

[RETURN TO CINEMATREK HOME](#)

# BONDURANT'S WETTEST COUNTY IS LAWLESS

In 2008, Matt Bondurant's fictionalized true story of his families' moonshining background in Franklin County Virginia was published and hit the bookshelves. It became a best seller; a nice feat for a first time novelist.

But the story had everything needed to stir the imagination of readers - defiance, love, courage, legend, evil, not-so-evil, heroes and villains. And though it embellished the facts a bit, it was nevertheless based on actual events.



"The basics of this story are drawn from various family stories and anecdotes, newspaper headlines and articles and court transcripts..." Bondurant clarified.

"However, this historical information does not help us fully understand the central players in this story, at least in terms of their situation or what their thoughts were; all involved are now deceased and little record exists. There are no letters, and my grandfather and his brothers did not keep diaries. My task in writing this book was to fill in the blank spaces of known record. There are family stories ... and these memories and stories are vague, and often specious at best, mixed with several decades of rumor, gossip and myth." Matt continued "My intention was to reach the truth that lies beyond the poorly recorded and understood world of actualities."

Brought in to direct the film was John Hillcoat whose recent interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" was both lauded for its cinematic presentation, but scorned for deviations from the novel. To adapt the novel to the screen, he brought in Nick Cave who worked with Hillcoat on the Australian oater "The Proposition".

I recently sat down with Matt Bondurant, when he visited Chicago to help promote "Lawless" and we discussed his book, the movie and the adaptation of his first novel from paper to screen.

**CINEMATREK:** Were moonshiners folk heroes? Should they have been considered folk heroes?

**BONDURANT:** I think they are already in the pop imagination to some degree...especially when you associate it with Prohibition. Pretty much everyone in contemporary society agrees that Prohibition was a bad idea. It definitely was a bad law, it seemed kind of absurd. So moonshiners represented a kind of people that were struggling against an unjust situation. But the real roots and tradition of moonshine going back to when the government started taxing liquor, and that's when moonshine started separating itself - it becomes an alcohol operation. It's basically people who are refusing to cooperate with the government. They were refusing to give up what they saw as an individual right, or liberty. It's like "I grow the crop, I can eat it or sell it or I can boil it down and extract liquor out of it. Why would I have to pay the government a tax for that?"

**CINEMATREK:** The government started taxing liquor at the start of the Revolutionary War, which prompted the Whiskey Rebellion, which George Washington reluctantly put down. After the war, the tax was repealed but reinstated again during the Civil War. Again after that war it was removed, but the Temperance Movement had already started taking hold. Then with the passing of the Volstead Act began Federal Prohibition. But these mountain folk were basically poor living in an area that was neglected by the government anyway. Is that why you feel they were looked at as folk heroes?

**BONDURANT:** I think that's part of it. I also think it's also just we romanticize the whole thing; which is what we do with many parts of history - including the Great Depression, World War II, there's plenty of things in the past that we look at through a sort of misty eyed set of lenses. And I think Prohibition and Moonshine, it seems very quaint...it's also very American. Prohibition and Moonshine is like something we own... it's like Jazz; something that we created - that we invented. You know, it's our own story. And you know people around the world find it very compelling too. They find it a very interesting period of time. And you know Prohibition creating organized crime, that's essentially what happened as we know it...the kind of gang violence that it spawned. It was a kind of wide open territory. It was wide open then all of a sudden

with Prohibition there was a chance to make tons of money. Some men banded together in these... and you get men like Al Capone. There hadn't been underworld figures. There had always been groups of criminals but Prohibition really accelerated everything. And these people wielded great power and made lots of money. Even the culture at the time was fascinated by them. People like Al Capone were celebrities, people found them very intriguing. that's why that stuff is with us today. I actually tried in the book to dispel some of that notion. The story of moonshining in Appalachia is a much more raw and rugged situation than what we regularly associate with prohibition speakeasies and all that stuff.



**CINEMATREK:** In your book, you referred to the journalist Sherwood Anderson throughout - I guess it's mainly through his eyes. And so does another author Charles D Thompson Jr. in his book *Spirits of Just Men*. Yet he wasn't even mentioned in the movie - even though he was a central character in both books that came out of this era. How did the decision come about to ditch him?

