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# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## The Moonshine War of 1883

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C.W. Parker of Persimmon beside his still, 1930s.



Sheriff Luther Rickman and Deputy Harley McCall with a confiscated still, circa 1940.

- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment

There is a story that's been around these mountains for years about a Moonshine War. To hear or read about it now, it seems to contain a good portion of legend. However, several different people have documented the events, and all their accounts are very nearly the same.

Highlands, North Carolina was established in 1875 and settled by Northerners, mostly from Massachusetts. They were temperate folk and opposed to the constant flow of moonshine that arrived in their community from Georgia. Lawmen from Georgia seemed to be unable to stop the whiskey traffic. The situation resulted in much hostility between Highlands and Moccasin Township in Rabun County, currently the Satolah area. Finally the citizens of Highlands asked the Federal government to intervene.

In 1883, a man named Henson was arrested with a load of whiskey by Federal agents and taken to Highlands. He was confined in a room in the Smith Hotel, since there was no jail in Highlands. One of Henson's friends rode into Highlands to rescue him, but he succeeded only in getting arrested himself. When the moonshiners of Moccasin heard of these events, they sent a written declaration of war to the residents of Highlands.

Eighteen men from Moccasin arrived in Highlands to free the prisoners. The townspeople of Highlands barricaded themselves behind the Smith Hotel and the Georgia men camped out behind a building across the street. For three days and nights these opposing forces shot at every head that moved behind either building. Finally Tom Ford from North



Carolina climbed to the roof of the Smith Hotel and with his rifle shot and killed a Georgia man named Ramey. The Georgia men withdrew and returned to Rabun County, but they left a letter declaring they would return with reinforcements after burying their fallen comrade.

Highlands sent runners to warn the adjoining communities and ask for help. Every man old enough to use a gun rushed to Highlands to defend the town. After three days the men from Moccasin did not return to Highlands to renew the assault, instead they sent a messenger with a letter. The letter stated that they knew that Highlands had to get all of their food and supplies from Walhalla, South Carolina, and the only road from Highlands to Walhalla passed through Moccasin Township. The letter declared they would kill any man from Highlands who attempted to pass over the Georgia road.

At first no one would attempt the trip to Walhalla, no matter how badly Highlands needed the supplies. Finally, Joel Lovin, an old

man who made his living as a teamster, hitched up his team and started for Walhalla. The real leaders of the Georgia moonshiners were the four Billingsley brothers. They really believed they had a right to make and sell liquor; the law did not apply to them. When Mr. Lovin reached the vicinity where the Billingsleys lived, they were riding to meet him with their rifles in their hands.

Mr. Lovin had no doubt the threat was real. He was not a religious man, but he decided it was a good time to pray. Holding the reins in one hand, he reached for his rifle with the other and prayed, "Oh Lord, if you won't help me, don't help the Billingsleys." The Billingsley boys passed by, never raising their eyes to the old man, and Lovin continued on to Walhalla unharmed. The standoff between Highlands and Moccasin ended. The wagons rolled again to deliver supplies to Highlands, and the whiskey traffic stopped. Joel Lovin said he never knew if it was his prayer or his rifle that saved him from the Billingsley brothers.

# Moonshine: A Way of Life

The term, “moonshine”, has its roots in England a few hundred years ago, referring to night work often under the light of the moon. The Scots-Irish heritage of many frontiersmen who settled the Appalachians included the knowledge of whiskey making and the hatred of government taxes on homemade brew.



Since the nineteenth century, governments have realized a tremendous loss of revenue from the illicit manufacture of non-taxed spirits. Georgia, particularly the mountainous regions where stills were easier to hide, has always been a leader in moonshine production. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported in 1967 that there were an estimated 750 stills in Georgia with a capacity of 750,000 gallons.

In many cases in Rabun County, the moonshiners were simply trying to feed their families in hard times. As someone told *Foxfire* in an early 1970s interview, “I felt like I was making an honest dollar, and if it hadn’t a been for that stuff, we’d a had an empty table around here.”

Luther Rickman, who was Rabun County sheriff from 1917-1940, including the Prohibition Era, was the first sheriff to raid a Rabun County still. In that era, sheriffs were paid \$10 for breaking up a still and an extra \$40 to \$60 for catching the operator. They generally did not, however, go out on raids unless informers turned in a moonshine operation. Sometimes tipsters would leave anonymous notes, and often those who reported the stills were wives or disgruntled neighbors or friends of the moonshiner.

Moonshine stills were often hidden by building a log shed over them covered with branches, locating them in a ravine under a

fallen tree, or digging an underground room big enough to stand in. If revenue agents did not locate and break up the operation early in the process, the white liquor still had to be transported to customers, a treacherous part of the business. Haulers would deliver it to bootleggers who watered it down, put it in jars, and sold it to customers, who sometimes resold the spirits to their customers.

The haulers, or “runners” as they were called, were known for fast cars and dangerous chases with lawmen. The load was often camouflaged by covering it with apples, corn or cabbage. Some cars had the back seats removed and special suspension and shocks to carry up to 12 cases of the “white lightning”.

