

# Looking Back to See

A Country Music Memoir

### Advance Praise for LOOKING BACK TO SEE

"*Looking Back to See* is a good book. It touches my heart to hear her story and to think back to my boyhood. Her story is real."

—EDDY ARNOLD, legendary country music star

"Fascinating. . . . She's warm, honest, gossipy, and outrageously funny. . . . Maxine wasn't just present at the birth of rock 'n' roll, she was one of its midwives."

—EDWARD MORRIS, former country music editor of *Billboard*

"An irreplaceable narrative by a participant in the golden age of country and 'hill-billy' music who witnessed and made its history."

—CHARLES MCGOVERN, former curator of twentieth century popular culture at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History

"The Browns became leading exponents of what was then developing as the 'Nashville Sound.' That sound was making musical history and increasing the popularity of country music worldwide. Maxine was right in the middle of it."

—RALPH EMERY, former host of TNN's *Country Homecoming*

"Here, for the first time, is an inside look at the 'Golden Age' of country music from a woman's perspective. . . . It's a strong book, and a vital book."

—CHARLES WOLFE, author of *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* and *Classic Country: Legends of Country Music*

"You guys *never* abandoned country music. I have always considered The Browns the perfect 'country' unit. . . . I still get lots of requests for all of The Browns' treasured sounds. You know your countless fans are still out there asking for your songs and you're needed today **MORE THAN EVER.**"

—BILL MACK, the Satellite Cowboy, XM Satellite Radio

"Maxine Brown has told a story of her early life as the oldest child of a poor family in Arkansas during the Depression days of the country. She went on to become an influential pioneer in country music. Her story is one that many of us lived through on the way to creating and making careers of what has become America's music—country music."

—TOM PERRYMAN, member of the National Disc Jockey Hall of Fame and the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
ARKANSAS PRESS  
Fayetteville

ISBN 1-55728-790-2



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The Browns—Maxine, Bonnie, and Jim Ed—are a trio of siblings that had tremendous success in the 1950s and '60s. Following in the tradition of Loretta's Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter*, this memoir, told in Maxine's own plucky, spirited style, delves into the Browns' remarkable past, beginning with a Depression-era childhood in rural south Arkansas scarred by poverty and tragedy. From that beginning emerged a duo, Maxine and Jim Ed, who became a popular feature of Little Rock's *Barnyard Frolic* and, in 1954, had a Top Ten hit with "Looking Back to See." Sister Bonnie later joined them and soon they were regulars on the well-known *Louisiana Hayride*. They would eventually help a young Elvis Presley get started on the show and tour with him as their opening act, and it wasn't long before he became a close friend of the family. Other hits followed, including "I Take the Chance" and "I Heard the Bluebirds Sing."

Early mismanagement couldn't prevent the Browns' careers from soaring. The group enjoyed a long relationship with RCA, and with Chet Atkins, and later joined the *Grand Ole Opry* cast. In 1959 the group's rendition of Edith Piaf's "The Three Bells" not only went to the top of the country charts but spent weeks at number one on the pop charts, and led to appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *American Bandstand*.

A vocal group without peer, the Browns were central artists in the changing sound of country and

*continued on back flap*

American popular music at mid-century. They were part of major changes in the entertainment business and American culture in the 1950s, participated in the growing popularity of the folk music movement in the '60s, and saw the birth of rock 'n' roll up close. Illustrated with many never-before-published photographs, *Looking Back to See* is a remarkable story told here for the first time.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PICTURE THIS PHOTOGRAPHY

