

MAYPOP WHISKEY AND HOUND DAWGS

By Dr. R. B. Holliman, Dublin, Virginia

When I was just a little sprat, about 10 years old, occasionally I had the pleasant opportunity to live with my great Uncle Mute (James Mutious Baker, 1885 - 1965) and my great Aunt Ila in Newtonville, Fayette County, Alabama. This was in primitive times in the 1930s. Uncle Mute taught me almost everything that a 10 year old boy ought to know and I loved him, a love that was exceeded only by a love for my parents.

It was in his company that I learned the useful quality of maypops. These vine-like weeds grew in fence rows and old fields and I thought that the fruit they produced were just wild gourds. When you stomped on them, they went "POP", thus their name was established. Being young and inattentive, I didn't realize that maypops had a long and important history in alternative herbal medicine and, locally, in the production of a very tasty "moonshine"!

Before we consider the maypop's role in illicit distilling, maybe a few words on their alleged herbal medicinal qualities would be in order.

When the Spanish Conquistadors landed in Florida in the 16th Century and began to explore what would become Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, they observed the beautiful and strange flowers that appeared on these vines. They coined the name: "Passion Flower" because they saw in the floral parts the image of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the pattern of the stamens. Passion Flower is the State Flower of Tennessee. Little did the Spaniards know that the Indians had been using the flowers, leaves and fruit for centuries in brews and tonics for the treatment of insomnia, convulsions, depression, anxiety, and as a sedative, a poultice to heal bruises, a tea to wash sore and tired eyes, a remedy for epilepsy, and as a treatment for drug and alcohol addiction.

The pulp from the fruits later became a popular component in jams and deserts. Even today, herbal supplements derived from the flowers and fruits are recommended in the treatment of fatigue, tension headaches, nervous tension, muscle tension, irritability, anxiety, the pain of shingles, irritable bowel syndrome, hypertension, nausea, ADD (attention deficit disorder) in children, and are alleged to stop the growth of certain malignancies and improve the sex drive !

If you are a believer in alternative medicine, maypop extracts appear to be one of the "gold standards" of herbal medicines. Scientific and medical research have yet to prove the value of these herbal extracts.

Now, that having been said, let's go back to the use of maypops in "moonshine" whiskey. Since most moonshiners don't invite 10 year old boys to participate in the production of whiskey mash ("beer") or to view this procedure, I can only reiterate

stories I have heard about maypop inclusion in "white lightning". When the fruits are ripe, usually around the time of the first frost, they fall off the vines and are harvested from the ground. Most are green or yellow, about 3 - 4 inches in diameter, and filled with seeds and a sweet pulp. They are crushed to release their essence and dropped into the corn mash with the sugar and yeast. When the "beer" has reached the proper point of fermentation (maximum alcohol production) the solids are strained out and the liquor is poured into the copper cooker and distilled. The steam is passed through a copper condenser immersed in cold water and the resulting liquid is caught in a jug, barrel or tub depending on the capacity of the still. Being 10 years old, I was never invited to "sample" regular "white lightning" and compare it to maypop whiskey but I was assured that the maypops added a particularly delicate and favorable flavor.

Now, my Uncle Mute was not a heavy drinker but he did enjoy a "nip" of quality maypop "moonshine" occasionally. And it was socially graceful to keep a little on hand for adult company. I was never told in advance when we were going to make a purchase but it always occurred spontaneously for me on a dark night in good dry weather. A dry road bed was prerequisite to getting to the "moonshiner's" house. I might be asked if I wanted to go somewhere with my favorite blue tick hound. Of course, I always wanted to be with my Uncle Mute regardless of weather or destination. I would whistle up old Charlie, my favorite dog, and a pack of 3 or 4 hounds would assemble. We would all pile into the back seat of an old, battered, 1929, A-Model Ford sedan. I know now that Uncle Mute let me take the dogs along as a distraction from the express purpose of the trip! He acted like I didn't know what we were going to do and I was smart enough to not ask questions and keep my mouth shut!

