



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

January 2026 Episode

Ethics on the Rocks

Susan: Happy New Year, ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to 2026 and to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. I hope you all had a wonderful holiday season and that you are ready to tackle this new year with joy, gusto, gratitude, and integrity. So I searched high and far for a story that would meld with the New Year holiday, and I desperately wanted to find an ethics story about champagne, right? But alas, I did not find one. So if any of you have a fun ethics story about popping the cork at midnight, *cork popping and bubbly pouring sound effect* please send it to me for next year.

I did find the next best thing though, an absolutely delicious story about bourbon. I have to believe that somewhere out there, at least one of you rang in the New Year with some sort of Jim Beam or Maker's Mark, or the like. So hopefully this story still rings true for our New Year's episode.

Admittedly, my knowledge of bourbon is about as expansive as my knowledge of rocket science, so bear with me on my ignorance of rare bourbons. But apparently lots of people do like bourbon. In fact, the author Mark Twain once said, quote, "If I cannot drink bourbon and smoke cigars in heaven, then I shall not go," end quote. Now I think that strikes me as a little strong so I probably can't relate, but even if, like me, you are a bourbon neophyte, I think you will still enjoy this tale of barrels, drams and ethics gone sour. So, cheers. Bottoms up. And let's jump in to this week's story.

This story takes us all the way to the West Coast, to the Oregon Government Ethics Commission. So in 2022, this state agency conducted an investigation of ethical breaches by six different people associated with the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission. They were the executive director, the deputy director, the budget manager, the chief information officer and two other managers in that office. You can probably tell by the title that is the state commission that regulates where and how liquor is sold. We have a similar one here in Ohio.

Apparently some brands are so rare and sought after that in a normal situation, it's almost impossible for the public to buy them because demand outpaces supply. So members of the public occasionally can only buy them by winning a lottery to get the chance to purchase this rare liquor, bourbon, etc.. So apparently two of those bourbons are known as Pappy Van Winkle and Elmer T Lee. I have to say, if I ever get dogs, I am so going to name them Pappy Van Winkle and Elmer T Lee. *dog howling sound effect* But I digress.

So variations of Pappy Van Winkle apparently are among the most prized bourbons and among the most expensive on the open market. The Oregon Liquor Control Commission typically made them available to the public through that lottery system that I mentioned. Well, in 2022 the state had just five bottles of a 23 year old Pappy Van Winkle available in the lottery, and that attracted almost 21,000 entrants to this bourbon lottery. Right?

So all six public officials in their Liquor Control Commission used their positions to divert this rare, expensive bourbon for their own use. Apparently, the state agency would set aside a reserve supply in case something happened to the bottles that were earmarked for the public. And that's the reserve supply that the state employees bought from before they were even available to the public.

They kind of help themselves. They didn't take them for free, but they did get that advance opportunity to purchase this rare bourbon, thereby diminishing the supply that would be available to the public.

Now in their state, kind of like in Ohio, state law does bar government employees, elected officials, etc. from using their positions for financial gain or using confidential information that they only know because of their job for their own benefit.

Apparently, just this past February, the Attorney General's office in their state launched their own investigation, as well as that by the Ethics Commission. In Oregon, the commission can levy civil fines, but the attorney general's office can actually bring criminal charges.

When I kind of was doing my research on this story, the Oregon executive director for the Ethics Commission, she said their investigation showed that practice, you know of, like, buying bottles of Pappy Van Winkle and Elmer Fudd or whatever it is outside of the regular process for all customers of their store system, reaches back more than three decades. So while this story kind of hit the news, apparently in 2022, unfortunately it was not a new situation.

mysterious whistled tune

Nick: Hey, sorry to interrupt, Susan, Susan it's me Nick from the Ethics Commission, you know, the other education person? Guy who edits the podcast and who sends you his time sheet every couple of weeks? Tall, glasses, eats lunch around noon every day?

It's not important, anyway, I have been doing my own research, I've been connecting the dots even though I don't really know the order and some of the dots are very very faint but I been digging through my files, the, the, the Eth-X Files, *mysterious whistled tune* and I got something here and it's a bourbon story you gotta hear!

So a couple of weeks ago in Virginia a masked burglar broke into a closed liquor store, knocked out a ceiling tile, smashed bottles, went ham on the bottom-shelf whiskey.

Now, at first you think: Organized. Maybe a coordinated ring. Human. But no! Employees found the culprit laying face down blackout drunk in the BATHROOM, surrounded by the wreckage of his own terrible decisions...

It was a raccoon, Susan.

A RACCOON.

Tiny, masked agent of chaos. You ever see those things' hands?

Anyway, animal control sobered him up and released him back into the wild, noting that he suffered no injuries other than maybe a hangover and some regret. But Susan... Susan... creatures don't just fall through ceilings and orchestrate whiskey heists by accident. Not without help. Not without... guidance.

I'm not saying this is connected your bourbon story.

I'm not NOT saying it either. *mysterious whistled tune*

The truth is out there people! WAY out there!

Susan, back to you!

Susan: So I don't have any bourbon stories from Ohio to share with you, but I did want to take you to an Ohio story, where a city police chief was using his public job to sell uniforms and other equipment to police officers.

Now, why is this comparable to the bourbon story? Well, because in this situation, this city police chief knew there were no opportunities for other vendors to sell those uniforms and that equipment because the chief knew the needs of his own department. He knew their budget. He knew about reimbursement amounts that happened for officers for purchases, in other words, he had all the inside scoop to be able to make sure he was the only vendor positioned to sell uniforms and equipment to those police officers.

Now, I grant you that bourbon story I shared is a little bit more conflict of interest related. This uniform one is about selling goods and services to one's own agency, but I still think the analogy is beneficial because that whole using the advantage of my position - inside knowledge, access, influence, etc. of our public positions to gain some benefit for ourselves, our families or our outside business associates is illegal, both in Oregon for the bourbon and here in Ohio for us.

I grant you again, this investigation might not seem quite as glamorous as illegally getting your hands on a \$4,000 bottle of bourbon, but I hope it's still a sobering story. You get it? Sobering? *crickets sound effect* All right. I won't quit my day job.

Anyway, that's our episode for this week. Please be sure to check out our show notes for relevant advisory opinions and fact sheets, or you can find my email address if you have fun ideas for podcast episodes in 2026. So please know that for this year, I am figuratively holding up my glass of pretend bourbon and I'm toasting you - to your health! Salud! Prost! Or as I grew up saying in my Polish family, na zdrowie!

Now be sure to join me again in two weeks when we tackle the topic of multi-level marketing and public service. But until then, if winter gets you feeling blue, remember, you know how when you hold a seashell to your ear, you can hear the ocean? Do you know what you can hear if you hold a glass of bourbon to your ear? The weekend. Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye.