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CLYDE (SHY) ALSUP: MARCH 13, 1910:
CHAPTER 17

“I bought more moonshine from Clyde (Shy) Alsup than anyone in Rutherford and Wilson Counties,” Luke Denny said of his old friend before we walked into Alsup Grocery, south of Lebanon, Tennessee, on Highway 231, December 29, 1987.

Luke opened the conversation, after a hardy handshake, with, “Shy, I have always wondered just how many moonshine stills you had going at one time, during your peak years?”

“The most I can remember was eight,” the 79-year-old Wilson County native answered, ‘pumpin’ out the white lightnin’ at once. Luke, you know it was hard work. It seems all the young folks today think makin’ ‘shine in the old days was nothin’ but fun and games. And, we always had to worry ‘bout the law.”

Alsup said he started working with illegal whiskey when he was about 15-years-old and he was raided by the federal officers and by Wilson and Rutherford County sheriffs. “I got caught three times,” Clyde Alsup revealed, “and all three times I was set up. Once I had to spend six months in the federal pen’ in Montgomery, Alabama. One thin’ to remember about people and the law is, good people WON’T turn you in. It was thieves or my competition who always squealed. In fact, I recall the time a woman turned me in and she was my nearest competitor.

“Sometimes I got lucky,” Alsup continued. “One time we had a big operation goin’ on in a basement near Nashville. It was in the City of Una, on the way to Murfreesboro. We were sellin’ whiskey like gangbusters. In fact, that outfit cooked 75 gallons a day and my friend that’s a lot of moon’ comin’ out of one house. A colored man and I went halvers on it and we were doin’ real good. Then I discovered he was sellin’ small amounts ta people who stopped by. See, I dealt in large quantities and sellin’ a pint or two to any Tom, Dick or Harry was a sure fire way to get busted.

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“We had a little spat over this, because many of his friends didn’t have the money to buy a large load and couldn’t find good bootleg moonshine anywhere else,” Alsup added. “The fewer people who know about your still the better chance you have of not getting’ caught. Drunks will turn you in for a drink, many times. But, I pulled out of Una and quit. He kept boilin’ it and sellin’ it a little dab at a time and it wasn’t long after I left he got nabbed. Let me see. That Una operation took place in the mid-50s.”

Luke smiled and questioned his friend. “Wasn’t it about this time in Davidson County you bought muddy water instead of moonshine? I remember you were made as a wet hen

when I came to load and you kept saying, ‘Just wait ‘til I get my hands on them.’ Did you ever catch them?”

“Now you’re brin’ back bad memories, Luke. I don’t like to talk about them, little loan remember the muddy moonshine Monday,” Alsup came back in a harsh tone of voice. “See, I needed more liquor than I had and went down to Nashville and picked up \$1500 worth of moonshine. All of that load, but eight gallons, was nothin’ but muddy, dad burn water. I stopped the checks, but they had already cased about \$700 worth. So, I lost about \$800 on that deal and never found them. I never forgot their faces either. There is no tellin’ what I would have done if I had found them that day.

“Luke, I forgot to tell you about the muddy water run. The revenuers had the place staked out. We waited til they went to lunch before loadin’ the eight gallons and the ‘dirty’ water. That’s the big reason I got burnt on the deal. I was in such a hurry and had only a few minutes til the revenuers got back from eatin’. I didn’t check the load out like I normally would have,” Alsup explained with a lighter tone.

Luke waved his hand and said, “I remember the first time I came down here to pick up a load. I stopped at your old store on the hill and they told me to stay there. You took my truck and after a while one of your work hands came back with the moonshine.

“After a few times I drove up to the old milk barn and while you and me were talking silhouettes kept runnin’ in and out of your barn loadin’ my truck. My first milk barn load was

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135 gallons.” Denny recalled. “I thought of that night many times. All I could see was little solid black figures in the darkness. And, to beat it all they were quiet as a mouse. I liked the milk barn operation because I didn’t want to get caught. Loadin’ and unloadin’ was always a good way to get caught by the law.”

