

(pg. 225)

SHERIFF SIDNEY S. HARPER: DECEMBER 13, 1911  
CHAPTER 26

Retired lawman Sidney S. Harper, 78, remembers Luke Denny as a happy, talkative man who had a reputation of whiskey hauling, "But NOT when I was sheriff of Smith County," the former sheriff said with authority in his voice from his Lancaster, Tennessee home on June 6, 1988. This was the second interview with Sheriff Harper.

The moonshiner quickly added, "That's what you thought. I knew you were as honest as a judge and would have locked me up in a minute had you known I was transporting whiskey to Smith County bootleggers.

"You worked for Tuley Furniture back in those days," the sheriff said, "I can see you trying to sell everyone a stove and refrigerator. You had a pickup truck, or two with Tuley Furniture on the bed. I'd see ya all the time, running around the county in those pickup trucks. Don't tell me you were hauling moonshine then? I thought you were going straight by that time."

"Yeap, you guess it," Denny added as if he had just smacked a home run with the bases loaded in the bottom of the last inning to win a baseball game. "I had it hidden in a hollow Frigidaire refrigerator crate."

"Sure, now I remember that box," Sheriff Harper continued. "I kinda wondered about that wooden crate. You had it tied next to the cab all the time. But, since you had other appliances on the back I really never gave it a second thought. I knew you drank, because I locked you up a few times. In fact, I believe I charged you with driving while drunk once or twice, but never for hauling moonshine. Well, well, if that don't beat it all. Luke, you old fox. It's a miracle I didn't catch you. I put many a man in jail for making whiskey. You're lucky.

"Once your wife Nellie called. You were home and causing a ruckus. I asked her to let me talk to you. Then, I told you, 'If you don't go to bed I will come over and bring you to jail.'

(pg. 226)

Then, I told Nellie to give me a call back if you didn't go to bed. Luke did go to bed and I didn't hear from him or Nellie...that night," Sheriff Harper explained while chuckling.

Denny returned to the conversation. "How long did you sheriff?"

"I was the Smith County Sheriff for 10 years and two years the Lebanon Chief of Police. Let me see, my sheriffing years were from 1952 to 1958 and then again from 1978 to 1982," the retired officer stated. "See, back in the 50s most of the moonshine stills were

in Jackson County. As far as I know there were very few here in Smith County. Isn't that right. Luke?"

"Yes, Jackson County had the most for middle Tennessee, back then. No-Man's land and Seven Knobs were probably the best known for brewing moonshine. Although there were a few here and there in Smith County, but usually they were so very small. One thing I remember about Sheriff Harper is he just wouldn't let you go if he caught you. He had that reputation. Buddy, if Sidney took you to court you might as well forget about hiring a lawyer, your goose was cooked and jail was just a few hours away."

"Well, I will say that's about right, Luke. I never took anyone to jail that I thought didn't deserve to be there. And, when I brought a person in front of the judge I really tried my level best to make it stick. I only lost one and half cases (The sheriff didn't elaborate on those case(s) he lost). If you ask the people of Smith County about the days I was the sheriff I believe 90 percent of them will say, 'I was honest and was a good lawman.'"

"No, I disagree with you Sidney," the moonshine runner quickly added, "I believe 99 percent of the folks would say you were one of the best, ever."

Mrs. Susie Harper, Sidney's wife of many years was feeling a little under weather, pronounced from the front porch swing, "Oh I can see you Luke. You were all dressed up in a suit most of the time and selling furniture. As I remember, you were smiling all the time and having a good time with the ladies. But, many of the married church going ladies DIDN'T like you at all."

(pg. 227)

The four of us laughed at Mrs. Harper's last statement. Sheriff Harper concluded, "Luke, it's a good thing I didn't find out about your secret hiding place in the Frigidaire crate. You know who would have been locked up 'under the jail'...Luke Denny!"

"Yep, I knew that, that's why I was careful to ride by the jail with the crate...EMPTY!" Denny finished the interview.