Robert Sawyer, Lawman

Article by Walt King, Ray Ann Cutler, and Duane Harris

Introduction

On a sunny afternoon in early September, Dr. Roy Armstrong, Walt King, Ray Ann Cutler, and Duane Harris, Life on the Pamlico staff members, traveled to Roper to talk with Mr. Robert Sawyer, retired sheriff and former A. B. C. officer of Washington County.
Since retirement, Mr. Sawyer and his wife have been operating a country store on the outskirts of Plymouth. We met Mr. Sawyer’s wife at the store. She informed us that Mr. Sawyer was at home waiting to “educate us.”

We drove to Mr. Sawyer’s home in Roper. This jolly gentleman kept us laughing as he traced his law enforcement career for us.

The purpose of our visit was to learn about the lost art of “moonshining”—that is, the way people make illegal spirits (whiskey).

Mr. Sawyer: This is what I’ve been looking for. That [a model] is a liquor still.

Life: Who made that, Robert?

Mr. Sawyer: I’ll bet you that thing cost Weyerhaeuser Company [financer of the model] a hundred and fifty dollars. It’s made out of stainless steel.

Life: The reason we wanted to talk to you is that you, being a retired lawman, would have a lot of good insight into law enforcement activities. The first thing we want to ask you is how you got into law enforcement.

Mr. Sawyer: By joking. There was some boys down here talk- ing ’bout runnin’ for town council, and I said, “If you all do, I’ll take the police job.” Every time they’d have a fight or somebody up the street was selling liquor, the cop would get in the car and drive out of town. You couldn’t get up with him. And I said, “If you boys get elected, I’ll take the police job.” And so they went ahead and got elected. And they come to me, and I said, “No, I don’t want no police job.” I said, “I was just kiddin’ you boys.”
Model of still, made by Weyerhaeuser

They said, "You told us you'd do it and you gotter take it if it's not for just for one month!" So I took it.

Life: When was this?

Mr. Sawyer: Somewhere around the '50's. No, '40's, '47, '48—somewhere around then. I took it. Charlie Mizell lived the second door from me. He said, "Well, he'll keep it just thirty days, and the first time he goes to arrest somebody, they'll beat the hell out of him and that will be end of his lawin'."

So I started working with the town of Roper, I guess. And they had this old log road. A railroad track run up in the woods,
and they brought the logs out and carried them up into the mill. I used to sit out there two or three o'clock in the morning under them log cars and everything. The boys came out there with a pint of liquor, and I'd jump out and grab them. Mess like that. And I stayed with them two or three years. Then Mr. Luther Basnight—he was the Chief A.B.C. Officer of the county and a deputy sheriff—him and Clyde Snell were the two A.B.C. officers. And I started going with them. On some days they'd come by, and actually they were scared to go down there and leave the car because Mr. Basnight got one near 'bout blewed. But he found the dynamite before it went off. And I started goin' with them and walking the woods and lookin' for liquor stills.

And so Mr. Snell, he got sick, and they laid him off and put me on with Mr. Basnight; he was the chief and I was the deputy under him. And his health kind of got bad, so they hired me as chief A.B.C. Officer. And I worked as chief and worked with the different state boys and the federal boys. When I first started, I worked with Jack Gasgill and ol' man Mose Hawkshaw and A. D. Bond and Benny Halstead. A. D. and Benny were A.B.C. officers in Pasquotank County in Elizabeth City. But they used to come down with ol’ man Hawkshaw and Jack, [who] were federal officers. And I used to go over there [Elizabeth City] and work with 'em, an' I went to Gates County and worked with 'em, Bill and them up there. And I went up over in Beaufort County and worked with Harry Stokes, who is chief over there now, and then William Boyd after Harry went back to the Police Department.

Life: What was the first liquor operation you remember being involved in investigating? Was it around here?

Mr. Sawyer: Right around Washington County—in '48 or '49.

Life: How big a rig was it?

Mr. Sawyer: Anywhere from six to 35 and 40 barrels. And then we found one across the river had 87 barrels to it.