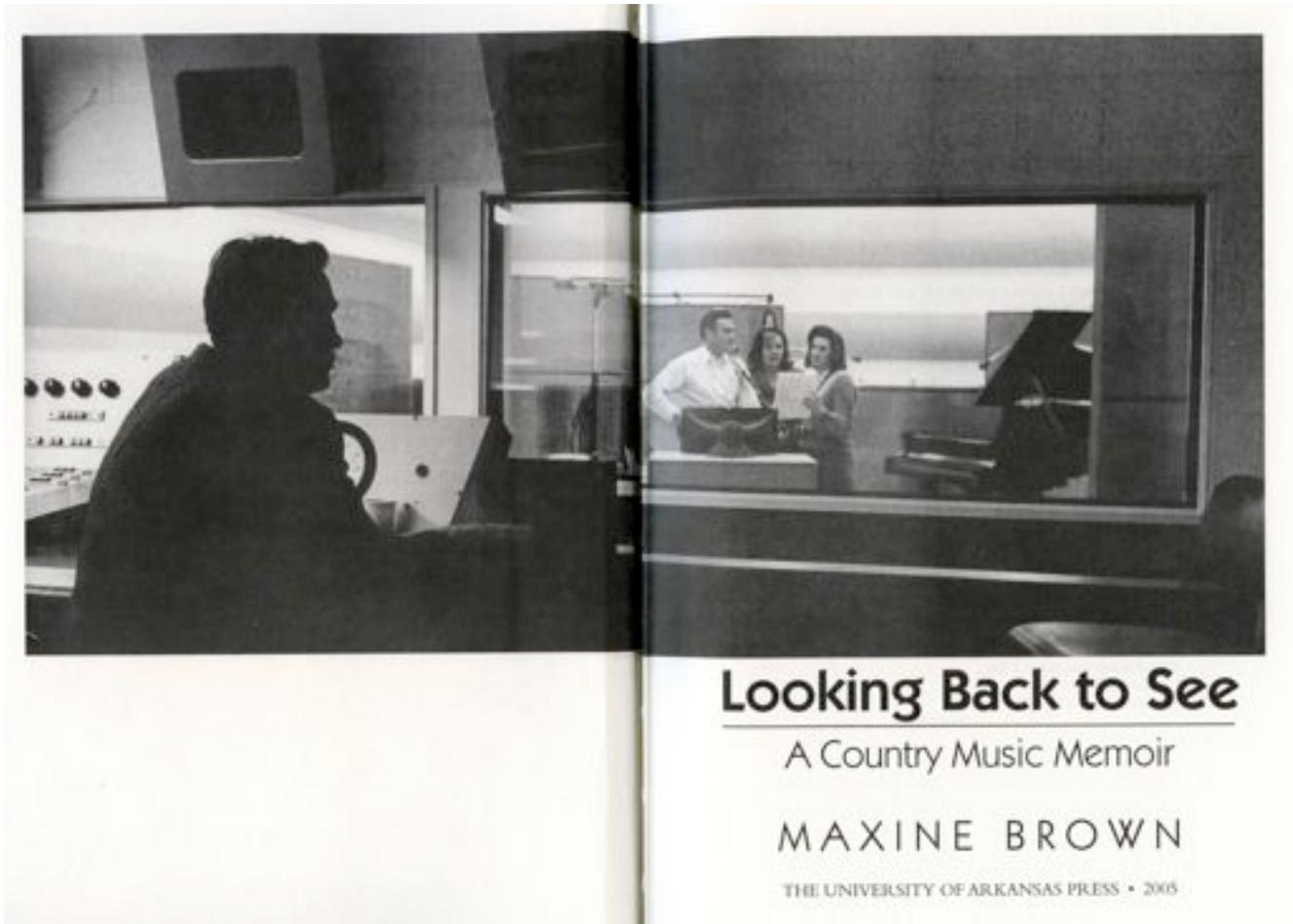
Maxine Brown lives in North Little Rock, Arkansas. The Browns are still performing.

FRONT JACKET: Poster featuring the Browns and Elvis courtesy of John Heath, Memphis, Tennessee. Photo of Maxine Brown from the collection of Maxine Brown.

JACKET DESIGN: Lix Lester

*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of my mother, Birdie Lee Brown.*

She gave me life, love, courage, and the strength to face the many problems I've had during my lifetime. I'm thankful and grateful to have had her, for she was my greatest friend who taught me above all things the power of loving kindness.



## FOREWORD

When Maxine was writing this book about her life, her family, her music, and her times, she came by to see me. I had retired to my farm and was always glad to see old friends drop by. As there is no end to things that can be fixed on a farm, we wound up riding around in my pickup truck as we talked and looked for parts and pieces for the things I was "fixing" at the time. What we talked about, of course, was her book. I had written a few and so we supposed I could make intelligent conversation about the project. I knew she was trying to get it right and be fair and accurate. She wanted to leave a record of a very important piece of a remarkable time. I am happy to report now that she has succeeded handsomely.

The book is, by necessity, set in exciting times. The Kennedys, space flight, Elvis, rock and roll, hula hoops, and the Browns.

Ah! The Browns. We heard them everywhere. I heard them first in Germany, where I "was with the Army, Ours. Brothers and sisters like the Browns are, as I see it, rare. They not only sang together, they breathed, moved, thought, and listened to the band together. It had to be something in their genes and in their upbringing. It was not at all natural, although they made it sound so. It was more something of a wonder of nature. This is admittedly high praise, but then we have the statistics to back it up. They sold records in the millions.

