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SILAS E. ANDERSON: MAY 25, 1900:
CHAPTER 8

Silas Anderson was known as the Elliot Ness of moonshiners around Middle Tennessee; THE federal revenue agent every moonshiner feared more than any other law enforcement officer, “Luke Denny said while riding to Cookeville, Tennessee, June 7, 1988, to interview the famous Alcohol Tax Officer in Room 12-A of the Cookeville Health Care Center.

“We all called him “Sicy”, but I’m not sure where he got that nickname,” Denny continued. “Mr. Anderson chased me three times that I’m sure of, and probably many other times that I didn’t know who was on my tail. He caught me twice, but both times I was empty. The other time I was loaded, but got away from him...thank heavens. “The first time Sicy got after me was in 1939. I had contracted a lot of moonshine in Jackson County and was traveling on Highway 56. He pulled me over, searched the car from one end to the other and said, “Luke, I know you are hauling illegal liquor and one of these days I’ll catch you at it. The best thing for you to do is get out of this business while the getting’ is good.’

“A night or two later he jumped me out of Gainesboro and ran me about 12 miles. I had a load of that good ol’ mountain dew that night. So, I turned off onto Philadelphia Ridge, flipped my lights off and sit quiet as a mouse, alongside 70 gallons of ‘shine. I knew he would have taken the car, too, and when Silas said something, you could bet he would stand by his word.

“I was afraid of him, because he meant a jail term. He wouldn’t beat up on a person, but he sure would arrest you and make it stick. The revenuer went straight and after half an hour, I guess, I rolled onto Granville and then to Carthage, in Smith County, where I unloaded the juice. I sure was happy to drive back over the Carthage bridge, empty,” the 5’10”, light blond haired runner said.

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“The third race was totally different,” Denny laughed. “This one Sunday afternoon in my life, I shall never, ever forget.”

“Hold on Mr. Denny,” Silas’ wife Lula Lee Anderson proclaimed from the living room of her Cookeville home, “that is one day I will never forget, either. It was in the 40s, if my memory serves me correctly. We were enjoying a Sunday family drive with the two boys in the back. All of sudden Silas spotted you and he said something like, “There’s Luke Denny. He hauls a lot of whiskey on Sunday and this time I’m going to catch him.’ I really didn’t want him to go chasing around the countryside with the boys and me, but Silas was a lawman 24-hours-a-day and I respected him for that.

“The highspeed chase seemed to have lasted a long, long time, but I guess it was over in 10 minutes. Do you remember how long it was Mr. Denny?” Mrs. Anderson questioned.

“It was between six and eight miles,” the whiskey runner explained. “And, you’re right, it was over in about 10 minutes. You folks were in a Dodge and I thought you were the local sheriff or his deputy. All of a sudden he hit me with his right bumper on my left rear bumper and spun me around, into the small ditch and up onto the embankment, near Baxter.

“There were three guys in the car with me,” Luke revealed, “and we had a quart of stamped (government) whiskey. During the chase one of the men hurriedly poured it out and it accidentally went into the shoe of one of my cousin’s.” This brought grins from Lula Lee and Luke.

Mrs. Anderson returned to the conversation, “I can see you getting out and Silas looking into your trunk and finding it empty.”

“When Sicy hit my bumper he blew his right front tire and when he saw we didn’t have any booze, the three of us helped him change the tire,” Denny noted.

Silas confirmed the chase from his room, but added, “Luke, I was mighty upset that day. I thought for sure you had whiskey and since I was in my Dodge I had a better chance of

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catching you. Lula was a little angry at me because I chased you with the boys in the car, and she was right. I never did that again.

“Boys, I’m, 88-years-old and I can’t remember some of the details like I used too. Some I can and some are fuzzy,” the elderly federal officer said in a sad tone. “But, those years were some of the happiest years of my life.

“Daddy (Silas Francis Anderson) was the Sheriff of DeKalb County for two terms in the 1890s. Then he became a Deputy U. S. Marshall from 1897 to 1903, I believe those are the dates. Then he was a U. S. Marshall from 1924 until he retired in the mid-thirties. I believe he retired in 1935, you might check those dates to make sure they are correct, but I believe they are.

“As best as I can recall,” the colorful lawman continued, “I started transporting prisoners for the Marshall service in the late 20s. Probably 1928. I’m pretty sure about that date because Lula Lee and I got married in 1925. I will never forget that year. She was the apple of my eye - -a 17-year-old beauty. She stuck by me all these years. I love that lady,” he said and then paused for a minute, before continuing, “You’ll have to excuse me men, I haven’t thought about some of these days for a long time.

“I became a prohibition agent for a few years. Then around 1933 or 1934 I became a federal revenue agent. And, in 1954 I took over as U.S. Alcohol Tax Unit Acting Supervisor in Charge when William B. Shofen retired November 30. Then in 1965 I too retired,” the former federal man uttered.

Silas stopped talking, looking up at Luke and this writer and said in a lawman’s stern voice, about to arrest you, “One thing I want you to tell your readers. I tried to treat the moonshiners fair, like they were just as human as I was. I had my job to do and they knew it. I tried my best to catch them and they tried their best to out fox me. When I caught them at the site we chopped up the still and poured out the mash. I normally told them to come on down to my office on such an’ such date. They nearly always kept their word, and I did too. That was very important. Your word was your bond.”

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When asked, “How many moonshiners, runners and bootleggers did you catch during your 30 plus years as a revenuer?”

