

PAUL KNOWLES AND SILAS ANDERSON

By Elmer Hinton

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This is the first of three articles about Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson, a team in the federal government's war against Tennessee moonshiners.



(Pictured: Silas Anderson, Paul Knowles and Sheriff Farris Conley raiding a still in Cannon county, TN).

These two revenue agents have made things hot for moonshiners in the Upper Cumberland.



Pictured: Left: Paul Knowles

Pictured: Right: Silas Anderson



Paul and Silas have made things hot for moonshiners in the Upper Cumberland hills.

Used to be a ‘shiner up there could do right well. Folks who liked the product from his still brought their own jug and paid a fair price for what they got with no questions asked.

Once in a while a revenooer would come poking around and tear up a still and pour out the mash. And occasionally a ‘shiner was haled into court.

But generally there was some fellow on the grand jury who had smacked his mouth over more than one swig from the defendant’s private jug.

Too, it has always been hard to convict moonshiners because it takes witnesses to convict. And witnesses are something the moonshiners ain’t.



(Pictured: The sheriff gives the agents the low-down on the still).

But Paul and Silas came in – Silas 21 years ago, Paul joining him later – and made a big change in things.

“Ain’t one-tenth of the stills in these here hollers as thar war back when Si took to radin’ them,” sighed one of the old time ‘shiners as we sat on an Overton county hillside and talked about the

old days and these.

Used to be, he said, there was a spring in every hollow and a still at nigh every spring.

Back then the hillmen who brewed the potent corn juice took a great delight in out-smarting the revenooers and more often than not the government agent came out second best in this battle of wits.

But the ‘shiners now are no match in this game with college-trained revenue agents like Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson, even though they still pull some mighty smart tricks to keep from getting caught.

“Ain’t nothin’ in this ‘stillin’ business any more with Paul and Silas prowlin’ around,” the old timer said. “That Si, now – he can spot smoke a mile away and he’s keener’n a jay bird’s chirp.”

And where there's smoke, Paul and Silas figure, there's fire. And where there's fire in the hills there's apt to be boiling.

Anderson admits that things were pretty bad in the 10 Upper Cumberland counties that make up his district when he joined the enforcement branch of the federal revenue service 21 years ago. There were stills everywhere you turned and the operators liked no part of a revenue agent.

They thought they had a moral if not a legal right to do whatever they wanted to with their surplus corn. It only took about 20 bushels to get the old mule through the winter. The hens had rather scratch in millet than to have corn thrown at them and hogs liked to root among leaves for acorns and come in at night for slop from the kitchen.

More food grew wild around them than was cultivated in more civilized sections. The old cow brought it in by the gallon, bees by the hive full and pigs by the sides of bacon. The Hillman had time on his hands.

It is possible that many took to 'stillin' because of pure loneliness. Good roads had not pushed into the region much then and there were few radios in the hill cabins to bring the world to their front door.

It was powerful lonesome in the hills unless a body figured out some way to pass the draggy hours. Checkers grew tiresome after a while. So did card playing and gander pulling.

There were some, if they had a batch of children, to whom moonshining became a matter of business to clothe their nakedness and put food in their bellies.

And the moonshiners said then, as they do today, that making wildcat whisky is more honorable than cheating, robbing or stealing.

Paul and Silas agree to that.

Before Paul and Silas went into the hills, a revenooer was a mighty unpopular person up there. More than one has carried home some lead as a result of the 'shiner's fierce hatred and unerring aim. Some of them may have deserved as much, from the tales that are told.

But that's neither here nor there, as the saying is. Paul and Silas changed all that and they number among their best friends men they have arrested and convicted for moonshining time after time.

What has brought about this change, not only in the hill counties but other sections of the state where moonshining goes on?

Silas sums it up in one word: "Fairness." That's the key.

Treat them like human beings, never lie on them to make a case in court 0 be firm but fair and they'll respect you for it," say the aggressive revenue agent.

In all the years they've been running down moonshiners in those hills, of all the stills and whisky and mash destroyed, Paul and Silas have never sot at one of the operators or been shot at.

