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JAMES MONROE (COON) WOODARD: JANUARY 14, 1909:  
CHAPTER 34

“I’ve known Coon (James Monroe Woodard) here, ever since I was a little toddler,” Luke Denny opened the May 6, 1989 conversation in the Woodard’s living room, in Elmwood, Tennessee, some 50 miles east of Nashville and north of Interstate 40. “Coon’s first cousin Bates Woodard worked on my daddy’s Rock Springs farm and even lived with us for a few years in the late 20s and early 30s. That’s how I first heard about Big Coon. See, he was eight years older than me. O’ yes, he was big and strong. Coon was tough as pig iron, too, and as you can imagine with a nickname like Coon, he loved to hust raccoons.” That statement brought laughter and a head not from Woodard, and a grin from his wife of 53 years Irene (Abney) Woodard.

Woodard, 6’1”, weighing about 200 pounds, pulled on his Duck Head overalls and revealed, “I can see Luke runnin’ around these parts in the early thirties. After he bought his first car – a used 1933 Plymouth - - we became closer friends. O’ Luke thought he was ‘IT’ back then. O’ he was a ladies man, always wantin’ to drink and dabble in moonshine. Anything to do with moonshinin’ seemed to mystify him. I can hear him say, wile flyin’ down a backwoods road, ‘Shucks, hauling moonshine is the only way to get off the farm.’ And, he worked at getting’ off the farm, too. I run around with Luke in the 30s before I got married, and some after I got married.”

Suddenly Luke started laughing. Coon stopped his conversation as Luke said, “Remember the Jackson County pit?” The elder man pulled his glasses off and started laughing nearly as hard as his friend. Woodard said, “We were drinkin’ a beer down at Red Petty’s place near the Caney Fork River on Highway 70-N along about late summer of 1948, around August. Luke asked me to ride with him over to Seven Knobs in Jackson County to contract a load of whiskey. It was late in the afternoon on a Saturday. About an hour later we pulled up in front of this small cabin-like rundown shack. Luke talked to

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this feller about a load of moonshine, but the man said he didn’t have enough liquor for a 50-gallon load. However, by mornin’ the rest of the moonshine would be ready. At this moment Luke didn’t know what to do; stay and wait for the rest of the white lightn’ to be brewed, or buy half a load, or leave and come back for the entire load.”

Denny added, “Seven Knobs was a long way from home. I had mixed emotions. We were damned if we stayed and damned if we left. Whiskey was hard to come by durin’ this period since Silas Anderson, the federal man, had been raiding stills and bootleggers right and left, and my customers were houndin’ me about supplyin’ them. About this time some of the still workers came strollin’ down a path from the woods with dirt nad sour mash all over their overalls. The first thing out of their mouth was how hot, hungry

and horny they were. I hadn't seen any food cookin' on the stove and silently wondered where the chow was coming from, plus no women were in sight.

"About this time a pet black and white pig, weighing about 200 pounds, ran right through the shack. Since there were probably eight to ten of us in the house, the moonshiner yelled, "We'll have a real country ham and moonshine party tonight. How's that sound?" Without waitin' for an answer away he ran after that pig. Coon and I continued suppin' on 'shine while they somehow killed the porker and skinned it, out back."

"Lord, Lord, what a mess," Coon Woodard continued. "They didn't use hot water, just skinned it and cooked it on an old Enterprise box stove. Before the ham was cooked - - along about dusk - - more men arrived and some wives and girl friends. Shortly in came a little country bank with fiddle, guitar and banjo and the hand-made furniture was quickly pushed aside to make room for a dance floor."

When Woodard paused an extra moment Denny picked up the conversation, "Then in came some unattached girls about 20 years-old and the part was on, big time. Everyone was drinkin' free moonshine from an old five gallon jacket can and dancin' and eatin' that pig. At this time there were probably 20 people all squeezed together in the house and millin' 'round the back of the house. Boy it was hot, muggy,

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sticky night, probably more than 100 degrees. We were sweatin' like a devil, since there was no air conditionin'. They didn't have electricity, but the house was fairly well lit with coal oil lamps and candles. One moonshiner had two walnut-handled revolvers in his front pants pockets, and they didn't fall out while he kept dancin'. There were rifles, pistols and shotguns all over the place.

