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## **Bootlegging Aliens: Unsanctioned Immigration and the Underground Economy of Smuggling from Cuba during Prohibition**

by Lisa Lindquist Dorr

Adolinae Marcinkas seems an unlikely candidate to be derided as an illegal immigrant. She had lived in New Jersey from 1907 to 1921, married there and had two children who were American citizens. But for some reason, her husband convinced her that life would be better back in their native Lithuania, and in 1921 he sent her and her children there, promising that he would soon follow. He never did, and in December 1922, she decided to return to the United States on her own, hoping to reunite with her husband. As a woman traveling alone, however, entering the United States was no easy task. In 1921, Congress had passed the first immigration restriction laws seeking to limit the influx of Eastern European immigrants through a system of quotas. She also faced another obstacle under the law prohibiting the entry of persons likely to become a public charge. A woman with no visible male provider caring for two children could be barred from entry because she lacked an identifiable means of support. Rather than taking her chances at a legal port of entry, where she would be subject to questioning by an immigration inspector who might send her

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away, Adolinae Marcinkas elected to bypass U.S. immigration laws entirely. Instead, she and her children traveled to Havana, Cuba and arranged to be smuggled to the Florida coast. After several days sick at sea—she could not remember exactly how many—and after being transferred from a “big” boat to a smaller boat, eventually she, her children and the other six illegal immigrants on board were landed on a deserted, wooded shore in the middle of the night. With no other transportation in sight, Adolinae and her children began to walk. She estimated that they walked three or four miles until her children grew too tired to continue. In desperation, she flagged down a passing automobile. It turned out to be a police car.<sup>1</sup>

Adolinae Marcinkas was arrested, as were the other undocumented immigrants who came to shore with her, and they were taken to jail in Tarpon Springs. Two years later in 1925, Adolinae and her daughter Helen testified for the prosecution against Sotiros Targakis, a Greek immigrant who was charged with smuggling immigrants into Florida. Targakis, like many other Greek men in Tarpon Springs, worked as a sponge diver off the Tarpon Springs coast; and like more than a few, he participated in what United States officials termed an alien smuggling network that operated between Cuba and the United States during Prohibition. Marcinkas’s attempt to enter the country outside the formal immigration process was replicated numerous times in the 1920s, when a confluence of factors made the smuggling of immigrants from Cuba into the United States both possible and profitable. While she was caught, and presumably returned to Cuba after her testimony, countless other would-be immigrants successfully made their way from Cuba to the shores of Florida, navigated north through Florida’s growing railroad and highway network, and disappeared into the interior of the nation.

Indeed, from the moment Congress passed laws restricting immigration, thereby creating the category of “illegal immigrant,” profit hungry smugglers and would-be immigrants took advantage of Cuba’s international connections, close proximity to Florida

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1 U. S. Sotirios Targakis, Case No. 1173, Box 11, U. S. District Court of the Southern District of Florida, Tampa, RG 21 National Archives and Records Administration, Southeastern Regional Facility, Morrow, GA (hereinafter NARASE), p. 11-21 and p. 25-27 of trial transcript.



and other advantageous factors to evade immigration laws.<sup>2</sup> They were largely able to do so because the framework of a smuggling network already existed, created by Prohibition laws that banned the manufacture, sale, and importation of alcoholic beverages into the United States. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment fostered the development of a smuggling industry whose purpose was to transport high-end distilled spirits to the United States from islands in the Caribbean to Florida beaches, where they traveled by new land routes to thirsty Americans to the north. When profits from booze became risky and the passage of the most stringent immigration restriction law in 1924 increased the number of desperate immigrants who could not enter the United States under the law's provisions, "bootlegging aliens" or "smuggling illegal immigrants" quickly expanded as an alternative source of profit for smugglers. Cuba's independence, long-standing international connections, lax immigration laws, and appetite for official corruption allowed the two illicit contraband cargoes to coexist, often on the same boats. "The smuggling of aliens is second only to the smuggling of liquor in this vicinity," one Florida Customs official reported, "and the two are so closely aligned that the inspection of aliens forms an appreciable part of the activities of Customs officers in the Florida district."<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration Service and the Prohibition Bureau sought to stem

2 A note on terminology: Records that provide the basis for this article routinely refer to immigrants who entered the United States without appropriate documentation or without inspection as "illegal immigrants" or "illegal aliens." They refer to the process by which such immigrants were brought into the country as "immigrant smuggling" or "alien smuggling." Contemporary readers would avoid such derogatory terms, noting that while actions can be labeled illegal, people cannot. Also, terms like "alien" in and of themselves imply that these migrants were strange, unfamiliar, disturbing and distasteful, and thus unassimilable or undesirable as citizens. I will avoid using their terminology where possible. I also do not use the term "trafficking" or its variants in this article because the evidence only occasionally suggests that smugglers exploited migrants, rather than merely providing them a service. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many officials tasked with enforcing American immigration laws in this period, and who created the sources documenting the legal and official interaction with undocumented immigrants, might very well have embraced the negative associations created by the term "illegal alien."

3 From Thomas J. Dublin, Customs Agent in Charge, Tampa, Florida, to the Director, Special Agency Service, U. S. Customs Service, undated but probably 1925, Miscellaneous Data 1923-1925, Box 46, Records of the Intelligence Division, 1922-41, Records of the U. S. Coast Guard, RG 26, NARADC (Herein after USCGID).



both forms of contraband smuggled in from the islands with varying degrees of success.

The duration of an organized smuggling network through Cuba was ultimately short-lived, and would largely disappear with the arrival of the Great Depression and the end of Prohibition. Nevertheless, it expands our understanding of the period in several ways. It illuminates the ability of smugglers to take advantage of the state's development to further their own interests, making the same improvements that facilitated Florida's tourist industry into the means of an underground economy in smuggling. It also places the historic ties of Cuba and Florida at the center of one of the earliest iterations of the category of the "illegal immigrant," well before it became racially encoded by association with Mexican migrants.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s, these so-called illegal immigrants came from countries such as Greece, England or Syria, as well as from countries whose citizens were barred by law from American citizenship. These would-be immigrants were barred for largely bureaucratic reasons—they were excluded by previous disqualifications (such as moral turpitude) or because they could not be accommodated under a nation's immigrant quota. Many Americans, however, considered them intruders, breaking into the nation through the "back door." From around the world, these

4 Mae M. Ngai's work provides a sophisticated analysis of the process by which immigration policy created new categories of persons according to race and legal status. See Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Claudia Sadowski-Smith examines what she calls the "Illegality Spiral" that helped associate certain immigrant groups with illegal status. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, "Unskilled Labor Migration and the Illegality Spiral: Chinese, European, and Mexican Indocumentados in the United States, 1882-2007," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (September 2008): 779-803. Erika Lee explores the smuggling of Chinese, though only gives brief mention of Cuba as a smuggling route. Ngai also mentions, but does not examine in any sustained way, smuggling from Cuba, though both Lee and Ngai explore the creation of categories of illegality in immigration. See Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 162, 193, 194 and Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 62. There are several articles that examine the smuggling of illegal immigrants more specifically. See Lawrence Douglas Taylor Hansen, "The Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco and the Smuggling of Chinese Immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Journal of the Southwest* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 37-61; Emily Ryo, "Through the Back Door: Applying Theories of Legal Compliance to Illegal Immigration During the Chinese Exclusion Era," *Law & Social Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-146; and Robert Chao Romaro, "Transnational Chinese Immigrant Smuggling to the United States via Mexico and Cuba," *Amerasia Journal* 30, no. 3 (2004): 3-36.



migrants converged in Havana, and participated in a market that offered passage to Florida, and thus the Promised Land. At the same time, this underground economy in immigrant smuggling revealed the fluidity of the nation's boundaries. Immigration restrictions, according to Ngai, helped to solidify state sovereignty by giving the federal government authority to determine who could enter the nation's borders. While she argues that this power extended the border metaphorically into the interior of the country, it simultaneously extended the border outwards from the coastline of Florida, across the Florida straits and into the capital of Cuba. While the sea boundary between Cuba and Florida was seemingly more tangible than the arbitrary geographic line that represented the land borders between the United States and its neighbors to the north and south, the coastal boundary's length and width made it virtually impossible to patrol completely. The U.S. government sought the help of the Cuban government to enforce American laws and prevent would-be immigrants' departure from Havana, miles away from the border itself. Thus the ninety miles of water between Cuba and Florida as well as areas within the city of Havana became a quasi-border on which the U. S. government, through the powers extended to the Coast Guard, sought to intercept would-be immigrants, well before they encountered the nation's actual borders on Florida's shores.<sup>5</sup>

