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EUGENE (GENE) PEAK

MAY 2, 1902

CHAPTER 3

“The thirties were THE times,” Eugene (Gene) Peak, 85, said during his interview December 30, 1987, in Cookeville, Tennessee. “I remember having many, many good times. Back then I rode with Mr. Luke (Denny) here. We would go to Jackson County and pickup moonshine and take it to places in Hartsville, Carthage, Lebanon, Gallatin, Sparta and all over Buffalo Valley.

“In those days we didn’t have any money,” the 6’4” black man said. “I worked on Mr. Luke’s Uncle Will Denny’s farm for many a year, just down the road from where Mr. Luke lived. You might say I was a sharecropper. See I was about 15 years older than Mr. Luke. We did all kinds of things when he was growin’ up. One thin’ for shore Mr. Luke wasn’t afraid of nothin’...back then. He would get into a batch of trouble and tell me about it and boy we would get the biggest kick out of it.

“Probably the one time I remember most was the big fight,” Gene Peak said as he adjusted his pipe. “Do you remember that bloody day, Mr. Luke?”

Peak continued, “It was just before Christmas in the mid-thirties. Luke wasn’t the big moonshine runner he would later become. Back then he only moved a few gallons at a time because he didn’t have any money. Don’t laugh Mr. Luke, shucks I didn’t have any change, either.” Both men laughed and so did Gene’s grandson who was listening to the interview from his parent’s living room.

“Gene loved to drink whiskey back then like we did,” Denny added. “He would go with me to the stills. Most of the time the moonshiners loaded the whiskey, but at the bootleggers Gene helped unload.”

“I unloaded just about evertime I went with ya, Mr. Luke,” Gene Peak returned to the interview. “After that we ate and drank some whiskey together. This one time Luke and me

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toted two or three gallons up to a house in a hollar between Rock Spring and Buffalo Valley. I believe it was on Mr. Joe Maddux’s place, but Mr. Joe didn’t live in the little, two-room shack. There was no road to the house, just a path. His house was ‘bout haf-a-mile from the main road. When we got there you could smell the lady’s homemade cakes. I wanted one, so did Mr. Luke, but we didn’t ask for them because the lady had baked them for her Christmas company.”

Luke said, "I was working on the halfers with the feller. He would sell it and I would bring it to his house. I never made hardly any money, very little at all, from this endeavor. He was also a 'pocket bootlegger'; that's one who carried a pint or two in his pocket, when he's around people. Usually, he would have a gallon hid near by. He would even sell it by the swig. When Gene and I arrived there were three men all ready there and they were having a big time, drinkin' moonshine from fruit jars and tellin' dirty jokes. The lady of the house wasn't home. I looked at those cakes and my mouth watered, but I didn't eat one. They were homemade yellow chocolate.

"Imagine this old shack. It was only two rooms. The living room doubled as the bedroom and the kitchen and dining room was the other room. Ye know something Gene, come to think of it, you and I are the only two alive who could tell about the big fight. The only survivors. We better not mention the brawler's names. We don't want to make anyone made at us, even tho it happened half-a-century ago," Denny suggested.

"There is one, your first cousin Mr. Holland Denny. He didn't see the fight, but didn't he drive the one fellow who was bleeding like a stuck pig to the doctor's house?" Gene Peak explained.

"Yea, that's right," the moonshine runner commented. "But the rest are dead. That's a shame. Anyway, we're getting ahead of the fight, Gene. It was about midday. I remember the sun was high as we walked up the path. After 30 minutes of laughin' and drinkin' in strolled four dangerous men. They brought some whiskey with them. I thought that was unusual - - for them to bring moonshine - - since liquor was sold at the two-room house. So there we were, all drinkin'. About an hour later

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Gene asked me if it was okay to lay down on the bed in the living room. He was getting pretty tight. There was a white man already in the bed, probably passed out."

"Right before that we ate all the lady's cakes, remember Mr. Luke?" Gene added with a smile.

