

(pg. 233)

JAMES (JIM) WHEELER: MAY 12, 1923:
CHAPTER 28

“I rode shotgun for Luke and was simply scared to death, James (Jim) Wheeler, 65, said about his old friend Luke Denny, during a second interview, at his home on South Ferry Road, Carthage, Tennessee, June 6, 1988. Wheeler was first interviewed January 25, 1986 at Wheel’s Place, on Highway 70, in South Carthage.

“Back in the early 50s,” Wheeler recalled, “probably ’51, Luke asked me to help him pick up and deliver a load of moonshine. He had this sharp ’49 Ford. Sometime after dark Luke picked me up at my restaurant. We had a big time talkin’ about old times while he drove east on Highway 70. Probably about 10 p.m. the moonshiner, in No-Man’s Land (Jackson County), finished stacking the 85 gallons of moonshine in the trunk of Luke’s green Ford. I lent a helping hand so we could get rollin’.

“Luke told me we were going over to DeKalb County, that’s south of where I lived in Smith County, but he didn’t tell me exactly where we were going. It was kind of a mystery to me. Well, all of a sudden he stopped near Alexandria. I’ll never forget what he said, as he looked at me, ‘Well Jimbo what are you waiting for, we’re here. Get your fanny out and help me unload the whiskey.

“I was shocked to find no one around on the desolate road,” Wheeler revealed as he removed his white cowboy hat and took a drink of water, before continuing the interview from the living room of his Cartage home. “Luke handed me the moonshine and believe it or not I stacked it in weeds, alongside the road. Remember, not a soul was in sight. Ol’ Luke jumped in the car and said, ‘Jim, get the lead out, we don’t want everybody and his brother to see us out here.’

“Within seconds Luke released the clutch and we were flyin’ low toward Carthage, with gravels flying all over the weeds where the moonshine had just been placed. Luke didn’t say a word about the operation. This kinda got to me. Why did

(pg. 234)

we put the whiskey out in the middle of nowhere? Who was it for? How was Luke paid? These unknowing tidbits simply added to Luke’s mountain dew mystic, I guess,” the bespectacled, stocky Wheeler noted.

“I didn’t really mean it that way,” Denny continued the thought, “I was thinking about two or three other loads and didn’t realize I hadn’t given Jimbo the scoop, Around the little community of New Middleton he asked about when was it going to be picked up, or something along those lines. I explained the white lightning had already been paid for by this Alexandria farmer. His wife didn’t know he was makin’ some extra rat-hole money by selling whiskey. That’s the reason we couldn’t deliver it to his barn or his home.

What Jimbo also didn't know was we were being watched by the bootlegging farmer, from a nearby words."

Wheeler was told how much money Denny made on the haul. This raised his curiosity. He began thinking, "How could I make this kinda money?" Wheeler then popped the question, "Would you haul moonshine for me, Luke? See, I have all kind of friends who drink moonshine, here in Smith County. Do you think I could retail the clear whiskey?"

While eating an early breakfast at Wheeler's Snow Creek Café the duo planned the future. "One thing for sure," Wheeler insisted, "I didn't want to get caught. The law kept nabbing people on the roads, that's why I told Luke I simply would not ride with any more liquor on the highways. We had to come up with some other way to get the booze to me. Plus, the law watches bootlegging establishments, after a drunk usually spills the beans.

"I'm not sure if it was my idea or Luke's, but the Cumberland River became our 'highway' to evade the sheriff. Remember too, the Sheriff of Smith County didn't patrol the Cumberland River, neither did the Coast Guard. Really, nobody did. The game warden might get out there every once in a while, but not very much back then. Silas (Sicy) Anderson (the local federal revenue agent), was something else. He was like a bloodhound. Once Sicy got your moonshine scent, he stayed on your trail. That feller sure caught a lot of whiskey

(pg. 235)

runners and buster a many still. I was probably on the lookout for Sicy more than the local lawmen. Ol' Sicy would send you to the Federal pen.

"Sorry, I strayed away from the Cumberland River hauling story," Wheeler continued as he checked his watch on his left wrist. "Here's how it worked for six years. Luke would notify me when he was going to the still, usually at my café, while eating. This Luke could eat his weight in gold and never gain a pound. We would come up with a rendezvous point on the river. I would hop in my boat and cruise to the spot, with fishing poles in hand. Sometime, when Luke was late, I would try my luck with rock fish. Let's see, most of the time we met at Horseshoe Bend or at Helms Bend, on the Caney Fork River."

"Speaking of Helms Bend," Denny added, "do you remember the night I broke my wrist? Lord, it's a wonder I didn't get us all caught," the whiskey runner smiled out of the corner of his mouth. "I was driving my friends beat up Chevy pickup. There was 72 gallons packed into 12 cases in the back of the jalopy. It had rained all day and was real muddy. About midnight I arrived. Boy it was pitch black that night. Then, while carrying a case, on the way down a slippery river bank, I stumbled and fell, while trying to hold onto the case of moonshine. One the way down I stuck out my right hand to break my fall and drove my right wrist deep into the mud. Crack. I can hear that sound

now. It hurt, too. Jimbo helped carry the rest of the white lightning down and loaded it aboard his boat.