**BONDURANT:** Well, you know it was something that I kind of expected to happen. I played no part in it [the decision]; they just told me and then they showed me the first script that Nick Cave put together. I talked to Hillcoat about it and he was kind of apologetic about it but he said that for dramatic purposes we want to concentrate on the three brothers and... Well, it made sense, it would have been another layer of complication in a movie that would already been thick with pretty compelling characters. And there's a fair amount of character building going on with the three brothers that... a fourth major character - to follow and work with. Of course his story is very intriguing and his take on the outside is interesting... but the film guys didn't think it would work. It's their decision.

**CINEMATREK:** Who is Charles Rakes? Is he a composite character? Is he combined with Charles Carter Lee from real life?

**BONDURANT:** No Charles Rakes in the book is modeled after what we know about the real Rakes. There's not a lot we know about him except he had a really strong animosity against my grandfather and his brothers and tried to kill them all on that day in 1930. Then he himself died very mysteriously the day before he was due to testify against Carter Lee [who they call Mason Wardell] in the film. In the book I tried to give a more complicated depiction of Charlie Rakes and try to represent him as a human being. He was a local guy. The biggest departure in the film was the depiction of Charlie Rakes to the point he is a complete fabrication. The only thing consistent in the movie is that he did shoot my grandfather on the bridge and all that sort of thing. All the other stuff was the film trying to extenuate the villain.

**CINEMATREK:** In your book, you referred to Smith Mountain and you also referred

to Smith Mountain Lake. But Smith Mountain lake was...

**BONDURANT:** Oh wait I know what you going to tell me, I know... [laughing] ... I did refer to Smith Mountain Lake at least once and it wasn't even there. That was a mistake. So did some one point that to you?

**CINEMATREK:** No, you see I visited Franklin County and Smith Mountain Lake.... I like to fish.

**BONDURANT:** So when was it finished?

**CINEMATREK:** It was started in 1960 and completed in 1963. The reason why I asked was because you refer to the Blackwater Creek area. Is that where the family still was?

**BONDURANT:** Oh, well... we don't really know precisely where the locations were. We do know that in the Burnt Chimney Area and... the problem was that Blackwater Creek runs through large sections of Franklin County. That's why it was popular to moonshine! You need a lot of water! So we know the Burnt Chimney Area, there's a jug filling station down there and ... we have a general sense. But as far as identifying anything.. For example Maggedy Creek - the bridge where they got shot - we were able to identify that bridge, we think we were able to identify a filling station nearby; but it's really hard to say with any certainty. And actually can't find any locations of any stills.

**CINEMATREK:** Well, I went as suggested by some guy show told me to just walk near the creeks. So I did and in the first half hour I came across two old pieces of a still. But I didn't push the issue because most of the people didn't want to talk about it.

**BONDURANT:** I had some delicate moments when I was out there talking to various people trying to negotiate that without being too.... you know. The people still don't want to talk about it.

**CINEMATREK:** And even though the have a new slogan as *The Moonshine Capital* the don't talk about it. They refer you to Smith Mountain Lake, the Booker T Washington Monument and Ferrum College but no moonshine.

**BONDURANT:** Did you go to the historical society?

**CINEMATREK:** Yeah, they are very helpful and knowledgeable.

**BONDURANT:** Well yeah, and they have a Moonshine Festival. Franklin County Tourism wants to capitalize on it...

**CINEMATREK:** They just don't want to talk about it.

**BONDURANT:** Well, I'm glad, because they are excited about the film.

**CINEMATREK:** Well it should generate even more tourism for that Moonshine Festival!

["Lawless"](#) opens everywhere August 29 and stars Shia LaBeouf, Tom Hardy, Guy Pearce and an overall dynamic cast. Matt Bondurant's book is available in hardcover and paperback. For more information on Franklin County contact the [Blue Ridge Institute](#) at Ferrum College in Ferrum Virginia -- [GEOFF BURTON](#)



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