

(pg. 205)

JEWELL RAY (DENNY) KOONCE: PROBABLY BORN IN 1916:
CHAPTER 23

“The blue eyed Jewell is the only wife - - of my three wives - - I have living,” Luke Denny said at the home of his first wife Jewell Ray Koonce, in Algoood, Tennessee, January 15, 1988.

“We were only married for three months, but what a time we had...some good, some bad,” Denny’s former wife said with mixed emotion. “Let me tell you just how it was, from where I stand. Luke Denny was a very neat, clean and well dressed man. Besides he was very handsome, intelligent and never rude to anyone, but his mother from time to time.

“He would come in our bar and was polite and very much a gentleman. He was a close friend to my husband at this time. He never made a pass at me until I sued for divorce,” Jewell Koonce continued.

“I had three children (in 1948) and I owned a bar called the ‘Hub City Inn’ on Highway 70 (west of Cookeville, Tennessee). I lived in hell the whole 18 months I was there. My husband wanted to go to Michigan for a while. I begged him not to leave me and the children, but he laughed and went on and took two women with him. When he returned home we sold the bar and moved out on Dixie Avenue, in Cookeville. The house wasn’t wired for a electric stove and that was all we had. We were eating out three times a day and it was rough taking three children to the restaurant every time they got hungry.

“My husband got another brainstorm and went back to Michigan. His niece was staying with me so I decided to sue for divorce. The niece and the three kids when with me to Cookeville to see a lawyer. We parked at the courthouse and were walking over to the corner of Spring and Jefferson streets to go upstairs to see the attorney.

“Luke Denny walked up and said, ‘Jewell, how are you doing?’ I said I was fine and that I was going to sue for a great big divorce. Luke said, ‘Well if you are getting a divorce why don’t we go out some time.’ I told him that was the last thing on my mind.

(pg. 206)

“He had just bought a new Pontiac. It was beautiful. So we went upstairs for about an hour. When we came down, to my surprise, there was Luke waiting for us. He called me over to the car and wanted me to go for a ride in his new car. It told him I better not that I had to get the kids home, but deep down I wanted to go. So he moved over on the other side of the car and told me and the kids to get in.

“Luke wanted me to see how good the car drove, so I drove around a block. I felt so guilty I parked the car and got out. I told him I had to get the kids home. He ask me for a

date. I said I would think about it and would let him know. Luke was dating another girl at the time, and other too. He didn't wait for me to get in touch with him as he came out to my house the next day. I was sitting in the front yard with the kids. We talked for a while. I really wanted to go with him, but was afraid so I made a date to go to a square dance in Wilson County, that Saturday night. They called it the 'Rendezvous'.

"Luke picked me up. He looked so sharp. He was well dressed. I was proud to go with him, but I felt like it was my first date. I got in the car and sat as close to the passenger's door as I could. We talked a little and he started laughing. I said, what's funny? He said, 'You can sit a little closer to me. I won't bite.'

"We went to someone's house and got a pint of peach brandy. Believe me I needed a drink for my nerves. We drank about half the bottle. Then I moved a little closer to him. We were felling great by the time we got to the Rendezvous. The longer we stayed, the more fun we had. I felt like I had gotten out of a cage. I was in a fantasy world. I felt alive again. I had lived a miserable life for 11 years. That was the beginning of a great love affair. I made up my mind I was going to make him love me, because if my first husband had loved me like he said he did, he wouldn't cheat on me.

"I knew if my former husband found out I went out with Luke he would kill us both, although I had sued for divorce. After that, Luke and I were together every chance we got. Finally my former husband found out someone else cared for me. He then wanted me back, but it was too late. I had found something to live for. My former husband had so many women he couldn't keep them all happy, but he sure tried. I found out

(pg. 207)

I could live better without him. He thought he was God's gift to women. He wanted me to sit at home and grow old while he lived it up. Well, I had a taste of life, myself.

"Luke and I were at a night club one nigh on Highway 70. When we left the club my husband was waiting outside. He tried to pin us in, but we got out, because Luke ran over some of the garbage cans outside the club. I loved every minute of it. My husband was hurting for a change.

