

# Moonshine at Peck's Lake

by Bennie Blake

*Herewith, the long-awaited sequel to the Peck's Lake saga, in which THE TAB takes a walk back in time with Clarkdale resident John McMillan.*

Underground at Jerome, workers from almost 40 countries once fought to pull rich copper ore from the mines. Above ground, powerful men fought for control of the mines and the wealth they produced.

Among those coming to Jerome in 1908 was a three-year-old boy named John McMillan, along with his parents and younger brother. When John was seven, the family moved to Clarkdale, and on April 2, 1915, young McMillan watched from the school grounds as the smelter was "blown in" and smoke, for the first time, poured from the new smokestack. He vowed he would remember that day, and he has. It was his tenth birthday.

A recent visit found John McMillan relaxing in a light-blue recliner at his Clarkdale home. He spoke in a deep voice, gentle from years of using it that way. Slender and erect, he rocked and patted the chair with a certain tenderness. It was a birthday present from his "three lovely daughters," who had left just the day before, after celebrating his 84th birthday with John and his wife Clara.

McMillan was reminiscing that day about coming almost nose-to-nose with a full-grown beaver in the 600-foot tunnel that carries water from the Verde River into Peck's Lake. Then he went back to earlier memories about that tunnel. This is his account, as told to Bennie Blake.

"There was a man by the name of Shay. He had that ranch that the Tavascis later leased. He evidently knew a little bit about engineering. He decided to dig a tunnel through the hillside to get water over to a field that needed irrigating. A 600-foot

"Now, Shay was the owner of a saloon in Jerome, and a lot of miners patronized his place of business and became indebted to him. This is the story I get — he let them work off their debts to him by digging this tunnel through the hill from the river.

"Miners had hand-drills in those days with a double-jack, they called it — a heavy hammer. And they put in holes by hand, the number of holes they needed to blast out the rock. They blasted, and then they went in there with wheel-barrows and mucked up the muck and hauled it to the outside and dumped it. There were places that had to be timbered, and they timbered.

"You could walk in the tunnel. There were some places you had to stoop a little.

"When I was about 13, us kids used to go swimming above the dam near the tunnel. About every time we went, there was this guy sitting up there on the hillside with a rifle. It was one of those 30-30 short-barreled deals. Us kids would be busy there, swimming.

"In the tunnel near there, the water was so close to the back in this one place, we were afraid to go in there,

but when we heard that revenuers went in and took out a still, we figured if they could do it, we could do it. In those days we didn't have bathing suits. We used old overalls as a coverup.

"Anyway, several of us kids went down to the swimming hole one day with a short piece of candle and some matches, and we walked in the tunnel and scooted down under this low back, as we called it, and then it opened up so we could stand up. About midway of this 600-foot tunnel, we found, up above the water, up as high as my shoulders at least, was this room that was cut out. And there stood an old-time coal-oil stove, a lot of bottles and jugs, two barrels of mash — only they had dumped the mash out — but it was still very smelly.

"They didn't need a smokestack in there. There was a natural draft in the tunnel that carried off the fumes.

"The revenuers had taken the still, which we didn't get to see, but somebody who had seen it described it as a copper washtub. The bootleggers would get a good gob of mash in there and they would cook it. They had a copper coil, and they would just let it drip — I guess they stood right there — caught the drips as they filled up one gallon-jug after another, which was slow.

"But the stuff was powerful. It looked like water. They called it White Mule in those days.

That guy with the rifle — we never saw him again."

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