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JAMES OLIVER DILLARD: OCTOBER 8, 1932:
CHAPTER 27

“Friends. That’s why I never got caught hauling moonshine. In fact,” Luke Denny said, June 6, 1988, at the South Carthage Police Station, “I would have probably been in jail, even today, if my many, many friends hadn’t helped me. The judges would have locked me up an’ thrown away the keys. Chief Oliver’s (Dillard) dad was one such friend.”

South Carthage Police Chief James Oliver Dillard, 57, continued, “Yes my dad, Gene Dillard (1905 – 1972) sure thought a lot of O’ Luke. Nearly everyone ‘round these parts knew Luke. Most knew the fancy dressed man was a whiskey runner. He made no bones about it. Ya know, Luke was like middle Tennessee’s Robin Hood. He’d give away his money nearly as fast as he made it, or drank it up.”

The two long time friends took a sip of coffee in the police station’s conference room. Chief Dillard smiled and reflected on the Denny era. “Around 1940, before World War II, when I was about eight, my dad owned the Club Springs old store, southeast of Carthage. Dad served as the Justice of the Peace (JP) for 18 years. I was the JP for 12 years, too. Dad’s country store was the center of attention for back road travelers. It was a gravel road stopover. Not too many strangers stopped, as it was a secondary road. Lord, dad sold everything from soft drinks to sandwiches to gas to farm tools and feed, eggs to R.C.s and moon pies. Farmers would stop by from their labors, drink a cold Coke-Cola and chat. Many old fellows gathered to talk about old times, including the lawmen.

“You must remember, this man right here (Luke Denny) was my hero around 1940. He always had a sharp, fast car, wore the best clothes and many times he had a good looking honey with him. I thought Luke was the richest man on earth,” the stocky, silver haired Chief revealed. “Different law enforcement officers came by the store. They would get together, gulp down soft drinks and plan their strategy to catch Luke. I would hide under the counter, a few feet away, and hear every word.

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they said. I’d tell dad. He would get the word to Luke, somehow. The moonshine hauler would take another route to avoid the law.

“Li’ Oliver had ears like a desert fox, when the revenuers, troopers, sheriffs and deputies came to the store,” Denny explained.

Chief Dillard smiled and said, “O’ Lord, do you recall the time my dad got mad at me for setting in your car?”

Denny leaned back in the chair and laughed. "See, Li' Oliver asked if it was okay to 'drive' my car while I pumped gas. I told him to get in and drive away to China. My 1940 Ford was empty that afternoon, as I was on my way to the still in No-Man's Land in Jackson County. Usually I would roll into the store for a quick gas pit stop, but not this time. Li' Oliver was turning the wheels and saying, 'varoom, varoom' when Gene saw him and yelled, 'Son, get out of Luke's car, he may have to leave in a hurry if the law comes.'

"A few years later, probably about 1948, Sergeant Joe Sanford, a Tennessee Highway Patrolman, we called them 'Yellow Jackets', and Smith County Sheriff Jefferson Davis (J. D.) Rollins planned to hem me up like a hog not too far from Gene's old store."

"Let me tell it," Dillard said as he grinned and puffed on a half smoked cigar. "I heard J. D. and Joe and some deputies, one was Deputy Bob Barrett, telling each other where the other one would be stationed that night. The trooper and sheriff were hidden up the road apiece behind the store, toward Beller Hollar. They were out to get you and you alone, Luke. For some unknown reason you were running late. The next morning dad said one of the lookout deputies, by the road, went over in the weeds to take a leak. Luke came flying around the curve near the store. My father could see his headlights and knew it was Luke by the roar of his engine. Dad, who was down a little piece from the store, waved for Luke to keep right on going, as he was out of the lawmen's sight.

"By this time the deputy realized it was the moonshiner's car, and after hurriedly zipping his britches up, he turned and disappointingly yelled, 'Dadburn it sheriff, we've let Luke get

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away. He just blazed by. Sorry, but I just had to go water the lilies. I only had my back turned a second. Blast it, Luke didn't even slowdown.'

"Sheriff J. D. Rollins angrily jumped into his patrol car, raced his engine and as he shifted his car into low gear spouted, 'No need to get after Luke, now. We'll never catch him. Shucks he's already through Stonewall. One of these days we'll nab that whiskey runnin' rascal.' I've heard you talk about being stopped many times by J. D., after that night."