While the Prohibition amendment that created a vast smuggling network was enacted after a lengthy temperance movement targeting demon rum, its passage did not mean that alcohol became unwanted by or unavailable to Americans. West Coast drinkers bought booze smuggled in from Mexico to the south and British Columbia to the north. Hundreds of boats brought liquor across the Detroit River from Canada, where distilleries dotted the riverbank across from Detroit. The ports of St. Pierre and Miquelon and Halifax in the Canadian maritimes provided ready supplies of liquor shipped from Europe for transport to the northeastern coast of the United States. In the South, the islands of the Caribbean served as the home port of numerous ships supplying alcohol to

5 Andrew Wender Cohen argues that efforts by the United States to prevent smuggling represented a state that was strongest at the margins, facing outward. This article extends that understanding into the 1920s. See Andrew Wender Cohen, "Smuggling, Globalization and America's Outward State, 1870-1909," *Journal of American History*, 97, no. 2 (September 2010): 371-398. See also Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).



the Gulf Coast from Galveston to Key West and even as far north as New York. European makers of cognac, whiskey, scotch, gin, vodka, wine and champagne shipped thousands of cases of liquor to ports like Havana, knowing that they would eventually end up as contraband in the United States. Smuggling liquor was a profitable business. Cases of liquor selling for four to eight dollars in Havana could be bought from a smuggling ship (or rum-runner) by what were known as "contact boats" for as much as \$65 per case, to be sold again on-shore for as much as two hundred dollars a case; and the contents of the bottles were often watered down to extend the supply and increase profits further. A full cargo of booze could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.<sup>6</sup>

Prohibition agents sought to enforce prohibitions on manufacturing, transporting and selling booze within the United States, aided by the efforts of local law enforcement and the nation's courts, who were charged with apprehending and prosecuting violators of the law. The U.S. Coast Guard, with the help of U.S. Customs Bureau, was charged with preventing the importation of alcohol on the high seas, a vast expansion of their respective duties. The Coast Guard sought to prevent and arrest ships and crews conspiring to transport illegal booze into the United States. According to the weekly "Notes on the General Situation" compiled by the chief Coast Guard Intelligence officer, the Coast Guard kept track of, on average, 240 ships suspected of engaging in the smuggling trade. Enforcing American laws on the high seas, however, proved no easy task. Shipping liquor from Canadian, Cuban, and Bahamian ports was perfectly legal. As long

6 Everett S. Allen, *The Black Ships: Rumrunners of Prohibition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co: 1965), 31. Most of the literature on smuggling during Prohibition focuses on the lore of smuggling, rather than scholarly assessments of the trade. There is surprisingly little scholarly attention paid to Prohibition enforcement and its consequences for international relations. There are a few books that explore smuggling on the high seas, but these tend to focus on the Northeast. There is also a short historiography on the role of the federal courts in Prohibition enforcement, and on diplomacy with Great Britain. See Allen, *The Black Ships*; Harold Waters, *Smugglers of Spirits: Prohibition and the Coast Guard Patrol* (New York: Hasting House Publishers, 1971); and Malcolm Willoughby, *Rum War at Sea* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1964). On Prohibition enforcement, see John J. Guthrie, Jr., *Keepers of the Spirits: The Judicial Response to Prohibition Enforcement in Florida, 1885-1935* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). On diplomacy, see Lawrence Spinelli, *Dry Diplomacy: The United States, Great Britain, and Prohibition* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1989). For the role of smuggling, or "clandestine commerce" over the course of American history, see Andreas, *Smuggler Nation*.



as a legal destination (someplace other than the United States) was listed on the cargo manifest, foreign port authorities claimed they could do little to discourage the illegal export of liquor to the United States. With the ships available, the routes well-known, and the strategies for evading law enforcement already well-established, adding undocumented immigrants as cargo was merely a logical extension of this trade.

And demand for entry into the United States away from the eyes of immigration inspectors was increasing. Federal efforts to limit immigration created a growing population of foreigners who found themselves barred from entering the United States. Beginning in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act generally prohibited the Chinese from entering the United States, and the infamous 1907 "Gentlemen's Agreement" effectively halted Japanese immigration. Specific classes of "undesirable" immigrants, such as paupers, prostitutes, the mentally unfit, and those convicted of crimes of moral turpitude had been excluded from immigrating through a patchwork of restrictions since the 1890s, enforced through inspections by immigration officers at U.S. ports of entry. Finding piecemeal restrictions ineffective, however, worried nativists sought a more comprehensive solution. The immigration laws in the 1920s, rather than targeting "unfit" individual immigrants, sought to staunch the flow of immigration through increasingly strict quota systems based on national origins, decreasing the overall number of immigrants from countries considered undesirable. The net effect of the acts passed in 1921 and 1924 was to require foreigners desiring to enter the United States to obtain a visa from American consulates abroad (who would presumably review and reject immigrants who failed to meet entry requirements) provided that country had not met its yearly quota.<sup>7</sup> While the primary task of preventing undesirables from arriving in the United States occurred at American consulates abroad, their efforts were supported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. With the laws in place, immigration agents around the nation's periphery, with the help of state and local law enforcement, pursued and

7 The literature on immigration and immigration restriction is extensive. For an overview, see Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: Harper, 2009). Ngai's work provides a sophisticated analysis of the process by which immigration policy created new categories of persons according to race and legal status. See Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, passim.



apprehended suspected would-be immigrants who attempted to enter the country without presenting proper documentation to or answering the questions of an immigrant inspector. Just as the Volstead Act sought to reduce the flow of “undesirable” beverages to a trickle, so too the 1924 Act sought to staunch the flow of undesirable immigrants. As the *Washington Post* noted in 1924, “a cargo of rum in the wrong hands can do a lot of damage. But a cargo of undesirable aliens can easily become a national calamity.”<sup>8</sup>

As with the inability of Prohibition to end Americans’ thirst for strong drink, the laws restricting immigration did not necessarily reduce the numbers of immigrants who desired to come to the so-called Promised Land. Soon after the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, smugglers devised methods for bringing Chinese in to the United States. European immigrants utilized the services of padrones, who arranged entry into the country and employment in the nation’s expanding industrial economy. Other immigrants crossed the land borders with Canada and Mexico alongside Canadian whiskey and Mexican tequila.<sup>9</sup> Legal efforts to staunch immigration almost invariably led to increases in what Patrick Ettinger calls “unsanctioned immigration” by excluded groups whose resourcefulness and determination astounded and vexed authorities.<sup>10</sup> Thousands of them, like Adolín Marcinkas, made their way to Havana in the hopes that they could be successfully smuggled into the United States by boat. Thus the simultaneous effort by the government to restrict booze and to restrict immigration created the conditions for an expanded and organized black market fueled by smugglers who dealt in one or both commodities. Would-be immigrants became commodities in

8 “Smuggling Aliens into the U.S.A.,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 1924, p. MS3.

9 See Lee, *At America’s Gates*, and “Enforcing the Borders: Chinese Exclusion along the U.S. Borders with Canada and Mexico, 1882-1924,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (June 2002): 54-86; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); William H. Siener, “Through the Back Door: Evading the Chinese Exclusion Act along the Niagara Frontier, 1900 to 1924,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 34-70; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 127-166; Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigration Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921-1965,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 69-107.

10 Patrick Ettinger, “‘We Sometimes Wonder What They Will Spring on Us Next’: Immigrants and Border Enforcement in the American West, 1882-1930,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 159-181.



a new market; and in precisely the same way Prohibition created a black market for booze, immigration restrictions spurred the development of an underground economy that sought to provide services to meet would-be immigrants' needs—provided they could pay for them. And Florida became tied to a transnational black market in the flow of people and liquor.

