

Midnight Moonshine Rendezvous
By Sr. Stony Merriman
Ralph Edward Sanders - b. 27 February 1943
Chapter 19 – pgs. 190 – 193
Ralph Edward Sanders was the step brother of
Nellie Ora (Keathly) Denny she md Luke Alexander Denny
*See Chapter 5 for family listing – ajlambert.com

“I wanted to ride with Luke Denny so bad I hid in the back of his car and didn’t say one word and tried not to breathe loud,” Ralph Edward Sanders, 47, said during his interview in Lebanon, TN, December 30, 1987.

“Luke was my brother-in-law and my folk hero, too. My one and only ride with him took place in late ’49 or early ’50. I was about seven-years-old, but I remember it like it happened this morning. And, that ride—with the local moonshine running legend—is the most vivid recollection I have of my younger childhood days. Everyone around knew Luke hauled whiskey. He would sit around at his house or ours and tell his tales. I asked Luke to ride with him and he would take me different places, but not when he had shine. I wanted to be his shotgun. He said, ‘No!’ So I went to my sister (Nellie) and requested her to intercede for me. She flat out refused to plead my case. I didn’t have any other alternative. I had to come up with a plan. Luke did I ever tell you how I devised the scheme to ride with you?”

“No, come to think of it, I can’t remember you ever telling me how you cooked it up. But, buddy I was upset and I mean upset when I discovered what you had done,” Denny said, with a frown on his face.

Sanders adjusted his glasses and took off his baseball type cap, lettered with “CMI” on the front and revealed, “I was playing hide-an-seek with some of the neighbor’s, around my South Carthage home, and while hiding I saw your car drive up to the house. You opened the trunk and took out some groceries. That’s when I dreamed up my hideaway plan. Plus, I overheard you and one of the bootleggers talking near your car about how much whiskey he wanted and when he wanted it. So, about 45 minutes before you were going to leave I opened the door away from the house and crawled into the back of your one seater. Your Ford had a big open area behind the seat.”

“That’s were I stored the moonshine. It was about six months old and let me tell you that green ’49 Ford, with overdrive, would tear up some road. It would easily bury the needle,” the 73-year-old Denny explained.

“Well, Luke finally came and took off toward Jackson County. It was dark and I was a little scared, but determined to have something on the other kids in the neighborhood. After a while I got concerned because he was driving fast and I was being thrown a little in the trunk on the curvy hill roads between Elmwood and Granville, towards Gainesboro. But, Luke and the passenger were talking about all the places they were going in the next few days and I thought to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have come on this ride.

Daddy is really going to be mad.’ That’s when I decided to reveal my hideout. I slowly crawled toward the front seat. Just before I started to say something my hand landed on a .45 caliber pistol. I knew I was in for a good whipping, when I got home.

“I can’t remember just what I said to Luke, but I know he was really mad for a few minutes,” the younger man informed us as he brushed his mustache in the low lit Rest Stop in Lebanon.

“What the lad didn’t realized was I had many, many stops to make,” Denny pointed out. “I believe it was between Christmas and New Year’s. I had to get the whiskey to all my customers. When we discovered Lit’ Ralph was with us it was too late to turn back, since it was 10 to 12 miles from his home. To take him back would have meant turning around and driving that 10 miles or so and then driving back another 10 miles. Plus, I was nearly an hour late as it was and wanted to try and make up the lost time by speeding. The little shit sat right between us and didn’t say anything for the longest time because I chewed him out time and time again.

“Once he finished with my butt chewing I felt good,” Sanders said, “because the two men forgot about me and talked about their mission. This was going to be more than just a few hours. I got a little worried, but didn’t show it or say one word about it to Luke or the other man. Luke wouldn’t let me get out while they loaded the whiskey, but I watched with much excitement. I kept telling myself, ‘I’m going to have some stories to tell my buddies, but I’ll have to keep some of this secret.’

‘I recall the first Putnam County bootlegger’s place better than any other. It didn’t look at all like I thought it would. Once the clear whiskey was gone it was back to this man’s barn for another load. Then we were off with the moonshine to the bootleggers. At every place Luke told me to stay put and keep quiet...and I was quiet as a mouse, too. They unloaded gallon after gallon. Then it was off to another joint. Oh, I was lovin’ it. I felt I was a man...at seven-years-old. We had been on the go for two full days. I was really tired, but I wanted to say awake to take everything in,” the six-foot, brown haired Sanders said.

Luke added, “That ’49 Ford was hollow behind the one seat. It would hold 120 gallons. I had the springs beefed up so the load wouldn’t shift and the car would look level. After two days of delivering I was also pooped. So, at the last drop off I told him we would stop out in the woods in No-Man’s Land (Jackson County), near a big still to eat and sleep, then reload for the final dropoffs. The moonshine wasn’t ready so we sat around while they continued brewing it and ate pork-n-beans, crackers and washed them down with moonshine.”

“Oh Lord, do I remember that scene,” Sanders smiled and continued. “Here we were in the backwoods, in this old beat up shack. It was cluttered with everything under the sun. A housekeeper would have died after looking at that place. It was a mess. One man had a dirty little, worn joke book. When he put it down I went over to look at it, but I could barely read any of the words. Also, I couldn’t understand why they all laughed so hard

after reading these jokes. I just couldn't figure out what they meant by the 'punch line'. I thought they were talking about boxing at first, then I thought it was another type of drink...like fruit punch, today. I was getting tired. I couldn't keep my eyes open."

"After a while I missed the little one," Denny observed. "I thought he might have gone outside to take a leak, but when I didn't hear him nor see him for about an hour I went lookin'. It was in the middle of the night. We were gathered around the wood heated pot belly stove, in the rundown, two-room log cabin. I grabbed a kerosene lamp and walked to the bedroom. That sight is burnt in my memory."

Both men started laughing so loud the patrons looked in our direction in bewilderment.

"There was Lit' Ralph sound asleep, between two long bearded moonshiners in dirty overalls," Denny smiled and said. "Just before dawn the Ford was once again loaded. We were off to my final bootleggers. It could have been the last day of December, 1949. On the way back to Ralph's home in Smith County we unloaded. The last drop off was on Pea Ridge, near Elmwood, about five miles east of South Carthage, just off Highway 70. When we rolled into his house the fur begin flyin'. They were angry at me for taking him on a whiskey run, yet relieved the little one wasn't hurt and safely back home."

"Dad (Bill Sanders) was on the front porch, waiting, mad. I mean he was hopping made at me. At first he was mad at Luke, but when Luke told Dad I had been a stowaway, he gave me a good spanking. I deserved every lick, too," Sanders maintained as he rubbed his derriere with both hands, against faded Levis.

"That was my one and only ride with my brother-in-law," Ralph Sanders pronounced as he looked at his watch on his left wrist. After donning jackets they strolled outside. While shaking hands, again, Sanders concluded, "It's time I got home. I don't want to be two-an-half days late, ever again."



Ralph Edward Sanders & Luke Alexander Denny