“do you remember the time I poured the mash into the barn lot and got Jewell’s hogs, chickens and geese drunk?” Alsup said with a grin.

“Lord, Lord,” Denny laughed so hard he dropped his wooded cane. “Do I remember that? I’ll never forget Jewell’s voice the next time I came to load. She was still hopin’ mad.”

“That was the funniest sight I’ve ever seen,” Alsup continued. “All those animals, drunk. I mean down-in-ditch, stoned, slip-slopin’ drunk. They started fightin’ between themselves. Oh, that was funny. I’ve never seen anythin’ like it since. The hogs were chasin’ the chickens and the geese where crashin’ into the hogs. But, it got cold that night and the next mornin’ all of her geese froze to death, but one. I had hell to pay for that trick. Jewell stayed mad at me for a week, I guess.”

“Clyde, didn’t you say some pigs helped you stay out of jail when the law raided you once?” Denny asked.

“Yep, your right Luke. I can’t remember when it was, but the law was searchin’ ‘round the house and somehow these four little pigs got loose and ran under the table and distracted the lawmen from my whiskey. They were getting’ close to it til those little porkers came along...just in the nick of time, too,” Alsup said. Both men laughed for a minute or two as customers waited to pay for sodas and candy in the grocery store.

Denny stated he bought moonshine whiskey from Shy Alsup after his discharge from the Army in WWII. “I probably started buying from Sly in the late 40s, maybe it was the very early 50s. I came down here every week for a long, long time. The least amount I got was about 80 to 90 gallons a week and the most was about 140 to 150 gallons a trip. Really, the amount was determined by my bootleggers and if it was around one of the big holidays I would fill up...big time,” Denny provided.

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“I was drinking one night and tried to jew Shy down on his price of liquor,” Denny said with a sheepish look. “I said, ‘Can you get me 50,000 gallons?’ See, I thought Shy would drop the price if I told him I need that much booze. Shy was kinda mad at me for not being sober and said, ‘I don’t car if you want 50 or 50,000 gallons. If you want it, I’ll get it.’ Don’t you remember that Shy?” Denny questioned.

“Sure I do, you old knucklehead,” the silver haired man said. “I had others who ran my whiskey and didn’t have time to fool around with drunks. That was a good way to get caught. I remember what else I told you that night, Luke. I said, ‘I done priced it to ya. If you want it, take it. If you don’t get the hell out of here!’ Do you recall that statement Luke?”

“I most certainly do. If my memory serves me correctly, you and Jewell had just returned from Florida about this time,” Denny said.

Alsup thought for a moment while rubbing his right leg and aid. “Yes. The revenuers were getting’ hot on my trail and we stayed in Florida to get the heat off. We picked oranges. That was in the early 50s. I’ll guess and say ‘bout ’53 or ’54.”

After a few moments of silence Denny continued, “It wasn’t too much longer that you stopped making whiskey and just sold bonded?”

“Well, it was in the late 50s that I stopped brewin’ the lightnin’. I’ll say about ’58. You’re right Luke. All I sold after that was government liquor. I sold bonded for years, too. Did I tell ya I did some hauling, like you? My first haulin’ car was a 1924 T-model Ford. It cost me \$400. I was ‘bout 15 or 16-years-old. My biggest hauler was a two-an-ton, long bed truck. But, I shore didn’t haul nearly as much as you did, Luke. I made a bunch tho. My biggest black pot would hold 500 gallons, but it made the worse whiskey.

I got rid of it. I prided myself in makin' good shine and stayed with the smaller, goose necked cookers. They fried out the smoothest Tennessee Moon around."

The sound of the cash register stopped the two men from reminiscing any longer. With customers adding to the gathering it was time to take some photographs of the two long time friends and move onto the afternoon interview session with more of Luke Denny's moonshining companions.