

Moonshine Runners, History, and Their Cars

Hot Rod Magazine, October, 2005

Like old thoroughbreds in their stalls at a racing stable, the aging moonshine-hauling cars of Willie Clay Call sit at the ready in the garage next to his home



Former bootlegger Willie Clay Call's garage holds the relics of an illicit business that flourished in the southern Appalachians in the mid-20th century. He stands before the primary components of a still, with part of his fleet of '40 Fords in the background.

in the Appalachian foothills of Wilkes County, North Carolina. Their rear suspensions are still ultra-stiff and ready to conceal the weight of more than 100 gallons of white lightning that the cars would haul out of the foothills to Winston-Salem, Lexington, or other points east.

They wait for loads that will never come from creek-side stills that no longer exist. The customers are gone too. The moonshine culture is dead--killed not so much by the persistence of law enforcement as by the spread of legal liquor and ABC stores into previously dry Southern states and counties. The

backwoods still, an American tradition that predates the founding of the United States, has all but disappeared from the ravines and hollows of the southern Appalachians.



As American production cars became more and more powerful in the late '50s, Call went for faster cars than these '40s. But he kept "a-haulin' a lot of stuff in those '40s."

On the brink of its demise, after flourishing since colonial times, the moonshine business went out in a blaze of iconic glory and real-life drama born of its integration into another uniquely American custom--the hot rod. Big loads, fast cars, and tough law all came together in the '50s and '60s in a pageant of high-speed chases, roadblocks, wild escapes, crashes--and on rare occasions, gunplay.

"My daddy was a moonshiner, and my grandpa was in it, too." --Willie Clay Call

Most of the old moonshiners are now up there in years. Call is 65. His lifelong friend Junior Johnson is 74. They could still stir the mash if push came to shove, but making bootleg liquor is some of the hardest work a man can do. Even if the market still existed, they have long since lost the need to bother. But they did quite well for themselves in the underground business, despite the cars that were confiscated, the stills that were blown sky-high, and the pieces of their lives lost to prison terms.



Call's devotion to the history and heritage of Wilkes County includes his mountain cabin, constructed in the same fashion as those built here by 19th century mountain folk.

Like any good businessmen, the moonshiners diversified. As the liquor culture died, another prosperous livelihood, chicken farming, arrived in the nick of time to replace it. Most of the former moonshiners now raise chickens for the local Tyson processing plant in North Wilkesboro, a linchpin of the area economy. No one wants or needs white lightning anymore.

The large garage behind Call's house in rural Wilkes County, the self-described moonshine capital of America, contains six

'40 Fords with flathead V-8s, a '66 Dodge Coronet 440 with a 426 Hemi, and a '61Chrysler New Yorker.

These are not replicas. "I used all these cars for a-haulin'," Call says. Call has 14 more '40 Fords in another garage, as well as other assorted vehicles. These cars were the tools of his distribution trade, and when those trading days were over, he kept the cars.

The '66 Dodge was one of three he ordered when they were introduced. In the '60s, the cars coming out of Detroit kept getting more powerful and faster, as if they were being custom-made for the moonshiners. "They didn't make but

40 with this engine," Call says. "I bought three of 'em. I got one-and-a-half now."



Equipped with extra-stiff springs to conceal the weight of the load, a '40 Ford could carry up to 22 cases of liquor, each holding 12 half-gallon glass jars of moonshine.

He sold one. The other he lost in a chase soon after he bought it. One of his drivers "drove it into a pond down there in Concord when the revenuers was a-runnin' him," he says. "I ended up getting the motor back. It took several years, but I got it. They'd pulled the engine out of the car and kept it in storage. I had a guy who worked down there and he got it for me." How did he get it? "I don't know," Call says. "Reckon he bought it or stole it, one."

The big-finned, baby blue New Yorker is hardly the stuff of HOT ROD. It was the type of car a doctor or a lawyer drove, and it was his most effective, best-driving moonshine car. This is the car he'll talk about first and most often. "That Chrysler would go on," Call says. "I've been run many a time in it. But there warn't no race to it. It'd run 180 mile an hour loaded or unloaded, uphill or downhill--it didn't matter. It's probably hauled more liquor than any car that's ever hit the highway."



