

The Steal

By Charles David Head
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Sand Mountain begins near Gadsden, Ala., and extends northward to a point above Bridgeport, Ala., where the Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee state lines converge.

Many small towns and communities dot the top of the scenic mountain as well as around its foot, with some of them pre-dating the Civil War.

In the spring of 1981, in Stevenson, Alabama, I was traveling across town to pick up a friend to go on an antique bottle-hunting expedition. We'd planned the trip a month back and that day was our time to go. At this juncture in my life, I'd been collecting antique bottles for nearly six years. I'd had a few successes, a lot of failures and a ton of fun in my quest.

Since March 1979, I had been hunting old bottles, arrowheads and Civil War relics with my good friend, Terry, from Signal Mountain, Tenn. Terry was always ready at a moment's notice to go on the prowl for long-lost loot from yesteryear. So it was on this chilly May morning that we were cruising the byways and highways across the Tennessee River from Stevenson in my green '72 Ford LTD (a.k.a. the Green Hornet), looking for old home places to search for antique bottles.

On this particular morning, Terry's wife, Rita, decided to join us, and since no babysitter could be found on such short notice, she brought along their 2-year-old daughter April. Since she was a good ol' country girl, I had no doubts that Rita would fare very well out in the boondocks with us menfolk, regardless of what Mother Nature might throw at us.

We turned down the old Loyd Ferry Road near South Coon Creek, literally catching our breaths at times when we glimpsed beautiful scenery during our drive. Tall mountains, wide, fertile valleys, passive streams, abundant wildlife, spring flowers and fresh green carpets of new grass reminded me of a recent sermon I'd heard at church about the Garden of Eden and how its first inhabitants had enjoyed its splendor.

I was enraptured by the beauty of the Tennessee River valley as Adam and Eve must have been with the beauty of their paradise at the beginning of time.

Driving down one long stretch of road, Terry spotted an old house sitting at the foot of the mountain in a grove of trees near a spring-fed creek. The house was not as old as I would have liked, probably built no later than 1910. Still, I thought there may be some keepers there in the way of soda and milk bottles.

I was hesitant to pull into the dirt and unkempt driveway, since we didn't know who owned the house and we didn't have permission to be on the property. Having a woman and child with us made me doubly cautious, but Terry was eager to get on with the show. He said "it would be a steal" to slip in there and check out the old home place without anyone seeing us. The house sat off a dead end road and besides, he said, we could always come up with an excuse should the owner catch us on the scene.

I looked in the back seat to ask Rita, and although there was some doubt in her eyes, she said, "What the heck, let's check it out." So like Adam many generations before me, we took a woman's advice and went where no man had gone before (at least, without permission).

Terry and I scoured the house and yard for bottles and relics. Rita took April by the hand and was busy gathering a bountiful harvest of white lilies that were scattered about the yard in bunches. An hour's search



of the place yielded only a half-dozen or so milk bottles from a leaning outbuilding, some embossed and some with applied color labels.

Not being a big fan of milk bottles, I decided to expand my search to the back of the yard where it met the mountainside. As I got close to a thicket at the head of the spring which fed the nearby creek, I began to smell an odor. It smelled familiar, but I just couldn't place it.

Then it hit me! It was the unmistakable odor of silage! Two smells a country boy will never forget is that from a pigpen and that from silage. I parted the blackberry bushes and made my way past the spring and there was a whiskey still cooking its "mountain dew." It dawned on me that it might not be a good idea to hang around the premises much longer. In fact, it





Oldtime lawman stands near to illicit whiskey still. (Courtesy of Ron Fowler)

probably wasn't safe!

Having descended from a long line of moonshiners myself, I was well aware that a guard might be posted nearby. As a child, my father, Lee Head, had often enchanted me with stories about his making "shine" during the 1930s and '40s while a friend pulled guard duty in case a revenue man came snooping around. It had been only a few years back when I was toting sacks of sugar, corn and yeast up a steep mountainside near Richard City, Tenn., to one of my friend's still. I also had the unfortunate honor of being close by cutting firewood when his workings were raided by the Marion County Sheriff's Department. Some 62 gallons of some of the best "white lightning" ever produced in that neck of the woods were confiscated.

Eventually, I came out of my daze and remembering we had a woman and small child with us, I took off at a trot to warn them of the dangers should we be caught on the property by whoever was operating the still. I told them to get into the car immediately, that we were leaving, when up the driveway came a decrepit old pickup truck with a grizzled old timer behind the wheel. I stood stock-still in the yard as the driver pulled up the truck next to me.

I looked at the solemn, leathery face of the old fellow and could not help but notice a large pistol on the passenger seat

beside him. The hole in its long barrel looked like the business end of the World War I howitzer guarding the courthouse square in Scottsboro, Ala.

Never shutting off the truck's engine, the old timer spat out a cud of dark chewing tobacco and finally asked me what we were doing around there. When I told him we were just looking for old bottles, he exclaimed, "You've got to be kidding me!"

I could see he didn't believe a word I said. After a minute or so, he asked me to follow him down the road a ways so we could talk. I realized that he thought we'd seen his still and in order to be sure we kept quiet about it, he intended to kill us all if we should be naive enough to follow him down a dead-end country road for a neighborly chat!

Needing a ruse to get away, I agreed and climbed into my car. Instead of following him, I sped off in the opposite direction toward town. Much to my dismay, I looked in the rearview mirror and saw he had turned his truck around and was following us. In a few seconds, he had closed the gap between us and was blowing his horn, trying his best to pass me. Not daring to let him get in front, or even beside my car lest he use the "Green Hornet" for target practice, I sped up and drove in the middle of the narrow, two-lane road.

Former race car driver Richard Petty sure would have been proud of the way I

drove those curving country roads at speeds that kept my passengers breathless and my rapidly beating heart stuck in my throat. The old timer stayed in hot pursuit all the way back across the Tennessee River and into the Stevenson city limits. It was then that Terry and Rita came out of their stupor and asked me a million questions about who was chasing us and why. I told them and got a respite from their nervous questions by asking them to keep an eye out for our pursuer.

After not spotting him for several blocks, I pulled into a convenience store parking lot thankful the chase was over. I then thought of little April. I had not heard so much as a whimper from her during all the excitement. Her mother lifted the child, who had fallen a sleep, from her lap and I was so relieved that tears came to my eyes. I thought we'd left her behind!

While Rita went into the store, Terry told me he thought he'd heard the man shooting at us. But we checked out the car and found no bullet holes and I thought Terry had just imagined it, or the old timer was a poor shot.

Rita also had the presence of mind to pick up the milk bottles and place them into the car. I gave her some of my share in appreciation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a true story and is based on an event that happened to me 25 years ago. It's an excellent example of why you should always get permission to go onto private property.

By the way, from 1989 until 1993 I lived a mere two blocks from the moonshiner on the same street in Bridgeport, Ala. But when we'd meet, he'd wave and smile at me as if we'd never met on that fateful day in 1981!