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## BOOTLEGGING IN NORTHEAST TEXAS

by *Bill O'Neal*

During recent years students in my history classes at Panola Junior College have interviewed forty-four former moonshiners and/or bootleggers and three law enforcement officers who had dealings with the illicit liquor trade. Most of the people interviewed operated in northeast Texas, a hotbed of moonshine activity, during the 1930s and 1940s, and a few of these individuals are still active today. The collected information preserves facts and anecdotes about a fading underground industry highly characteristic of East Texas.

Quite a variety of recipes and processes for moonshine whiskey was learned. The consensus seemed to be to mix fifty pounds of sugar with fifty pounds of steel-cut corn chops (or fifty pounds of rye, depending upon whether you wish to make corn whiskey or rye whiskey). Add about thirty-five gallons of water and let it "rot" or ferment for four to seven days. The mixture bubbles for a few days. When the bubbling ends and the "sour mash" is sky blue it is ready to be "cooked off." The sour mash is contained in a fifty-five-gallon copper-lined drum or wooden barrel called the "setting drum" or "mash barrel."

The mash is transferred from the setting drum to the "cooking drum," which is attached by half-inch copper tubing to the nearby "cooling drum." There may be from fifteen to thirty-two feet of tubing, most of which is coiled inside the cooling drum, which is filled with cold water. The tubing is coiled by wrapping it around a small tree stump.

A low fire is built beneath the cooking drum. Since alcohol is lighter than water, the fire causes the alcohol to evaporate through the copper tube in the cooling drum. The steam condenses in the cooling drum and drips through the tubing and out a spigot into a Mason jar, jug, pop bottle, or other container.

To age the whiskey, it should be placed in a charred white-oak keg. The keg, with its bung hole open, should be placed in a barrel of cold water. The water in the barrel is heated to the boiling point, but care must be taken not to boil the whiskey. When the whiskey gets hot, the keg is removed from the water barrel, re-sealed, and left to cool. After about twenty-four hours the whiskey will taste as if it has been aged for five years. One shiner would put his shine in a crock and let it stay under cool creek water for several weeks.

The same mash may be used for four or five runs, although a little extra sugar, grain, and water must be added for each additional run. Some find the first run too weak, and add it back to the setting

drum for the second run. A still can produce forty-five to sixty gallons per week. The mash must be discarded after a month, but it can be fed to hogs and it makes them drunk.

There are a number of ways to improve the shine or to accelerate the process. For example, ice bags attached around the copper tubing will hasten condensation. One moonshiner set a "thump keg" between the cooking drum and the cooling drum; thus thump keg would catch the undrinkable "puke." In cold weather moonshiners would add a cake or two of yeast for the proper result.

"Charter moonshine" is considered the best. The usual process is employed, but the whiskey is then set in charcoal oak barrels for several days, thus absorbing the charcoal color. If coloring or flavor alterations are desired, a variety of ingredients may be added: red oak chips, peaches, apples, caramel, moss syrup, raisins, rock candy, or spoiled potatoes, which "ferment nice and quick, but make an awful smell." Another way to speed up fermentation is to add lye to the mash, but this is inadvisable since it causes the customer's lips to swell greatly.

Some shiners preferred soft water to hard water in making whiskey, and never used city water because of the chlorine. Spring water was considered best, but at least one shiner would use river water in a pinch: "the customers never knew the difference," he rationalized.

In another pinch, a moonshiner used shorts in his mash. The shorts clogged his tubing, causing an explosion which nearly killed him. He did not use shorts any more. To swell the corn, the chops could be soaked in a creek or pond for three or four days. Another short cut consisted of pouring the mix into an automobile radiator and adding battery acid. This can be cooked off in one day, rather than the usual three or more. But the lead contents from the acid may cause "Jake Leg," or lead poisoning.

Jake Leg often resulted in paralysis of the legs. One bootlegger began sampling what turned out to be a bad batch as he was driving in Shelby County. Suddenly he developed an agonizing head and stomach ache, his feet began to burn, and he passed out. A Timpson constable found him and took him to a hospital where he spent ten days recovering from blood poisoning. When he returned home, his wife skulled him with a cast-iron pot, sending him back to the hospital for thirty-one stitches. A moonshiner called "Buckwheat" was notorious for his bad batches. Jake Leg from his whiskey reportedly caused a number of deaths. Sour mash whiskey can be tested by flame: if it burns a green or yellowish color it is considered to be lethal "green" whiskey; if it burns a blue flame it is considered ready and safe.

To make homebrew, or malt liquor beer, mix six pounds of sugar,

a three-pound-can of Blue Ribbon malt, two yeast cakes, and a pinch of salt in a five-gallon crock of water. Cover the crock with a cloth (to keep out the bugs) and leave it in a warm place to ferment for three to seven days, depending on the weather and the preference of the manufacturer. Then add one spoonful of sugar and bottle it. A bottle of homebrew is as strong as three bottles of purchased beer, and a number of retired moonshiners still make it for their personal use.

