

The Rakes from Shooting Creek: Legit liquor dealers, moonshiners

By David K. Rakes

Southwest Virginia has a colorful history of liquor dealers and moonshiners among whom members of the Rakes Clan of Floyd, Patrick and Franklin Counties were prominent figures. A pair of brothers, R.F. Rakes and A.B. Rakes were legitimate liquor dealers in the years before national prohibition.

Artifacts from that alcoholic era are few and most exist as one-gallon clear glass jugs embossed "Send Order to R.F. Rakes Rocky Mount, Va. 100 Proof Sweet Mash Corn Whiskey \$2.00 Per Gallon." Also embossed on the jugs' heels are the marks of manufacturers Charles Boldt Glass Company (C.B. Co. Pat. with a serif B) and Nivision-Weiskopf Co. Both firms were in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The Boldt jugs were made between 1910-13 and the embossing contains an unneeded apostrophe in the Rakes name, making it Rake's. It's more than likely the company was more expert at manufacturing glass jugs than spelling.

The Nivision-Weiskopf factory was headed by Henry P. Nivision until 1904 when Weiskopf left the factory. Nivision chartered his own bottle manufacturing business in Baltimore, Maryland, The Nivision Glass Company, which was located on Fort Avenue and Laurence Street. I think the R.F. Rake's jugs were first made by Nivision-Weiskopf and later by Charles Boldt.

The jugs are considered relatively rare, although I have five and gave two away to my brothers Larry and Shawn. I paid \$200 or

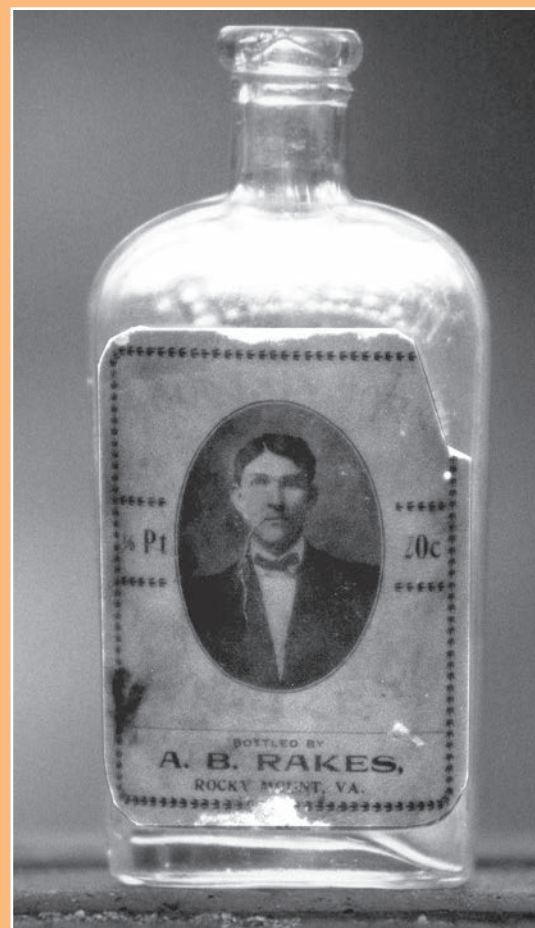
less for each jug about ten years ago and may have done well since others have sold for \$600 to \$900 in recent auctions.

How R.F. Rakes became a lucrative whiskey dealer starts on Shooting Creek, a clear and pristine stream originating in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He was a farmer and constructed a pipeline from the creek to a patch of level land on which he built a still. He became a moonshiner that was caught by revenue agents. One told Rakes to get a license and make his whiskey legally. He did so and soon started advertising in the Rocky Mount newspaper.

A 1910 ad: "Try R.F. Rakes Corn Whiskey and be pleased. Rocky Mount Corn Whiskey, 100 proof, full-strength – White Corn Whiskey – is very popular and deservedly so for it is the triumph of the distiller's art – the best produced. Every customer who orders this brand is sure to order again. No water in this whiskey at the low price of \$2 a gallon – customer pays express."