"That's right," Denny said. I nearly forgot about those cakes. Boy they were delicious. When we first got there we wouldn't touch them, but the drunker we got the easier it was to eat them, I'm embarrassed to say. Well, the bootlegger took one gallon of moonshine outside. I believe, now, he did it so the men who brought it could pick it up on their way home. At the time I didn't think it happened that way. One of the late arrival's in overalls, said, 'You stole my damn liquor.' The bootlegger grabbed a homemade blackjack and came back at him harshly, 'You're a damn liar'.

"Only moments before we were joking about Gene laying in the living room in bed, all sprawled out with this white man who was totally out of it, about half on the bed and half off. Gene was on the other side of the bed, with one leg on the floor. All the blankets were stacked in the middle.

“Well, all of sudden the two men started scuffling. I don’t remember either getting a good lick in, inside the house. They totally destroyed her house. It was a complete mess. Then they rolled through the door and into the yard. You wouldn’t believe the yellin’ and cussin’ goin’ on,” Denny revealed.

“All the commotion woke me up,” Gene Peak commented. “By the time Mr. Luke and me got to the door they were screamin’ at each other like two cats and dogs - - with their tails tied together - - and on fire. Boy, they were mad.”

Denny added, “The man with the blackjack took a big swing at the other one. Instead of backing up and getting hit, the man lunged forward. The blackjack missed his head, but hit the back of his neck. Then the hand strap broke. Wham, went the blackjack into a mule pulled mowing machine wheel about 20 feet away. It ripped the black leather cover off the blackjack revealing the six-inch piece of steel about the size of a quarter.

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“The really made the man without the blackjack hoppin’ mad. Quickly, he grabbed the bootlegger by the hair with his left hand and from out of nowhere came a knife,” Denny proclaimed with high excitement in his voice. “I will never understand why he had his index finger on top of the blade as he swiped at the bootlegger’s throat. For some unknown reason, I jumped fro a couple of giant steps and grabbed the knife wheelin’ man by the belt, from behind.”

The black man added, “I told you at the beginnin’ Mr. Luke here wasn’t afraid of nothin’. He slung the feller with knife around by the belt and away from the bootlegger. Suddenly the knife man came to a stop and looked dead at Mr. Luke and said, ‘Say listen, it’s old Luke.’”

“Meanwhile, another man picked up a double-bladed ax and took off after the bootlegger’s brother-in-law. Away they ran. But, after three or four slashin’ swipes from the sharp ax if finally struck the back of the bootlegger’s right leg, up from the ankle about three inches. The blow struck so hard it cut the man’s shoe entirely off. Oh, the sound of that ax hitting his leg and ankle bone made an awful racket. It’s a sound a person will remember for the rest of his life. The blood came gushin’ out like a Texas oil well comin’ in.”

“It’s true, every single word,” the older man mentioned as he puffed on his pipe faster. “It’s a wonder, no a miracle the ax man didn’t kill him. When the ax hit his leg it came out of his hand.”

“From out of the house came another man armed with a poker,” Denny explained. “He whacked yet another man over the head. Oh my the blood spurted suddenly like a water hose turned full blast, from the top of his head. Within seconds his hair turned Chinese red with blood. His face was completely covered with blood, instantly. Goodness. It

was an ugly sight. Blood here and there, drunk men hollarin', cryin', screamin'...all at the same time. What a sight! It's horrifying to recall the event after more than fifty years.

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"Mr. Gene sobered up the fastest I've ever seen him; like he was in front of a judge. He put his hand on a fence post and pole vaulted over it and ran through the woods like the devil was after him." This brought back slapping laughter from the two lifelong companions.

"When I heard someone yell, 'The laws comin' I got a hat,' Peak uttered while motioning how he leaped over the fence.

"My first cousin, Holland Denny, from up north in Akron, Ohio, had driven down for a Christmas visit. Someone went and got him. He took the wounded combatants to the country doctor in Buffalo Valley. I believe it was Dr. Denton, I'm not sure of that fact. When my cousin drove off the rest of us scattered in every direction. I stopped and hid behind a tree on a hillside on the other side of the main road, but within voice range.