Prices charged for moonshine and homebrew varied greatly. One doctor prescribed moonshine whiskey, which he provided at fifty cents per half-pint. Indeed, more than one moonshiner ladled their product into their children at the first sign of illness. Prices were as low as thirty-five cents per pint to two dollars, while a quart might sell for fifty cents and a gallon for two to four dollars. Homebrew was priced at ten cents to twenty-five cents per bottle. Sales were especially good at Christmas and other holidays. Business also was good during the summers because of church revivals. As one old bootlegger pointed out, "When the preachin' ends, the drinkin' begins!"

How did it taste? One manufacturer claimed that his homebrew tasted more like champagne than beer. Another admitted that his brew did not taste very good, but his customers did not know what fine beer tasted like anyway. Another moonshiner liked to pack a gallon jug of whiskey in mud just above the water level of a creek. Within two weeks it would "become cold, sour, and thick—and it will knock you out." One shiner pointed out that if you drink pure rye whiskey until you become drunk, you will never suffer from a hangover. Another moonshiner boasted that one pint of his whiskey would get *two* persons drunk.

What motivated East Texans to become moonshiners and/or bootleggers? A large number of the men and women who were interviewed testified simply that they needed the money. One woman, with no education, not even a high school diploma, said that otherwise she would have had to engage in manual labor at minimum wage. One debt-ridden farmer who had eleven children regularly moonshined during the winter months, when his farm income was low. Several others testified that they did it to provide for their families. One man stated, "During the Depression I had a good income when other people did not," while an active bootlegger pointed out, "The best thing about this is that I don't pay taxes."

In several families the trade was handed down from father to son or uncle to nephew, and one woman was taught by her mother. One moonshiner was urged into the business by his enthusiastic wife, who wanted to learn how herself. Moonshiners and bootleggers often started young. One bootlegger was first apprehended by the law when he was thirteen and another began at fourteen.

At the age of nineteen one man lost his left hand and part of his side to a buzz saw in a mill, forcing him out of standard labor into "the job of the hills—moonshining." Similarly, a twenty-year-old was paralyzed from the waist down when a tree fell on him. Since he could no longer dance or go to clubs, he began a bootlegging operation at his own place to meet people: he feels "loved when they drink and socialize with me." A pulpwood cutter who was a bootlegger on the side was killed in an accident, causing his widow to carry on the illicit liquor trade as her family's sole source of income. During the Depression a millowner paid \$175 to provide one of his employees with a new copper still with the stipulation that he receive a free and constant supply of shine.

How did moonshiners and bootleggers make contact with their customers? Some shine and homebrew was sold forthrightly—and boldly—over the counter. One group of five shiners used a cafe as their main point of distribution, but they had to pay the cafe owner forty percent of their income while dividing the other sixty percent among themselves. Other shiners permitted customers to come to their houses. Moonshine whiskey also could be picked up at the still by casual passersby. One student interviewed his grandparents, who lived in Shelby County during the Depression. When her grandfather went squirrel hunting in the woods, he passed three or four moonshine rigs, and he would take a sample at each one. Upon hearing this his wife exclaimed, "No wonder you never brought home any squirrels!"

A surprising number of moonshiners and bootleggers who were interviewed were never apprehended by the law, despite careers of long duration. How did they elude capture?

"I was damn careful about who I told that I made it," explained one shiner who was captured just once and then spent only forty minutes in jail. Another man who was never caught refused to sell to anyone he did not know. New customers had to be vouched for by old reliables.

A veteran moonshiner cautioned that during the Depression one had to be extremely careful about buying copper pipe since such purchases aroused suspicion. Other shiners would rig string all around their stills. If the string were broken, they would send their wives to "pick berries"—and to see if lawmen were lurking nearby. Other shiners had a network of relatives and friends who kept a watch for law officers. One man kept a V-shaped plow point hanging in a tree in his back yard; if someone suspicious arrived his family would bang on the plow point with a hammer.

More than one moonshiner worked at night so that the smoke

could not be seen. One preferred nights when the moon was out because he regarded the use of lanterns as dangerous. Several veterans buried their supply of shine when lawmen were in the area, and there was one well-known cache in Shelby County known as the "Big Ditch." One woman, who was arrested twice, when under surveillance would put her liquor in a nearby ditch or in a friend's house.