We would drive down the main dirt road (now State Route 171) to Newtonville, turn off to the west on County Route 100 and soon be on a nearly impassable logging road in the piney woods. It was as dark as a tar bucket with the lid on! Presently, we would pull up into a small clearing and I could barely see a house set back in the trees. Uncle Mute would admonish me to be quiet, keep the dogs quiet, and "stay put". He would get out and go knock on the door. It would open and a hand with a kerosene lamp would appear. The light would disappear and the door would close and I was cloistered in the pitch black dark with a pack of dogs for a little while. I felt safe in the company of all my canine friends. Presently, the door would open and Uncle Mute would return to the car carrying a large dark object which he placed on the floor on the passenger side of the front seat and we would backtrack home.

At home the dogs and I piled out and the dark object materialized into a gallon ceramic jug with a corn cob stopper. Uncle Mute would tie the jug handle to a small manila rope hanging from a Chinaberry tree in the back yard next to the smokehouse. He would pull the jug up into the dense cluster of Chinaberries and leaves and tie off the rope on a peg in the wall of the smokehouse. Thereafter when he needed a "nip", he would untie the rope, lower the jug, remove the stopper with his left hand while balancing the jug in the fold of his right arm, give the rope a little slack until the jug tilted and have a little "short snort"! The stopper returned to the jug and the jug returned

to the seclusion of the Chinaberries and leaves.

This ritual was always observed as we exited the back door of the house to round up the dogs in preparation for a coon hunt. All adult males in the hunting party were invited to participate in the "short snort" routine.

In 70 years I have heard of many clever ways to hide illicit "moonshine" but Uncle Mute's technique was the most unique yet functional. Uncle Mute and Aunt Ila are gone, their house is gone, the "moonshiner" is long dead, the Model-A disappeared as junk years ago, the smokehouse is gone and the Chinaberry tree was cut down, but with this story, memories will live on.

THOSE WERE THE DAYS !!

By Dr. Rhodes B. Holliman, Dublin, Virginia

Once upon a time, and that was a long time ago, there was a boy who lived for the opportunity to come to Fayette County, AL (Newtonville) and stay with his great aunts and great uncles, hunt and fish, and get back to the frontier environment away from the clamor of city life. His pleading to his father was perpetual, rain or shine, hot or cold, any season, for: "let's go see Uncle Eura, Aunt Mae, Uncle Mute, Aunt Ila, Uncle Virgil, Aunt Pearl," knowing full well that the roads might be impassable in wet weather and the old 1929 Ford A-Model sedan might break down, but the kinfolk would always be happy to see us unannounced. That boy was this writer.

This was a time when the crossroads at Newtonville were almost as primitive as when the Creeks and Cherokees moved out and my ancestors migrated in from South Carolina in the 1830s. There was no pavement south of Fayette, no electricity, only crank phones, no municipal water, and no sewage treatment. Instead of having 6 rooms and a bath, most of the homes were a dog trot, "4 rooms and a path!" These wonderful kinfolks never owned a gas or electric stove, a refrigerator or even an ice box, a washing machine or dryer, electric lights, running water, a tub or shower or any indoor plumbing. If you wanted water there was a hand-dug well in the back yard. Needed to wash clothes ? There was a big, cast iron, 3 legged pot in the back yard, in which you put water and under which you built a fire. When the water was hot, you put the dirty clothes in with some homemade lye soap, pulled out the wet garments and scrubbed them over a wash board and rinsed with cold water. Needed a cookstove ? There was a chop block near the well where you split stove wood. Needed a bath ? There was a 16 gallon washtub in front of the hearth or wood stove. Needed lights ? Kerosene lamps did the trick. Needed to store cooked food ? There was the pie safe. Needed heat in the winter ? Back to the chop block or crosscut saw. Needed air conditioning ? Get out your cardboard church fan. Needed to go somewhere ? There was a buggy and a horse or mule in the barn. A few "wealthy" folk had a Model T or Model A Ford. Needed groceries ? Go to the storm cellar and pick out some home canned vegetables and/or take a sack of corn or grain to the local grist mill and come back with meal or flour. Needed meat ? Go out to the smokehouse and cut down a ham, bacon or "sow belly." Needed a doctor ? Dr. Blakeney could be reached on your crank phone and he would come to your house in his antique car or on horseback. Needed to satisfy a sense of visceral urgency ? There was a path to the outhouse. It could be a "one holer or a two holer." Worried about cholesterol ? What was cholesterol ?