Florida seemed an especially logical landing point. It had approximately 1,000 miles of coastline, much of it undeveloped. Reports on smuggling in the state frequently noted that nature itself had made Florida uniquely suited to handle contraband.<sup>11</sup> Its inlets and waterways were often shallow near the shoreline, facilitating the navigation of small, shallow-draft boats, while preventing deeper-keeled Coast Guard crafts from pursuing them. Its mangroves and foliage near shore created hiding places for trucks and automobiles sent to unload cargo. Its economic development created the means to move cargo northward. The effort by hotel and railroad magnates like Henry Morrison Flagler and Henry Bradley Plant to build glamorous tourist resorts for the wealthy, as well as the rail lines to transport guests, not only fueled the development of tourism, it created the transportation infrastructure for smuggling as well. By the turn of the twentieth century, Flagler's railroad extended to Miami on the east coast of Florida. Plant created thousands of miles of track of his own, including a line running from Jacksonville to Tampa.<sup>12</sup> The decade before the passage of Prohibition also saw a steady increase in the state's network of highways to bring less wealthy travelers to the beaches by car. Highways connected the east coast of Florida to states to the North. The completion of the Dixie Highway linking Florida to Chicago opened in 1915. And according to Tracy J. Revels, by 1930 Florida could boast of "3,800 miles of roads surfaced with clay, grouted brick, macadam, concrete, or asphalt."<sup>13</sup> In short, the same roads and railroads that brought northern tourists to Florida also transported liquor and unauthorized immigrants north to the rest of the country.

A smuggling route between Cuba and Florida was itself a logical choice for what authorities called "alien smugglers." Only ninety miles south of Florida, and exempted from quota restrictions,

11 Frank Buckley, *Survey of Prohibition Enforcement in Florida* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1931), 4: 101.

12 Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 50-55.

13 *Ibid.*, 67-68.



Cuban citizens were free to travel without passport to the United States and remain there for as long as six months. Tourists from the United States traveled to Cuba for vacations, arriving aboard ferries that operated regularly from several points in Florida, New Orleans and New York, while Cubans traveled back and forth to the United States. And while Cubans migrated to the United States to live, Americans also relocated and made Cuba their home. Cuba also was well-integrated into the flow of goods around the world. The island had long-standing economic and trade relationships with the United States; one of the most prominent liquor wholesalers to rum-runners, for example, got his start brokering sales of Cuban-grown onions and potatoes to markets in the United States.<sup>14</sup> More important, Cuba was itself a common destination for immigrants from around the world. Cuba had one of the largest communities of Chinese immigrants in the Americas, and absorbed numerous émigrés from Spain. It also attracted a substantial stream of Jewish immigrants from both Europe and the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> Cuba's ties to liquor production also facilitated its role as a smuggling center. A significant contributor to Caribbean rum production, Cuba became a primary location for smuggling illicit high end spirits into the United States. Cuba's smuggling industry operated aboard schooners and motor boats (as well as the ferry system and even some aircraft) and easily absorbed a new form of human contraband created by changes in American immigration laws. Indeed, the agencies charged with interdiction of both kinds of contraband speculated that smuggling aliens provided a potentially lucrative addition to the bottom line.

Cuban immigration policies facilitated the country's establishment as a depot for immigrants hoping to land in the United States illicitly—without going through the standard inspection process at an immigration center—on Florida's coastline. After American intervention in the war for Cuba's independence from Spain, Cuba adopted immigration codes similar to those in

14 Letter from Charles S. Root to HJ Anslinger, Division of Foreign Control, Bureau of Prohibition, April 30, 1928. Correspondence relating to Individuals, Rum-Running Era, 1927-30, Box 56, USCGID.

15 Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2-4. See also Robert M. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993) and Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).



the United States.<sup>16</sup> Foreigners arriving in Cuba were subject to inspection upon arrival, and potential incarceration at Tricornia, Cuba's immigrant detention facility located across the harbor from Old Havana. American officials noted, however, the common practice of immigrants bribing officials for release from detention, or to escape inspection entirely, allowing virtually unimpeded access to the country for those who could pay.<sup>17</sup> Propaganda in European countries targeted those who desired to go to America by touting Cuba as an alternate destination with fewer quota restrictions than the United States.<sup>18</sup> Intercepted European immigrants admitted a variety of origins and destinations, indicating the far reach of Cuba's attraction as a smuggling staging point.<sup>19</sup> Chinese nationals, though subject to similar restrictions to entry as in the United States, nonetheless requested legal entry as students and merchants, and joined an established Chinese community in Cuba. Other immigrants testified that they hailed from Russia, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and the Middle East, as well as throughout Asia. Cuba's own immigration reports suggested that the adoption of quotas in the United States in 1924 increased the number foreigners arriving in Cuba, ostensibly seeking it as a way-station before attempting travel to Florida. Comparisons between immigration by country in 1923 and 1924 showed a substantial increase in immigration from Germany, "Austria-Hungary," Greece, Japan, "Checo-Slovak," Lithuania, "Yugo-Slavia," Syria, Turkey, and Palestine, in many cases more than doubling, and some cases even tripling, the number of migrants in the span of a single year. In 1924 more than 60,000 of the 85,000 people entering Cuba came from countries subject to quota allotments in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

16 Duvon C. Corbitt, "Immigration in Cuba," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1942): 304; Alejandro de la Fuente, "Two Dangers, One Solution: Immigration, Race, and Labor in Cuba, 1900-1930," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 51 (Spring 1997): 30-49.

17 Secret Report of Captain P. A. del Valle to General L. C. Andrews, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, September 21, 1925, p. 3-5, Folder "Cuba Report, 1925," Box 64, USCGID.

18 Marcin Kula, "Those Who Failed to Reach the United States: Polish Proletarians in Cuba during the Interwar Period," *Polish American Studies* 46, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 19. See also Levine, *Tropical Disapora*, 33.

19 U. S. v. Frank Parker et al., Case No. 1526, Box 15, Tampa Cases, 1918-, U. S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, RG 21, NARASE. Statements of residence appear on pages 26, 2, 14, and 20 of the transcript.

20 Report of Inspector Feri F. Weiss and Inspector Joseph D. Mitchell In re: Cuban Smugglers, April 14, 1925, p. 1-2, Folder "Habana Counsel," Box 68, USCGID.



To American officials, these numbers suggested a growing industry. In December of 1924, just after the enactment of the most stringent quota law, Carleton Bailey Hurst, American Consul-General in Havana wrote to the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C. about the growing problem of immigrant smuggling in Havana. "It is well known that Habana is probably the most important center of the smuggling of immigrants and rum into the United States."<sup>21</sup> By 1926, the smuggling of would-be immigrants was a well-established business.<sup>22</sup>

Bootlegging aliens and rum-running were easily combined as smuggling ventures. Some of the most well-known Cuban smugglers, such as Facundo Sardinias and Miguel Sastre, dealt not only in smuggling immigrants and booze, but occasionally dabbled in the smuggling of narcotics as well.<sup>23</sup> Testimony and intelligence information occasionally placed both illegal booze and undocumented immigrants on the same boats that came surreptitiously to Florida shores. The schooner *Parkir* took on 3,500 cases of liquor in Havana, then sailed to Cojimar where it loaded an additional cargo of immigrants before it proceeded to the east coast of Florida.<sup>24</sup> Immigrants confided to authorities that they were forced to unload liquor on southern beaches, as smugglers used one commodity to move another.<sup>25</sup> And stateside distributors who wanted only to deal with one commodity could be forced to deal with both. One bootlegger in Florida, interested

21 Carleton Bailey Hurst to Secretary of State, December 26, 1924, Vol. 519 (1924), 624.4, Records of Foreign Service Posts, Consular Posts, Havana Cuba, RG 84, National Archives and Records Administration—College Park (hereinafter NARACP).

22 See for example, "Alien Smuggling Adds to Profits of Rum Row Ships," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 25, 1924; "Smuggling Aliens into U.S.A.," *Washington Post*, September 14, 1924; "Describes War on Alien Smuggling," *New York Times*, June 30, 1925. See Letter from William A. Whalen, Inspector in Charge to Immigration Service, Jacksonville, FL, July 7, 1921, Case File No. 55166-31, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC (hereinafter INS); Report to Commissioner-General of Immigration, Department of Labor, Washington DC from Thomas Kirk, District Director of Jacksonville, Florida, January 16, 1926, Case No. 55396/10, INS.

23 Memorandum to division of Foreign Control, September 4, 1928, Folder "John Amoros Bastre" Box 63, USCGID.

24 Report by Agent 1001, p. 3, p. 1 respectively, Cuba Report, 1925, Reference D. Box 64. USCGID.

25 Letter from G.H. Hilldreth, Jr., Collector, U. S. Customs Service, Tampa, FL, to W.W. Gober, U. S. Attorney, Jacksonville, FL, March 2, 1925, Miscellaneous Data 1923-1925, Box 46, USCGID.

only in alcohol, testified that he was forced to bring immigrants to shore before he was allowed to offload cases of booze from a rum-running boat.<sup>26</sup> That these two smuggling enterprises might join caused little surprise among officials tasked with staunching the flow of both commodities to American shores.

