

Midnight Moonshine Rendezvous
written
by Dr. Stony Merriman
told by Luke Alexander Denny
Schoolyard Tales

“When I went to school, head start and all the other preschool programs were unheard of. Then, the normal age to start school was six. I started my ‘book learnin’ as it was referred to in those days, in 1922. I believe school started July 26. My mother may have taught at the school, before I started. My first school was a one-room schoolhouse in Rock Spring, in the lower end of Putnam County. My first teacher was Mrs. Sadie Amonett; a dedicated tutor if there ever was one. I will always remember her special humanitarianism traits. An example of this was Mrs. Amonett shared her lunch with some poor students behind a big oak at the southside of the school yard many times. One day three little girls and a little boy ate nearly all of her lunch. I remember they were crying. They brought their lunch in a lard bucket. My bucket was blue and white.

“The oldest in one family, a girl 11-years old, dispensed food to the younger members of her family, to the best of her ability. One time she was complaining bitterly because molasses got mixed with the mashed potatoes. She exclaimed in a loud voice, “The old soggy mess isn’t fit to eat.” They all started crying. It was a pathetic scene. I can still see it as plain as if it had happened a month ago. There was no welfare back then. The government didn’t feed people. People worked at that time and they were proud, even if they were poor.

“Mrs. Sadie, as we called her, was eating nearby. I was wondering how she was going to handle this situation. She went over and said something I couldn’t hear, but motioned toward the old oak tree. The little fellows all trooped in behind this tree. In a few seconds Mrs. Sadie joined them with some sandwiches and some tea cakes. These children’s father was in the state prison in Nashville. Back then there wasn’t hardly anyone overweight. Times were rough. They were sending their children to school to get some education against cruel and terrible odds. I would say all concerned are dead, since this took place more than 60 years ago.

“ I found out later Mrs. Amonett always carried extra food with her as long as she taught school. If she is not in heaven there isn’t one!

“My first day in school was most embarrassing, especially to my brother John Henry Denny. Instead of going to the ‘John’ behind the Sycamore tree I chose to use the front steps of the school house. I thought it was a waste of energy to walk all the way down to the tree, so I answered the call of nature at the handiest

place. My brother whipped me and took me back in the schoolhouse. That was the last time I did that. The girls had their own outhouse.

“At around 10 a.m. I got hungry and decided to eat, so I raided about five or six lunches in the Clothe Room before they caught me. For a short time I thought I was at an all-day singing or a dinner-on-the-ground. John Henry, once again, gave me a good whipping. I deserved every lick.

“Some of my other teachers were Miss Nina Huddleston; Miss Nola Neighbors; Mrs. Carlen West Evans, Carlen was my first cousin; Miss Geraldine Huddleston; Mrs. Martha Bleasley Maddux Breeding; Mrs. Leona McKinley and Mr. Noel Maddux. They were all very good and dedicated teachers. We were very fortunate in getting such talented people to teach us.

“Id say Mrs. Leona McKinley and Mrs. Martha Breeding would have been very capable teachers in a university. They were brilliant. They excelled in English and literature, but both were good in math, history and other subjects, too.

“Miss Leona McKinley was my teacher more than any other. I am sorry to say I gave her more hell than all the others combined. She whipped me regularly and I needed it every time. A lot of times, when I got by some way or the other, I needed to have gotten more whippings from her. I was always into some kind of mischief. For example, I had to stay after school, stand in the corner and stand up to the black board with my nose in a circle many times. This was a great delight to all the other kids. I have heard them snicker, but I pretended I didn’t hear them. I was not about to give them the satisfaction of knowing how miserable I really was.

“One time, while being spanked by Mrs. Leona, I was bellowing somewhat louder than usual and she became concerned. I was putting it on a little too thick. She knew she wasn’t hurting me after finding out my britches was padded with a book satchel, made out of bed ticking. I could tell she was very amused, but she laid it on me again and a lot harder the next time...minus the protection of the satchel.

“Martha Bleasley Maddux Breeding and Carlen West Neil are the only teachers, I believe are alive,” Denny explained. At Mrs. Breeding’s Algood Tennessee, Colony apartment the articulate, neatly dressed, silver-haired lady said of student Luke Denny on April 8, 1989, “To me you are still that sweet little boy who was at my coattails all the time. For the two years I had him in my class I can never remember having to call him down. He never gave me any trouble. Luke was a good student, above average. He always called me Mrs. Martha. If he would have only applied himself after school to a noble career there is no telling what he would have made himself. Whiskey running sure left its mark on this boy’s life. You have stopped hauling illegal whiskey? “Mrs. Breeding suddenly asked Luke, while giving him a sharp look.

