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WILLIE LANE: MAY 12, 1914:
CHAPTER 7

“I will never, ever, forget you,” Willie Lane, 76, said of his long time moonshine friend Luke Denny, March 5, 1988, at his trailer west of Gainesboro (Jackson County), Tennessee, “he was hungry all the time. The first thing he would do when he arrived at my house was tell me how much whiskey he wanted and head for the kitchen. And, it didn’t matter what leftovers I had, Luke ate it like it was his last meal.”

Denny added, “Well, it was extremely dangerous to stop, even when a runner was empty. The word spreads like wild fire - - from one lawman to another. Willie would always have some good home cookin’ on the wood stove. I remember the corn bread, cold beans and taters.”

Both elderly men laughed and so did Lane’s wife Grace...from the kitchen. For some unknown reason both men paused for a moment before reflecting on their past.

Lane broke the silence by laughing and patting his knee, “Do you remember the brothers from Louisville, Luke?”

Denny thought for a couple of seconds and said, “All I can recall about them is they came in two cars and I had to wait until both were loaded and gone before you loaded me. They caused me to run late a few times.”

“Right. You are right on the money Luke,” the silver haired Lane commented. “It seems they had half the seat cut away to store more moonshine. They hauled 225 gallons back to Bluegrass Land every week, but that wasn’t the funniest part of their operation. They sold the booze from an ambulance. It would hold three 50 gallon barrels at once. And, as you know, 150 gallons is a lot of moonshine.

“What a difference in those days and in the 30’s. Luke would be broke half the time and only buy small amounts of mountain dew,” Lane adjusted his dark rimmed glasses and added. “Oh, no. I must tell you about this one time. Sicy (Silas Anderson, federal revenue agent) was out to nab my buddy,

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here, and his bootleggers were getting’ hot on his trail to furnish them some white lightning. Young Luke came zippin’ around the curve and slammed on the brakes by my house. He yelled, “The feds are right behind me, where can I hide?”

“He had a good lookin’ Ford and it was neat as a pin. I ran over to my barn and while runnin’ I motioned for him to follow me. I pointed to the hall and in he came. After slammin’ the doors I ran just as fast toward the front year and within a minute here came

Sicy and I think Paul Knowles, Sicy's partner. They skidded to a stop in front of me and the dust got in my eyes. Sicy said, 'Did you see Luke Denny's coupe come by here?'

"I was not about to tell on my partner, sweating peach seeds in the barn, so I pointed on down the road and said, 'Oh yes, he went speedin' down the road that way about five minutes ago.' They poured the gas to their old jalopy and threw gravels all over the yard, and on me too. I didn't appreciate them doin' that either.

"On the way back to the barn I saw Luke peak through the opening of the barn doors and before I arrived we were already laughin' so hard. Now it wasn't funny a few minutes before, but when you fooled ol' Sicy and Paul that was time to rejoice," Lane explained. "It was about this time that these two federal men were lockin' up everybody from far and wide. In the mid-fifties the big newspaper wrote a piece 'bout them and named it 'Paul and Silas'. Whoever wrote it was right on the money. Everythin' was true. Those two stayed on my trail all the time."

Denny said, "I was really and truly scared out of my gourd, and you took you ever lovin' sweet time strollin' back to the barn after Sicy took off. I was dressed up and Willie loaded me. I didn't tell him I was broke til after the Ford was filled. I can see the look on your face when I said, 'Willie I will need this load on credit.' 'You got a little made when I said, 'I'm going to need 'bout five bucks for some gas money, too.'"

"Naw I wasn't that mad, Luke," the former Jackson County moonshiner continued, "I was highly pissed and I remember sayin' somethin' like, 'I guess you want me to drive too?' Luke then ran in the kitchen and grabbed a chicken leg

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and took off. I had to get Sicy off his trail, pack his whiskey in his new car, hand him my moonshine on credit, give him five bucks for gas and then beat it all he ate my biggest drum stick. Now if that don't beat it all. One thing for sure, Luke would pay you back every cent, without fail. There were others I would not trust with my liquor and money."

Denny said of his friend, "Willie would climb back into the car in the middle of the night and stack the whiskey just right. He was the best at stacking. I knew when I left his barn the load wouldn't shift, nor rattle.

"The whiskey runner smiled and added, "I can just see Willie's eyes looking at me from inside the car - - in the shadows - - with the moon providing the light, and him saying, 'Hurry up and give me one more gallon. I need to squeeze it right here. Get a move on Luke, I don't have all night to fool with ya.' Other shiners hated to load me, because I was so particular. But you must remember, if I had to outrun the law I couldn't afford to have all that liquor movin' from one side to the other. I might tip over while flyin' 'round one of those hilly curves and might get caught. And, if the bottles or jackets cans made a noise that might bring the law down on my neck." Lane also smiled and reveled, "Boy, those were the years. We had so many, many good times. Dancin' til dawn. It

was hard work makin' whiskey, real hard. It was 'bout this time that I had seven stills goin' at once. I never loaded the whiskey at the stills, because I was afraid the feds would catch me. I always loaded at the house or barn. The feds caught me four times and the county got me twice. I pulled eleven-twenty-nine in the federal 'resort' at Montgomery (Alabama). The lawmen made things rough for me and other moonshiners 'round these Tennessee hills so I took off to Detroit til it cooled off.

