

Valley Business

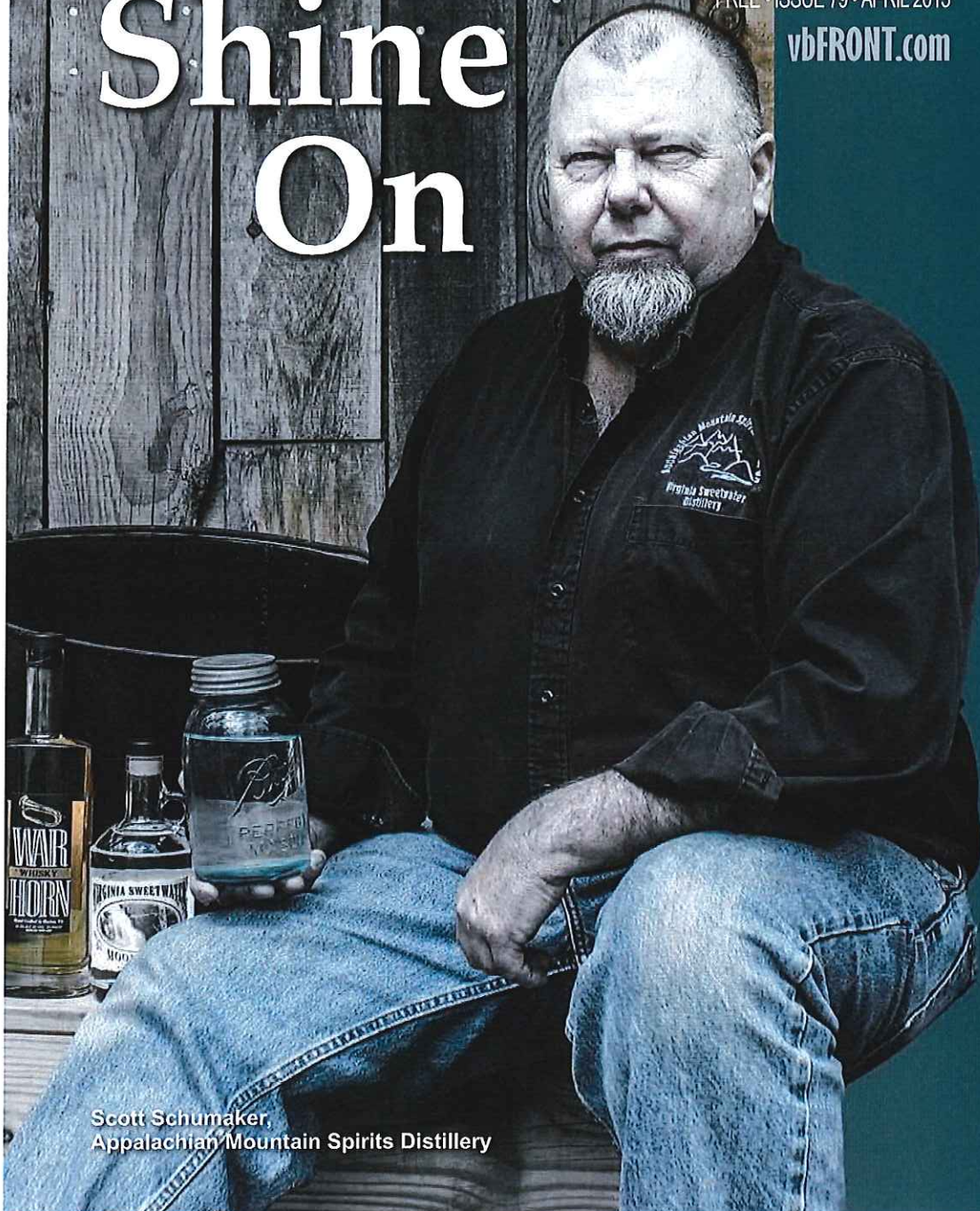
FRONT

THE SMALL BUSINESS & ENTREPRENEUR
CHAMPION IN VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE

FREE • ISSUE 79 • APRIL 2015

vbFRONT.com

Shine On



Scott Schumaker,
Appalachian Mountain Spirits Distillery



Miss Dana, the 200 gallon turnip still

all photos: Anne Sampson

MOONSHINE!