"We met Elizabeth Staley and her husband. The four of us went to Nashville and stayed the night. We drank until five in the morning. I never laughed so much in my life. I knew I was falling in love with Luke and he was with me. He was so sweet and kind. He was so good to me.

"Then he took me mover to a lady bootlegger's house in Hartsville. I watched them strain moonshine through an old black hat it was clear as water. I was flabbergasted. I was learning fast about rum running. Then, it was very exciting.

"One day, Luke and I went to Carthage to a bootlegger and got a pint of whiskey. As we crossed the bridge I looked in the mirror. The law was after us. I told Luke to hang on. I

was driving and you wasn't supposed to pass on the bridge, but I passed every thing on the bridge and turned right by the bluff and headed west. The officer's siren was still whining loudly. I was driving 90 mph and Luke said, 'Pour it to it honey, don't let him catch us.'

"Then he would take a drink and hand the bottle to me. We knew we had to drink it all before we got caught. We finished off the whiskey and threw the bottle out the window by the time we rolled into Wilson County. Safe at last. We had a great laugh. We had won. We beat the law.

"It wasn't long after that episode Luke had a real bad accident and totaled his car, but somehow he wasn't hurt too bad. I was working at a restaurant at the corner of Spring and Walnut Streets (the place has been torn down). Luke was supposed to pick me up at 5 p.m. He was never late, but this time he was. He had gone to Jackson County to get a load of whiskey. After the deal was made he got drunk and on the way

(pg. 208)

back to pick me up he had the wreck. They rushed him to the hospital. By this time I was feeling a little down. Benton Young came into the restaurant and told me what happened. We went to the hospital.

"Luke was setting up in the bed with cuts all over his head, still drunk. He looked up at me and said, 'Hi honey. I played hell this time, didn't I' Luke laughed like it was a funny joke. He was never serious about anything, but loving me and having a good time. I don't think he ever thought about the future or saving a dime. I knew he loved me and was serious when he ask me to marry him. I loved him very much, but had three children. Luke was in his 30s and had never been married.

"He had always lived a fast life and was still living at home with his parents. His father would go to dances with us. He loved a good time. His mother was a wonderful woman. She stayed home all the time. She loved Luke very much. I thought Luke was rude to her at times. He had one brother, John Henry Denny, and a sister Helen Denny.

"John Henry was married to a girl named Helen. I never got to know them very much. They had two kids and lived a normal life down in the (Buffalo) Valley. John Henry was a trustee in Putnam County for a long time. He was a constable or deputy for awhile, too. Helen, his sister, and I never got along.

"Luke and I got married in July of 1948. Our friends Elizabeth Staley and Vestal Jones went with us to Rossville, Georgia. We were drinking moonshine all the way there. By the time we arrived we were ready for anything. We went to the mayor's office to get married. When he ask Luke what his name was and he said, 'Luke Alexander Denny' I started laughing so hard and started out and down the stairs. Luke came and got me and said, 'We are getting married honey.' So, we went back and said our vows. That mayor should have been arrested for marrying two people who were drunk as skunks.

“We stayed the first night at Mrs. Staley’s. Oh, we had some wonderful times together. Luke would go out and haul a load of whiskey, then we would live it up til the money was gone. Then we would stay home a few days and play Rook at

(pg. 209)

night with Luke’s father and Albert Madewell. Sleeping late every morning was our schedule. His lovely mother would have breakfast ready when we got up. When we needed money it was off to Jackson County to contract a load of whiskey.

“On one occasion, Luke was suppose to contract the moonshine and take me home, then go back and haul the whiskey, but he got drunk instead. So, I told him we would take the whiskey as we went back. He didn’t want me involved, but I insisted for I was afraid he would get caught. The moonshiners loaded the trunk and we were off to the storage barn. Luke was driving all over the road, so I told him to stop the car...I was going to drive this load of liquor. Believe you me, I was scared he would crash and get us both thrown in jail.