Life: How would you get a lead?

Mr. Sawyer: Law enforcement is no better than the informant. If you got good informers, you got good law enforcement if they'll [lawmen] listen to [informers]. But if your informers ain't gone tell the officers anything, then you ain't got nothing nowhere, same as we got in Washington County and two or three other counties 'round here right now! They hadn't got a still in I don't know when. And I guarantee you, I can take you to two, in two hours right now!

Life: You had good information?

Mr. Sawyer: Yes, sir, I had some real good informers. Had one lady, she's dead and gone now; don't reckon it'd hurt to say. She told me where her husband's still was. I got three stills in three weeks oft'n the same informer. The bootleggers didn't even get a chance to run [make the liquor] 'em.

Life: Tell us how a liquor still is made?

Mr. Sawyer: Here's the way they're made, right here [shows us a model]. This is the barrel you put mash in. 'Course, Raymond Ellis [former associate] says he don't like these trees [on the model] 'cause the leaves is shedded off and an airplane will see it when they go over. But they put about fifty pound of sugar in there and about three or four pecks of meal in a 55 gallon barrel. Some of 'em kills a rabbit and put it in there to make it work fast. Some of 'em puts box lye in it.

Life: What is a doublin' keg made out of?
Mr. Sawyer: Most of 'em made out of boxes and regular kegs, you know, little wooden kegs. Some of 'em makes 'em out of wooden boxes. And the still, some times you'll find a wooden still, which they call a submarine. A submarine still is made out of wood with metal on the bottom. And you heat it. But some of them use a steel barrel; and some of them instead of using a copper worm, they use old car radiators. And they claim the solder from the steel and the solder from the old radiators would get lead solder and this was killing people by lead poisoning.

Life: [Informative Note] There are several steps in the process of making illegal whiskey. Not only is the process long and tedious; it is also rather expensive. Several supplies are needed to make a liquor still. The most popular method of making "moonshine" is by the use of a copper pot. To make liquor in a copper rig, the "moonshiner" needs several 55 gallon barrels, a 40 gallon copper pot, a copper cap, several feet of copper tubing, a wooden or metal doubling keg, jars to catch the supply of "moonshine," and several hundred gallons of water.

The next stop in the process is to prepare the "mash." The "mash" is prepared by mixing 50 pounds of sugar, two pecks of corn meal, and water in a 55 gallon barrel. The "moonshiner" can prepare as many barrels as he has supplies for. After the mixture is prepared, it must be stirred each day until it ferments. After fermentation, the "mash" is poured into a 40 gallon copper pot. Then a fire is built under the pot until the mash comes to a boil. The pot is then capped off and the alcohol in the mash vaporizes and is transported through the doubling keg and the cooling barrel by means of copper tubing. When cooled, the vapor liquidizes and produces a liquid that has a very high content of ethyl alcohol.

Life: At this time, was this county dry?

Mr. Sawyer: Well, it was wet then, but it had been dry. Though it hadn't never been dry. Mr. Ward told the judge one time, "Just as long as God sends the dew drops and the rain and that Albemarle Sound still runs through there, they're going to make liquor in Skinnersville." And I believe that's right.

Life: How would you destroy them?

Mr. Sawyer: Well at times if it was small, we'd use an ax and chop it up. And if it was large, we'd use dynamite. Just take dynamite pliers and stick a hole right to the stick of dynamite like that and stick the dynamite in there and crimp a cap on there and stick it in there [the still]. Then take seven or eight fuses in your hand and split the fuses (and I was smoking along then), just take my cigarette like that and touch it and set them on fire and throw a stick in each barrel and run.

Life: What's the scariest you've ever been?

Mr. Sawyer: The scariest?

Life: Yes!

