

MOONSHINE MEMORIES OF LUKE DENNY

By Ken Beck, Staff Writer
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SMITHVILLE, TENN. – Luke Alexander Denny fought the law and the law lost.

A master moonshine mover for 30 years, Denny never got caught with the goods.

“I don’t believe a man ever lived could have caught me in that Pontiac with 60 gallons of whiskey on a gravel road at night that I knew,” said Denny, who plied his trade under cover of darkness, just like the distiller who made it – after all, that’s why they call it moonshine.



His bag of tricks was amazing for a country boy with an eight-grade education. Like Robert Mitchum’s character in the 1958 movie classic *Thunder Road*, Denny, a Putnam County native, cruised the back roads in fast cars, modified to support the weight of a load of moonshine.

“I had some good drivers after me, I was just lucky to get away,” said Denny, now 74, of his high-speed late-night trips. “O could drive, and I kept my cars in top shape, much more than I did my health.”

From 1938-1971, Denny transported thousand of gallons of “white lightning” from the moonshiners who brewed it to the bootleggers who peddled it. The whiskey runner’s incredible tales of eluding the law have recently been told in the book *Midnight Moonshine Rendezvous* by Stony Merriman, M. Stone Publishing.

Denny pitched out the back seat so he could load as much as 120 gallons of moonshine from the trunk right up against his seat. He had puncture-proof tires put on his cars and extra-leaf springs added to disguise his heavy loads. Denny carried sets of license plates from different Tennessee counties as well as Georgia and Florida plates. Like a backwoods James Bond, he added a “smoker” to pour a dense cloud of smoke from under the exhaust when cops gave chase.

Denny also memorized every road, curve and cow path in Putnam County, which aided him greatly. He said he was chased at least a dozen times in his illegal career, often twisting the speedometer needle beyond 120 mph. He wore out 15 cars and trucks, was involved in 14 wrecks and totaled four vehicles. Still, despite many near misses, the law always came up empty-handed as Denny continued to “slip-shuck” the police.

Retired Tennessee Highway Patrolman Blackie Mayfield, 84, of McMinnville, was one of the many lawmen who would have liked to have seen Denny’s dangerous journeys come to a halt.

“He was a likeable boy,” Mayfield recalled. “We tried to catch him and stopped him several times, but he would always be empty. I’d see him every day or two and talk with him. In fact I tried to get him to straighten up and quit fooling with that whiskey.”

They were fast times, but Denny has paid a steep price. He was married and divorced three times and now lives alone in poor health in a small, drab apartment in public housing in Smithville.

He keeps in touch with his one surviving ex-wife and with his two children who live in Nashville. Still Denny would love to go back in time and erase his past.

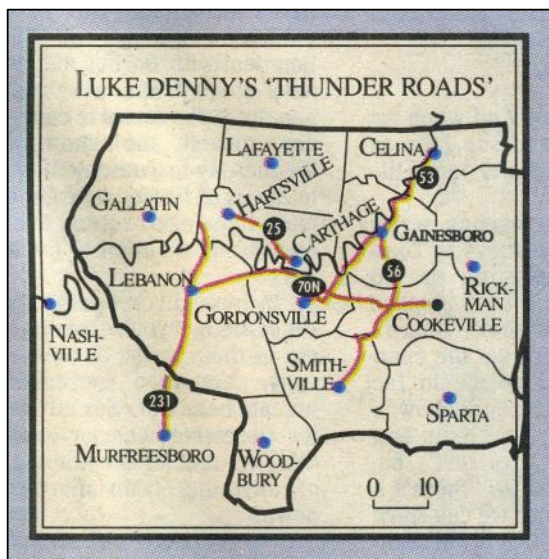
“I made a gross mistake in pursuing it as long as I did,” he said. “I hauled liquor for 30 years. Like to froze to death twice. Almost went into the river and drowned. It got on my nerves. That’s the reason now a lot of night I don’t sleep. I wouldn’t fool with it. I wouldn’t haul it. It’s a pretty low calling. Nothin’ to brag about. It’s very dangerous.”

The fleet, slick vehicles he once steered have long since been buried at the junkyard. Today Denny drives a 1977 Oldsmobile with 191,000 miles on the odometer, but he can remember the times when “every day was Christmas.”

“One week I hauled about eight loads and made about six or seven hundred dollars there. Boy, I went out and had a ball,” he said. “I bought a couple of new suits, picked up two or three honeys different times. I went to every beer tavern I reckon from just about Cookeville to Nashville an’ made everybody drunk, and I had a hog-killing time.”

Denny made some futile attempts at farming before turning to whiskey hauling, where he gained a reputation as a man who enjoyed whiskey, women and song. While most Tennessee whiskey runners wore overalls, Denny was a slick dresser who went for three-piece suits.

“One moonshiner said, ‘I know why he wears those suits. The son of gun don’t want to load and unload,’ but I’d figured if you were well-dressed you wouldn’t be as suspicious cause most of those whiskey runners wore an old slouchy cap and old jumpers and maybe clothes not even too clean. I felt like it would be better business – and to make an impression on the opposite sex.”



When Denny began his hot-rodding adventures in the late 1930s, a gallon jug of moonshine was going for a dollar, a gallon of gasoline cost 18 cents and a nickel played a song in the jukebox.