"They call it that good old mountain dew,
And them that refuse it are few.
I'll hush up my mug, if you'll fill up my jug
With that good – old – moun – tain – dew."
*'Good Old Mountain Dew', Bascom Lamar Lunsford
and Scotty Wiseman, 1928, 1935*

It's known by many names: Mountain Dew, Happy Sally, Branchwater, Hillbilly Pop and Mule Kick being just a few. But everyone knows what you're talking about when you say Moonshine. It's the stuff of legends for a lot of reasons, from the wallop packed by good hooch ('Popskull'), to the running war between state and federal agents ('Revenuers') and the illicit distillers of grain alcohol ('Bush Whiskey'), to the birth of NASCAR ('White Lightning').

There's a simple difference between a legal distiller and a moonshiner: The moonshiner doesn't license his distilling operation or pay taxes on his whiskey. His product, unencumbered by the extra cost of tax revenue, is less expensive. In the mid 17th century, Great Britain slapped a tax on spirits that gave birth to a burgeoning coastal smuggling trade. Necessarily unloading their cargo at night, these stealthy traders were known as 'moonlighters.'

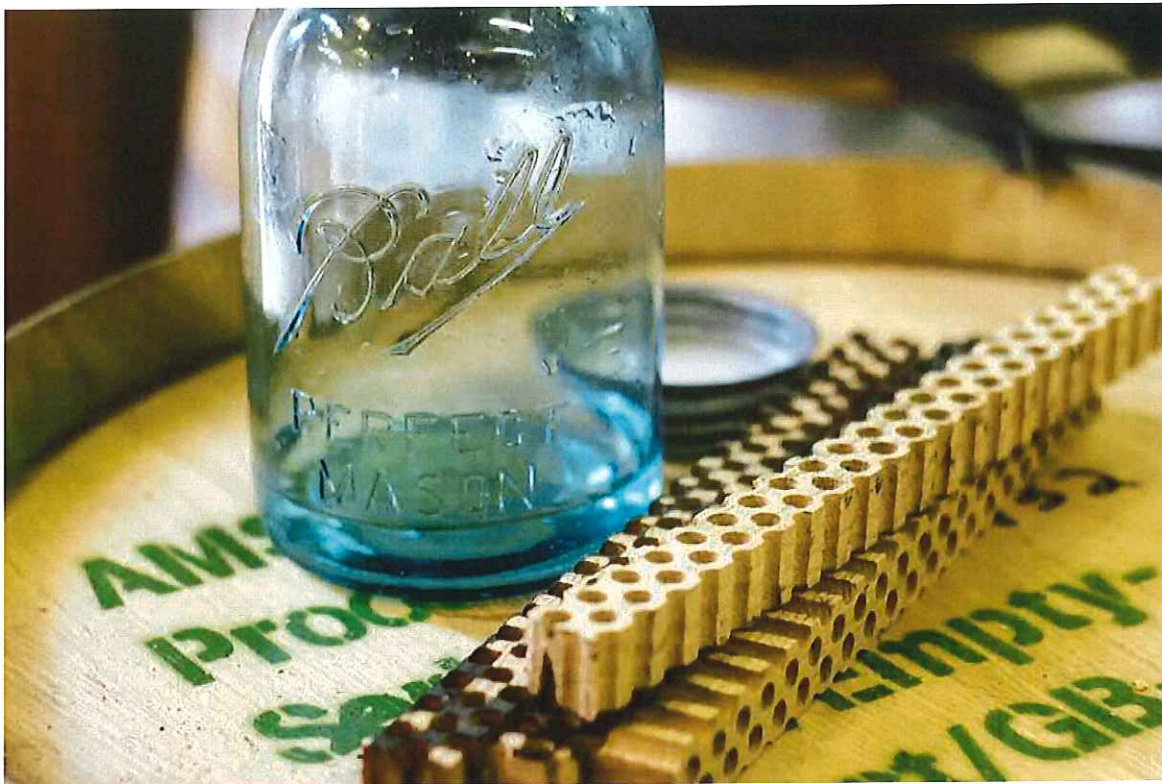
In the Blue Ridge, there were many reasons to feel – strongly – that making your own alcohol was a right and not a privilege. A crop of grain or fruit was easier to transport from isolated farms over bad roads in liquid form, and much more valuable, too. Alcohol, with addition of fruit, bark, roots or herbs was used as a tonic, liniment, antiseptic and anesthetic by people who were accustomed to doing their own doctoring. Self-reliant frontiersmen were resentful of interference from a faraway governing body that was ignorant of the challenges they faced.

