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The Moonshine Capital of the World: A Visual History of Untaxed Whiskey in Franklin County, Virginia

We often take horizons for granted. In any given photograph of the great outdoors, the horizon not only divides the earth from the sky, the terrestrial from the celestial, but also provides the observer with a sense of orientation. Yet the horizon occupies little more than a sliver of the first photograph (figure 1). Instead, a large earthen wall looms over the entire scene, occupying most of the background. The image records more than mere topography, however. Environmental historians know better than anyone that the lay of the land can shape the culture and ecology of a place in profound ways. In some cases, it can even serve as an accomplice.

This essay examines the production of untaxed whiskey, otherwise known as “moonshine,” in southern Appalachia over the past ninety years. Unlike traditional histories, which prioritize the written word and treat visual sources as little more than window dressing, this essay offers a critical reading of historical photographs. Foregrounding a visual analysis of the images and using textual sources to fill gaps (rather than vice versa) yields several unexpected insights. Collectively, these photos reveal that the agricultural, technological,

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Figure 1. The Ingram family poses with a turnip-style moonshine still, Franklin County, Virginia, 1929. Note that every member of the family assisted in the production of moonshine during Prohibition. Credit: "P-682 Ingram Family Still, Franklin County, VA," Lloyd Ingram Collection, Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College.

and social foundations of moonshine production have evolved over time. They also shed light on the environmental reach of otherwise invisible black-market networks, and they suggest new ways of thinking about the oft-strained tension between rural communities and federal agencies. Appropriately, all of the photos were taken in Franklin County, Virginia, long celebrated in music, film, and literature as "the moonshine capital of the world." Chosen for its superlative qualities, Franklin County offers instructive lessons about the evolving relationship between a place and its people that apply equally well to the rest of southern Appalachia and beyond.¹

Consider again the topography in [figure 1](#). Located along the easternmost edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in southwestern Virginia, Franklin County contains innumerable valleys, gorges, and hollows like the one in this photograph. Steep hillsides may have limited one's agricultural options, but they were just about perfect for concealing illicit behavior. Sure enough, the equipment in the photo transformed Franklin County's most abundant agricultural product (corn) into its most famous agricultural product (untaxed whiskey).

To understand how the process worked, start with the barrel on the far left. Though its contents are hidden behind wooden slats, the barrel undoubtedly contained "mash," a thick fermenting soup of

cornmeal, rye, malt, yeast, sugar, and water. Crucially, it also contained bacteria, which ate the sugars in the mash and excreted alcohol. The fermentation process produced a froth on top of the mixture, and when that froth dissipated, the mash was transferred in buckets from the barrel to the turnip-shaped boiler, which is located just right of center in the image. A fire burned beneath the boiler, which was constructed of rocks instead of wood for obvious safety reasons. The rocks were sealed with the same iron-rich red clay that gave the nearby community of Ferrum its name. When the mash reached approximately 173 degrees Fahrenheit, alcoholic steam rose toward the metal cap that was affixed to the top of the boiler. The cap would then direct the alcoholic steam through a copper coil, which was immersed in a water-filled wooden box known as a flake stand. This, in turn, would condense the alcoholic vapor into alcoholic liquid. In fact, the photograph shows this process quite clearly, with steam visible just above the flake stand and liquid moonshine trickling out from the bottom of the wooden box and into a bucket.

There are also several clues about when the photograph was taken. Consider the technology. The turnip-shaped boiler was most popular during the 1920s and 1930s but would fall out of favor by the 1950s. In similar fashion, miniature barrels like those in the foreground had been largely abandoned by mid-century. Collectively, these observations suggest that the photograph was taken around the time of Prohibition and that would make sense. Demand for black-market whiskey surged following the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, and this led to something of a bonanza in Franklin County.

The people offer their own lessons. Some might find the presence of women surprising. After all, popular representations of moonshiners, from the old Snuffy Smith comics to the new *Moonshiners* television show on the Discovery Channel, generally depict the guild as being all male.² This image proves that women also made moonshine. We should not be terribly surprised. Moonshining was a commercial enterprise, one that required a reliable workforce. Mothers and daughters could stir mash just as effectively as fathers and sons.