These two officers never bring a 'shiner they know – and they know them all – into jail when they arrest them. They put him on his honor to come in a certain day to make bond or go to jail to await trial.

"They never fail," says Silas. The average Hillman goes all out on keeping his word - "My word is as good as my bond," he'll say – and it generally is.



Although moonshining still flourishes in some sections of the state, particularly in Cocke county and the Chattanooga area, it has been reduced to a mere trickle of what it was 25 years ago. No longer are the operators the trigger-happy lot that they were back then. Only three revenue agents have been killed in this state in the line of duty during the past 15 years.

What has brought about this change?

(Pictured: Silas' family greets him as he returns home to Baxter, Putnam Co., TN. The one on the right is Silas holding football and next to him is son John Suel and James Norris. Facing them is Silas E. Jr. and Lula Lee (wife of Silas).

Perhaps the big thing is that the federal alcohol and tobacco tax unit set higher standards for their enforcement agents. As a result better men came into the service at higher salaries than formerly. An agent starts in at about \$4,000 a year now and can advance to \$10,000.

Paul and Silas are about typical of the 26 agents and six special investigators working in this state except that a majority of them now have law degrees. All have college work.

Silas, 53, attended Tennessee Polytechnic institute and Milligan college, lettering in football, basketball and baseball. He played some semi-pro baseball before entering government service.

He taught six years after leaving college and was football coach at Algood for four of those years. Still an ardent sports fan, he umpires all the TPI baseball games.

He and Mrs. Anderson have five children, three of which have finished college. The two youngest are in grade school.

Paul, 39, being the son of a Methodist preacher, attended school at several places in the mid-state area but was graduated at Portland, where he played football.



After attending Bowling Green Business university, he first worked as a clerk with the social security board. He transferred to the revenue department. For a while he worked as store-keeper and gauger at various Kentucky distilleries.

(Pictured: Paul at home with his wife and three sons).

Then the bugles of World War II began blowing and he entered the service, serving two and a half years with the first army artillery. Sent to the European theater, 27 months and six battles later he was back home and in the revenue service enforcement branch. He worked at Greeneville a while before teaming up with Silas at Cookeville.

He married on the 12th of June 1937, Putnam County, TN to the former Reba Mae Anderson of Smith county. They live at Baxter and have three children, two months to nine years.

Both Paul and Silas like their jobs. They like the outdoor life and the security it offers under civil service regulations, fairly free from political interference. The fun and challenge of matching wits with the crafty moonshiners must have it appeal, too.

The one man, perhaps, who did more to raise the standards of the department in this state was Joseph L. Spurrier. He worked out of the Nashville office back before the turn of the century.

Widely known for his untiring diligence and courage, Spurrier made his name synonymous with truthfulness and square dealing – even among some of the moonshiners.

Accustomed as some of the moonshiners had been to treachery and mistreatment, a few resorted to the same methods that been employed against them.

And Spurrier paid the price for a situation he had no part in creating. On Oct. 7, 1892, he and two fellow officers were shot off their horse and morally wounded from ambush in Lincoln county, where they had been lured by a decoy letter.

But the brave officer had set a pattern the gunmen's bullets could not erase. His mode of conduct has become a part of the unwritten code by which revenue officers perform their duties to this day.

Next week's story will tell some of Paul's and Silas' experiences and adventures among the moonshiners. Some are funny, others have a pathetic note – but all are interesting. A few of the ingenious devices used by moonshiners to fool the revenooers in the never-ending battle of wits will be described.

*Read more about Silas Anderson at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

THE REVENUERS ARE GRIMLY RESPECTED

By Elmer Hinton

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This is the second of three stories about Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson, a team of alcohol tax revenue agents...

“Down in the holler at my still, Paul and Silas on the hill...”

Two lanky moonshiners sang their improvised verse and beat on the bottoms of tin buckets in mock banjo accompaniment.

They were in a gay mood. Their still, in a dense thicket by a running stream in the Seven Knobs section of Jackson county, was brewing as potent a juice as was ever distilled in those hills.

But their song was never finished. Two revenue agents stepped out from the bushes where they had been hiding and placed the ‘shiners under arrest, tore up their still and poured out the mash.