Shiners sometimes located their stills in bottomland where their cows grazed. They would take towsacks of grain into the bottom, ostensibly to feed the cows, but actually to make their mash. One moonshiner built an enormous brush pile to conceal his still. If lawmen ever had discovered the location he planned to start a fire and run. He felt that the resulting explosion would melt the copper and destroy other evidence, but this theory was never put to the test. Stills often were moved from time to time as a precaution. One man hid his still in an underground gourd cellar of an abandoned farmhouse behind his shack, while another shiner operated in a secret room beneath his roof.

After World War II one young man opened a still in Carthage in a vacant two-story house behind a motor company. A camouflaged door near the fireplace opened onto a ladder which led to a concealed room in the attic where the still was built. It took three years for the Panola County sheriff to discover and destroy the still. The shiner resourcefully moved to the country, set up a three-hundred-gallon still, and employed eleven Mexicans to help him cook and transport 1,000 gallons per week, mostly to Oklahoma. A pickup load of barrels of whiskey was disguised with fence posts on top. This arrangement was discovered by the law after seven years, and then he set up a smaller still in another part of the county. He was caught after four years and decided to quit.

One East Texas bootlegger could always tell when someone was hauling a load of brew because the car would set down so low, a tell-tale trait for law officers. Another revealing tip was a path leading from a backwoods house to a still, which is why many moonshiners would locate their stills far from home. One moonshiner testified that the roads were better leading to their stills than to their houses.

One group of bootleggers carried a hammer or wrench to break the jugs and destroy the evidence, should the law approach. A couple, who needed to replenish their supplies, drove to Marshall with a few small bottles of shine to sell to raise the necessary money. The Harrison County sheriff saw them and chased them. The wife drove and the husband gulped down all of the evidence. They turned a bend and he discarded the bottles. The sheriff finally stopped them but there was no evidence, although the man was quite drunk. The sheriff, a spoilsport, gave the woman a speeding ticket.

Another man claimed that he could conceal a quart jar of shine in the top of his boot, while a woman would clamp a pint of bootleg whiskey between her legs under her dress. A Harrison County woman could perform this same feat when officers searched her house—and she had mastered the art of walking around with the whiskey clamped between her thighs. When the sheriff of Shelby County came to the door of a woman bootlegger with a search warrant, she delayed him while emptying all of her shine and homebrew into her bathtub. She added half a bottle of Ivory dishwashing soap, then admitted the sheriff to her house. She explained that he had gotten her out of a bubble bath, and he never thought to check the bubbly contents of the tub during his search.

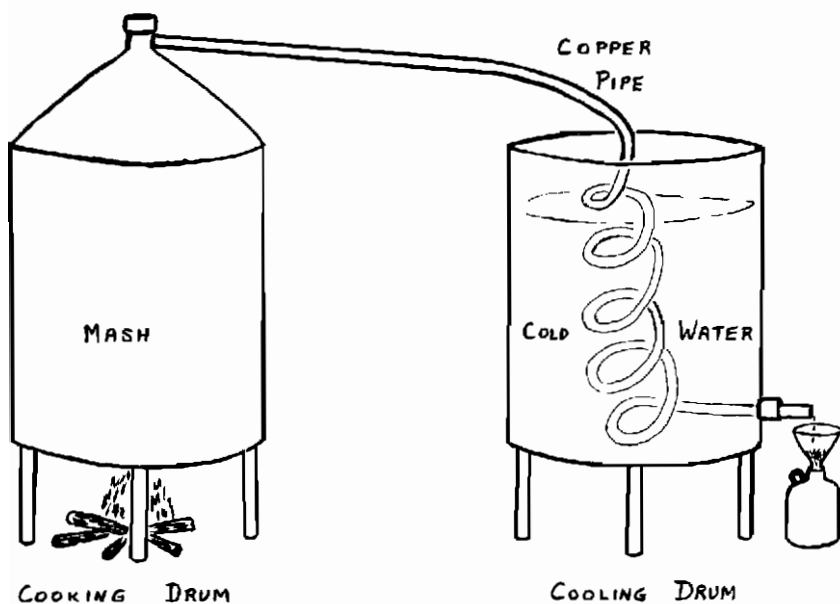
During the Depression a Shelby County farmer regularly loaded his shine onto a wagon beneath his cotton when he went to Center to the gin. Then he would sell it while he was in town. One bootlegger was an insurance salesman and Sunday School teacher who was hardly the type the law would suspect. Once a week he would put his insurance papers in the front seat of his 1941 Dodge and drive to Longview. He would haul eight cases of white lightning in his trunk, twelve pints to the case. A current bootlegger runs a game center, which provides a front for his liquor sales. He stated that the success of such an operation depends upon one's friendship with the sheriff.