And so, herein, are the stories of a person (Maxine) and her brother (Jim Ed) and her sister

(Bonnie) and all the adventure one could hope to have in three or four lifetimes.

I am happy to have known and worked with this trio and sincerely hope you enjoy the tale. It is told with honesty and humility and in a wonderful American voice.

TOM T HALL

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I would like to thank who have helped me during the course of writing this book, but the one person I wish to thank the most is Baxter Clarence Hall. Had it not been for Clarence, this book would have never been seen.

After I finished writing it to the best of my ability, my sister Bonnie insisted that I give it to her friend Clarence Hall to see if it had any potential. Clarence liked it so well that he took it upon himself to put it into book form. He worked hard to improve my efforts, for which I will always be grateful.

It is indeed a great honor to have a man with his credentials help me with my first attempt at writing a book. Some of his accomplishments include being a professor of English at Arkansas Tech University, writer in residence at the University of Arizona, and writer in residence at the University of Houston. He was awarded the Edgar Allan Poe award for nonfiction in 1984 and was elected to the Arkansas Writers hall of Fame in 1997.

I feel very honored and blessed to have had Clarence Hall's guidance and words of encouragement during all the years I felt like giving up.

The people I owe the most besides Clarence Hall are three gentlemen I didn't meet until the latter part of 2001. They are Eric Lensing of Memphis, Tennessee, Edward Morris of Nashville, and Tom Dillard of Little Rock, Arkansas.

Eric Lensing is a freelance writer from Little Rock now living in Memphis. The first time I met Eric was when he came to my home for an interview with my sister Bonnie and myself. He was putting together a story on the Browns for the Memphis newspaper, the Commercial Appeal. When he saw I had written a manuscript, he realized how important it was to have it on a computer disk. He went to work editing and transferring my typewritten manuscript to a disk.

Eric worked in Little Rock as a popular deejay for eight years before moving to Dallas, where he wrote and produced nationally syndicated sports programs for radio and television. He is an award-winning author who has had articles published in various periodicals.

It is hard to believe someone would go out on a limb the way he has to help me. He thought I had written a story that needed to be told. I will never be able to thank Eric enough for all he has done for me and for introducing me to his former employer, Tom Dillard.

Tom Dillard was the curator for the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies in Little Rock. We became great friends over the course of a few months while he tried to generate interest in my book. I appreciate Tom's help and his enthusiasm for Looking Back To See. Most of all I appreciate him helping me to secure a publishing contract with the University of Arkansas Press. Tom has recently taken a position with the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville as curator for its library system. Good luck, Tom, and thanks a million!

In November 2001, during the Reunion of Professional Entertainers banquet and awards show in Nashville, a friend brought a gentleman to my table and introduced him as Edward Morris. My friend explained that he had given Mr. Morris, a writer, a copy of my manuscript for Looking Back To See. The room was so crowded and noisy that we found it difficult to talk, but Mr. Morris did manage to tell me that he had stayed up all night reading my manuscript and thought it was one of the best stories he'd ever read. He said that if I ever needed him to help me get my story published to give him a call. Then he wrote down his phone number, handed it to me and disappeared back into the crowd.

When I asked the people around me who this Edward Morris was, they told me he was the former country music editor of Billboard and was currently writing for the Country Music Television Web site CMT.com. I learned later that he had written several books about country music, including a popular one called Garth Brooks: Platinum Cowboy. When I returned home to North Little Rock, Arkansas, the first thing I did was give Ed Morris a call. From that moment on, he has been relentless in helping me find a publisher.

Although I had tried years earlier—without success—to interest the University of Arkansas Press in my book, Ed suggested that I try again since the Press now had a new director, Lawrence Malley. Three years after Ed and I first began working together—three years of phone calls, e-mails and reader reports—the Press agreed to publish my manuscript. First, though, I was told, it would need some close editing. All the dates, places, chart positions, and awards I had written about would have to be double-checked and verified. And who better to do this than Ed Morris? He immediately undertook the task as what he called "a labor of love." Ed not only liked my book, I discovered, he also had been one of my biggest fans all those years that the Browns were in show business.

So how do you say thanks to someone like Ed? Well, I guess you do something like this—You let everybody know about him. I will always be grateful for his help, encouragement and friendship, but most of all for this lasting "labor of love."

Over the twelve years it has taken me to write my story, I've tried to convey the difficulties a woman has to face in being a wife, a mother, and a performer, all at the same time. But I'm not sure I've ever gotten my point across. I think I became too emotionally involved in writing some of these painful stories. I don't know how many times the agony of remembering caused me to put the manuscript aside, sometimes for months. When I started writing this, it was for the benefit of my children, who knew very little about some of the bad things that happened between their mom and dad. I had always tried to shield them from those painful times, and I certainly never meant to bare my soul for everyone else to see. But some things need to be told, and I have tried to do that to the best of my knowledge, memory and ability.

