

***“Corn from a jar” producers tried to stay solvent***  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* column on May 13, 2013)

Carolyn Krause brings us an excellent report on a recent presentation she attended. She shares the views of a historian on illegal moonshine in East Tennessee and North Carolina. Sometimes the facts are more unusual than the legends.

Before we enjoy Carolyn’s review let me ask for help. The Oak Ridge Public Library, which operates the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History, is looking for volunteers to staff ***Ask Me, I was There!*** at the upcoming Secret City Festival.

Did you play any kind of a role in the Manhattan Project? This could be a housewife living in one of the trailers, flat tops, "alphabet soup" cements houses, or other living areas, as a guard on one of the seven portals, a super scientist or technician working on the design of a reactor or related component, an enlisted person serving in the wartime arena, or any other role. If so, there will be an opportunity for you to tell your story during the upcoming Secret City Festival on June 21 – 22, 2013.

The schedule will be flexible but probably in two-hour time commitments from 10 AM to 4 PM on both Friday and Saturday. Contact the Oak Ridge Public Library if you desire to tell your story.

Now learn what Carolyn brings us from the recent presentation by Dan Pierce, “Corn from a Jar.”  
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The stereotype of illegal moonshiners in the Great Smoky Mountains is inaccurate. They were not lazy, stupid, violent people trying to get rich making white whiskey from corn or sugar by the light of the moon. Instead they were hard-working, smart, peace-loving people trying to supplement their income to stay solvent.

So said Historian Dan Pierce during an April 24, 2013, lecture presented by Roane State Community College’s Arts and Lectures Committee on the Oak Ridge campus. Pierce spoke about his findings published in his new book “Corn from a Jar: Moonshining in the Great Smoky Mountains,” due out in August.

Distilling whiskey by fermenting corn sugar in an illegal copper pot still easily hidden in the mountains takes special skill, and hauling the product to market while being chased by federal agents is hard work, Pierce said.

The illegal moonshiners had a code: Don’t shoot unless you are shot at first. Once you’re caught, don’t resist arrest. Don’t tell federal agents about any neighbors that you know are making illegal moonshine.

Pierce obtained some of his information by interviewing Junior Johnson, who told him, “Liquor is for selling, not for drinking.”

Born in western North Carolina, Junior was the son of Robert Glenn Johnson, Sr., a lifelong bootlegger (originally meaning “a smuggler who conceals a bottle of liquor in his boot”). His father spent 20 years in prison.

Federal agents frequently raided the Johnson house. Junior spent one year in prison in Ohio for having an illegal still. But he was never caught during his many years of transporting bootleg liquor in a car at high speed.

In 1955 Junior Johnson became a NASCAR driver. He won the 1960 Daytona 500 and claimed 50 victories as a driver when he retired in 1966.

In the 1930s and 40s, stock cars used to haul liquor at night in gallon jugs, tin cans and tanks became race cars on Sundays. The best early NASCAR drivers were bootleggers from north

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Georgia, North Carolina and southern Virginia. Excessive cash from illegal liquor sales financed construction of racetracks.

Pierce, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, wrote his dissertation on the Smokies and a comprehensive history of NASCAR. His work has been published in The New York Times, and he has appeared on National Public Radio and the History Channel.

Starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the southern Appalachians, Pierce said, building stills and making whiskey (“water of life”) were part of the Celtic culture of settlers from England, Ireland and Scotland. Whiskey was used with herbs as medicine. Also, transportation of whiskey was an easier way to get corn to market.

Most important, selling corn whiskey was crucial to land-owning farmers in a semi-subsistence economy in the mountains. They needed the extra cash to pay property taxes and make mortgage payments.

The market for illegal moonshine persisted. One reason was the permanent federal excise tax on hard liquor that Congress levied in 1862. The federal government began cracking down on large distilleries in Tennessee and other states who failed to pay the tax. Another was the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century temperance movement, embraced by the Methodists and later the Baptists, who argued that drinking hard liquor is a sin.

The Moonshine Wars were fought from 1875 to 1883. Blockade runners in Blount County (and notably, outlaw-folk hero Lewis Redmond of Brevard, N.C.) skirted blockades to get to market their products made in small stills hidden in the mountains. In the 1890s the federal government stamped out big still operators.

After industrialization, when people in the Southern Appalachians took jobs with the railroads, lumber camps and cotton mills, the market for illegal moonshine increased. People had more money and drinking whiskey was part of their tradition.

In 1907 drinking alcoholic beverages was outlawed in East Tennessee, except for Chattanooga and LaFollette. In 1909 North Carolina was the first state to prohibit alcoholic beverages. In 1910 Gov. Ben Hooper, leader of the “dries” in Tennessee and a staunch Baptist, banned transportation of liquor and importation of more than a gallon of moonshine into the state.

Pierce interviewed Glen Cardwell, who lived in the Greenbrier, N.C. part of the Smokies. As a boy he found a still on the property owned by his father, a deacon in a Baptist church.

When he revealed his discovery, his father said, “Don’t tell anybody. We need to make moonshine to tide us over during economic hard times.” Cardwell learned his father’s best customer was the local sheriff.

Making whiskey illegally was not practical in northern Appalachia. The people there lacked the Baptist-Methodist evangelist tradition that enabled Prohibition to persist in the South from 1907 to the 1960s, boosting demand for illegal moonshine.

Prohibition in the United States was a national ban on the sale, production and transportation of alcohol that lasted from 1920 to 1933 when the Twenty-first Amendment to the Constitution repealed the Eighteenth Amendment. Ike Costner of Cocke County sold illegal moonshine then until he was imprisoned. But many counties in the South stayed “dry” for decades after Prohibition.

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In the 1960s illegal moonshining declined because people could earn better wages by taking government and industrial jobs and by growing tomatoes, beans and other vegetables for the Stokley and Bush Brothers canning companies. As the price of sugar increased and liquor became legal in more and more counties, it became more profitable to grow marijuana and make meth in the mountains.

Moonshine is staging a comeback, but it’s legal now, Pierce said. By the mid-2000s North Carolina and Tennessee changed their laws, allowing small distilleries to produce and sell legal moonshine liquor. Popcorn Sutton of Cocke County, who can still be seen on the History Channel, may have ushered in the revival. “Moonshiners” is a docudrama TV series on the Discovery Channel.

Ole Smoky Distillery of Gatlinburg sells Ole Smoky Tennessee Moonshine nationally, and Troy & Sons Distillers of Asheville markets “original American moonshine.” The distillery uses an heirloom North Carolina corn of the 1840s to make a “perfect white whiskey, smooth as silk with vanilla oak overtones.”

These products can be ordered over the Internet. What is made in the mountains doesn’t necessarily stay in the mountains.

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Thanks Carolyn for yet another excellent article.



Dan Pierce, author of *Corn from a Jar: Moonshining in the Great Smoky Mountains*, who gave a talk on his new book, to be published in August, 2013