The sheriff of San Augustine County during the Depression was tolerant of moonshiners because he felt it was the only way for them to make money. One Harrison County moonshiner of the Depression era named two sheriffs and two deputies who would give a warning before launching a raid. But when there was a change of county government this same man was arrested and fined \$1,000. A San Augustine moonshiner claimed that during the Depression the Shelby County sheriff would drive over, load up with whiskey, and take it home to sell. At one point during the 1940s the Shelby County sheriff evidently was greatly underpaid, because bootlegger payoffs reportedly provided a major source of his income—as well as a safety measure for bootleggers. Indeed, new bootleggers were arrested by the cooperative sheriff, thus eliminating interlopers. Moonshiners felt that some officers would “shoot up” or “ax up” a still if they were not cut in on the proceeds. In any event law enforcement of liquor laws was made difficult by the fact that there were only two federal agents to cover East Texas, and their office was in Tyler. Officers could find stills most readily from airplanes when such resources were available.

One winter morning before dawn Panola County lawmen staked out at a still and apprehended the moonshiner sampling his wares from a quart bottle. The shiner sprinted toward his house with the officers

in pursuit. The shiner dashed into his kitchen and threw the quart of whiskey into the stove and it exploded instantly. The back wall collapsed and part of the stove flew through the roof. The shiner was knocked down and immediately handcuffed. His three small children darted out of the house, screaming in fright. They all jumped into a barrel, which tipped over and rolled down a hill. The barrel hit a tree, spilling the children and completing the Keystone Kops scenario.

Because of pressure from law officers, or because of a declining market for their product, most moonshiners and bootleggers dropped out of the trade. But a retired moonshiner, when asked if he thought he could still make a good batch, snapped, "Hell, yeah, I know I can." And a diehard female bootlegger announced, "I'm not going to stop unless God says otherwise." And here and there in the brushy bottomlands of East Texas a venerable industry is carried on by individualistic practitioners whose customers prefer "tea" and "white lightnin'" to anything that can be purchased over a counter.





## INTERVIEWS

A number of moonshiners and bootleggers, especially those who are still active or who have ceased operations in recent years, were understandably reluctant to reveal their names. Eight insisted upon anonymity, while several others chose to give their professional sobriquets—as one moonshiner put it, his “pen name.”

- Joe Adams (7-26-81), by Nick Conner  
 Corbett Akins (8-11-81), by Dedie Patterson  
 Anonymous (4-2-81), by Lisa Cato  
 Anonymous (4-13-81), by Lisa Cato  
 Anonymous (8-11-81), by Darla Hopkins  
 Anonymous (4-2-81), by Tamara Kennedy  
 Anonymous (11-12-80), by Annette Pearson  
 Anonymous (4-7-81), by David Pittard  
 Anonymous (4-13-81), by David Pittard  
 Anonymous (8-2-81), by Brad Williams  
 Race Brown (7-2-81), by Dedie Patterson  
 Lou Calaway (8-11-81), by Susan Bramblett  
 Tom Dickerson (4-6-81), by Robin LeGrone  
 Jane Doe (6-1-81), by Leola Williams  
 John Doe (6-1-81), by Leola Williams  
 Clarence Fountain (11-30-80), by Joey Bushiey  
 Edna Mae Golden (8-11-81), by Dedie Patterson  
 A. H. Grayson (8-11-81), by Mark Odum  
 William Edward Griffin (8-3-80), by Rhonda Griffin  
 Jack Hordorn (5-1-80), by Denita Cooks  
 Arty Johnson (11-12-80), by Len Moore  
 Booker Johnson (8-10-81), by Andrea Reynolds  
 Mrs. Ray Kimbro (4-28-77), by Tommie Greer  
 Bernice Lawless (10-25-80), by Barbara Golden  
 Jane Lister (10-10-80), by Sharon Lister  
 Perry Martindale (8-1-80), by Kirk Wiebold  
 B. P. McClelland (11-22-80), by Kinnie Adams  
 Monk (8-2-81), by Gene Lawhorn  
 Mr. Blackjack (5-3-81), by Ronald Watkins  
 Mr. Sam (5-2-81), by Ronald Watkins  
 Robert Nero (6-12-81), by Greg Cherry  
 George Tiller (7-2-81), by Dedie Patterson  
 Elzie Pilot (4-10-80), by David Fairchild  
 Jerry Rhode (4-16-81), by Mark Collins  
 Wayne Ritter (8-4-80), by Karen Edge  
 Ellis Sholar (8-6-80), by Judy Norris  
 Johnnie Spradley (4-24-81), by Glenn Hays  
 Levi Wagstaff (8-10-81), by Liz Perrett  
 Hoyet Walker (8-10-81), by David Duncan  
 Asa Watts (10-8-80), by Ben Fiedler  
 Donnie White and Amos Polley (3-25-81), by Sherri Polley  
 C. D. Williams (11-3-80), by Len Moore  
 John Williams (8-11-80), by Belinda Woolfolk  
 Cleo Alton Wise (11-9-80), by Michael McCulfeey