The United States used whiskey taxes to help pay the debts of the Revolution and the Civil War, and there were many licensed distilleries. According to "Moonshine – Blue Ridge Style," an exhibit produced by the Blue Ridge Institute and Museum of Ferrum College, there were dozens of licensed distilleries in the Blue Ridge by the 1880s; 77 in Franklin County in 1893-94. Many of these operated on 3 month licenses after

Gettin' our Shine Back On in Virginia >

Executive Summary:
Not as many people as you might think (given our Blue Ridge and Appalachian folk lore) are aware that moonshine is now available at the ABC store — at least the kind regulators have allowed.

By Anne Sampson



Aged whiskey gets its smokey flavor and caramel color from charred wooden 'honeycombs' in the barrels; clear corn whiskey ages while you drink it

the peach or apple harvest came in, converting fruit into brandy.

Then the nation went completely dry in 1920, and moonshine went back underground.

Make almost anything illicit and it will develop a mystique, and moonshine is certainly no exception. A casual search of the internet turns up over 100 American songs about moonshine. Moonshine haulers like Curtis Turner, a legend of NASCAR's formative years, inspire awe with stories of their evasive driving skills, developed in the rough country that makes it easy to hide a still. Whatever the motivations of the individual distiller, the public mind often sees the moonshiner as a romantic outlaw and a heroic representative of personal freedom.

Curtis Turner, 1924-1970, is said to have been a master of the 'bootleg turn,' that exciting skidding spin that sends a car 180 degrees, back toward its pursuers. According to Curtis's daughter, artist Margaret Sue (Suzi) Turner Wright, Curtis was never caught with moonshine, although he was once stopped on the highway with the car riding low on its suspension. The cargo: pounds and pounds of sugar, an important ingredient in the 'shine distilling process. A judge accepted his story of the folks back home suffering a sugar shortage and needing syrup on their pancakes and sent him home to Floyd County. Suzi has donated a couple of her father's cars to the Virginia Museum of Transportation in Roanoke.

There's a whole lot of moonshine mystique in Franklin County, self-named and universally acknowledged Moonshine Capital of the World. There are no records for the amount of illicit liquor made in Franklin County over time, but from 1920 to 1933, the years of Prohibition, over 130,000 gallons of moonshine were seized by government

agents. 99% of the county's population was connected somehow to moonshine. It was big business.

"During Prohibition, they had a boxcar on a siding over near Ferrum," says Morris Stephenson, who covered the moonshine trade for the Franklin News Post for 50 years. "They'd ship (moonshine) to D.C. and Chicago." Al Capone bought Franklin County moonshine for his speakeasies. Stephenson, who maintains friendships with moonshiners and with ABC agents, was called to cover raids for the newspaper two or three times a week. "It got so the front page always looked the same, so we said, 'How about just calling us if it's a real big or unusual raid?'"

In 2000, a collaborative operation between the Virginia and North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control agencies and the FBI, called Operation Lightning Strike, netted 27 modern moonshiners, who faced serious federal charges.

