

## MOONSHINERS RE-LIVE LIVELY PAST IN AREA

By Stony Merriman, Smithville Review  
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How many of you have seen the 1950's movie "Thunder Road," starring Robert Mitchum?

As you know this action packed moonshine running film captured an era of Tennessee's past. However, Smithville's Lucky Alexander Denny, better known as Old Luke, hauled illegal whiskey around these parts from 1932 to 1962 and was lucky enough to stay out of the calaboose.

"Yes, the law never caught me hauling moonshine. I was very lucky," the 68-year-old man said with a grin. "But, boy I sure had a lot of fun trying to stay one step ahead of the revenue officers, sheriffs, policemen and finally the state troopers.



(Pictured: 'Making Moonshine' Willie Lane, left, and Luke Denny show how moonshine is made using an authentic copper 100 gallon pot in DeKalb County, TN. In real life Lane was caught four times for making the illegal moonshine while Luke Denny was never arrested).

"Now don't get me wrong. The lawmen stopped me many times, but I never had any moonshine. A few times they go so mad, because I had empty jacket cans, they gave me a ticket for driving under the influence. I had to pay \$150 for a DUI ticket in 1949 and that was a really a lot of bucks back then" a slender man remarked.

When asked, "When did you haul your first load of moonshine?" the cheerful, well dressed Denny said, "I was 15-years-old and had just completed my second year in the eighth grade.

"See, I was born and raised in Buffalo Valley and went to the one-room Rock Spring Grade School. My family did not have any money. We raised wheat, corn, tobacco and hogs on the old home place. Now let me tell you something, I hated farming. It was long hours, blistered hands and little pay," Denny remembered.

After Denny finished grade school he farmed with his dad for one crop and attended the Baxter Seminary for one term. After dropping out of the seminary it was back to the farm in Buffalo Valley in 1934.

“I had to come up with some way to earn extra money, and get off the farm,” Denny recalled. “My buddy Hack Montgomery had an old Essex and we would simply pick up a few gallons of whiskey in the Boma Community in Putnam County and brought it to the (Buffalo) Valley and doubled our money, it was chicken feed, but we thought we were living in high cotton.

“I’d work on Dad’s farm in the daytime and ride shotgun (passenger and load and unload the ‘shine at night,” Denny said.

“Then in March of 1937 I bought my first jalopy; a 1933 Plymouth,” Denny smiled and continued. “I was 19 ½ year old and I was so proud of that bomber. The car costs me \$125. I sold some hogs to make the down payment at Carlen Motors in Cookeville.



(Pictured: Luke Denny examines a worn-out whiskey keg near Gainesboro, recently. Denny sold the 1953 Frigidaire range in the background to a moonshiner in 1953).

“My first real break came in May 1937 down at R. L. Maxwell’s General Store in Buffalo Valley. Clarence Russell asked me to walk over to the pump to get a drink of water. Russell said, ‘Your hoss

(Denny’s Plymouth) needs shoeing (tires) and the boys are out of liquor.”

Denny asked, “How much will they buy?”

“Oh, bout 30 gallon,” Russell replied.

“But I’m broke,” Denny said.

“We’ll furnish the money if you provide the wheels,” Russell responded.

Nearly 20-year-old Denny asked, “What will you give me a gallon?”

“How about .75 cents?” Russell offered.

No, but I’ll do it for a dollar,” Denny suggested.

Russell thought for a moment and said, “Let me check with my daddy, first.”

After Clarence Russell got the okay from his father they filled up Luke’s car, “On credit, too,” said Denny with a big smile.

“I cleared \$27 and still had half a tank of gas left over from any trip from No Man’s land in Jackson County to Buffalo Valley. That would be like \$150 today. Gas was only .18 cents a gallon at Maxwell’s General Store back then.

With easy money in his pocket Denny began to look for other retail outlets, commonly known as bootleggers. Clarence and his buddy Jim “Bo” Medley recommended the young whiskey runner to other bootleggers.

Local farmers became his next retailers. “They would keep moonshine in the barn and either sell it to their friends, give it away or drink it. These folks kept it in the barn so their wives wouldn’t know anything about it. Soon I had about 25 gallons to drop off to a few farmer,” Denny remembered.

“Probably my biggest break came in 1938. A bootleggers bought 25 gallons every two weeks in the St. Mary’s Community of Smith County,” he noted.

