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MATTIE AND RAY RONNIE RANSOM: RAY'S BIRTHDAY IS JUNE 28, 1895.

CHAPTER 6:

"I can remember when a person could stand on top of one of these hills in Jackson County and see smoke from stills comin' up from just about every hollar," Ray Ronnie Ransom, 93, said during his interview in the kitchen of his Seven Knobs Community home in Jackson County, March 5, 1988. "This area was moonshine heaven back in the thirties, fourties, fifties and sixties...and I sure made a hell'va lot of the Tennessee powerful brew."

His wife of 53 years, Mattie Ransom, grinned while cooking Luke Deny a piece of ham and added, "And, I sure sold a lot of his whiskey, too."

According to the Ramsoms and Denny, their friendship began in 1937 and continued for about three years, as the moonshine hauler left for service during the early War World II years.

"See," Denny said while eating the ham sandwich Mattie had cooked, "back in the early days of my whiskey runnin' I didn't have much money. I tried to select the moonshiner close to the bootlegger's place so I wouldn't hav'ta drive very far with the illegal liquor; the shorter the haul the better. I guess you could say that's one of the main reasons why I didn't get nabbed back in the thirties. Even then I dreaded the thought of being behind bars. Sicy (Silas Anderson, federal revenue agent) was the person I hated seeing the most."

"You hated seein' him," Ray Ronnie continued. "That man was always after me. Shucks, old Sicy caught 'bout everyone in these hills once or twice. If you made whiskey long enough Sicy would catch you. Now that's a fact, brother. What was bad about him was he though like us. He knew how moonshine was made, the paths and trails we used, and for some reason he had a sixth sense about his thinkin. One time he shot at me, I strongly believe. Now the tale is Sicy never fired his pistol at anyone, but I believe it was him that got after me and fired a few bullets around my head. It is possible it was one

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of the local deputies, but I believe it was Sicy. I've heard he was a good shot and he fired up in the air to scare some of us, but this one time I believe he did shoot at me.

"But, old Sicy was a good lawman, if there was a good one in the bunch. He would tell you like it was. He didn't beat up on people and act like a big shot federal man. Now, don't get me wrong, he was on the other side of the law and I didn't like him, but by George I did respect him," Ray Ronnie said in a loud tone as his hearing is failing.

“Back in the thirties I was caught three times by the law for makin’ whiskey, and I spent three months in the Cookeville jailhouse. It was different back then. Let’s say there was three of us at the still and the sheriff or Sicy caught us. One would say it was his still and take the time and the lawmen would usually let the other go. So, I took the blame at least three times that I can remember. I believe Logan Mayloy and Sandy Holmes, local officers, caught me once, too, down in Jim Springs Hollar. That was way back yonder. When you’ve made moonshine for as long as I did there’s a lot a person forgets. Boy, I’ve made that mountain dew all over Jackson County. I guess my favorite makin’ palces were: Five Acre Springs; Whad Spring; Cubalo Hollar; Boney Branch and naturally Jim Springs.

“I started back in the late twenties or the early thirties,” Ramsom pointed out. “In those days I used corn to make the shine, but changed to sugar in the thirties. Luke here never bought any corn whiskey from me. By the time he arrived in these woods (1937) we all brewed sugar, or I should say just about everybody did it that way. When the war happened it made things rough on us because sugar was rationed. Many a young man went off to fight the Germans or the Japs so moonshine died down some around the early to mid-forties. When they came home they were really thirst and the moonshine business got back into third gear, too.”

His wife reentered the interview. “Times were hard back then. We just didn’t have no money to speak of and folks around wanted to drink moonshine. It seemed makin’ and sellin’ moonshine was about the only way a person could make a dime. I remember one time Luke needed a big load and we didn’t have a drop. A big runner had bought every pint we had

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and Luke had a big order. When I told him Ray was down in the hollar makin’ some he said, ‘When he’s got me loaded, wake me. I’m pooped.’ With that Luke laid down on the floor by the fire place and slept til Ray run it off.”

The threesome laughed. Luke said, “You know, I had forgotten all about that night. The goin’ price for their booze was \$1.10 a gallon back then. I would usually buy between forty and one hundred gallons a trip. Probably 60 gallons was the normal load.”

“That’s about right, Luke,” the elderly man said in a high tone. “Back then the boys made about 75 gallons a day. That was a good day, but boy it was hard work. Carryin’ that sugar down them hollers and then tote all the whiskey back up was a rough job. My stills ranged from 100 gallon pots to 125 gallon. Now, I liked to drink shine too. Hell fire, I would hav’ta plow that ol’ mule in the hot sun and many a day I was half drunk. It helped me forget the heat.