“My whole hand was hurting. You know I’m right handed and can’t hit a lick with my left. This night I steered the old truck with my left hand. My eyes played tricks on me. I was light headed, you might say, like being drunk, but I hadn’t had one drink in two or three days. My vision was blurred. Somehow the old Chevy got me up the Chestnut Mound hill, on Highway 70, before I passed out. The shoulder of the road began moving in slow motion, like it was floatin’. Before passing out I was able to pull to the side of the road. Zap, I was out like a light. Clyde Allen Preston woke me. He volunteered to drive me to Jimbo’s 24-hour café.”

(pg. 236)

Wheeler said, “I can see Luke coming through the café door, holding his broken arm. He was pale as a ghost. We went into the back room and wrapped his right wrist in goose grease and placed a splint on the sides of his arm. I tried to get him to let me drive him to the hospital to have it set, but Luke was so bullheaded.”

“No, Jim, I wasn’t bull headed. Those doctors or nurses might have called the law on me, ya never know,” Denny returned. “This wrist still hurts often, especially when it rains.

“Hold on,” Wheeler continued, “did I tell you what happened to me after you fell that night? Remember, the night you got hurt was my very first night with this river-boat operation. I didn’t know the Caney Fork as well as I knew the Cumberland River, plus it was black as jet that night. The moon wasn’t to be seen, at all. All of a sudden my boat crashed into a floating log. It nearly threw me out of the boat, but didn’t thank goodness. My knees started knockin’, I’m her to tell ya. Yes, Luke, I’ll admit this young lad was scared.

“Somehow I navigated back to my house along the banks of the Cumberland, on South Ferry Road, not too far from the Carthage bridge. It seems I unloaded one case into the house, but I remember how and where I stored the remaining 11 cases. Do you recall how I used to hide my whiskey from the law, Luke?”

“O’ yes, under the big tree roots in the river,” Luke smiled as if a general had pinned a medal on his chest for bravery.

Wheeler confirmed, “Right you are my friend. I had grass toe sacks on my back porch, with wires through them. Shucks, it would take me no time to put a case of whiskey in one of those sacks. Soon I would have 11 sacks tied to large tree roots resting under the Cumberland River waters, below my house. For six years I did this and never got caught by the law. A few times some fishermen would catch their fishing lines on a root or on one of my wires. I had to be careful of them. Also, if the law raided me I didn’t want to get caught with much moonshine in the house.”

(pg. 237)

“We used this method of whiskey running from the early ‘50’s to about ‘56 or ‘57,” Denny commented. “I met him on the river twice a week, sometimes three times around holidays, but never less than once a week. Do you remember why you stopped buying from me?” Without waiting for an answer the whiskey runner answered, “I do. You got religion!”

“How right you are. For the next 11 years I quit peddling booze and turned to the Lord. Yes, it’s true, I joined the church. Every Sunday morning you would find me at church. Shortly I turned my efforts to law enforcement. In 1959 I became the Carthage Police Chief. Thirteen years (1959 – 1972) later I ran for the Sheriff of Smith County (1972) and was elected for a two-year term. In 1974 I went back to being the Carthage Police Chief. Three years later I went to work in guarding prisoners at the Middle Tennessee Receptional Center in Nashville. After about six years there, I retired; the last part of 1985.”

For some unknown reason the conversation turned to World War II. Both men served in the U. S. Army in the European Theater. Denny fought as a machine gunner and a motor transportation soldier, while Wheeler, an Arkansas native, spent 23 months fighting the Nazis in Europe. Eleven months Wheeler saw front line duty with combat engineers.

Denny returned to the whiskey runner days with a personal question. “Didn’t you get shot in the stomach while serving as the Chief of Police?”

Wheeler smiled and answered, “Yes, but it was my wife who shot me twice. Boy, she got mad as a wet hen at me. Soon after the shooting we divorced. Do you remember the times I locked you up when I was working on the other side of the law, Luke?”

“Shore do. I would get drunk and you would lock me up. But, when you were in office I made damn sure I stayed clear of your territory...most of the time,” the whiskey runner replied.

“Your dear wife called on me a few times, about being intoxicated. I would go get you and lock you up. In the morning I’d let you out - - on your personal bond - - after sobering up. A few

(pg. 238)

times you were really soused. Yes, Luke, those were the days of a bygone era. The younger people are taking drugs today. Drugs are extremely dangerous to this country and our younger generation,” Wheeler said, while sounding like a preacher.

“Today,” James Wheeler finished the interview, “I no longer smoke, nor drink, nor run around with women. Over a year ago I started back to church and I’m a deacon in

Gordonsville. I'm a better man for it, too. In fact, if my health stays as good as it is today I might even run for sheriff again in 1990."

Visitors interrupted the two old timers shaking hands for a photograph. It was time to say goodbye. Luke concluded, "If you are elected sheriff just think...you won't have to stay on the lookout for THIS whiskey runner. This ol' bird finally learned his lesson. My nerves tell me I learned too late.