



**Robert Lee Bates (1907-2004)**

*On the day before his 97th birthday, the Old Settlers Gazette interviewed Robert Lee Bates at his home in Licking, Missouri. Mr. Bates grew up in the small mill community of Hazleton on the Big Piney River. We talked about river men and his teenage years as a bootlegger with his father. Following is an excerpt about those days in northern Texas County.*

**Old Settler's Gazette:** Were there ever any stills in the backwoods around here that you know of?

**Robert Lee Bates:** Well, I did that back in the Prohibition days. We had a copper still and copper line to run it through and had a big spring where we got the water and we soured the mash in four 50 gallon barrels and they was put inside of a big wooden box and a lantern put in there to keep it warm so it would work. Then one time the Sheriff come down, him and the Prosecuting Attorney from Houston came down to search our place, and there wasn't no still on our place a-tall and no liquor and no mash but he took us here to Licking, me and my dad. I was only 16 or 17 years old at that time. So they had the trial here before a Justice of the Peace and this Justice bound us over to Circuit Court in Houston and we were under a bond, 300 or 3000 dollars, I don't remember which.

A fellow by the name of Virgil deForest had a business here in Licking, he's not living any more, was in there and my dad went out and got three bondsmen that lived here in Licking and brought 'em back. My dad was a Mason and he knew a lot of people and he come back and this Justice of the Peace was writing out the bond and Virgil deForest pulled out his pocketbook and wrote out a check and he says, "Don't fool with that, here's a check for their bond."

## An Interview with Robert Lee Bates

by Jan Primas

He [Judge] looked at it and he [deForest] says, "If you don't believe that check's good, I got the money right here in my pocket. He [Judge] said, "Oh, your check's alright." But the next morning, as soon as the bank was open, that Justice of the Peace was there to see if he did have money. When he went, he asked the cashier if that check was good. He [cashier] said, "That check's good for twenty thousand dollars right now." And back in them days, twenty thousand dollars was a lot of money.

Anyway, we had Bill Hyatt out of Houston, the best lawyer in Houston, for our lawyer and he told my dad that it's no use for you guys to get on the witness stand. He says that guy's going to bind you over to Circuit Court. They didn't have any evidence. I don't know what they took us for. They didn't find no whiskey, no still, or anything. All they found was a gallon jug in the house, a clear glass jug that I had picked up beside the highway and it had an odor of whiskey in it but nothing in it. I just picked it up and brought it to the house and he found it in the house. And my mother had, I think it was, a six gallon or quarts stone jar there that she made apple vinegar out of. Harry Kelly was the Sheriff. He got a bucket and he poured it all out and my dad told him "You might have to pay for that later on." He just poured it all out and he took us in.

When our case come due that next spring in April, why we was at Houston and my dad said he was going to put the case off until next term. We was under criminal charge at that court and it would be the next August in that same year. So he got the case put off 'til August but when we got ready to leave, my dad knew we had to fill out a new bond, that the old bond only held from the Justice of the Peace at Licking to Houston. So he talked to our lawyer there and he says what are they going to do about the bond and then our lawyer says if the Prosecuting Attorney hasn't got sense enough to put you under a new one, go on home. And that's what we done. His name was Dale Mobley and the Sheriff was Harry Kelly.

So we come on home and the next August, when he called our cases, why we wasn't there. So Dale Mobley says, "I'll just have their bondsmen just hunt 'em up." And the Judge over the Court says, Let me see your bond." He looked at it and he says "Why, you don't have them under a bond." He said, "That bond was out when they changed their case to the August term of court." He said the

Prosecuting Attorney stood there and looked like a crazy man. He was the Prosecuting Attorney and didn't know as much about the law as my Dad did. My Dad was a Justice of the Peace.

So we didn't go and later on, I don't know how it happened, but the Sheriff come down after me and I didn't go. I got away. And my Dad, I don't know. I left the country in April of 1925. I was 18 years old and I left the country and when the case came up the next time, the Judge of the Court threw it out. There was no evidence. But he had nothing to take us in on in the first place. He found no liquor, he found no still, or anything else. Only that jar of vinegar that my mother was making out of apples. They just didn't know what they was doin', I guess.

**OSG:** So, where did you have your still hidden where they couldn't find it?

**RLB:** Well, it wasn't on our place. They searched our whole farm, the house, downstairs, upstairs, and all. We was about three miles from our house at a spring that some people lived at in that part but they didn't live there anymore. It was a good spring. It was all walled up with rocks. That's what we used for the mash and you had to use it to keep your copper tubing cool 'cause when you boiled your whiskey, it went into that tubing, it turned into liquid, and came out the end of it.

**OSG:** Who did you sell your whiskey to? Who bought it?

**RLB:** Well, we sold it to, not to kids or young people, but mostly old people. Virgil deForest was one of our customers.



Confiscated still in Texas County, 1927. Courtesy of the Texas County Historical Society.



**OSG:** [Laughs] That's why he was so good to get you out of jail.

**RLB:** Yeah, and the Houston lawyer was one of our customers and some of those tie buyers that went through the country and bought ties for the railroad, they were customers. We've had young punks come there and want to buy whiskey. We told them we didn't have any. We wouldn't sell it to 'em. I had one guy to come there one day and he went to grade school there at Harmon Valley and he had a little flat bottle. He said "Would you sell me a dime's worth of whiskey?" I said, "I ain't got none." We turned them all down. That was in the Prohibition days.

