



SOUTH CAROLINA'S DARK CORNER: MAYHEM, MYSTERY AND MOONSHINE

The spirit and spirits of the Dark Corner of South Carolina are alive and well in the form of the Dark Corner Distillery and its 'shine, made with the same processes used in the 1700s.

WORTH A CLICK

For a list of legal moonshine makers in the mountains, as well as a video about Dark Corner Distillery, visit BlueRidgeCountry.com/Moonshine.

It's a little area just across the North Carolina border around Hog Back Mountain, Gowensville and Landrum, where immigrants from Scotland, England and Ireland began settling in the early 1700s.

By 1832, the area had been dubbed the dark corner, because it was the only area that voted against the nullification act (which gave South Carolina the right to ignore federal mandates): a dark corner where the light of nullification could never shine.

Over the ensuing decades, the corner seemed to gather additional strength through its population of whisky-makers, heavy drinkers and backwoods people who were suspicious of outsiders.

Moonshine, used originally for medicinal purposes, had been made by the Irish and Scots in their homeland and they considered moonshine the "water of life." They mixed in different herbs, spices or fruits depending on what kind of ailment they wanted to cure.

Moonshine got a bad rap when the local settlers refused to pay government taxes on their product, thus creating illegal stills. The settlers believed that it was their God-given right to make moonshine. But they also brewed it for economic reasons. Prior to textile mills, farming and lumbering were the only money-making ventures. Farmers soon discovered that instead of getting about 50 cents for a bushel of corn, they could convert the corn into meal, distill it and bring in about \$1 a gallon or \$2.50 per bushel.

Emotions ran high over moonshine and there were many gunfights and feuds. There was an unwritten

local code that it was unpardonable and cowardly to report a distillery. Disputes over who gave information to revenue officers led to more killings in the dark corner than anything else. Many of the bigger families in the area – the Howards, the Gosnells and the Bowers – were South Carolina's version of the Hatfields and McCoys. But even with the family feuds, it was still a close-knit community that looked out for one another. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, government attempts to crack down on stills increased. "Revenuers" – state and federal officers – were sent in to collect taxes. Locals would find out about the planned raid though and would warn other 'shiners that the law was coming by firing rapid gunshots in the air. The revenuers would usually find the stills unmanned and would cut them up but wouldn't have anyone to arrest.

Mystery has always shrouded the Dark Corner and many believe several areas to be haunted or "hainted." There's a cabin at Camp Old Indian that was used as a secret meeting place by the Gosnell family for years. There are reports of baby's crying (when there are none around) and visions of wagon wheels on fire when crossing certain streams.

Today, more than 150 families of the first original settlers still live in the area. Some were forced out of their homes for lumbering in 1904 and then again in 1917 when the army decided to use the area as an artillery range. But they came back.

And the Dark Corner Distillery in downtown Greenville, S.C. makes moonshine just like it was made in the 1700s.

"We use an 80-gallon copper pot, no electronics, fresh corn and other local ingredients to create a premium quality product," says co-owner Joe Fenton. "But people don't just have the opportunity to come in and sample the spirits, they can also come in and get some history of the Dark Corner of South Carolina." The Dark Corner Distillery is on North Main Street in Greenville. For information on the product, and on classes, music and food, go to DarkCornerDistillery.com or call 864-631-1144.

Dean Campbell, dubbed the "Squire of the Dark Corner," has made it his mission to keep the history of the South Carolina spot alive. His family sang ballads and passed stories down from generation to generation.

"We want people to discover the Dark Corner for themselves, though," says Campbell. "We will never have a drive-it-yourself brochure or historical markers. That's not who we are."

The Dark Corner remains the unofficial capital of South Carolina moonshining. People still make moonshine like "their daddy taught them to" and the area remains a sort of a mystery to outsiders. But people such as Dean Campbell continue to educate visitors to the area.

For information on guided tours of the Dark Corner, visit SquireOfDarkCorner.com. –Sherry Jackson