

October in the North Georgia Mountains means different things to many people - summer's over and the cool air arrives, harvest time, trees sporting vivid colors and yes, time again for the Dawsonville Moonshine Festival in Dawson County, Georgia.

The Moonshine Festival has been a tradition for 42 years now, and celebrates the somewhat dubious honor that has been bestowed upon this area as the "Moonshine Capitol of Georgia."

Equally as famous as the potent brew are the drivers that emerged from these hills and turned their extraordinary talent for driving at high speeds into another way of making a living.

Producing moonshine goes back a long way - the art of making moonshine was a pastime enjoyed by the farming community simply for personal use. Of course there were those who viewed it as a profitable venture and a supplement to existing means of income.

Contrary to popular belief, moonshine was part of the rural culture long before the Prohibition Era years of 1919 to 1933. When the 18th Amendment prohibiting the "manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors" in the U.S. became Constitutional law, there was an instant market and widespread demand for homemade whiskey would make any modern distiller today green with envy.

Even though Dawson County had a huge reputation for selling moonshine in the Southeast, it didn't quite have the same reputation for consuming it according to Gordon Pirkle, owner of the Dawsonville Pool Room.

The majority of whiskey that was produced in Dawson County took place under the cover of night to prevent state and federal authorities from intervening with the illegal activity.

"Trippers" loaded up their cars daily with moonshine and made the journey down Highway 9, nicknamed the old "Whiskey Trail," and headed for Atlanta to rendezvous with their customers.

There are conflicting accounts about just how much moonshine was transported out of Dawson County during the Prohibition, but estimates of 50,000 gallons a week are probably not too far off the mark.

As careful as moonshiners were to operate under the radar of the law, eventually revenue agents discovered where the source Atlanta's "shine" was originating from. As revenuers increased their efforts to stem the flow of illegal traffic, the haulers where always one step ahead of them by developing a network of backwoods country roads leading bewildered law enforcement officers on a merry chase that ended with the moonshine drivers getting away.

A typical run by a whiskey hauler in the early days began with 24 five-gallon jugs. Each jug was placed in a wooden liner to prevent them from clinking against each other and making a racket that might tip off the revenuers who might be listening and lying in wait on a dark country road.

Back then, there wasn't much traffic on the roads at night and haulers seldom encountered much trouble. When they did meet up with another car, they knew it was either another moonshiner or the law. Headlights from oncoming traffic could be spotted long before the cars actually met. This gave the whiskey runners ample time to prepare for the worst case scenario.

To hear tell it, most of the old stories about running moonshine were nothing more than tall tales according to Millard Ashley, a close friend of Junior Johnson. Ashley said a moonshine run through the mountains wasn't much different than making a trip to the local store and didn't put much wear and tear on the car. Only on occasion would they have to run wide open to get away from the revenuers.

Moonshine cars were usually faster than the cop cars - the average moonshine car could run at 100 mph in first gear and up to speeds of 115 mph in second. Very few police cars could exceed 95 mph which definitely gave the whiskey runners the advantage in a full-fledged chase.

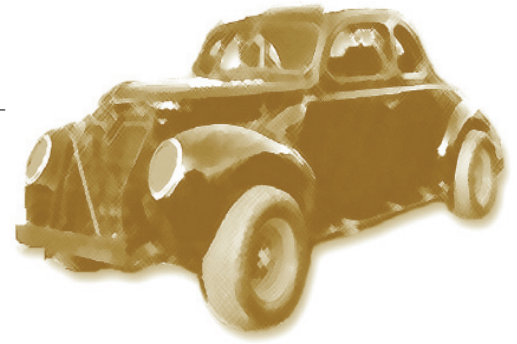
Some of the drivers, such as Junior Johnson, learned how to tinker with their cars and get better performance and speed - like adding extra power to the engine and inserting special springs and shocks to handle sharp turns at corners.

With the combination of faster cars and good money to be made in running moonshine, more and more young men were attracted to the growing ranks of whiskey runners. Before long, when they weren't hauling moonshine, they were running against each other with informal races in attempts to prove who was the fastest of the bunch.

If there was money in running moonshine, there was extra money to be won in these races in their spare time. These races increased in frequency during the thirties. On a local level, the first stock car race was held in 1939 at Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta - and naturally the winner was a driver from Dawsonville.

From that point on, there was a convergence of sorts beginning with the decline in moonshine's profitability while the increase in racing as organized events in the Southeast developed during the 1940s and 50s.

During that time NASCAR, as a governing body on a national level, came into existence in 1947 and launched the careers of Junior Johnson, Tim Flock, Lee Petty, Ned Jarrett and many, many others.



Today, there are all types of oval racing series throughout the U.S. and they all owe their continued success and growth to legend of moonshine. •



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