“Yes ma-mam, I stopped hauling liquor many years ago. My nerves got so bad I had to quit or die,” Denny answered.

“Well then hon, I sure hope you’ve stopped drinking it, too,” she counseled.

“Well, not completely,” Denny sheepishly said in a boyish tone. “I’ve slowed down tremendously tho, but every once in a while the ol’ devil himself comes sneaking around and hands me an open bottle. It’s tough to turn down a drink or two from old friends.”

“You must say NO, sweetie. It’s for your own good. Now I mean it Luke. Stop your drinking,” the teacher decreed. After pausing for a moment, while holding onto Luke’s hand she said, “I remember you were the first student to return to school in late July. You were in the room, seated, before any other student. Why?”

Denny smiled as if he had pulled one over on his former teacher and elaborated, “If you recall my seat was always next to the stove. This way when the cold winter days cam I would have squatters rights on that seat, and keep warm. We only had the one stove and it got real cold in the little one-room schoolhouse, especially if you sit a long distance from the stove.”

“See,” Mrs. Breeding concluded, “he was always thinking. If only he would have channeled his energy toward an honorable profession.”

On the way back to Luke’s Smithville home he recalled, “When school started there were about 40 kids. That was a lot for a country school. However, many dropped out because they had to walk so far. In March there would be only about 15 students to complete the term. It seems school let out in the latter part of March, back in those days.

“Edith Amonett was an attractive fellow student. Brother, I had a crush on her during all the grade school years. Carlen Evans was the teacher when we were having a Christmas program. She was having difficulty in getting us lined up properly. I was determined to get beside Edith, so I changed positions two or three times. She would change me again and this resulted in some low places in the middle of the ranks, but finally she gave up and I slipped, once more, on Edith’s right side. Clarence (Pete) Upchurch, in the confusion, somehow would up on the other side of Edith. Pete was a foot taller it seemed and it was rather a comical arrangement. Even the youngest students started bellowing and laughing.

“Pete told me in later years it was somewhat embarrassing to him. Anyway, the teacher in desperation finally gave up. She said, ‘Awe just let it go, Luke want to be beside Edith.’”

"Pete loved to play basketball, too. We only had one goal. The county didn't even furnish us a basketball. Someone brought us a beach ball to play with.

"We had to improvise ways of entertaining ourselves so R.D. Starnes came up with a .50 cent piece trick. R.D. told us he could make it disappear. To make it vanish he set his arms in some crazy whirling motion. The coin was to magically reappear in his mouth. However, he really made it disappear when he swallowed it. I asked him years later did he ever recover it? 'No" R.D. said, 'it was never found.' I nicknamed him 'Citizens Bank' after his Houdini act. You will never guess what career he chose; dentistry.

"Stilts," Denny remembered. "I nearly forgot about Douglas Rittenberry's stilts. Back then we called them 'Tow Walker's'. The pair would lift his feet about three feet from the ground. Doug could easily wade the creek without getting wet. Often he ignored the foot log that spanned the creek. We used the log to cross the creek on the way to and from school. If there was no audience Doug would place the stilts over his shoulder and walk on the log to school.

"Once, around 1928 to 1930, an August flash flood drenched Middle Tennessee. Violent thunderstorms sent lightning across the sky every few minutes. The high current almost dislodged the foot log. We watched from the bank and expected it to wash away any minute.

"Up come Doug. Even tho the water was high and getting higher he wasn't about to pass up this chance to be a hero in front of his classmates with his walkers. We all advised him not to use the stilts. So, he ignoring all advice nonchalantly began his perilous crossing. It appeared for a while he might actually make it, even though the water was up above his waist. The current was alarming to look at. At one time it washed him a quarter of a turn and he came very near being sucked under. Somehow, like magic, he regained his balance and smiled at us. At that moment he thought he was King of Buffalo Valley. Doug even 'walked' another step or two and was just a few feet from the shore, where we stood. Somehow one of his walker's became wedged between two rocks. The stilt was fastened, really frozen, to the bottom of the creek bed. His facile expression changed from proud-as-a-peacock to fear!

"Suddenly he started falling backwards toward the middle of the stream, when all at once one stilt gave way. He moved it quickly back and for one second balanced himself. Suddenly the walker flung him forward. He crashed face down. We were all scared he might drown. A number of us waded a few feet into the creek and pulled him to safety. Doug was visibly embarrassed. He was luck to be alive. He lost his wallet and the stilts floated down into the Caney Fork River. The Tom Walker fad came to an abrupt end," the quick minded Tennessean recalled.

