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Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: John Swenson

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: R. F. Button
(Signature)

Date: Nov. 12/74

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Oral History Collection

Red Button

Interviewer: John Swenson

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Date: November 12, 1974

Mr. Swenson: We're at the house of Mr. Red Button on Rose Street in Denton, Texas, on November 12, 1974. We're going to talk to Mr. Button about bootlegging in Denton County in the early part of this century. When did bootlegging start in Denton County?

Mr. Button: Well, the biggest end of it started along in 1918. That was the big part of it. What it actually . . . bootlegging here then was more or less wildcatting here. Aubrey was noted. In other words, Aubrey was called the "Fruit Jar Junction," you know, just nicknamed that. In the Aubrey vicinity alone, there were--let me count them up there--roughly five right there. The population of Aubrey wasn't but 200, and there was five . . . well, possibly, ten. I know there were five known moonshiners.

Mr. Swenson: Do you remember their names?

Mr. Button: Well, now we'll start with the ones that was caught. There was John Thomas. He was a farmer south of

Aubrey. There was Mr. Redferring that got caught. There was a Mr. Housin that was caught. Mr. Ernest Smith was caught. I know of that they went, you know, to the penitentiary. The rest of them, they . . . well, they just dismissed it.

Swenson: Who was it? Was it federal people?

Button: No, it was mostly local law here at that time. It was the local sheriff's department here. You take in the days of . . . Bill Fry was one of our sheriffs here and Mr. Sweney. Then the local constables was here. The point was you paid off for protection, see.

Swenson: Yes.

Button: The sheriff's department . . . whichever sheriff's department you could pay off. You know what I mean. The standard rule was that it was so much a gallon. Now I don't remember just a specific point about this, how much per gallon, but it was substantial. It was way up there. I know that . . . now my father . . . when we started, he had a working deal with the sheriff's department in Denton County. We paid off at the sheriff's department, see. Those that didn't wound up eventually being caught, see.

Swenson: Where were the local constables? Did they have a local constable, say, at Aubrey?

Button: Yes, and the justice precincts and stuff like . . . the justice precinct was the constables.

Now you take down in our area. Down there there was a fellow, a big tall fellow, big-headed fellow. I never will forget it. He was a big black-headed fellow, tall . . . Bill Fox. I remember one time that I came out here to Denton. I came to Denton out here to bring some money. I was just a kid at that time. I was about ten years old. They told me what these constables were fixing to do. Well, I went back home and told, and in the meantime our neighbor two miles north of us during this period of time, why, they raided him. He was a well-known farmer by the name of John Thomas. They raided his outfit. I never will forget. They slapped an ax in it, to show you. They slapped an ax in it, and this big old tall fellow got scalded. This fellow that they raided, he eventually went down to the penitentiary for it.

Then up north of us, Mr. Redferring, they caught him. Now they were what my father would call wildcatters due to the fact that they never had a very good outfit. It was mostly just . . . it wasn't a good outfit.

Swenson: The quality of the materials and the still was . . .

Button: . . . was not. Now my father had a good solid . . . you saw it out there--solid copper still. It came to this country from Kentucky in 1875.

Swenson: Who'd it come with? Who brought it over here?

Button: I don't remember. It's been in the family. Anyway, they never kept their outfit clean. Now see, the basic principle of moonshine whiskey is . . . it all reverts back to cleanliness, you might say. Fermentation . . . in other words, you can take . . . most of this whiskey in this country in them days was made out of sugar. It was sugar whiskey, say, eighty-five pounds of sugar to a barrel of water and about thirty to thirty-five pounds of ground corn or ground barley to make the cap and two yeast cakes. Well, if the barrel wasn't rinsed out good and clean and everything, that fermentation wouldn't work, wouldn't turn the sugar into alcohol, see what I mean? You had to keep your still really clean because . . . there was a lot of alcohol poisoning. A lot of people didn't think too much about it, but it did. It caused . . . a lot of times they had what they called "shake leg" and everything else, you know. It was nothing to . . . there's a fusel oil, a poison, that really gets on contaminated whiskey. In cleanliness you could avoid that.

These people, maybe they might have had . . . instead of a copper worm, they could have had a galvanized worm, well, galvanized copper, and wasn't clean, the galvanized wasn't. Well, that could have caused poison. They just run it out and never filtered it, nothing.

Now our whiskey was run through charcoal and sand. We always kept a clean barrel in which you could get a better turn-out. But one reason why that was that way, these people did not . . . they didn't pay off or nothing, and it was just out in the woods . . . and they'd build up a fire or something out there and sink a barrel or two down here on the side of a branch or something and just pour that old branch water or whatever they had in there. Well, the barrel . . . they didn't have a chance to clean it out. Then they'd . . . maybe they'd just put a board or something over the barrel and rake leaves over it where that stuff could get in there and everything else, see. That was what they did.

They was forced to, in a way, for survival. It was a quick, easy way of making money. They'd just do it. There was always a ready market for it, being as close to Dallas and Fort Worth. Everybody had their own customers.

It was just kind of like a name brand. People would get . . . for instance, well, now you take . . . well, I'll tell you . . .

Swenson: What'd they call your brand of whiskey?

Button: Well, they would just say, "If you want some good whiskey, I don't know whether you can get it from him or not, but . . . well, I'll tell him. You can just get George Button up there, and he's got good whiskey, and it's 100-proof or whatever proof you want." That way it was word of mouth, see?

Swenson: They had some brand names for some others?

Button: No. It was just like . . .

Swenson: Different people?