Mr. Sawyer: Well the scariest I've ever been was when I car-ried a patrolman in the woods with me. We were sitting in there. I said, "Come in here. We might as well blow this thing up. Come on." He come in there and I fixed some dynamite. And when I looked, he was putting fuses in his mouth and crimping it with his teeth. Now, I got scared! And I said, "Man, let me have that!" And he gave it to me. I had two barrels and he had two [to blow up]. And I threw mine in each barrel like that, and he dropped his in one barrel and run over there. And I noticed that evening he was making a fuss, sounded like a goose trying to make a nest, popping sticks. And whenever I went over there, that joker had taken a pint of liquor in there with him, and I didn't know it. He had got-
ten drunk that day at this still. And I said, "Ain't that some-
thing! Trying to catch a man making liquor with a drunk!"
[Laughing] I came on out of there!

*LIFE*: How could you tell when the mash had fermented?

*MRS. SAWYER*: Well, I didn't love to do [taste] it. And I wouldn't
do it if there were a lot of bumble bees, flies, and stuff in it.
But the barrel will have a thick head when you first mash it
in. Then whenever it works out [ferments], it will bubble over
and over. And they go in there and stir it every day or two.
Stir it with a boat paddle. But if it's cleared off and settled
down, you go in there and put your hands in there, just touch
it cross your lips. It'll taste sweet, bitter, and rough right quick.
Like an old persimmon or something. You'll know it's ready
to run.

*LIFE*: Did you ever get shot at or have anybody resist?

*MRS. SAWYER*: I got bit. I went to serve a warrant on a mental-
ly retarded boy up here one day. He was sleeping under a store
like a dog, and when I opened the warrant and said I had a
warrant, he said no I hain't. And I opened the warrant and
started reading it. He grabbed me by the head like that, and I
went to push him off and stuck my finger right in his mouth.
He bit it. I like to have lost that finger. I couldn't hit him 'cause
I was scared he'd bite my finger off. And the onliest way I
could get him off, I took my finger like that and jabbed him
right in the eye. And when he hollered, I came up there like
that. And then I got that blackjack to work.

*LIFE*: Tell us about the time you had to put a pan under the
house.

*MRS. SAWYER*: Oh, yeah!

*LIFE*: What was that story?
Mr. Sawyer: A man was selling, and he had a hole cut in the closet [pointing]. Right there under the stairway was a closet, and it had a hole cut right in there. And he kept his liquor in a dish pan, a great big old pan. And he [lawman] would go up and knock on the door. He would say, "Who is it?"

Say, "The law." He'd run right straight to that thing and dump it out [through the hole in the floor]. T. I. told Paul, "We gone catch that joker this time!"
I said, "You bring a dishpan, and I'll go around there." And I went around and crawled under there. Paul went to the front door and Foy went to the back door and knocked.

Said, "Who is it?"

"It's the law. Open the door, got a search warrant." They didn't have any liquor, but it scared them so bad, that woman [bootlegger's wife] went in there, squatted down over that hole, the water started flying, I started backing up!

Paul said I came out from under the house and said, "Damn, Boy! That's strong liquor." That's something Paul told on me.

But I have seen many a gallon. We went down here, had a report there was a still in this house. And the federal boys came down, Walter Peal and myself, and I went to the front door, they went to the back door, and Walter knocked. Said, "Who is it?" So he opened the door. When he did, the federal boys went right in. Said they had a search warrant. And she started running.

I told 'em, I said, "Boys, don't let her get in there where that pistol is; she gone make somebody jump!" So they run right on in, read the search warrant, started to searching. We got 80 gallons of liquor out of there and a big still upstairs, about seven barrels, and we threw the mess out the window. Chopped the barrels up round the yard. Made a mess round there. And they took her to federal court. Judge gave her nine years. And, boy, she started crying and the boy [woman's relative] went up there and asked the judge if we could get a psychiatrist to say that if she wouldn't hurt nobody, would you let her pay a fine.

Said, "Well, I might." So they made her pay twelve hundred dollars. We caught another man right across the street with ten gallons in a shower. Cost him $3500. All from the same pot. The courts is all wrong. In my opinion, they are definitely wrong.

Life: What happened when the professor came to see you?