Along 'bout midnight a loud knock on the wooden door stopped the music. Everyone scrambled for a weapon. The man identified himself as a whiskey runner. He wanted to buy a load, but was dressed in a suit. That was kinda strange. I dressed that way, but most runners didn't. The moonshiner pointed a double-barrel 12-gauge shotgun right at the nose of the young man, and said, in a rather loud voice, 'Hell, we ain't sellin' no moonshine, we're havin' a party...c'mon in.' The well dressed young man - - with lawman written all over his face - - shook his head no, and after seein' so many men with guns, he started walkin' toward his car when he stepped on a big, mean sleepin' black dog. That dog chased him around his car several times until he finally climbed onto the front bumper and got on top of the hood. Buddy, if that dog would have caught him he would have taken a piece out of his hide. Many of us watched in the moonlight as the city slicker slowly crawled down - - about 15 minutes later - - from his hood, quickly grabbed the door, jumped inside, slammed the door, cranked the motor and took off like a bat out of hell. We thought he probably was a new federal or state agent wantin' to make a name for himself. That's the last time I ever saw that feller. Now that was one funny sight. Just as his shoe hit the ground the dog snapped at his leg. I believe it ripped both trouser legs, too. And, the dog might have nipped him a time or two. Oh, did we ever

laugh and laugh some more. One feller laughed so hard he spilled some of his moonshine. As he bent over, kinda holdin' his sides, another shiner give him a swift kick with the side of his foot - - on the rump - - and he went flyin'. I can't ever remember laughin' so hard."

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Woodard leaned back in his black recliner and added, "In the wee hours of the mornin' the married folks begin to leave and by dawn there was silence. We had all passed out or fell asleep in a stupor.

"Wait!" the tall silver haired man commanded in a louder voice as he recalled another episode. "Goodness, goodness. Luke think back to about '38 or '39. Before you went to service. We had picked up a load, delivered most of it and was on our way to a bootlegger in Carthage to empty the car. O' there was probably 25 gallons of shine in the trunk. O' yes, I can just see us drinkin' whiskey out of that mason jar; we'd pass the jar back and forth. It was full moon out, but you were drivin' awfully fast, probably about 80 to 90 miles per hour. We should have been safely creepin' along about 30 miles an hour. Granted we were both high, but I was not drunk. We had taken the back roads to stay away from the law. The gravel one-lane road ran across a ridge with deep, deep hollers on both sides. I was gettin' kinda scared since you came within an inch or two of rollin' us down a 150 to 200 foot embankment. You paid no attend to us ridin' on the very edge of the shoulders, sendin' gravels flyin' down the hollers. When the Ford spun around and skidded sideways for a good distance, then came to rest lookin' backwards - - headed the wrong way - - buddy I was wide awake. You just shrugged it off, shifted up into second gear, turned the steerin' wheel as you popped the clutch, the same time you floored the gas pedal. Somehow, it straighten up. How, I don't know. You were laughin' and singin' some girlie, honky-tonk tune. I had one hand on the dashboard and a firm grip on the door handle...at the same time. Do you remember what I asked you, Luke?"

"Lord no, but I do remember your face was white as a sheet," the legendary moonshine runner answered.

Woodard explained, "I shouted, 'Damn it Luke, slow down!' Luke stopped singin', looked at me with a wildy, strange stare and without a smile said, 'Aren't you driving?' And, my friend he was dead serious. I honestly believe he didn't even realize he was drivin'. It was as if he had driven this ridge so many times at night the car was drivin' by itself. However, he did slow down. We didn't drink another drop, before or after

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the delivery. The second the last dollar was counted Luke drove me home," Woodard stopped as Denny interrupted. "And by George I drove straight home to my pa's place in Rock Spring. To this day I don't remember drivin' on that one-lane ridge road, that is 'til

Coon yelled for me to slow down. I was extremely lucky. Someone watched over me all those years, or I wouldn't be here today...it's as simple as that."

Coon, I want to hear about the time you hit that feller at Charlie Ferrell's Pea Ridge colored moonshine hoedown. I have heard the tale eight or ten time. Each time I hear it, it's different. And, did the rock break Apple's widow?"

"Well, every year Charlie and his colored moonshine bunch invited a lot of whiskey people to a big shindig, on him. There would be moonshiners, bootleggers, runners and drinkers. About half were white. People either walked, rode a horse or rode in a wagon. There were very, very few cars back in those days. O' Charlie brought in the best colored three-piece string band (banjo, fiddle, guitar). It was part time. Charlie had a large wooden platform built to dance on, too. Everyone looked forward to his annual event. He would have all you could eat and drink.