"Shortly up rolled two or maybe three cars full of lawmen. They jumped out of the cars nearly before coming to a stop. I laughed, because I knew we had all left the scene. If I'm not mistaken they were led by Putnam County Sheriff Sam Denton Pottett. Later I found out the lawmen confiscated the blackjack remnants, the bloody ax, the bloody poker and the gallon of moonshine. It was hidden in the tobacco patch, which had been harvested a few months before, in a basket. That big fight had been triggered over one gallon of moonshine," Denny inferred and once again both men shook their heads.

"The law tried to get someone to come forward and tell what happened, but to no avail. They questioned me, too, Denny announced. "I didn't tell them anything. They would have sent me to jail just as fast as they would the others. No charges were ever brought against anyone. And, believe this or not, about two weeks later, three or four of the veterans - -who had fought each other so viciously, trying to kill each other - - were drinking moonshine out of the same half-gallon jar down by the Buffalo Valley railroad."

"Stop, stop for a minute," the large chested black man interjected. "Mr. Luke I've got a confession to make to ya. Don't get mad. Promise?" Luke waved both hands, palms forward, while nodding from side to side. "Well, about four year later,

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when you were really haulin' a lot of moonshine I went with you and your cousin in your new '40 Ford. If I'm not mistaken it was right at the end of 1939. We had two big 20 gallon kegs filled with moonshine. The law got after us between Rock Spring and St. Mary's. You slowed down and your cousin tossed those heavy kegs out. They rolled down the steep bank toward the creek.

Denny said, "Oh yes. I remember that. After two or three days my cousin and I went back and found one keg and brought it back to the barn. We looked and looked from the other one. We even waded the creek. Finally, we gave up. I guess it hit some of those rocks and broke open and floated on down the creek.

The handsome elderly black man sent up a cloud of smoke from his pipe and smiled devilishly. "Mr. Luke, that's what I need to confess 'bout. See, what happened was I went back that night after you dropped me off and drug that keg across the creek. Then pulled it up the lane, down the fence row, across the field and into my barn. I hit on that keg for a month or so, before it was gone. I just couldn't get up enough courage to tell you, plus soon after that you went in the service and moved from the Valley. I'm sorry."

This revelation brought side aching laughter from the two friends. They shook hands for at least a minute. Gene Peak said, "Mr. Luke, stealin' that one keg from ya has bothered me for more than forty years. I'm real glad to get it off my chest."

Moonshine hauling Luke Denny said of the black man, my family loved his family. They were and are good people. Times were hard back then. Gene was a good, faithful man. He was a handy man. Gene could fix a flat - - out on the road, in the middle of the night - - faster than any man alive. Sometimes we were loaded with liquor. It was scary, dangerous too. Oh yes, he had bushels of brothers and sisters. We played games with them many times when I was growing up. Gene here had a large family, himself. When it came to farming, you couldn't beat Gene. He grew the best tobacco and corn. He was one of the best mule teamsters in the Valley. Few could break ground as quickly as Gene."

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Suddenly both men stopped talking. A hush came over the neatly decorated room. Denny recalled, "I can see Gene walking down the lane toward the house in the late thirties. He would say, something on the order of, 'When are we goin' to Jackson County to get a load?' Followed by, 'Ye got any whiskey in the car?' I'd say, if you can find any it's yours. And by George somehow, he would find a pint or half pint I had hidden somewhere. Usually, I had forgotten I had hidden it. We would sit on the porch or out in the barn and sip on moonshine, together. Sometimes, we would roll on down the road to pick up and deliver a load of white lightning. Oh, Gene was a good lookin' feller. The colored girls thought he was the cats meow. But, when he got hitched up with his sweet wife, he settled down and took good care of his family. Gene, I can honestly say, you were and are one of my best friends. I love you like a brother."

Softly, Gene Peak concluded, "I love you too Mr. Luke, like one of my own kinds. You are my very, very good friend."