

DAMON RUNYON

Beyond Guys and Dolls

ies and learned the newspaper business from his father, Alfred Sr., who was a typesetter and partner in a string of Western papers. the *Pueblo Chieftain* published a poem by the 11-year-old Alfie Runyan, and a year later the boy was working as a reporter on the *Pueblo Evening Press*.

When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Runyon was not old enough to join the army, but the determined young man, not quite 18, found his way to San Francisco and wangled his way into a contingent of Minnesota volunteers, who were shipped out to fight insurrection in the Philippines. It is doubtful that Runyon saw action, but he did use the experience to expand his reportorial skills. The *Chieftain* published Runyon's account of life in Manila—a vivid piece that displayed his already distinctive journalistic voice.

On his return to the States, Runyon jumped from newspaper to newspaper, reporting politics in Denver, writing up sports events in San Francisco. These early years established Runyon's lifelong fascination with hard-drinking journalists, gamblers, and other tough-minded individualists. His itinerant life, however, ended in 1910 when he married society reporter Ellen Egan and moved to that other Manhattan on the East Coast to become a sportswriter for William Randolph Hearst's *New York American*. (The marriage would end 20 years later. Runyon then married a dancer named Patrice Amati Del Grande, who divorced him some six months before his death in December 1946.)

For 35 years Runyon was a top sportswriter and featured columnist on the Hearst papers, a dapper man-about-town, and friend to those within and outside the law. (When Al Capone went off to prison he gave Runyon, a dog lover, his two prize whippets.) Runyon brought a keen eye and a personal style to everything he wrote, whether covering baseball games or boxing matches, following General Pershing to Mexico on the hunt for the guerilla leader Francisco "Pancho" Villa, or filing 5,000 words a day on the Lindbergh kidnapping trial ("probably the best American courtroom reporting ever done," according to fellow journalist Jimmy Breslin).

Runyon was also a prolific poet and short-story writer. Between 1907 and 1929, he published volumes of often grimly humorous verse and many stories in *Harper's Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan*, and other leading journals of the day. For the Hearst Sunday papers, Runyon wrote a series of stories about "My Old Home Town," em-

Damon Runyon was a man of many lives—notably a journalist, a fiction writer, and a bona fide New York character. He was born Alfred Damon Runyan in 1880. A newspaper printer accidentally changed the spelling to Runyon in 1900, and several years later an editor on the *New York American* chose to delete "Alfred," creating the byline Damon Runyon, which would become famous the world over.

Runyon started life in Manhattan, Kansas, and grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, when the West could still be considered wild. According to family legend, Runyon carried a six-gun in his youth, and there is no reason to disbelieve the story. Runyon's mother died when he was 8 years old, and for the next few years he wandered the steel town of Pueblo, playing hooky, smoking cigarettes, and drinking whiskey. (He would swear off drink around 1910, though he replaced alcohol with coffee, drinking some 40 cups—by some accounts, 60 cups—a day.)

He also, however, spent time reading in librar-

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PROHIBITION

1917 - 1933

At the turn of the 20th century, acute alcoholism, spousal and child abuse, abandonment and destitution were just some of the societal ills that were blamed on the profuse availability of intoxicating liquors and the tacit acceptance of excessive drinking. This concern was nothing new. Fines for drunken behavior and selling liquor without a license date back to the early American colonial era. Protestant sects had long urged its parishioners to refrain from drinking for moral and health reasons. But it wasn't until the mid-19th century when an organized temperance movement began ramping up its campaign and vociferously promoting the notion that everyone should just stop drinking.

As serious as this cause was for many, the issues of slavery, and then the Civil War itself, made getting traction for the movement difficult. And then that changed. Long before they were granted the right to vote, women began to take the lead in the temperance movement. The Women's Crusade, founded in 1873, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1874, began to demand political action. Through the end of the 19th and into the early 20th century the movement gained momentum with the WCTU and the single platform Prohibition Party getting strong support from the Anti-Saloon League (ASL), which was soon to become the movement's leader.

By 1913, through strong grassroots efforts, the temperance movement, with the Anti-Saloon League leading the charge, was able to get nine states to pass state-wide prohibition laws and numerous municipalities and townships to put local options laws on their books and declare themselves "dry." With these successes the ASL turned its focus on achieving the Holy Grail of legislative instruments: a constitutional amendment for a national prohibition.