**OSG:** How did you sell it? In little pint jars?

**RLB:** Oh, we sold it in quart food jars, half a gallon fruit jars, and if we could find bottles, we had bottles. We used to call 'em fruit jar drinkers back in them days.

I know one time there was two fellas come up to our place and they was camped down at Hazleton and they was from Mexico, Missouri. These two fellas drove up in a car that time. They said they was told by a fella at Hazleton who run the store that they could find some good liquor up here. Talked to my Dad and he said, "Whoever they was, told you wrong." We didn't know the people. They might be prohibition men so we turned them down.

One of 'em had a horseshoe pitching place in the lane. He said, "Do you pitch horse shoes?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, let's play a game." So we played a game and my Dad was talking to the other fella. When we got through, they left.

**The Profit is Alluring  
Temptation Is Too Great for Maker of Moonshine Whisky to Turn Their Backs**

Were it not for the large tax imposed by the government upon the manufacture of ardent spirits there would be no such thing as "moonshining." An old revenue officer who has had years of active experience in raiding stills and capturing blockaders, who has had many a battle with the outlaws and heard the bullets from their guns whistle past him, who has often crouched behind rocks and stood behind trees and who has done his share in trying to stamp out the miscreants, said a few days ago in speaking of blockaders and moonshine whisky:

"I have been a revenue officer for about 25 or 30 years and have seen all kinds of service under all kinds of circumstances, and I don't believe blockading or illicit distilling will ever be stopped. The reason for my belief (and I am not the only one) is simply this: There is such a large profit in the business that the temptation is too great for most of that class of people, regardless of the law, not heeding what has befallen fellow moonshiners. Even forgetting that they have once been caught or suspected and that the eyes of the officers are on them, they go right ahead and distill the grain. But at the same time they are on the lookout for raids and have their guns ready to send a piece of lead into their discoverer. They are good shots, too, hardly missing when they have a fair opportunity to take aim.

"I will give you an idea of how cheaply moonshine whisky is made and the immense profits that are reaped from its sale. They take one gallon of cheap black molasses, which costs about 30 cents; two bushels of meal, costing 65 cents per bushel, and some water. This is made into a mash, allowed to ferment and the stuff then goes through the process of evaporation. This amount of meal, water and molasses makes 40 gallons of whisky, which is sold for \$2 a gallon. Anyone can see the immense profit from this illustration.

"Latterly brown sugar has been used instead of molasses and is a great deal cheaper. The sugar costs about 4 1/2 cents a pound; there are 300 pounds in a barrel, making it cost \$13.50 per barrel. An immense amount of molasses is made from a barrel of sugar and the profit is almost twice as great as in using the first method. Distillers are captured every day, and when they are sent to prison others take their places and thus the perpetual flow of 'white lightning'".

*Pulaski County Democrat January 29, 1904.*

So that day I told my Dad, I said, "I'll go saddle my horse and go down there and see if they were down at Hazleton. So I tied a quart of whiskey on the back of my saddle and I rode down there. I asked 'em how the fishing was and all that. There was two other fellas, there was four of 'em, and they had a tent. So I said, "You guys still want liquor" and they said, "Yes, have you got to any?" I said, "Yes, I got a sample for ya." They said, "Let us taste it." So they all took a swig out of it and said, "Boy, that

stuff is good." I said, "Yes, it is. It's double run." It wasn't single run. So they said, "We'd like to have a couple gallons of it." I said, "Well, I'll bring it down to ya." I sold it at that time for ten dollars a gallon. Took it down there and they stayed a week and then they come up there and each one wanted a gallon to take back t' home with 'em. I said, "Well, I don't have that much in reserve but I got two gallon." So they took the two gallon and I never saw 'em anymore after that.



"Still in operation." Photo by Vance Randolph, 1931. Courtesy of Lyons Memorial Library, College of the Ozarks.



On 1 August 1920, Irene Bowling, then five years old, started school in Pleasant Grove, a two room school house, located across the street from what we all know as Moore's Greenhouse in Buckhorn. She remembers it as if it were yesterday. Ms. Laura Anderson was her teacher and Irene was scared to death.

At the end of fourth grade, Irene and her family moved to Hancock, Missouri, where she studied for the next four years, under her father. Irene's parents and many of her siblings were teachers, so her path was decided for her. Upon graduation from school, Irene took the teacher training class in Richland, Missouri and then sat for the teacher's exam. She passed and

immediately was hired to teach grades 1-8, at Prospect School, a one room school house located 10 miles south of Buckhorn. This slight 17 year old had 25 students under her tutelage and she was paid \$50.00 a month.

Irene lived at home and rode her horse, Dixie (for which she paid \$25.00) to and from the school. Because women were required to wear dresses and a dress was difficult to wear on a horse, Irene sewed the middle of the skirt together to make the riding more comfortable. The room was heated by a large potbelly stove, which the boys were required to fill. Near the end of the school day, the girls would tidy up the room and the boys would gather sticks for the potbelly stove which provided warmth in their classroom. Irene loved her children and ensured she stayed the night with the parents of each of her children. Altogether, here and in California, Irene taught school for twenty years.

Irene celebrated her 90th birthday on 23 July 2005.

The Law Office of Deborah A. Hooper salutes Irene and all of those other wonderfully dedicated teachers, who took the time to care about their students.

**HAPPY 90TH BIRTHDAY IRENE**