Button: Yes, different people. We had a fellow up there that . . . he got the bright idea of even putting in lye, but he didn't last long because the rest of the moonshiners run him out. He put lye in his whiskey, you know, to give it a bite. But see . . . they'd say, "Well, now you don't want any of his whiskey. It'll burn you up." Stuff like that. "Well, you don't want that man's whiskey because, oh, it's got a sour taste to it. He just runs it any way in the world." It was more or less word of mouth, see. You had to be careful. You'd just

work up the people that you had . . . you had your own customers, you might say. You could wholesale it. Now most of ours was all wholesale.

Swenson: Who'd you sell to?

Button: We sold in Dallas and here in Denton. It was just, you know, more or less a wholesale proposition. We never . . . now as far as actually letting them come out there and getting a pint or a quart or a half-gallon, no, that wouldn't do.

Swenson: Did you always sell it in quart Mason jars?

Button: Half-gallon.

Swenson: Half-gallon Mason jars.

Button: Half-gallon Mason jars. For instance, now to keep down any publicity or anything, they'd say, "George, I'm sending after . . ." or "There'll be a fellow . . ." Them oldtimers, the way they'd work that was this. You might not know the guy that came after the whiskey, see. But he would say something to let you know that he knew, see.

What they would do . . . now you take Dallas, for instance. They would rent automobiles from some of those rentals. In them days there was a lot of Cadillacs, a lot of rental Cadillacs down there. They would rent a Cadillac. Most of them was all big cars. Well, they'd

rent a Cadillac because it was the biggest car then. In them days that was a good, fast automobile, just an old Cadillac touring car. Well, he'd come up there and get ready to load that thing down. In case they got caught down there somewhere . . . if there was a roadblock, they wouldn't lose their car because it was a rented car. Most of the time when they'd take it into Dallas it would be delivered to some law enforcement agency. You know, they were all . . .

Swenson: In on it?

Button: Yes, probably. Now you take a lot of law enforcement agencies was bootlegging right there and had a line of customers at little old speakeasies, you know. They'd sell maybe a gallon or two. They just sold it by the drink. They'd water it down. You'd sell them 100-proof whiskey, and they would water it down. Naturally, they would water it down, and they would sell it to these little places.

Now, for instance, one of their big outlets for it here . . . now they put a place out here. We never . . . I don't know whether any of our whiskey ever went to them or not . . . of course, we never did sell them any whiskey.

But now, for instance, there was places out here by the edge of town here that you could . . . they would

take Coca Cola. Coca Cola was a standard soft drink then. They'd take a Coca Cola bottle. They would uncap it. They'd uncap that . . . just pull that cap off. They'd pour out enough . . . they'd pour out coke, and they'd put, say, a good stiff drink of moonshine whiskey in that coke bottle. Then they would shake it back up. Then they had a home brew capper that they'd squeeze that cap back on there. Well, they called them "hot Coca Cola," see. They were so much. Now, for instance, you could get twenty-five cents or thirty cents or whatever they wanted, see. You knew this . . . say, it was "Cowboy Slim" or "Long Jake," well, you'd go in there at his place . . . maybe it was a little filling station or stuff like that and say, "Coke!" Well, if he knew you, he'd say, "Hot?" If he didn't, why, you'd tell him "I want a hot coke." You could . . . it was just an easier way of . . . but we never did, no, but that's the way they would do that.

Swenson: Where was this place that would sell them like that?

Button: It was out here . . . there was a place out here right where the truck stop is now on the old Sanger highway.

Swenson: Yes, that Union 76?

Button: Yes, you know, out here. That old Sanger highway went out here, and then there was a road that run off. It was right in the forks there where the road . . . one road banked off to the left and went into Krum, and then the other one went on up to Sanger.

You could go in there. It was a filling station, little filling station, and grocery store. It's just outside the city limits now. I mean, it's in the city limits, but then it was way out in the country, see. You could go in there or go by there, and he had . . . for instance, he had a lot of people dropping in there. He sold lots of Coca Cola. He had a good Coca Cola business because he had it spiked. That's the way . . . you know, there are a lot of ways . . .

Swenson: Did you ever see him take a milk bottle and paint it a white color on the outside and then fill it up and plug it up and deliver it like that?

Button: No, I never did. I never did, but I've knowed them in later years to have a . . . now a lot of the bootleggers had regular customers. I know of that happening here in Denton. Say, they had lots of business that wouldn't . . . now, of course, the names I wouldn't know. But they'd have just like a milk route. The bootlegger here in Denton would make a regular delivery. Maybe this

fellow over here wanted a quart or a half-gallon. It was just like a paper route. He had his good . . . and they were good substantial people here, you see, that drank regularly. That's where they would do that because along in them days . . . for instance, the Police Department here, they didn't have but one policeman here. He was the marshal. He couldn't be on the job. He had to sleep. He was working in the daytime.

Swenson: What was that man's name?

Button: Lee Knight.

Swenson: Lee Knight.

Button: Lee Knight was the marshal. Well, he couldn't . . . it was no way . . . it was impossible for . . . it was a safe proposition, and the people that this bootlegger had here would . . . well, he just had a regular . . . he had good customers, just like . . . I mean . . . I know . . . it was bankers, lawyers, and everybody that drank, see, you know.

Swenson: Did they ever have any conflict? Would one man try to muscle in on the other man's customers or business?

Button: No, no conflict there. Now the only conflict . . . for instance, you take back here . . . then, it would be eliminated before . . . up in those hills now, if a guy came in there and just started . . . say he moved from another

community. Say he moved from McKinney back in these hills and just squatted down there and started making whiskey, see. I've knowed this happening. He just come in here and just . . . maybe just want to take it over, see. Well, the word is just like . . . he wouldn't be squatted down in there a week till they'd know what he was doing. All these people . . . all was all neighbors. They all knew one another, and there was plenty of business. Well, what they would do, instead of keeping down everything . . . I'll show you.