"Correct," Denny agreed, "the sheriff did get down on me after that night I slipped the noose, thanks to your dad. I believe he gave me a couple of DUIs. He probably should have given me more, but he never caught me with any moonshine," the evasive white lightning runner noted.

'Gene was one hellva man,' Denny added. "Folks came from far and wide to buy one of his ice cold soft drinks from his drink box. Gene always had fresh crackers. He would slice me a thick piece of bologna and put it between eight crackers - - four on top and four on bottom. I would usually grab a can of pork 'n' beans while he fixed my bologna

and crackers. Guess what I washed them down with? A frosty bottle of Nehi Peach, my favorite soft drink, with just a little ice in the top of the bottle.”

Chief Dillard pulled out his silver pen and started pointing to a photograph of his father’s old store. “Everyone knew if Luke was loaded with moonshine or empty by the time he came into the store. If he was empty, Luke would ease into the front, park and come in, or get gas. Most of the time he would fiddle-fool around getting gas and check his oil, in no hurry at all. When he hit the door he was ratcheting (talking) a million miles a minute. He knew everyone from far and wide. Again, if he was empty he would sit and talk to anyone who would listen to him spin a tale. But what’s amazin’ is his tales are TRUE!

“However, if on the other hand he was loaded it would be dark, probably 99 percent of the time, and O’ Luke was in a hurry. First the chickens in the coop would sound the alarm, after they were sprayed with loose gravels from the side of the store. Luke usually gassed up before going to lad the whiskey but on a few occasions he came in loaded. Next, he would leave

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the car or truck running. This was our signals to get him in and out in a flash. On these fast ‘pit stops’ dad, without a word being spoken would have his bologna and crackers waiting for him, minus the car of pork ‘n’ beans. If the law was right behind, Luke would only get about half-a-tank and take off without paying for the gas. The next day, without fail, a slow-walkin’ Luke Denny came in and said, ‘Gene, how much was my gas bill yesterday?’ My dad operated the Club Springs store from 1939 to 1971.”

Denny somberly added, “I felt like Gene’s son. He was as close to me as my own father, maybe even closer. In 1972 cancer took him away from us and sent him to the golden Club Springs in the sky.”

After a minute of silence, the moonshine running legend continued. “This area stuck together like honey bees,” Denny returned to the conversation while adjusting his black and yellow cap with “TENNESSEE” blazing on top. “We didn’t let anyone jip each other. For example, five or six young bootleggers were going to beat me out of a load of whiskey. Their plan was to give me a ‘rubber check.’ I couldn’t have gone to the law, because the check was for illegal whiskey.”

“But I overheard them talkin’ about it in the store and told dad,” Chief Dillard remembered. “In a few minutes, maybe an hour, in rolled Luke.”

“On this particular run I was hauling 40 gallons. After agreeing on the price one of the young whipper snappers handed me a phony check and said, ‘Here’s the check.’ I told him, ‘Cash only. I don’t take checks.’ One of the smartaleck’s spouted off, “How ‘bout taking Gene’s check?’ I came back with a wise crack, ‘Yes, I’d take his (Gene) check on a corn shuck.’” This brought laughter from the two.

Dillard said, "I've heard dad tell the 'corn shuck' story over and over again. Oh yes, Luke use to come by and help us strip tobacco. He would roll in with a suit on, change into work clothes, chow down on breakfast and head for the barn. About sunset he washed up, changed back into his suit and ate supper. Then away he would go.

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'One time your wife phoned mother on a Wednesday, I believe and questioned her about you. Your wife said, "He pulls out from home before the sun come up IN A SUIT, returns home late at night IN A SUIT, then gives me this bull dust story he has been working in tobacco all day" the uniformed police chief revealed.

Denny muttered, "Oliver once, when I had been working in tobacco for your dad, Gene said, 'How much do I owe you Luke?' I told him \$75 and he handed me five twenties and said, 'You worked more than nay \$75 worth.' By George, people shore don't treat you that way in this day and time. Then, a friend was a friend for life, not just when you had a few dollars in your pocket.