Later in the year he added Carthage and White County to his list of customers.

“I’ll never forget carrying 10 jacket cans to William Duncan’s in the Peeled Chestnut area of White County. A lawman stopped me and found the empty jacket can,” Denny said, “and that was my first run-in with the law.”

It was during this period Denny found favor with five large bootleggers in Smith County. “I could only haul 50 gallons in the ’33 Plymouth and these new bootleggers wanted 60 gallons a trip and more. Plus, I had put a lot of hard miles on the Plymouth in 18 months, so I swapped it in on a hot ’37 Ford Coupe.

“This jewel would carry 125 gallons.” Denny beamed with pride. “It had the front bench seat. Behind the front seat was open space. I had removed the rest so I could put more whiskey in it. I used six ply puncture proof ties. Also, I had helper springs to balance the load in to disguise, the Ford. Oh, it would drive perfect with 60 gallons in her.”

Willie Lane, a 71-year-old former Jackson County moonshiner who sold ‘shine to Denny said, “do I ever remember that shiny Ford coupe and old Luke. I made moonshine for years and Luke was one of my best’ drivers. Luke hauled for me in the late thirties.

“One time,” he laughed, “old Luke came flying around my house, jumped out of the car, and screamed. “The feds are right behind me, where can I hide?”

“I ran to the barn and opened the stall door and motioned for him to pull that beauty inside. Then I ran out to my front yard and just as I arrived the revenuers car skidded to a stop and one yelled. ‘did you see Luke Denny’s coupe come by her?’

“I said, ‘Oh yes, he went racing down the road that way about five minutes ago.’” And, those officers took off. I went back to the barn and we had a good laugh as we loaded up his car.”

Denny said. 'Willie do you remember what I said after the car was loaded?'

"Yep," the Jackson County former bootlegger came back quickly, with a frown on his face, and said, 'Willie I will need this load on credit.' I said okay. Then this smooth talking, fast driving rum runner said, 'Willie I'm going to need 'bout five bucks for some gas money, too.'

They both had a good chuckle.

"I had to get the feds off his back, load his booze, give him credit and then give him gas money, too" Willie added with a smile. "But old Luke was always good for it. He never jipped any 'legger out of one penny. Those were some of the good old days.

"I wasn't as lucky as Luke," Lane remembered. "The law caught me making moonshine three or four times in the thirties and I had to spend some time in the state and federal 'resorts'. But, I still loved those days.

Denny changed the subject, "I usually hauled on Sunday nights. That was the best night to drive. The drunks were pooped out from drinking Friday and Saturday nights and were either passed out or trying to recover.

"John Law was also tried out from their busy weekend and usually were trying to get ready for the next week. They loved to spend Sunday nights with their families, too. Also, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights were okay to haul, but Friday and Saturday evening were taboo.

"Most night wrecks come around Friday and Saturday," Denny explained, "and a wreck is a rum runner's worst nightmare. The law can legally check your wrecked car and a runner can get caught easily, too."

Luke Denny had a few wrecks and it was about this time in his life (1939-40) he explained. "Everyday was like Christmas. I had a lot of outlaw friends. Shucks, I was pulling down about \$200 or more a week and dressed like Prussian general.

"The only government liquor store in Middle Tennessee was in Nashville, so a few of us runners had a field day. When the 1940 cars came on the market I bought me a brand new one from Loftis Motor Company in Cookeville. I gave \$750 for it. But, I had a blowout in the rear tire in early '41 and totaled the car in West Cookeville," the shine runner said with a scowl on his face.

This accident set Denny back financially, so he purchased a good used 1938 Ford from a doctor that was "As slick as a peeled onion," Denny said with a big smile.

Nazi war drums began sounding and Denny was drafted into the U. S. Army. "the night before I left for the Army and each time I came home and ran 'shine. My bootleggers

needed the whiskey and were happy when I got leaves. I restocked their shelves,” he remembered.

After completing basic training in the summer of '42 he was transferred to Ft. Jackson, S.C. where he became an assistant machine gunner and assistant driver, naturally.

In early 1943 the draftee sailed to England for 14 days on the USS Marine Raven. After three months of training in England, Denny and his 696<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion buddies landed in Le Havre, France.

“We went three miles before making contact with the Nazis,” the combat veteran remarked.