R.F. Rakes was born on July 25, 1874, in Patrick County, the son of Alexander and Violet Turner Rakes. Before 1900, he moved to Rocky Mount, where he resided in a boarding house and worked as a storekeeper. In 1903, he purchased the Opera House Saloon from B.B. Dillard, who operated as a liquor dealer in nearby Roanoke. Rakes sold whiskey from his Rocky Mount saloon and became quite successful.

His wide range of products included White Rose Corn, Spring Hill, Royal Arch, J.W. Kelly's Corn, Old Kentucky Corn, 5-year-



Rare A.B. Rakes whiskey bottle with self portrait



Lee Goodie Rakes at his copper still

old corn, 3-year-old corn, 2-year-old sweet mash corn, White Rye, Gibson Rye, Level Best Rye, Burwood Rye and Penfield Rye, along with Applejack Brandy and Franklin Apple Brandy.

Long before R.F. Rakes was in business, his older brother, Turner Francis Rakes, was already an established liquor dealer. His Rocky Mount saloon was known as the T.F. Rakes Bar Room that he had purchased the building for \$1 from his parents in 1883. The building had frontage measuring 25 feet and measured 100 feet across the back and adjoined the W.L. Garrett Hardware Store.

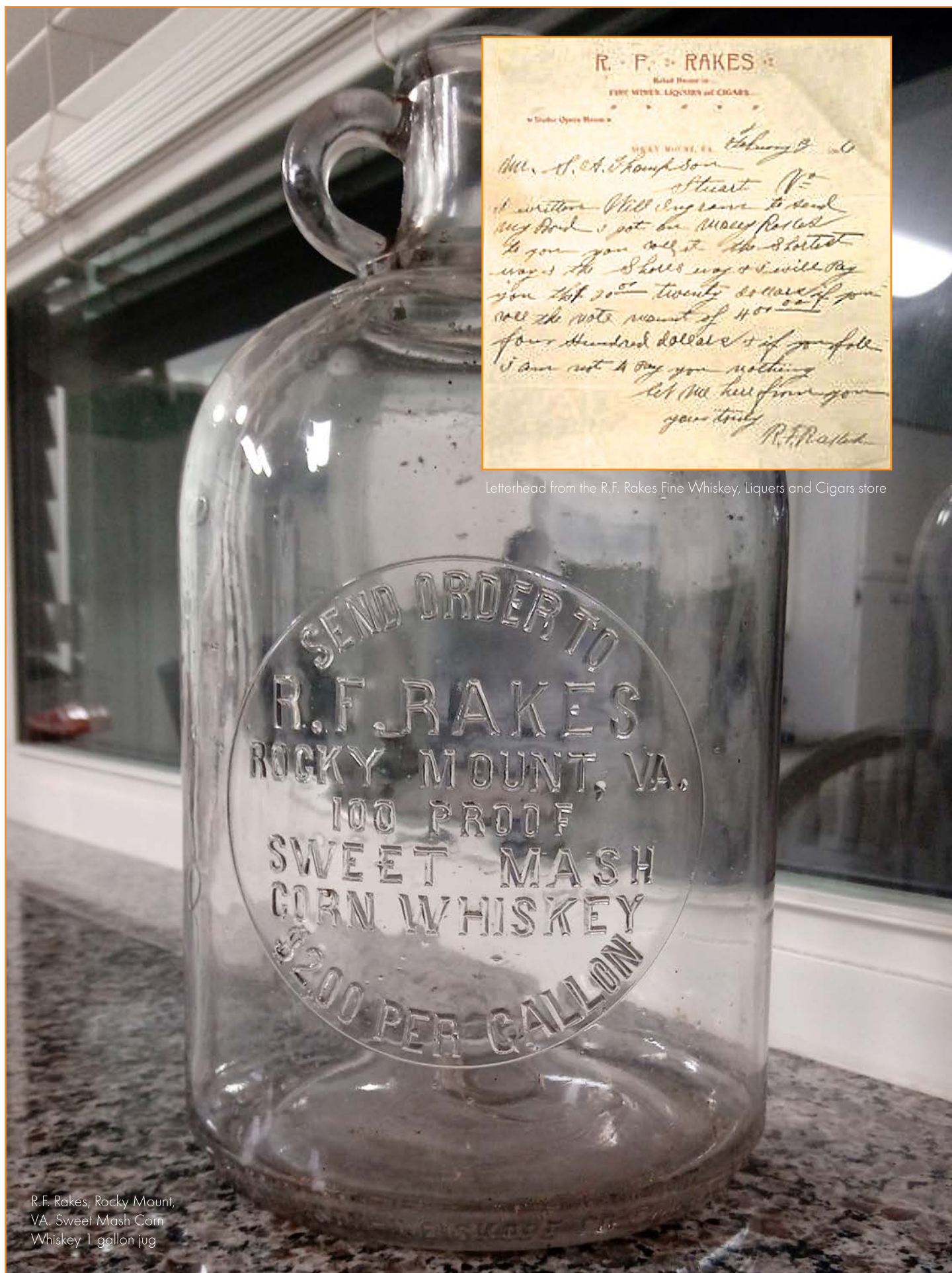
In November 1905, Turner and his wife, Ellen, deeded the building to his brother, George Lee Rakes. A year later, the business was known as the G.L. Rakes Distilling Company from Shooting Creek, Va. It advertised itself as a manufacturer of copper distilled corn whiskey and retail liquor dealers. But George died of natural causes in November 1906, and his father, Alexander Rakes, took over and deeded the building to R.F. Rakes. The latter now had two liquor establishments.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Virginia was still officially

