

Moonshine Shelter

District Ranger Allen Swayne issued a citation to a man for setting an illegal fire on the Cherokee National Forest. He took the man before the U.S. Magistrate in Cleveland, Tennessee. The man was fined \$25. Allen never mentioned that the fire was under the pot of a moon shine still. That's pretty much the way things were in the late 40's to early 60's. Don't mess with the moon shiners. They might set fires.

I was informed of this unofficial policy by Fire Control Officer Gotto Patierno shortly after my arrival on the Williamsburg District of the Cumberland National Forest. I was the new Junior Forester. My first work was to be the marking foreman of a timber marking crew made up of the Districts Lookout Tower men. We were marking trees for sale on an area called the Gulf. About a week after we started we heard something running through the leaves in front of us. A short distance ahead, in a drainage, was a moonshine still with fire under the pot. It had been in operation a few minutes earlier. While my crew sampled the still beer, I removed my Kodak Pony 135 camera from my army field jacket pocket and took a picture.



My education on the finer points of the art of moonshining began on this day. Francis Ball, one of the crew, had been a moonshiner during his younger days. Hagon Barnett and Prince Meadows, the other two members of the crew, were also knowledgeable on the subject. Francis had served time in the McCreary County jail for moonshining. He said he was out hunting for sheep when he was arrested. He said he was innocent at the time of arrest but had been guilty so many times before that he didn't contest the case. I heard many tales of moonshining around the lunch fire in the winter of 58. These guys taught this young Forester how to recognize a still site. I believe I would recognize one if I saw it today. That was the first and last time that I encountered an operating still in the woods. I did come close one time.

I was the Forester on the London District of the Cumberland National Forest. We were having fire weather and I was the leader of a fire crew on standby. We were waiting at the Baldrock Tower for a fire. I was up in the tower with Lookout Dispatcher, Kermit Hale, when a smoke popped up a couple of miles from the tower. The fire was definitely on the Forest. I headed out with the fire crew. We had driven as far as we could go on an old log road and had started to walk. Directly Kermit came on the radio and said, "John, get out of there!" He had excitement in his voice. We returned to the tower. Kermit explained, "Someone had just started a fire under the pot of a still. I knew what it was when the smoke went down." An experienced Tower man can recognize a still fire if he watches it for a while.

I was on the Somerset District of the Cumberland National Forest in 1963 when we got a memo for all Districts from the Forest Supervisor about stills. Revenue officers found a still that was marked with yellow Forest Service tree marking paint. It seems that a marking crew on one of the other Districts ran on to a still and marked the pot with an X. Obviously the Forest Service wasn't cooperating with the Internal Revenue Service. The Forest Supervisor was not happy and reminded everyone that the official policy was that all Forest Service employees would cooperate. So much for the unofficial policy.

A friend and one of my college class mates, Tom Frazier, was District Ranger on the Williamsburg District in 1964. A fire escaped from a moonshine still down the Devil Creek Road. Tom called in the Revenue Officers. I visited Hagon Barnett, one of my earlier teachers, not long after the still fire. Hagon said, gasp, "Tom carried the still out of the woods and right through the Young's Creek Community in his green Forest Service truck." The Young's Creek Community is likely where the prior owner of the still lived. The new official policy was in effect for all to see.

In the 1980's I became friends with Bert Tollison, a retired Revenuer who had worked out of Hot Springs for a number of years. Bert had numerous tales of the moonshiners that he caught. One of his favorite moonshiner hunting grounds was the area north of Jessieville. Bert said the moonshiners that he knew were honorable men, just trying to make a living for their

family. He arrested many and never took them to jail. He told them when they should meet him at the office of the U. S. Magistrate. They were always there for their trial. I have a fire ax in my garage that Bert used to chop up the stills that he found.

One day in the early 1990's there was several of us sitting around eating lunch discussing things of importance. The subject of moonshining came up. The discussion led to still site locations. Dillard Graves said moonshine was made on both Blakely Creek and Merriott Branch. Also it had been made east of Hwy 7 on tributaries of Middle Fork. Everyone knew that there were still sites on the head waters of Trace Creek just north of the Forest Service Road 11. I had seen three on that creek. One had a still that had been chopped up by my friend, Bert Tollison. Right in the middle of all of this past moonshining activity, on a ridge top, along side of the Ouachita Trail, was a brand new unnamed Trail Shelter.

By John Archer. Thought to have been written 2011.