Mr. Sawyer: He came down here, and he wanted to go see a liquor still. [In] Bertie County and Martin County they wouldn't carry him [show him a still]. I said, "Come on; I'm not responsible for you but I'll sure carry you and show you one if you want to see one!" He came down here and stayed a couple of days with me.

Life: Were you born and raised in this area?

Mr. Sawyer: Mackeys, which is about five miles from here.

Life: And you've been in this area all of your life?

Mr. Sawyer: All my life. Well, I did move to Greenville and stayed one year. Working with J. and Williams in a slaughter house. Came back home.

Life: You didn't like the big city?

Mr. Sawyer: It was all right but not like home.

Life: This little store that we stopped in...

Mr. Sawyer: It's my wife's.

Life: Do you work in there any?

Mr. Sawyer: I get up every morning and go down there and open up at five o'clock. I stay there until about eight or eight thirty, and she [wife] carries my grandbaby to school. That's my grandbaby that stays with us. She comes up there and I
Mr. Sawyer’s lovely wife said Robert was going to “educate us.”

come on back. I lay down and take some oxygen [for health reasons]. I have to take oxygen about twice a day.

*Life:* Are they still making much liquor in the county, Robert?

*Mr. Sawyer:* Yes, they are making right much in there.

*Life:* I never have understood why they would want to make liquor when it’s legal.

*Mr. Sawyer:* Well, it’s like I said a while ago. You take 50 pounds of sugar, which is higher now than it’s been, and four pecks of meal; and the first time you get about three to four gallons. Then the next time, you put about 10 pounds of sugar and about 10 pounds of meal in there, or five pounds of meal, and stir it up and let it work again; and the next time you’ll
get about five gallons. And they sell for about 20 dollars a gallon. That’s a hundred dollars a jug; that’s the reason, the money.

*Life*: They make real good money?

*Mr. Sawyer*: They go out there, and a man takes five barrels and runs it in less than a night’s time, about a half a night. They go in there, and in about four or five hours they run out five jugs and bring it on out. They’ve done made $100 where if they go out here and work, they have to work the whole week for a couple hundred.

*Life*: Mr. Sawyer shared with us a newspaper article about his views on courts and other matters:

Everyone who knows Sheriff Robert Sawyer has at least one humorous story, if not more for every occasion. It is just his way of getting along with people and it works. The other day, talk in the Sheriff’s office turned to the over 60 persons who are on Raleigh’s death row and someone asked why they didn’t clean house and let the criminals know that this state means business. It was pointed out, however, that some of those awaiting execution just might be innocent. The Sheriff said that reminded him of an old country doctor who delivered the babies of a nearby family free of charge in return for the husband doing odd jobs on the doctor’s farm, but after delivering the family’s 12th child, the old doctor told the man it was time he and his wife stopped having babies. The man looked around at his barefooted youngsters and agreed that if his wife became pregnant again, he would hang himself. Well, as you might expect, the doctor got a call the next year that another was on the way. He reminded the husband of his promise the year before. The bewildered man looked out the window and said: Doc you see that noose on that tree? The doctor nodded his head. Well one day I got up on a crate and put that noose around my neck and was right ready to jump
when I heard a voice: “You fool,” it said, “you might be hanging an innocent man.” The point is, who knows?

Life: I like the statement on your hat: “I’m not getting older; I’m getting better.”

Mr. Sawyer: Sometimes I wonder.

Life: Do you like the taste of this liquor?

Mr. Sawyer: No, sir, of no kind. I never drink none.

Life: Do people use stills just to make liquor to sell or do they drink the liquor themselves?

Mr. Sawyer: Some of them drink it; most of them sell it. One old fellow, when he was making it, said it won’t for to be drunk, it was made to sell.

Life: Robert, when you went to go sit on a still [by sitting on a still you mean wait for the people to come in so you could catch them to run the liquor off], how long have you had to wait before? What was the longest length of time you had to wait?