“Those crazy Germans had the town of Lorient so fortified that we simply had to bypass it after fighting for two weeks.”

Five major campaigns were added to Denny’s fighting annals in France, Luxemburg, Holland, Belgium and then into Germany. On October 1946 the tried, worn-out 29-year-old soldier came home.

“Immediately after getting home from WWII I bought myself a slightly used 1946 Ford for \$1,500. I hauled two loads and got rid of that piece of junk.” Denny proclaimed with anger in his voice.

“It would only do about 70 mph and I couldn’t hold it in the road. I ran that dog though the Wilson County auction in Lebanon and got \$1,600 for the beast. Then I bought the best car I’ve ever owned, a brand spankin’ new blue 1947 Pontiac Chieftain with a straight eight motor. I paid \$2,550 cash on the barrel head of it.

“Boy would that Pontiac hold the curves. I put extra leaves in the springs to stabilize the load.” Denny explained, “and those puncture proof Goodrich Silvertown heavy duty tires. I would hold 120 gallons. The trunk would hold 80 gallons by itself.”

With the new Chieftain the 30-year-old whiskey runner added parts of Davidson County but not Nashville to his route. “At this time I was supplying about 40 communities in Middle Tennessee.

“I even took one load to Oklahoma City, one to Louisville, two loads to Detroit and two to Knoxville in that straight eight,” Denny added. “I wrecked it in 1949 in Double Springs on Highway 70 north of Cookeville and nearly got killed in a head-on collision with a Hoover Freight Lines truck.

“I was drunk and on the wrong side of the road. I had stopped by Robert Perry’s still in Seven Knobs, Jackson County, and Robert said, ‘Denny Wah-Diddy you are too drunk to drive and I’m not going to sell you any whiskey. Why don’t you spend the night?’”

“Robert and I got into a little scuffle and I left, made,” Denny revealed. “Thank goodness Petty didn’t load me or I would have been set to the pen for sure. The wreck hurt my chest and head. But I recovered somehow.”

In June 1949 the moonshine runner bought himself a '49 Ford in Carthage. Denny said of this car, “it would do about 100 mph and carry about 80 gallons. It was too light.”

While driving this car he became an instant preacher to evade the law.

“I’m a little ashamed of this,” he said. ‘it had been raining and this Ford flooded in a Granville creek. There I was, setting in the middle of the creek with a load of moonshine. About this time two revenue officers got out of their car, from the other side of the creek, and asked who I was.

“I told them my name was Brother Hargis from over Baxter way. Don’t You see, I always went dressed kind of spiffy to throw off suspicion. I had one of the best conservative dark grey suit’s on. I knew there was a minister in Baxter by the name of Hargis. They had heard of him, too, thank goodness.

“They asked me if I was related to him and I said, Sort of. We are distant relatives and he had been feeling kinda low lately.’ One of the officers knew the real Hargis had been feeling bad, also.

“I told them I had drowned out my car and I was late to hold a meeting over there at the Church of Christ. ‘By this time the meeting will be under way and I’ll be late.” Denny told the officers.

“One of the officers was from Kentucky and said, ‘We’re looking for a man by the name of Luke Denny who is driving a car like yours Brother Hargis.’ He looked inside the car and I had a Zane Grey book on the dashboard that looked like a Bible.

“That’s all it took. When the revenue officer saw what he thought was a Bible he turned around and said, ‘If you see him will you help us catch this fellar?’

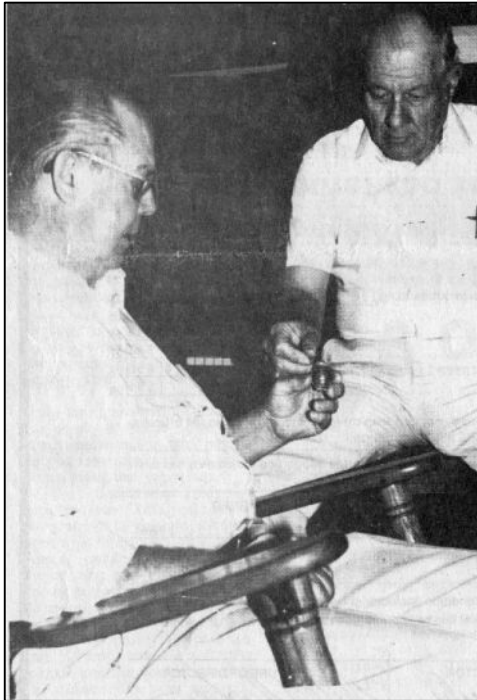
“I told them no, but I would pray for him. With that remark they turned away and drove off. If they only knew my entire trunk was full of moonshine. I had to let Logan Halfacre, a local farmer, pull me out of that creek with a pair of mules.