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DAMON RUNYON (cont'd)

playing a style and a narrative stance that evolved into his most famous works about Broadway guys and dolls. Yet alongside those Broadway tales, Runyon published many other stories, including parodies of hard-boiled detective fiction, pieces centering on "My Old Man," and epistolary sketches of an everyday American couple named Joe and Ethel Turp.

As amusing and colorful as these works are, they are far surpassed by Runyon's masterful stories about such Broadway characters as Joe the Joker, Dark Dolores, and Sky Masterson. The first of the Broadway tales, "Romance in the Roaring Forties," was published in 1929, and the idiosyncratic world that has come to be known as "Runyonesque" is on full display. All the Broadway stories are narrated by an anonymous character who is at once a participant in and an observer of events. He speaks in present tense without contractions and employs a patois that is partly a record of language Runyon heard all around him in underworld and sporting circles, but is chiefly the author's own inspired invention.

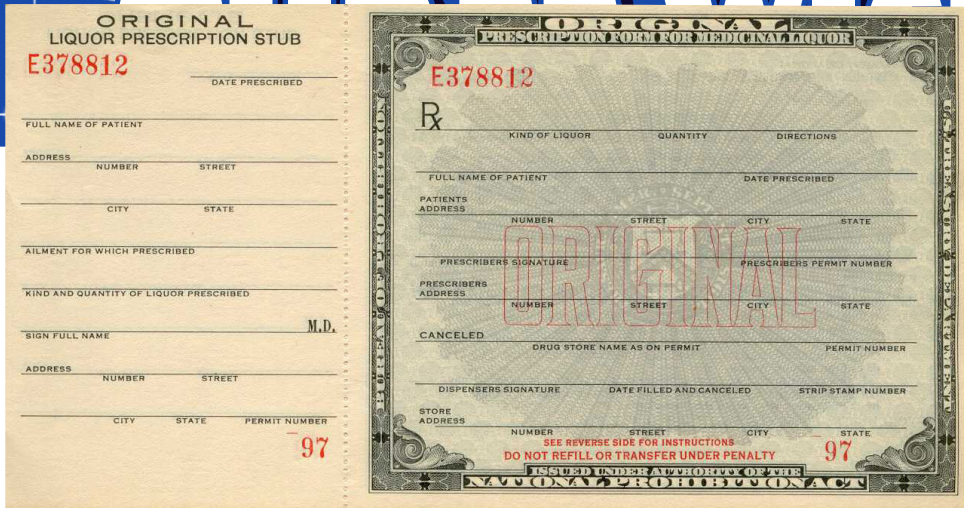
His work is still in print all over the world and lives on in the many works adapted from his stories. Hollywood has made more than a dozen Runyon movies. The first was Frank Capra's *Lady for a Day* (1933), based on Runyon's touching "Madame La Gimp." Capra remade the story for his final film in 1961, *Pocketful of Miracles*. Runyon provided Shirley Temple with her first starring vehicle, *Little Miss Marker* (1934), a story that Hollywood cannot seem to get enough of, remaking it in 1949 with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (*Sorrowful Jones*), in 1962 with Tony Curtis (*40 Pounds of Trouble*), and once more in 1980 as *Little Miss Marker* (with Walter Matthau and Tony Curtis back as the villain). Runyon's stories were also dramatized on radio for the 1949 program *The Damon Runyon Theater* and on television in yet another *Damon Runyon Theater* as part of the 1955-56 CBS season. The most famous Runyon adaptation, however, is no doubt the 1950 Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls* (music and lyrics by Frank Loesser, book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows), an artful weave of various Runyon stories, including "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown," "Blood Pressure," and "Pick the Winner."

The subtitle of *Guys and Dolls* is "A Musical Fable of Broadway." Runyon's New York is a fabulist's terrain, in some ways a kind of never-never land, yet it remains grounded in the real Broadway landscape of the 1930s and '40s. ("Broadway," as Runyon's son explains, includes "Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues, from 42nd Street to Columbus Circle.") Mindy's restaurant in the stories is a stand-in for the famous Lindy's. Waldo Winchester is modeled on Runyon's journalist friend Walter Winchell. Dave the Dude is a version of the mob boss Frank Costello.