"Sometime late in the afternoon this short, wiry Hop Madewell came up to me. I was tall and did my share of fightin', and he was short and did his share of fightin', too. I really don't remember why he came over to me to pick a fight, but he tapped me on the shoulder and said, I'm made well (Madewell was his name), and I cover all the ground I stand on.' I thought that was kinda funny, and laughed. That upset Hop. Angrily he came right back with, 'Don't laugh about it. I mean it. I cover all the round I stand on!' Without hesitation I hit him square on the jaw - - hard too - - and said, 'Let me see how well you are made.' He fell hard to the ground and skidded a short distance in the dirt. This embarrassed him. All of a sudden he picked up a little rock about the size of a hen egg and threw it at me. The rock missed my head, but hit the only car around right in the middle of the door. It was Oliver Apple's brand new A-Model shiny black

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Ford. That deep dent made Oliver hoppin' mad. He took off after Hop, but couldn't catch him. After that lit' scrap the party settled down. We stayed up half the night and had a whale of a good time.

Luke asked his old friend, "What happened to your back?"

"I fell off a horse about 15 years ago. It took me about six weeks to get where I could half way walk." Without completing the answer he asked Luke, "Do you remember those two seed corn metal boxes I made for you when I worked for Roy Vaden? Why did you and your backer want them just so, so?"

"Coon," Denny grinned and explained, "we didn't use those two boxes for seed corn. I used them to haul whiskey in, in the back of my truck, when it was rainin'."

"I had a sneaky suspicion you were usin' them for somethin' related to moonshine, but I never knew what," Woodard returned.

Denny added, "My backer stored the whiskey in his barn, tobacco barn and just in case we got raided he had your two steel boxes in the stump of an old chestnut tree in the back of his barn by the woods. This way if ol' Sicy came 'round and got the barn moonshine he might not find our boxes. We painted them brown and put dried leaves on top to hide them. Then when it rained I hauled the booze in mason jars stacked in cardboard boxes, placed in you metal boxes. I would pull back these and load them in the truck bed, with some help. They were heavy. Your 'seed corn' boxes held about 50 gallons apiece.

"I can remember faintly seein' my backer, when it was pitch black outside around midnight, standin' out by the highway like a grayish-blackish ghost. I would be loaded and slowly drivin' out the barn pathway toward him, with my lights OFF," Denny recalled. "When the coast was clear he would turn on his flashlight and flick it quickly, then turn it off. It was roolin' moonshine thunder then. I'd pull my headlights on after I made my way up or down Highway, 70N, just inside the Putnam County line, near Smith County, and away I would go to make delieveries."

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"Well since you are tellin' some of your secrets let me tell you one too," Coon Woodard continued. "As you know I worked on the highway and buildin' bridges early on in life. I worked on Highway 70 in front of the house, here, and we didn't use one bull dozer. We used mules. Only one big piece of machinery was used on this highway and that was a steam shovel to cut through the Chestnut Mound Hill. I worked on the McMillan Gore's place. I shouldn't say lit' Al, shuck he is our senator and I like him. He and his dad never did mess with moonshine. O' yes, did you know that bridge broke in two in the late 20s? It was one more big mess, too. I worked with an old friend of ours, Earl McCallum. I think Earl was actually workin' on that bridge when it fell around '29.

"Let me get back to my secret. Did you know I made many a copper still in South Carthage in the '50s?" Without waiting for Luke to answer Woodard added, "After dark I would turn off the front lights, but still have enough light in the work area to bend the copper. I'd have the still pots and copper worms hidden away so when Sheriff Sidney Harper or his deputies come around every once in a while they wouldn't spot anythin'. Remember, I used copper to make many things and welded all the time. Usually my stills would cook 40 to 50 gallons. I didn't make any larger than 50 gallons, that I can recall. Luke, I took real pride in my work, but I didn't make whiskey itself. Now I drank a lot of that clear mule, with a powerful kick, but makin' it was for someone else."

Denny looked at Mrs. Woodard who was seated in the living room, also, and said, "Coon, I dropped some moonshine off to you every once in a while, too."

"That's true, Luke. In the '50s, when you worked for Tuley, I remember meetin' you in the wide, kidda hidden, curve on Helm's Bend Road. We'd have our times and dates arranged, usually over a beer at Red Petty's place. While the boys would unload fruit jars in the cardboard boxes from your wooden refrigate crate, tied with a rope or two, in the

back of the pickup, I would pay you. Believe it or not," Coon said as he also looked toward his wife, "Luke would be paid and gone within

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ten minutes and I would have 25 to 30 gallons on my way to South Carthage to make deliveries. This didn't happen that often, but it did happen. That's a fact."

After photographs were taken of the two old friends they slowly walked to the front porch to say their goodbyes, quietly, together, and alone. It was as if the passing of an era, of a different time in America's youth, was fading away with little fanfare from the porch swing in the quaint little sleepy town of Elmwood, Tennessee. This author wondered silently, if these two lifelong friends - - 80 and 71 years old - - would ever see each other again. At least, for the morning of May 6, 1989, they relived the illegal whiskey hauling days of yesteryear...in peace.