

THE RANDY SONS OF NANCY WHISKY

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As I went down through Glasgow City,
Nancy Whisky I chanced to smell;
I went in, sat down beside her;
Seven long years I loved her well:
Whisky, Whisky, Nancy Whisky,
Whisky, Whisky, Nancy-O.¹

THAT OLD SONG, in both its Scottish and Irish variants, celebrates a lassie-colleen who rarely receives the scholarly attention she deserves. But, when I traveled through Mountain City, Tennessee, doing fieldwork for the LAGS project in August 1971, a good occasion presented itself to investigate the old girl and her American descendants in a serious, if not thoroughly scholarly, way. An interview there uncovered the historical remnant of a troublesome old industry and the source of a unique set of problems for American English lexicography. A 99-year-old woman recounted that, as a last resort in revenue collections, agents of the federal government supervised the operation of a whiskey still and dispensary on Stout's Creek, near Neva, in Johnson County. Before being burned to the ground by dissident neighbors around 1905, the building housed both the still and a primitive mechanism for commercial transactions. Extending out from a hole in the wall, a board made a sliding counter upon which \$2.50 was placed by the purchaser, the board then being drawn in by an unseen tradesman and returned with a gallon of corn liquor. No one clearly understood the incendiary bent of the neighbors—whether motivated by the impulses of temperance or free enterprise—but a casual observer might suspect a ruse on the part of journeymen moonshiners posing as federal agents. No one ever saw the operators of the blind tiger (as such an enterprise is called), and regular customers simply acknowledged they were “trading with Nancy.”

Like the remains of that east Tennessee blind tiger, a ruined

1. The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, “Nancy Whisky,” *Isn't It Grand, Boys* (Columbia Records CS 9277/CL 2477).

monument to the despair of the Internal Revenue Service, the historical vocabulary of moonshine, especially the terms for the product itself, offers a challenge in restoration to be met some day. For now, since neither that sort of *blind tiger* nor *Nancy* herself is to be found in the four great historical dictionaries (*EDD*, *OED*, *DAE*, and *DA*),² information from east Tennessee and north Georgia is served up here mainly to skoal a master tracker of words and their ways. If the material should also prove to be an eye-opener to a brave young lexicographer, that will enhance this testament; under no circumstance, however, is this blended evidence from two separate surveys to be taken, by even the randiest of readers, as a potable appendix to *The Blue Ridge Parkway Guide*.

The paucity of documented evidence on the subject reflects problems of semantic and cultural interference that are familiar to all students of Appalachian folkways. LAGS workers first encountered both kinds of difficulties in rural north Georgia, where they investigated terms for privately distilled whiskey and for cheap, inferior, and harmful varieties. Findings of the Dialect Survey of Rural Georgia, the LAGS pilot project, showed considerable overlapping almost everywhere in the application of the words; and, in more than one place, informants displayed open hostility to close questioning. Indeed, a student-fieldworker was chased out of a rural community near Cleveland in White County, Georgia, by an irate middle-aged man whose mother was being interviewed. After observing much of the conversation, the son quietly walked out to his pickup truck as the Emory English major began the moonshine questions. Returning immediately with a very modern rifle, the son threw a round in the chamber, removed the safety lock, pointed the weapon at our man's midsection, and announced the interview was over.

Setting aside the natural antipathy for snoopers shared by all living things, one recognizes the clash of folklore and reality as a basic problem for a naïve investigator, whether fieldworker or project director, seeking the vocabulary of moonshine in the mountains even today. In *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921), J. C. Campbell put it this way:

2. The *blind tiger* and *blind pig* identified in both the *DAE* and *DA* suggest a rural forerunner of the urban *speak-easy*, where drinks were sold by the dram or bottle. Another LAGS informant recalled a blind tiger across the Iron Mountain from Neva in Shady Valley, Tennessee—a clearing in a laurel thicket, one half mile off the main road, where one left his money and returned later for his goods.