"Operation Lightning Strike kind of dried this county up," says Stephenson, adding that "people still make moonshine," but on a small scale. Stephenson published a book in 2013 called *'A Night of Making Likker and Other Stories from the Moonshine Capital of the World.'*

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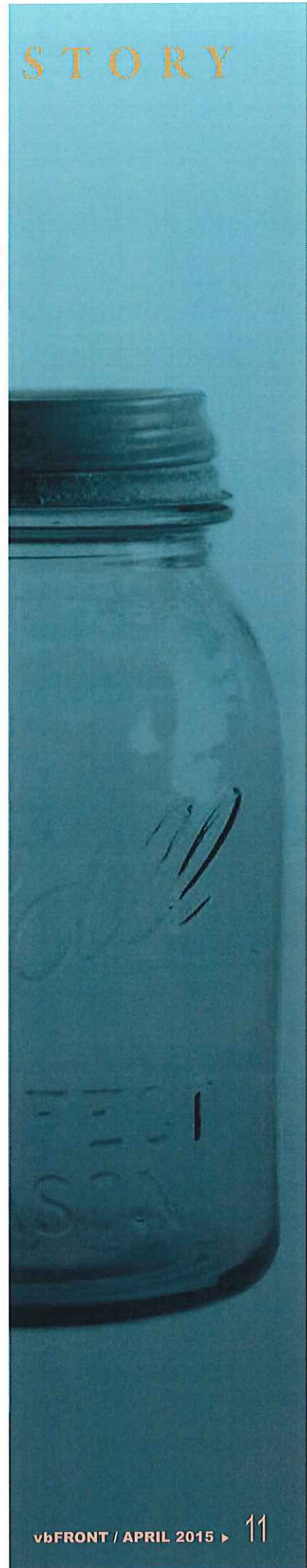
The Legend Now Lawful, Local

Marion snugs up to I-81 in the Blue Ridge Highlands region of Southwest Virginia. Almost in Tennessee, it's the seat of Smyth County and a quintessential small town, with a mid-twentieth century feel and a population hovering between 6,000 and 7,000. In spite of its small stature, Marion is the home of the Lincoln Theatre, a restored architectural gem which hosts the nationally syndicated bluegrass program, 'Song of the Mountains.' Two doors up is the restored General Francis Marion Hotel and the Black Rooster restaurant. The modern version of the soft drink 'Mountain Dew' was created when Marion resident William H. Jones reworked an old Tennessee recipe.

It's also the home of another mountain dew: Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine, distilled legally by Appalachian Mountain Spirits Distillery.

"I got into this because I wanted to make fuel," says Scott Schumaker, legal moonshiner. A native New Englander who spent many years in Florida, Scott is interested in self-reliance and off-grid living. He heats with wood, and thought maybe he could learn to make fuel and become more energy efficient.

"I got a still from someone who will remain nameless," he says with a grin. "I started working on it, and tweaking it, and I finally asked him, 'When do you think I can burn this





Scott Schumaker with award-winning spirits. Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine is on the shelf behind him

stuff?' He said 'Boy, you're not making this to burn, you're making this to drink!'"

Scott gets interested in things, and then he has to master them, so he began honing his distilling skills. He says, without ego, that he has a talent for this work. Before long, he was offered a job at a distillery in Wytheville. It was not, as it turned out, a legal operation.

"But I wound up with a lot of the equipment," he says, "so I wrote a business plan."

Scott settled in Marion because the mountains remind him of his childhood home, so when he started distilling whiskey, he wanted to honor local culture.

"I wanted to make a product that was historically correct," he says, "an authentic Appalachian moonshine." It almost didn't happen.

The process of getting a federal permit and state licensure for alcohol is a complex one, as fraught with switchbacks as a mountain road, and saddled with a two-inch-thick application manual. Scott's capital ran out as delays mounted, first discovering he was in a dry county, then as the manual was rewritten. He worked a full time job; he was hospitalized for stress-related illness; he considered bankruptcy. He was making liquor he couldn't sell, while visitors returned two or three times to see if he was up and running yet. Finally, in September 2014, he was approved to sell his whiskey and moonshine.

COVER STORY

"It was a three year journey just to get to the beginning," he says.

Scott's retail outlet is at 112 East Main Street in Marion. The 114-year-old store features local art and handicrafts in the front, where you can buy lamps made from his moonshine bottles. The rear of the store is the tasting room, where you can sample spirits any day of the week.