Just let me show you something. Now this is just Arm and Hammer baking soda. It was a dime a box in them days in the grocery store. Well, now if you went out there and you shot that guy or caused a big fuss, well, that, you know . . . but you'd just go buy a box of soda. You could get it anywhere. Then you'd spot where his mash barrels was at. You could go in there because it would be out in the woods. Wherever his mash barrels was at . . . when he left them . . . and then you just go to pouring soda in his mash barrels. He'd have to pour them out. He couldn't run it. After about twice or three trips, he would get the message that he wasn't wanted in there, and you wasn't actually out but about thirty or forty cents, and you eliminated him. There was no fuss or no muss. He would get the message that

he wasn't wanted in that community because he couldn't never run . . . because you done poured the Arm and Hammer soda . . . because soda would kill the fermentation. See what I mean?

Swenson: Yes.

Button: That eliminated him. You could eliminate the undersirables, and no fuss or no muss. That's the way they worked that. I have done it. I've done it when I was a kid. I poured Arm and Hammer soda in guys' mash barrels. It wasn't exactly . . . they'd just come in there.

Swenson: How old were you when you started working around stills?

Button: I was eight years old.

Swenson: And that was in 1918?

Button: No, I was ten, but I started working, you know, around them . . . but when we really fired up and got really going, it was 1918, along in there.

Everybody knew everybody. There was no conflict there. When you was paying off, you was alerted when these outsiders was going to raid. That was all. It boiled down to that. It was a pretty well-known fact that . . . it was a well-established fact that your protection . . . a lot of these out-of-town bootleggers just knew . . .

Now for instance, if you take Nocona, for instance. It was an oil field town in them days. They knew in these little towns around . . . they knew that you could come to Aubrey up there, and if you knew one or two guys, well, they would come up there and they would say, "We want a load of whiskey." He'd have to come in there, that little town. They'd have to know him. "Well, let's see now, I haven't got . . . I can spare ten gallons" or "I can spare . . . I'll sell about fifteen gallons." Well, it was kind of a co-op proposition. That guy might . . . he might want three or four loads of whiskey in going to this town. Well, maybe there'd be four or five guys, you know, to fill that order, that would help him out. That's the way they worked up here. It was kind of a co-op proposition, you know.

Swenson: How many gallons would you make per setting or per load?

Button: Well, actually, on an average . . . of course, a lot of times the weather would foul you up, or some little something would foul you up, see. Maybe your yeast cake was a little weak or something. But on an average you could get five gallons of 100-proof whiskey out of each barrel, you know. Lots of times it would run six. That's 100-proof whiskey.

Swenson: How long did it take to make that?

Button: Well, it didn't take too awful long. You had about a three-quarter-inch worm. You see, the worm would . . . now it was owing to the cooling power. You had to control your turn-out, I mean, your . . . if you had plenty of good cold water . . . in other words, if you had plenty of good cold water to keep that coil cold, you could turn up your fire to more steam, see. You could turn it up to more steam. You could regulate it. Now we had a Coleman . . . the first Coleman burners. I reckon Coleman like the Coleman stove people. Now we were the first ones. There was no such thing as butane in them days, and most of them cooked by wood. But now we had . . . it was the first Coleman system. That was back yonder, oh, way back there. They were burners about so big, and there were about five burners under that still out there. They were all little bitty copper tubing that it was all connected to, and we had a pressure tank over here, Coleman tank. It was just like an old automobile pump. You would pump it up. We would . . . because that way were making in a . . . well, they would call it a basement now, but it was dug under the barn, see. We dug under a barn. That way, why, there was no wood smoke. I've seen the time you could go around up there, and you could spot, you could

tell, in them hills who was . . . by the smoke. Most of them fired . . . but controlled heat was your . . . your water was the main thing. Your cooling, your condensation, was your . . .

Swenson: Where'd you get your water to . . .

Button: We had a well dug just for it, you know what I mean? There were two wells on this place, but the other one had copperas in it, and we had a deep well. We had Mr. Meyers to dig us a deep well, soft water, and we had it piped in there, see, down there in this. A lot of times, if you was trying to get too much . . . too quick a run . . . time didn't mean anything to them old-timers. It didn't because you wasn't going nowhere. You just wanted a steady stream coming out. You'd watch your condensation.

A lot of times . . . now another thing that those wildcatters didn't do . . . and I've seen them try anything. I've seen wildcatters even have a spring there and bury their condensation pipe and let the water, you know . . . they'd have it out here, dug down here, to where it'd drip in, a homemade deal. We always had a barrel and water running through it. Things like that, see.

Another thing, a lot of those stills did not have what . . . well, actually, it was a steam trap, but the real name for them was thump keg. What I mean by thump keg would be, oh, I would say, eighteen inches or twenty-four, somewhere in that vicinity. See, your lid of your still goes right down like that. And right here in the center is a jam nut and everything. Where the pipe comes out like this, you jam it down there. That is about three-quarters . . . that's where the steam comes up. And you elbowed it over here. Now right here was what we called . . . well, we call it a thump keg, but it's actually a steam trap. It was a copper . . . about a three-gallon solid copper--we had it made--steam trap. It would jam up down in there, and that steam would go just right down in that thing and then come out over there on the other side, just like that. Well, that was in case that something happened to the fire there. You've got a roll in there. It kind of boils over like boiling beans. You know how beans will boil over?

Swenson: Yes.

Button: That was to catch that boil-over if something happened. But if you didn't, that old soured mash would go all the way through that and down through your condensation into your whiskey, and it would give your whiskey a sour . . . it would give you a sour mash . . . oh, man! It would

give you an awful taste, and there's no way in the world to get it out after it boiled over in there. You couldn't never tell when it was going to boil over in there, see. That was to take care of that . . . in case it boiled over.

