

Hank Lane's Whiskey Still

Sometime during the Prohibition Era (1920 – 1933)

The following is provided by Ginny Waples.

Vern Waples (Ginny's father-in-law) was a Montana Game Warden for 32 years (1947-1979) and for most of those years his working territory included the Pryors as well as the Beartooth Mountains. The following oral history is in Vern's words, transcribed and edited from a 1992 videotape.

That old Hank Lane who was a good friend of mine, friend of the Tilletts and so forth... they have his records. He lived way back on the other side of the Pryor Mountains. Closest person to him was 20, 30 miles. Closest neighbor. And he was a little Swiss and didn't speak very good English. When I knew him, he was in his mid-seventies. And whenever I was over there in that country I would stay at his place.

Tilletts had a line camp there. That was his ranch but they bought it from him, but he got to live there as long as he wanted to. But he built a two-story cabin...and that was Tilletts' line camp. He had a dugout right beside it. That's where he moved to. And so, when I was over there in that country I'd stay there overnight quite often...eat with him and he'd tell [stories]. He didn't talk to people very often...

Well anyhow, he decided he'd set him up a still. And he was so far out that nobody would ever find him, you know. They found a lot of stills for the odor, they had a certain odor. Whenever the wind was blowing from one direction it would come to they could kinda figure out where it was coming from. But he was so far away that nobody would ever smell his still. And he had in it a little clump of, well not little, large clump of quaker aspen above his place about half a mile and well hidden and everything.

And he took me up there and showed it to me and so forth, and I got two of his old barrels. He carried the whiskey, they're little barrels. [demonstrates size with hand, about 2 ft. diameter]. He put two of them on each side of the pack horse, you see, and carried them down to the Indians. But any rate he operated about a year or so, and then he got hit by the revenuers.

And he couldn't figure it out, he just couldn't figure it out. He figured that someone must have squealed on him. Some no-good. Well, he bought three times, about three times a year, maybe four times a year. He'd take a pack string with 20 head of horses into Bridger and buy corn and sugar. That's all he'd buy--corn and sugar. [Laughs and shakes head.] He couldn't figure out how they would ever figure that out that he was making whiskey with the corn and the sugar. But somehow the word got to the revenuers about the big pack strings of corn and sugar that were going off toward the Pryors.