When Runyon died of throat cancer in 1946, his friend Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War I flying ace and president of Eastern Airlines, fulfilled a request in Runyon's will, and from a plane above Times Square scattered the writer's ashes over the Broadway that Runyon loved and immortalized. ♦ ♦ ♦

- Jeffrey Couchman

THE WINE GUYS



PROHIBITION (cont'd)

In four short years, success was theirs: a constitutional amendment - the 18th - was presented to Congress in December 1917. It prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes.” The amendment was ratified on January 16, 1919, when Nebraska became the 36th state to vote to approve it, just beating out Missouri for the honor of being the state to present the last required vote (with Wyoming, Wisconsin and Minnesota following closely behind). After that, it took the congress most of the year to pass the National Prohibitions Act, also known as the Volstead Act, which provided the enabling legislation for implementation of the new amendment. One year to the day, after the required year-long waiting period, Prohibition took hold of the country. And then the fun really began.

Prohibition, of course, didn't stop drinking; it simply pushed the consumption of booze underground. By 1925, there were thousands of speakeasy clubs operating out of New York City alone, and bootlegging operations sprang up around the country to supply thirsty citizens with alcoholic beverages.

Like any law, there were several important and rather large loopholes to the Volstead Act. The first went to the farmers, who argued that alcohol enabled them to preserve fruit over the winter. That is, they needed to take their apples and turn them into hard cider, and then the hard cider got turned into a potent applejack (think of it as a fruit brandy). This powerful potable remained legal in farm districts across the country. Ironically, and not surprisingly, the farm districts were among the biggest supporters of Prohibition.

Another loophole was for “medicinal liquor.” Though in 1917 the American Medical Association (AMA) said, in support of Prohibition, that there was no reason for alcohol to be used for any therapeutic reason whatsoever, they very quickly changed their tune. They realized that there was an enormous opportunity here to make some money, and within a few short years of the start of Prohibition one could go visit their local doctor in virtually any city or town in the country and, for \$3, get a prescription that could be taken to the local pharmacy, where it would be redeemed for a pint of liquor. And refilled every 10 days. This interesting work-around is really what kept many of the larger Kentucky distilleries in business

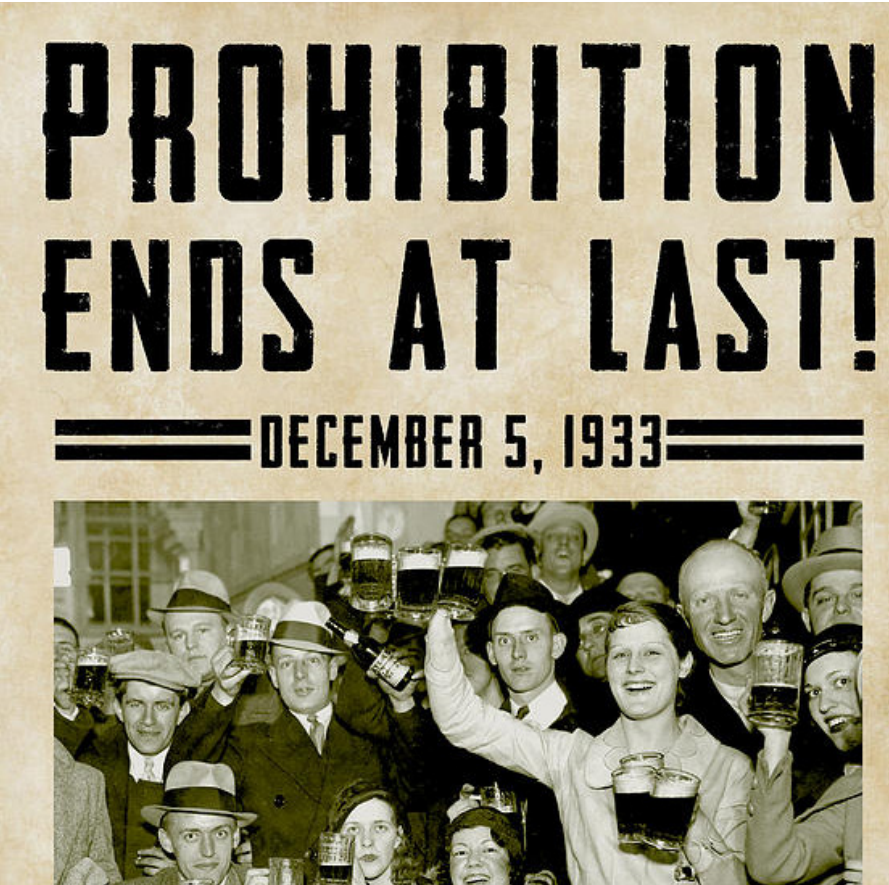
throughout the Prohibition years.