"I worked at the Jefferson Plant of U.S. Rubber on the east side of Detroit, near Belle Isle. After a short time I realized many of the factory workers were good ol' boys from the south and wanted some of that good clear shine. Some of my relatives and me brewed it out of town in a barn. I sold it in the Motor City for about 11 years," Lane revealed. "My moonshine was good stuff. I demanded everything be just right or I threw it out.

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You can ask anyone who drank my liquor if they had any gripes about it and you won't come up with one person. Now some got mad when I wouldn't sell to them on credit, but not the brew itself. It was clear as crystal and always carried a good bead. Right, Luke?"

Luke nodded his head up and down and asked, "Willie I can vaguely remember those five or six wooden saw horses you had in the loft. You had wooden 55 gallon barrels on them and ran out 55 gallons into jacket cans. Isn't that right?"

"You've a good memory," lane answered. "This way I knew when I was finished I didn't have to count the 55 jacket cans.

"How many stills would you say you've built and operated during your moonshining years?" Luke questioned his old friend.

"At least 100, and that's not braggin'. That's the truth. Now that counts the ones in Michigan, too. I was makin' white juice for many a year. My stills ranged from 55 gallons to 135 gallons. That 135 gallon cooker was the biggest," Lane said.

Denny asked, "Why did you quit cookin' whiskey?"

"Charles Carter (State ABC officer, Cookeville) caught me in the Highland County of Jackson County and I promised Mr. Cart4er I would never make it again. The judge hit me with a \$741 fine and I stopped makin' whiskey. I was married to Grace and liked my job, working on the Jackson County highways.

Luke grinned sheepishly and leaned back in the soft chair and said, "We honky-tonked many a night at cheap nightclubs after delivering the mountain dew to the bootleggers. Back in the early days Willie was known as a ladies man and a tremendous dancer. He would sweep them off their feet and I would say I wasn't that bad on my feet, either. See, we would cruise in to one of the dives with a big roll of money that would choke a

horse, and the girls knew who we were and that we wanted to party and have fun. Most people didn't have much money back in those days and runners like me only had it after a successful whiskey run.

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"We couldn't keep the money in banks so we rolled it, for the most part, and kept it in our pants pocket. That was one sure fire way to get the girl's attention when we walked into the beer joints. I can see Willie and me strollin' up to the bar about midnight or earlier in the mornin' and when the beer hit the bar, out came the rolls of money...with the biggest on top, and here came the girls. It was like they could smell the money. We would be dressed up, fairly nice and it was time to party...long and hard.

"After we got completely slip, sloppy, commode huggin' drunk, the girl you picked would be polluted to and the two of us would waddle across the road to the nearest motel and continue partying. We drank so much that many time we would pass out. Sometimes there would be three or four shiners and runners and bootleggers with four or five girls of the night at the room and you talkin' about havin' one more time, we did. We'd sing some of those old crazy beer tunes like, "What's the matter with the mill", "After all what is life lived alone", "Marie", "V-8 Blues", "Deep Elem Blues", "High Geared Mama", and "Just Because", to name a few. Those old nickel juke boxes were turned up loud and we'd dance half the night away.

"Around Cookeville we sang and danced and drank at honky-tonks with such names as "Cedar Tavern". Denny looked up to the ceiling and continued his reflection.

"This motel across from the Cedar (Tavern) in Mt. Juliet was one of my favorites. They knew when I walked in with room I wanted and he wouldn't say a word; just toss the key. I always paid him a little something extra to keep his nose to the ground, just in case the law came snoopin' around. I would tip him and if we got rowdy and broke something in the room I would pay him. He was a good friend, but I can't remember his name.

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"Up in Macon County, way back in the woods, and I mean wa-a-ay back in the woods, there was this one special moonshiners dance hall. The records were gone from the juke box and the liquor makers were all men and I remember it had a long, long table in the center of the room. They wore their dirty overalls and drank moonshine all the time. Oh yes, most had long beards and they would get so drunk they would dance with each other and laugh til they fell in the wood floor. I mean that was one more sight. That wasn't for me. I loved the nicer places with the girls of pleasure. And, it seemed the young girls - - ranging from ages 18 to 35, most of the time - - loved to see us, because they knew we had bucks and wanted fun. The young, good looking girls didn't like to get in the hot sun and bust their fanny in the fields behind mules and plows, either."

The two moonshine men checked out an old jacket can on Lane's front porch and chatted about the old fashion buck dancing. Before leaving, Luke said, "Those were the days my good friend, those were the days."

"Yep," Willie Lane commented, "we sure had some good times, but you, the fancy dressed runner, was the luckiest or the smartest of my haulers..you never got caught!"

"I thank my lucky star every day," Luke Denny concluded as he waved goodbye.