There is a romantic appeal, too, in some of the darker aspects of mountain life. It is this appeal, undoubtedly, and not a desire to misrepresent, that has led the journalist and writer of fiction to fasten upon the mountain people as a whole the reputation of being feudists and moonshiners. Instinctively they see in the lonely hollow the proper setting for the illicit still, then in imagination the smoke of the still itself rising among the misty tree-tops. The woman calling to her husband on the hillside is warning him of the approach of strangers. The far glint of mica is the sun on his gun-barrel. The remote mill seemingly smothered in a narrow green gorge or set by a lonely rush of waters is a moonshine mill, and the innocent horseman with his sack of corn is the blockader in pursuit of his trade. And there is just enough approach to fact in this picture to fasten it in the mind. [Pp. 149-50]

The clash is illustrated by this account of a fieldworker, reported by T. P. Crutcher in *Spurrier with the Wildcats and Moonshiners* (Nashville, Tenn.: Univ. Press, 1892), a century before the LAGS project got started here:

An incident is related by a young man himself, who was canvassing Fortress [Fentress] County, Tennessee, in 1871, which will convey some idea of the desperate characters who were in sympathy with the moonshiners at that time. This young man says: "I chanced to stop for a rest under the shade of a tree, in the vicinity of some of these wildcat distilleries, and, while resting my head against a tree, I heard a rustling in a small patch of corn near by. Turning my head in that direction, I discovered someone in the act of shooting through the crack of the fence. I ducked my head just in time to hear the report of the gun, and see the bark fly from the tree against which I was reclining. The man proved to be not a moonshiner, but a half-witted fellow who was in full sympathy, and had taken me for a Revenue officer. [P. 164].

Even in current discussions of cultural change, students of southern Appalachian life are themselves sometimes swept up in the romance. E. Wigginton, editor of *The Foxfire Book* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1972), writes:

The manufacture of illicit whiskey in the mountains is not dead. Far from it. As long as the operation of a still remains so financially rewarding, it will never die. There will always be men ready to take their chances against the law for such an attractive profit, and willing to take their punishment when they are caught. [P. 301]

A more realistic appraisal was made by D. W. Maurer in "The Argot of the Moonshiner," *American Speech* 24 (1949):

Today, the moonshiner exists as a dual personality, with remnants of the naïve mountaineer gradually being supplanted by elements of the smart, well-organized racketeer, spawned by prohibition and, in present days, often sponsored (or opposed) by powerful political machines whose groping tentacles inevitably encircle Washington. [P. 3]

Fiction, fact, and cultural change offer one set of complex problems for students of words used in moonshining, but cultural pressure upon the informants we interview must also interfere psychologically with their ability to answer freely. The church, the government, the schools, the family, and now the LAGS project (a lesser institution to be sure) all aggravate the situation by pulling and probing from several directions. Consequently, fieldwork meets with the same difficulties encountered in my earlier investigations into the veiled language of ethnic slurs and sexual designations in Chicago.

To minimize the practical problem, our LAGS research was modified with no pretense whatsoever of exploring the deepest semantic or psychological reaches—where language and mind are unified. When fieldwork for LAGS began in east Tennessee and the task was mine alone, I decided to approach the topic gingerly through discussion, rather than by straightforwardly requesting synonyms as the students did in the Dialect Survey of Rural Georgia.

The words and phrases recorded in north Georgia and east Tennessee offer a beginning for a more ambitious and more nearly systematic investigation into the complicated little category of whiskey terms in the American English lexicon. In the following outline, terms are evaluated by informant response to the question, Is the liquor decently drinkable? Uppercase letters in parentheses indicate potables of good quality according to informants in Georgia (G) and Tennessee (T); lowercase letters in parentheses indicate ones of poor quality according to informants in Georgia (g) and Tennessee (t). The much higher incidence of interesting terms in Georgia is probably the result of the larger sample there. In north Georgia, 100 rural informants were interviewed (four in each of 25 communities); in east Tennessee, as of June 1974, 57 LAGS field records had been analyzed. It is important to note, however, that Georgia has totally eclipsed Tennessee (as well as every other state of the Union) in the production of moonshine.

