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HARVEY (COTTON) DYER: JUNE 1938:
CHAPTER 14

“I never want to hear a city slicker say making moonshine is a piece of cake,” Harvey (Cotton) Dyer, 51, said inside his tavern, south of Gainesboro, Tennessee, on Highway 56, a pack mule, hauling those heavy 100 pound bags of sugar - - up and down the hollows. Jackson County has steep hills, and many thousands of gallons of moonshine have been brewed in this country.

“When Mr. Denny was running shine I loaded him out many times in the late 40s and 50s, mostly when I was in my early and late teens. But, I never unloaded him nor rode shotgun with him. I was a loader. Probably what stuck out about him was his flashy clothes and that hollow Frigidaire refrigerator crate in the back of the furniture half-ton truck. He would come rolling in to lad and we knew it was him because Mr. Denny wanted to be loaded in a hurry and he never offered to help us lift the cases of whiskey,” the stocky Dyer revealed.

The lounge owner looked around the low lit room as pool balls clanged and continued, “I never had much to say about the outdoors, but humping all the materials to the still, during the building phase, wasn’t easy, either. Cooking the whiskey took a long time and many things had to be done at certain times to keep the whiskey from burning or becoming scorched. It kept us busy, all the time. Once the liquor flowed into the collecting jug or barrel, it was another chore to carry the whiskey up and out of the deep hollers to be loaded in the runner’s car or truck.

“On the way back down to the still I had to tote sugar. People don’t realize how dangerous it was. We moved much of the supplies in the darkness and fell many times. True, we had trails and markers to guide us, but it was still risky. Then we

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had to cut hard wood trees to fuel the still. Oak and hickory trees were probably out most popular wood to burn,” Dyer added.

“Then there were the elements. We made whiskey year round...when it was icy cold and when it was hot as a firecracker. Yellow jackets, wasps and hornets would sting you constantly. The mosquitoes sucked your blood, while rattlesnakes and copperheads drove us crazy during the muggy summer months and we would freeze our fanny’s off running up and down the gullies and hog trails during the cold, frigid winter months. And don’t let anybody tell you it doesn’t get cold in these Tennessee hills from December through February, especially here in Jackson County.

“But, the moonshine had to brew and get to haulers like Luke – to get our money,” Dyer noted while running the fingers of his right hand through his thick brown hair. After

rolling up his sleeves one notch on his light plaid jacket, he continued. “Oh, we can’t forget the law. We had to be constantly on the lookout for federal revenueurs like Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson, State Troopers and County lawmen, too.

“It was a never ending war. Really, it was a war in the hills. I don’t mean a shooting and dying type of war, but a war of nerves. Oh, there was some shooting from hunters, but not really like people think. It wasn’t like the Hatfields and McCoys portrayed on TV. But, after awhile I got used to moonshine making, but I wasn’t in love with it I’ll tell you that. I just kept my butt to the grind stone and did my job. Making moonshine was the hardest work I’ve ever done and I’m sure happy I don’t have to do it today, and haven’t done it in years and years,” Dyer explained strongly and walked outside.

Denny, who had been silent inside said, “I can see Cotton carrying those cases out of the darkness and packing them in the crate, in the back of my 1953 Chevrolet pickup truck. I was selling furniture and appliances for Tuley Furniture Company in Carthage and selling moonshine at the same time. You talk about getting fired, buddy if the Tuleys would have known I was transporting illegal whiskey I would have been out on the streets in nothing flat.

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“Yes, I was in a hurry all the time. Cotton was strong and fast and a good stacker, too. He would have me in and out in 20 minutes. Think of that. The specially designed crate would hold 96 gallons; 16 cases of 12 jars per case. Cotton didn’t say much, it was all business and I respected the young man.”

With that statement the short interview concluded as Dyer’s customers beckoned his return to bartending. After a photograph or two the men, a moonshine generation apart, parted with a hearty handshake and a wave.

Before pulling out of the gravel parking lot a smiling Cotton Dyer reminded us, “Don’t forget to drop off one of those books here. I plan to read it in a good, clean, comfortable bed...a long way from being barefooted, wearing overalls, stirring hot an’ steamy moonshine mash...in the middle of a burning, sticky, summer night.”