Government officials in Havana, Florida and Washington located and followed intricate immigrant and alcohol smuggling networks, and identified several preferred strategies for smuggling people. Reports of smuggling attempts, both foiled and successful, abound in the Immigration and Naturalization Service papers, as well as in the U. S. Coast Guard Intelligence files. Spanning the period from 1921 into the 1930s, these reports present a picture of an extensive network of smugglers who freely exchanged one commodity for the other. Operating out of Havana with contacts along the Gulf Coast from Texas as far north as New York, most sought to land their contraband along the Florida coast. Disrupting smuggling was a complex operation that combined the efforts of local law enforcement officials in southern states, Coast Guard crews and officials, state department officials in Washington, and consular officials and employees in Cuba and elsewhere, all aided by immigration agents and informants on the ground.<sup>27</sup> By 1925, officials had amassed a working knowledge of the most common methods of smuggling immigrants.<sup>28</sup>

Authorities estimated that approximately 200 immigrants per week were successfully smuggled into the United States from Cuba, an influx of more than 10,000 immigrants per year, each paying on average between \$200 and \$250 per trip, though costs could vary.<sup>29</sup>

26 Testimony of J.W. Fredericy, in *U. S. v. Danton Claramunt and J.W. Fredericy*, U. S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, Tampa, Case No. 1664, Box 17, NARASE.

27 The sources that provide information on the smuggling of undocumented immigrants into the United States are located in the following archival collections: The U. S. Coast Guard Intelligence Files, and Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (housed at the National Archives in Washington DC), Consular and Embassy records of the U. S. State Department (housed at the National Archives facility in College Park, MD), records of the U. S. District Courts in the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama (housed at the NARA Southeastern Regional Facility in Morrow, GA).

28 The following description of smuggling operations is taken from the report of Feri F. Weiss and Inspector Joseph D. Mitchell to the Hon. W.W. Husband, Commissioner General of Immigration, Washington DC, April 4, 1925. Folder "Habana Counsel," Box 68, USCGID.

29 It is of course impossible to assess the accuracy of these numbers, as officials had no way to gauge the exact number of successful entries into the United States. The relative success of immigrant smuggling likely varied over time



Some would-be immigrants entered the United States as stowaways on board the ferries or steamer ships that regularly ran between Cuban ports and Florida, the source of much small-scale liquor smuggling as well. Customs officials, for example, reported in 1927 the discovery of 19 immigrant stowaways and 115 quarts of alcohol being smuggled aboard the SS Munleon ferry on one trip between Havana and Tampa.<sup>30</sup> Immigrant stowaways were brought on board by complicit crew members. Passage to the United States was rarely pleasant as a stowaway—they were reportedly hidden in the ship's coal bin, in the coal pipes, in tunnels and holds, wedged among the cargo, in the water tanks wearing life preservers, the airshafts, or if they were lucky, the crew quarters or anchor compartments. Women occasionally traveled to the United States posing as the wife of a crewmember or passenger, paying a substantial sum for the comfort of a cabin, but also running the risk of unwelcome attentions from their "husband" while in transit. Other men and women traveled as regular passengers, carrying falsified Cuban citizenship papers or birth certificates. Those without documents were smuggled off the ship on rope ladders as the ship waited in quarantine before docking or impersonated crew members helping passengers unload their baggage. Immigrants posing as passengers or crew, holding fraudulent papers and traveling in relative comfort, paid the highest price for passage, around \$300 to \$400 per passenger.

A far larger number of immigrants sought entry to the United States aboard smuggling ships that plied the waters between Cuba and the Florida coast. As early as 1921 Southern newspapers reported that smuggling immigrants was a growing sideline of rum smugglers. One Florida newspaper described "an infant industry which bids fair to become secondary only to bootlegging...and it is said the two operations are carried on in conjunction in many cases."<sup>31</sup> Ships bringing in booze or immigrants might be sailing

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in response to law enforcement efforts to stop the trade. Officials, for example, were becoming increasingly confident that they had shut down many operations in 1926, only to note in 1929 that the industry was once again thriving. They also acknowledged that ending operations in one area, either in Cuba or along Florida's coast, often merely pushed the activity to another area.

30 Memorandum from Treasury Department, Bureau of Customs, Tampa, September 1, 1927, Folder "Alien Smuggling Information" Box 50 USCGID.

31 *New Smyrna Daily News*, "Frustrate Attempt to Bring in Chinese", August 19, 1921, p. 1.

schooners that spent several days at sea, or high-speed motor launches that could make the trip to the Florida coast in a matter of hours. Schooner smuggling represented the most dangerous method of travel "owing to uncertainty of the weather, the leaky condition of the average smuggling craft, and the unscrupulous character of the schooner captains and crew;" and was also, unsurprisingly, the cheapest, averaging \$100 per person.<sup>32</sup> High speed gas launches offered a speedier trip and could take anywhere from fifteen to thirty immigrants per trip, clearing an estimated \$3,000 to \$5,000. Most times they were able to outrun Coast Guard vessels or lose them in the shallow waters off the Florida Keys and along the coastline. Operators made easy money, charging about \$180 per passenger. Whether in a sailing schooner or motorized launch, this nautical method commanded most of the attention of authorities, and resulted in the largest numbers of apprehensions and prosecutions in U. S. courts. One such ship was the *Reemplazo*, seized by the Coast Guard in May 1920 as it lay at anchor off Clearwater, Florida. It was held for illegally landing 17 Chinese nationals as well as carrying 3,000 quarts of whiskey and 15 demi-johns of alcohol. Its captain and crew were charged in separate cases of violating the Prohibition laws and the immigration laws. They were acquitted of smuggling immigrants, but convicted on the liquor charge and sentenced to a year in prison.<sup>33</sup>

To government officials in the United States, immigrant smugglers were frustratingly successful at their trade. One Tampa smuggler, Mario Pelli, well known for smuggling liquor and immigrants, boasted that in 1923 alone, he single-handedly landed over 1,400 immigrants on Florida's shores. By all accounts, Pelli ran an efficient, successful, and profitable operation. With two boats under his command in 1923, he allegedly ran four full cargoes of immigrants to the United States per month. In 1924, he added four additional boats to his fleet. In 1925, he consolidated his operation by opening a hotel and restaurant "The Genova" that also served as his Havana headquarters. Like all good businessmen, Mario Pelli succeeded because he provided a reliable service. He virtually guaranteed his customers safe landing on American shores, assuring them he had purchased the protection of officials

32 Report of Inspector Feri F. Weiss and Inspector Joseph D. Mitchell, In re: Cuban Smugglers, April 4, 1925, p. 12. Habana Counsel, Box 68, USCGID.

33 U.S. Magil Estevez et al., Case. No. 519, 580, and 581, US District Court, Tampa, NARASE.



in both Cuba and the United States.<sup>34</sup> According to an undercover American agent in Havana, by 1926, Pelli had a widespread and well-deserved reputation in Florida, Cuba and Europe: "He has many hundreds of recommendations and references of Italian families. His fame is great and reaches Italy and even France. He never cheated an alien and when his attempts of contraband failed, he always very honestly returned the money aliens paid him in advance and suffered all the losses himself."<sup>35</sup> To drum up additional business, Pelli traveled to Europe to recruit potential immigrants and arrange for their transport to Havana.

Pelli's operation was unusual in its comprehensive business model. Most smuggling outfits allowed European steamship lines' emphasis on Cuba's openness to immigration and its cosmopolitan reputation to do their marketing for them. One advertisement pointed out "you will clearly see that Cuba is a logical and ideal New-World destination for those Old World Immigrants who are eager to avail themselves of the wide opportunities and advantages and the broad equality of America, but who are, because of filled quotas or other misfortunes, denied admittance to the United States." This 1922 advertisement for the French Line that appeared in Europe was forwarded to the Department of State. Embassy officials also learned that steamship companies frequently provided the names of well-known smugglers in Cuba to their passengers.<sup>36</sup> Once in Cuba, foreigners from countries with small immigration quotas for entry into the United States recounted being approached by recruiters in Havana's parks or seeing flyers around the tourist areas of the cities. Locating a smuggler then was quite easy. Two Jewish men who were captured on a train in Florida told authorities that they had traveled to Cuba after having attempted to obtain visas legally in Russia, Germany, and France. While sitting in Central Park in Havana, they overheard two other Jewish men talking about a smuggling operation and were able to get the business card of the leader.<sup>37</sup> Other would-be immigrants

34. Letter to Commander on situation in Florida from Bill (William Kelly, Prohibition Agent in Miami to Commander Root), undated (probably December 1928), Folder "William Kelly's Reports," Box 66, USCGID.

