

Texas A&M

The Battalion

August 25, 1982 Page 1B

Bootlegging one man's way of life

United Press International
TEXARKANA — Johnnie Gentry says he has been in jail more times than many folks have been in church — but that's just the price he has paid for his 48-year career as a bootlegger and moonshiner.

Sitting in his living room where pictures of his 17 children and their families cover the walls, Gentry, 65, is now retired and is content to shell peas and reflect on the past.

Gentry said moonshining was a way of survival during the Depression. He said he began his career when he was 16 and his family moved from West Texas to Titus County. Soon after, he began assisting older whiskey makers.

"I worked for 50 cents a day and was glad to get it," he said. Outside his home is a collection of trucks and cars — old time getaway vehicles.

"I have outrun every officer in this county," Gentry says, pointing to a Ford pickup parked in a dirt driveway.

Gentry got his first still when he was 17 or 18 and "I'd make whiskey all day long."

The night before he married his wife, Mildred, he sold a man two 10-gallon kegs of whiskey for \$25 each.

"It was more than most people in the county had," Gentry said. "I had a young horse, a brand new saddle and hogs running in the bottom."

The preacher who married Gentry and his wife carried a bottle of moonshine in his pocket all the time, he said.

"After he married us, he reached in his coat pocket and came out with a half pint. He says, 'John, you're going to need a drink.'"

Gentry described his life as a

cycle of distilling moonshine and being chased by federal agents.

One incident in 1936 stands out vividly in his memory — the day 17 agents raided his still.

Gentry was in a Model A car driven by a companion with 21 gallons of whiskey in it he said. The driver steered the Model A straight at the agents to get away.

He said: "They began shooting," hitting the car at least nine times.

He said one agent grabbed him by the shirt as he fled, but he

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kept going. The shirt was left in the agent's hands.

"They was shooting in every direction," he said. "We had three rigs (stills) going that night that got raided."

Another moonshiner that night hid from the agents in a hog pen with a sow and six pigs, he said.

Gentry said how often they were raided depended on how often somebody got mad at them and turned them in. Stills

were set up on somebody else's property so the moonshiner couldn't be traced.

"We'd hide it as best we could. We also looked for a place they (lawmen) couldn't hem us in."

By 1953, when Gentry had his last still, bonded liquor was easier and cheaper to get. But his illicit activities merely shifted more to bootlegging.

Gentry, who has one artificial eye as the result of a childhood accident, did try his hand at lawful employment but it didn't work out. He hauled dirt, drove a bulldozer and worked on an oil rig.

Oil drilling proved as treacherous as moonshining. In one rig accident, he cut a nerve in his leg, broke his back and fractured his hip.

"I quit then," he said. "That was in '59. I went back on in '61 and worked nearly two years."

"Then I went into straight bootlegging. I had three braces I had to wear. I wasn't able to get a job at anything else. I already had a reputation. I had a family to keep up."

But even while he was employed at other jobs, he bootlegged on the side, retailing the moonshine of others. He was last raided in 1975, he said, and quit bootlegging in 1977.

By the 1970s, he bought moonshine and bonded whiskey from others to sell in dry Titus County.

"I bought lots of whiskey in Oklahoma," he said. "It got to be where it was hard to get across the Red River. You never knew when (lawmen) were going to block it."

He finally quit bootlegging in 1977 when he began driving an oil truck.

"I got tired of it," Gentry said. "(Bootlegging) was too much worry."



staff photo by David Fisher

Welcome, Class of '86!

Becoming a freshman means learning to fit in. Part of that process includes learning the yells so as not to become an object of general derision at

yell practices. Here some incoming freshmen at Fish Camp "hump it" during a mid-afternoon yell practice.

Collector blasts neighbors

United Press International
PHOENIX, Ariz. — Why would anyone want to collect cannons?

"Well," says Dale Sandige, "they don't rust and they don't eat anything and there's nothing to wear out."

Also, he said, they're too heavy to steal.

Callers step through Sandige's front door to find themselves staring into the muzzle of a 4-foot cannon.

Three cannons point off his back porch toward the neighbors.

The neighbors hear the "BOOMS." They feel their win-

dows rattle. Clouds of black smoke bearing the smell of rotten eggs waft over their lawns and hedges.

"They've never called the police," he said. "They say 'Oh, that's that crazy Sandige. He only does it once a year so let him do it.' I don't know if they're deaf or intimidated."

Sandige started collecting cannons in 1977.

"I didn't have a cannon to play with when I was a kid," he said. "I can't remember why my folks wouldn't buy me one."

So he put an ad for cannons in a hobby magazine.

Now he has 70 to 80 cannons.

Some are like the 500-pounder from the War of 1812 standing guard inside his front door. Some look out from mounts on the tip of his baby finger.

A model of a Gatling gun and a cannon he says once guarded the German passenger liner Prince Rupert sit in his living room. A toy cannon, the first he collected, is in front of his fireplace.

A shiny, brass, 200-pound poopdeck cannon once used by the French to repel pirates points toward the kitchen.

Under the television set: A sun dial cannon. "You set it at a

certain angle and it'll go off at noon."

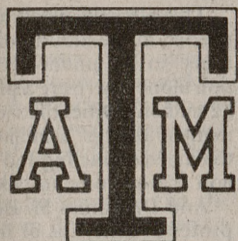
All those come before entering the Cannon Room.

There, on shelves and on the floor, are his toy cannons, like the one which uses a firecracker to propel rubber balls.

Poised on the floor are signal cannons from the 1860s and 1880s, similar to ones used today to start yacht races.

Sandige has been named unit chief for Arizona in a tongue-in-cheek cannon club known as CHAOS, Cannon Hunters Association of Seattle. CHAOS "canonizes" members who save cannons from destruction.

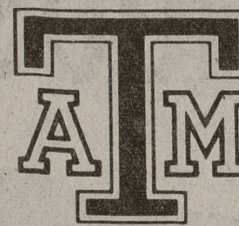
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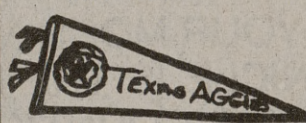
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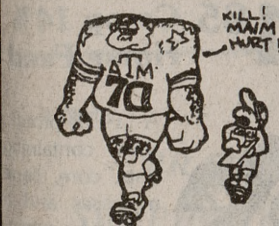
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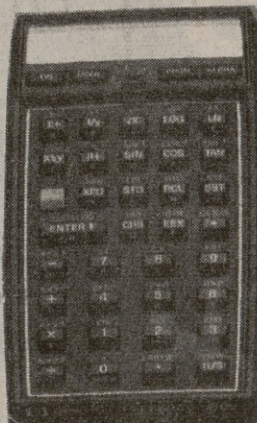
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