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Legendary Tales: Moonshine, Malice and Mayhem

The Great 1934 Bank Heist

On a Tuesday afternoon in August, five men pulled up in front of the Bank of Clayton on South Main Street. Three men with guns entered to find Miss Drewilla Bleckley, the bookkeeper, alone with one customer. Miss Drewilla ran out the back door screaming and into the Dover & Green Drugstore next door to give the alarm.

Dr. J.C. Dover, one of the bank's founders, ran out of the drugstore to find one of the robbers with a small machine gun. "Git back in thar, big boy", said the gunman as he fired at the doctor's feet. The gunfire scared the robber inside the bank into leaving with only a little over \$1,800 and jumping in the getaway car.

Sheriff Luther Rickman, who was getting a haircut across the street, ran outside where he deputized two men who proceeded to race into Reeves' Hardware to grab guns and ammunition. As the sheriff later told it, "We jumped in a little old Ford and started south in their direction."

Unbeknownst to their pursuers, the robbers had fifty pounds of nails which they began to strew over the road from the back window. Several cars were stopped by flat tires, but Sheriff Rickman crossed to the other side of the road and kept up the chase.

The robbers turned onto Eastman Mountain Road and headed toward South Carolina when they encountered a Rabun County road crew who had the road blocked with their machinery. When the road crew was too slow in getting out of the way, the machine guns came out to hurry them along.

The trail was lost until Wednesday afternoon when officers were notified that the robbers had wrecked and had held up a passing motorist and stolen his car. Considerable blood was found in the car, and a good description of the criminals went out.

Sheriff Luther Rickman did not get his man for another five years. Zade Sprinkles, the ringleader, served time in North Carolina for stealing the motorist's car. When Sprinkles was released in 1939, Sheriff Rickman was there to

transport him to Georgia to stand trial. Zade Sprinkles, one of the all-time great criminal names, admitted he was the getaway driver and made \$366 as his share of Rabun County's greatest bank heist.



The Bank of Clayton on South Main was organized in 1904 as Rabun County's first bank and the only bank for many decades.

The Moonshine War of 1883

There is a story that's been around these mountains for years about a Moonshine War. To hear or read about it now, it seems to contain a good portion of legend. However, several different people have documented the events, and all their accounts are very nearly the same.

Highlands, North Carolina was established in 1875 and settled by northerners, mostly from Massachusetts. They were temperate folk and opposed to the constant flow of moonshine that arrived in their community from Georgia. Lawmen from Georgia seemed to be unwilling or unable to stop the whiskey traffic. The situation resulted in much hostility between Highlands and Moccasin Township in Rabun County, currently the Satolah area. Finally the citizens of Highlands asked the Federal government to intervene.

In 1883, a man named Henson was arrested with a load of whiskey by Federal agents and taken to Highlands. He was confined in a room in the Smith Hotel, since there was no jail in Highlands. One of Henson's friends rode into Highlands to rescue him, but he succeeded only in getting arrested himself. When the moonshiners of Moccasin heard of these events, they sent a written declaration of war to the residents of Highlands.

Eighteen men from Moccasin arrived in Highlands to free the prisoners. The townspeople of Highlands barricaded themselves behind the Smith Hotel and the Georgia men camped out behind a building across the street. For three days and nights these opposing forces shot at every head that moved behind either building. Finally Tom Ford from North Carolina climbed to the roof of the Smith Hotel and with his rifle shot and killed a Georgia man named Ramey. The Georgia men withdrew and returned to Rabun County, but they left a letter declaring they would return with reinforcements after burying their fallen comrade.

Highlands sent runners to warn the adjoining communities and ask for help. Every man old enough to use a gun rushed to Highlands to defend the town. After three days the men from Moccasin did not return to Highlands to renew the assault, instead they sent a messenger with a letter. The letter stated that they knew that Highlands had to get all of their food and supplies from Walhalla, South Carolina, and the only road from Highlands to Walhalla passed through Moccasin Township. The letter declared they would kill any man from Highlands who attempted to pass over the Georgia road.

At first no one would attempt the trip to Walhalla, no matter how badly Highlands needed the supplies. Finally, Joel Lovin, an old man who made his living as a teamster, hitched up his

team and started for Walhalla. The real leaders of the Georgia moonshiners were the four Billingsley brothers. They really believed they had a right to make and sell liquor; the law did not apply to them. When Mr. Lovin reached the vicinity where the Billingsleys lived, they were riding to meet him with their rifles in their hands.

