

Riverton Moonshine

by Cecil Hayes

During the early 1920s, many families living in the hill country of Northwest Colbert County were in one way or another associated with the making and selling of moonshine whiskey.

This was one of the few ways these people had of making money, and making lots of it. In many instances, bootlegging offered the only choice between living in luxury and going hungry and ragged.

The fine art of whiskey making in the hill country was as old as the history of the country itself. Some of the first settlers of this region were Scotch-Irish emigrants, who came from Northern Ireland to western Pennsylvania, then eventually to the mountainous regions of the South.

They brought with them many old ways and traditions; one of which was the rare skill of making the best homebrews, scuppernon wines and corn whiskey this country has ever produced.

For countless generations, the hill folk made whiskey for their own use and to give away to their friends. The housewife used "spirits" in her cooking and as a disinfectant. Every hill dweller knows the effectiveness of alcohol against insect and snake bites.

Whiskey was considered a panacea that cured anything from a simple skin rash to a severe chest cold. And it was amazing how many home remedies and folk medicines called for liberal quantities of raw whiskey. No well-refined host would allow a visitor to depart without first offering him a "little dram" for the road.

So, for a hundred years and more, moonshine whiskey was a daily part of the hillman's life. The local law enforcement accepted it as such and gave it little attention. But this all changed dramatically in 1920. At 12:01 a.m. on July 16, 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect the next 13 years would be known as the Great Prohibition era. That was the year when Uncle Sam went on the "water wagon." Or did he?

History tells us there was never any shortage in the flow of whiskey. It just came from a different source.

Suddenly the impoverished hill people found themselves in possession of a potential gold mine; the demand for their age-old produce intensified and cash rained down like manna from the skies.

Men who'd know little more than dire poverty most of their lives, found themselves miraculously with more money than they could spend. It was commonplace to see a hill man in slouch hat and patched overalls with his pockets bulging with \$20 bills. Never having known the use of cash, he spent it indiscriminately and foolishly. He bought new automobiles, flashy clothes, and fancy foods he'd never tasted before. And still the money kept pouring in.

But the great tide of wealth was soon to ebb, for close on the heels of the whiskey buyers came an army of federal agents. Hundreds of hill people were arrested and sent to prison for terms of one to five

years. This touched off what later became known as the "moonshine wars," when the red-clay hills were stained redder still by human blood.

For 13 years an intermittent battle raged between the government agents and the fiercely independent hill people. Few other conflicts have been fought with more deadly purpose. Some of the most amazing stories to come out of these hills depict the stratagem and fox like cunning-ness used by the two warring forces. At first it became the duty of the local sheriff to hunt down and destroy the stills and to arrest the violators. But this procedure had its drawbacks. The law-man was being asked to imprison people he'd known from childhood; people who'd put him in office, in some cases his own relatives. Whenever he was forced to make a raid he usually made sure the moonshiners knew about it in advance.

By the time the Great Depression hit in 1929, the bootlegging business in Colbert County had greatly reduced. Countless still operators were now doing time in federal prisons. Others either retired or left the country to escape capture.

The names of some of the largest operators passed into local legend and are still remembered today: Jeff Brown, who owned a fine home on Wilcox Hill, drove an expensive car and wore business suits; Bob Carrithers of Hog Hollow, who for many years made a thriving business of bootlegging; and the notorious Watkins brothers who lived near Boone Creek.

But during the so-called "Lawless Decade" (1920- 1930), the hill country of Northwest Colbert County experienced a unique revolution like nothing else in its long and illustrious history. The life style here would never again be quite the same.

The hill people had had a taste of wealth and they didn't care to go back to their former state of utter destitution. So they moved away.

Within a few brief years places like Hog Hollow, which had once known as many as 20 families, was left without a single house. Dark Hollow was pretty much the same, as were countless other little coves and valleys.

Even Happy Hollow, where the picturesque and music loving black folk lived, was soon abandoned. They had depended mostly on white folk for their employment.

Today, all these places have been turned back to nature, and much of their rich and colorful history lies buried beneath a wilderness of underbrush and pine trees. But a few of the legends live on in the minds of the older citizens of the Cherokee area. And from these legends has come this story.