Everyone was happy and didn't seem to miss anything in life and always looked forward to family visiting, family reunions, church homecomings and revivals and all day singing and "eating on the grounds."

It was in this wonderful world of simplicity that I grew to manhood never feeling

that I was missing anything.

Hunting was my passion. A great uncle named Eura Carter (Uncle Eura) lived in southern Fayette County near Patton's Chapel and very close to the Sipsey River.

Uncle Eura had a fox terrier named "Beans" that was the finest squirrel dog that ever put a nose to the ground. Beans was a silent tracker: he didn't bark until he had the squirrel treed and then he would bark one time. You had to keep Beans in sight because if you didn't hear his solo bark, you would lose him and he would hold a squirrel up a tree for hours. He was never a house pet. The only time he ever showed any friendly emotion was when we came out of the house with a shotgun and indicated that we were going hunting. Then he was a bundle of energy leading the way !

In those days the virgin timber in the Sipsey Bottoms was composed of giant gum, water oak, beech, hickory and other trees that grew 100+ feet tall and produced a canopy so dense that sunlight could not reach the forest floor except in the dead of winter. There was very little undergrowth and you could walk through the forest without being encumbered by thickets of briars, brush and saplings. It was in this pristine wilderness that I first went hunting at age 4 with my dad, Uncle Eura and Beans.

Beans trotted along ahead, nose to the ground and presently he barked and we saw him. If you couldn't see the squirrel, you just got down on your knees and looked up Beans' nose and there was the quarry ! If the squirrel moved, Beans would move, always keeping his nose pointing dead on target. Well, Beans was pointing, dad was loading his shotgun and I was standing under the tree looking straight up. There was a tremendous "BANG", a thrashing in the tree top, and the squirrel fell directly on my head ! Luckily the squirrel was DOA (dead on arrival) and did not bite or claw me. From that moment on, I was hooked (addicted) to squirrel hunting and my question arose immediately: "when can I have a gun?" Such a question today would probably instill a sense of horror and fear in a city bred parent but, "in the good old days," a conservative father, reared on a farm, would give this question some serious consideration. I had to wait until I was 6 years old and learn hunter safety and be strong enough to carry a firearm. At 6, I became the happiest child in the Sipsey Swamps with my new .410 single barrel while dad carried the ammunition. Beans would find the squirrel, dad would stand behind me and hand me a shell and another squirrel would "bite the dust." That gun produced a mighty kick for a 6 year old but the harvest it produced offset the pain and bruise.

In the days of the Great Depression, squirrel meat was a staple source of protein in Fayette County and many other rural areas of the South: par-boiled and then fried or cooked as squirrel and dumplings. Yum ! I learned quickly that the hunter is responsible for cleaning his harvest and Uncle Eura was a master teacher of the technique for skinning a squirrel. Any coon hounds standing around would be happy to eat the raw squirrel hides, hair and all, in one gulp !

As I grew older and larger, night time coon and possum hunting were added to my

list of favorite things to do. There was much sadness when Beans departed this life. I continued to hunt squirrels with hounds but none of them could ever match the skill of Beans. I finally resorted to "still hunting": going into the woods and finding a likely spot near some beech or hickory mast or a squirrel den in a hollow tree, sitting very still and quiet, and watching for movement. When I was about 14 years old, using this technique, I killed 6 squirrels in one giant red oak den tree. I would shoot, the squirrel would hit the ground, I would mark the spot but not move, and wait for the next one to appear. This kind of hunting takes patience and perseverance.