What makes a distillery legal? "A legal distillery requires a license. Obtaining a license triggers a Virginia ABC inspection and background investigation, as well as federal oversight. Virginia ABC ensures that the product is sold only to Virginia ABC or to those out of state that the law permits to receive it. Applicants must furnish Virginia ABC with a copy of their label approval by the federal agency: Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Spirits sold in Virginia must conform with regulations adopted for the federal agency relating to labels, definitions and standards of identity." Provided by Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control.

Books on moonshine history line rough-hewn shelves and a bar runs the length of the tasting room. Bottles of product are displayed in shadow boxes made from trays from an old knife factory. A farmhouse table sits in the center of the room, with benches made of split tree trunks. There's an air of rustic elegance; there are no hillbilly caricatures here, just bottles of hand-crafted whiskey and moonshine bearing awards from the American Distilling Institute.

The stillhouse sits on a switchback overlooking hardwoods and laurel outside Marion





(left) Scott uses non-GMO, native Pamunkey Indian corn

(right) Cooked corn mash will be reused as livestock feed. "The pigs fight over it."

You can purchase flights of Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine at 85 proof, Shiner's Gold at 101 proof and War Horn barrel-aged whiskey, with souvenir glasses. Although Scott doesn't make flavored moonshine, he'll provide you with "mixins" so you can add your own fruit flavoring.

"This is essentially an ABC store," he says. "The state gets the profit and I get 15% commission." The tasting room is a marketing tool, to introduce visitors to the product and encourage them to look for it in liquor stores and bars.

"When there's a show at the Lincoln, we're busy," says Scott, who serves on the Lincoln Theater's board. "And I get people in here who wouldn't be caught dead in a regular ABC store."

To get to the stillhouse where all this magic is made, we hop in Scott's dual cab pickup and head out of town. A rural road dotted with homes and small farms leads us to a switchback track which disappears up the side of the mountain. Scott owns 42 pretty vertical-looking acres here, bounded by creeks and furred with hardwoods and mountain laurel. Someday, his home will be at the top of the ridge, with 360 degree views.

Scott built the small stillhouse himself, on a little flat place he dug out of the side of the mountain. It houses Miss Dana, a 200 gallon turnip still, a corn cooker, fermenting vats and a tabletop bottling operation. Barrels of whiskey age in racks against one wall. Tubs of ground, non-GMO





Pamunkey Indian corn await the cooker. Although there's no music playing today, Scott says they play bluegrass for the yeast, and talk to the whiskey.

"Bluegrass makes the yeast happy," he says.

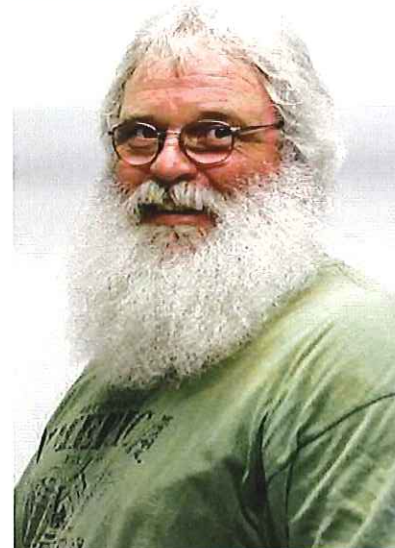
Today they're bottling War Horn, the caramel-colored spirit named for Scott's brother's unit, the 32nd Signal Battalion. His brother, Lt. Colonel Sean Schumaker, was the last commander of this unit before it was deactivated. He died in 2012.