35. Report from agent 1002 in Havana to Coast Guard Intelligence Division, Folder "Special Agent William Kelly's Reports, 1925-27," Box 67, USCGID.

36. Letter from Williamson S. Howell, Jr., Charge d'Affaires, Havana, Cuba to the Secretary of State, January 8, 1923, Case File 55166 31-B, INS.

37. Report "Smuggling of Aliens and Narcotics through Cuba: Bureau File No. 39-48," p. 2, unsigned and undated, Case File 55166/31-A, INS.

spoke of being approached by fellow countrymen who offered their services. Jim Glico, a Greek man who was traveling from Greece to Mexico with a stopover in Havana, recalled being approached by another Greek man who asked if he would like to go to the United States. After an initial reluctance, he decided he did.<sup>38</sup>

Concerned officials in Cuba and the United States noted the flood of foreigners entering Cuba, alarmed that many of these so-called tourists ultimately made their way illegally into the United States, since they seemingly disappeared from the population in Cuba.<sup>39</sup> Eliminating the underground economy surrounding immigrants intending to enter the United States illegally, however, required that officials be able to distinguish between potential immigrants and legitimate tourists to Cuba. It was a murky distinction, as many future immigrants "passed" as legitimate tourists until they could secure passage to the United States. Complicating things, organizations focused on the smuggling of both alcohol and immigrants were intertwined with the larger tourism industry in Havana. Smugglers utilized familiar cafes and hotels to conduct their business, and took advantage of area roads and beaches. Some, like Mario Pelli, began businesses—his Hotel Genova—to house his illegal activities. Other smuggling outfits became associated with particular Havana merchants. Immigration officials in the United States listed the Hotel Aurora, the Hotel Domenico, the Centro Gallego, and the Grand Continental as businesses associated with smuggling syndicates.<sup>40</sup> Liquor smugglers were regularly in their lodgings so they could be easily located—George Schwartz who owned several well-known smuggling ships typically stayed at the Lafayette Hotel when he was in Havana. Other smugglers operated out of Neptuno Bar on Neptuno Street, the Sazarac on San Rafael, and Del Barrios American Bar.<sup>41</sup> Coast Guard Intelligence officers estimated that

38 Affidavit of Jim Glico, November 23, 1926, taken in Attorney General's Chamber, Nassau, Bahamas, Folder "Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41," Box 50, USCGID.

39 See for example, Letter to Commissioner-General of Immigration, Department of Labor from Thomas Kirk, District Director, June 7, 1924, Case File 55396/10, INS.

40 Report from Immigrant Inspector of New Orleans (Thomas Worden? Signature unclear) to Commissioner of Immigration, New Orleans, February 27, 1923, p. 2, Case No. 55166/31-B, INS.

41 List of smugglers and information about hangouts apparently drawn from Weiss investigation, untitled and undated, Folder "Cuba Smuggling Information, Box 58, USCGID.



the “California Hotel Gang” had smuggled approximately 800 immigrants from Havana’s Hotel California.<sup>42</sup>

Like their established business locations, smugglers utilized established financial procedures to conduct their business. Large scale liquor wholesalers who sold booze to smuggling ships generally only accepted cash, but they financed their own liquor purchases from European distributors at regular banks because selling liquor was a legitimate business in Cuba. Financing the smuggling of undocumented immigrants involved a different process, though it too was largely a cash business. Would-be immigrants paid varying rates for transport to the United States depending on their perceived risk as cargo. By 1925 or so, the market was established enough to charge largely standardized prices. Cost, however, varied by race. Invariably, Chinese nationals attempting to enter and stay in the United States paid the highest prices, usually between \$800 and \$1000, probably because they were so readily identifiable, and thus a risky cargo, though simple discrimination likely also played a role. Europeans paid an average of about \$200 per person. To finance their trip, passengers usually paid smugglers a portion of the transport fee in Havana before they left, and then deposited the rest with specific Havana businessmen. A report to the embassy in Havana detailed the arrangements. Noting that two establishments, a grocery store and a café in Havana, handled deposits for immigrants, authorities traced the financial transactions: “The proprietors of these stores are given in deposit the amount of \$200 for each alien and they charge \$20 for their services. The officer of the crew taking charge of the alien receives \$50 in advance payment. If the alien lands safely upon the return of the vessel he [the officer] receives the balance \$150, if the alien is caught and deported to Habana he [the “alien”] gets back the amount of \$150.”<sup>43</sup> The Bureau of Immigration outlined the general practice with more detail: “When the aliens are landed they give receipts to the smugglers and the smugglers return to Cuba and present these receipts” to obtain the deposited balance of cost of transport.<sup>44</sup> U. S. Coast Guard ships and immigration officials occasionally captured would-be immigrants in Florida, and

42 Note for Files, August 25, 1927, Folder, “Alien Clean-Up—Cuba,” Box 60, USCGID.

43 “Report” undated, probably 1924, 811.1, Vol. 519 (1924), Records of Foreign Service Posts, Consular Posts, Havana Cuba, RG 84, NARACP.

44 Unsigned, Undated report, 3 pages, Case No 5166/31-A, INS. Quote on p. 2.

deported them back to Cuba, as the law required undocumented immigrants to be returned to where they came from, rather than their country of origin. The immigrants merely retrieved the balance of their payment in Havana, and waited to try again. American officials frequently expressed frustration that they had little ability to prevent immigrants from making multiple attempts to enter the United States illegally, noting immigrants who had made the trip across the Florida straits three and four times unsuccessfully, only to return to Cuba to try again.<sup>45</sup>

Bureaucrats saw undocumented immigrants as law violators, along with the smugglers who provided them passage. The language in these sources betrayed little sympathy for either smugglers or the people who sought transportation to the United States, though it usually avoided the vitriol that undocumented immigrants, or immigration in general, spurred in the popular press. Preventing the smuggling of migrants was, in the eyes of officials, a problem of enforcement much like the enforcement problem involved in preventing the smuggling of liquor. That they enforced Prohibition did not mean that officials spurned alcohol where it was legal. Indeed, officials in the United States frequently corresponded with agents in Havana about their liquor preferences and reminisced about drinking together and with other American government officials in Havana.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, government officials tasked with enforcing American laws rarely viewed would-be immigrants as the innocent victims of traffickers largely because they believed the immigrants themselves actively sought to circumvent American laws. The media, on the other hand, saw undocumented immigrants as a more dangerous and malevolent threat, promising to contaminate the wider American population. An *Atlanta Constitution* editorial, for example, called immigrants “worthless human scum,” while George Creel characterized them as “a broad and turgid stream [that] floats little more than

45 Letter to Mr. I.F. Wixon, Deputy Commissioner, INS from James E. Maker and Harry A. Ritzke, INS Ellis Island, November 30, 1936, Case File No. 55607/457, INS.

46 Conversations about shared drinking figure in the extensive correspondence between Charles Root, Commander of Coast Guard Intelligence and Henry Kime, an undercover agent in Havana. They also frequently bemoaned the bureaucratic difficulties in getting the U.S. government to reimburse agents in Havana for their expenses as well as pay them their salaries. See USCG records of the Intelligence Division, Kelly's Reports, Box 68, USCGID.



human wreckage.”<sup>47</sup> Article titles like “Breaking into the United States” constructed immigrant smuggling not just as a violation of immigration laws, but of the nation itself, and illegal immigrants as undesirables whose arrival represented a home invasion.<sup>48</sup> The *Saturday Evening Post* ran several articles in the 1920s arguing the “[illegal immigrant] came in by the second story ... instead of by the front door of the quota. He really sneaked in .... He comes in like a burglar yet he wants U. S. to give him an engraved guest invitation.”<sup>49</sup> Unsanctioned immigrants thus threatened the well-being of American society in much the same way that prohibitionists believed alcohol did. Both forms of cargo potentially poisoned all that middle-class, white, native-born Americans held dear.