Mr. Sawyer: I went in there on Wednesday and come out on Friday morning. But when I come out, I brought the men.

Life: I’ve heard you talk about mosquito nets you used to have to wear.

Mr. Sawyer: I used to have to wear mosquito nets and insect repellent and everything else, and they near about eat you up!

Life: Did you ever see any people actually have to serve any time other than paying fines?

Mr. Sawyer: Yes, a few, a mighty few though. Most of them would get up there and pay it.

Life: Mr. Sawyer told us about one of his adventures.

Mr. Sawyer: We were down in a skinny little section, which is Pea Ridge, looking for a still. The sheriff Paul Basnight had dropped me out. And I was walking the area out, and somebody come a running and jumped the fence and near about jumped on me while I was coming down the road. They saw me and stopped like that. I could tell they were scared, and so Paul come on up and picked me up and said, “Where did you see them boys the first time?”

I said, “In the cow pasture around there on [highway] 64.” I said, “Well, there’s where the still is.” So I went to the car and lifted the boot up and there were old gum boots and mash all over their clothes and everything in the back seat. I looked at it and closed it back down.

And I asked Jim about carrying me back there, and he told me, he said, “No.” He said, “Get Carl Gilcrest to carry you back down there and I’ll get up with him. I’ve got to carry my wife uptown to get some groceries and I’ll get up with him and I’ll come back. Where do you want me to be?”

I said, “I want you to be there or they’ll come get it [the things in the car]; they’ll come get it.” So he said all right. I had an old walkie-talkie about as big as a suitcase, not like the ones we got now. I got my wife to carry me down there, and I stayed and stayed. Just about dusk, here comes the car down there and dropped two colored fellows off and he drove right on down the road. And they walked on down through the cow pasture and I started hollering for the sheriff. And I called and I called and then I called Edenton P.D. Thought maybe they might be able to pick it up. Couldn’t get Walter Peele, the
deputy, couldn't get the sheriff. So I kept hollering till I heard them coming back. Nobody wouldn't answer, so I cut the walkie-talkie right off. And whenever they put the liquor over the gate, they put it down at the end of the ditch. I jumped up and ran out there and said, “Hold it!” And, Lord, they run away from there like a covey of birds. That's what's fun when you jump out there like that.

Life: I've heard of lawmen seeing smoke. Have you ever found one that way?

Mr. Sawyer: Yes, sir.

Life: Not with an informer?

Mr. Sawyer: I found a still and I was riding up there and I said, “Look, they're firing up right now.” When we got in there and caught the man, it was the wrong place; it weren't the place I was through that day. So we walked on across the ridge over there and caught another man. We caught two in one night's time.

Life: When you're looking for a still without an informer, what are some visual aids to help you?

Mr. Sawyer: Well, you know the area about where they might put them. And what you do is you just go out there and circle that area and you'll pick up its path. We were going in one night, had the A.T.F. [Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms] officer and the supervisor. The head man was down here, and I had found the still and come out and left it. I got them to come on over, come on in, and we parked the car about three miles from where they were, walked down the woods. And as we walked along I said, “All right, boys, there's a fence right here.”

The old Supervisor said, “How in the hell did you know there was a fence in there?”

I said, “You aint crawled over it so many times as I have in the last 20 years.” We crawled over and walked on up to the edge of the field. And I said, “Here's another fence.”

We got over that, and he said, “Well, I aint seen that one either.” We got over that and walked on down, got over the fence again and started over the woods path and got in there.

I told the two federal officers, I said, “Get quiet!” I said we’re right on the back of Bloods Creek. They had so many children down there they called it Bloods Creek. I said, “You boys get quiet; you're right behind the man's house!”

They said, “There ain't no houses back here. We've been walking for the last 30 to 40 minutes right down in the woods.”

I said, “You'll find out!” So we went there and eased back to the field. I said, “See that house over there?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Follow me.”