The third loophole went to - you guessed it! - the church. The Catholics and the Jews were among the most vocal groups raising their voices in opposition to Prohibition. Wine played a vital part in the Catholic sacrament of Communion, and the Jews required sacramental wine for their Sabbath and other services. Under the Volstead Act, both denominations

received a “religious exemption” - a term that we've come to know quite intimately in recent days. For one California-based winery, Beaulieu Vineyard (BV) in the Napa Valley, it was a game changer. In 1912, the owner of BV had secured an ecclesiastic approbation from the archbishop of the Northern California Catholic archdiocese. This allowed BV to sell sacramental wine directly to priests across the county. When Prohibition took hold, BV was primed to take full advantage and corner the priestly market. Priests in turn were able to provide the sacred sips to their congregations during services and also plenty of beverage to take home - for a suitable donation to the church, no doubt.

In the Jewish community anyone could claim themselves to be a rabbi. There was no singular higher body that controlled or recognized them, as the archdioceses did for the Catholics. Under the law, rabbis were entitled to receive 10 gallons of wine for each adult in their congregation per year. It's not surprising that existing congregations boomed and even nonexistent ones flourished.

Despite the proliferation of illegal bars and taverns, and despite the shocking increase of organized crime, for over a decade Prohibition was the law of the land. In fact, some say that Prohibition turned the country into a land full of lawbreakers - “scofflaws” is the term that was coined for those “wets” who snubbed their nose at the law and drank as they pleased. But it was the Great Depression that rang the death knell for Prohibition. Starting in 1928 the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA) and the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR) began to work toward the repeal of the 18th Amendment. Consensus grew quickly, fueled no doubt by the hard times and by the fact that the sale of liquor would once again be a huge - and much needed - tax-generator. On December 5, 1933, the 21st Amendment was ratified, repealing Prohibition in the United States and allowing individual states to determine their own law for the control of alcohol, and the nation's “great social and economic experiment,” as Herbert Hoover had dubbed it, was over.



SPEAKEASY

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

During prohibition the proliferation of establishments where one could go to enjoy an illicit beverage or two exploded - and the modern “speakeasy” was born. But when and how did such a place of liquid pleasure come to be known as a “speakeasy”?

The name may come from the phrase “speak softly shop,” which first appeared in a dictionary of British slang in 1823 and meant a “smuggler’s house.” A similar phrase, “speak easy shop,” appeared in a British naval memoir written in 1844 and denoted a place where unlicensed liquor was sold and thus, like the “smuggler’s house,” came to define a place where one was required to keep their voice down to avoid detection.

The exact term, though, can be found cited earlier in 1837 in an article in the Australian newspaper the *Sydney Herald*, where a “speak easy” referred to a “sly grog shop,” which clearly aligns closely with the modern meaning. Leave it to the Australians to lead the efforts in this matter.

It wasn’t until 1889 that the term appeared in print In the United States. A Pittsburgh area newspaper article refers to a “speak easy” as the name used for “a saloon that sells without a license.” This seems to have come from a popular anecdote about McKeesport, PA, saloon owner Kate Hester, who ran an unlicensed bar there. Hester was supposedly known for telling her rowdy customers to “speak easy” to avoid attention from authorities. Here again, speakeasies were so defined “because of the practice of speaking quietly about such a place in public, or when inside it, so as not to alert the police or neighbors.”

Though certainly the most popular - and the one with the most longevity - a “speakeasy” (or its shortened version, “speak”) was by no means the only term coined for such establishments. “Blind pig” and “blind tiger” also originated in the United States in the 19th century. These terms derive from interesting legal workarounds. “Blind pig” most likely comes from a tavern in the state of Maine where the proprietor would charge customers to see an attraction in the back room (such as an exotic animal, say, a Greenland pig) and then serve a “complimentary” glass of rum, thus circumventing the law.