I. Terms for either taxed or untaxed liquor:

- A. Whiskey: *alcohol* (G), *booze* (G, g, t), *devil's eye water* (G), *dram* (G), *drink* (g), *firewater* (G), *liquor* (G, g, T), *tot* (G),³ *whiskey* (G, g, T)

3. The single instance of *tot* /tɒt/ is questionable. M. Keller and M. McCormick, *A Dictionary of Words about Alcohol* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Publication Div., Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies, 1968) offer two possibilities: "tot [connected with tot a tiny child]. A tiny quantity of anything, especially drink. Also, a little drinking

- B. White (corn) whiskey: *corn liquor* (T), *corn whiskey* (G, T), *white corn liquor* (T), *white liquor* (G, T), *white whiskey* (G, g, T)
 - C. Red (essentially, corn) whiskey: *buckeye* (g), *redeye* (t), *red liquor* (g)⁴
- II. Terms for untaxed whiskey:
- A. Related to production: (a) *dulterate* (g), *backings* (g, t), *black liquor* (g), *black pot* (t), *corn squeezings* (T), *country whiskey* (G), *double and twisted* (G), *doubling* (G), *hogwash* (g), *homebrew* (G, g, t), *homemade* (G), *homemade corn whiskey* (G), *homemade whiskey* (G, g), *home whiskey* (G), *low wine* (g), *moon* (G), *moonshine* (G, g, T, t), *moonshine liquor* (T, t), *moonshine whiskey* (T), *mountain dew* (G), *pure corn* (T), *pure corn whiskey* (T), *scrap iron* (G), *shine* (g), *shine liquor* (g), *singlings* (g), *sweet mash* (G), *wildcat* (G, g), *wildcat whiskey* (T)
 - B. Related to distribution: *blockade whiskey* (G), *bootleg* (G, g, T), *bootlegged whiskey* (G, T), *bootlegging whiskey* (g), *bootleg stuff* (T), *bootleg whiskey* (g, T), *stump rum* (G, g), *stump water* (G, g)
 - C. Related to intoxication: *bustskull* (t), *knock-over* (G), *lightning* (G), *popskull* (g, t), *rotgut* (g, t), *rotten gut* (g), *white lightning* (G, g, T, t), *white mule* (T)⁵

vessel. *tot system* A method of payment practiced in South Africa by which non-European laborers receive an allotment of wine or other drink during work" (p. 203). Because the single Georgia occurrence was in black speech and in an idiolect in which *tot* 'tiny child' would be realized as /tat/, the second possibility might be profitably explored.

4. All three of these terms are well established Americanisms. Although the earliest citation of *red liquor* in the DA is Kephart (1922), E. Kellner suggests a much earlier currency in *Moonshine: Its History and Folklore* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 62: "It was first called 'red liquor,' then 'Bourbon County Whiskey,' then 'Kentucky Bourbon' (to distinguish it from the rye made in Pennsylvania), and then just 'Bourbon.'" Documented in the DAE and DA simply as *buckeye*, anything of inferior quality, *buckeye whiskey* was apparently known to Confederate soldiers. S. R. Watkins notes in "Co. Aytch," . . . *A Side Show of the Big Show* (Nashville, Tenn., 1882; rpt. New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962), p. 76: "It was Christmas [1862]. John Barleycorn was general-in-chief. Our generals, and colonels, and captains, had kissed John a little too often. They couldn't see straight. It was said to be buckeye whiskey."