Swenson: Would you make one load a week, say, or two?

Button: Yes, well, it just depends. If we had an order . . . I have started, say . . . well, we've got a big load coming in. You know, we've got . . . well, take for instance, maybe there's a fair fixing to go on in Dallas, and maybe this guy, this supplier, down in Dallas, he'd say, "Now we've got . . ." you know, of course, that was a big deal going on. That was a big deal then, the fair. Well, I have started running . . . say we had room for twenty-four barrels of mash lined up against a wall, and before we would get through, run all of them, run a whole twenty-five . . . it just depends. It takes, oh, I'd say by the time you cleaned . . . it wouldn't take over two hours to run a barrel of mash. To clean up and everything, you know, it wouldn't take over two hours, but then you've got to clean up. I can run a barrel of mash . . . if everything is running good, I can run it and run it slow--you know what I mean, no hurry--I can run a barrel of mash in two hours.

Swenson: Where did you buy the sugar?

Button: Wholesale here in Denton.

Swenson: They must have known that you were . . .

Button: Oh, they did, sure. But, see, in order for a sale, why, they would . . . they wouldn't . . .

Swenson: They wouldn't bother you.

Button: No, and everybody knew everybody. Incidentally, just like . . . you could buy wholesale. You'd buy your sugar wholesale down here. Well, there was the Long and King grocery wholesale house here. You'd buy your sugar wholesale.

Swenson: Now a bootlegger is a person who doesn't necessarily make it. He just takes it from one place to another, is that right?

Button: Yes, a bootlegger is a guy . . . there's lots of difference. Now there are a lot of differences in a fellow that makes whiskey and a bootlegger. There is a lot of difference due to the fact that the bootlegger has to deal with a lot of different people. The whiskey maker knows the man he's dealing with. Right there . . . he unloads it right then and there.

Now it's up to the bootlegger. Now a bootlegger will take your whiskey, and he's just liable to mess it all up any way to suit hisself, but it's out of your hands. See, it's out of your hands. That was the difference.

Swenson: Did you know any real famous bootleggers around in this area?

Button: No, not really famous because everybody . . . there was lots of bootlegging. Now you take just like down here in Niggertown right now. There's lots of, you know, different ones. Well, man alive! You and I can start out right now. We can get in your pickup, and in twenty minutes' time we can contact at least, you know, four or five places where we can get it at two dollars a half-pint. That's the standard price here in this town of today, see.

Swenson: What were you selling it for back then?

Button: Well, wholesale it was going for around \$12.50 to \$15.00 a gallon. It depends, you know. That's good. But see, now . . . now there's your difference in what you call a bootlegger. You can take a . . . I'll say it like this. Alright, 100-proof whiskey is 50 per cent water. In other words, an 80-proof whiskey is 40 per cent water. That's your proof, see. Well, now a bootlegger, he can take 100-proof whiskey, and he can cut that down. He can cut it down 20 per cent, or whatever, and still have a . . . that'll knock your head off, see? In other words, he can take 100-proof whiskey and drop it, and he can make 20 per cent quicker than . . .

Swenson: Just by putting water in it.

Button: That's right. He can run it 20 per cent for 20 per cent water. See, he's done made a whole bunch right there, see. I've seen them pull everything.

Now a whiskey maker wouldn't do what I'm fixing to tell you. Now suppose that he had . . . now a bootlegger had all kinds of trades--whites, blacks, everything. Maybe he had a section of town that was all blacks. In them days there wasn't much money. Well, to satisfy them down there, he had to have him a cheap product. Well, he'd buy . . . and he could sell them a pint of gin, synthetic gin, for, I'd say, a dollar and make fifty cents easy on it. They'd buy those--what the bootleggers called--a hickory shaft pint. It was twelve ounces. A full pint is sixteen ounces. That bootlegger would go to some drug wholesaler in Dallas . . . at that time you could buy ether tablets. You've probably seen them--big white tablets.

Swenson: Yes.

Button: They were cheap. Now them ether tablets were cheap. Well, anybody knows that gin is nothing in the world but juniper berries, distilled juniper berries. You can buy that spirits of juniper berry--the same thing. It tastes like

gin. Okay. Now he'd fix up . . . I'd call it bathtub gin because they're liable to run it in on you. Say he had a big old bathtub fixed up three or four feet off the floor. Well, you take and run that full of water. See, ether will make you drunker than a goat. You mix so many of those ether tablets with so much water. Then you mix it. You put so much of that gin flavoring in it, well, you'd have a synthetic ether gin, see. You could sell ether gin, and it would make them drunk and crazy, you know, on ether.

Swenson: Did it tear up your body any?

Button: Well, no, not too much. It just got them crazy while they were drinking it. You'd really get high. That was what you call bathtub gin. See, now that's the difference in a bootlegger and . . . he would try anything, see. Make ether gin. I've seen them make . . . why you could take one tablet, and, man, you could make a pint of gin out of it, see, you know, if you wanted to. That's the difference in bootleggers. It just depended on what he wanted.

Swenson: How many bootleggers were there in Denton who made a living off of it? Just round numbers.

Button: Just bootleggers, not whiskey makers?

Swenson: Just bootleggers.

Button: Well, I would say there were, oh, about eight good ones. Now that's not taking in the colored section.

Swenson: How many people were in Denton at that time?

Button: About half what it is now.

Swenson: About what? Twenty thousand people?

Button: Something like that. We had a fellow here, a well-known fellow here, that made whiskey, bought whiskey, and bootlegged. He was a combination. His name was Drew Copeland. Now he was a combination at that time. He amassed a whole lot of money out of a deal. He was a combination.

Swenson: Made a pretty good living?

