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## Morris returns to Marion

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Wednesday, August 21, 2013

By MORRIS STEPHENSON -

Jack Powell, my long-time friend and retired ABC agent, and I made our "Mission to Marion" journey Saturday and enjoyed every minute of it!

We did a book-signing at the Mercantile Stillhouse Store located across and just down the street from the town's now famous Lincoln Theatre, home of "Song of the Mountain" program, featured locally on Cable 12. It is shown by TV stations across the nation.

The "Song of the Mountain" is the Marion music center.

It has one live program the first Saturday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m. Cost of tickets is \$25 each. And FYI, the groups featured on Sept. 7 will be Lindsay Lou & the Flatbellies, Clinton Collins & the Creekboys, along with Swing Sheiks.

I've been trying to find out this information for some time now and this ties in with the Stillhouse Store's plans of having jam sessions before and after each event at the theater.

Scott Schumaker and his wife, Dana, own the distillery that turns out Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine along with War Horn, a "sweet" whiskey, according to Scott. The trade name of the business is Appalachian Mountain Spirits LLC.

Jack and I made final plans Friday for our trip to Marion. He lives in Roanoke, so we made arrangements to meet about 9:15 a.m. at the big convenience store just off the Christiansburg exit of I-81. And we did!

White fluffy clouds dotted the blue sky, and the temperature was almost at the mid-60 mark when I passed through Floyd after coming up Shootin' Creek. I left the "Little Mean Green Machine" parked away from the busy store and rode the remaining hour to Marion in Jack's little PT Cruiser. Needless to say, we talked non-stop for the remainder of the trip.

Jack did a lot of undercover work in Marion, as well as the entire southwestern part of the state, including the coal fields. However, it had been 50 years since his last trip to my hometown. And it was my first return since 2005, when my mother passed away. So it was a homecoming of sorts for both of us.

The book-signing was from 11 to 3, and we arrived in plenty of time. Actually, we found a free parking place on Main Street across from the store. There was no problem carrying books and my moonshine still photos across the street. Motorists actually stopped to let me cross the street.

Main Street in Marion was one of the first "Main Street" projects completed in Virginia, if my memory is correct. The exteriors of old empty store buildings that once flourished were refurbished with rental apartments on the second floor. The still house location was once part of the big Rose's Store.

What the Schumakers did with the interior was impressive. The walls and all the trimming were all done in old wood. The floors are also wooden. In addition to selling souvenirs from the two bands of whiskey, the Schumakers sell two sizes of wooden kegs. And the Stillhouse Store sells handmade items, like jewelry and paintings. There were t-shirts, caps, jackets and other types of clothing. In fact, the selection of items was so large, I won't try to get into any more. Scott, nicknamed "Mash," said he has an application into the ABC department to set up an operating still in the store with "tasting" privileges. That's what the owners of "Virginia Lightning" in Culpeper have done. They were assigned an ABC number just like one of the state stores.

We also learned Scott holds "Still Nights" at the distillery where people can spend an evening learning to become a real moonshiner! The \$50 cost includes a dinner, moonshiner's manual and an American Mountain Spirits patch and shot glass. Space is limited to six people per class, which is held from 5-9 on Fridays and 4-8 on Saturdays. How's that for cool? Of course, you have to be 21 or older.

Oh, yes, Scott told me something else that blew my mind and it apparently came about because of an item I wrote in this column some months ago. Do you remember when I wrote about the souvenir jug from the first batch (2-11-13) of Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine I received from Scott after sending him a signed copy of my book? Shortly after the item appeared, an agent from the Marion area came in questioning Scott about sending the moonshine through the mail. Everything was okay when Scott explained he did not get the 'shine to me by mailing it. To me, that seemed to be a little nit pickin'. After Scott explained, the agent was satisfied and left.

The Mercantile Stillhouse business is not all that wide but is the length of a city block deep. At the back of the current store area is a stage area with a sound set-up and stands in which to place instruments when not in use, topped off with a large piano.

"We will be starting up jam sessions on Wednesday evenings and Saturdays throughout the day and into the night," Scott said. Like Franklin County, Marion and Smyth County are crammed full of musicians who like to gather and jam. One talented young man, who performs with an area band, came into the store while we were there.



Jack and I were enjoying some fabulous barbecue sold by a store a couple of doors down when I glanced up and saw a woman standing in front of our "signing table." She had one my "Dust to Glory" Martinsville Speedway books clutched in front of her. "Do you remember me?" she asked. "I'm Carole Wassum Rosenbaum. Of course, I didn't but she quickly explained who she was and she was a native of Marion. I knew her folks.

Carole graduated from MHS after I did in the years between my younger sister and brother. "I wouldn't take anything for this book," she remarked. "My father took me to the first race ever held at Martinsville Speedway! I remember Red Baron won the race and it was really dusty. Our shoes sank in the dust when we left the track," she vividly remembered.

"I want you to please sign this book for me and I want to buy the one you wrote on moonshining," she said, thrusting the book toward me, already opened to the inside cover.

I signed that one and the one she purchased. Of course, we spent some time catching up with each other, so to speak.

Jack and I had wanted to tour the Stillhouse where the moonshine and whiskey were made, but it had closed for the weekend. They do give tours of the distillery, but Scott's wife was out of town. And Scott couldn't leave the store. So Jack and I are both looking forward to a return trip.

We did learn the whiskey produced is named in honor of Scott's late brother, William Sean Schumaker, who was a U.S. Army commander, who saw combat in Iraq. His brother retired but unexpectedly died Dec. 29, 2011, before the brothers had a chance to reconnect. There's a special section of a wall in the store that pays tribute to his brother with photographs, medals and his uniform.

I could go on and on about our trip but would highly recommend if you're planning a short trip, make the destination Marion. It takes me two hours from Ferrum to Marion going up Shootin' Creek through Floyd to the interstate. The telephone number is 276-378-0867 in case you want to call in advance.

As for Jack and myself, we're still looking forward to touring the distillery, which is located on the way to Hungry Mother State Park, two miles from town. So as of now, I've never seen a legal still in operation.

Hummers going strong - With less than a month remaining in the hummingbird season" my flock is numbering close to 20, and I'm using three cups of sugar a day keeping them in motion. We're going to miss them but not the daily chore of making sugar water, for sure!