5. This term also has currency in Georgia, according to J. Carr, reporting on a bootlegger-turned-conman's fate in *The Second Oldest Profession: An Informal History of Moonshining in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 220: "The flimflam does not always work. One Georgia bootlegger made the mistake of assuming his former moonshiner friend didn't know that he (the bootlegger) had set up such a

III. Terms for alcohol not intended as a beverage:

- A. Blends of antifreeze and water, sometimes including methyl alcohol, solvent or paint remover, cleaning fluid, canned heat, or other alcohol mixtures: *smoke* (t), *smoke-on-the-water* (t)
- B. Blends sometimes excluding antifreeze: *explode* (t), *gluckem* (t), *shake-a-leg* (g, t), *splo* (t)⁶

Even at the earliest stages of genealogical research, the relatives of Nancy Whisky are difficult to classify. Omitted from the lists are several structures of modification that cannot be interpreted as phonological words according to their patterns of stress, for example, *bád bóoze*, a modifier and head, contrasting prosodically with *whíte whiskěy*, a phonological word. Instances of these in the surveys include *bad booze* (t), *bad moonshine* (g), *bad stuff* (g), *bad whiskey* (g), *cheap whiskey* (g), *old white lightning* (g), *poison liquor* (g), and *sorry whiskey* (g). Also omitted is the apparent trade name *Billy's Best* (t), offered by an elderly informant in Talbott, Jefferson County, Tennessee: "Get on a cheap drunk with Billy's Best." And, as in any survey of the spoken language, there are unique sequences of phones, such as ['sɑ:;gɪb] (g), that are omitted here because the underlying systematic phonemes are too numerous, for example, [s] for /s, z/, [ɑ:] for /ɑ, ɔ, ə/, [g] for /k, g/, [ɪ] for /u, ɪ, ə/, and [b] for /p, b/, with a potential string of graphemes that nudge a speller back to Billy's Best.

Many of the terms in the list that are not satisfactorily documented in the historical dictionaries are elaborately detailed by Crutcher (1892), Campbell (1921), and H. Kephart in *Our Southern Highlanders*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1922, 1st ed. 1913). Kephart, for example, describes the production of sweet mash and opens the *hog wash* question:

The sprouted corn is then dried and ground into meal. This sweet meal is then made into a mush with boiling water, and is let stand two or three days.

squeeze play. The bootlegger wasn't killed, but it was no comfort for him to receive—as a get well present while hospitalized—a neatly wrapped quart of white mule with his own testicles permanently preserved therein."

6. These terms, particularly *splo*, mark the Knoxville focal area. Readers of the Knoxville daily newspapers as far north and west as Tazewell (near Cumberland Gap) knew the term from that source. Although *splo* has not yet been observed in Atlanta, D. W. Maurer tells me that it is a commonplace expression among less fortunate alcoholics in most Southern metropolitan areas. Surprisingly missing in the responses are *yakky-dak*, *rubby-dub*, *alley juice* (an antifreeze cocktail), and *sneaky pete* (inexpensive wine fortified with any of the available additives).

The "sweet mash" thus made is then broken up, and a little rye malt, similarly prepared in the meantime, is added to it, if rye is procurable. Fermentation begins at once. In large distilleries, yeast is added to hasten fermentation, and the mash can then be used in three or four days; the blockader, however, having no yeast, must let his mash stand for eight or ten days, keeping it all that time at a proper temperature for fermentation. This requires not only constant attention, but some skill as well, for there is no thermometer nor saccharometer in our mountain still-house. When done, the sugar of what is now "sour mash" has been converted into carbonic acid and alcohol. The resulting liquid is technically called the "wash," but blockaders call it "beer." It is intoxicating, of course, but "sour enough to make a pig squeal." [Pp. 134-35]

Continuing his description of the production, Kephart used two other basic moonshining terms, *singling* and *doubling*, both of which recurred in the surveys, but neither of which is recorded in the historical dictionaries:

The product of this first distillation (the "low wines" of the trade, the "singlings" of the blockader) is a weak and impure liquid, which must be redistilled at a lower temperature to rid it of water and rank oils.

In moonshiners' parlance, the liquor of second distillation is called the "doublings." It is in watching and testing the doublings that an accomplished blockader shows his skill, for if distillation be not carried far enough, the resulting spirits will be rank, though weak, and if carried too far, nothing but pure alcohol will result.