Yet many of the foreigners who sought entry into the United States did not fit such descriptions. Adolaine Marcinkas believed herself to be a respectable wife and mother who had already established her ability to live appropriately in the United States. There were also women, like Fannie Tunic, who traveled alone from Russia to Tampa to live with her brother-in-law as a single woman appropriately under the supervision of her family.<sup>50</sup> There were even a few families who managed to illegally make their way to the United States with their small children in tow. Some of them had been legal immigrants and residents apparently successful enough to afford passage back to their country of origin. They then found themselves unexpectedly caught in the web of restrictions created by the new immigration laws, and unable to return. Tom Koronas, after living in Detroit for twelve years, returned to visit Greece in 1922. Upon his arrival, the U. S. consulate in Piraeus assured him that he would have no trouble obtaining a visa for his return. In 1923, however, he was drafted into the Greek army, extending his stay in Greece for twenty-eight months. Despite his efforts to return legally, he was unable to obtain a visa to the United States because Greece had reached its quota limit. He decided to

47 “Appearance of Typhus at Any Point is Feared,” *Anniston Star*, February 19, 1921, p. 1; James C. Young, “Breaking in to the United States,” *World’s Work* 49 (November 1924): 55. George Creel, “Melting Pot or Dumping Ground,” *Collier’s*, September 3, 1921, 9-10; George Creel, “Close the Gates!” *Collier’s*, May 6, 1922, 9-10.

48 Young, “Breaking into the United States,” 53-58.

49 Henry H. Curran, “Smuggling Aliens,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 31, 1925, p. 12.

50 U. S. v. Frank Parker et al., Case No. 1526, Box 15, Tampa Cases, 1918-, U. S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, RG 21, NARASE, p. 14 of trial transcript.

take his chances with a smuggler.<sup>51</sup> These immigrants had arrived initially at a time when restrictions on immigration were few, and they freely participated in continuing interaction with family in their countries of origin, including travels home for visits. But they could not return to the United States unless they could be accommodated under their country's quota limits. For them, smugglers represented a welcome alternative means of entry.

Arrival in America for these migrants, however, was neither easy nor guaranteed, and Florida's sparsely settled tropical coast offered hazards of its own. Numerous would-be immigrants were caught as they landed, watched as their smugglers were arrested for conspiracy, and then were held until they testified at trial before being deported back to where they began (usually Cuba though occasionally back to Europe). Smugglers also landed immigrants in remote locations on the Florida shore, requiring them to fend for themselves. Immigration officials found bedraggled, mosquito-bitten and starving would-be immigrants who had been dumped on deserted beaches in the Keys. One group was shipwrecked miles from shore and rescued by a commercial ship.<sup>52</sup> Another group reported being left to spend two uncomfortable days out in the open in April in Key West before being transported to a train bound for Miami.<sup>53</sup> There was even a report of thirty-five skeletons discovered in Florida, people who had starved waiting for a boat that was supposed to transport them to the mainland.<sup>54</sup> Others paid for passage but never made it to the States. Fraudulent smugglers would request payment, stow the unsanctioned immigrants in the hold, sail along the coast of Cuba for several hours until they reached a deserted spot, and then unload their cargo, claiming they had reached the United States, deserting them with a cheery wave.<sup>55</sup> Even worse, smugglers might very well

51 U. S. v. Tom Koronas, Case No. 1410, Box 14, U. S. District Court of the Southern District of Florida, Tampa, 1918-, NARASE, pp. 8-10 of trial transcript.

52 See U. S. v. John Middleton, Case #342, District Court for the Southern District of Florida—Key West, Box 5, Criminal Case Files 1908-53, U. S. District Court Records, NARASE.

53 U. S. v. Armando Alfonso, Case #438, District Court for the Southern District of Florida—Key West, Box 9, Criminal Case Files, 1908-53, U. S. District Court Records, NARASE.

54 Report of Inspector Feri F. Weiss and Inspector Joseph D. Mitchell, "In re: Cuban Smuggling," April 4, 1925, p. 20, Folder "Habana Counsel," Box 68, USCGID.

55 "Big Swindles Bared in Alien Smuggling," *New York Times*, June 29, 1925; "Hoax Defrauds Aliens Seeking Entry into US," Clipping dated December 15, 1926; Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41, Box 50; USCGID.



jettison contraband cargo, either booze or immigrants, when Coast Guard ships appeared. Because “bootleg alien” cargo could testify against smuggling rings, some were thrown overboard or were killed outright when smugglers believed they spotted authorities.<sup>56</sup> Thus, despite the well-organized aspects of smuggling as a business, it remained illegal, and for would-be immigrants caught between a panicked smuggler and the Coast Guard, the results could be fatal. For most, however, the greatest risk they faced was being returned to Cuba to try again.

Prohibition laws and immigration quotas thus collapsed people and booze into smuggle-able commodities. Smuggling operations utilized the same organizations, businesses, and transportation networks to accomplish both, all of which was possible because of the close proximity of Florida’s coast and the extensive international networks that connected Cuba, the United States, and the rest of the world. The two forms of contraband, however, did present some differences. Booze required transport to the consumer, and the files of law enforcement are filled with notations of booze that successfully made it to Florida’s shores from Cuba, only to be confiscated on the highways or railroad cars while it traveled to its final purchaser. Immigrants, at least theoretically, could move themselves. As one government official reported, “aliens” were usually “landed and then left to their own resources.”<sup>57</sup> Once would-be immigrants reached Florida, the experience of immigrating without documents or inspection transformed according to the immigrant’s ethnicity. Smuggling European immigrants, many smugglers insisted, was much easier. Able to blend in with local populations, they could make their own way to their final destinations where they often disappeared into the existing immigrant community.

Chinese nationals, by contrast, faced different challenges. Knowing that many Americans viewed all Asians with distrust,

56 Coast Guard Files contain clippings from newspapers in both the United States and Cuba reporting the murder of illegal aliens. They also included memos reporting murders as part of their information on suspected smugglers. See *Havana Post*, October 14, 1927; *La Prensa*, September 15, 1927, Alien Clean-Up—Cuba, Box 60, USCGID. See also “Report 17 Chinese Slain,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1927. The murder of Chinese nationals traveling illegally from Cuba to the United States also figures prominently in the plot of Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* (1937).

57 Report of Weiss and Mitchell, “in Re: SMUGGLING,” March 16, 1925, p. 2, Folder “Habana Counsel,” Box 68, USCGID.

smugglers believed that Asians would inevitably be viewed as being in the country illegally. This was not always the case. The most convenient route from Asia to the Caribbean, parts of Latin America, and perhaps even Europe, was through the United States. Many Chinese sailed from Asia to San Francisco, disembarked and then traveled by railroad through the United States to Florida to reach ships that would take them to destinations further south, or made the reverse trip. Nevertheless, knowing that their mere presence in the United States raised suspicion, Chinese seeking to be smuggled often drew up their contracts with smugglers to stipulate that they would be delivered to a particular location, usually a large east-coast city with a substantial Chinese population that made it easier for the illegal alien to assimilate and "pass" as legal.<sup>58</sup> Networks focusing on traffic in Chinese immigrants thus had to extend their operations beyond Florida into the interior of the United States.

Smuggling networks created procedures that sought to transport contraband with as little attention as possible. Some organizations utilized the newly built train lines to transport would-be immigrants or alcohol to a larger metropolitan area. Others utilized cars driven by hired drivers. Groups weighed the dangers of being spotted on the road by a nosey local against the dangers of being spotted by an immigration official on a train.<sup>59</sup> Smugglers agreed that often the most difficult part of their journey was from the beach to what officials called "the bottleneck" of northern Florida, where there were only a finite number of possible routes north. Immigration or Prohibition officials often waited at well-used bridges and roads stopping vehicles suspected of carrying either booze or immigrants.<sup>60</sup> To avoid attracting attention, most smuggling groups divided their cargo into small groupings for travel on shore.<sup>61</sup>

58 Letter from Assistant Commissioner Joseph H. Wallis, to Commissioner of Immigration, New Orleans, March 14, 1933, Case No. 55166-31B, INS. For a discussion of Chinese nationals using the American railroad system to transit through the country, see "Smuggling Aliens and Narcotics through Cuba," June 28, 1922, p. 5, Case No. 55166/31-B, INS.

