

Gentlemen Bootleggers: The True Story of Templeton Rye, Prohibition, and a Small Town in Cahoots

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Readers with local knowledge will appreciate the variety of photos, from Henry Hospers to the Pizza Ranch. Multiple images capture the changing downtown business district. The captions include references to landmarks and street names to help readers orient themselves to the current town. Outsiders get an insider's view of a particular midwestern small town's material development from a village to a more diversified town. All readers will benefit from the careful selection and analysis of the photos. The captions for the 200 photos tell the story with a historical sense of the larger context of the developments in the town. These captions should serve as a model for others who use photographs in their work, from authors to historical museums to genealogists.

Gentlemen Bootleggers: The True Story of Templeton Rye, Prohibition, and a Small Town in Cahoots, by Bryce T. Bauer. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014. 282 pp. Map, illustrations, source notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Bill R. Douglas of Des Moines has written about World War I-era Iowa and Iowa's religious history. Full disclosure: he doesn't drink spirits, rarely drinks wine, but *is* fond of beer.

I approached *Gentlemen Bootleggers* expecting a romp about bootleggers, with the possibility of gleaning some information about Prohibition. Instead I got a fully formed social history of a small western Iowa town and its environs, from World War I to the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment – with, of course, an emphasis on alcohol and its governmentally mandated scarcity. I also learned from researching the subtitle that *cahoots* was not, as I suspected, of Punjabi origin, but Old French for “in the same hut.” That seems to have had surprising resonance in early twentieth-century Carroll County, Iowa.

Gentlemen Bootleggers is, secondarily, a tale of two Iowa Herbert Hoovers. One left the state and accumulated enough wealth to be able to drink legally in the Belgian Embassy while a cabinet member during Prohibition, ran successfully as a dry for U.S. president in 1928, and modified his position to support legal beer during his reelection campaign – his defeat should, of course, be attributed to other issues. The other Herbert Hoover stayed in Iowa as a blacksmith and invented a recipe for whiskey flavored with rye that would catch the attention of a thirsty but still discriminating public. That the latter Hoover would succeed was the result of successful branding and resourceful organizational skills. (Perhaps that description could apply to the more prominent Hoover as well.) Here Joe Irlbeck came in to provide the strategic

combination of decentralized production and centralized distribution that proved crucial in marketing an illegal product. It helped that a homogeneous German Catholic population—even including a monsignor—considered the enterprise more congenial than the federal mandate.

By *gentlemen* in the title Bauer means not a social class but the opposite of *gangster*; his contrasts to Capone in Chicago, and even the scene in Des Moines, argue for the moral superiority of rural values of solidarity. Certainly the episode of Irlbeck and his nemesis, federal revenueur B. F. Wilson, conversing on the street and agreeing to disagree with a handshake, without either relenting from their respective jobs, seems impossible to imagine in Chicago and improbable in Des Moines. The source for this encounter, an oral history tape of Joe and Laretta Irlbeck, probably deserves more skepticism than Bauer gives it. As Bauer also points out, other rural Iowa bootleggers were not so gentle or so scrupulous.

Bauer argues that the agonies of the 1920s rural depression were mitigated in Carroll County by Irlbeck's imaginative and immensely profitable bootlegging operation. One might quibble with his description of the outlier counties in Iowa that voted for Al Smith in 1928. Bauer attributes Plymouth County's vote to being adjacent to Sioux City (139). I suspect it was due more to a combination of Catholic votes and the extreme agricultural depression in Plymouth County; Bauer does later cite Ferner Nuhn's article in the *Nation* documenting the Farm Holiday uprising in Plymouth County.

The recent accusation—after the publication of the book—that the contemporary incarnation of Templeton Rye may not be based on the Prohibition-era recipe or made in Iowa after all, raises the question of what Irlbeck would have thought about that: whether hustling government regulators or providing quality product would be paramount. I suspect that he would have thought it a false choice and wanted both.

In any case, my initial expectations were correct: this is a very entertaining, as well as informative, read.

The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America, by Edward White. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 377 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 hardcover.

Reviewer R. Tripp Evans is professor of art history at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Grant Wood: A Life* (2010).

Nickolas Muray's 1925 photograph of the writer and artist Carl Van Vechten neatly captures his subject's charismatic complexity. Dressed