Kephart also suggests obvious explanations for *dulterate*, *popskull*, *bustskull* (certainly a blend of *popskull* and *busthead*), and *bumblings*, a term not recorded in the dictionaries or the surveys:

As for purity, all of the moonshine whiskey used to be pure, and much of it still is; but every blockader knows how to adulterate, and when one of them does stoop to such tricks he will stop at no halfway measures. Some add washing lye, both to increase the yield and to give the liquor an artificial bead, then prime this abominable fluid with pepper, ginger, tobacco, or anything else that will make it sting. Even buckeyes, which are poisonous themselves, are sometimes used to give the drink a soapy bead. Such decoctions are known in the mountains by expressive terms "pop-skull," "bust head," "bumblings" ("they make a bumbly noise in a feller's head"). Some of them are so toxic that their continued use might be fatal to the drinker. A few drams may turn a normally good-hearted fellow into a raging fiend who will shoot or stab without provocation. [Pp. 137-38]

Campbell quotes a passage with a use of *white lightning* that antedates the DA reference; another unrecorded Americanism, *third-rail liquor*; and insights into the reasons for the terms *black liquor* and *scrap iron*:

"When it comes to concoctions used as a substitute for liquor by the inhabitants of many sections of the country where statutory prohibition prevails," says the *Asheville Gazette News* of January 6, 1916, "officials of the internal revenue bureau are not easily shocked. However, there was genuine amazement over a drink recipe figuring in a North Carolina moonshine case. It appears that two moonshiners got into a quarrel with the result that one went into court and exposed the business secrets of the other. Here is the recipe for the latest North Carolina 'temperance tippie' called 'white lightning': 'One bushel corn meal, 100 pounds of sugar, two boxes of lye, four plugs of tobacco, four pounds of poke root berries, two pounds of soda. Water to measure and distill.' This recipe is for fourteen and one-half gallons of the 'third-rail' liquor." [P. 109, n. 2]

Crutcher's *Spurrier with the Wildcats and Moonshiners* was prepared as a celebration of the most distinguished revenue officer in middle Tennessee, who was ambushed near Flintville, Tennessee, 7 October 1892, dying of wounds three weeks later. Published within days of Joseph Spurrier's death, the book not only uses *wildcat* 'moonshiner' in its title but also includes *wildcatting*, *wildcat business*, and (elsewhere) *wildcatter*:

George little dreamed when he first laid his plans for wildcatting that his hopes and anticipations should so soon come to an end, and he landed in prison. But so it was. Soon after starting his wildcat business, it was reported to the authorities, and a posse of men were detailed to look into the matter and bring to justice the offender. [Pp. 105-6]

Other terms collected for LAGS introduce additional problems of lexicography and semantics. For example, both the *DAE* and *DA* have *sour mash* but neither records *sweet mash* (the product in its early stage) nor *beer* 'wash.' Unattested in the *EDD* and *OED* as well, both *sweet mash* and *beer* 'wash' seem authentic Americanisms.⁷ *Wash* in the sense 'refuse' is synonymous with *slop* or *swill*, something to be discarded or fed to hogs. In another sense, *wash* is synonymous with the moonshining sense of *beer* 'an alcoholic work in progress,' as Maurer (p. 8) reports: "That beer's working off good." The semantic problem is complicated by the facetious use of the term, as recorded in Georgia, to designate the finished product. There is a similarly ambiguous use in Tom Clancy's version of "The Moonshiner," in *Come Fill Your Glasses with Us* (Tradition Records TLP 1032):

I'll go to some hollow in this count-tery;
Ten gallons of wash, I can go on a spree:
No women to follow, the world is all mine,
And I love none so well as I love the moonshine.

7. Maurer (p. 8) lists *beer*, *beer still* (where the spirits and residue are separated), and *still beer*.

Concerning *wash* as slop, this note from Wigginton (p. 314) might also be considered:

The fact that hogs love the corn mash that whiskey is made out of is legend. Often moonshiners were forced to put fences around their stills to keep hogs, who were kept on "open range" then, from falling into the mash boxes and drowning. Once a two-hundred-pound sow fell into a mash box where she drowned. The men running the still found her body in there several days later, but went on and made whiskey from the same mash anyway. From then on, if whiskey was too strong, the man drinking it would say, "That must'a had a dead hog in it."

