

(pg. 200)

JOHNNIE BURKS AND MACK BURKS: AUGUST 14, 1921 – MAY 7 1928:  
CHAPTER 22

“Johnnie and Mack Burks here always made some of the finest moonshine I’ve ever tasted,” Luke Denny said while rocking in a wooden chair on the front porch of Mack Burks home, January 14, 1988, in the Hickory Nut Corner Community. Mack’s home is near the triangle where Jackson, Clay and Overton Counties meet.

“I bought many a gallon of whiskey from their stills. I loaded from their woods, house, barn and smokehouse, too,” Denny added. “Not one time did I ever find anything wrong with their liquor. They took pride in making the very best whiskey, possible. Boy did he have the brothers.”

Johnnie Burks, 69, laughed and so did his younger brother Mack, 62. Mack said, “There were seven of us boys. Back in those days we had three and four stills cookin’ at the same time and usually hired about seven work hands. I can see old Luke drivin’ in to our barn ready to load. Usually around midnight he came rollin’ round the bend, empty, ready to fill up his car with our moonshine. He was always dressed fancy and didn’t want to turn his hand when it came to loadin’ the whiskey.”

This brought laughter from the trio, “And, I tried my level best not to load, nor unload at the bootleggers,” the former moonshine runner replied.

“Do you back in ’48 when I got my ’47 Pontiac stuck in the field over yonder...with 100 gallons of your shine? It was raining like cats and dogs fightin’. Thunder was making noise all around and lightning could be seen every few minutes across the sky. I was in a hurry, like always. But, this time I had a new suit on and had a hot date waitin’ for me after unloading at the bootleggers,” Denny devilishly smiled and continued.

“I said something like, ‘Just leave it (stuck in the field). I’ll come back in the mornin’ and pick it up. I don’t want to get wet,” the 73-year-old former moonshine runner said.

(pg. 201)

Mack Burks recalled, “And I remember comin’ right back sayin’, ‘No lets get it out now. That’s just invitin’ Sicy (Silas Anderson, Federal revenue agent).’ Then I went to the barn and hitched up a pair of mules and pulled your big Chiefton out of the mud.”

“Didn’t your brother John Henry come with you that time?” Johnnie Burks questioned the two men.

The moonshine hauler quickly remarked, “No, not on this run. John Henry did ride with me a few times down here, but not on this particular trip. I remember this episode because of that gal. She was a good lookin’ dishwater blond with an hour glass figure. I

was thinkin' about her and not payin' close attention to my drivin'. That's probably why I got stuck."

Mack unbuttoned his brown jacket and pulled off his black toboggan while laughing. "Coke syrup jugs. Do you remember brin' me all those Coke jugs when we ran out of empty jars and jacket cans, Luke?"

"I had forgotten all about those Coca-Cola syrup jugs?" Denny returned. "One bootlegger was settin' on empty and got word to me to bring HER whiskey in anything I could get my hands on and all I could find was about 100 containers, that held a gallon of syrup. Did you know those Coke jugs held nearly half-a-pint more than a gallon? The Coca-Cola folks didn't fill them all the way up because they might explode. However, some moonshiners didn't realize that fact and would fill them all the way to the cap."

Mack Burks answered, "That's right Luke. You brought 100 of them and guess who had to wash every single one of them? Me, that's who. After getting' them clean as whistle I went ahead and refilled them with our moonshine.

"A few months after that, I believe it was in 1949, I had two boys workin' for me at the still. We had 28 cases loaded, 27 of them were in the woods and I had one in the car. As I started down the road Sheriff Hugh Philpot, I believe it was Philpot, blocked the road. I threw the one case away. The sheriff got the two boys and the other 27 boxes of moonshine; we had six gallons per case. Sheriff Philpot had me drive the whiskey to Gainesboro," Mack Burks noted.

(pg. 202)

"The law got me in 1952 and I was sent away to Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. I'll never forget the day they issued me a pair of size nine shoes and I wore a size seven. I traded with some other prisoner at the pen," Mack Burks revealed while grinning.