Button: Yes, he did. He . . . but he was a combination. He would make it, or he would buy it. He was raised in this country, and he knew every other . . . he knew all. Maybe this little bitty bootlegger out here on the side of the branch . . . it didn't make any difference how nasty or how bad that whiskey was, he'd buy it, see. This fellow didn't have to . . . he could . . . he was just on the fringe, you might say. He was what they called a wildcat whiskey maker. He was just sitting out here firing his still with wood or what have you and maybe have two old tubs soldered together, you know, and

a galvanized . . . he knew that he had a market for whatever it was. He knew he had a market for it because Drew Copeland would buy it at some price, and Drew made whiskey, see, you know, because he had an outlet for it.

There wasn't really but about, I would say, in Denton County . . . the early ones. The early distillers in Denton County outside of my father, I would say there wasn't but two. But now in later years . . . in later years, when this thing got to going good and there was money in it, the outside interests came in here. You take now . . . there was a big . . . they came in here . . . well, it was . . . I wouldn't call them a syndicate, but it was out of Dallas and Fort Worth. It was organized liquor makers out of there. They could . . . they seen that this county was kind of wide open. They came in here and just went at it full blast.

Swenson: Who was the sheriff at that time?

Button: Well, let's see, at that time we had . . . Bill Fry was sheriff, and Sweney was sheriff, and . . .

Swenson: Wasn't Bill Fry sheriff again after Sweney was here?

Button: Yes, he'd been here . . . Bill Fry had been in there two or three times. They came in and, you know . . . kind of like Mount Pleasant. Now, see, Mount Pleasant was always

down in that country. Well, then Dallas come up here.

I guess the last big . . .

Swenson: There's always been distillers near Mount Pleasant?

Button: Yes, that Mount Pleasant was always . . . Mount Pleasant and Glenrose. Them was the two of the most famous places that it was--Mount Pleasant and Glenrose. They had always . . . I imagine that there never was a time . . . and I imagine right now because . . . and down there they had a knack of . . . well, I suppose it was good whiskey. I never did drink it. Well, I've tasted of it, but I never could tell much difference. But down there in that East Texas country those farmers down there depended largely on sorghum molasses. Everybody had a sorghum . . . well, there's . . . you can take sorghum syrup and make whiskey out of it. It'll distill. It'll turn to . . . it'll turn. You know, they used what was available down there. You could always . . . I imagine they've made whiskey down there for two ages--Mount Pleasant and Glenrose. Wherever there is money in a county, it looks like you can get to the law enforcement agency. Now I don't know why that . . . don't misunderstand. I don't think that all law enforcement agencies . . . but there is a price tag. That has been kind of the rule regardless, you know.

Swenson: When these people came out of Dallas and Fort Worth, did they set up their own distilleries around, out in the country or in town?

Button: Yes, you take . . . I guess the last big known one was down here on the Fry Ranch. Yes, they would lease. They'd come in here, and they'd lease a whole passel of land like a ranch or something, see. The Fry Ranch, now it was a big outfit, but they finally caught them down there. The Liquor Control Board caught them.

Now for instance, the last big known still was a Jew's. There were . . . now I could be wrong on the name of them, but I believe it was the Ace . . . well, it was a salvage company. I don't remember their name, but they were salvage. They brought . . . it was during the first war, see, not World War I, but this next . . . this last one, you know? Well, they were salvage people, and they would buy . . . it was these Jews. They were big wrecking people. Now the last known still that I know--big one--that must have been along . . . let's see. I married in '39, and it must have been along in '34 or '35. It was during that . . . well, I don't know.

But anyway, they got hold of . . . but what they did, they bought from North American Aviation Company, and it was government . . . they bought anti-freeze. They

They had some alcohol anti-freeze, and they went out of that alcohol anti-freeze. The government had barrels and barrels of . . . it was alcohol, see. It was alcohol and the government used it and . . . it was surplus.

So they went another deal, another way, see, like the anti-freeze we've got now. Well, there sat all those . . . that alcohol--barrels and barrels of it. Well, these Jews bought that whole kit and caboodle. You've never seen so many steel barrels of war surplus.

Well, they set up here in the bottom. I don't know where they got hold of these guys. Well, I started to work around it, but I didn't. I had a friend that worked around it. He wanted me to go work for them. That day, why, labor was cheap. If you made two or three dollars . . . well, anyway, they sat this . . . this was an upright still, a big one. They would bring in barrels of alcohol in trucks up there, see. Man, there were beaucoups of them! What you did, you redistilled that. They got it for nothing. You just poured it all over in this still, just like mash, in steel drums. You would rerun it. You talk about . . . I was up there one day helping. You talk about the awfulest mess and gum and stuff. Boy, it was . . . after it'd get through running

. . . of course, it would all come out of there just clear and pretty and white. All the alcohol would, but, man, cleaning up that still . . .

Now that one was the last one . . . but they were distilling. They were rerunning that alcohol that . . . these Jews or whoever they were, this salvage company. They set up up there. It was . . . they set up west of Aubrey there in the hills there. That was the last one that I knew of, big outfit. Now there were . . . but in those days, you talk about any bootlegging, lots and lots of people had to make whiskey to get by. You know, that was their quick source of . . .

Swenson: Income?

Button: Yes, and lots of them . . . and it was just kind of word to mouth: "Now I'll tell you what you do . . . " "Well, I don't know nothing about making whiskey." Well, everybody . . . they'd say, "Well, I know somebody that knows." Well, they'd come over here to this one: "Yes, I'll tell you what to do." Consequently, the trouble was that they never had a very good outfit. They just . . . most of them would take two tubs or something like that, just a tin outfit, galvanized outfit. There was lots of tinsmiths here, and they would just solder up something.