The illegality of their behavior would help explain why some of the people are brandishing guns, but it does not explain why they are all facing the camera. Illicit activities are usually clandestine, but these people are posing with incriminating evidence. The woman holding a pistol (second from left) appears to be smiling. Such blatant disregard for the rule of law says something about the people, but it says even more about their community. They clearly did not fear reproach from anyone. Federal authorities seldom visited remote and rugged Franklin County, and local authorities were not only permissive but also encouraging. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Franklin County's chief prosecutors and its entire police force protected

moonshiners from federal interference in exchange for a cut of the profit. Federal agents discovered the racket in 1935, resulting in more than eighty indictments on charges that ranged from tax evasion to murder.³ These crackdowns generated headlines across the nation, but they failed to destroy the county's moonshine industry.

As evidence, consider the next photograph (figure 2). The slightly higher resolution and the clothing both evoke mid-century, but there are other clues. Once again, the image captures a specific iteration of ever-evolving technology, thus making it easier to estimate the time period. Note that the wooden barrel that housed fermenting mash is gone. So too is the stone-and-clay boiler that distilled alcoholic vapors from the mash. Instead, both pieces of equipment have been combined into a single oblong container known as a "submarine," seen here on the right. Constructed from wood and galvanized sheet metal, each submarine held close to 800 gallons of fermenting mash and was thus considerably larger than its turnip-style predecessor, which held only 100 gallons. As a result, nearly all of Franklin County's moonshiners were using submarine stills by the 1950s and 1960s. The technology may have looked different, but the principles of distillation remained the same. The man on the right is stoking a fire beneath the submarine to heat the mash, and someone has placed a rock on top of the cap to prevent the rising pressure from blowing it asunder. Alcoholic steam condenses as it passes through the flake stands, and the man on the left collects the alcoholic liquid that trickles forth.

Other details should also factor into our analysis. Unlike the previous image, this one shows people tending to the equipment, which means they are not facing the camera. This may have been deliberate. By the 1950s, Franklin County's moonshiners could no longer count on local authorities for their protection, meaning they had to adopt ever more clandestine practices. This still is hidden amid a thicket of trees on a hillside, and the photo contains no horizon at all. Furthermore, the people in this photo almost certainly do not own the still. Gone were the days when moonshine was produced by family units. By the 1950s, moonshiners were far more likely to hire temporary workers at their still sites, allowing the people who were bankrolling the operation to keep their hands clean. These changes were subtle but significant. Far from disappearing into the history books, Franklin County's moonshiners were developing new technology to dramatically increase the yield, and they were attracting new investors who expected to turn a profit. Both of these observations suggest a vibrant industry that was poised for growth.

A photograph from 1972 bears this out. It shows that Franklin County's moonshiners began to scale production in dramatic fashion (figure 3). The site in this photograph contains twenty-four stills arranged in two orderly rows. Collectively, they could have held more



Figure 2. Two unidentified men operate a submarine-style moonshine still, Franklin County, Virginia, 1950s. By mid-century, most moonshiners had learned that stills made with galvanized sheet metal were far more efficient than ones made with rock and mud. Credit: "Moonshining photo #78," Earl Palmer Collection, Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College.

than 19,000 gallons of mash. Rather than operating all of the submarines at once, moonshiners moved the cap from one still to the next on an as-needed basis. While it is difficult to tell, the heating process was also much different. Whereas previous generations had stoked fires beneath the boilers to help distill alcoholic steam, these stills utilized propane burners. This innovation standardized the heating process, reduced the threat of exploding stills, and, perhaps most importantly, helped eliminate telltale smoke.

Even the two sacks lying in the foreground are significant. They both contain sugar, which was an increasingly important ingredient in moonshine by the 1970s. Fermenting corn naturally produces sugar but in frustratingly finite amounts. Moonshiners could thus extend the life of their mash by dumping sugar into the submarine and feeding the bacteria inside. Doing so not only increased yield but also expedited the fermentation process. A batch of sugar-based moonshine could be distilled in seventy-two hours, whereas corn-based moonshine without any additives could take as many as ten days. Adding sugar eventually degraded the quality of the product, however, and could only be repeated a few times before the last drop of