Went on down. I was going along feeling like that with my feet. Didn't want to turn the light on 'cause I knew they were in there. Could hear them feeling for where they walked a path down the strip. You could tell going through the woods walking down feeling with my feet, and I walked a little past it. I said, “Wait a minute, boys. We've done passed the road.” I said, “Back up and when you look back, there'll come the man right down the path. Be right quiet, boys; turn the light
off.” Sit there a minute. Turned it back on and walked right on to the still. I said, “Come on, come on.” We went back out towards the field.

He said, “What’s the matter, you scared?”

I said, “No. Ain’t nothing I’m scared of. You just follow me. I’ll show you how to catch a man.”

So they followed me on out, and just before we got to the field, we stopped and I said, “You get over here and I’ll get over there.” When he was coming along, I jumped right up and grabbed him right there. And I said, “Hold it!”

And it scared him so bad he said, “Aahh!” I thought I had caught a deaf dumb man at first!

I said, “Y’all be right quiet, and I’ll get him.”

He said, “Well, what are you doing?”

I said, “Give me your flashlight.” The man passed me the flashlight. I’ll never forget it before I die.

I sat there, and he said, “Let’s go.”

And I said, “No.”

He said, “Why?”

I said, “You’ve got to give him time to go up to the house and get a bag of sugar to carry in there. You just wait and I’ll show you how to catch a man. You’re a supervisor of the A.T.F. and you don’t know how to catch a man. Let an old country boy show you how it’s done.” So we sat out there, and I said, “Turn the light on.”

Started on in there, and he said, “Cut the light off.”

I said, “No, it’s his light. They know it’s green. It’s got a green head on it and everything. It’s all right; just follow me. I’ll show you how to catch a man.” We turned the light on and walked in there and got about where he was before, cut the light off and listened for a minute and walked right in there. The man was sitting there as close from you to me before he ever saw who I was. And I grabbed him, and the other one took off running. The federal boys started running him. The fellow had the flashlight in his back pocket, and he ran right on away in the dark, the light shining up in the air. And the federal boys never caught him.

*Life:* What are some of the things the people who had these liquor stills used to do to try to scare law men off?

*Mr. Sawyer:* They’d shoot and blow the horn.

*Life:* I’m talking about the still itself, like set traps.

*Mr. Sawyer:* Oh, yes. You take like on the river, where they had a boardwalk going to it in the swamp. What they’d do is take a board and put up there and take a matchbox and stand it right up on its edge. If that matchbox was crushed, then you ain’t going to it. You’d know somebody else done stepped on that board and mashed it and wouldn’t go to it.

*Life:* Tie snakes around things too, wouldn’t they?

*Mr. Sawyer:* Yes, a little of everything. I stepped on an autotrap one night, down in Tyrell county. I was down there with Julian Post. Julian was the A.B.C. officer and chief of police in Columbia. It was right much fun. I had a lot of fun. I had more fun tearing up stills than I ever did with the sheriff’s department.
Life: How long were you in law enforcement before you retired, Robert?

Mr. Sawyer: Thirty-three years, eight months. Benny Alstead, he made it 50 years before he retired.

Life: You and your wife, how long have you been married?

Mr. Sawyer: We got married in 1952.

Life: Do you have any children?

Mr. Sawyer: We got three. We had four, and the first one died. We got two girls and a boy, six grandchildren.

Life: This one of your grandchildren here?

Mr. Sawyer, sitting; standing, left to right: Mr. Sawyer’s grandbaby, Duane Harris, Ray Ann Cutler, and Walt King
Mr. Sawyer: Yes, it is. He stays right here with me and his grandmother. He got those trophies up there playing baseball.

Conclusion

Talking with Robert Sawyer was very enjoyable as well as very informative. Mr. Sawyer informed us on his views of the law enforcement and court systems. In his past experiences, the law enforcement officers would work very hard catching criminals, while the courts would let them go a lot of times with only a small fine. His stories were very enjoyable and interesting. He shared his scrapbook with us—full of clippings, pictures and mementos—with deserved pride and respect. Lawman, talker, story teller—Mr. Sawyer earned our respect and friendship.