of the federal taxation division of the Justice Department, Bureau of Federal Prisons, and handled cases concerning violations of the Volstead Act (the act passed by the U.S. Congress designed to enforce the 18th Amendment).

Willebrandt immediately set goals to vigorously enforce the Volstead Act. She realized that in order to stop the numerous small bootleggers the large smuggling ring operations had to be shut down. One of her main concerns was the notorious, and now famous, rum runner Bill McCoy, who was embarrassing the federal government with his high seas smuggling exploits.

Willebrandt proclaimed Bill McCoy as the federal government's most significant law enforcement target (the precursor to Public Enemy Number One). She lobbied for the

federal government to modernize and expand the Coast Guard.

Over the next few years, the Coast Guard was expanded from 4,000 to 10,000 personnel that were trained to intercept and catch rum runners. A new fleet of cutters coupled with 25 refurbished Navy

destroyers complimented a vast coastal deterrent program, which caused a significant reduction in rum running activities.

McCoy Saves the Life of Federal Agent Peter J. Sullivan

Federal agent Peter J. Sullivan was sent undercover to Nassau, Bahamas to gather intelligence on rum runners, and specifically on Bill McCoy. When Sullivan's identity was discovered by a group of unscrupulous rum runners and mobsters they made plans to kill him. McCoy was determined to prevent Sullivan from being senselessly murdered. He invited him to lounge overnight in his hotel, and then smuggled him onto a ferry heading to Miami, and to safety. McCoy said his moral code did not include murder. This honorable good deed helped define McCoy's moral character for the rest of his life.

McCoy's Schooner *Tomoka* Outgunned by the Coast Guard's Cutter *Seneca*

On November 25, 1923, McCoy's schooner *Tomoka* was off the coast of Sea Bright, NJ in international waters. McCoy was not aware that the U.S. State Department received permission from Great Britain to not interfere if the British-registered *Tomoka* was boarded and searched outside of U.S. territory.

Following instructions from Mable Walker Willebrandt to capture Bill McCoy as soon as possible, the Coast Guard's cutter *Seneca* sent a boarding party onto McCoy's schooner *Tomoka*. Coast Guard lieutenant Perkins claimed that McCoy's papers were not legal and ordered him to sail the *Tomoka* to Sandy Hook, CT. McCoy refused and sailed the *Tomoka* further out into international waters.

The *Seneca* received orders to bring the *Tomoka* in or sink her. The *Seneca* chased McCoy's *Tomoka* for several miles and then fired a shell over the *Tomoka*'s bow. The *Tomoka* returned machine gun fire, but the firepower of the *Seneca*'s military-grade 4-inch shells proved too much for McCoy's *Tomoka*. McCoy ordered his vessel to stop and the Coast Guard seized it. Around 400 cases of whiskey was discovered onboard the *Tomoka*. McCoy was also carrying more than \$60,000 in cash. On the way to Sandy Hook, McCoy paid his crew their owed wages, and wished them good luck as he sensed his rum running days were in jeopardy.

McCoy's Legal Battle and Light Prison Sentence

McCoy told reporters that he was not breaking any U.S. laws and said, "I was outside the three-mile limit, selling whisky, and good whisky, to anyone and everyone who wanted to buy."

Mable Walker Willebrandt offered McCoy a deal if he would cooperate with the Justice Department. He decided to plead guilty, negotiated for the charges to be dropped against his brother Ben, but did not name or testify against any other rum runners.

In March 1925, after almost two years of expensive legal maneuvering, Bill McCoy was sentenced to serve only nine months in prison at the Essex County Jail in New Jersey. He lost his ships and reportedly a lot of his wealth, but his celebrity status followed him to jail as he was occasionally permitted to leave the jailhouse as long as he returned by 9:00 pm. The warden of the prison, Charles E. Blue, accompanied McCoy to the Walker-Shade prizefight at Ebbets Field, in Brooklyn while he was incarcerated. When photographs appeared on the front page of newspapers showing them sitting

together in ringside seats the warden was fired, and McCoy was not granted an early release from prison.

Bill McCoy Returns to Civilian Life



Bill McCoy's passport with his United States address listed as Holly Hill, Florida. (Collection of the Halifax Historical Museum, Daytona Beach - Photograph by Randy Jaye - April 2023.)

After serving his full nine-month sentence Bill McCoy was released from prison on Christmas Day 1925. His brother Ben picked him up and they drove back to Florida. It seemed the McCoy's had enough of the rum running business as the Coast Guard's patrols were now more efficient, high jacking and piracy on the high seas had escalated, and organized crime was now controlling a majority of the illicit trade. As far as anyone knows, the McCoy brothers never again ventured into the rum running business.