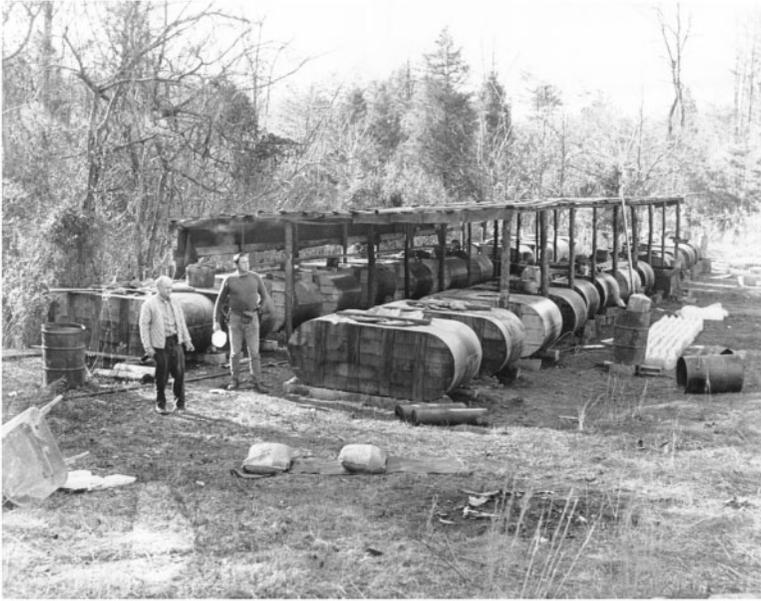


Figure 3. ABC agents stand next to a large-scale moonshine operation, Franklin County, Virginia, 1972. An increased reliance on imported sugar (foreground) allowed moonshiners to scale production in dramatic fashion. Credit: "Photo 60-Revenue Agents at Massive Submarine Still, Franklin County, VA 1972," Morris Stephenson Collection, Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College.

alcohol was obtained.⁴ This growing reliance on sugar had several far-reaching consequences. After all, the moonshine profession is sometimes celebrated for its self-reliant nature, but moonshiners in Franklin County had to import their product's most essential ingredient from distant places. Meanwhile, just as the networks of production expanded, so too did the networks of distribution. Sugar allowed moonshiners to scale production to unprecedented levels, which helped them reach a greater number of markets up and down the East Coast.

Other changes are likewise telling. The flake stand that condensed the alcoholic steam into potable liquid remained a necessary component, but the wooden crates of yesteryear had been replaced with metal barrels by the 1970s. Another important technological innovation can be seen on the right side of the photograph: plastic jugs. These containers could not be stacked as easily as miniature barrels, and their transparency left little to the imagination, but their remarkably cheap price quickly rendered them a mainstay among moonshiners in the late twentieth century. Two other details also warrant greater scrutiny. First, most of the submarines were located beneath a makeshift wooden shed-like structure. This was not done to protect the stills from the elements but, rather, from prying eyes. By the

1970s, law enforcement agents at the state-level Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) had begun utilizing helicopters and airplanes when searching for stills in Franklin County. Hiding the stills beneath a roof was the moonshiners' best version of anti-aircraft technology. In fact, this site was only discovered when the moonshiners expanded production beyond their protective covering. And this leads to our second detail, the people. The journalist who snapped this photo, Morris Stephenson of the *Franklin News-Post*, wrote that people often ask how he ever got moonshiners to pose with their criminal operation. In fact, they were not moonshiners, but ABC agents. The photograph was taken after the stills had been discovered but before they had been destroyed.⁵

Rather than forcing Franklin County's moonshiners out of business, the risk of getting caught forced them underground, sometimes literally. The next photograph, which appears to show a well-tended cemetery, complete with tombstones and flowers, offers one such example (figure 4). The only thing that seems slightly amiss is the man holding what appears to be a broken tombstone. Closer inspection reveals that the well-tended grounds of the cemetery were not grounds at all. Instead, the ground was a well-tended roof. The headstones were nothing more than cinder blocks that had been painted white in an attempt to dupe airborne ABC agents. The man in the photograph is one of the ABC agents who discovered the ruse. There were neither caskets nor corpses buried six feet beneath him, but there were eighteen submarine stills containing more than 11,000 gallons of mash and more than 400 gallons of distilled moonshine (figure 5). ABC agents estimated that the operation had produced more than 120,000 gallons of moonshine prior to its discovery in 1979.⁶ By documenting the dramatic lengths to which moonshiners would go, these photos help convey the challenges that law enforcement faced. State officials persistently tried to combat the moonshine trade in Franklin County, but their efforts were nearly always thwarted by sympathetic locals who rather liked the county's notorious claim to fame. This lenient attitude helped the county's moonshine industry prosper. By the 1990s, ABC agents were seizing about 20,000 gallons of moonshine in Franklin County every year, but they estimated the county's actual output was closer to 600,000 gallons per year.⁷