“wet.” But many county governments passed laws making it illegal to make liquor, even if one had purchased a license. By 1911, many liquor dealers in southwest Virginia were forced out of business. In 1916, the Virginia Legislature passed a statewide ban on the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, forcing R.F. Rakes to close his Shooting Creek Distillery and Opera House Saloon. His businesses were reportedly one of the last to dry up.

Out of the whiskey business, R.F. Rakes was one of the wealthiest men in Franklin County. He purchased large amounts of farmland and started farming again; he also bought land along the Pigg River and built the Rakes Picnic Pavilion, a recreational area. Also purchased was a Chevrolet dealership in Rocky Mount. In November 1935, he campaigned for the Franklin County Sheriff's Office but it is not known whether he was elected. He died at age 67 on March 13, 1941, and buried in the Alexander Ingram Cemetery in Ferrum, Va.

Enter Alexander Bird Rakes, the brother of R.F. He was yet another Rocky Mount liquor dealer. We know that was his occupation because David D. Rakes of Georgia owns a flask



Letterhead from the R.F. Rakes Fine Whiskey, Liquors and Cigars store

R.F. Rakes, Rocky Mount,
VA. Sweet Mash Corn
Whiskey 1 gallon jug

with an intact label. Its collared and applied top dates it to just before the turn of the 20th century. The label shows an oval frame containing a photo of an early 20-year-old, clean-shaven man with a clear complexion, dark hair parted in the middle, and wearing a white shirt, dark jacket and small bow tie. The bottom of the label is inscribed "Bottled by A.B. Rakes, Rocky Mount, Va." But there are no records that A.B. Rakes was in the liquor business in Rocky Mount, so perhaps he sold his products in one of his brothers' saloons.

Moonshining had long been a way of life for the Rakes families and others in Franklin County. Despite the prohibition, many people in the county started taking advantage of the demand for illegal liquor. Moonshining suddenly turned into an organized business made up of producers (moonshiners), wholesalers (runners), and retailers (bootleggers). It was one way for impoverished farm families to get cash during hard times in rural America.

I must tell you about the most infamous Rakes moonshiner of them all: Hugh Namon Rakes. Born August 4, 1899, in Franklin County, the son of Samuel P. and Minerva Lemon Rakes, Hugh reportedly quit school at age 8, and when 15, he was selling moonshine throughout Southwest Virginia. He was a bad boy, once forging his mother's name on a \$1,000 note and buying 250 gallons of moonshine, loaded the whiskey onto a wagon, guarded it with a Winchester rifle and sold it in Christiansburg for \$1,500. History does not record whether his mother was ever reimbursed. Another time, he sold his brother's rifle for \$40, bought three gallons of apple brandy, and then sold it for \$40 a gallon in Kimball, West Virginia. Over the years, Hugh and cousin Amos Rakes were getting rich in the moonshine business and almost everyone in Floyd County knew it.