MAXINE BROWN  
March 2004

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone this side of Fabor Robinson's ghost should welcome Maxine Brown's memoir. "Looking Back To See" was the one of the Browns' first hit song (it went to number eight in 1954), and a perfect one for this volume, indicating both retrospective tone and music business focus—What most distinguishes it from other country music autobiographies is its voice—strong, consistent, wholly idiosyncratic. From the first pages it's clear that Maxine Brown is now, and was then, a formidable personality—she was the one, after all, who started the whole show by entering her younger brother Jim Ed in a talent contest in 1952—and she comes across here as a woman capable of both enduring rancor and no less enduring gratitude. There's no middle; she almost never says a record is pretty good, or a person just OK. She burns hot, a rhetorical extremist—if she likes you you're a wonderful person, best the world's ever known. If her decision goes the other way you're a snake, a devil in suit and tie. She expresses both feelings fulsomely, and readers will surely be both informed and entertained.

There's a sweeping history here, of the country music business as it boomed from radio into television, flirted with crossover pop success, and dealt with the threat of rock and roll. But the panorama is built with anecdotal blocks, stories told from the perspective of one family group at the heart of these big events, and the anecdotes themselves are vivid and compelling. Sometimes they're hilarious, as when Maxine and Jim Reeves steal a load of Hitler's personal beer steins. Stardom's downtime is a bone-grinding trek, filled with relentless and often dangerous travel, but there are parties aplenty, riotous with booze and sexual escapades.

At other times the anecdotes are petty and sordid—tawdry tales of music industry chicanery starring a huge cast of scumbag promoters, managers, and other company types. Fabor Robinson—a fellow Arkansan, by the way—stars in Maxine Brown's memories as a peculiarly loathsome gargoyle, but he's simply the most prominent of a huge squadron of trolls. (It's reassuring, somehow, when one suspects that Robinson simply couldn't have been THAT bad, to find other accounts confirming her portrait. Colin Escott, for example, interviewed scores of musicians, DJs, and promoters for his 2002 *Roadkill On the Three-Chord Highway*. The summary report on Robinson is a chilling one: "they all came to despise him, and left as soon as they could." Robinson did have one "apologist," a one-time business partner, but the best he could say was that Robinson was "a good man and a Christian man who lost God and became angry and twisted.")

At their most harrowing Maxine Brown's stories are simply devastating. Many hard tales are told in *Looking Back To See*—two near rapes, the deaths of beloved parents and siblings, battles with cancer and alcoholism, fires and fatal car wrecks and plane crashes, children left too much alone, parents ravaged by guilt and despair. But these stories, too, for all their horror, are a part of the saga. When Maxine Brown looks back, what she sees is a very mixed scene. At her worst the narrative can almost degenerate into an exhaustive catalogue of unforgotten and unforgiven wrongs. But at her best she manifests a remarkable resilience and generosity of spirit, and surely her narrative gains credibility from its unblinking gaze and unsparing tone.

The story of the Browns has deep ties to Arkansas. From their Sparkman roots to their Little

Rock debut on KLRA's *Barnyard Frolic* and later appearances at Robinson Auditorium, to the family restaurant in Pine Bluff, Arkansas places and Arkansas people play central roles in their history. The Browns' sound, featuring smooth close-harmony vocals, appealed across many genres, and was perfect for the great explosion of "crossover" music in the 1950s. Moving outward and upward from their beginnings on the *Barnyard Frolic* and Shreveport's *Louisiana Hayride*, they appeared on *American Bandstand* and the *Ed Sullivan Show* as well as the *Grand Ole Opry*, the *Ozark Jubilee* (in Springfield, Missouri) and the *Town Hall Party* (in Bakersfield, California). They were at the heart of the so-called "Nashville Sound" era, and their biggest hit, 1959's "The Three Bells," is often listed as a "folk revival" piece. Three years after their first record they were singing in Europe (and a Japanese tour was in the future).

Of course their crossover successes were resented by others less capable of them, and the Browns were subjected to sour-grapes accusations of insufficient rusticity. The major anecdote here features a bellicose Little Jimmy Dickens in the purist role, with Maxine as usual counterpunching vigorously. But the whole conflict is baseless—Gene Autry was a telegraph operator, not a cowboy, and Pee Wee King, leader of the Golden West Cowboys, was a polka musician from Milwaukee. The old quarrel is still going strong, too, as if based in reality, with one Nicholas Dawidoff as a contemporary Little Jimmy hammering Garth Brooks at some length in his recent *In The Country of Country*.