Further reading will no doubt provide earlier citations for all these terms—as well as others not encountered in the survey.⁸ Two designations recorded in Georgia but missing from the dictionaries are notable: *stump rum* and *stump water*.⁹ Like *moonshine*, these terms have multiple associations of appearance, production, and distribution. *OED* citations indicate that moonshine was produced and distributed at night, by the light of the moon. The *stump*-forms suggest the stagnant water standing in rotted stumps, as well as portals to subterranean works and traditional places for exchange. The use of a hollow tree as an entrance to an underground distillery is illustrated by Crutcher (p. 48), but the mercantile function of the hollow tree or stump is probably more familiar:

The "hollowing tree" was always a well-known spot. This retail outlet worked by a sign on a certain tree, saying, "Leave \$2.00 and come back in 15 minutes." In fifteen minutes the two dollars would be gone, and the jug would be filled, with neither party speaking to the other.¹⁰

8. Carr (p. 28) offers these additional synonyms for illegal whiskey: *tiger's sweat*, *panther's breath*, *alky*, *squirrel whiskey*, *sugarhead*, and *soda pop moon* ("usually bottled in discarded soft-drink bottles"), as well as these regionalisms (p. 166): *cannon-ball swig*, *preacher's lye*, *dead man's dram*, *swamp root*, *shinny*, *roasting ear wine*, *balm of Gilead*, *kickapoo joy juice*, *who shot John*, and *teedum barrel*. Although he does not provide regional labels, Carr carefully distinguishes the meanings of most of the terms.

9. J. S. Hall, in *Sayings from Old Smoky* (Asheville, N. C.: Cataloochee Press, 1972), p. 133, glosses the sentence "His head is full of swamp water" with information about magic power and witchcraft related to stump water, but without reference to liquor.

10. Carr, pp. 59–60. Also, as reported by an elderly folk informant in Sevier County at the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, an alcoholic ancestor used a stump in dealing away most of the family land for moonshine. The wastrel called the stump "Knoxville," where he would announce to the community he was going for the day. This served to cover his disappearance and to alert the moonshiner, another neighbor, that a delivery was expected.

The same function is described by Grandpa Jones in "Mountain Dew," *Grandpa Jones Sings His Greatest Hits* (King Records 554):

There's a big hollow tree down the road here from me
Where you lay down a dollar or two;
You stroll 'round the bend and you come back again:
There's a jug full of good old mountain dew.

The use of a hollow tree as a distribution point brings the discussion back to the Tennessee blind tiger, but without a definitive genealogy for the many sons of Nancy Whisky. However, the best place to carry that investigation forward is out there in the field, with the help of authorities like Thomas Pyles and the moonshiners themselves, but always with the proofs of a rigorous evaluation procedure.

U.S. AND ITS CONGENERS

Copy editors may exercise a little-recognized influence on such forms as *US* and *USA* (*American Speech* 45 [1970]: 159). Most publishing houses I have worked for insist that *United States* (unmodified noun) be spelled out and that the initials *US* never be used except as modifiers (*U.S. imperialism*). *USA* is rarely used but would be subject to the same rules as *US*. *US of A* would be considered unacceptable except for facetious effect or as appropriate dialogue for a member of the so-called Silent Majority (the TV character Archie Bunker is often given this or similar lines: "That don't happen in the good old US of A, meathead!"). *United States* or *America* might be used interchangeably for variety in a paragraph overloaded with one or the other, but *United States* would be preferred in most cases. *The States* would be considered too informal except in dialogue for appropriate characters (for example, soldiers). Newspapers, however, have different rules: rewriters, particularly for tabloids, might use *US* as a noun or adjective because of space considerations. This is only one example of "standard copy editing" and hence of the copy editor's small but widespread influence on readers and indirectly perhaps on speakers.

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