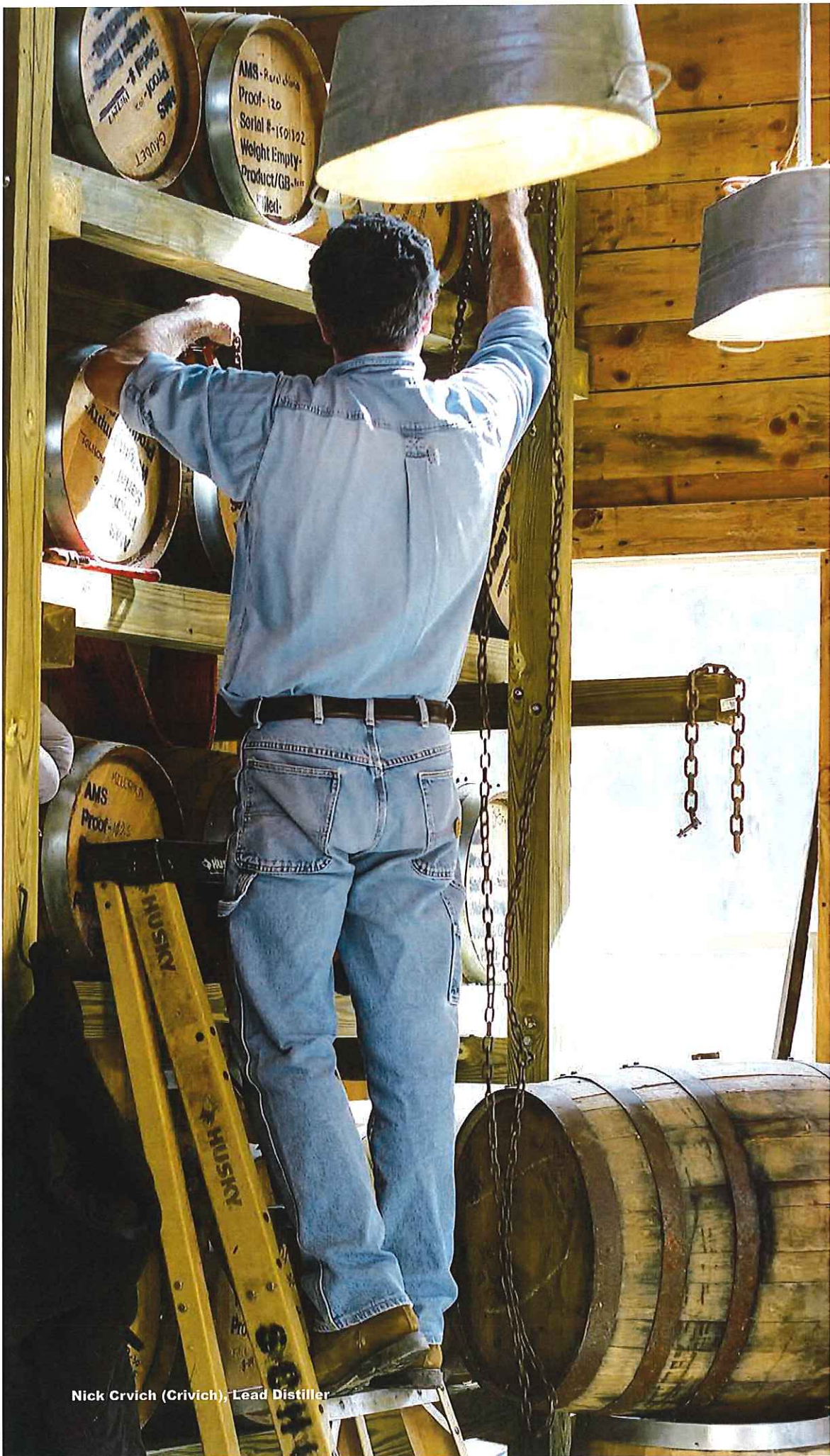
While Doug Kaufmann, distiller and investor, seals bottles with a hand held heater, Lead Distiller Nick Crvich (Crvich) tweaks the corn cooker. Bottles labeled 'Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine' are stacked in cases, awaiting the completion of the distilling process.

"The difference between whiskey and moonshine is the aging," says Scott. They give War Horn a little jump on aging, as well as its color, with the addition of charred oak "honeycombs" added to the barrels. Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine, on the other hand, ages as you pour it into your glass. "The only clear spirit which can be labeled as whiskey is made of corn," says Scott. He plans to introduce a new spirit soon – a single malt corn whiskey much like Scotch, aged in red oak.