“Blind tiger” refers to illegal drinking establishments where the seller’s identity was concealed in ingenious ways. Take this example: “A drawer runs into a wall of what appears to be a billiard parlor. You pull out the drawer, drop in your change, shove the drawer back, call for what you want and then pull out the drawer again and there it is, ‘Straight’ or ‘Spiked’ just as you’d have it. Nobody is heard or seen, and the blind tiger, apparently without any keeper, works like a charm.”

“Hooch joints,” “buffet flats,” or “beer flats” are other names that were also used for “speakeasies.”

It’s not surprising that in and around this new speakeasy subculture a new argot would develop. Some refer to the language of the speakeasy itself as “Harlemese,” named after the area known as Harlem in New York City where illegal drinking establishments proliferated. The New York based *Sunday News* published an article on November 3, 1929, stating that any “stranger who plans a complete tour of the night club circuit should know the following at least.”

Here are a few term from the list;

- ▶ **Boodle** – a lot of anything
- ▶ **Dogs** – feet
- ▶ **Getting high** – getting drunk
- ▶ **Honey man** – a kept man
- ▶ **Lap** – liquor



- ▶ **Scronch or Skip** – dance
- ▶ **Spruce** – a sucker
- ▶ **Walk that broad** – show style when dancing with a girl
- ▶ **Working moll** – prostitute

Colloquial slang covered further areas of this illicit marketplace. Those who traded in illegal beverages were called “bootleggers” (or “booties” for short). The term comes from the practice begun early on at the start of Prohibition of hiding a flask or bottle in one’s boot, where it would be concealed yet easily accessible. Cheap home-distilled liquor had colorful nicknames that suggested the precarious nature of the product: “coffin varnish,” “horse liniment,” “monkey rum,” “panther sweat,” “rot gut,” “tarantula juice,” or simply “hooch,” to name a few. The enhanced powerboats used for illegal importation, or “rum running,” were known as “torpedos,” hit men became “trigger men,” doormen became “gorillas,” grenades became “pineapples,” and the iconic Thompson submachine gun became known as a “rod,” “trench broom,” “Chicago typewriter,” “Chicago organ grinder,” or simply the “Tommy gun.”

When we look at these lists of words we can see where Runyon got not only inspiration, but also some of the actual terms he uses in his stories. ♦ ♦ ♦



THREE WISE GUYS

HORSE RACING IN THE 1930S

Horse racing, the second most popular sport of the 1930s after baseball, first came to America alongside British colonialism. The English imported horses and their centuries-old “Sport of Kings,” building the first American racetrack on Long Island in 1665, with many other colonialists soon following suit. By the late 19th century, there were over 314 racetracks in the United States, with many tracks being largely dominated by organized crime. During the 19th century, gambling at most horse races was “against the house,” with the odds often stacked (and sometimes fixed) against the players. Fraud was widespread, with horse owners often simultaneously acting as bookmakers and utilizing “ringers” as fraudulent substitutes for their horses. Although organizations such as the American Jockey Club attempted to clean up horse racing during this time, the criminal element remained undeterred, which was part of what led to the harsh backlash against the sport at the turn of the century. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century a moral zeal swept through the country and almost every state made all forms of gambling illegal, including horse racing. The number of operating horse tracks decreased to just 25 by 1908, as popular opinion turned against the sport.

Following the 1929 stock market crash, however, many states began to reconsider their strict laws regarding gambling, with many seeing horse racing in particular as a means of increasing tax revenues. Furthermore, the popularization of a betting structure known as parimutuel betting lent an air of legitimization to the sport. In parimutuel betting, all of the bet money is pooled, and after a fixed percentage is removed for track expenses and taxes, paid out to the winners based on calculated odds. For example, if a horse is projected to win by odds of 2-1, if the better puts \$1 on the horse and it wins, the better will get \$2. Bettors may wager on whether a horse will win (finish first), place (finish first or second) or show (finish first, second or third). The mechanization of odds-making in the early 1930s created what many people felt was a fairer and more objective system. In 1933, the American Totalisator Company (AmTote) installed the world’s first electro-mechanical betting system that displayed odds and payouts on illuminated boards. Although betting still carried an air of the morally suspect in the 1930s, fraud was nearly nonexistent and betting was conducted within legal parameters.