"When our father passed away in August of 1946," Johnnie Burks pointed out, "we had a barn full of whiskey and wanted to unload the entire batch. Luke and his backer said they would take the whole barn load. It took us three or four nights, in a row, to empty all that whiskey. It was made out of sugar, Luke. That same sugar, I believe, you got for us from Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Wasn't it Hopkinsville?"

"Yes, the sugar came from Kentucky, just across the Kentucky line, but not from Hopkinsville. And, I remember haulin' that load of rationed sugar in a truck. It was smoked sugar; meaning it had been in a fire. We bought 100, 100 pound bags for \$5 a sack. That was a fortune back in those days. The man who sold us the sugar collected twice. First from the insurance company, then from us. It also remember drivin' through Clay County so well because I had a real bad headache from drinkin' moonshine made from molasses, up there. That moonshine was okay to drink, but it packed a wallop.

After drinkin' a lot of molasses whiskey I had to take Goody's headache powder the next day," Denny revealed while removing his brown cap.

"I can't remember you ever drinkin' anything, Mack," his longtime moonshine runner asked.

"It was for suckers to bit at (drink). I didn't like the taste either. That's why I didn't drink," Mack Burks said with a strong tone of voice.

As Mack Burk's dog, a Blue Heeler, ran by, Luke questioned his friend Johnnie about his leg brace. "It seems you've had that brace on as long as I have known ya. How die that happen, Johnnie?"

"I was about 13-years-old and was working at one of the stills," Johnnie Burks said. "This mule was named old Babe Bell and I fell off and busted my leg up good. I was doubled over for along time and I had to wear a cast on it for three years. The doctors had to take a bone from my leg and put it in my back.

(pg. 203)

"Luke, not long after my accident Sicy caught me. In fact, he nabbed me three times for making whiskey and the county got me once. Judge Davies, of Putnam County, gave me a real good butt chewing when I appeared in front of his court. I mean he really laid it on. The last time Sicy got me, we talked a long time and I promised him I would quit and I did. The judge gave me five months and 29 days. He said he could and should hit me with five years in the hoosegow.

"Oh my, I just thought of something," Johnnie recalled with excited enthusiasm. "It was could in 1944. Snow was on the ground about three or four inches high. It was near or below zero, too. One of our 'hands' went to the small 16 gallon still and brought back 14 gallons of moonshine tied on a long pole. The load of whiskey was heavy and cumbersome. It was a long hike to and from the still, down a deep ravine. After a few hours I got a little worried, because he should have returned, so I went lookin' for him. When I finally spotted him he was nearly froze to death. His face had already turned a light blue. I helped him to the house and turned up the coal burnin' stove and also warmed his insides up with a few shots of whiskey. He said the pole was so heavy he couldn't make it across the fence so he walked all the way down to the gate. As he went through the gate opening one of the glass jars hit the gate post and broke. The man was very concerned I might be made at him. The moonshine business is not for the faint of heart. It was hard work...I mean real rugged, backbreakin' labor."

The bespectacled man pulled on his overall strap and continued. "After that I opened a little country store. You might call it a beer joint. We ran it for 30 years.

Luke interrupted, "One time I was on my way to load from your still. When I stopped for gas in Gainesboro the service station attendant said you were in the Jackson County Jail."

Johnnie Burks said, "That could very well be true. I had to spend 30 days. I also lost a 1953 pickup and 100 gallons of good whiskey. I remember I had to pay \$50 to my lawyer Bob Johnson. Then I paid the fine and court cost. Judge John Mitchell of Carthage was the judge."

(pg. 204)

The sun began dropping on the horizon and the interview had to be shortened as raindrops covered the windshield. After photographs were taken of the three old friends, Johnnie Burks recalled one last whiskey related tale. "During World War II everything it seems was rationed, even shoes. I had on some old worn out, ragged plow shoes and was standing by the fire at the still during one of the cold, snowy winter's in the early forties. A ball of fire, probably a red hot knot hole from a log, leaped from the fire and lodged between my toes. I jumped around like a banty rooster. Boy I nearly went completely crazy with pain for a few hours. Now that was so-o-m-m-e-e-e hot foot."