The next photo from the late 1990s helps explain how it all came crashing down (figure 6). There is no horizon and no hint of the outdoors because moonshiners had largely moved their operations indoors. The image contains older technology that was once cutting-edge, like submarine stills and plastic jugs, but it features new innovations as well. The mash ferments inside a large metal vat rather than barrels, and it is heated with electricity rather than propane. Moving inside allowed the moonshiners to utilize power outlets and



Figure 4. ABC agent stands in faux cemetery, Franklin County, Virginia, 1979. The agent is showing that the headstones in this "cemetery" are nothing more than painted cinder blocks. Credit: "Photo 50-Revenue Agent Lifting Fake Headstone at 'Cemetery Still,'" Morris Stephenson Collection, Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College.

fluorescent lighting, but it did not prevent them from getting caught. Once again, the person in this photo is not a moonshiner but, rather, a law enforcement official. His smile and his demeanor resemble a big-game hunter posing with a trophy, but his camouflaged clothing is even more instructive. Military fatigues would seem more appropriate for federal troops and that would make sense. This photo was taken during the largest federal raid in the county's history.

Convinced that state officials were unable to suppress Franklin County's thriving moonshine industry, and that local officials were unwilling, federal agents in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) orchestrated and executed Operation Lightning Strike in the summer of 1999. Drawing upon the full resources of the federal government, the ATF sought to crush Franklin County's moonshine empire once and for all. Agents were not only outfitted with combat fatigues, but they were also given night-vision goggles, car-tracking devices, hidden surveillance cameras, phone-tracing systems, and other high-tech gadgetry. They busted sites of production like the one in the photo, but they also raided the moonshiners' suppliers. When federal agents raided Helms Farmers' Exchange in the county seat of Rocky Mount (with a population of 4,500), they learned that the small general store sold several million pounds of sugar every



Figure 5. ABC agents beneath the faux cemetery, Franklin County, Virginia, 1979. Below the grounds of the “cemetery,” agents discovered eighteen submarine stills and more than 11,000 gallons of mash. Credit: “Photo F-Revenue Agents at ‘Cemetery Still,’ Franklin County, Virginia,” Morris Stephenson Collection, Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College.

year. The store’s owners protested that they had never made moonshine and that the goods they sold were perfectly legal. Federal agents were not convinced.⁸ Instead, they froze bank accounts and seized property, including homes, cars, and land. They sought to punish not only moonshiners and suppliers but also family members. These sorts of tactics were unprecedented in Franklin County’s history, and they were devastatingly effective.⁹

As proof, consider this photograph of a moonshine jar (figure 7). It comes emblazoned with a label and all of the trappings of proper commoditization, including the name of the brand (Franklin County’s Finest), the batch (1st Sugar), the potency (90 proof), and a list of ingredients (cane and rye). Rather than hiding, the moonshiner who produced this batch has signed his name across the front of the jar. He claims to use the exact same recipe as his recent ancestors, meaning the product should be identical. The only thing that is different—the only thing that makes this batch legitimate—is its taxed status. Now that federal authorities have secured their cut of the profits, one can legally buy Franklin County moonshine at any liquor store in Virginia.



Figure 6. ABC agent poses with stills during Operation Lightning Strike, Franklin County, Virginia, 1990s. While state-level ABC agents participated in the raid, Operation Lightning Strike was planned and executed at the federal level by the ATF. Credit: C. J. Fairfield, "Last 'Lightning Strike' Agent Retires from ABC," *Franklin News-Post*, April 11, 2018.

The label also features Morris Stephenson's famous photograph of ABC agents busting a still in 1972, highlighting the extent to which moonshining has become an object of nostalgia. There was a time not so long ago when talking about one's connections to moonshine could, and sometimes did, result in murder, yet former moonshiners now join former law enforcement officials on panels at the annual Ferrum Folklife Festival to reminisce about halcyon days. Moonshiners once hid in the thickets of Endicott to evade detection. Now out of work, they help narrate guided bus tours that highlight the county's colorful past. Indeed, Franklin County's moonshine heritage has inspired annual festivals, numerous books, and a major motion picture, *Lawless*, that stars Shia LeBeouf, Jessica Chastain, and Tom Hardy. In other words, memories of Franklin County's recent history remain strong, but memories may have to suffice.