59 Letter from Thomas Kirk, Inspector in Charge, Jacksonville, to Commissioner-General of Immigration, May 10, 1922, Case No. 55166/31, INS.

60 "Smuggling Activities in State Held Low Despite Growth of Florida Cities," Undated clipping, Case File No. 55396/10, INS.

61 Letter from Thomas Kirk, District Director, Immigration Service, Jacksonville, to Commissioner-General of Immigration, July 30, 1925, Case File No. 55396/10, INS.



Local attitudes along the route shaped the risks that smugglers faced. While support for prohibition fluctuated across the country and even within communities, the attitude among Americans toward the smuggling of immigrants, officials suggested, was almost entirely a function of one's relationship to the incoming immigrants themselves. Folks along the Coast, who feasibly benefited from the business, might turn a blind eye to smuggling, but the further removed from the trade, the less sympathy smuggling evoked. Away from immigrant communities and inland from the Florida coast, any toleration apparently evaporated. "The ordinary 'Florida cracker' or 'countryman' is very much against the foreigner," one customs official wrote, suggesting that in that particular area—inland from Pensacola in very rural and sparsely settled country—most undocumented immigrants had been apprehended by vigilant locals.<sup>62</sup> Hostility towards immigrants appeared frequently in letters sent to various government agencies from around the country as well as from communities caught in the traffic. They protested the appearance of foreign workers, or assumed any Asian must be in the country illegally. One business owner in Fort Pierce, Florida, took his concerns directly to the White House, writing President Warren G. Harding prior to the passage of restrictions in 1924. It was too easy, he argued, for "skilled runners" to land unwanted immigrants and "chaperone [sic] up into the North where they can go in hiding." Tougher immigration laws, he insisted, would prevent enclaves of ethnicities "within in our midst, made up of unassimilated and unassimilatable [sic] material."<sup>63</sup> Floridians protested the presence of what they called "undesirables and paupers" arriving from Cuba and pointed out that Cuba provided an easy entrance to "the kind of immigrants that the U. S. would like *not* to have come to this country," suggesting that the smuggling of immigrants was common knowledge in the area.<sup>64</sup>

Official efforts to thwart immigrant smuggling, however, took place in an environment that was not uniformly hostile to immigrants. Many would-be immigrants traveled with the intention of joining well-established immigrant communities already in the

62 Letter from A.G. Watson Jr. Acting Collector, U. S. Customs Service, Tampa to the Secretary of the Treasury, October 16, 1924, p. 4 Folder "Miscellaneous Data 600-800-listed as 1923-1925," Box 46, USCID.

63 Letter to President Warren G. Harding from B. Yorkstone Hogg, September 19, 1921, and forwarded on to the INS. Case File 55166/31A, INS.

64 Dr. C.E. Berkshire, to INS, December 19, 1922, Case File No. 155166/31-73; H. Gross to the INS, October 8, 1923, INS.

United States—indeed some had even been members of these communities before they decided to return to their country of origin. Those communities helped facilitate networks that aided immigrants, sent them money in Cuba or helped with the fees smugglers charged for transportation. Officials frequently looked with suspicion on particularly visible immigrant groups along Florida's coast that they believed helped to smuggle others into the country. Officials kept a wary eye on the community of Greek sponge divers who made their living from boats off the coast of Tampa and Tarpon Springs, Florida, one of whom was Sotirios Targakis who transported Adolinas Marcinkas. He was a captain of a sponge boat when he was accused of smuggling nine immigrants into the United States in 1925. When the prosecutor cross examined Nicholas Amourginos and Nick Janeski, two witnesses for the defense, the only question he asked them both was whether or not they were Greek, implying their support for the defendant stemmed from their common Greek ethnicity.<sup>65</sup> Officials were no less attentive in their tracking of networks supporting Chinese illegal immigrants. They investigated businesses, such as Chinese restaurants and laundries, that they believed harbored unauthorized immigrants.<sup>66</sup> They did not doubt, and indeed frequently confirmed, that immigrant groups were sympathetic with the efforts of smugglers.<sup>67</sup>

Faced with a steady stream of smuggling attempts, federal agents bemoaned the anemic efforts of Florida's law enforcement and judicial officers to prevent smuggling. Local sheriffs accepted bribes from smuggling syndicates and looked the other way as boatloads of booze and immigrants landed on area beaches. Judicial officials responsible for trying smugglers of either variety were allegedly corrupt as well. Coast Guard Intelligence estimated that only one or two counties in Florida were free from corruption

65 U. S. v. Sotirios Targakis, Case No. 1173, Box 11, U. S. District Court of the Southern District of Florida, Tampa, RG 21, NARASE, pp. 30, 32 of trial transcript.

66 Letter from K. Hughes (signature illegible), Commissioner of Immigration, Philadelphia to Commissioner-General of Immigration, August 11, 1922, Case No. 55166/31, INS.

67 See Memorandum from Commanding Officer TALLAPOOSA to Commander, Gulf Division, RE: Gulf Division commander's telegram 1027-1600, November 1, 1924, TALLAPOOSA folder, Box 82, USCGID; also Letter from A.G. Watson, Jr. Acting Collector, U. S. Customs Service, Tampa to the Secretary of the Treasury, October 16, 1924, p. 3 Folder "Miscellaneous Data 600-800-listed as 1923-1925, Box 46, USCGID.



in their law enforcement and judicial systems. A memo from the Intelligence Division to the Commandant of the Coast Guard called St. Johns and Flagler counties “thoroughly rotten.” The sheriff of Duval county was “in the smuggling business and is a partner of one Paxton who is a notorious smuggler.” Smuggling in Brevard County was financed by a wealthy woman who was purportedly a niece of the local judge. Palm Beach County was “so rotten that I cannot attempt to describe the situation in detail. Even the Deputy Collector of Customs...[was] not above suspicion.” Dade County was “absolutely uncivilized,” as was the county surrounding Key West. Only Lee and St. Lucie County officials were described as clean.<sup>68</sup> U.S. District Courts were apparently little better. Coast Guard vessels were instructed to tow seized vessels to either Mobile or Savannah when possible, because the District Courts outside of Florida were more likely to prosecute smuggling offenses.

Whether the commodity in question was immigrants or liquor, federal government agencies, local law enforcement and the military branches occasionally found themselves stepping on each other's toes. While there was some evidence of cooperation,<sup>69</sup> different agencies routinely dismissed the worthiness of their counterparts in other agencies. Coast Guard officers disdained Prohibition agents.<sup>70</sup> Immigration officials circulated allegations made by the Ft. Lauderdale sheriff that at least one Coast Guard unit nearby was involved in the smuggling of “liquor, narcotics, and Chinese.”<sup>71</sup> The Special Deputy collector of Customs in Tampa, Florida, in a meeting with the head of Coast Guard Intelligence, shared his frustration when two carloads of Customs agents, attempting to prevent the landing of a well-known smuggler outside of Miami, were detained by local police for alleged traffic violations as they sped to the landing site. They were only allowed to proceed after proving their authority.<sup>72</sup> Rocky collaboration across law enforcement agencies, in short, often worked to prevent effective enforcement of the law.

68 Memo from Intelligence Officer to Commandant, December 12, 1927, Box 10, USCGID.

69 *New Smyrna Daily News*, May 5, 1926, p. 1.

70 Commander R.L. Jack to Charles Root, August 30, 1929, Folder “Florida Seizures,” Box 9, USCGID.

71 Letter to District Director of Immigration, Jacksonville from George Harris, Acting Commissioner-General, April 27, 1927, Case File 55166-31H, INS.