I've seen them there that couldn't buy a worm, you know, copper tubing: "Well, you don't have to have copper." You know, they just, "Well, I'll tell you what we'll do . . . "

And they'd go out there in the woods. They'd join a three-quarter-inch galvanized pipe, see. They'd go out there in the woods, and they'd pick the tree the size that they wanted. About that size, see, big around (gesture), up there to where it didn't have no limbs to way up there (gesture). They would just start wrapping that around that tree, that pipe, just bending it around and around and around and around that tree, see, and put on another section of it, see, till they got what they wanted. Then they would take a cross-cut saw and cut it off way up here and just lift that out, see, and deals like that, see, to make do, anything to make do, see.

Well, you couldn't keep that galvanized clean. It would be . . . there's something about it that . . . that stuff running through there hot would make that flake off, see, and there's something about it that would make it turn dark. You know, there's something about the steam and that alcohol.

Now that's the reason that copper . . . all you've got to do to copper is to make you up a solution of Arm and Hammer soda, warm, and you run it through there. You run it through. It didn't make no difference. If you thought . . . it might look clean to you, but regardless, when you got through running it, you made sure. That killed everything. That soda would stop all the bacteria, and it would flush out, regardless. It was a "must" to clean your outfit. Now I don't care if it is . . . I've been tired and said, "Why, that don't need it." Well, you didn't need to be told but once.

Swenson: Yes.

Button: And you knew because it had to be . . .

Swenson: When did you quit making whiskey on that still out there?

Button: In 1926, I believe. I think that 1926 was the last. Right where Lincoln Park is now, northwest of there.

Swenson: Why did you stop making whiskey?

Button: Well, we . . . times then was . . . and the law enforcement got a little stiffer here in Denton, you know, and everything. It just wasn't worth the risk, and it just got down to cheaper . . . of course, then, you could get . . . they began to get whiskey in here, see.

Swenson: From outside?

Button: Yes, and it just wasn't profitable. There wasn't no use in going in there and paying off. I imagine a man could have paid off, but it wasn't profitable. You couldn't have because you had always been under a dread there.

Swenson: That was right after the Story bunch got busted up here, wasn't it?

Button: Yes, W. A. Martin, see, he was a . . . he was a good . . . W. A. Martin and . . . well, now that Story bunch, when they set up . . . I knew W. A. I knew W. A. real well, and his family. In fact, when Tom Hickman, the Ranger captain, when he set up out there on the TWU campus with that gun at that white house over there in the corner . . . I hadn't been gone from that house . . . I had a 1925 Model-T touring car, old Model-T. I could just barely drive the thing. I hadn't been gone from there that long. He had bought a case of half-gallons. He was a customer. W. A. was a customer.

Now right there was the beginning of the end of . . . we had slowed down. We were slowing down there then. That was back about the last time that . . . but, you see, when they came in here . . . now you take . . .

now right there, that little incident was . . . W. A. run a tire shop here. He run a tire shop there right about where, I think, Denton County National Bank is now. W. A. Martin run a tire shop.

So then there were . . . there was W. A. Martin, and there was Burl Stiff. The Stiff's was raised down hère. Burl's brother got killed here several years ago, that old cripple fellow they beat to death with his crutch. He was the last one. Then there were the Storys. There was Nathan and Yancy Story. J. T. Baker was actually the mastermind of the whole business.

Now J. T. Baker--I'm talking about the Storys and them and that gang--now J. T. Baker, when I first knew him and first got acquainted with him, was around Aubrey up there, and he was the caretaker of the Blue Cemetary. Well, I didn't know much about . . . he was a nice-looking fellow. He was coal black-headed and had a black mustache.

Well, then right out here, right north of . . . right there . . . right on east of Cooper there was a little country store called Mingo's. It was a little country store over there. Well, J. T. Baker bought that little store. Of course, my father was acquainted with him and everything. J. T. was . . . I didn't . . . that's when I first got to

know him. But anyway, my father knew him. I had met him with my father up there around Aubrey. Well, so he was . . . I don't know what J. T. was . . . but he was always highly nervous. He was afraid of lots of . . . he must have had a past.

But anyway, there was a fellow came in here on a hobo trip. See, there was a water tank there, and this fellow was bumming his way through somewhere. He was out of Fort Worth, was where he was from. He got off there at Mingo's Store. This local was taking water, but he had fifteen cents in his hand. He was wanting, I guess, a can of sardines or something. He knocked on the door of the store--it faced the south--and he knocked on the door like . . . and the door always opened to the inside like that. He knocked on the door, and J. T. Baker shoved a gun through the door. That guy was . . . and he stumbled, or something, into it, and J. T. Baker shot him, I mean, just riddled him right there on the porch.

Well, he . . . we bought that store. My father bought it. He wanted to move to Denton. My father bought that store from him. He wanted to get away from there.

Well, I seen then that that man was, you know, there was something wrong with him because he was mean.

He came right down here, right where the Wolf Grocery Store is, across the street there, where their trade barn is. That was J. T. Baker's home.

Well, that there was the base of the Story and Martin gang. That was . . . and he . . . this old fellow masterminded a lot of that. Well, when they finally . . . it got so bad here that citizens and everybody else . . . Denton County was getting in pretty bad shape in everything, see. They had tried to run . . . they'd shot at Sheriff Bill Fry there. They'd had . . . well, man, they were just taking it over, trying to.

So they decided they'd better . . . well, these deputies, you couldn't . . . boy, they'd run these deputies ragged, see. So they come up on the idea that down here, down on the border . . .

Swenson: Well, now were these local deputies that . . . like the Martins would whip them or . . .