Mr. Lovin had no doubt the threat was real. He was not a religious man, but he decided it was a good time to pray. Holding the reins in one hand, he reached for his

rifle with the other and prayed, "Oh Lord, if you won't help me, don't help the Billingsleys." The Billingsley boys passed by, never raising their eyes to the old man, and Lovin continued on to Walhalla unharmed. The standoff between Highlands and Moccasin ended. The wagons rolled again to deliver supplies to Highlands, and the whiskey traffic to Highlands stopped, although whiskey production did not. Joel Lovin said he never knew if it was his prayer or his rifle that saved him from the Billingsley brothers.



The Highlands Inn began as the Smith Hotel in Highlands in 1880 and was the site of the Moonshine War of 1883.



Chub Wall, Rabun's Desperado

Miles Houston Wall was born on July 5, 1879. Known locally as "Chub," after the small bait fish, Wall had a slight build but a bigger-than-life attitude which earned him comparisons to Billy the Kid. Certainly, like the Kid, wherever Chub went trouble followed, as was first evidenced in 1897 and 1899 when he shot two different men, claiming self-defense in both incidents. While the scant reporting provided at the time backed up these claims, the shootings also were harbingers of what was to come.

In fact, Chub's next brush with the law came quickly when, in 1900, he shot and killed an Atlanta peddler. The trial was covered by a number of newspapers, one of which described Chub as *"a small boy or man weighing perhaps 110 pounds (with a) bright, intelligent face and... countenance...(who) looked anything else but a murderer."* Despite his youthful appearance, a Rabun jury found Chub guilty of murder and he was sentenced to hang. However, upon appeal this verdict was overturned, based on the argument that the jury became biased when they were told about Chub secretly working for the Internal Revenue Service in *"that moonshiner hotbed in the Northeast corner of Georgia."*

After retrial, Chub was again convicted of murder, but this time he was sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1903, with questions arising about the veracity of the testimony which had been given in court, Georgia's governor commuted Chub's sentence to time served. Soon thereafter Chub again was in trouble, this time for shooting an uncle who, according to different reports, either had refused to sign a petition for his earlier pardon or had testified against him. Although Chub was also convicted of this shooting, in 1906 he escaped from the Hall County jail where he was being kept for "safety" (whether his own or the citizens of Rabun is unclear), by using a saw provided by outside sources. Chub was finally turned over to Georgia officers in 1907 --- before escaping once again. This seems to have been one of Chub's talents. Various accounts of how he eluded the law, true or not, had him riding through town in a coffin, leaving the Sheriff of Hall County a letter explaining how he escaped from that jail, and later in life turning up at his mother's funeral dressed as a woman.



Chub Wall, center, being escorted by four lawmen to Gainesville for trial

As to Chub's 1906 and 1907 escapes, it was not until an unspecified four-figure reward was posted that an Internal Revenue agent apprehended Chub in 1913 and returned him to the Clayton jail. By this time, he was also facing federal charges of moonshining. As before, he served only a portion of this sentence before receiving a pardon from Governor Nathaniel E. Harris, in 1915. The announcement was published in the Atlanta Constitution, along with the Governor's surprise at receiving a kiss from Chub's 5-year-old daughter. A year later, Governor Harris received a less pleasant surprise when he garnered only 89 of 719 votes cast in Rabun, supposedly because of the pardon he had given Chub.

By 1919, Chub was again in trouble for moonshining and other unspecified charges that in aggregate resulted in a seven-year sentence. To no one's surprise, he soon escaped from the Rabun chain gang to which he had been assigned.

After his release from prison in Florida (date unknown), it is believed Chub lived somewhere in the western part of that state until his death when he was in his 90s. The date of his death and burial site also are unknown. That these and other details of Chub's life remain a mystery may in part be explained by his use of aliases not only in Georgia but also while in Mississippi and Florida.

Chub Wall's life was full of contradictions. His youthful appearance belied his reputation as an escape artist, and although he worked for the Internal Revenue Service he also was repeatedly arrested for moonshining. Chub obviously was an intelligent man, but he never learned how to stay out of trouble. Finally, although a seasoned criminal, Chub was a family man who found time to produce four children with his wife, Lucy Holden Wall, whom he married in 1900 along with two other illegitimate children. Making sense of these contradictions would be an impossible task, except perhaps for Hollywood screen writers.



Rabun County Historical Society
81 North Church Street
P.O. Box 921
Clayton, GA 30525

Phone: 706-782-5292
www.rabunhistory.org
E-mail: history@rabunhistory.org



- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Unknown Moonshiners in an Unknown Location

In many cases in Rabun, moonshiners were simply trying to feed their families in hard times. As someone said in an early 1970s interview: "I felt like I was making an honest dollar, and if it hadn't a been for that stuff, we'd a had an empty table around here."