A story like this one, then, told in this way by this teller, is at one time an editor's dream and nightmare. The dream is the insider account, the gritty honesty of Maxine Brown's partisan memoir, the detailed eyewitness presence at events long ago turned to legend. Even a glance at the photographs of Elvis Presley, for example, reveals a nascent world, slouching out of Memphis to be born. The nightmare is the sometimes haphazard chronology, the earthy turns of phrase and colloquialisms, the occasional self-pity and the more than occasional vituperation.

But in fact something very much like this mix has been present from the beginning, at the very heart of the (generally lame) canon of literature devoted to country music. Here the founding text might be *My Husband Jimmie Rodgers* from 1935, but the field was soon crowded, mostly with losers. Nick Tosches's: *Country. The Biggest Music in America* provides a list of low points (many) and high (one, Emma Bell Miles's "Some Real American Music" from 1904, reprinted in her 1905 classic. *The Spirit of the Mountains*). Another obvious high point, though not noted by Tosches, is Alton Delmores memoir, the wonderfully titled *Truth Is Stranger Than Publicity*.

In her salty indomitability Maxine Brown may at times remind readers of Patsy Cline. Or at her most outrageous she might even come across as a female counterpart of Ronnie Hawkins. But finally all comparisons fail; Maxine Brown is Maxine Brown, and there's nobody else quite like her. The editors at the University of Arkansas Press chose wisely, interposing no editorial extreme makeover and eschewing the full-bore scholarly introduction. What is provided is an appendix, capably compiled by Kelly Owens and John Riley, providing very brief informational entries for many persons and programs whose reputation Maxine Brown takes for granted. But you can't take show business reputations for granted, even for a decade. It's difficult for anyone who lived through their glory days to imagine (let alone accept), but in a class of thirty-eight undergraduate university students in the spring of 2004, only four were familiar with Guy Lombardo and only six could identify Jim Reeves as a country singer. Frank

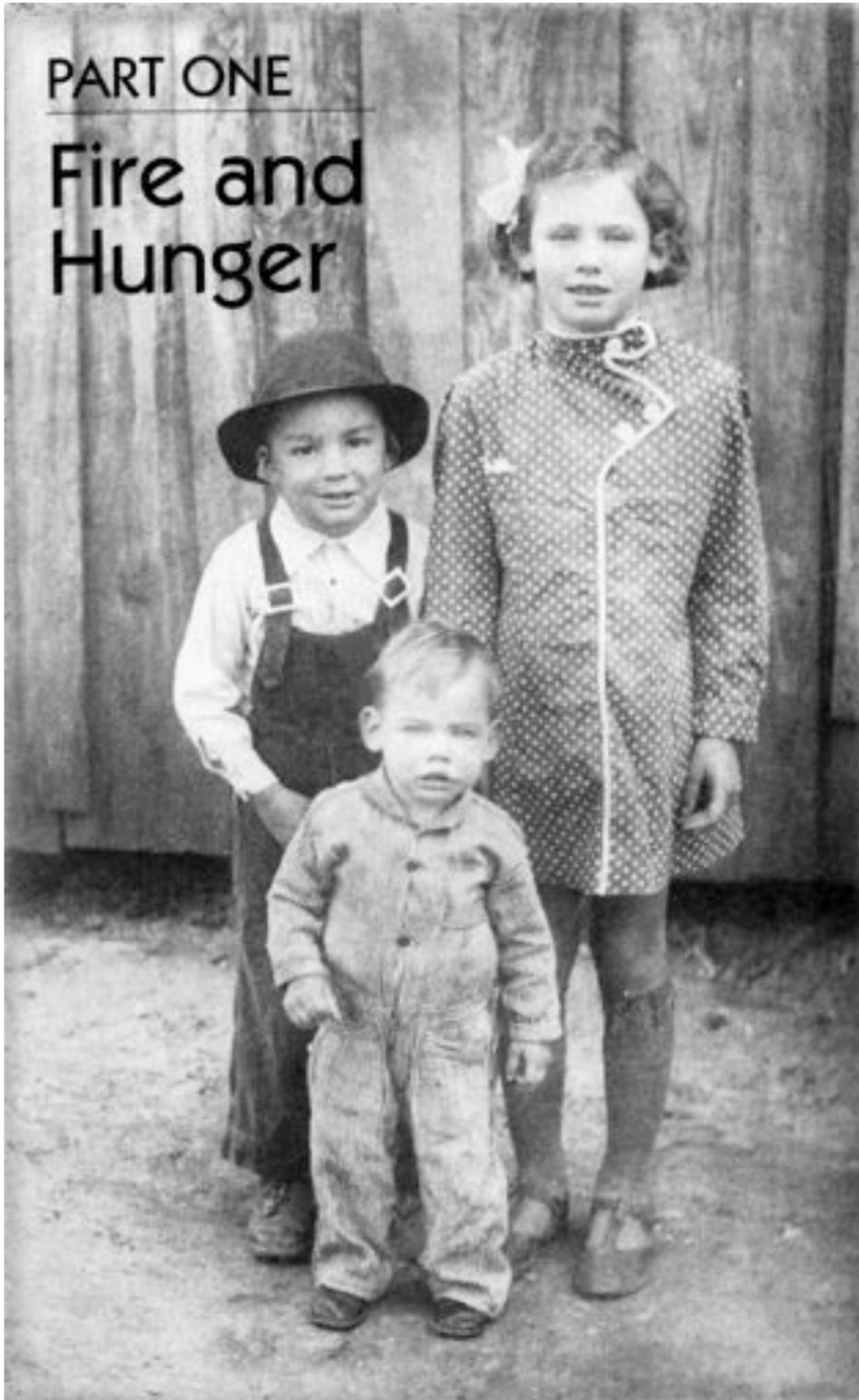
Sinatra was familiar, though not always as a singer, to twenty-nine. Only Elvis Presley was known to all.

