

My 'Lawless' family

Matt Bondurant talks about his grandfather, the gangster, and how he became a Hollywood hero



The real Jack Bondurant, photographed in the 1930s Photo: Courtesy of Matt Bondurant

By Horatia Harrod

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December 19 1930: four trucks careen across the hills and hollows of Franklin County, Virginia. It's early morning, and the drivers hope not to meet anyone on their way. At each bend in the road, dozens of jars make a gleeful clinking. The jars are filled with what people in the north – and only there – call moonshine. Prohibition has been around for a decade and the Great Depression is just beginning: the market for illegal liquor is booming.

Before long, three of the cars reach the narrow wooden bridge at Maggodee Creek. Arriving there, their way is blocked by a car, beside which stand two sheriff's deputies, Charley Rakes and Henry Abshire. Neither is surprised to see the Bondurant boys – Jack, Forrest and Howard – making a morning delivery. They may not have been the biggest moonshiners in the area but they were certainly infamous: Jack's own father-in-law called the three brothers "the toughest mess ever to hit Franklin County". Forrest, the

middle brother, was their talisman, reputed to be invincible; two years earlier, according to family legend, he'd had his throat slit, perhaps over a botched liquor deal. He survived by walking 12 miles through the snow to hospital, blood gurgling from his throat.

We don't know whether Rakes taunted the boys, or demanded a bribe, or whether Jack reached for his gun – almost everything reported about the shooting at Maggodee Creek was disputed in the years that followed. But we do know that the road was covered with snow, and that Rakes raised his gun and shot Jack in the chest; that when Forrest went to aid his brother, Rakes shot him in the gut; and that he was making to shoot Howard, too, when deputy Abshire knocked his gun off target.

Matt Bondurant, a novelist and creative writing teacher at the University of Dallas, is Jack Bondurant's grandson. But he knew nothing of his grandfather's past when he was growing up. Likewise, Matt's father, Andrew, had no idea his father had been shot until the last years of Jack's life.

It could have stayed that way; Jack would happily have taken the story to his grave. But it was not to be. Jack died in 2001, and in 2008 Matt published a fictionalised version of the bloody events of his grandfather's life, *The Wettest County in the World*, which has now been turned into the brutal half-western, half-gangster movie, *Lawless*, starring Shia LaBeouf as Jack and Tom Hardy as Forrest.

The true history of the Bondurant boys only came to light in the late Nineties, when Andrew took up the gentle hobby of genealogy. "My father started picking up all these articles on Franklin County," says Bondurant, 41, "and there was a set of articles about the Bondurant boys, in quotations, talking about them as a notorious gang. And there was this big article about the shoot-out at the bridge in December of 1930, where my grandfather was shot." When Andrew confronted his father about the shooting, Jack simply admitted it. "Yeah, shot me there," he told his son, and lifted his shirt to show where the bullet had passed.

"There wasn't a whole lot of story there other than that," says Bondurant, who was in his late twenties at the time. "The tradition of not talking in my father's family was very important, because if you talked, you could get in a lot of trouble. I don't think he was ashamed of being involved in criminal activities, but he was adhering to the code where you keep your mouth shut."

As a child, Bondurant knew his grandfather as a farmer of beef cattle and tobacco. Jack and his wife, Bertha, were taciturn folk. When Bondurant went to stay on their farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains, four hours from his own home in the city of Alexandria, Jack would wake him early in the morning to go and feed the cows. "I'd ride along with him in a truck for hours," says Bondurant, "and we wouldn't say a word. He was quiet, silent, somewhat gruff. I knew he was somebody to be taken very seriously."

Bondurant also remembers a pair of rusty brass knuckles hanging from the gun rack in his grandfather's utility room. "I don't know if he ever used them," says Bondurant. "But they were emblematic, part of his terrifying aspect." Bondurant admits to being thrilled when he discovered that the latent violence he'd sensed as a child could be fleshed out with a dramatic, bloody, real-life history. "It was very exciting," he says. "Up until then I, like most people, thought our lives were quite dull and our family was full of nice, respectable people."

Jack may not have been a storyteller, but his grandson is. With his father, Bondurant pieced together what he calls a "constellation" of details from newspaper cuttings and court transcripts. The big picture was relatively clear. Millions of gallons of moonshine poured out of Franklin County every year, cooked up in stills from a fermented mixture of sugar, water, grain or fruit: "mash". The county was, as the contemporary writer Sherwood Anderson put it, "the extreme wet spot" of the United States in the Thirties. There was a centuries-long tradition of evading the taxes that were periodically levied on alcohol; when Prohibition was enacted in 1920, distillers were forced underground.

