

**CLEO MAE  
GILBERT  
EPPS  
1909-1970**



**QUEEN  
OF  
THE  
BOOTLEGGERS**

The company you keep can often determine your fate. While running her illegal bootlegging business, Cleo Epps was part of the violent criminals known as the Dixie Mafia. When she crossed them, she paid the ultimate price.

Cleo Mae Gilbert was born in Magazine, Arkansas in September 1909 and moved to Oklahoma in the mid-1920s. She graduated from high school at sixteen and the Tahlequah teaching seminary at eighteen, teaching school in Wagoner and Creek counties. She married a Tulsa attorney but divorced him due to his drinking. She then married Cecil Epps in 1936, who became a bootlegger. Although she was strictly against whiskey, his alcoholism forced her to take over the business. They divorced in the 1950s, but by then she was known as “Queen of the Bootleggers”.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Oklahoma was a “dry” state. Despite the fact that the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol was illegal, bootlegging was a major industry. Epps controlled the wholesale and retail moonshine traffic during the 1940s and 50s around Tulsa, importing truckloads of illegal booze from Missouri.

Epps sold liquor to prominent Tulsa citizens and supplied many of the swanky hotels. The big money in bootlegging got her involved with the Dixie Mafia, including career criminals Lester Pugh and Albert McDonald. Prohibition was finally repealed in 1933 but Epps was convicted in 1966 in a multimillion-dollar moonshine operation, which was overturned. However, her continued association with the Dixie Mafia kept her under the watchful eye of law enforcement.

In 1970 Charles Pope ran for district judge against popular incumbent Fred Nelson. Although Nelson was easily expected to win re-election, McDonald and Pugh decided to put Nelson out of the race so their friend Pope could win. When they asked for dynamite from their friend Epps’ farm, she grew suspicious and informed Creek County investigator Jack McKenzie who observed them removing five sticks of dynamite. On August 25, 1970, Judge Nelson’s car was blown up in his driveway. He was critically injured but survived.

Epps agreed to testify in disguise before the grand jury but word leaked out that she had fingered her Dixie Mafia pals. Three weeks later, on November 12<sup>th</sup>, McDonald convinced her to meet him at 51<sup>st</sup> Street and Union Avenue about an illegal liquor shipment. Her pickup truck was later found abandoned there with her purse inside.

McKenzie believed that McDonald was driving with Pugh in the back seat. They proceeded to 71<sup>st</sup> Street and Union Avenue where Pugh shot Epps in the back of the head, immediately wrapping her head in a towel and securing it with a rubber band to prevent blood stains in the car. Then they drove to 65<sup>th</sup> Street and Union Avenue to where they dumped her into an old septic tank at an abandoned farm. Three months later in February 1971 an anonymous tip led investigators to her body as the second Nelson grand jury investigation began. They were convicted and both died in prison.

Cleo Epps was front-page news in life and death. Her funeral was attended by U.S. Rep. Ed Edmondson, District Court Judge Bill Hayworth of Muskogee, and many in local law enforcement. She ultimately was rubbed out because she knew too much.