Maxine Brown in all her rowdy glory has not only a great Arkansas story, but also a great American story to tell. She was there when great things happened; she shared stages with everybody from Ira Louvin to Ricky Nelson. She saw Elvis at the beginning of his incredible, tragic ride. She's appalling and wonderful. She is, quite simply, the real thing, a brash, ambitious, talented country girl from Arkansas here with the tale of her real-life magic carpet ride, complete with bumps and crashes. *Looking Back To See* is her story, in her words. She does the looking, and we get to see.

ROBERT COCHRAN  
Center for Arkansas and Regional Studies  
University of Arkansas

PART ONE

# Fire and Hunger





## **Living Lean and Country Values**

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I was only three years old when I first found out that fire and hunger are sometimes the same thing. That was back in 1934, in a time we now call the Great Depression, and we were a family named the Browns. Like so many poor people who had to endure those hard times, we were more than just a family. We were a strong clan, solid as native stone, living together and laughing and loving and singing as we tried to survive down there in the poor piney woods of south Arkansas.

Uncle Harvey and Daddy hunted and trapped for a living. We ate the wild game and sold the hides for a few dollars a month, and that's all we had to live on. For a mink, they could get two dollars, for a fox, a dollar twenty-five, for a coon, seventy-five cents, and for a big possum twenty-five cents. One year there was no game, and all daddy caught in his traps was a red fox. With the money for its skin, he went into the town of Sparkman and bought a sixty-four-pound sack of flour, a one-pound can of coffee and a bucket of lard, all for a dollar twenty-five. But in all the bad times, I don't think any one of us Browns ever complained or even thought about being unhappy. We didn't know it then, but living off the land must have made us stronger in the long run and given us something special to carry through the years. Its like the time someone asked Hank Williams Jr. what the difference was between his songs and his daddy's music. "What's missing is the poverty," he said. And maybe that's the difference between the music we made and the songs you hear today.

When I was three years old, we were visiting at Uncle Harvey's house. My brother J.E. was just a baby then and asleep in the bedroom; I used to have to take care of him some. When I went in to check on him, I saw fire all around him on the floor and walls. I ran to the kitchen to tell Aunt Ester, who was cooking a big supper of turnip greens, fried potatoes, and cornbread. All I can remember is that they got J.E. and put him out in the middle of the gravel road. I had to stay with him and watch everybody running in and out of the house trying to save a few things. That old house burned to the ground. The smell of that fire lingers in my mind to this day. Aunt Ester's cooking, like my Momma's, had the most delicious aroma in the world, though it somehow gets mixed up in my mind with smoldering timbers and ashes. Of course, no one got to eat any of Aunt Ester's cooking that day.

Uncle Harvey needed sixty dollars to buy fertilizer and seed to plant his next year's crop. He went to the bank, and they wanted to know what he had for collateral. He said, "I've got a horse, a cow, a calf, some one-horse plow tools and, of course, the crop when it's harvested. "The bank president told him, "If you will assign us all these assets you just mentioned, and get two upstanding citizens to sign your note, I will let you have the \$60" Uncle Harvey told him, "You kiss where I can't and go to hell." He didn't get to plant his crop that year. We were all hungry after that.