With Prohibition, the market for whiskey turned black as pitch. One moonshiner was punished for a transgression with the forced removal of his testicles; as he recovered in hospital, his testicles were returned to him in a jar of moonshine. Bondurant couldn't resist adding this piece of Grand Guignol to his novel. "I don't think it has anything to do with my grandfather and his brothers," he says, "at least we don't know that it did, but it happened." What is also certain is that the "Bondurant filling station" was as infamous for drinking and violence as it was for moonshining. Rather than shy away from the brutality that seemed to surround his ancestors, Bondurant's prose pulses with it. Did he ever question the morality of what they did? "I'm very proud that there were people in my family who made difficult choices in a difficult time," he says. "It's unearthing and acknowledging and even exploring and celebrating an aspect of my family that I didn't know existed. And a capacity for certain things, whether it's breaking the law, or breaking another man's face with a pair of brass knuckles."

Bondurant never got a chance to ask his grandfather about the details of this extraordinary period in his life. Too timid as a child, too distracted as a young adult, by the time he was seriously considering writing his grandfather's story, Jack was dead. So as the history of his grandfather's life began to dim, Bondurant decided to write it as fiction; his book was in turn picked up by the director John Hillcoat and his collaborator Nick Cave, who'd worked on the similarly blood-drenched and uncompromising outlaw film, *The Proposition*, in 2005.

Having almost been lost from the historical record, the Bondurant boys were suddenly large enough to fill the big screen. "As a young child in America," says Bondurant, "you read these stories about people

like Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, these frontiersmen who have this legend built around them. We know much of this is apocryphal, or half-true, or embellished, and yet we still celebrate them and their spirit, and I think that's what's going on to some degree here."

If the Bondurants are the heroes – or anti-heroes – of the piece, then Charley Rakes is the villain. And if he's bad in the book – a corrupt and violent man enforcing a protection racket on local moonshiners – he transforms into something grotesque in the film. He's played by Guy Pearce as an effete, brutal sadist. Rakes too has living descendants. "He does have a surviving daughter who's very old," says Bondurant. "I heard that she was a little concerned about his portrayal. But I haven't had any real interaction with anyone on the Rakes side. Charley Rakes tried to kill my grandfather, so I don't have too many apologies for the way I wrote him. History bears out that he was not a good person."

Rakes survived the shoot-out with the Bondurants and continued to serve as a policeman, the whole incident seemingly swept under the carpet. But, in 1935, he was indicted in a corruption trial – "The Great Franklin County Moonshine Conspiracy Trial" as it came to be known – which exposed a massive system of kickbacks and bribes enforced by local officials on moonshiners. Thirty-one people were convicted, but Rakes was not one of them; he died in mysterious circumstances before taking the stand. A fellow deputy of Rakes's named Jefferson Richards was also killed; gunned down on a dark road because, it's thought, he was threatening to reveal how high up the corruption went.

Moonshine continues to roll down from the hills of Franklin County. In the Sixties it was supplanted by marijuana, and in the last few years the young Appalachian lawbreaker has been more likely to cook up methamphetamine than white lightning. With hard economic times, though, comes moonshine. Last year a reality television show, *Moonshiners*, aired on the Discovery Channel. The Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control promptly sent out an irritable press release saying that no illegal liquor had been produced on the programme.

"If illegal activity was actually taking place, the Virginia ABC Bureau of Law Enforcement would have taken action," wrote the department's spokesman, Kathleen Shaw.

The taste of moonshine, says Bondurant, is like Scotch: "If you don't like whiskey, straight whiskey, then you're not going to like it. But there aren't as many additives and sugars as store-bought whiskies, so it doesn't have the same flavour profile or complexity – though there are probably people who'd disagree with me about that!" It comes in many forms – with peaches, berries, apples – and is known by many names: mule, white lightning, stump whiskey, mountain dew, fire water.

The drinking culture is conservative. You couldn't ask a stranger for a sip of their delightful moonshine,

but if you have family who make it, you might find a cup being thrust into your hand at a gathering. That's how Bondurant first tasted it as a teenager. "It's something that's done outside, by men," says Bondurant, "out of the back of pickup trucks. You don't sit down at the table and drink." So do the Bondurants keep a still today? "Well, if they did," says Bondurant, "I certainly wouldn't tell you."

'Lawless' by Matt Bondurant (Canongate) is available to order from Telegraph Books at £7.99 plus £1.10 p&p. Call 0844 871 1516 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk. 'Lawless' the film is released on September 7

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