

(pg. 247)

HAROLD LEE WILLIAMS: DECEMBER 4, 1929:  
CHAPTER 31

“I can see Luke and myself setting at a table in the Gordonsville Café, mapping our moonshine run to Gallatin, while eating hamburgers, in the Spring of 1953. I believe Francis Tubbs ran the restaurant back then,” Harold Lee Williams, 59, opened the interview, from the living room of his Turkey Creek home, north of Carthage, Tennessee, November 12, 1988.

“Nearly everyone, from around these parts, knew fancy Luke was the whiskey haulin’ man. I guess I’ve known him since the late 30s,” Williams, a barrel-chested man, recalled. “From 1951 to 1953 I was in the U. S. Army. I spent 24 months and 26 days a soldier, then I returned home to Smith County, 23 (years old), single, full of vinegar, and with a lead foot. Before going into the service most of us boys my age didn’t have cars. With the Korean war winding down, nearly all of the returning men had a car, me included.”

Denny interrupted, “I was using my green ’49 Ford to haul about this time excuse me, Harold, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Go ahead.”

“At this time Luke was sick, he said. I could tell from his bloodshot eyes and his pale look, ol’ Luke was in some pain,” Williams continued. “Luke wanted me to drive him - - with a load of whiskey - - to Gallatin.”

“O’ hell I really felt bad,” Denny explained as he took off his hat, smiled and added. “I believe the clear liquid inside a fruit jar was what made me sick. See, a bunch of us had been ‘hitting’ on a jug or two all day. By midnight I hadn’t recovered. Plus, I couldn’t trust just anybody to drive with me. Shucks, they might panic and get me caught.

Williams revealed, “Back then Luke was the local hero to us boys. He had fast cars and even faster women. We were in the youth of our lives and looking for excitement. My buddy, here, told me the 120 gallons of moonshine was already loaded in the trunk. So, I agreed to drive him. Really, I was looking for

(pg. 248)

my own tale to tell around here, I guess. Well, about midnight we took off. I drove while he kept a constant, steady eye out for the law. He kept tellin’ me to slow down and stay just under the speed limit. That was hard for me to do back then.

“We rolled across the Cumberland River bridge into Carthage, continued on the old Highway 25, cross (Highway) 231, and into Sumner County. After drivin’ by some tobacco barns on Muddy Run we came upon a house with a circle drive. Can we tell who’s house we delivered it too, Luke?”

“No, he’s dead. But, if he was alive I know he would want to be in the book and movie, too. He was probably the biggest bootlegger - - retailer and wholesaler - - in all of the southeast. He had two identical cars. Seems to me his wife drove on and he drove the other, while they were haulin’. One was empty. They used it as a decoy. They other car - - green I believe carried the moonshine. Everyone of the whiskey people said his wife was an excellent wheelman. I’ve been told by different runners she could cut curves as good, if not better than us all,” Denny recalled. “I’m not sure if she is alive or not. Continue on Harold, I need a sip.”

With that statement the 73-year-old moonshine legend got up and strolled to the kitchen, as usual. Barbara, Harold’s wife chatted with us momentarily as Todd, their son, headed for the kitchen, also.

Harold spouted, “Back to my first whiskey run. Luke instructed me to turn into the circle drive. In back, we stopped and the bootlegger came out. A cross-eyed white man, along with a very dark skinned colored man walked out from a shed behind the house. The bootlegger spot checked our load and paid Luke \$10 a gallon. Luke said he made \$3 a gallon profit. Unloading took only a few minutes. We didn’t unload. The cross-eyed man and the colored fellow handled that chore. About half the load was in half gallon fruit jars and the other moonshine was in Coca-Cola jugs. Our drive back to Gordonsville was uneventful.”

Denny returned to the living room and quipped, “Tell him ‘bout your drag race in front of Snow Creek’s Truck Stop with the yellow Merc, that happened shortly after you first run.”