“I bought an old ’33 Plymouth when I got about 19 years old and I went to hauling on my own,” said Denny. “I believe the first major load I hauled was 30 gallons and I recall I made a dollar a gallon, which was \$30 and that was back in 1938 or ’39, and that kinda ruined me.”

“So I got to hauling 100 gallons a load, and from then on I just kept getting more customers, and I was hauling to Carthage, Buffalo Valley, Baxter, Cookeville, Hartsville, Lafayette, Lebanon, Bethpage, Westmoreland, Gallatin, Sparta.”

What would have happened had the law caught up with the whiskey runner?

“At least three to five years in the penitentiary,” Denny said. “A lawyer told me, ‘Every patrolman in the country and every revenue agent, every sheriff and every deputy is wanting to catch you.’ One man said, ‘You got every patrolman so made they could eat a flashlight.’”

Denny knew his calling was no picnic.

“A lawman said, ‘Luke, what makes you run so fast? It looks like you’d rather go to jail than go to the grave.’

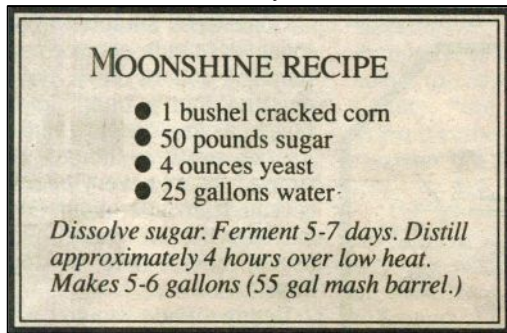
“I said, ‘Well, it’s my privilege to try and get away if I can and your privilege to catch me if you can but I take more chances than you boys do. It’s kind of like a dog after a rabbit.’ I said, ‘If a rabbit loses a race,

he loses his life, but if a dog loses a race, he just loses a meal. So I figure you boys are kind of like a dog, you just miss a meal.”

Did he very have success in a lawful trade?

Sort of.

For a time he was prospering salesman with a Carthage furniture company. A smooth talker, Denny sold a ton of goods in rural Jackson County, “the top of the woodpile when it comes to moonshine in Tennessee,” but the transactions rarely dealt in cash.



“I’d go to Jackson County and they’d say, ‘I’d buy that freezer, I’d buy that range, I’d buy that washer or what have you, but I don’t have the money. I’ll swap whiskey.’

“See, I’d make both ways. I’d swap the appliance for whiskey, then wait ‘till it got dark. Then bring the whiskey over and sell it, and the next day I’d carry the money into the store.”

Denny said his boss told him “boy, you’re the best salesman ever I’ve had. Them people in Jackson County, they came here the other day and wouldn’t buy nothing.’ Just picked out what they wanted and said send Luke up there and I’ll buy it.”

Denny recalled the biggest load he ever hauled, 1,000 gallons in one run, earned him over \$2,300. He quit his whiskey-running ways in the early ‘60s but made one last 100-gallon run in 1969 before retiring in 1971. Except for his amazing tales, Denny has precious little to show for his years of fast living and high-speed driving except for a case of bad nerves and a wrinkled brow.

“The last few years I hauled I was uptight, and it got so dangerous and every load looked like it got worse and ever mile got further. I saw I was gonna get killed and I didn’t mean to get caught. I began to get nervous and I watched the mirror a lot. Had to quit. I wouldn’t haul it now if it wasn’t against the law,” Denny said.

“It worried my mother. Course the last 10 years I hauled, she didn’t know I was hauling. She told me, says, ‘Leave the whiskey hauling to the devil,’ and I took her advice – but too many years too late. I’ll never haul no more. Of course, they could catch me now on a bicycle.”

Moonshine’s still around: Tennesseans have been making moonshine ever since there has been a Tennessee, and now the trade appears to be on the rise again.

“I think it’s picking back up a little bit,” said Jimmy Higdon, chief law enforcement officer with the Alcoholic Beverage Commission. “Number one, the price of sugar is down, and they can make some money in it. They only trouble is that there’s quite a bit of work to it.”

Moonshine didn’t become an illegal brew until during the Civil War.

“Distilleries were a prominent part of the antebellum rural South,” said David Carlton, associate professor of history at Vanderbilt. “the modern phenomenon came into existence when the federal liquor tax comes into existence, basically during the Civil War, when untaxed liquor became illegal.

“The problem became chronic after the Civil War in the South, especially in places like the East Tennessee mountains and western North Carolina.”

During the hard economic times of the '20s and '30s, moonshine became a cash crop for many poor farmers. Moonshining was here before, during and after the Prohibition era, 1920-1933. In fact, it may have hit its heyday after Prohibition, during the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

“We still find several stills a year,” Higdon said. “Last year I think it was 12 or 13. In the few years previously we found about 15 a year. We saw back in the late '70s and early '80s a decrease because about that time there was a sugar crisis.

“A lot of these people are raising marijuana, which is somewhat easier work than moonshining.”

*Read more of Luke Denny and the book *Midnight Moonshine Rendezvous* by Stony Merriman at: <http://www.ajlmbert.com>