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Daddy finally got a job working on a farm for a family called the Butlers for twelve dollars a month. We lived in a dirt-floor shack out in the middle of the farm. Uncle Harvey and Aunt

Ester came to live with us after they lost their house. Then, after Grandpa Tuberville died, Grandma Tuberville lived with us too. The house didn't have a single shade tree, and the cracks between the boards on the porch were so wide that if you stuck your toe or hand down there too far, a chicken would peck it. Somehow we all found ways to make it through. I loved sneaking up to the landowner's big house and smelling the aroma of rich food coming out of the kitchen. I'd sometimes peek in the front window at all the pretty things in the house. Now that I think of it, those people might not have been all that rich. But to me it was as bright and beautiful as Aladdin's palace.

After two years of farming for the Butlers, Daddy was offered more money to farm for the Frank Ballard family, who lived only a short distance up the road. Every time Daddy would take a load of cotton into Sparkman, he would go by the local sawmill to inquire about work. Mr. Sam Horn, who owned the mill, assured him that if he ever had an opening he would be sure to let him know. There were two restaurants in town, and when Daddy had to go past them, he would hold his nose and run like hell to get past because the smell of all that food made it unbearable. Although hamburgers cost only ten cents each and a bowl of chili was only fifteen cents, he never had a nickel to buy anything. He knew some of the men from the sawmill ate there and that there had to be something better in life than farming for a living. When he told the Ballards that he was going to work at the mill in Sparkman if and when an opportunity presented itself, they told him we would have to move out of our shack. They said they had to have someone they could depend on for the full season.

So we moved into another house of sorts about a mile behind Herschel Thrower's country store. It was while we lived there that I first remember seeing a hog butchered. Even though it was a horrible experience to watch, I loved the cracklins from the hogs skin that my Momma made in a big old black pot outside the house. My job was stirring those cracklins, and I'd have to stand there and do it all day. When Momma made cornbread from those cracklins, it was the best stuff I had ever tasted.

After rendering all the fat and then storing it in gallon jugs for cooking, we would take the best part of the hog—the hams, shoulders, and backbone—and rub them down real good with salt and sugar. We would then store the meat in salt bins in our smokehouse. We ground up the rest of the hog for sausage. Hog-killing season was a favorite time for country folks, and everyone would share what they had with each other. Nothing in the world tasted as good as sugar-cured ham, red-eye gravy and biscuits. The memory of those country delicacies is still with me to this day.

One day Momma sent me down to the store. I was wearing a red dress. There was a mean old bull in the pasture that hated the color red. Momma kept a watch out for me as I went down the dirt road. It was a good thing she did, because that bull broke through the fence and started after me. I could hear Momma screaming for me to run, which I did, with that bull right on my heels and Momma right on its heels with a big broom. Good old Herschel saw what was happening and ran out to divert the bull's attention. I'm sure I had only a couple of flour-sack dresses, and this red one was my favorite. But Momma would never let me wear that red dress again as long as we lived there.

It was early spring when Daddy got word that Mr. Horn needed someone to help unload logs at the sawmill. This job came along just at the right time. That winter, the only things Daddy caught in his traps were a fox and two minks. Wild game had become very scarce.

By then, though, times were getting much better. Mr. Neal Woods, an independent contractor for Horn's sawmill, came to Daddy and offered him a job hauling logs for two dollars a day. This was more money than he had ever made before. We moved into a rundown shack on the sawmill grounds. The front part of the shack had a wooden floor, but the back

part was nothing but packed-down sawdust.

In 1937, the time came for me to start school. My Momma made me wear a pair of old-timely, long brown stockings. From the minute I stepped onto the schoolyard in those tacky stockings, I was the laughing stock. I was also tall for my age, taller than anybody else in first grade. I was always stooping over so I could be on the other kids' level. They teased and taunted me all the more. I failed the first grade. I never could get on their level. I've often wondered, though, just who was passing and who was failing.

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One night Grandma Tuberville saved our lives. Daddy was working out in the logging woods for a little extra money, and we were in the house by ourselves. After we had gone to bed, we heard a loud noise outside and then somebody was pushing against the door. Pretty soon the noise got louder, and the door hinges started cracking.

"Somebody's trying to break in and rob us" Momma said and grabbed J.E. and me up in her arms. The intruder was banging harder on the door. It sounded like a sledgehammer. We were scared to death and didn't know what to do. But Grandma was a tough old lady. Many a time she had told us about living out in the wild country where they had to defend themselves against Indians. What she did next proved that she still had a lot of that old-time spunk left in her.

