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JAY CHARLES (J.C.) ROLLINS: AUGUST 17, 1933:  
CHAPTER 29

I've been in law enforcement since September 1, 1966 and I've never seen another Luke Denny," said Jay C. Rollins, 56, Criminal Investigator with the Assistant District Attorney General's Lebanon, Tennessee office. "Yep, they broke the mold after making ol' Luke, here," Rollins added from the spacious living room of his Flat Rock, Tennessee, home, July 9, 1988."

The relaxed lawman stretched and continued the interview as his friend Luke - - of more than 35 years - - chatted with his wife in the kitchen about her special recipe for making jelly. "Did you know I put Luke in jail in the late sixties? I was Smith County's first salaried Chief Deputy (Sept. 1966 - 1972) and was making my normal rounds in South Carthage. I'll say it was in the fall of the year. I walked into Earl McCallum's Southside Café. Luke was standing with one of his relatives and was taking a big swig from a pint of whiskey. It was illegal back in those days to drink, plus he was drunk as a skunk.

"Luke had his back to me and didn't see me," Rollins added. "He turned and quickly put the top back on and eased the pint in his pocket. I told him to go outside and get in the patrol car. Then I took him to the Smith County Jail near the courthouse in Carthage. When we got inside I told Luke I would have to search him. And, sure enough the pint of whiskey was still in his pocket. Ol' Luke was so drunk he didn't have enough sense to toss it into the bushes as we walked up to the lockup.

"I went ahead and charged him with Public Drunkenness and Possession of Liquor. Do you remember what the judge gave you?" Rollins asked the moonshine hauler.

Denny instantly spouted, "\$40 for RD and \$50 for Possession. I remember that so vividly because you were the only officer of the law to arrest me for Possession of Liquor. And, what makes this so funny is I only got caught with one pint of government whiskey and I was drinkin' it in public.

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Think of the many hundreds of thousands of gallons of illegal moonshine I've hauled and then to go to jail for drinkin' one lousy pint."

Both men laughed and Jay Rollins said, "We had to keep the drunks in jail at least four hours back then, but I can't remember how long you stayed that night, nor who went your bail. But I can recall one special tidbit about Luke and jail. Every time he was locked up for drinking he gave me his diamond tie tack and asked me to hold it for him. He thought one of the prisoners would steal it while he was asleep, I guess."

Rollins' wife briefly entered the conversation from the kitchen, where she was breaking beans, with, "Whatever happened to the tie tack, Luke?"

"I lost it some where or some jerk wad stole it," Denny muttered in disgust.

"It's no wonder you lost it Luke," Rollins said with a smile, "you could get drunker than anyone I know, and if you weren't actually drunk, you could act the part so well we all thought you would fall flat on your face any minute. Then, without a word you would act as if you were sober as the judge sitting on the front pew of the church on Sunday."

Both started laughing and pointing at each other as they remembered another drinking episode. Rollins started the tale with, "We were sitting around Richardson's Shop-Rite on Highway 25 in Carthage around this same period and Luke asked this Carthage attorney how much he would charge to represent him in a Public Drunkenness case, which was coming up in General Session's Court. The lawyer said fifty bucks and ol' Luke pulled a roll from his front pants pocket. He peeled off two twenties and a ten and promptly handed it to him.

"But the funny part of this whole story is when the attorney and Luke appeared in front of Judge Henry Mathis. I think it was Henry. Judge Mathis asked Luke how he pleaded and the lawyer quickly pronounced to a full courtroom, 'Oh he's guilty as sin, your honor.' Judge Henry immediately dropped his gavel and said something like, 'That'll be ten dollars. Pay the clerk, like always, Luke.'

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"Luke stuck his head into the side room and said to me, 'J.C. why did I pay that dumb lawyer fifty smack-a-roos to tell the judge I was guilty as sin? Hell, I could have saved myself \$50 by pleading guilty without sin, myself, like I usually do.'"

Laughter rang throughout the beautiful high wooden ceiling home.

"Wait, wait," Rollins revealed, "it was about this time I spotted Luke in the old Gordonsville Esso, which was locate on the north side of what is now I-40. He was acting kinda funny. Luke was always a big talker, but for some reason he was fidgety. You know, nervous like. I thought he might be returning to his old moonshine hauling days. He had been out of the whiskey hauling business for how long Luke?"

"Oh, about 10 years, I guess. That was about 1969 or '70 and I stopped moving shine big time about 1961," Denny answered.

"Luke was walking back and forth in the service station. He looked at me, then toward the gas pumps, then down the road and back at me again. He didn't stop looking. I could tell he wanted me to leave, so I stuck around. This foxy brunette pulled up with the brightest cherry red lipstick. She was a knockout. Built on the same order as Jane

Russell. The old boy here raced out and paid the attendant for her gas, and she drove off. Luke got in his pickup and took off in the same direction as the woman.

“About five or ten days later I saw Luke in the parking lot behind the Carthage courthouse,” the lawman continued. “Luke motioned for me to stop, he wanted to talk to me. He said, something like, ‘J.C. don’t tell Nellie what you saw the other night over in Gordonsville. She’d ring my neck.’ I didn’t tell anybody anything like that. To me, that was none of my business..

The lawman said he continued to hear of Denny’s exploits from time to time when he was Sheriff Cecil Bryant’s Chief Deputy in Wilson County from 1972-1974. Rollins met Denny every once in a while when Rollins served at Watertown’s (TN) Chief of Police (1974-1978). From 1978 to 1986 Rollins was Smith County’s first paid detective for the sheriff. The two chatted a few times about the old days. Officer Rollins was

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Sheriff Johnny Bane’s detective in Smith County when he resigned (1986) and accepted the Criminal Investigator’s job with the Assistant District Attorney General. The two friends met again at the Smithville Fiddlers Jamboree in early July 1988.

The criminal investigator explained how he and other lawmen of yesteryear checked to see if the clear liquid was moonshine or not. They took a quart cap and poured some liquid in it. Then put a match to it. If a blue flame covered the cap and stayed low it was moonshine, but if a yellow flame shot up, it was something other than whiskey.

After the moonshine checking lesson, a few photographs were taken of the two men looking at photographs of moonshine stills; one in which two large radiators were used to make illegal whiskey. As the two shook hands in walked country and western music singer Charlie Louvan. Louvan was on his way to sing at the Grand Old Opry that evening. Reminiscing about old country music greats concluded the interview session.