When Virginia went dry in 1916, Hugh and Amos continued delivering moonshine up and down the state's east coast in violation of federal law. They were able to accomplish transporting by paying off deputy sheriffs at their still or along the highways. The illegal transporting of liquor went on for years until 1935 when many moonshiners were caught, and the Franklin County Moonshining Conspiracy Trial took place. Thirty-four people were indicted, resulting in nine prison terms, 13 probationary sentences and hefty fines. Hugh somehow avoided indictment but was caught trying to bribe jurors who were deliberating on his business partner's fate. He was sentenced to two years in jail and fined \$1,000.

After he got out of prison, Hugh continued his wheeling and dealing, some of it legal, some of it not so much. He tried to buy the Natural Bridge, a 215-foot-high natural arch made in a limestone gorge carved out by Cedar Creek. The bridge was once owned by Thomas Jefferson and today is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. He played a role in setting up a land investment scheme that involved selling off much of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Federal investigators moved in and stopped the deal just before a North Carolina company was about to put up a \$1 million mortgage loan for the land.

In 1947, Hugh was sent to prison again, this time for four years in federal prison for his part in a multi-million-dollar embezzlement

scheme that failed the Farmers and Merchants State Bank Fredericksburg. After his discharge from prison, the one-time moonshiner and con man never went back. He lived in a stunning Georgian Revival Mansion on Main Street in Floyd, Va. and died on October 16, 1995.

Other moonshiners of the turbulent past are portrayed at the Blue Ridge Heritage Archives in Ferrum, Va., where Walter Lee "Goodie" Rakes is pictured sitting next to his copper still. He made moonshine from rye and cornmeal and guarded it with the Winchester rifle sitting in plain view. Sparrell Rakes is dressed in coveralls and posing with other moonshiners at the Hosea Thomas still on Shooting Creek in 1915.

Harbour Rakes and his son Darius were moonshiners of a later era in Franklin County. Revenue agents habitually caught them. In 1969, they were found by revenueurs in Rocky Mount and charged with manufacturing whiskey without a license. It was a felony punishable by a sentence of up to three years in the state prison. Their still was a wood-fired submarine type with a capacity of 400 gallons that could turn out 300 gallons per week. The pair's potential profit came to about \$750 a week.

While the revenueurs destroyed the still, the moonshiners were allowed to walk home and clean up before driving themselves to the jail or courthouse. I find it amusing that there was this kind of trust between law enforcement and moonshiner.

The legal whiskey businesses of R.F. and A.B. Rakes live on in the rare examples of embossed whiskey jugs and the labeled whiskey flask. Their stories will live on because of the records left to history. One case still alive is the large mansion once owned by moonshiner Amos Rakes, a son of Turner Francis Rakes. The home is on Road 40 in Patrick County, almost at the Franklin County line. After Amos and wife, Winnie, died in the 1980s, the home was sold and turned into a bed-and-breakfast. It is still called "the house that whiskey built."

SOURCES:

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- Deed made on the T.F. Rakes Bar Rom in Rocky Mount, Va., November 20, 1905, from Ellen M. Rakes to George L. Rakes, *Patrick County Deed Book* 54, Page 192.
- April 5, 1906 letter with letterhead marked G.L. Rakes Retail Dealer in Fine Wines, Liquors and Cigars, Opera House, Rocky Mount, Va., letter to Mr. S.A. Thompson from R.F. Rakes.
- Business Card: R.F. Rakes, Candidate for Election to the Office of Sheriff of Franklin County, Va., November 5, 1935.
- Photo of the A.B. Rakes whiskey flask from David D. Rakes, Norcross, Ga., dated December 1999.
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