

MIDNIGHT MOONSHINE RENDEZVOUS

By Dr. Stony Merriman
Secrets of Luke Alexander Denny's
Moonshine Running Adventures
(1930s-1960s)
M. Stone Publishing
P.O. Box 275-N
Smithville, Tennessee 37166

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MIDNIGHT MOONSHINE RENDEZVOUS provides a glimpse into the fifth estate of the moonshining era from the mid-1930's to the mid-1960s and how one man, handsomely dressed, evaded the law while transporting illegal whiskey for nearly 30 years. Luke Alexander Denny, born November 20, 1917, used moonshine hauling as his way of getting away from hard work on his father's middle Tennessee farm. His moonshine career was temporarily halted for four years while he saw action as a driver and a machine gunner during World War II in Europe. Luke loved fast women, fast cars, fast honky-tonk country music, hauling and drinking moonshine whiskey. "Everyday was like Christmas," Denny says of his days of yesteryear. "If I saw something I wanted I bought it and worried about paying for it later." Come relive those thrilling days when white lightning was "King of the Tennessee Hills." Ride alongside Luke during high speed midnight chases along steep, curvey, narrow gravel back roads. Listen as Luke as his lifelong friends reveal secret escapes routes and methods...some more than fifty years old. Find out about the stowaway and the tobacco spiked booby-trapped wagon path that

brought his car to a sudden halt. And, yes, Luke Denny is not all bad, he even saved a lad's life. Sadly, discover the Luke Denny of the '90's.

DEDICATION:

This book is dedicated to my wife Judy Love Merriman and our son Don. It is impossible to thank them enough for keeping the study door locked, for taking telephone messages, and for sharing the experiences when I returned from interviewing.

Furthermore, it is only fitting this book share its dedication with Luke Alexander Denny. Much credit must be given Luke for his persistence, his eagerness to see it through and for the vast amount of time and energy he spent while tracking down the folks in this book and others who had died or would not give us permission to be interviewed.

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FOREWORD:

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My interest in the subject of this book started when a Smithville Policeman Tim (Fud) Banks came to ‘The Smithville Review’ to drop off some accident information I had requested during the fall of 1985. I was the newspaper’s Sports & Wildlife Editor, since my retirement from the U. S. Marine Corps in March 31, 1983, but also wrote hard news and feature articles often. Journalism was my Marine Corps military occupation. I served on active duty in the Marines for nearly 23 years (1960-83), before turning in my Master Gunnery Sergeant (E-9) chevrons at Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, D. C., where I was the Public Affairs Chief of the Marine Corps (Division of Public Affairs).

Officer Fud Banks and I were softball enthusiasts and friends, and still are. Fud, in passing, asked if I knew Smithville’s legendary moonshine runner who never got caught hauling illegal whiskey from the 30s to the 60s, around Middle Tennessee? Since I had not heard of the runner and was always looking for a good feature story I indicated, “Tell me more.” The officer said, “His name is Luke Denny. He lives in the Smithville projects. He doesn’t have a phone. When I see the old moonshine man I’ll tell him to come and see ya.”

A week or two went by and I heard my editor Dorothy Walker, from the front of the newspaper office, say, “Go on back, he’s writing a story.” Luke walked into the small reporter’s back room and didn’t stop talking for 30 minutes. I did not believe what he was telling me. His tales were simply unbelievable, I thought. Finally, I reasoned, “Okay, I will write a story if you can get a moonshiner who supplied you with illegal whiskey and a lawman who knew about your moonshine exploits to backup your story. Much to my amazement he came back with, “How many do you want and when do you want to interview them?” I needed a long feature piece for the Christmas ’85 edition so I set the time and place. Willie Lane, of Jackson County, was the first of Luke’s old

whiskey “still men” to be interviewed, while retired Smith County Sheriff Sidney S. Harper was the first lawman.

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On December 25, 1985 the 80 paragraph story with four photographs appeared on the front page, pages 2 and 3 of ‘The Review’. It was headlined: “Retired Moonshine Runner – Denny Reminisces About Good Old Days.” The Christmas edition sold out. Luke’s article was the talk of the town. More readers called to say, “Thanks for the article,” than any other I had written. Much to my surprise only one elderly lady was upset with the article.

