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DEWEY (JUNIOR) BENNETT: DECEMBER 7, 1926:
CHAPTER 32

At turn of the half century mark, Luke Denny was serving as a large appliance salesman for the Tuley Furniture Company in Carthage. Dewey (Junior) Bennett, now 63 years old, was the “fix it” man for Tuley. Luke was 32 and Junior 24. Junior had boxed for a goodly number of years and loved to drink moonshine. His friend and co-worker Luke had hauled illegal whiskey since the thirties and loved to drink moonshine, too. Naturally, the two young men - - full of adventure - - became lifelong companions.

During Junior Bennetts interview on January 28, 1989 he said, “My claim to fame is I built Luke Denny’s Frigidaire refrigerator crate so he could haul moonshine under the noses of the law while sellin’ appliances.” Bennett smiled big while pushing his glasses back on his nose. His nine-year-old grandson T. J. Stinson climbed on his shoulders as the stocky mechanic continued.

“I knew Luke, my o’l buddy here, ad been foolin’ with the white liquor for a long time. We always had a pint or quart hidden in the Tuley Furniture Company warehouse. The boss, Mr. W. R. Tuley, never found it or we both would have been without a job. Lke had been haulin’ in his green ’49 Ford for a couple of years and the law kept stoppin’ him at ever crook in the road. It’s a wonder ol’ Luke didn’t get nabbed with all the moonshine he hauled. His green Ford was red hot, Luke used to say. Well, he and Nellie got hitched along about February 1949. Along came Charles Lynn sometime in 1950 so Luke decided to quit the moonshine business since he was doin’ so well sellin’ those ranges and freezers. I remember W. M. was really happy with both of us.

“Luke ad been sellin’ around Smith County when he had his ’49 Ford, but when he bought his blue ’52 Chevy pickup truck in late 1951 I noticed e was movin’ his business to Jackson County more and more. I really didn’t pay much attention to where he was takin’ the appliances until one day.

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the boss praised him for doin’ such good business in the deep hollers near Seven Knobs. Everyone knew but the law abidin’ citizens that Seven Knobs was the capital of Moonshineville, Tennessee.

“The next time I recall was just after Luke bought his pickup. He wanted me to build him some sideboards for the back. Then he had some lettering painted on them. Mr. W. M. was pleased because it had his store’s name on them in silver letters. The back of the sideboards was painted in blue. They looked real nice, I must say,” Junior said.

Luke added, “I did go straight for six to eight months I guess. Somewhere about that time. But when the moonshiners would only pay for the appliances with mountain dew,

that's when I began returnin' to the haulin' trade. I told every lawman I have stopped haulin'. And, I didn't haul...for awhile. You might not believe this, Junior, I did not get pulled over by the law one single time with my '52 Chevy pickup. I traded it in on a black 1953 Ford pickup. That was a mistake. I should have kept that Chevy."

Junior said, "Luke, Stony's interviewin' me. Let me tell him 'bout the crate in your Ford truck."

Both men laughed as they sat on the wooden steps of the Spring Street Grocery store, one block northeast of the courthouse in Carthage. Junior's nine-year-old grandson listened to every word intently from his grandfather's shoulders.

"I really don't know where Luke came up with the idea of hidin' the whiskey in the wooden Frigidaire box, but he did. He wanted the actual crate fixed up real sturdy, so he could haul a lot of moonshine. The first thing I did was pull the original nails out of the front lid of the crate. Then took the lid off the back. We found another Frigidaire crate and removed it's front lid. I 'X' braced the new back lid that would be against the cab. Then nailed them shut with additional stronger, longer nails. I built four shelves just like a cabinet maker would. Next, I braced the four shelves."

Luke chimed in, "That way I could slide four cases good and snug - - side by side - - on one shelf. With Junior's three new pine shelves and the bottom of the box as a fourth shelf, I fit 16 cases tightly in the crate, which was 96 gallons."

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"I tellin' about the crate, Luke," Junior added with a grin. "He's right. The crate was about six-an-half feet tall, four feet wide and three feet deep. Under the shelves I ran some pine strips for extra support. For more strength I also added an extra thick piece of plywood inside the crate. Luke could run up and down the highway empty or full and no one was the wiser...and he did too."

Luke returned. "Sometime Junior and I would pull out of the warehouse shortly after sunup. My Ford pickup would have two or three ranges or refrigerators. He—pointing at Junior Bennett—would install the appliances, while I tried to sell the customer, or their neighbors additional items. The crate was empty at this time.

"Sometime, if we were in the Seven Knobs we would drive over to a moonshiner and load the crate with moonshine. Then drive it to my backer or to a bootlegger. Most of the time I took the whiskey east of Carthage, near home, but always at night. Some of my favorite off-loading spots were: Sullivans and Helms Bend, Upper Ferry Road and Myers Bottom, in Smith County. Then I would cruise on home most of the time.