“Old Luke here liked to drink the shine back then,” Ray Ronnie recalled. “When he come to pick up a load he would always have to take a swig before hittin’ the road. Ain’t that right Luke? Now let me tell you somethin’. My boys and me made the moonshine

the right way. It was good whiskey, not like some made today. They use everything one can imagine to make it in.”

Mattie looked at the whiskey runner with a smile and asked, “Do you remember the porch laden days, Luke?”

“I will never forget it,” Luke recalled with a quick answer. “I’d roll in and they would load it off the back porch. That’s no lie. I mean right off their porch. I was scared to death the law’d roll ‘round and block me off with the car half loaded with moonshine and send me up the river and take my car, too. Every time I shut my eyes, back then, I could see the law pullin’ up in the yard.

“Usually I bought twice a week from Mattie and Ray. There is no tellin’ how many times I bought from the house. I’ll guess and say at least a hundred. Is that about right?” Luke said.

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“You know the truth, I couldn’t tell you,” Mattie related. “It could have been twice that number, because you were always here eatin’ my cookin’. Luke was the hungriest man I’ve every seen. I think his stomach didn’t have a bottom, because he never got fat and I could never hill him up.”

Laughter filled the Ransom’s kitchen.

“When Luke rolled up in his shiny car he’d bring the empty jacket cans and we would unload them as fast as possible,” Mattie quipped. “he would tell me how much he wanted and start eatin’. We swapped jacket can for jacket can. If he needed to buy a few jackets he would usually stop at the lady’s store of Gainesboro, on Highway 56, and get some, and some fishin’ floats for corks.

“Ray stopped makin’ it, but I continued sellin’ for a long time. I even had a license to sell bonded and beer for a long time. I sold the moonshine to our neighbors and about 1980 I stopped selling liquor and beer all together. I was like Luke here, lucky. He never got caught haulin’ and I never got caught sellin’. I’d guess you could say we’ve got somethin’ in common. Se., if I didn’t know them, I wouldn’t sell it. That’s the reason I never got caught. And, I stuck by that. Many a time I would want to sell it to a stranger to make a good profit, but that little voice inside would always say, ‘Mattie you don’t know this feller, don’t sell him any’. And, I never did either.”

Mattie Ransom stopped and all looked at her. She stated, in a softer tone, “People loved one another back then, and for the most part everyone was good to each other. Most had nothin’ to eat. People are livin’ to fast today. They don’t have time for each other and don’t car for nobody anymore. People are livin’ above their raisin’.”

A sadness fell over the group, then Ray Ronnie opened the conversation with a smile and said, "Everybody loved Luke, that knew him. He was happy and could act like he was drunk as a hoot owl. Sometimes he was that way, but many times he was sober as a judge. He nearly eat me and Mattie out of house and home tho." This statement brought a smile back to the friends faces.

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"When Luke worked for Tuley's Furniture in Carthage we bought a bedroom suite from him, after our house burned," Mattie advised.

Luke said, "That's right. And, all the time I worked for the Carthage furniture company, Tuley never knew I hauled whiskey in the truck and furniture and appliances, too. If he would have caught me or even got wind of my haulin' I would have been fired on the spot."

Mattie's facial expression changed. She said, "Times was hard for us back in the twenties and thirties. See I was one of 13 kids. Dad died when I was five-years-old. But, somehow we made it and in '35 Ray Ronnie and me were married. We had five lovely children and love each one dearly."

A moment of silence fell over the kitchen for a couple of minutes and Luke started laughing. "I just thought of something we all forgot. We must tell the readers all the places you and Ray Ronnie hid the moonshine."

For the next few minutes the trio laughed. "We hid it everywhere. In the weeds, behind trees, under bushes, near the fence posts, in the garden and even in the corn patch...it was all over the place," Mattie added.

Billie Kinnaird, a relative from White County, said of their hiding places, after hearing of the interview a few days later, "During one visit Ray told me to go to his bed. That's when I spotted many, many pints of moonshine...under their bed. We always enjoyed the Jackson County visits."

"I always had some by the road so one of our customers could stop his truck or car and pick it up on the way from town," Ray said.

Luke spotted an old jacket can in the back yard of the Ransom house and Mattie said it was one of the very last can's she had used and it was what the called THE can. It had a screw top. After a few photographs were taken she handed it to this writer and said, "If you need this jacket can for the book or movie, take it. But remember where you got it from...it's the last one we used."

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Her words ended the interview and after the jacket can was carefully placed in the trunk of the car Luke and this author pulled away from Seven Knobs. Luke pointed towards a wooded area and said with an excited voice, "Stop the car and look over by those rocks, behind the big trees. What do you see?"

I said it looks like someone is burning something in the woods by the bluff about a mile away, because there is a thin layer of smoke rising upward.

"Think again. This is moonshine country," Luke concluded.

SAD NOTE: Ray Ransom died November 11, 1988 and Uncle Billie Kinnaird left us January 12, 1989.