Denny then told how he used to straighten out the curves with this Ford. “I had to drive late at night many times to avoid detection. When a car was spotted coming up behind me normally I wouldn’t try to race him. I would gauge my speed and slowly pull away from the car.

“However, sometimes I had to outrun the law on crooked roads. I would put the pedal to the floor and It was katy-bar-the-door, then. I successfully evaded capture many times by watching the electrical and telephone lines that normally run alongside most roads.

“On a curvy hillside you can tell that you were going to meet a car by seeing their lights reflect off the wires,” Denny explained.

“The law was really getting hot on my trail about this time and many of my outlaw friends told me my car was hot, too and for me to lay low for awhile. So I swapped my '49 Ford for a half-ton 1953 Chevrolet pickup and started work for the Tuley Furniture Company of Carthage.



“I was their sales representative or field rep they called me. I sold furniture and appliances for about two years (1953-55), and did not haul any moon’. When I went by the sheriff’s offices or the police stations I would chit-chat with them and sold them some stoves and refrigerators, too.

(Pictured: Retired Smith County Sheriff Sidney S. Harper, Lancaster, shows Luke Denny the badge he wore while serving as the Smith County Sheriff for 12 years).

“I told them I was going straight and I was for awhile. Some of my best customers were my old moonshining buddies.

“However, the urge came all over me about 1956 and I started hauling again, but this time I knew I had to come up with some way to fool John Law.

So I put the whiskey inside a hollow Frigidaire refrigerator crate. It was nearly six-feet tall,” he recalled.

“I had a cabinet maker build me 16 individual cross members. It would hold 16 cases or 96 gallons in half gallon glass fruit jars. I had them four across and four down. It took two men to load and unload. I sold furniture and appliances and whiskey too.

“This was perfect. In fact, 1955, was my banner year with Tuley. They paid me \$100 a week and I hauled in Jackson, Putnam, Macon, Trousdale, DeKalb and Smith Counties,” Denny said.

“I remember old Luke Denny very well,” Sidney S. Harper, 73, said at his Lancaster home. “I was the Sheriff of Smith County from 1978 to 1982. I was also the Chief of Police in Lebanon.

“I knew he was hauling whiskey, but somehow we could never catch him. Old Luke was always happy, dressed nice and didn’t seem to bother anyone. There was s till over in Pleasant Shade and a few more, but most of the stills were in Macon and Jackson

counties. Luke and other wheel men drove through and delivered in Smith County when I was sheriff.

“I recall one time Luke’s wife called me and said, ‘Sheriff Harper, Luke is drunk again and talking loud and I have to go to work tomorrow and need some sleep. Will you come up here and make him go to bed?’

“I drove up to his house and told Luke, ‘go to bed. The next time I have to come up here you are going to jail. Do you understand?’ Luke staggered on the bed and I did not get another call from his wife.

“Do you remember that Luke?” Harper asked.

“Yeah I sure do,” Denny answered. “And I knew you meant business and would have taken me straight to the hoosegow if I didn’t go to bed.”

Concerning his wife, “My wives could not keep up with me. I probably shouldn’t say that, but I was on the go all the time and drank quite a bit. It an though four wives and I have tow lovely children. But, when I made al that moonshine money, I would get drunk after making a delivery at a tavern and pickup women, often.

In 1961, I saw Paul Knowles, a revenue agent in Carthage. He pointed toward my truck and his wife shook her head. I knew he told her I was hauling moonshine whiskey in that Frigidaire carte and I was going to get caught.

“That’s when I quit. I never hauled another load in that crate. It was hot,” Denny said.

“Now, I did haul a few loads after 1961, but for a few friends. Just on rare occasions. The last was back in 1962. this man, and he is alive today and a upstanding citizen so I don’t want to mention his name, asked me to bring him 80 gallons on Christmas Day, under a load of corn in a one-ton pickup.

“He gave me a \$50 bonus because I hauled it during the daytime. After that I stopped hauling whiskey. It started to getting to my nerves.