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W. T. (DICK) SAMPSON: NOVEMBER 10, 1907:  
CHAPTER 16

At one of the most dangerous 90-degree turns in Smith County, Tennessee, near the DeKalb County line in Lancaster, lives Dick Sampson. Dick, also known far and wide as W. T., operated an old general store on the banks of the Caney Fork River. Dick also bootlegged Tennessee Mountain Dew. After World War II, Luke Denny was one of his biggest whiskey runners. Their interview took place in the Sampson's living room, December 28, 1987.

Luke started the interview with, "W.T. do you recall our cantaloupe ride?"

"How could anyone ever forget that wacky day," Sampson stated. "The house was by far the dirties house I have ever been in. But, wait, I'm getting' ahead of our story. This was probably in the late 40s or early 50s. All the bootleggers were out of moonshine, includin' me. We just could not get any. Luke usually hauled my whiskey from Jackson, Putnam, Overton or Wilson Counties. But the lawmen were crackin' down with Feds helpin' out.

"Luke heard of a small wildcat still over in Cannon County. I told him I would even go and help him load in order to get the Mountain Dew back to Lancaster. I believe the Cannon County ride was the only one I took with Luke. See, I bootlegged. I didn't go in for the fast drivin' or ridin' shotgun part," Sampson continued. "We finally found the house on Pea Ridge, not far from the City of Woodbury. They only had 50 gallons. We had to wait for them to brin' the whiskey from deep in the woods back to the house. The entire family was the dirtiest I have ever seen in my life, but somehow they were healthy lookin', too. Isn't that funny? Any, Luke complained about bein' hungry. He was always hungry. I think he was born with a hole in his belly."

Denny injected, "You would have been starved, too. I had hunted whiskey in three or four counties - - all day and night and couldn't find any. All my bootleggers were crying for it. I

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hadn't eaten anything. I will never forget those two mushmelons inside that dirty house with the dirt floor. I remember asking W. T. if cantaloupes were dirty on the inside," and they laughed as did the audience in the Sampson home.

"I ate one-an-half cantaloupes and W. T. ate the other half," Denny explained. "We were late as it was. If we took off for a restaurant in Woodbury we might lose the whiskey to another runner. This would have left W. T. dry and that is one thing bootleggers fear...running out of liquor for their customers. I wanted to go on to Woodbury, but W.

T. explained how much time it would cost us, so we decided to stay and eat those cantaloupes. They were sweet and tasty.”

Denny’s eyes lit up as he remembered yet another tidbit. “Dick, Dick, remember the dam run? Somehow we got this small Cannon County run through, luckily, as the lawmen were keeping a close watch on all the roads around my bootleggers. Dick’s place is only a mile or so west of the Center Hill Dam. Before I left for WWII European service with the Army, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers had designed the dam. Construction on the dam begun in the late thirties, but temporarily halted until the war came to a close. The dam was located 26.6 miles up the Caney Fork in DeKalb County. This multi-purpose lake and dam is only a few miles south of Interstate 40 (built before the interstate was constructed), at the Buffalo Valley Exit, some 20 miles west of Cookeville and about an hour’s drive east of Nashville.

“Somehow the law found out we were able to get through their traps with our Cannon County run. Yes, the word was out...they were going to catch me in a dragnet of enforcement officers. I was hot and I knew it. For a month prior to our ‘Cantaloupe Run’ I laid low and did not make one run. I spotted lawmen all over the area. They stopped and searched me and my cars every time I cranked the engine...it seemed. When federal agents, county sheriffs and deputies, city policemen and highway patrolmen found me empty they were furious. They warned me. Some even lectured me and told me in no uncertain terms I had better get out of the whiskey hauling business as they were going to nab me, period.”

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Dick Sampson continued briefly, “All the bootleggers were dry. That 50 gallons was gone the first night. Customers swarmed like bees to my place when they heard I had whiskey. Then it was gone. Others were angry.”

Luke, about 30-years-old at the time, reconnoitered the surrounding counties. “I searched for still’s from Jackson County to Cookeville, south of Sparta, west to Smithville, through Watertown and onto Lebanon. There I turned back east and stopped at my favorite Southside Café in South Carthage. Earl McCallum, the owner, quickly informed me that the area was ‘crawlin’ with lawmen’. He overheard different ones telling how they were going to shutdown my operation.

“I can see the worried look on Earl’s face as he explained about the roadblocks,” Denny said. “ol’ Earl said something like, ‘Please don’t haul anymore whiskey for awhile, Luke. Lay low. They are going to catch ya. I’m dead serious.’ I laughed and told him not to worry, I wasn’t going to move any Mountain Dew until the coast was clear.”

“Clear or not,” Dick Sampson added, “I was out. Empty. Plus, I didn’t car how he got it to me, by boat would have been okay, just as long as the whiskey arrived.”

“Well, after my lunch at Earl’s place in South Carthage, I continued checking out the territory as I drove east to Gainesboro. I met with my backer and explained the situation. He had received word that other bootleggers needed whiskey badly. It was time to haul, even though the law was out in force. We planned to lad in the backwoods of the Turkeytown Community near the Jackson, Clay and Overton county lines.

“See,” the whiskey runner adde4d, “I thought the moonshiner had a brother who was a night watchman on the Center Hill Dam. After loading 80 gallons in my two-door, midnight blue ’47 Pontiac I asked him about his brother, the security guard. The moonshiner said something like, ‘My brother is okay. You can trust him. He loves white whiskey, too.’ The government had just about completed the dam at Center Hill and were using a construction road atop the facility to move equipment and supplies back and forth, from one side

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of the Caney Fork to the other. But, the road was closed to regular traffic. This was the only flaw we could find in the law’s roadblock plan.