Button: Yes, see, you know, these were local deputies. Well, you couldn't get a good deputy. Well, they hit on the idea . . . and these was an old border man down there by the name of Parsons. Down there on the border, man, that long lanky thing, man, he was tough. He was tougher than a boot: "Well, yes, I'll help you clean up Denton." So

they hired him. Bill Fry hired him. "Well, we've got to have another one." Well, there was an old . . . he looked like he had eyebrows down to here (gesture), and his name was Gooch. He was an oil field . . . he cleaned . . . he had been marshal in a lot of oil field towns.

Swenson: Real heavy-browed, low?

Button: Yes, and that was Gooch. They hired him, see. Well, they come in here, and they were pretty rugged old characters.

Well, so they decide that them guys have got to go. They all got to drinking, Martin and Story and them. They all got to drinking. They decided, "Well, we'll fix them." So they take . . . Yancy Story, he . . . Yancy Story, he was a big old tall . . . and he was nice-looking. He was going with a Chadwick down here, a rancher's daughter, an old maid down here. He was nice-looking. He was a big old tall boy. Well, they . . . he wore a big old black hat. I never will forget.

They wrote names just like you would write for Christmas gifts. They wrote Nick Akins, and they wrote Parson, and they wrote Gooch, and they went right down the line, see, them names, folding them up and put them in this hat, see. Well, they figured it all out who all

was around there. Oh, there was always a bunch of them around there. So everybody had to reach in that hat and draw a name. Whoever you drew, you had to get that guy. Well, so they all drew names. They was out there at this house. They all drew names.

Well, W. A. Martin drew old Parson's name, see. He drew Parson. Well, he took off after him. These other guys, they still . . . they didn't . . . incidentally, none of the rest of them got their man. They was all there. Well, Martin got . . . he got down to right here where Calvert's Feed Store is now. There was a little hamburger joint right across from there by the name of Riley's Cafe. Well, W. A. was looking for this Parson, and he was messing around there. W. A. was waiting over there in this cafe.

The Trade Square was there then. Well, Parson happened to be in that Trade Square, and he went into this here . . . it was Cook's Grocery Store, see. He went in the side door there. When he come out of the front, when he come out the front of . . . right there where Calvert's Feed Store is, well, he came out. Well, W. A. come out. Just as Parson stepped off the curb right there where Calvert's is, why, W. A. had done crossed the street, and he had two Smith and Wesson .38's. Man, he downed him! He stood there straddling him until he emptied them. He killed Parson right there.

Well, then he run back out to the house, and they was still out there. Well, then . . . boy, when this guy . . . oh, man, alive! The sheriff's department and everything else . . . Tom Hickman was Ranger captain. They decided they'd better do something soon. So, incidentally, it all boiled down to this . . . I don't know how . . . but anyway they got Tom Hickman in here, see. Right there, on the campus, that's where they busted that gang up, is right there. So W. A. went . . . of course, he went to the penitentiary, but he didn't stay the whole . . . I mean, he got to be boss of . . . well, a cook. There was some politics there.

Swenson: What politics was that?

Button: Well, his brother happened to be the chief of police at Belton down here, and Martin came from a nice family, see. They got him to be a kind of a boss over a bunch of convicts. They got it eased around there, down there.

Well, they had to send him. Well, they sent him down. They sent all the Story's down, see. Well, incidentally, this Yancy Story, the one that drewed the names, now . . . I moved to Dallas along about that time, and Mrs. Martin stayed with us some down there. But anyway, why, he got married in the Dallas County jail. He married this here rancher's daughter, this Chadwick. He married

her through the bars before he went down there. They had a big wedding. Now he had a big wedding in the Dallas County jail. Yes, he had a big wedding (chuckle).

When they got all of that mess squared away, why, they thought they had the town . . . they had it pretty well . . . well, Gooch at that time . . . up here at Nocona there was still a lot of wells running. Nocona was still a wide open town. Well, Gooch, he'd made it through all this deal here. So Nocona was just a little . . . they decide that they need him. They make a deal for him to be marshal up there.

Well, there was a bootlegger up there, a guy that pretty well knew . . . I mean, he . . . I knew him. I've met him two or three times. Of course, he had some kin-folks back here was how come we knew him. He was a half-Indian by the name of Carl Goodspeed. He was a rugged character. But he was bootlegging, and, you know, he was making a living, and he was pretty well off. That was an oil field town, and it was wide open. Anything went.

Well, the do-gooders was going to clean up the town. They got Gooch up there. Well, he made his big play and was doing alright. But he didn't make no bones about it. He was after Carl Goodspeed.

Well, now I wasn't up there, but I know what happened. Well, he was going to search this place. That's where he made his mistake. He was going to . . . now this was all brought out in trial. There's no telling what happened. But this is just the matter of a trial record. He knocks on the door of Mr. Goodspeed's house, and Carl told him, "Come right on in Mr. Gooch. You're welcome to sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee." "I've got a search warrant here. I've got to search your home." Carl said, "Sure, Mr. Gooch." Now this is testimony. "Help yourself. Start in this room here or that one or the bedroom. But now leave the bathroom." He said, "My wife's in there taking a bath. Wait till she comes out to get that. You can search these other rooms."

Well, no. Mr. Gooch, he just said, "Why, no!" He said, "I'm going to . . ." and, boy, he hit the bathroom first. Well, now he was dead.

There's no telling what happened. He hit the . . . now Carl's wife and Carl both swore this. He jerked the bathroom door open, and Mrs. Goodspeed was taking a bath. Here it was. "That big, rough son-of-a-gun broke that door, and I was in there in the tub, didn't have no clothes on." Well, Carl took the shotgun and he gutted him. I

mean, he blowed a hole in him with a shotgun right through there.