He said, after thinking about the question for a long period, “I just can’t remember. Paul Knowles, my partner for many years, and I arrested thousands. And, that’s not a fib, and it’s not bragging, either, please understand me. It’s a fact. But, I’ll tell you how you can get some of the story you are looking for. Back in ’54, Elmer Hinton, a writer with THE NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN, worked with Paul and me for a while and the newspaper ran a three-part-series in the Sunday paper. They called it “Paul and Silas”. I think my wife kept copies of those newspapers and they will have the facts you are looking for. That Hinton was a good reporter. He checked with us to make sure the facts were right before he put them in the paper. I don’t believe there is but one mistake in the series. He switched names underneath our family pictures. My family was Paul’s family and Paul’s family was my family,” Silas grinned.

A nurse came into the room to check on the interview and seeing Mr. Anderson in good spirits and all was in order, she departed.

After photographs were taken of Silas and Luke, we drove back to Mrs. Anderson’s home and she located the three 1954 newspapers Silas had mentioned, plus many other news clippings and photographs about her legendary husband.

The three editions were February 28, March 7 and March 14, 1954. And, just as Mr. Anderson said, the newspaper magazine series was dubbed the biblical sounding “Paul and Silas”. The sub-headline read, “These two revenue agents have made things hot for moonshiners in the Upper Cumberland hills.”

According to the newspaper text, Silas, 53 at the time, attended Tennessee Polytechnic Institute (now Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville) and Milligan College where he lettered in football, basketball and baseball. He played some semi-pro baseball before entering government service.

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Silas also taught six years after leaving college and was football coach at Algood (town near Cookeville) for four years. “Still an ardent sports fan, he umpires all the TPI baseball games,” the newspaper read, “He and Mrs. Anderson have five children, three of which finished college. The youngest are in grade school.”

To quote the 1954 newspaper again, “At least 1,200 stills destroyed over a 21-year period for Silas. More than 10,000 gallons of whiskey and 3,600,000 gallons of mash poured out on the ground. A batch of hangovers went down the hollow with all that.”

The publication said a gallon of moonshine sold for \$5 and, “That’s why the ‘shiners had rather boil corn than plow it. The difference is Paul and Silas are not looking for anybody doing nothing to corn but plowing it. The federal government doesn’t make a moral issue out of the illegal manufacture of whiskey. To our Uncle Samuel it is a cold impersonal matter of collecting taxes.

“In 1952 federal agents in Tennessee seized 1,238 stills. They destroyed 536,985 gallons of mash and 13, 317 gallons of illegal liquor. They made 837 arrests...”

The next year (’53), “through October, 890 stills had been destroyed by the government agents, 379,915 gallons of mash,” and more than 12,000 gallons of whiskey destroyed. “Arrests had reached 540,” according to THE NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN of March 14, 1954.”

“Moonshining gets in ones blood,” Denny cited, “and it’s really hard to get it out. Some think they can’t do anything else. And, the ‘shiners would do just about anything to get Paul and Silas off their trail.”

The newspaper series said of Denny’s claim, “Thin threads are stretched across paths leading to the stills, colors blending with the season - - green in spring and summer and brown when the leaves turn in the fall. If moonshiners find the strings broken, somebody is poking around, and that somebody might be revenooers.

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“Small stones are placed at certain spot on boards covering mash barrels. If the still owner finds the stone moved or gone, its ‘shore and sartin’ visitors have been there in his absence.

“Different routes are used to go to the still in an effort to throw the agents off their trail. An early morning hunt with shotgun and dog all around the still, but never going to it, is designed to find officers that might be hiding in the bushes.

“Any car that Paul and Silas may have is the best known vehicle in all of the 10 counties. Even with a new auto, one trip through any given section is all that is needed for all of the moonshiners to be able to spot it. News travels in the hills.

“Then when the car goes through there afterwards, likely as not a dinner bell will ring or three shots will be fired from a six-shooter. And quicker’n scat another bell will ring or answering shots will be fired way off yonder. The system works,” reads the old capitol newspaper.

“Sicy was clever and honest, too, and I can’t say that ‘bout all lawmen,” Denny stated. “Once he got wind you were makin’, haulin’ or sellin’ illegal mountain dew in his territory he got after you, and he didn’t get off your trail until he caught you or you quit. It was that simple.”

Another whiskey man said of Silas in the 1954 article, “That Si, now - - he can spot smoke a mile away and he’s keener’n a jay bird’s chirp.”

The newspaper continued, “And where there’s smoke, Paul and Silas figure, there’s fire. And where there’s fire in the hills there’s apt to be boiling.

“Used to be,” and old time ‘shiner said in the article of the Overton County hill,”..there was a spring in every hollow and a still at nigh every spring.”

Denny added, “Yes, many hundreds of thousands of gallons of moonshine were brewed in Overton County, Tennessee, but during my hauling days I saw more produced in Jackson County, and that’s where I loaded more liquor from than any other county.”

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The old moonshiner runner concluded with, “Silas Anderson was the best whiskey still-buster there was in this area, period. Even his nickname (Sicy) struck fear into the hearts of many a ‘shiner...and me too.”

Note: On July 18, 1988 - - forty one days from Silas E. Anderson Sr. was interviewed - - he passed away in the Cookeville Health Care Center. He was buried in Crest Lawn Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. It is very possible this interview and photograph session was the last conducted. This nation lost one of its most colorful and devoted federal lawman. It was indeed an honor for this journalist to interview him.