

[Moonshine Home](#)

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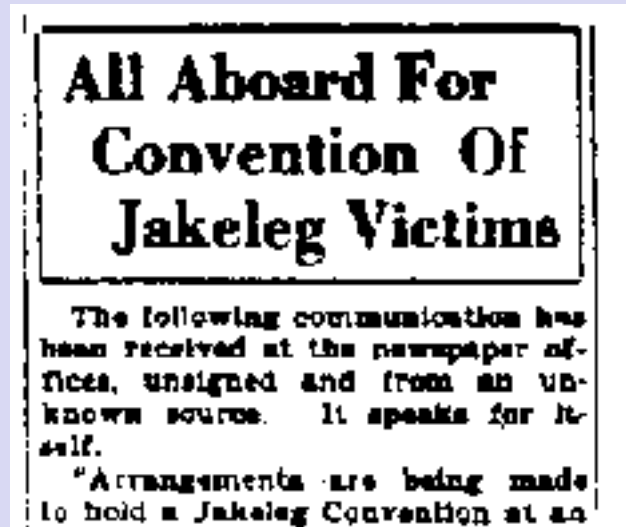
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## The Jake Walk Effect

Serious medical symptoms, different from the ones associated with legally manufactured alcohol, often result from drinking moonshine. Often these symptoms are immediate, sometimes they're temporary, but sometimes they're permanent. People go blind from drinking moonshine, or suffer nerve damage or develop sores or ulcers.

In the 1930s, though, a specific affliction struck moonshine drinkers in a number of Southern states. It is estimated that some 50,000 people were crippled with partial paralysis, mostly in their legs, as a result of drinking "jake". In some cases the paralysis proved to be temporary, but nearly all victims were forced to walk with in high-stepping, foot-slapping style that quickly became known as the "jake walk" or the "jake leg".



Listen to:



[Jake Leg  
Blues](#)  
by Willie  
Loften

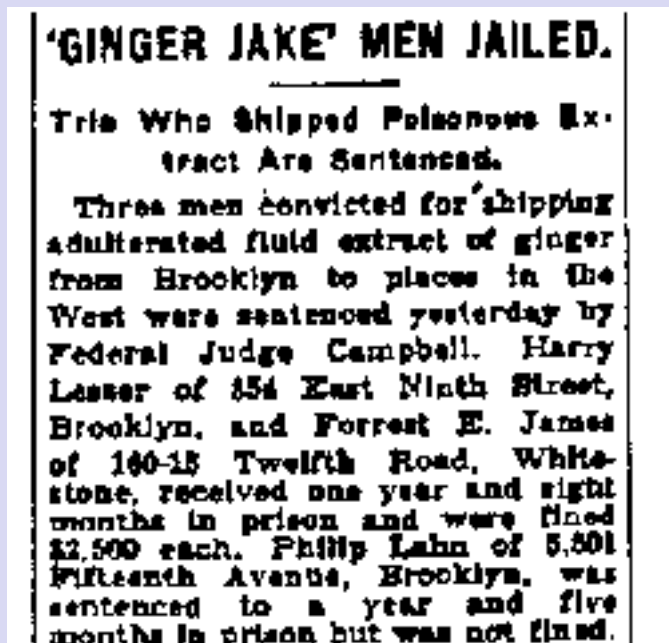
Read lyrics from  
the  
[Mississippi Sheiks](#)  
and  
[The Allen Brothers](#)

## What is Jake?

Jake is actually Jamacian ginger extract, marketed and sold as a medicinal tonic for any number of ills. It was available in the United States since about the time of the Civil War, and Americans quickly realized that the nearly 70% alcohol content made "the jake" a way to skirt local or federal laws banning the consumption of liquor. Compared to whiskey, jake was often cheaper, and often had a higher alcohol content. Many drug stores sold Coca-Cola or coffee, which people would then use as mixers for the jake, often using a side room in the store to concoct their drink.

Jake sold between 1920 and 1930 caused no health problems. In the spring of 1930, however, the manufacturers of jake decided to add a new ingredient, an industrial chemical called tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate.

The new ingredient was added to help adulter, or water down, the jake. It was tasteless, soluble with alcohol, and cheap. It also turned out to be highly toxic, particularly to the spinal cord.



## The Jake Walk in Music

Technically, jake is not really moonshine. It was manufactured and distributed legally, intended for medical use. But the way jake was used, to subvert Prohibition, to provide a relatively cheap means of getting drunk while avoiding paying federal liquor tax, creates a close connection to jake and the more traditional bootleg liquor. And, like moonshine, jake proved to have the potential for severe health problems. So while the victims of moonshine were often unrecorded or attributed to something else, many victims of jake paralysis have been documented, both in medical records and in [song](#).

Nearly all of the early victims of "the jake walk" were white men, many middle-aged. It has been theorized that the apparent lack of black victims may be evidence that blacks rarely drank jake. On the other side, though, are a number of folk songs, recorded by black artists, that explicitly mention jake or "the jake walk". This seems to suggest that is not far-fetched to believe that though black victims were not given treatment in near the number that whites were, there were certainly a good number of black jake drinkers who

suffered from paralysis. Of the thirteen songs, seven were performed by white artists, five by blacks.

During and after the first bout of jake-induced paralysis, references to jake and the jake walk began to appear in folk music. Research has uncovered a total of [thirteen songs](#) that mention jake by name, evidence that in at least some Southern circles, jake had become a part of the cultural and social fabric.

The clipping at the top right is from the Johnson City *Staff News*.

The clipping directly above is from the *New York Times*, June 1, 1935.



[How to Drink  
It](#)