After a moment to reflect, Luke Denny reached back to the same era for a school day spelunking episode. “There was a small cave not more than a quarter of a mile from school where both boys and girls played during recess. We didn’t go to the cave every day. Sometimes it would be a week or two in between visits. Solid rock covered the inside of the horseshoe shaped tunnel with two openings. For some reason we always used the right entrance. The entrance-exit holes were about three feet in diameter. The tunnel was about 40 feet long, but the long curving arch went several yards under the bluff. To complete the trip, the entire adventure covered about 90 feet. There wasn’t room to turn around nor stand up so we got down on our hands and knees. Sometimes we crawled backwards.

“The 30-minute morning recess came at 10 a.m. then the hour long lunch started at noon. At the opening bell on an October day—it wasn’t too hot nor too cold—one boy started talking about a special lunchtime cave excursion. He made it sound so exciting. ‘It will be the best trip, ever,’ I can hear him say. Promptly at 10 o’clock the lad took off, by himself and disappeared into the woods between the school and the cave. Later, he told me he was afraid the kids would back out from this lunch venture. As his squad ate lunch he—the most popular boy in school—mingled with prospective spelunkers offering encouragement and exchanging little pleasantries here and a kind word there. With lunch quickly finished it was time to go.

“The trip promoter was talking to himself, but was loud enough so everyone in the group of about 15 could hear. ‘It is going to be so exciting. I can’t wait to get there and be the first one inside,’ he was saying. Then he started moving up and down the column. Clint McKinney owned the cattle farm with the cave. Near the entrance we had to scatter a small herd of cattle to get by. Everyone from front to back was trying to get ahead of the next one. A few feet from the entrance our leader conveniently stumbled and fell. He put on a good show, pretending to break back into the column. No one let him break line. Not being able to get in front of anyone he complained bitterly about being the one who brought up the trip and having to bring up the rear.

“The happy, excited group crawled through the cave fast to see what the special event was going to be. We all found out as we came into the light at the end of the tunnel...our hands, knees and clothes were covered with MANURE. The children in front of the column had the most on them. The leader, who came through the cave last and didn’t get any ‘waste’ on himself, apologetically muttered, ‘Those darn calves must have gotten into the cave.’ Pete Upchurch harshly responded ‘Them ‘ere cows didn’t do that. A calf couldn’t even get in ‘ere. Someone done that and I’m goin’ta find out who. When I do it’ll be too wet to plow for him!’

“What a motley, yet pathetic crew we were. All of us washed at the nearby spring. I was washing too as I didn’t escape the ordeal. No one came out

smelling like a rose, except the promoter who set the manure trap. Some thought it was me who dreamed this prank up, but it sure wasn't Luke...for once.

Douglas (Doug) Madewell grew up with Luke Denny, he remembers Luke. "I grew up with Luke and have known him all my life. We went to Rock Spring one room schoolhouse." He remembers the time they had a mock courtroom trial at school. A boy in school named Clarence Upchurch, "Pete" had down a cat in Rock spring. When our teacher Mrs. Martha Beasley Maddux found out about it she was mad, but wanted to teach us all a lesson in courtroom practices so she told everyone in the small one room school there was going to be a trial on Friday and everyone would become a member of the court. If they didn't have a part to play then they were part of the courtroom audience.

"Mrs. Maddux selected Wilson Crook to be the judge and Luke Alexander Denny was the Attorney General, so he calls it. Luke was the prosecutor. Doug Madewell was the defendant for Pete. Madewell said, " It was my job to get Pete Upchurch off and I will never forget how Pete and I dreamed up things to say about that cat. First we said the cat probably got a cramp and drown because it couldn't swim, but Luke objected and Judge Crook wouldn't let us use that so the only thing we could come up with was the cat had a heart attack and I told Luke, before the class, "Now prove the cat didn't have a heart attack. That stopped Luke dead in his tracks. For once Luke was speechless and he said something like, 'Doug, I guess you got me. That's one I can't top.' And the judge said, 'Case dismissed because of lack of evidence against Mr. Clarence "Pete" Upchurch.'

Luke said, "I think I tried to prove you saw Pete throw the cat in the spring and you kept saying, 'Now how can you say that Mr. Attorney General, did you actually see me or my client throw that cat in the water?' Luke said, "Doug, you had me so turned around that day I forgot I was asking you the questions and before long I was answering my questions to you. It was fun and the school learned a lot from that mock trail."