The McCoy brothers returned to the boatbuilding business, real estate investments, and lived modestly in Holly Hill, Florida. They also donated their time and skills to restore several important historical ships.

In 1929, McCoy received a communication that the *Arethusa (Tomoka)*, his once prized possession, had been wrecked during a snowstorm at the entrance of Halifax Harbor in Nova Scotia, Canada. The Coast Guard impounded the schooner after McCoy was

initially arrested, and she was later auctioned off and used in the fishing trade in Nova Scotia. He never stepped foot on her or seen her at sail after his arrest. He anxiously traveled to Canada to discover what remained of her. McCoy found some of the schooner's wreckage and donated pieces to various museums. The *Arethusa* is an important piece of maritime folklore to this day. The schooner's plans are housed in the Smithsonian Institution.

Bill McCoy's Legacy

On December 30, 1948, at the age of 71, Bill McCoy, the legendary pioneer rum runner of Prohibition died of a heart attack and complications of ptomaine (food) poisoning aboard his ship *Blue Lagoon* in Stuart, Florida. During McCoy's short-lived rum running career, where it is estimated he transported two million bottles of liquor, he claimed he never paid a cent to organized crime, corrupt politicians, or to crooked law enforcement personnel for bribes or protection.

Bill McCoy became a national symbol for his defiance of Prohibition, the most unpopular law in U.S. history. He always believed he was not breaking any U.S. laws because he conducted his rum running business in international waters.

It was McCoy's innovative rum running methods, especially the invention of Rum Row, that actually forced the U.S. Coast Guard to expand personnel, training, and enlarge their ship and boat fleet. Many believe that McCoy was the catalyst for the development of the modern U.S. Coast Guard.

Although he dealt in the illicit liquor business, with many unscrupulous characters, he kept his gentlemanly character, transacted honest business deals, and was considered an honorable outlaw by the general public.

The term "The Real McCoy" was used before the days of Prohibition. However, Bill McCoy's insistence on selling untouched authentic alcoholic beverages in their original factory-sealed bottles was the inspiration for this term evolving from Prohibition until today to mean "the real thing" or "the genuine article."



Northeast view of Bill McCoy's former house at 1090 Riverside Drive, Holly Hill. (Photograph by Randy Jaye - May 2023).

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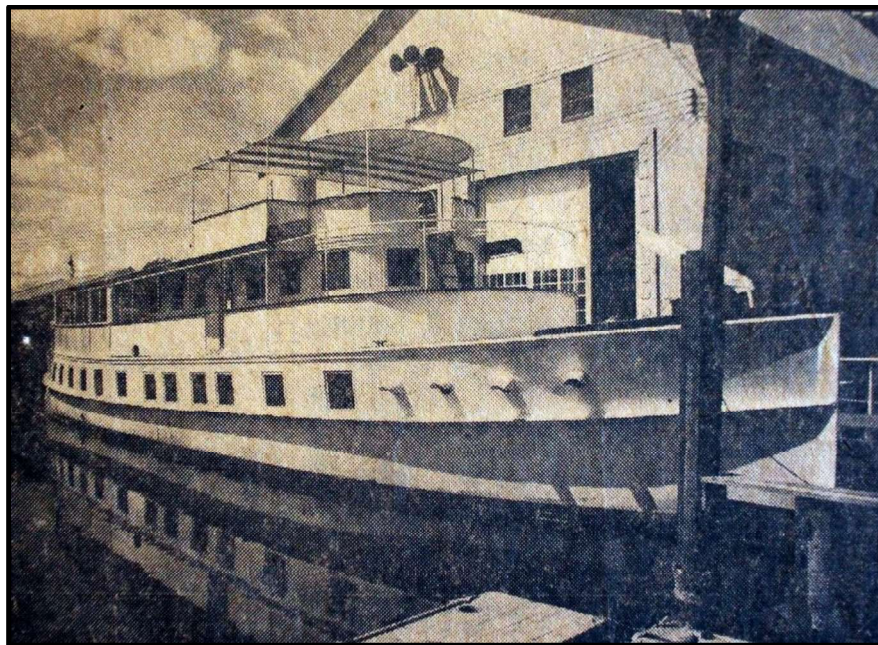
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The yacht Siesta had two decks, six state rooms, and was 100 feet long. It was built from cypress wood by Ben and Bill McCoy along the river front in Holly Hill prior to Prohibition. This photograph shows her anchored at the Daytona Beach Boat Works around 1950. (Collection of the Halifax Historical Museum, Daytona Beach.)