72 Memorandum to File, Charles Root, June 24, 1927, File “Florida Affairs—Confidential,” Box 9, USCGID.

Such difficulties were compounded by the bureaucratic procedures put in place as part of the effort to prevent smuggling. One continuing bone of contention was the inability of court officials to secure the appearance of witnesses from government agencies. The Coast Guard received one blistering complaint from a U.S. Attorney in Florida who laid out his frustrations. In so doing, he made plain the bureaucratic inefficiencies that made it difficult to secure needed testimony, especially of Coast Guard officers who were frequently at sea patrolling for smugglers. The District Court in Jacksonville attempted to convene a grand jury to bring indictments in several smuggling cases. A week before the grand jury was scheduled to convene, the court sent a list of its required Coast Guard witnesses to the Bureau of Customs at Tampa with instructions that Customs should make arrangements to have the Coast Guard officers in Jacksonville to testify. On the day Coast Guard officers were supposed to testify, the court learned that the Bureau of Customs had never taken steps to notify the Coast Guard officers and make sure they would be in court. The District Attorney noted that as a result of the failure of the witnesses to appear, eight to ten cases had to be dismissed.<sup>73</sup> The complex procedures that required communication across multiple agencies, even though each agency operated within Florida and ostensibly worked together to enforce Prohibition and immigration restriction, hindered operations. Certainly this was not true in every instance. The Coast Guard did successfully seize numerous ships, some of whom were towed into port and their captain, crew, and owner successfully prosecuted. But bureaucratic frustrations considerably diluted the power to stem the tide of illegal cargo arriving on American shores.

American officials were certainly frustrated by domestic bureaucracy, but they faced additional difficulties. One factor that made Cuba such an ideal base for smuggling operations beyond proximity and trade relations was the specter of corruption that surrounded the Cuban government.<sup>74</sup> Cuban officials themselves allegedly profited from the smuggling trade. American government officials frequently debated the good faith of Cuban efforts to stem

73 Letter to Commander Charles Root from W.P. Hughes, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the southern District of Florida, October 22, 1928, Folder "Miscellaneous Data," Box 48, USCGID.

74 Rovner notes that sustained political instability and an environment in which illegality is rarely or inconsistently punished can foster widespread corruption, which in turn allows smuggling to flourish. Such was clearly the case in Cuba in the 1920s. Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, 6-7.



the tide of immigrants heading to American shores from the island in violation of United States law. Intelligence officers also noted that several smuggling operations bribed Cuban senators and Treasury officials to obtain “protection” and assistance for their operations, and look away when consular officials from other Latin American countries provided forged documents declaring ships had unloaded their illegal cargo in non-American ports.<sup>75</sup>

The experience of smugglers aboard the *Antonio Barba* illustrates the problems of law enforcement across national boundaries. The *Antonio Barba* was a Cuban tugboat with a captain and crew of seven. According to the *Havana Post*, she set sail from Cuba on September 10, 1925, clearing port on a charter cruise ostensibly to “take a look at Cuba from the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.” As soon as she was out of the harbor, however, the boat took a turn for Florida. Cuban authorities immediately grew suspicious, alerting the Naval Station at Key West. An American Coast Guard ship sighted the *Antonio Barba* as she was attempting to unload more than forty passengers onto a Florida beach. When confronted, these passengers told Coast Guard officers that they had paid for passage with the understanding that they would be landed along the Florida coast.<sup>76</sup> The Coast Guard boarded and impounded the *Antonio Barba*, arresting her crew. Convicted in October of violating immigration laws in federal court in Tampa, the *Barba*’s crew was sentenced to two years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta.<sup>77</sup> Some American officials considered the conviction of the crew of the *Antonio Barba* as a great victory. “The fact that six aliens—the crew of the *Antonio Barba*—were recently sent to the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta from Tampa is having a splendid effect,” wrote Thomas Kirk to the Commissioner General of Immigration. Along with the conviction of another well-known smuggler, Kirk believed officials had “smugglers somewhat checked.”<sup>78</sup>

75 Memorandum for Intelligence Files, August 14, 1928, Folder “Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41,” Box 50, USCGID.

76 This narrative appeared in the *Havana Post*, October 12, 1925, a summary of which appeared in Coast Guard files. Folder “Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41,” Box 50, USCGID.

77 Memo from Officer in Charge L.A. Yancey to Division Commander, “Crew of *Antonio Barba*, conviction of,” October 24, 1925, U. S. Coast Guard, Tampa Florida, Folder “Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41,” Box 50, USCGID. U. S. v. Sam Ferrera et al., case No. 1605, USDC Tampa, Box 17, NARASE.

78 Letter from Thomas Kirk to Commissioner General of Immigration, Department of Labor, November 24, 1925, Case No. 55396/10, INS.

Kirk's optimism was short-lived. Within three weeks of her capture, the *Antonio Barba* was released from custody and allowed to sail back to her home port with a new captain and crew.<sup>79</sup> Upon arrival, according to the *Havana Post*, the Cuban authorities again impounded the ship. "The boat has just reached Havana and the administration will keep it for its own use, and not return it to its former owners, who although not aboard the vessel when she was captured, knew of the plans and were willing to charter their vessel to smuggle aliens to the United States." The *Havana Post* cheerily assured its readers that the Cuban government was doing its part to punish Cubans who violated American laws. Charles Root, Commander of Coast Guard Intelligence, was not so sure. His scrawled note at the bottom of the transcript of the article conveyed his skepticism: "The above is a fraud," he wrote. "If the *Antonio Barba* was held at all it was because some Cuban official needed it for his own smuggling ventures."<sup>80</sup> Within a year, the *Antonio Barba* had once again come to the attention of American authorities. It had been sold to owners of another well-known smuggling outfit, renamed the *Coco*, and was engaged in smuggling liquor out of Cuban ports. It was finally put out of the smuggling business within a year, but only through the efforts of Mother Nature. It was sunk in Havana Harbor in the October 1926 hurricane that would decimate Miami as well.<sup>81</sup>

The *Antonio Barba's* smuggling career ended with the 1926 hurricane, as did those of numerous other smuggling ships. That same hurricane dampened Miami's development as a tourist mecca. But despite a momentary lull, the aspects that made smuggling between Cuba and Florida a profitable enterprise would continue for a few more years. Tied by international trading and travel relationships, Florida's location near Cuba, the physical features of its coastline, and the long miles of uninhabited beaches made it an ideal landing point for both human and spirituous contraband from Cuba. The development of rail lines and roadways to facilitate

79 From Officer In Charge L.A. Yancey to Division Commander, "Antonio Barba, release of," October 9, 1925, U. S. Coast Guard, Tampa Florida, Folder "Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41," Box 50, USCGID.

80 See note at bottom of transcript of *Havana Post* article, "Alien Smuggling Information, 1928-41," Box 50, USCGID.

81 Letter from L. C. Andrews to Secretary of State, October 18, 1926, Correspondence, Diplomatic Posts, Vol. 191 (1926), 811.4 Memos on Various Smuggling Ships, Diplomatic Posts—Cuba, RG 84, NARACP; Listing of smuggling ships, Havana, Cuba, June 3, 1927, p. 5, Habana Counsel Folder, Box 68, USCGID.



the expansion of tourism provided the means by which liquor and hopeful travelers could be transported to points further north. The willingness of many of its inhabitants to ignore the law allowed both commodities to slip through the net of the law enforcement. Despite the best efforts of American authorities to force Cuban officials to enforce American laws, the black market in transporting both liquor and immigrants continued. These factors would cease to matter only when the circumstances that made the 1920s a smugglers' heyday disappeared. That would happen with the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and arrival of the Great Depression, which vastly reduced the number of immigrants seeking entry to the United States via Florida. But for a time, the parallel restrictions on immigration and on the manufacture, sale, and transportation of high-end distilled spirits created the potential for a lucrative black market for smugglers. Would-be immigrants and liquor became profitable commodities for shipment, with the waters between Florida and Cuba a convenient transit point for both. This was no mystery to the various American officials tasked with enforcing prohibitions against both, who sought to extend American law enforcement across the Florida straits and into Cuba itself. The realities of their bureaucracies, however, made it difficult for them to act in concert against the illegal traffic. And regardless, they often confronted a local culture of law enforcement in both Cuba and Florida that tolerated, and even participated in, the dispersal of liquor and was often unwilling to interrupt their operations to deal with human contraband, even if they themselves shared the racist and xenophobic attitudes enshrined in immigration restrictions.

The potential of Florida as an entry point enabled the flow of illicit alcohol and would-be immigrants to become entangled, in the process connecting the state to a transnational commerce in goods and people that included Cuba and that continued despite the passages of laws to prohibit both. The not unexpected side effect of new legislation restricting immigration was the creation of a ready supply of immigrants eager to take advantage of an already existing market. The potential profit for smugglers encouraged them to respond to the growing demand for illegal entry from Havana into the United States through Florida. For immigrants, despite the risks of capture, deportation, or perhaps even death at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers, they crossed the globe regardless of the law. For law enforcement, the differing perceptions of the two forms of contraband made little practical difference. In the 1920s, they could not effectively stop either.