A few weeks prior to the story I accepted the Editor & Publisher position on the neighboring county’s newspaper, ‘The Carthage Courier’. During the Christmas holiday’s, Hershel Lake, ‘The Courier’s’ owner, saw me at a basketball game and requested the article for ‘The Courier’. After getting permission from William (Ron) Fryar, ‘The Review’s’ publisher, the article ran in Smith County, January 16, 1986. I took over my new assignment January 11, 1986.

Two more stories concerning Luke Denny appeared in ‘The Courier’ early in 1986. One highlighted South Carthage Police Chief Oliver Dillard and the other Jim Wheeler, Smith County’s former sheriff and former Carthage Police Chief. I planned to write another piece about Jim Medley, but didn’t.

A year later I resigned from the ‘The Carthage Courier’ and became Chief, Public Affairs Officer, with the Nashville District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, January 12, 1987. This is the position I now hold.

During 1987 my wife and I built a new home and moved back to DeKalb County. From time to time I saw and chatted with Luke. Each time I saw him the more stories he seemed to have. Therefore, in the fall we came up with the idea for a book and possible movie about the life and times of the old Middle Tennessee moonshine hauler. A contract between Luke and myself was drafted by Smithville Attorney-at-Law and General Sessions Judge A. Vester Parsley, Jr. We signed the agreement on December 6, 1987 at the Little Giant Gas Station on West Broad Street, Smithville. W.O. Hale and Eugene Johnson were our witnesses. The dollar received carried the numbers: F10552042H, series 1985.

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Luke and I met in my living room to discuss how we would go about the mammoth undertaking during Christmas ’87. Our plan was to interview as many people who knew about his adventures and misadventures as possible. Next, we wanted views from both sides of the law. Photographs were a must, if possible, of Luke and each person. It’s sad to say we lost our first person – the Rickman moonshiner – on a Friday and our interview was scheduled for Sunday. Since the start of the book at least four interviewees have

passed on. Probably the most notable was long time Federal Revenue Agent Silas Anderson who lived less than two months after our interview. His was one of the best visits.

Our next problem was how to put the book together so the reader will enjoy it the most. Normally, an author will take the easy route with a chronological method (1917 to present). I chose another:

1. Use a conversation, relaxed writing style.
2. Let the people tell their story the way they talk.
3. Tell both the good and bad sides of Luke,
4. If he had a good time doing something bad, tell it. If he is sorry, tell it. If he is not sorry for something he did, tell it.
5. Both sides of the law must be represented.
6. Divide the book into two parts:
 - I. Personal history overview with special highlights.
 - II. Individual chapters for interviewees.

Our plan called for Luke to arrange each interview. I would drive him to the different places, take notes and photograph the folks. Since I have a full time job, Saturdays and Sundays, holidays and annual leave would be the only days for these information gathering sessions.

Furthermore, there would come a point when the most important facts had been collected and the manuscript would come to a close...with still a few untold stories, of lesser interest, not told. We knew this from the beginning. This task took us to moonshining backwoods, to a Federal agent, to sheriffs, to policemen, to troopers, to bootleggers, to 'shotguns',

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to a mechanic/cabinet maker, to a restaurant owner, to a stowaway, to a young moonshine 'mule', to a moonshining/bootlegging lady, to his brother, to a friend who helped him escape, to a cousin who booby-trapped Luke's trail, and to Luke's only wife who is alive.

Our main goal was not to hurt anyone. We tried our very best to leave out something if it would cause a family heartache. If someone wanted to be in the book, and they had a story to tell about Luke, they are here. If they refused, they are not. We used the real names, times and places, with one exception and it is noted in his personal chapter. Luke and I ran down many, many leads which led to nowhere.

Remember, most of this book evolves around Luke Alexander Denny's moonshining days from the mid-thirties to the sixties. Luke is no angel, never claimed to be one and probably never will be one. He is not a churchman.

I discovered Luke has two completely different “faces”. On the one hand he is a kind, happy, friendly, gentlemanly fellow, who will do anything for anyone. However, the other face is a clever, con artist who has done many things to get his way.

This book tells of the many ways he got out of loading and unloading whiskey. This will sound like he was and is lazy. Yet, I’ve actually seen this man work very hard all day in cold tobacco barns...at age 72.

Personally, I look forward to seeing this book become a reality and watch the adventures of Luke Alexander Denny appear on the silver screen in the moonshining days of yesteryear. What an exciting and yet sad “run” it has been for this author.

Dr. Stony Merriman
Smithville, Tennessee
October 1, 1991