

White Lightnin'

Moonshine (an intoxicating liquor, especially illegally distilled corn whiskey) is but one of many names for this beverage, including rot gut, white lightnin' and corn liquor. A "moonshiner" is a maker or seller of illegal whiskey. Whiskey is a Gaelic word meaning "water of life." Moonshine has been a part of world history and a tradition in the southern United States, including Oklahoma.

Almost from the nation's beginning, the manufacture and sale of whiskey has been taxed as a source of government revenue. Consequently, the primary reason for illegally making whiskey has been to avoid paying the taxes.

In Indian Territory it was against federal law to provide alcohol to American Indians. In 1889, when Oklahoma Territory opened to non-Indian settlement, saloons began operating along the area's eastern and southern borders, adjacent to Indian lands. The liquor traffic was so heavy over the next two decades that the framers of the 1907 state constitution included the prohibition of all alcoholic beverages. Nevertheless, making, selling and drinking moonshine continued.

After national prohibition was repealed in 1933, the state legislature, guided by religious conservatism, passed a law declaring that nothing stronger than 3.2% alcohol beer could be sold in Oklahoma. In 1959 the law was repealed.

Moonshine is made from fermented grains—in Oklahoma, usually corn. Yeast, malt and sugar were added according to the taste of the maker. The process required copper pots, a fire and an oak barrel in which to age and give color to the liquor. As the mixture cooks, a sweet odor is created from the sugars. Revenue agents could sometimes locate a still by this smell or identify a moonshiner by the ingredients and quantities purchased. The resulting product was usually bottled in fruit-canning jars and sold.

Home brew, moonshine, Choc (Choctaw) beer and/or other non-taxed and illicit alcoholic beverages have found a large market in Oklahoma. As late as 1963 law enforcement agencies reported that 18,400 stills had been seized nationally in that year, with Oklahoma and Arkansas tied for tenth place in the number of state seizures. Oklahoma's moonshining tradition continued into the 21st Century.



William Thornton Sheldon, Delaware County's first Deputy Sheriff, and a confiscated still near Grove, Oklahoma.
Image courtesy of Delaware County Historical Society

Choc beer was put up in 10 gallon crocks. It was usually sold by the gallon, or by the mug. It was a popular drink at domino games, and usually sold for 25¢-30¢ per gallon. Home brew was made of hops, malt, yeast, sugar and corn, rye or barley. The mixture was kept at a temperature appropriate for fermentation. When the fermentation process was completed, it was bottled and capped. One had to be careful not to bottle it too soon or it would explode. Test bottles were set at a safe distance. This beverage was about 15% alcohol, or about 5x more potent than commercial brew.

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