Veteran moonshiners and bootleggers (left to right) Willie Clay Call, Junior Johnson, and Millard Ashley pose in front of three of Call's most potent moonshine vehicles on his farm outside North Wilkesboro.

The New Yorker has logged more than 300,000 miles, either under Call's foot or that of another driver, and taken several bullet holes in its body. "I had it painted about seven or eight years ago," Call says, "and the boy called me and said, 'You know there's a couple of bullet holes in your car?' I said, no, I sure didn't. I figured out where they came from, though. It was back in the '80s."

"Junior had a reputation for being a guy who had a hotrod with a one-brake wheel. He could

go down the road and hit that brake and turn around in one lane of a highway and head back the other way at great speed." -- ATU Agent Joe Carter



Call's secret weapon and all-time-favorite moonshine-hauling car was this '61 Chrysler New Yorker, a luxury car of the era. In addition to a number of engine modifications, it had heavy-duty springs all around and two sets of shocks in the front.

The dashboard is production, except for one minor modification. Junior attached a pair of toggle switches just left of the steering column that, when flipped, cut off the brake lights, or the taillights, or both. More than one pursuing lawman ended up in a roadside ditch after overdriving a curve while on Call's tail.

"You never did see that car on the road unless it was loaded," Call says. "I didn't keep it around the house or nothin'. I kept it hid."

Call's cars may not be the sleekest hot rods you'll ever see, but their legacy in American car culture is secure. Not only did the moonshiners' livelihood rest on their skill and imagination as car builders and drivers, their very freedom depended on it.

"On the race track, you're a-runnin' to beat someone," Johnson drawls. "Out on the highway, you're a-runnin' for your life."

No trophy in Junior Johnson's palatial country home, and no victory in his 50 triumphs in NASCAR racing means more to him than his pride in the statement, "They never caught me a-haulin'."

Johnson will tell you with a straight-on, dead-level look that Stock Car racing was a comedown compared to running moonshine, and not only because of the legal threat. "I had some purty fast race cars, but I never run anything as fast as the fastest cars I had on the highway," Johnson says. "The cars we ran on the road, you could modify 'em to the tip. Plus, they were supercharged and turbocharged. We could just do anything we wanted to 'em. There was never a time we could do anything we wanted to the race cars, even the Modifieds.

NASCAR wouldn't let 'em run turbochargers or superchargers or anything like that. A supercharger or turbocharger just packs so much power in that motor, it's unbelievable. And we had no limitations on cubic inches. We could bore and stroke 'em all we wanted. We'd run 500 cubic inches a lot of the time." Clay Call never competed in the first Stock Car race, but one day in the early '60s, he took his supercharged '55 Ford out onto the track at North Wilkesboro Speedway, where Fred Lorenzen, the Golden Boy of NASCAR's early years, was practicing. Call says he outran Lorenzen lap after lap.

"We didn't back down in doing whatever we could do to make 'em faster," Johnson says. "You didn't have no top end on 'em with a supercharger. That thing would just keep gettin' up. It had the power to take it where the road was so narrow, you couldn't imagine how fast that thing was a-runnin'."

The cars driven by treasury agents and other law enforcement officers were no match for the moonshiners' cars. "I called the cars the government gave us 'mechanical miscarriages,'" says former federal Alcohol Tax Unit (ATU) agent Joe Carter, the guy who captured Johnson on foot at his father's still in 1956. "But then, we lacked another component they had--the drivers. Those guys could drive a car like you wouldn't believe. By the time they got to be 14 years old, they could outrun any officer I knew of. They learned how to drive and they knew every curve, though some of 'em got killed doin' it."

Despite his fame as a Stock Car racer and team owner, Johnson never considered himself better than the other moonshine drivers. "Most all the guys who hauled whiskey were good drivers," Johnson says. "A lot of guys were as good as I was on the highway. But when it got to racing, and the car is set up to just go left, you can almost double your speed going off into the corner." That took a special skill that Johnson excelled at.

Fellow moonshiner Thurmond Brown explained some years back about how terrifying it was to ride with Junior when he was going full song on the highways of North Carolina. "Junior and me was comin' back through Winston-Salem once at about 3 o'clock in the morning after unloading a load, and hell, he was just drivin' sideways. And them little old mailboxes and newspaper boxes, well, Junior was justa clippin' by those things right beside

my face. I said, Junior, you're gonna have the law on you. And it made him about half-mad, I believe. He said, 'If we can't outrun 'em empty, what the hell are we a-doin' down here loaded?'