The Tasting Room
at Appalachian
Mountain Spirits

Doug Kaufmann, Distiller,
investor, bottles War
Horn Whiskey





Nick Crvich (Crivich), Lead Distiller

A little sample of War Horn is passed around in a shot glass. Scott takes a sip and smiles.


Scott is not the first legal distiller of moonshine in Virginia, although he says he's the only one in the US who still distills "in a holler." In 1988, Chuck Miller started a distillery on his farm in Culpeper, Belmont Farm. Smarting from low commodity prices, he was looking for new ways to make a living from the land. Remembering his granddad's corn liquor sideline, he started from scratch and came up with a product called Virginia Lightning. Tim Smith, Pittsylvania County moonshiner and star of the Discovery channel docudrama, "Moonshiners," has "gone legit." His Climax Moonshine is named for his hometown of Climax, Virginia, where he is chief of the volunteer fire department.

According to Morris Stephenson in Franklin County, there are three or four Rocky Mount distillers attempting to get licensure from the state. One, a third generation moonshiner, is "maybe two months away" from being legal.

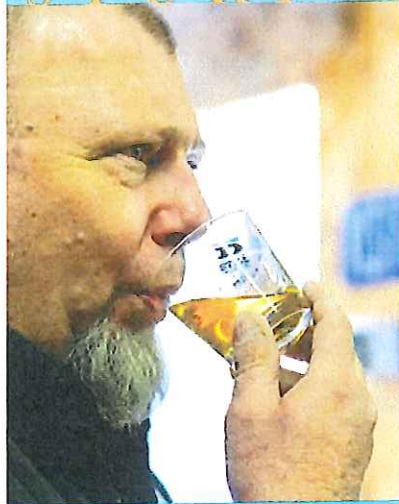
Legal distilling "will definitely help the economy," he says. "It maintains the mystique and it ties in with the Crooked Road (Southwest Virginia's Heritage Music Trail). This April, the United Way is having a Shine 'n Dine fundraiser at the Bootleggers Café with dinner, music and moonshine tasting." Moonshine has come a long way from the hollers.

Scott says people from Franklin County come to taste his moonshine, expecting an inferior product.

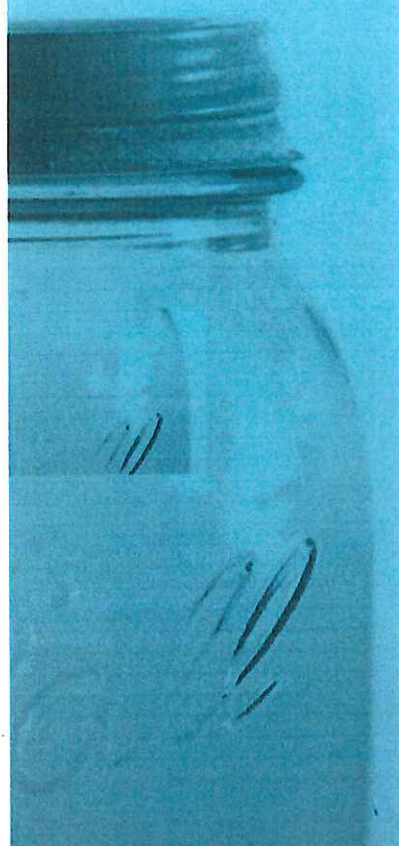
"Once we get past the 'where I grew up' talk, we find out we're the same," he says. "Local moonshiners say I do this right."

"I want to honor the tradition," Scott continues. "A man who could make good whiskey was worth something. There's an art and a science to this. It's an iconic mystery." 

Appalachian Mountain Spirits www.virginianwhiskeys.com
276-378-0867



Tasting is a necessary part of the job



Sweetwater Mule >

- 2 oz. Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine
- 4-6 oz. Ginger Beer
- 1/4 Fresh Lime
- Muddled mint, optional

Squeeze lime into Collins glass and drop into glass. Add 2-3 large ice cubes then pour in the Sweetwater Moonshine and Ginger Beer.