A broad grin covered the ‘shiners’ faces. They took the surprise raid good naturedly, as most of them do.

Used to be that a moonshiner was just spilin' for a fight when a revenue officer showed up. More than once in the remote Upper Cumberland section guns have barked on the hillsides during a still raid.



Silas Anderson finds the traditional cob stoppers at a still

In the old days churches, fired with more zeal than practical judgment, sent missionaries into the hills to reform the makers and drinkers of wildcat whisky.

Most of these, however, soon hurried back to friendlier climes, glad to get away with even a part of their skins. Afterwards they took care to say as little about the matter as possible.

(Pictured: Silas Anderson finds the traditional cob stoppers at a still).

That is why Silas Anderson was ordered never to raid alone when he took the Cookeville post 21 years ago as a federal revenue agent. But in all their raiding Anderson and Paul Knowles, who joined him later, have never shot at a

moonshiner or been shot at.

A Revenooer's life is filled with hard work, lots of fun and an element of danger. Paul and Silas are on speaking terms with all three.

"I might have been shot at lots of times if I hadn't grabbed the advantage," Silas say. The agents never raid unarmed.

Paul and Silas have never posed as reformers. They have simply tried to do their duty. Many times though, they have told these violators there is a better way of life than making moonshine whisky.

A few have followed their advice. Others have served their time and gone right back into business, only to be caught again. Moonshining gets into the blood. Silas says some fellows will hire out to work at stills cheaper than they will do carpenter work. The job seems to fit them, like a possum hide fits their hand for a glove.

One former 'shiner quit the business and now is a successful farmer living between Cookeville and Gainesboro. He, his dad and four brothers had been arrested and convicted time after time.

“I didn’t know there was an honest way to make a living ‘til you showed me,” he told Silas.

The others quite too. The youngest had a case pending in federal court when he went off to the army. After his discharge he came in to face trial. It developed he had a fine



record – as a military policeman.

He got a probation sentence, married and went out west where he has a good job and is doing well. He sends Silas a Christmas card every year.

(Pictured: Paul Knowles rises up to chase a moonshiner fleeing from a still).

So it goes with the moonshiners among the hills. At Seven Knobs, No Man’s Land, Forkum Hollow, Sugar Camp, Tick, Phifer Mountain, Rabbit Ridge, Little Crab, Double Top and Bald Rock.

Some quite for a while, then go back to moonshining. More do this than stay quit. Most of them just keep on. If Paul and Silas tear up one still it isn’t hard to round up an old pot, a piece of pipe and some barrels. A batch of sugar and meal and a secluded spot by a running stream are all that is needed then to get back in business.

One hill man caught operating a still went to preaching between his arrest and trial. He came into court with his Bible under his arm and praising the Lord.

Impressed with this change of heart, the judge gave him a probation sentence. The “call” apparently hasn’t been as strong since that because Paul and Silas have information he is back at his still again, and they are dogging his footsteps.

Sometimes a revenue agent has to lie out in the woods all night to catch his unsuspecting prey.

Paul and Silas and Sheriff Farris Conley of Woodbury were watching a still in the Short mountain section early one morning when the wife of the moonshiner and one of their small girls showed up.

The woman started a fire under the boiler and went about the business of making whisky in an expert manner. The child sang hillbilly ditties.

In cramped positions in the undergrowth surrounding the still, the officers waited for several hours. Finally the husband came down and took over. They “flushed the still” and arrested the operator – the eighth time he had been caught.

That night the woman had another baby to add to the ever-increasing brood. She named it for the sheriff.

Before he could face trial the man suffered a paralytic stroke and is now a helpless cripple and can talk only in unintelligible mumbles. They with their children of varied ages and sizes still live in the cabin near where they were caught at the still.

The smallest outfit Silas ever caught, and perhaps the nearest time he came in getting shot, was being operated by a former student who was especially good in chemistry.

He had a two-gallon still all rigged up with glass tubes and other things used in laboratories. This fellow was buying the mean moonshine whisky, adding a chemical and redistilling it.

The result was whisky equal in quality to that brought in any legal store, so his customers said.

