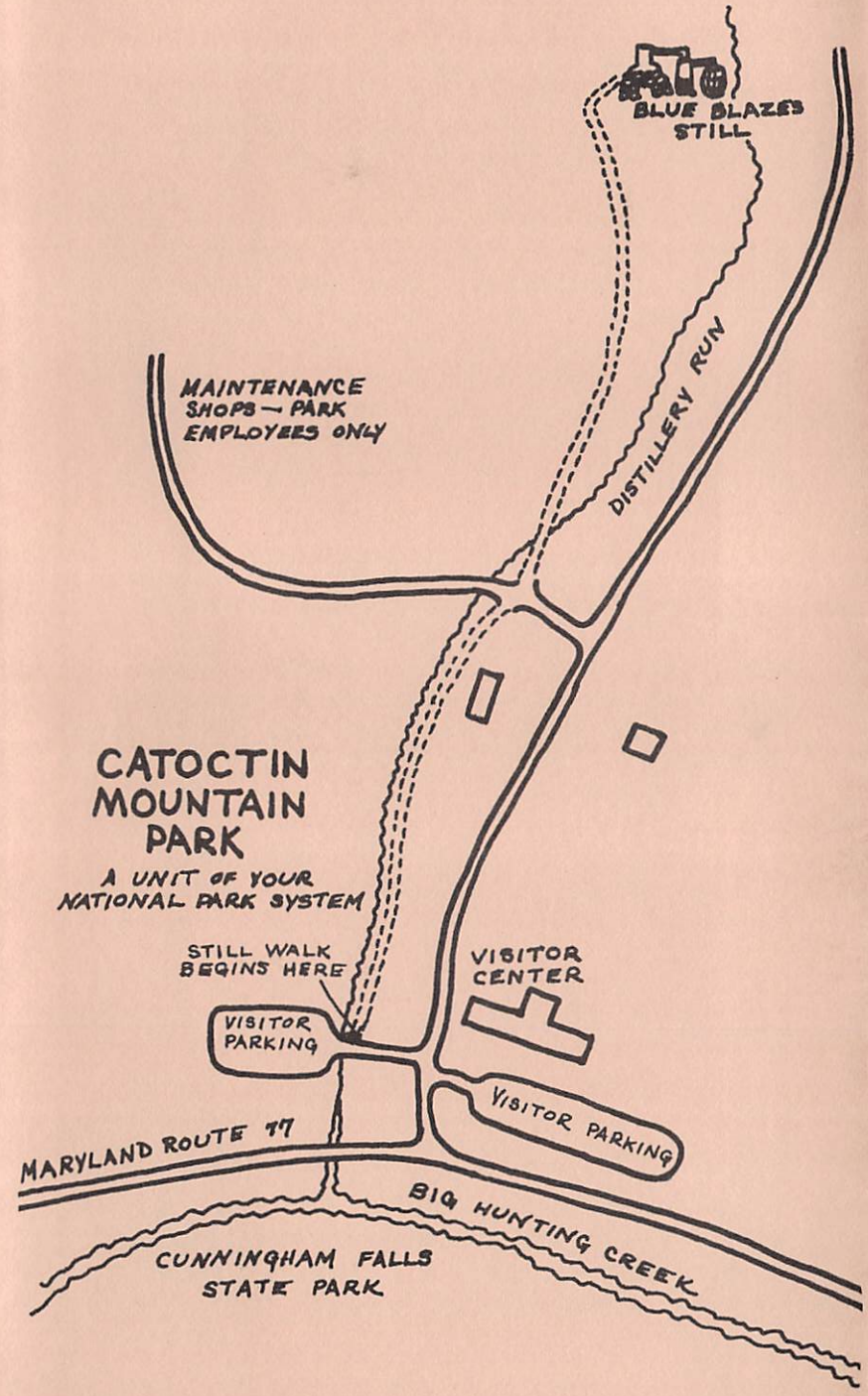


PARTS OF A STILL

- | | |
|------------|---------------------|
| 1. FIREBOX | 8. CAP ARM |
| 2. FURNACE | 9. HEADACHE STICK |
| 3. FLUE | 10. THUMP BARREL |
| 4. KETTLE | 11. SHORT THUMP ROD |
| 5. COLLAR | 12. WORM |
| 6. CAP | 13. FLAKE STAND |
| 7. BALE | 14. FUNNEL |



MAN
ON
CATOCTIN
MOUNTAIN:



THE BLUE BLAZES WHISKEY STILL

It was hot, that July day, even up on Catoctin Mountain. And quiet. Nothing moved, save a cloud of dust stirred up by a local car bouncing along the dirt road through Harmon's Gap.

Across a small wooden bridge the driver spied another road, hardly more than a lane. "This must be the place," he half whispered to his companion, "let's go."

They parked, fished an empty jug from the back seat, and started into the woods. The road ran up the draw, paralleling the branch of Big Hunting Creek. Before they had gone a hundred yards they found themselves peering down the barrel of a blockader's rifle.

"Where are yuh goin'?"

"We want to buy some liquor," the man with the jug answered.

Instead, they got free advice. "Yuh had better git out of here if yuh don't want to get shot!"

"Git" they did--back to a second car with four deputy sheriffs parked down the road. That was on the last day of July 1929--the raid on the Blue Blazes Still was starting.

It was a large commercial operation, a "steamer" still. More than 25,000 gallons of mash were found in 13 vats of 2,000 gallon capacity each. Today, another still sits on the banks of Distillery Run. It's quite different than the set-up found that day.

The new Blue Blazes Still is more typical of the smaller moonshine still of an earlier day. Even more different--visitors are welcome--not challenged.

Conversion of rye and corn into liquor probably began in Frederick County with the harvest of the first crops, somewhere around 1734. Until Congress passed the 1791 excise tax, just about every farm had its own still. For the next 128 years it was legal to own a still--provided you paid the tax. Not until adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was the possession of a still an offense.

The problem with the 1791 excise tax was that it took the profit out of making liquor. For mountain people, the liquid concentration of rye or corn was the most practical way to get crops to market. So rather than pay the tax they went underground, operating by the light of the moon. Hence the term, "moonshine."

Moonshine was made by "blockaders," a hold-over term from earlier days when sea blockades and blockade runners were common.

The moonshine operation began by grinding rye or corn into meal which the blockader cooked with water in his copper kettle, then transferred to the mash barrels. The next day he added malt, covered the barrels and went home. For the next five days daily checks were made to make sure the "beer," as this mixture was called, was fermenting properly. It was critical to "run" before it turned to vinegar, and this was judged by the head that formed on it.

When it was ready--the beer was bucketed into the "kettle" and a fire started in the firebox. When the beer came to a rolling boil the still cap, the upper one-third, was put in place and strapped down by the "bail." A paste of rye flour and water was mixed to seal the joints and the blockader sat back to await the thump.

The thump was caused by the hot steam from the kettle bubbling through the cold beer in the "thump barrel." This device enriched the steam, producing a higher proof alcohol. Because alcohol evaporates at a lower temperature than water, the steam passing through beer in the thump barrel absorbed the alcohol from it.

When the thumping stopped, the blockader knew the whiskey would soon be coming. From the end of the worm sticking out of the "flakestand" came a gush of steam followed by a surge of liquid. This soon died down to a trickle, then a second surge. This was the start of the whiskey.

Under the end of the worm the blockader put his jug and funnel. In the funnel was a piece of clean, white cloth and a couple handfuls of hickory charcoal--to absorb the "bardy grease," the oily slick on top of the whiskey that would make one ill.