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New movie shines light on Prohibition moonshiners

August 31, 2012 by [Scott Bomboy](#)

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The new movie *Lawless* takes on a recently popular topic, moonshiners, back in the final days of Prohibition.



The film was first presented at the Cannes Film Festival in May and [reviewed extensively \(with spoilers\) by Time magazine.](#)

And while we won't give away a lot of the movie's plot, it is being praised, at least from a cinematic standpoint, for taking moviegoers into the era of the early 1930s with its colorful cinematography.

“Not directed so much as art directed, this unquestionably handsome film (shot by the French cinematographer Benoît Delhomme) has a habit of placing actors of craggy demeanor in careful groups, as if posing them for a Walker Evans photograph,” said reviewer Richard Corless back in May.

The film is based on a book about the Bondurant family of Franklin County, in southwest Virginia, who were profitable bootleggers.

Today, Franklin County embraces its historical nickname of “the Moonshine Capital of the World,” selling souvenirs to tourists (but not moonshine, of course).

The whole topic of Virginia moonshiners got a lot of buzz earlier this year when the cable TV show *Moonshiners* debuted on Discovery Channel.

Critics, including local law enforcement officials, claimed much of the show was staged when it was shot in neighboring Pittsylvania County.

It showed modern-day “moonshiner” Tim Smith as he demonstrated traditional bootlegging techniques. (State officials said no actual moonshine was made or used on the show.) The series ended with Smith seeking investors for a legal distilling business.

Prohibition was the high-water mark for the illegal booze business.

The 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act made the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” for “beverage purposes” illegal, with the laws going into effect in January 1920.

The 21st Amendment repealed Prohibition in 1933.

But the practice of making homemade liquor dates back to the Revolutionary War era. The Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s was about the taxation of liquor.

The domestic distilled spirits tax was championed by Alexander Hamilton as a way to pay down the national debt.

Since then, battles over moonshine and taxes have been a continuing issue. Moonshine differs from other spirits, like barrel-aged whiskey, because it is designed to be made quickly, in a stronger form, to evade detection by the authorities.

The origins of NASCAR were in specially modified cars designed to carry bootleg whiskey and moonshine, and outrun police

vehicles.

But one fact is still up for dispute:
Is Franklin County really the
current Moonshine capital of
America?

In 1950, American Magazine said
North Wilkesboro and Wilkes
County in North Carolina were
named the “moonshine capital of
America.” Its local racetrack was
one of the first NASCAR venues.

A New York Times article from
2000 showed that despite which
county is the home of moonshine,
[it was still a thriving business in
modern times.](#)

“Once a sideline of dirt-poor
farmers who made whiskey in 50-
gallon stills to get by, moonshining
is now carried on here with 800-
gallon stills, sometimes 5 or 10
linked like railroad cars, in a well-
organized, high-profit business,”
the Times said about business
operations in southern Virginia and
North Carolina.

Moonshine arrests still occur in the
Virginia and North Carolina area.

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