When Silas called to him through a door of an outbuilding where he was operating, this former pupil reached for a .45 automatic hanging at his side. But Silas beat him to the draw and there was no trouble. He would never tell what the chemical was he used.

But Paul and Silas rarely find a gun at a still, and when they do it is probably there for the purpose of killing a squirrel or two for supper. There’s a law providing a stiff penalty for having a gun at a still for the purpose of resisting arrest, whether a man tries to use it or not.

Various methods are employed by moonshiners to throw the revenue men off their trail. Some big operators have rail runners who do nothing but stay on the lookout for officers approaching.

Thin threads are stretched across paths leading to the stills, colors blending with the season-green in spring and summer and brown when the leaves turn in the fall. If moonshiners find the strings broken, somebody is poking around, and that somebody might be revenooers.

Small stones are placed at certain spot on boards covering mash barrels. If the still owner finds the stone moved or gone, it's 'shore and sartin" visitors have been there in his absence.

Different routes are used to go to the still in an effort to throw the agents off their trail. An early morning hunt with shotgun and dog all around the still, but never going to it, is designed to find officers that might be hiding in the bushes.

Any car that Paul and Silas may have is the best known vehicle in all of the 10 counties. Even with a new auto, one trip through any given section is all that is needed for all of the moonshiners to be able to spot it. News travels in the hills.

Then when the car goes through there afterwards, likely as not a dinner bell will ring or three shots will be fired from a six-shooter. And quicker'n scat another bell will ring or answering shots will be fired way off yonder. That system works.

Silas went modern once to outwit the moonshiners. With an airplane and several automobiles, all equipped with a two-way radio system, he proposed to clean the 'shiners out.

Knowing all the pig paths up the hills and down the hollows, Silas took the airplane to do the spotting. The cars were placed at different sections to await instructions from the air.

Well, Silas spotted the stills all right, lots of them. Trouble was he got air sick every time he took the microphone to talk to the cars. Nary a 'shiner was arrested.

And Silas has kept his feet on the ground ever since.

The third and concluding installment of the story about Paul and Silas next week will give some of the economic sidelights on moonshining. More about the relentless fight the government agents carry on to wipe out moonshining and just how they are succeeding will be told. All spiced with humorous sidelights in the battle of wits between the 'shiners and the revenooers.

MIGHTY FEW 'SHINERS GET RICH

They find it hard to outsmart Paul and Silas

By Elmer Hinton

The Nashville Tennessean Magazine

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This is the last of three articles about Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson, a team of revenue agents.

The happiest man in the whole Upper Cumberland area is said to be a moonshiner.

He has four fiddles, 10 hounds, a deaf and dumb wife, and Paul and Silas have never spotted his still.



Some of the hill folds call him smart. Others, those who know, say he's "jest danged lucky."

And that's probably it. There are few moonshiners operating in the hills and hollows of that rugged section who haven't been caught at one time or another.

(Pictured: Silas Anderson tests the "dew" of a Tennessee mountain.

Paul Knowles and Silas Anderson have made good records since being stationed at Cookeville with the federal tax unit. They are revenue agents.

At least 1200 stills destroyed over a 21-year period for Silas. More than 10,000 gallons of whisky and 3,600,000 gallons of mash poured out on the ground. A batch of hangovers went down the hollow with all that.

Paul has worked by Silas' side for five years. Or the only time he hasn't been at his side was when some 'shiner Silas had "flushed" went to kicking flint rocks getting out of there and Paul had to run him down.

Not many get away because Si knows them all and he gives them a good looking over before he goes in. They know that and also know he will come and get them if they do run off.

But moonshining is a paying business if the operator can out-smart the officers.

With about \$6 worth of sugar, yeast and meal, a 'shiner can put up a barrel of mash. This, if he knows his business as most of them do, will make six or more gallons of whisky that sells for, on the average, \$5 a gallon. Several barrels can be run off in a day.

That's why the 'shiners had rather boil corn than to plow it. The difference is Paul and Silas are not looking for anybody doing nothing to corn but plow it.

The federal government doesn't make a moral issue out of the illegal manufacture of whisky. To our Uncle Samuel it is a cold impersonal matter of collecting taxes.

