

Mrs. Joseph McDowell, Sr. (nee Ruth Montgomery)  
August 19, 1978

Ruth McDowell is sitting here. We're going to talk about the old bootlegging stories that she knows about.) Montgomery household was a mile from Chestertown, and there were six of us children. All of us liked to read, but had very few books. Therefore, the little library that was in Chestertown was a boon to us. Now it was only open from seven to nine at night in the wintertime and it was run by Miss Ella Potter who was the local schoolteacher and occasionally by Edith Vetter, who took her place when she couldn't come in. Now living a mile out of town, we had to walk, and we found that in the wintertime, we still had to walk. Now this was called - Route 9 was called the bootleg trail, and of course that meant that the bootleggers coming from Canada down through Route 9 to New York City or Albany or whatever had to pass by our house and we had to walk the road on which they went. Now these bootleggers were mostly using big, old Dodges, Packers, or Cadillacs. The seats were taken out of the back, and they were very well laden with booze. Now these were what they called touring cars. There was no such thing as glass sides or anything as we have today. They had sides with - I don't know what you call them - canvas sides with isinglass or something in them but there was no glass sides. Well, anyway, as we walked along the road, at that time of course Chestertown had absolutely no lights of any kind. The few houses, which was about five on the way to town, they had kerosene lamps for their lighting purposes. So the roads were dark, summer or winter, but we walked along the roads. Now as these cars would come along the road, not too many of them, of course, but they had a loud motor, and we would hear them coming and the only thing that we could do was to jump to the side of the road and jump up onto the snow banks. Now the banks were not as they are now, because at that time there was no such thing as snowplows. (So how did you know that they were the bootleggers?) Well, because nobody else was fool enough to be on the road. Now it doesn't seem possible, but in those days very few cars were on the road because there were no snow tires, and the roads weren't plowed that well. And people just didn't go out. There was really not much place to go anyway at night. But you didn't get out, and the so banks had been plowed by horses or maybe a small truck or something of that thing, but the roads were not in very good shape. But anyway, we would jump from the road up onto the hard snow bank. Now different people would say to my mother, "Aren't you afraid to let the girls walk to town in the dark like that", because we didn't even carry a lantern. That wasn't the thing to do. You just didn't carry a lantern, and we probably didn't own a flashlight. But anyway, she said no, because, she said, those bootleggers have more on their mind than stopping to pick up girls, and in those days I don't think people stopped to pick up girls anyway. We didn't hear of that type of thing then. But anyway, she had no fear for us and we had no fear of the bootleggers except that they were in a hurry and, not having lights, we didn't linger on the road; we just jumped to the snow bank.

Now another little incident that happened: now my mother was anti-beer, anti-liquor, anti-everything of that type. She was a Carrie Nation if ever there were one. But one day, we lived next to Charlie Baker and he had a barn on the right-

hand side of the road going toward town. And she was out on the porch, and she saw this bootleg car coming. You could tell them, a Model A, you knew exactly what they were 'cause the backs were weighted down so. But she thought . . . and she figured that it was going so fast and all of a sudden they got to Charlie's barn and they just didn't wait for anything, they scooted right in to the place where the hay mow usually is, there's a big wide spot. And he dashed right in there and pulled the door shut just as fast as he could. Well, my mother was so furious, and she disliked alcohol in such a way, that she went in the house and she got a pencil and a paper, and she walked down the road and she got to the barn door. And the man was there, and she just opened up the barn door and wrote down the license number. Well, you never saw any car go out of that barn so fast in your life, which is just what she wanted. She didn't want any ... she figured that they thought that the federal men were chasing them and so they were going to get into the first barn that came along. Well, they did, but they got out just as fast, almost, as they went, because they figured she was going to turn them in. Which I don't know whether she would or not, but anyway, she didn't want them around.

Now, another little item, this was later on when my sister and I were in college and we came home one September - late September or early October. There were, as usual, about eight of us piled into Clifford Raymond's old Dodge touring car, and we went to a dance up on the Schroon Lake road which is just this side of Scaroon Manor. It was a dance hall up on the left and I would say it was opposite what I think used to be called The Cedars. And they had an orchestra, and anyway we had a real good time, and the dances in those days were from nine until two. Well, we were on our way home, probably about two o'clock, and we had just passed Loon Lake Colony turn on the way to home when a big probably a five-cell flashlight flashed in front of us and Cliff slowed down. Now our car was an old Dodge touring car, and there were eight of us piled in it, so it probably was weighted down and it looked very similar to a bootleg car. But Cliff slowed down, but he didn't stop. And all of a sudden, about - I don't know how many shots, we were too excited to know - but at least probably three or four shots were shot into the air. Well, we stopped, and we stopped in a hurry. And then these men came over, and we saw that they were not federal officers as we thought when the shots went off. But they were highjackers, and somebody was looking to highjack the load of liquor, which we were not. And when they looked in, they made some remark, and said, well, I guess you're not the one we're looking for, because they didn't want eight young people. They just wanted liquor. And so, anyway, we were excited and we went home but we never forgot it. (Do you think they were local people'?) No, I doubt it, because the hijackers usually were people from Albany or New York, or down in the Catskills, and they were picking up liquor which they would sell to the resort areas like down in the Catskills where they would have hotels and that sort of thing. They would pick it up and then they would take it down there and sell it. No, I had no idea that they were local people. But if they had been, we could never have recognized them; we were too excited.

Now one other little item was that this bootleg business was the basis of a play put on, I believe, for the benefit of the Odd Fellows because some of us local people were in it. And it was called "Bootleg Trail" and it was based on the runs of the bootleggers between Montreal and New York. It was a comedy, and it was put on by (Jack Lynn Shoals?). Now Jack Lynn ran a restaurant in Warrensburg, but he had been an old-time vaudeville man, and he was quite famous in this area for his plays, and because of his knowledge. He would undertake to use local people to put on the plays for the benefit of whoever wanted to use it. And I think that's all that I can do.