(pg. 249)

“Okay,” Williams agreed. “I brought myself a fast ’51 maroon Studebaker Commander convertible. It would tear up the road, let me tell ya. Well, this fellow named Joe had a quick Mercury. And, it’s amazing how you can remember the smallest details, Luke. Joe’s car was yellow. We lined up on the two-lane road, Highway 70, in front of Snow Creek Truck Stop, headed west toward South Carthage. I was in the wrong land. This man flagged us off with a mechanic’s rag from the truck stop’s garage. My Studebaker’s back tires grabbed better than the Merc’s. His smoked and burned the road. About three tenths of a mile I was a few car lengths ahead and pulled into the right lane.

Before crossing the Caney Fork River bridge, near where Senator Albert Gore Jr., now lives, there was Red Petty’s restaurant. I wheeled around and waited. Well, nothing happened. I waited some more. When they didn’t show up I got concerned. Maybe the law caught them, but I hadn’t heard nor seen any lawman. After crankin’ up my Studebaker I drove back up (east on Highway) 70. There had crashed. That Yellow Merc had turned over. I took them to the hospital.

“Shortly after that Luke talked me into helping him haul another load, with him,” Williams explained.

Denny muttered, “What happened was this same Gallatin bootlegger wanted 150 gallons. I had my midnight blue, ’47 Pontiac at the time. It would only hold 80 gallons in the trunk. He wanted it that night. I didn’t have time to make two runs. Harold and I got along real good. We met at the truck stop. Together we headed east to my backer, up on Highway 70. We can’t use his name. His children wouldn’t give me permission. I was in front.”

Williams continued, “When we turned right Luke’s backer told us to stop, get out, leave the cars, and walk toward the highway while they were loaded. Then we took off. I was starting to get scared, for the first time. That’s when I realized the law would take my Studebaker and throw me in jail if we got caught. Buddy, I thought to myself, ‘Harold, if you make this run it will be your last.’ It was, too.

(pg. 250)

“Just like the first whiskey run, we drove in back of the Muddy Run, Gallatin house. He spot checked us, again, while the same men unloaded us. This bootlegger was so big he had to employ three shifts to move all his booze. Just as we were ready to crank up I heard Luke cuss a blue streak. Do you remember what had happened?” Williams asked his lifelong companion.

“Lord do I. Boy I was pissed. Damn it my back right tire was flat as a flitter. My Gallatin bootlegging buddy said, ‘Calm down, I’ll phone the police station.’ I said, ‘Don’t call them, you’ll get us all caught.’ He smiled and came back with, ‘Don’t worry. All they will do is pump up your tire.’ You will not believe what happened. A policeman was there in nothin’ flat. He took one look at the tire, pumped it up and was off before I could say, Jack Rabbit. I didn’t even get to thank him,” Luke added.

Williams rejoined the conversation, “On the way back to Snow Creek I thought long and hard about hauling any more moonshine. My whiskey haulin’ days were history. We could have easily gotten caught as we drove right by the courthouse square in Carthage, Hartsville and Gallatin. We were lucky, I thought to myself as we pulled into the truck stop about three in the morning.”

Construction and law enforcement would be Harold Williams’ careers. In November 1975 the stocky man joined the Smith County Sheriff’s Office as a deputy. In March 1977 he resigned and ran for sheriff himself. Following his defeat, Williams became a Gordonsville policeman (1978-81). Today, he is a foreman on the Smith County Highway Department.

As the interview came to a close, photographs taken, Luke stood up and said to this author, “How much do you think Harold charged me for driving with me the first run,

then using his car with 70 gallons of whiskey the last time?" Without waiting for an answer the legendary mountain dew runner declared, "Nothing. We never discussed it."

Harold Williams concluded, "That's a fact. I never got a nickel.. I didn't want money."

(pg. 251)

"That's the way life way back in those days. Friends took care of one another, not like today. It's dog eat dog," Luke Alexander Denny said in a strong voice. "In the old days it seems everyone was happier. Times were hard, but we met and talked a lot. I long for those days of nostalgia. They'll never return. People don't have time for each other today. It's sad.