To the Hillman who loves his independence above everything, the government says, in substance: Live your own life, breathe the free air and manage your bad mules. But, by crackey, if there's whisky made there's going to be about \$10.50 paid on each gallon- or else.

And that big "else" makes moonshining a gamble that many have decided isn't worth the risks involved.



Some keep right on taking the gamble only to learn better the hard way. In 1952 federal agents in Tennessee seized 1238 stills. They destroyed 536,985 gallons of mash and 13,317 gallons of illegal liquor. They made 837 arrests – those who continued to gamble.

Now that was a lot of taxes for Uncle to lose, and that's why the fight goes on.

(Pictured: A 'shiner signs his fingerprint record for Paul Knowles).

Last year, through October, 890 stills had been destroyed by the government agents, 379,915 gallons of mash and 12,894 gallons of whisky destroyed. Arrests had reached 540.

That sounds like a heap of snake bit medicine. But compared to the old days, things in some of the more noted moonshining sections are as quiet as a barnyard after a hog ringing.

Little Texas in Williamson county, the Spivey hills in Macon, Bug Hollow in Sumner, the Marrowbone creek section in Cheatham, to name a few. Nowadays there just isn't much doing in those places from a corn squeezings standpoint any more.

Little Texas once could be depended on for a headline when everything else failed. That was about the most rambunctious bunch of 'shiners that ever poured meal in a tub.

They wore 10-gallon hats, took their fiddles and guitars to the still and when the revenooers jumped down in the gullies with them there was enough whooping and fist swinging to divide up and made several good-sized rodeos.

But from press reports, there must be a passel of illegal fires still burning over in the Chattanooga district.

There, as in a lot of other places, the old timers have resorted to the trick of pushing the youngsters in front.

The idea for this is that as first offenders they are usually granted probation. Too, they stand a better chance of outrunning the officers.

But U. S. District Judge Leslie R. Darr messed up things for them recently by slapping terms of from a year and a day to four years on 12 first offense whisky violators.

In the rural sections this didn't work so well, either. The young fellows don't have much stomach for getting haled into court for moonshining, even if they don't get more than a probation sentence.

In increasing numbers, these men, after their initial fling at moonshining have gone off to the city to get good paying jobs, leaving the old timers with their empty jugs and boilers.

While there has been a steady decline in moonshining during the past few years, it isn't likely the art will wither on the vine. The lure of easy money is still there and lots of folks still have a craving for the stuff from a demijohn with a corncob stopper.

Even the prospect of big fines and long prison terms doesn't kill the urge to set up a still and make moonshine whisky. The thing, whatever it is, gets in the blood. Some men think they can't do anything else.

One 'shiner who had been arrested for operating a still and convicted time after time had just served a long prison term. He hadn't seen his family during the time.

When he was released and got off the train at Cookeville, the first thing he did was to walk down the street to see another man about helping him to set up another run.

A Jackson county man went broke trying to make whisky, although Paul and Silas never did catch him. He would set up for the run and the officers would go in and tear up his outfit, although they never could find him at the still. The losses from constant raiding, however, were too much and he threw in the towel in a short time.

Two others reversed the act of the reformed moonshiner turning officer. A former sheriff in one of the counties and the man who had served as his chief deputy were arrested by Silas operating a big outfit.

Where do the revenue agents get their information about stills?

Well, that's one the moonshiners would like to know, but rarely do. It is usually from a source they never guess. Paul and Silas, of course, never tell.

And it is well that they don't, because a moonshiner never forgives an informer. To him that is treason at its double-distilled best-or worst.

He grants Paul and Silas the privilege the right to spy on him, catch him and convict him- so long as they do it fairly. That is their job, their duty, and no hard feelings.

Not so with the informer who turns him in. He is the untouchable-if known.

There are eight main sections of the federal code under which moonshiners can be prosecuted. Fines range from 1 cent to \$5,000-prison terms from one month to five years.