Well, when it all comes to trial. In other words, there wasn't but three people that know what went on. There were actually three. One of them was dead, and the other was a man and his wife. The testimony . . . now he broke in there. Mrs. Goodspeed swore that he broke in the bathroom. She didn't have no clothes on. Carl said, "Nobody's going to do that in my home." Now that's what happened to Gooch, see.

But when Gooch went there, the thing about it . . . Carl Goodspeed or Gooch--one had to go. It all boiled down that Gooch had . . . he was the man that had to go. There's nobody that knows. Well, it could have happened that way, but who could say otherwise? They didn't have nothing to do but to take the actual facts.

Swenson: When they grabbed Martin and the Story Gang there by TWU, did they . . . I've seen some stories about some man taking a shot from the hip at old Martin when he was coming out. That man was an old retired sheriff from Aubrey. Did you know about him?

Button: Yes, but he didn't.

Swenson: He didn't?

Button: No, I know.

Swenson: What happened?

Button: That machine gun on that tripod was what brought them out of there. The rest of these . . . Tom Hickman, he could have killed him if he'd have . . . now I'll give the Ranger captain that one. He was on top of that all the way through. Him and that there . . . he got a machine gun out of the armory somewhere. It was one of them that sits on a tripod. When he began to cut that thing through there . . . now he was on top of it. There was nobody, see . . . they listened to him. Then when he began to cut them windows and things . . .

Swenson: They came out?

Button: You bet your life! But now he could have killed them just as easy. But he wasn't trigger-happy, and he wasn't letting none of them . . . as far as them deputies around here, oh, they was running around, but he made them deputies all back off. He had that thing . . . him and his deputies . . .

Swenson: Had the situation under control?

Button: Yes. They didn't trust . . . they didn't trust . . . they done it themselves. Their men was right on top of him. There was no deputies. They're the ones that done it, actually the Rangers, because the rest of those guys wouldn't mess with them.

Now Baker, in later years he went to Wichita Falls for the insane. He was . . . he died up there from . . . he was criminally insane, anyway. But he actually did . . . when all of that . . . he really did. But he was really the boss of that whole deal. Actually, you know, he . . . these little old . . . rest of these was just doing it, but as far as actually making any money out of it . . . now he was the guy that . . .

Swenson: . . . that had everything planned?

Button: Yes.

Swenson: When did he go? After the trial . . . did he ever stand trial?

Button: No, see, he wasn't in that bunch. He was down at his house when all of this happened.

Swenson: Did they ever pick him up or anything?

Button: No, they never could pinpoint him down, see. But they were about to, only they was messing around.

Swenson: When did he die?

Button: Oh, he died several years later. He was actually . . . I always thought . . . because the rest of these guys, they wasn't criminals to start with. For instance, they picked up a little old welder. There was a Story here that was from a machine shop. Well, when they botched

that guy up there at Aubrey, why, man, they burnt and burnt and, you know, just deals like that. That bank . . . they couldn't . . . they wasn't actually . . . they didn't know . . .

Swenson: They didn't know enough to.

Button: No, they just . . . all they would do is just take pot shots at the sheriff and aggravate him. They wasn't . . .

Now you take Baker down there. Well, now where he . . . he had enough on the ball there that he corrupted . . . say, these break-ins and stuff, these railroads, these locals, stuff like that. Maybe there was a carload of sugar, for instance, or you noticed anything that way we could sidetrack here or yonder, you know. If there was hot cars or . . . he was the guy that . . .

Swenson: . . . put things together.

Button: Yes, he put them together. But then this bunch, well, would do it, see.

Swenson: Whatever happened to Martin?

Button: Well, I'll tell you. That was sad. I've always hated it. I was living in Dallas at that time. Well, Mrs. Martin had got her an apartment over in Oak Cliff. When W. A. came out, right up there where the Central tracks is,

what they called Deep Elam, right there where the old Central Depot is there, right along in there where that line of rows of hockshops up there on what they called Deep Elam. He went into business there. It was a pawnshop of tools. It was any kind of tool in the world. He would loan money on them. He had money. He made money while he was in the pen, see. Well, he had a pretty good-sized place there. He was making good money out of loaning money on . . . these carpenters would go in there, and he'd loan money on them-- anything, see, or buy.

Well, two doors up from him . . . two doors up from him was a place called . . . a little old domino hall there. I forget now--Ma's Place or something. But anyway, it was right at the front here where they played dominoes. There was a door at the back there. That back there was . . . there was a lot of tables there.

By that time in Dallas . . . Dallas wasn't wet, but there were a bunch of people there that made beer, home-brew, and they wholesaled it all over Dallas. See, Dallas was pretty corrupt. Now you could go in this place and buy a bottle of beer, buy home-brew. Tables were set up just like a beer joint is now.

Well, I went up on the streets there. W. A. started drinking there in this place with me. He didn't want it, but he'd drink a bottle of beer. Well, anyway, he went on home. Well, his wife kind of got on him about this drinking, see. They had a little old friendly . . .

Well, he had two children, a boy called Son and a girl. Well, Son--we always called him Son--was in this apartment sitting on the couch just like you and I are sitting here. But this boy was kind . . . he was kind of a wild kid. He was getting in deep water down there and had been since his dad was in the pen, see. He was starting.

Well, W. A. just hauls off and slaps or hits Mrs. Martin. I never did figure out which. But anyway, he downed her. He had done that two or three times, especially when he was drinking. His boy had his gun. He had his gun under the cushion. He had a gun under there. He just raised up and said, "Dad, you've hit my mother your last time," and he downed him, killed him, killed his own father. In later years, I don't know how late and how many years, but he, this boy, went to the gas chamber for hijacking. But anyway, he died and they gased him in California. W. A.'s son killed him. Of course, he got out of that, but he went on from that. He just turned bad. But he was turning bad all the time that his dad was in the penitentiary.