"I knew we could outrun 'em, loaded or empty, but I was dreadin' that ride. Junior whipped a car. The car was scared of him. He manhandled it. But settin' over there on the other side--it was hard on me. He'd pass another car on the right side of the road, and the air would be full of dirt and grass, and that ol' rear quarter-panel would be way up there in the damn woods and honeysuckle and such. Junior would say, 'Ah, c'mon. It'll be there when we get there.'"



According to Call, the 413 in the '61 New Yorker urged the car to 180mph, "uphill or downhill, loaded or unloaded." Fully loaded with 25 cases of liquor weighing about 750 pounds, the car weighed close to 4,750 pounds.

The old '40 Fords, with their flathead V-8 engines, dominated the moonshine scene until the '50s. The most frequent modification the moonshiners made was to replace the flathead V-8 with the biggest Cadillac engine they could find, which happened to be in the carmaker's ambulances. Johnson and Call would haunt auctions for Cadillac ambulances, yank the engine, bore and stroke it to get all possible cubic inches, and slap a supercharger on it. As they say in Wilkes County, that old Ford would go on.

As younger men in the '40s and '50s, the moonshiners also tapped into the burgeoning hot rod scene in Southern California.

"We did to start with," Johnson says. "We'd buy stuff like Offenhauser and Edelbrock cylinder heads, and cranks and pistons and rods and all kinda stuff. But soon we was doin' all that ourselves. Then, when we got real strong into it [in the '60s], California didn't have as good a stuff as we did."

Though never caught on the road, Johnson, Call, and many other moonshiners did feel the sting of the law. In the mid-20th century, moonshining was so open in Wilkes County that the federal government built a small courthouse in

North Wilkesboro to handle all the criminal cases. It became something of a factory, turning bootleggers into federal prisoners by the score for failing to pay the required federal levies on liquor.

The moonshiners usually pled guilty to the charges against them; local lore claims they were so honest, they'd be told after sentencing when to report for the prison bus and then sent on home. Invariably, when the bus arrived a few days later, the moonshiners would be there waiting for it to take them to prison.

Johnson himself spent 11 months and 3 days in a federal penitentiary in 1956-1957 near his peak as a Stock Car racer after his arrest at his daddy's still. He pled guilty to that one. In 1959, however, Junior was found not guilty in another case after NASCAR officials took the stand to help him prove he was racing at the time it was alleged he was making liquor. In 1960, nine months after his acquittal, Johnson won the biggest race of his career--the Daytona 500. That same year, doing well in racing and tired of being hounded, Johnson quit the moonshining business.

Call, meanwhile, lost several automobiles to the feds, as well as seven months of his life. He was convicted on a conspiracy charge in 1960. Unlike Johnson, who was sent to the federal penitentiary in Chillicothe, Ohio, Call spent his time in a prison set up at Donaldson Air Force Base in Greenville, South Carolina.



Toggle switches installed just below the dashboard near the steering column allowed Call to switch off the brake lights but leave the taillights burning if he were chased at night. That prevented the law from seeing where he was braking on the twisty roads of the North Carolina foothills.

"I hated to leave down there," he says. "I'da stayed if I'd had a payin' job. I really liked it. Hell, it was an Air Force Base. They fed good int here. I had a vehicle and drove anywhere I wanted to on the base. And I picked me up two or three good customers."



NASCAR legend and ex-moonshiner Junior Johnson today enjoys life as a gentleman farmer on his estate in the Appalachian foothills just east of Wilkes County. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan granted Johnson a "full and unconditional pardon" for his moonshining conviction of 1956.

Call admitted for the first time during HOT ROD's visit that he'd continued making and hauling illegal liquor well into the '80s. Today, he's a one-man archive of the culture, including the fleet of moonshine cars he owns, the 40-plus homemade copper cookers he's collected, and the well-hidden "mock" still he has on land he owns back in Wilkes County woods.

Both Johnson and Call have donated cars and other moonshine and racing memorabilia to a new museum scheduled to open this year in the Old Courthouse building in North Wilkesboro. "They're getting along with it pretty good," Johnson says. "It'll have the history of Wilkes County and racin' and bootlegging' and fightin' and everything else."