

Bootleg Cove

When I look back to prohibition days, I realize how lucky I am to be alive. Gangster bootleggers had no compunction about killing anybody — even a barefoot boy — who got in their way. And it was my fate to get very much in the way of a whole outfit of those gun-toting rats.

Even now I shudder at the thought of what they could have done to me that black October night. They could have riddled me with bullets from their snub-nosed automatics. They could have ground me to dust under their heavy sedans. Or, worst of all, they could have fed me to man-eaters in the middle of Calibogue Sound.

It all started late that afternoon, just before night set in. I was in the woods near the Bluffton Cemetery, comfortably perched in the top of my private chinquapin tree. I had found the tree the previous fall and had kept it a secret. In those days chinquapin trees were getting scarce and hard to find. I wanted this one to last a long time. Even the path that led to the tree — a half hidden rut in an abandoned wagon road long since grown up in bushes — was known only to me. Or so I thought, until I saw that big shiny Cadillac inching along through that old wagon road.

There was only one man in the car, and I figured he was crazy. Nobody in his right mind would plow a beautiful brand-new automobile through thick bushes just for the fun of it.

He drove the car into the clearing right by my chinquapin tree, turned it around and backed it up to the edge of a deep tidewater cove that cut into the woods from the river a half mile away. Then he got out and took a careful look down the cove toward the river, obviously expecting to see something coming from that direction.

Close behind the Cadillac another car appeared, then another, and another, until finally there were 11 of them lined up at the edge of the cove. They were all big cars, including Cadillacs, Packards and LaSalles, and only one man in each car. From first to last, they had rolled in so quietly that I hardly heard a spring squeak.

Hugging the tree like a trembling chameleon, I realized that I was trapped. The arrival of the first car had puzzled me. But by the time the last one rolled in, I had no doubt as to what was going on. To reveal my presence was to risk my life in the hands of some of the most dangerous men in the world.

Like everybody else in Bluffton, I knew that 'Scarface' Al Capone's liquor traffic had been using secret landings near the town for some

time. Repeatedly law enforcement officers had tried to surprise and arrest his hirelings. But they were too well organized. They seldom used the same landing twice, operated silently and swiftly at night with the aid of local paid informers and portable two-way radios, and were always several jumps ahead of the law.

The pattern was routine up and down the coast from North Carolina to Florida. A big shallow-draft launch would rendezvous in the ocean beyond the 12-mile limit with a foreign vessel and take on a load of liquor from Cuba or elsewhere; then, under cover of darkness, proceed to a prearranged landing in a coastal creek or cove. There the liquor would be transferred to automobiles equipped with secret built-in compartments and rushed to a big city for delivery to hotels, speakeasys and private clubs. It was an exciting, dangerous and fabulously profitable business.

From my lonely perch in the chinquapin tree, I was witnessing something that only one boy in a million would be lucky enough to see. I was so scared I tried to hold my breath. Some of the men had removed their coats and I could see their snub-nosed automatics in shoulder holsters.

The men stood around in groups, smoking and talking in whispers. As soon as it was real dark, they snuffed out their cigars and cigarettes.

The boat arrived so quietly that I neither saw nor heard it. There was a sudden flurry of activity and the discreet flashing of a light revealed a long gray launch without a top. The tide was high in the cove and the boat was moored close to and on a level with the top of the bank.

Every time the light flashed, I caught a glimpse of men moving back and forth from the boat to the cars. I could see cases of liquor on their shoulders and I could see them loading the cases in the secret compartments. But it was all done so quietly that I could hear nothing, not even the closing of the car doors.

While the men were busy loading the automobiles, I thought of easing myself down out of the tree and slipping away into the black woods and running for home. That would have been the sensible thing to do. The thin sweater I was wearing was hardly adequate for the chilly night air, which was getting colder every minute.

But my curiosity was stronger than my common sense. And while I sat there procrastinating, that cold air penetrated right down to my bones and set off a sneeze loud enough to wake up everybody in the cemetery.

Instantly a light flooded my tree and picked me out in the top branches. The man with the light ran to the tree and spotlighted me

and ordered me to come down. When I got to the ground, a cordon of snub-nosed automatics encircled my head.

The man with the flashlight snapped out a few unprintable words, and two men grabbed my arms and rushed me to the boat. They shoved me into the stern and tied me up with a piece of rope, and left me lying on the floor.

I could see nothing. But I could tell that a desperate effort was being made to get the last few cases of liquor out of the boat and into the cars. And it wasn't long before they began pulling off. As soon as the last one had gone, two men jumped into the launch and got it under way.

The boat moved slowly and very cautiously until it reached the open river, where it turned left out of the cove and headed somewhere toward Calibogue Sound. Then it began to pick up speed.



"Two men grabbed me and rushed me to the boat."

The vibration of the high-powered engines bounced me around on the floor, making it difficult for me to concentrate on the praying I was trying to do. It was a half-hearted prayer anyway, because I had already decided what my fate was going to be. Just as soon as the launch got about halfway across Calibogue Sound, those two underworld characters in the bow were going to drop me overboard right in the middle of a school of tiger sharks. They would swallow me, rope and all, and nobody on earth would ever know what had happened to me, or where to start looking for me. I was cold and my teeth were chattering, and I wished I had died long before I was ever born.

Suddenly the boat slowed down. It seemed to be pulling into the shore. One of the men came to the stern and untied me and jerked me to my feet.

"Boy," he said with a foreign accent, "you swim?"

I nodded.

"Then swim!" he said, grabbing me in the seat of the pants and pitching me overboard.

I hit the water flat on my face and started swimming. The launch turned back toward the channel and roared away.

The water was shallow and I soon had my feet on solid ground. I floundered ashore and started running toward the trees along the bank. I didn't know exactly where I was, but I knew the general direction of Bluffton and home, and I headed that way. And I didn't stop running until I was inside my front door.