When viewed in sequence, these photographs offer several intriguing lessons about the environmental history of moonshine in southern Appalachia. They show that sugar gradually replaced corn as the primary ingredient during the twentieth century and that moonshine grew increasingly divorced from its agricultural origins as a result. Moonshiners who originally relied on homegrown ingredients increasingly relied on imported goods, which ultimately left them more vulnerable. Sugar also allowed moonshiners to scale production,



Figure 7. A jar of legal (taxed) moonshine, Franklin County, 2015. Note that the label recycles Morris Stephenson's photograph from 1972. Credit: Photograph by Giant Step Design.

which meant that their black-market distribution networks reached ever more distant places. In similar fashion, technological innovations like plastic and electricity changed how their product was manufactured and where it was delivered. Meanwhile, these photographs also shed light on the evolving relationship between rural communities and the federal government. They capture an escalating game of cat and mouse, but they also reveal a clear trend. The militarization of local police and the triumph of taxation both help communicate a subtle, but undeniable, shift in the balance of power away from local communities and toward state and federal governments. Finally, if the photographs appear to show the demise of Franklin County's moonshine industry, they also show its resolve. Moonshining has been called the "second-oldest profession" and not without good reason.¹⁰ The desire to imbibe spirits predates the oldest civilizations

and is at least as strong as the desire to avoid paying taxes. These impulses helped citizens of Franklin County build an illegal empire that flourished in the twentieth century, but that empire has since fallen into ruin. It remains to be seen whether moonshine will ever flow again.

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Notes

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1. *Lawless*, directed by John Hillcoat (Culver City: Red Wagon Entertainment, 2012); Morris Stephenson, *A Night of Makin' Likker and Other Stories from the Moonshine Capital of the World* (n.p., 2012); Charles D. Thompson, *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); William B. Hopkins, "Another View of the Great Moonshine Conspiracy Trial of 1935," *Virginia Bar Association: News Journal* 36 (Winter 2009–10): 18–21; Vaughan Webb, Andrew Pauly, and Roddy Moore, "Moonshining," in *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture 14: Folklife*, ed. Glenn Hinson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 330; Matt Bondurant, *The Wettest County in the World: A Novel Based on a True Story* (New York: Scribner, 2008); T. Keister Greer, *The Great Moonshine Conspiracy Trial of 1935* (Rocky Mount: History House Press, 2002); Rodger Doss, *Shine* (Salem: Docar Publications, 1996); Thrillbillyz, "Franklin County Moonshine," recorded on *Romp!*, Thrillbillyz Muzik, 1995; Jean Shepard, "Franklin County Moonshine," recorded on *It's a Man Every Time*, Capitol Records, 1965. For more on the history of moonshining beyond Virginia, see Bruce E. Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists: The Battle over Alcohol in Southern Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).
2. Famous exceptions to this rule include the Morrison Sisters on *The Andy Griffith Show* and Granny Clampett on the *Beverly Hillbillies*.
3. Thompson, *Spirits of Just Men*; Hopkins; "Another View"; Greer, *Great Moonshine Conspiracy*.
4. "Pity the Poor Moonshiner! Sugar Shortage Is Headache," *Washington Post*, May 31, 1945, 4; Webb, Pauly, and Moore, "Moonshining," 330.
5. Stephenson, *A Night of Makin' Likker*, 60.
6. "Five Va. Men Sentenced for Cemetery Still," *Washington Post*, May 3, 1980, B2; Stephenson, *A Night of Makin' Likker*, 84–87.

7. Holly Roberson, "ABC Task Force Sniffs Out Moonshiners," *Roanoke Times*, April 6, 1998, A1; Peter Finn, "Authorities Still Trying to Stem Va. Bootlegging," *Washington Post*, February 24, 1997, B3.
8. Heidi Juersivich, "Helmses Are 'the Nicest Guys,'" *Roanoke Times*, May 13, 1999, A1; Rex Bowman, "Major Moonshine Operation Raided," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 8, 1999, B3.
9. Peter T. Kilborn, "U.S. Cracks Down on Rise in Appalachia Moonshine," *New York Times*, March 23, 2000, A1.
10. Jess Carr, *The Second Oldest Profession: An Informal History of Moonshining in America* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972).