

Moonshining in the Southern Appalachian Mountains

Don & Diane Wells

“Old timers around here call that Moonshine Mountain”, the man said when he learned where we lived. From its early pioneer history through the 1970s, the area between Oglethorpe Mountain and Burnt Mountain and beyond in the Southern Appalachians was home to moonshining operations. During 1956-1957 a parade of souped up cars, transporting 35,000 gallons of moonshine, made their way from the Dawson, Pickens, Lumpkin, and Gilmer County mountain area to the Atlanta market every week!

The Pioneer Days

Many Scotch-Irish immigrants moved to the Southern Appalachian Mountains after the Indian Removal in 1838. They came from North and South Carolina, Tennessee and elsewhere to escape government interference with their lives and to find new opportunities. Some came because gold had been discovered in Georgia. Some were farmers who had bought Land Lottery Land Lots from the GA lottery owners while others simply moved onto the land and settled down.

These Scotch-Irish immigrants banded together in small communities oftentimes far from the general population areas. They built log homes near streams and began to scratch out a living from the very rugged terrain. In 1840, corn liquor, sold for \$0.35 a gallon and there were no restrictions on how much could be made. The farmers began to count on that added income. After the Civil War, the government levied a tax on whiskey to help pay the war debt. This did not sit well with the very independent Scotch-Irish. Instead of paying the tax, they simply moved their moonshine making operations into the depths of the almost inaccessible mountain areas. The war between the “moon-shiners” and the “revenuers” began. It escalated as the demand for untaxed (cheaper) whiskey grew.

The High Volume Moonshine Days

Following WWII, the Atlanta area began to grow rapidly. With that growth the demand for cheap whiskey skyrocketed. In fact, Atlanta became the moonshine consumption capitol of the US. With a good profit to be made, the law of supply and demand really kicked in. As a result, bootlegging was one of the most profitable businesses around from the 1940’s through the 1970’s. A two to three hundred percent profit was not uncommon. The wholesalers and retailers did well also. With plenty of good water and relatively safe places for stills, the business of making whiskey prospered.

About one of the leading “businessmen” in our area, J.R. Turner, Charles Weems in his book, *A Breed Apart*, said: “J. R. didn't make enemies. He was quick to help anyone in the community around Dawsonville and could be counted on to contribute generously to every charitable cause. He wore nice clothes and an expensive fedora. He could have been the mayor or a legitimate businessman. He was intelligent, nice-looking and an excellent manager of men and details. The

only problem was J. R. was the biggest moonshiner in the state, and one of the largest in the nation.”

By the 1950's, White Lightning made from sugar was more economical than that made from corn. A 100-pound bag of sugar sold for \$9 to \$12 a bag and would make about 10-12 gallons of illegal whiskey. The whiskey sold for around \$5.00 a gallon. Even with all the expenses of setting up the still, costs of other ingredients and transportation to market, the moonshiner made money. Many of the large stills could produce over 1,000 gallons of moonshine a day, seven days a week. That was a lot of profit for those willing to operate a risky, illegal business.

The plethora of springs and streams in the Southern Appalachian Mts. flow down from the mountain ridges into the coves. In these cove areas, moonshine stills could be found on almost every stream. While exploring the mountain trails, we have discovered the remains of many of these stills. Most of the large working parts have been destroyed and hauled away. But one can still find the metal rings of the 220 gallon hogshead mash barrels and even some of the large metal containers used for cooking the mash. Old radiators used to cool the alcohol steam can also be seen at some locations. Some of the larger stills were located on the periphery of the wilderness area in chicken houses, barns, farmhouse basements and other places where the still could be hidden.

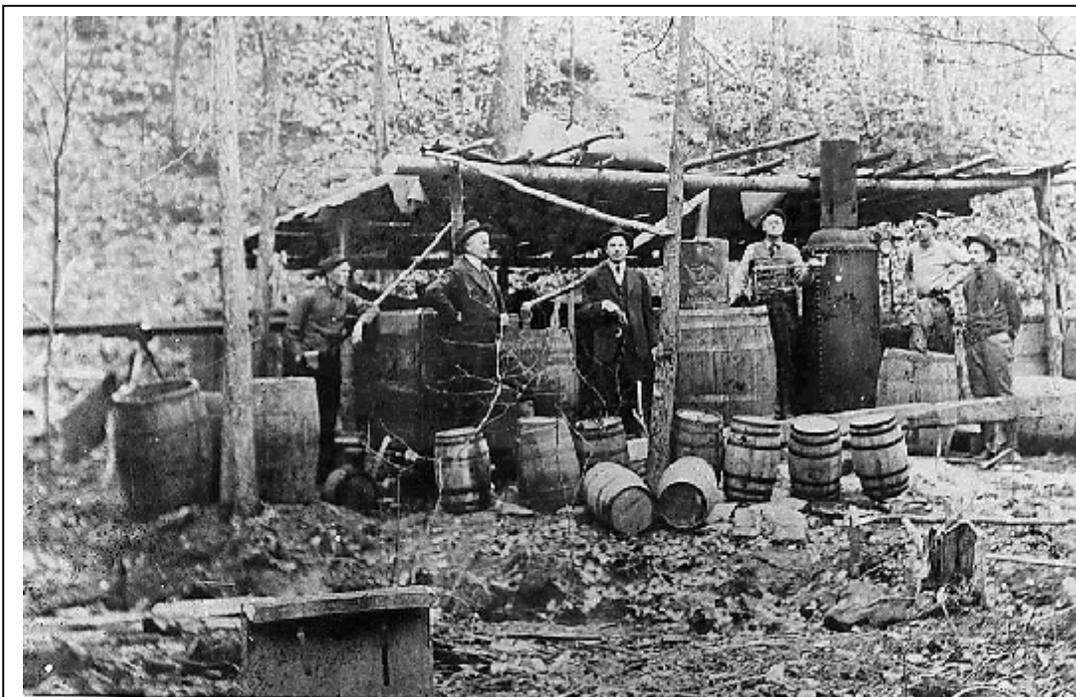
The moonshine would be picked up from the still or a stash location and brought to the city for sale to the wholesalers. “Trippers” would haul 150 to 200 gallons of moonshine to Atlanta almost every day. The movie Thunder Road with Robert Mitchum brought to light the story of moonshining in the Appalachian Mountains. Highway 9 from Dawsonville to Atlanta was one of the Thunder Roads leading from Pickens, Dawson and Gilmer Counties to Atlanta.

When they were not hauling moonshine, “Trippers” would often gather at dirt tracks and race in order to prove who had the fastest car. These races eventually evolved into NASCAR. Some famous “Trippers” from Dawson and Pickens County included Lloyd Seay, Ben Hall, Crash Waller, Fred Goswick and L.D. Legs Law.

Two of the well-known ATF agents in the Southern Appalachian Mountain area were Charlie Weems who worked out of Atlanta and Duff Floyd who was assigned to Pickens County. By the late 1970's, they had closed down most of the illegal moonshining business. However, hardly a year goes without someone being arrested for making “shine” in these Southern Appalachian Mountains.

The history of North Georgia moonshine is celebrated every year at the “Moonshine Festival” in Dawsonville. It is scheduled to be held this year on 22-24 October, 2010.

Suggested books about history of moonshining in the Southern Appalachian Mountains are [A Breed Apart by Charles Weems](#) and [Mountain Spirits by Joesph Earl Dabney](#)



Revenuers Discover Moonshine Still in Mountain Area