“It was about midnight as we drove down the backroads from Turkeytown en route to Dick’s place. Oh yes, it was cold as snakes outside and my backer was worried stiff,” Denny said.

“No kidding,” Sampson revealed, “It wasn’t warm as the Sunshine State in Lancaster, either. I had been waiting - - with some helpers - - for him to get there four or five hours, to help unload him. The law had been to my place two or three times earlier that night looking for him, I’m sure. We were all concerned, worried would be a better word for it, that if we didn’t get him unloaded in a hurry we all might spend the rest of the morning in the Smith County Jail.”

Denny said, “My backer was worried the guard wouldn’t let us cross the temporary narrow road atop the dam. He also didn’t like the idea because the watchman, a federal employee, might turn us over to Silas Anderson, the local revenue agent.

“When we arrived at the northern side of the dam the guard stopped the car, filled with whiskey, and I said something like, ‘It sure is cold out here this evening. We’ve been to your brother’s place in Tukeytown. He wanted us to give you a belt of moonshine. I think he know you would be cold out here next to the bluff. Here’s something to warm up you insides.’

“Before handing the moonshine to him I took a drink. After a few minutes the guard asked for another drink, then another and then another. Soon he was feeling the effects of the whiskey. I reached for a pint hidden under the dashboard, handed it out the widow to the watchman and said, “This will keep you warm the rest of the night, long after we’re gone. By the way, we’re loaded with your brother’s moonshine and need to get it down

the river to Dick's place. Will it be okay if we drive across the dam right quick? It sure will save us a lot of time and maybe keep old John Law off our back.'

"The guard, feeling no pain, said, 'Oh hell, any damn time I'm here...bring it on through.' We slowly drove across the dam without our headlights on. It was a little scary. We turned right and 'flew' to W. T's place," Denny explained. "That was

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the first time and last time I took the shortcut across the Center Hill Dam, that is until it was opened to the public, then I took that route many, many times in the early and mid-fifties."

Sampson continued, When Luke rolled in you would have thought our unloading bunch was the pit crew for a stock car racing team. Buddy, Luke was in and out..in nothing flat. I told Luke I wanted to hear how he got through the roadblock the next time I saw him. Goodness, he told me about the dam caper ten times...at least."

"Ya know something, Dick," Denny recalled, "everytime I think about that dam ride I break into a cold chill."

Sampson halted his long time friend for a moment and revealed one of his hauling experiences. "Before your dam episode I carried 40 cases of bonded liquor from Nashville once in an old pickup, without doors. What do you think of that? I was only caught one time and that was for selling bonded booze, no moonshine."

Denny asked, "Tell us how you nearly got caught on the train. I can't remember the details?"

"Let me see. It was about this time I took the train to Nashville and brought back four cases wrapped in plain paper. On the way back I had the bonded stacked in the smoker, by the passenger's side, watching it. The conductor, a short man punching tickets said, 'Be careful tonight. We're expecting the law.'

"I got really concerned because I had heard the sheriff had been trying to catch bootleggers, whiskey runners and moonshiners in Smith County. The Midnight Special didn't stop to let passengers off at Carthage, Lancaster, Caney Fork, not Sebo. Butterflies were flapping in my stomach because I knew I was going to get caught. At the next stop I saw Chief Deputy Stanton Robinson and I believe his deputies Charlie Grissom and Leon McKinney boarding the train.

"The second I saw them I dropped the bonded off the train in the tall grass - - as gently as possible - - as the train slowed and got back in the smoker. Chief Deputy Robinson came directly at me and said, 'Traveling late tonight aren't you Dick?' After checking the train from one end to the other - - and discovering nothing - - he gave me a ride from the depot to

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Lancaster. I went back shortly to where I dropped the whiskey off and found it. Not one pint was broken. You better believe I was one lucky man that night,” Sampson noted.

Mrs. Sampson, who was playing a friendly card game with a niece and her youthful guests, reminded the two old bootlegging partners, “Daddy never drank a drop nor kept it in the house. He kept it up on the hill, but I never knew were.”

“Yes mom, that’s the truth,” W. T. Sampson agreed. “I didn’t drink the fire water. I buried large boxes on the hill where I could ‘cut’ the whiskey down to pints for sale. The boxes held 280 pints and I had it so well hidden that a ground squirrel couldn’t find it. In fact, I know it’s still up there, after probably 35 years, but I don’t think I could even locate it now.” The statement brought more smiles from the gathering.

“Luke was my biggest and best whiskey runner,” Sampson related. “He probably averaged 200 gallons a week. That’s a lot of pints. Now sometime he would haul me between 150 and 170 gallons, but around Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween, Labor Day, the Fourth of July and around Election Day he brought me more than 200 gallons that week. Bootlegging was not an easy job, as many think. It was hard work, but it was the only way I had to feed my family for about ten years.

“True, I farmed a little, then went into the construction business. For the last 40 years or so I’ve worked on and off, in and around Nashville building such sights as the Ford Glass Company (seven years); Gates Rubber Company in Madison (two years); and I also worked in Toledo, Ohio with an engineering firm,” Sampson provided.

“I had one policy I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone,” Sampson remarked. “If a person wanted to buy any amount less than a pint I gave it to him, free. My sales ranged from a pint to a 10 gallon keg. I sold moonshine and bonded whiskey anyway I could to make a dollar. But those years are gone and lost forever. I wouldn’t want to live them again.”

As the two men shook hands Dick (W.T.) Sampson remembered one last tidbit about Luke Denny. “Old Luke was always dressed like he had a million dollars. He told everyone he dressed that way to keep the law off his trail and to pick up

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ladies. While that’s true I know another reason he wore those three-piece suits,” Sampson smiled and concluded, “he didn’t want to load and unload all that moonshine whiskey!”