The offenses listed in the federal code and the penalties include:

Possession of still, one month to two years and \$100 to \$1,000 fine; carrying on business as distiller without bond, 30 days to two years and \$100 to \$5,000; working at still, one to



six months or \$100-\$1,000 or both; fermenting mash fit for distillation, six months to two years and \$500-\$5,000; possession of whisky in unstamped containers, five years or \$1,000; removing or concealing spirits on which tax has not been paid, three months to three years and \$200 to \$5,000; reuse of whisky bottles, two years or \$1,000; removal or concealment of articles with intent to defraud, three years and/or \$5,000.

And this is not the whole picture. It does not take into account the loss of time spent in prison, the burden of their families to relatives or friends (or public welfare), attorney's fees and the humiliation-if such there be among moonshiners-attached to those who violate the laws for gain.

(Pictured: COOKEVILLE, TN – This 130-gallon still boiler was only a small part of the extensive whisky-making layout which ATU agents Paul Knowles, left, and Silas Anderson smashed Friday in Jackson County. They said it was one of the biggest and most complete operations they had ever encountered. Photo by Bob Coates).

Yet in the face of these stiff penalties, despite the fact that there are neighbors and acquaintances who hold grudges and will turn them in to the officers, even with all the odds against them, some of the moonshiners won't quit.

Neither will Paul and Silas ***

*To read more about Silas Anderson, the history of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas and moonshine runner Luke Alexander Denny at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>



Pictured: Gathering at the book signing "*Midnight Moonshine Rendezvous*": Sitting at the table signing a copy of his book is Luke Alexander Denny (1917-2000), moonshine runner during the 1930s-1960s. Luke is buried in Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. You can read the book at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>. Next to Luke on the right is the author of the book Dr. Mitchell Stony Merriman (1943-1995) buried in DeKalb Memorial Gardens, Smithville, TN. Lady sitting in the chair with plaid jacket is Lula Lee (Norris) Anderson (1908-1995), wife of Federal Revenue Agent Silas E. "Sicy" Anderson Sr. (1900-1988), both buried in Crest Lawn Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. Behind Lula Lee (Norris) Anderson is her daughter Barbara Jean Anderson who md Billy Joe Headrick. Photo courtesy of Barbara Jean (Anderson) Headrick.

Silas Eastham Anderson was known as the Elliot Ness of moonshiners around TN. Silas Eastham Anderson and my father, Tim Denny are 2nd cousin's twice removed. They share the same ancestor Thomas Shirley Anderson Sr. (1779-1858). Thomas' father William Anderson and his father James Anderson were patriots of the American Revolution.

Luke Alexander Denny was known as the fastest, slickest, best dressed moonshine runner in Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas. Luke served his country during WWII in the U. S. Army. He was my father, Tim Denny's 2nd cousin. They share the same ancestor Zachariah Denny (1794-1848) whose parents were John Denny & Sarah "Sally" Winfree. Sarah's father James Winfree was a patriot of the American Revolution.

From Silas Eastham Anderson on my grandmother, Audra Camilla (Anderson) Denny's side of the family to Luke Alexander Denny on my grandfather, Timothy Virgil Denny's side of the family, we had a Federal Revenue Agent chasing a Moonshine Runner all over the county of Putnam Co., & surrounding areas in Tennessee. Years later Luke got Dr. Mitchell Stony Merriman interested in writing a book about his moonshine running days. Luke got together with all of the people he could to tell his story. By this time Silas was not chasing him anymore and they were able to laugh about the days of trials and tribulations.

Luke had a dream that someday his story would be made into a Hollywood movie. It never did. The movie I always remember that reminds me of Luke Alexander Denny's moonshine running days is called "*Thunder Road*" a 1958 film that tells the story of the death of moonshine runner Luke Doolin. Robert Mitchum wrote the story and song of the same name, put up the production money and cast himself as lead in the movie. Mitchum acknowledged he drew on the stories of veteran revenuers to make the movie, and fans speculate he based Doolin's death on a real crash. Mitchum died in 1997 without saying either way.

Sue Russell of Celina, TN was gathering information for a book, now published, called "*Cures What Ails Ya*" Memories of Moonshining in Clay County, Tennessee, compiled by Friends of the Clay County, Tennessee Library Vol. 1. Luke and Silas stories are mentioned in this book.

Summary by: Audrey J. (Denny) Lambert : *Read more at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>