

"Queen of the Mountain Bootleggers" dies at age 101

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Maggie Bailey, known as "The Queen of the Mountain Bootleggers," died of complications from pneumonia Saturday at Harlan Appalachian Regional Hospital. The Kentucky legend, who began selling moonshine when she was 17 and was still selling alcohol from her modest home at Clovertown in Harlan County when she was 95, was 101.

Over and over again, often despite a preponderance of evidence against her, Mrs. Bailey beat charges of illegally selling alcoholic beverages. Juries just would not convict her.

"Everybody knew her and she had helped everybody. Why do you bite the hand that feeds you, as the old saying goes," said Helen Halcomb, who is married to Mrs. Bailey's nephew.

Mrs. Bailey was well-liked and well-respected, and she often helped poor Harlan Countians, buying coal to heat their homes in the winter and giving them grocery money so they would not go hungry, friends said. Mrs. Bailey put several children through college.

Anybody who wanted to get elected went to see Maggie Bailey, Halcomb said. "She was very influential. She had power," she said.

Former Gov. Albert B. "Happy" Chandler was among the many politicians who paid Mrs. Bailey a visit while campaigning. During one of his campaigns for governor he told her, "Mag, if you can help me get elected, I'm going to buy you some shoes," Halcomb said. "Sure enough, when he got elected he sent his lieutenant governor in here with some new shoes."

'A delightful lady'

While she spent money on other people, Mrs. Bailey lived like a pauper, Halcomb said. For years, Mrs. Bailey, perhaps appropriately, wore a uniform with the name "National Distillery" over a breast pocket when she greeted her customers. One of Mrs. Bailey's sisters worked at the distillery in Louisville and handed down her old uniforms to Mrs. Bailey, Halcomb said. "I represented her for a number of years. I always thought she was a delightful lady," said U.S. District Judge Karl Forester.

"She was an expert on the Fourth Amendment. She knew the laws of search and seizure as well as any person I've known," he said.

Forester recalled once representing Mrs. Bailey on bootlegging charges at six trials on the same day. "We had six acquittals at three different courts in the same day," he said. On another occasion Mrs. Bailey lost in a circuit court trial, but the conviction was overturned on appeal, Forester said. "I know that she must have been hauled into court at least 100 times...I do not remember a single time that she was convicted," said Harlan lawyer Eugene Goss, who represented Mrs. Bailey many times.

"I don't care what the evidence was, the juries would not convict her."

He said that even state police troopers loved her, and law enforcement officers "finally quit trying" to catch her at illegal activities.

"She was very adroit. She had a million different places to hide it," Goss said of the moonshine. "She had a labyrinth of buildings all around her dwelling." Often, search warrants for her property were thrown out because they weren't written to include certain buildings, he said. "That happened about every time there was a case," he said.

Starting young

Mrs. Bailey once told Halcomb that she started bootlegging to support her family. She helped raise five younger siblings. Later, Mrs. Bailey helped raise two nephews after their father was killed at the Battle of the Bulge in World War II.

"Maggie, she didn't have a lot of school education but Maggie educated herself," Halcomb said. Mrs. Bailey read every newspaper she could get her hands on and was always watching news on television, she said.

"She could converse with you in anything you wanted to talk about. She was very intelligent," she said.

Mrs. Bailey was imprisoned at a federal reformatory for women in Alderson, W.Va., from May 1941 to May 1943 for selling moonshine. The federal indictment said she had 150 half-gallons of moonshine on hand at the time she was charged.

In the 1960s, Mrs. Bailey found herself dealing with federal authorities again, this time after police claimed to have found hundreds of thousands of dollars in a foot locker at her home.

The incident was written about by the late Lexington lawyer Bill Bagby in a book called *Queen Maggie Outfoxes the IRS Evil*.

The Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal carried articles about the case. "She was a great lady. In fact, she was one of the finest people I ever met. In all the years I represented her, she never lied to me," said Harlan lawyer Otis Doan.

"She was a very well-spoken person. I never heard her curse. She sold whiskey, but she wouldn't sell it to anyone who had a whiskey problem," Goss said.

Any time Mrs. Bailey heard about someone doing something reprehensible she would say: "I'm glad I'm just a good old-fashioned bootlegger," Goss said.

Mrs. Bailey, the widow of Lora Bailey, is survived by her nephew, Don Halcomb, and several great-nephews and great-nieces.