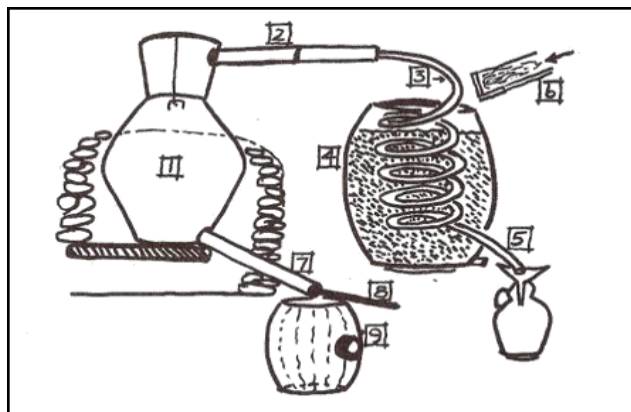
The heyday of moonshining in Rabun County was the decades from 1930 through 1960. By the late 1950s, law enforcement found an effective tool for stopping liquor manufacturing by requiring merchants to report large sales of sugar or jars. One Clayton grocer



reported that prior to this requirement, two-thirds of his business was the sale of sugar and jars. Former Sheriff Don Page said the last big raid on stills in Rabun County occurred in the early 1990s, although some moonshiners were arrested in 2006.

Today there are much easier ways to make a living in Rabun County. One law enforcement officer believes “it is unlikely the whiskey trade will ever really die out.” Sheriff Don Page suggested that moonshine making was indeed a way of life for decades. “There ain’t a family around here...that didn’t dabble in

liquor one time or another,” Page said. What was once a craft that pride was taken in has now become almost a lost art. It remains, however, an important part of Rabun County history.



**A Still's Working Parts, Simplified**  
(Diagram from *Foxfire Book #1*)

- 1. The Still** – the furnace, bedrock platform, fire-box and still cap
- 2. The Cap Arm** – This copper pipe (often four inches in diameter) conveys the steam from the still to the copper worm.
- 3. The Worm** – This pipe is about ¾ of an inch to an inch in diameter, and is coiled tightly to get maximum length of pipe into minimum space. The steam condenses into liquid in the worm. Often the worm is fixed inside a water tank of some sort—in this case a 50 gallon barrel.
- 4. A 50 Gallon Barrel** – through which cold water is constantly circulated.
- 5. The End of the Worm** – The alcohol which flows out here is usually strained through hickory coals.
- 6. The Pipe, or Trough** from the cold water source, usually a mountain stream.
- 7. The Slop Arm** – The slop (waste) is drained out this copper pipe (which passes directly through the furnace wall) after each run.
- 8. The Plug Stick** – At the end of each run, the plug stick is pushed in, thus releasing the slop which flows through the tilted slop arm into a bucket.
- 9. The Container** for the slop.



# Biz Quiz

Match the Rabun business with its historic description.

1. Gennett Lumber Company
  2. York House
  3. Aid Corporation
  4. Hanes
  5. Lake Rabun Hotel
  6. Clayburne Manufacturing
  7. Dillard House
  8. Tallulah Falls Spray
  9. Belk-Gallant
  10. LaPrade's
  11. Reeves
  12. Rabun Land and Water
  13. Derrick's Standard Oil
  14. Ritter Lumber Company
  15. Clayton Light and Waterworks
  16. Clayton Cafe
- A. This company opened in Mountain City in 1950 and employed more than 100 by 1955.
  - B. Airplane parts manufacturing began here in 1941, replacing a dogwood mill.
  - C. Hiram Gibson deeded 40 of his 1,000 acres near the Little Tennessee River to his granddaughter, Mollie, in 1873. She and her Civil War veteran husband started a boarding house here in 1896, eventually catering to travelers on the Tallulah Falls Railroad.



The Tallulah Falls Railroad passes Ritter's Sawmill in Mountain City, circa 1955.

- D. In March of 1953, Rabun's first textile manufacturer opened, eventually employing 400 persons to produce shirts.
- E. Renowned photographer and Tallulah Falls native, Walter Hunnicutt, began this newspaper in 1896, the same year the *Clayton Tribune* was founded.
- F. This manufacturing plant was converted from Sangamo-Weston to yarn producing in 1988.
- G. This company began logging along the Chattooga River in 1902 and sold thousands of acres to the brand new United States Forest Service in 1911.
- H. This boarding house site was originally called Oak Lawn, but the current name was inherited from relatives.
- I. Beginning in 1929, this company supplied hydroelectric power to the city of Dillard and Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School. The power plant was located at Estatoah Falls.
- J. Tom Roane operated a hydroelectric plant on Stekoa Creek near Clayton, supplying electricity to more than 50 homes and businesses in Clayton beginning in 1908.

- K. Augustus Andreea financed the building of this business in 1922 and was responsible for its unique architecture. His family operated the business for decades.
- L. Built as a fishing camp in 1925, this business housed and fed workers on the Lake Burton hydroelectric plant in its early years.
- M. Former professional baseball-playing brothers, along with their father, opened this business on the east side of North Main Street in 1926.
- N. Frank Bleckley's department store was purchased by this chain in 1945. It became Clayton's first air-conditioned business in 1952. It closed its doors in 1979.
- O. This family enterprise began in 1928 when it expanded from Clarkesville. The lumber part of the business was begun in the 1930s.
- P. This restaurant began operation in 1931, and in the 1940s also served as a Trailways bus station.



Claude, John, and Fred Derrick stand in front of their Standard Oil Company on North Main Street, circa 1925.



The brick building on the Derrick block in Clayton, circa 1915, which would later hold the family business that operates in the same location today.

Answers: 1-G, 2-C, 3-B, 4-F, 5-K, 6-D, 7-H, 8-E, 9-N, 10-L, 11-O, 12-I, 13-M, 14-A, 15-J, 16-P

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We're on the web!

[www.rabunhistory.org](http://www.rabunhistory.org)

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## EXCITING NEW TECHNOLOGY IN MUSEUM!

A 78-inch interactive computer screen now allows slide shows and Power Point displays to make our museum even more interesting to visitors. Come check it out!



Nancy Gribble, Linda Barden, and Ron Barden observe while the installer mounts our new screen.