"If it was in the daytime I usually dropped it off at the backer's barn," the old time whiskey runner explained. "See, I would drive inside the barn hallway and we shut the barn doors. The barn was off Highway 70-N. It was no problem loading or unloading

there, anytime. But, east of Carthage was different. There I had to unload at night. Everyone and their brother could have spotted us. I would have been in jail as quick as a wink if we had off-loaded in the daytime.”

“This one time,” Junior said, “I remember real well. After I fixed up this lady’s electric stove and showed her how to work it she cooked us a meal to show us how good a cook she was, plus make sure it worked. Luke always was a big eater. I don’t know why he stayed as skinny as a rail. Well, after supper I helped the man load the moonshine from a smokehouse, while Luke jaw-jacked with the lady of the house. He said, after we was headed down the road, he thanked her for the meal and was trying to make another sale.

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I know better. This rascal here was the best at getting’ out of work. He seemed to have someone to load and unload all the time. Then I helped unload it at the backer’s tater house. It was down from the barn aways, closer to the woods. He said he wanted to keep a load down there just in case the law raided him. That way he would have some extra booze for his bootleggers.”

“I remember that time, Junior,” Denny said, the whiskey was in half gallon fruit jars. Oh yes, I did untie the crate that day,” Luke Denny laughed and said,

“Yep, I must tell the truth. You did help untie the ropes from around the crate. That was one time you did lift a hand,” Junior said sarcastically.

“See,” Denny said while motioning with his hands like he was lassoing a steer, “The loaded crate was tope heavy. If I took a curve too sharp it could slide and possible tip over or make me crash the pickup. So we had to tie it at least twice, with two ropes. Plus, if the law got after me I would stand a better chance of getting’ away if it was tied down.”

“The bucket, the bucket, the bucket,” Junior Bennett halted the conversation with excitement, “remember that bud? I was loadin’ moonshine down from the loft in Jackson County in the early 50s. It was hard work and hot too. When I climbed down all I could think of was a good drink of water. In the kitchen sink was a bucket with a dipper layin’ in the water. I scooped a full dipper of water and guzzled down about a half. Wow, my tummy was not expectin’ liquid fire...better known as white lightning. That was a shocker. Anyway, after the flames stopped blazin’ out my ears I slowly drank the rest of the dipper of whiskey.

“On the way back we stopped at a café, now closed, between South Carthage and Elmwood. I don’t remember if it was Luke or me who complained about the steak not bein’ cooked right. We got into a big fuss with a load of mountain din-o-mite in the crate. When they started to call the law Luke pulled the phone off the wall and we took off.”

“I had to pay for that silly prank,” the moonshine runner softly mentioned. “How about the hundred dollar bonus?”

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“O” my, yes, do I remember that night,” the mechanic answered. “It was December 24, still early in the 50s. We had worked hard, real hard, and Mr. Tuley gave us a one-hundred dollar check from Santa Claus for a Christmas bonus. I’ll never forget the check. Mr. Tuley actually had written ‘From Santa Claus’ on the bottom. Now that was like a million bucks today. We went down to a truckstop near Rome, that’s near the Wilson County/Smith County line, on Highway 70 north. We got smashed. Luke was drunker than me.

“It started snowin’ and I had to get home. So I finally convinced Luke to come on and get in the black Ford pickup. He was angry because I wanted to leave. In fact, he threaten to kick the passenger’s window out if I didn’t turn around and go back. I pulled over. Got out. Took the rope from the truck bed. Luke was catchin’ a few z-z-z-z’s so I gently tied him up. Even before I turned the engine over he woke up. He stomped and tried kickin’ the dashboard. But I kept drivin’ home. Finally, we arrived at his house and I untied him. I told Nellie it was too cold and snowy for him to go back out. Then I tossed her the keys to his truck. Those snow flakes were big. It must have been around zero. The wind was whippin’. The trees were full of snow and bent over, it was blowin’ so hard.”

This rope tying episode brought laughter from five or six bystanders and the two friends. Dewey Bennett summed up his eight or so years working with the Tennessee backwoods moonshine runner this way, “I worked with Tuley Furniture for nearly 17 years. Everyday was new and different when the happy man, Luke Denny was around. He was always a barrel of laughs. Yes, those were the times I remember as happy days in my life. If you needed someone to lend you money or a helpin’ hand, this gent was one of the best. He loved people and the people loved him. That’s the main reason Luke Denny never got caught haulin’ whiskey. Luke is a friend’s friend...even if I did have to tie him up once in a snow storm.”

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Luke smiled as the engine cranked behind the grocery store. Luke yelled at Junior and said, “Junior we should have told him about you fighting a gorilla for 10 minutes at the Smith County Fair in 1953. He received a dollar a round. Then Junior fought a kangaroo at the fair the next year.

“I had to watch the kangaroo’s tail. I learned to get inside. That’s how I beat the ‘roo!” Junior Bennett said as we drove away.