The RUNYON QUIZ

Damon Runyon’s characters speak with their own distinctive vocabulary. Take the quiz below to test your knowledge of Runyon’s lexicon.

Part 1 Circle the correct answer.

1. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING MEANS MONEY IN RUNYONESE?

- a) Bobs
- b) Scratch
- c) Potatoes
- d) Fish
- e) All of the above

2. WHAT IS A BETSY?

- a) Waitress
- b) Winning horse
- c) Pretty woman
- d) Gun
- e) All of the above

3. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING MEANS JAIL?

- a) Campus
- b) Sty
- c) Sneezer
- d) Cave
- e) All of the above

4. A NOSE IS WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING?

- a) Shnoozer
- b) Buffer
- c) Beezer
- d) Sniffer
- e) All of the above

5. A CHALK EATER IN RUNYON’S WORLD IS WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING?

- a) One who bets only on favorites
- b) Pool shark
- c) Stool pigeon
- d) Corpse
- e) All of the above

Part 2

Draw a line from one column to the other to match the words.

ROOTY-TOOT-TOOT

DETECTIVE

ELBOW

KNIFE

STICK MAN

NEWSPAPER

KADY

TOMMY GUN

BLAT

CROUPIER

CLEV

HAT

Rooty-toot-toot
Tommy gun
Elbow
Stick Man
Blat
Kady
Clev
Detective
Croupier
Newspaper
Hat
Knife

Runyonesse Glossary

From *Three Wise Guys*

- Bangle** - a bracelet or an anklet.
Bash - a party.
Beezer - the nose.
Blackjack - a short, leather-covered club.
Blow - to leave.
Blow-out - a big party.
Bobs - dollars.
Bootie - a bootlegger.
Booting - bootlegging.
Bottle and a bird - A bottle of wine and a fine meal (pheasant, for example).
Bounder - an ill-mannered, unscrupulous man.
Brawl - a party.
Cad - an unprincipled man.
Can - a car.
Coco - the head.
Collared - arrested.
College - prison.
Come through - to do what is needed or anticipated.
Conk - to hit.
Cooled off - killed.
Cooling his heels - waiting.
Copper - a police officer.
Croaker - a doctor.
Croaks - dies.
Cut - a share (of earnings or winnings).
Dame - a woman.
Darberoo - someone or something special, a beauty.
Doll - a woman.
Dough - money.
Framed - to be falsely incriminated.
Front - a legitimate cover for shady dealings.
G - one thousand dollars.
Gee - a guy.
Gendarmes - police officers.
Go straight - to become law-abiding.
Gripsack - a small suitcase.
Guff - nonsense.
Hauling wet goods - transporting liquor.
Heat - trouble, pressure.
Heavy - imposing, tough.
Heel - a contemptible, dishonorable man.
Heist - a burglary.
Hold your horses - calm down, restrain yourself.
Inside job - a crime committed by, or with the help of, someone associated with the victim.
Jeeves - a butler (from the character created by British humorist P. G. Wodehouse).
Joint - a building, a place of business.
Jugs - banks.
Knock off - to rob.
Knock someone off - to kill someone.
Loot - stolen money.
Make a killing - to get rich.
Marker - a written promise to pay, an IOU.
Mobbed up - partnered.
Noggin - the head.
Old dolls' home - a nursing home.
Potatoes - money, dollars.
Pretzels - a small amount of money.
Pull - perpetrate (a crime or a fraud, for example).
Pulling a fast one - committing a deceitful or treacherous act.
Put your checks back in the rack - to die.
Racket - a business or occupation.
Ritzy - Fancy, elegant.
Run-out powder - a sudden departure.
Second-story man - a burglar who slips in through an upstairs window.
Shindig - a festive party.
Slammer - prison.
Slouch - a lazy or inept person.
Small potatoes - unimportant, inconsequential.
Sneezer - prison.
Sugar - money.
Swell - wonderful.
Take plenty of outdoors on - get away from.
Throw the book at - to give a convicted criminal a harsh sentence.
Touting - soliciting customers.
Welsh - to default on a promise or a payment.
Wise guys - smart alecks.

EXPLORE MORE HERE!

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