“He laughed, but got out and staggered around to the other side. I took all the side roads I could take. When we finally got to the whiskey hideout where we were scheduled to drop off the load, I got out of the car and ran all the way to the house. I was scared so bad I shook all over. Luke laughed at me and called me his ‘Little Rum Runner’.

“That was my last load. I could think of better ways to make a living. I ask Luke to get a job; a decent job, so we could live a normal life. His answer to that was, ‘I’ll quit drinking, but not go to work on a regular job.’ I had nothing to look forward to. My first husband and his mother had taken my kids away from me, while I was in Michigan and I wanted them back desperately.

“I had a wonderful father and mother. We were raised poor, but very happy. I didn’t know what whiskey was until I married the first time in 1937, but I learned fast. I had two good teachers, my first and second husbands. Luke, however, was different than my first husband. Luke was very good to me, sweet and kind. My first mate didn’t care about anyone except himself. But, Luke lived from day to day.

“With my first husband I had everything but happiness and respect. I had money, three lovely children, a car, a house not a home, or peace of mind.

“Luke made me feel wanted and loved. His mother had no bathroom so Luke and I would go to the creek to take a bath. We would go skinny dipping and throw water on each other.

(pg. 210)

The water was so cold, but it was fun just to sit in the water and listen to the birds, frogs and watch the water bubble and run. It was so peaceful.

“I even washed clothes on a board. I did it for Luke’s mother. Oh, she was a wonderful woman, but a lonely person. I got tired of living it up. There was no future in it. Also, Luke didn’t want kids. We were arguing one day over something – I don’t even remember what the subject was about. He took me up on the hill to some of his folks and left me there, and didn’t come back home all night. I was heartbroken. I never thought he would hurt me that way, but I said to myself this will be your last time to cheat on me. I’m sure I knew who he was with.

“I was pregnant, but I never told him. I’d rather raise a child alone rather than go through hell like I did with my first husband. No one would take this baby away from me because they wouldn’t know about it. (Don’t ask about the child Luke, you will never find out).

“So, I started planning to leave for good. The next day I went to Nashville and took the train to Michigan. That must have been in September or October 1948. I worked two jobs for a while. I couldn’t get a divorce for a year. I stayed with some dear friends. They were wonderful to me. I never heard from Luke, or seen him for 38 years. The first time I saw him was in July 1986 when Mitchell Helms did. He was my friend’s ex-husband and he was a friend of Luke’s. When I went to the funeral home Luke walked in with some large blond haired woman, with a can.

“When I heard his voice I really got shook up. So I ask my friend if we could leave. We left, but came back the next day. Luke and his friend came in and sat in front of me at the funeral. When the funeral was over I went up and spoke to Luke. He was dressed nice and looked nice, too, but acted like he didn’t know me. I think he recognized me the first day.

“I didn’t think I would ever see him again, but to my surprise he came over to show me some stores about his rum running days. They were very interesting. He was at my house about 30 minutes when my youngest daughter and family walked in. They came from Florida to see her father. The minute I told them who he was I knew I was in trouble.

(pg. 211)

Someone had told her she was Luke Denny’s daughter. This is very untrue. Claudine was 18 months old when Luke first ask me out. My kids are all married now and have their own homes and children. I’m very proud of them.

“I’m on my own now and happy. I can go anywhere I want too; when I want too. I answer to no one. I have more money than I ever had when I was married,” Jewell Ray Koonce concluded in her manuscript chapter for this book entitled, “My Marriage to Luke Denny...The Rum Runner”.

Luke commented about his former wife's chapter with, It's a shame. I wasn't ready to settle down and have a family, at that time. I was carefree and lived one day at a time. As long as I had plenty of good threads, money in my pocket, a late model car I was in my glory. My heaven was complete when I was honky-tonkin' with a good lookin' babe and drinking double-sugared white lightning.

“Jewell and I had many good times and I was very fond of her. I always, however, considered her first husband my friend...and still do.”

A special thanks goes to Jewell, from this author for taking time to be interviewed and photographed and then for penning 24 handwritten pages of her life for this publication.