Grandma got Daddy's shotgun and came to stand in front of us all. She told Momma to hold onto the babies and not let go no matter what happened. Then she hollered out, "Whoever you are out there, if you don't get away from that door, I'll blow a daylight hole right through you!" The intruder didn't heed Grandma's warning. He kept pounding on the door until it sounded like it was going to break in. Grandma didn't give a second warning. She raised the shotgun and let go a blast that blew the whole door off!

We heard a big yelp outside. Our intruder must have been wounded or scared to death because he howled out of there before the smoke cleared. We didn't have a front door anymore, but we did have one brave Grandma. Nobody came bothering us again as long as we lived in that place.

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After making two dollars a day for so long working for someone else, Daddy decided to go into business for himself. He was getting more and more mouths to feed. Our little brother, Raymond, and little sister, Bonnie, were born in 1936 and 1938 while we were living in Sparkman. Mr. Horn knew by now that Daddy was a faithful and hard worker. So he bought Daddy a brand new truck and a team of mules. Mr. Horn allowed Daddy to repay the loan for these things at fifty cents per thousand feet of timber he brought into the sawmill.

There was a big farm for sale near a place called Holly Springs, nine miles out of Sparkman, for one thousand dollars. Daddy thought we'd all be better off living on a farm and that he could make more money by farming his own place. After all, those people he'd farmed for before, such as the Butlers and the Ballards, seemed to be pretty well off. After he got Mr. Horn paid off for the truck and team of mules, he turned around and sold the truck for \$1,100 and kept the team of mules. He bought the farm for one thousand dollars and kept the extra hundred dollars to buy seeds and fertilizer. Once we moved to the farm, the mules and a wagon were our only means of transportation. It was a poor but workable farmstead, and our house was big but rickety. Still, it had lots of rooms for Floyd and Birdie Brown's kids to grow up in. With a lot of fixing, we made it a home.

We were kind of stuck, way out there in the country. Our nearest neighbors down the road were black people, and they were as suspicious of us as we were of them, the times being what

they were. But there came a time when we had to ask these folks for help. J.E. had a bad habit of getting himself into life-threatening situations. He had already survived being burned up in a house fire. Then, one morning after we'd been living on our farm awhile, he took it upon himself to fall off our big barnyard fence and break his arm.

Daddy had gone to work, and we were all alone. We could see that J.E.'s arm was badly broken. And he was deathly pale. We didn't have any transportation and there was no traffic going up or down our road. It must have been some kind of holiday because even the mail truck didn't run that day. After standing out in the road for what seemed like hours, waiting to flag down a car or truck that never came, I finally ran all the way up the hill to the black people's house. I begged them to come and help us. At first, I think they thought I was trying to play some trick on them. But after a while, they said they would come and take J.E. to town in their pickup. They said they couldn't leave the fields, though, until they finished the day's work.

Poor little J.E. suffered all day with that broken arm all swollen up. We didn't think the black family was even going to come. But along about sundown, here they came in their old rattletrap truck. They took us into Sparkman to the doctor. I was upset that they had taken so long, because I thought my little brother was going to die. Later, however, I grew to understand the reasons for their caution and understood their willingness to help us was an act of kindness. Down in south Arkansas during the Depression, not too much kindness had come our way, and it certainly hadn't come their way either.

Farming wasn't all Daddy thought it would be. After that first year, he still didn't have ten cents in his pocket to buy one of those good smelling hamburgers in Sparkman. So he turned the farming over to his brothers and took a job in Fordyce hauling gravel. Times had gotten so bad that Daddy had to sell his team of mules in order to feed the family. J.E. was only seven years old, but Daddy had him drive that team of mules to their new owner, who lived thirteen miles away. Momma cried and begged Daddy not to have J.E. do this because one of the mules was mean and hard to handle. She was still wringing her hands and praying when J.E. finally made it back home late that night with the money.

Our nearest neighbors, the black family, lived about a mile and a half from our house. They sharecropped for a man named Posey who lived a short distance on up the road toward Holly Springs. Mr. Posey had been stricken with polio in both legs and was unable to work his farm. But he managed to get around quite well on crutches in his tiny little grocery store, which was about the size of four outdoor Johns. He built this tiny store right outside his front door so he wouldn't have too far to walk. He sold only the things that county folks needed, such as flour, salt, sugar, cornmeal, coffee, and lard.

Every so often. Momma would send me to his store for something. On those occasions, Mr. Posey would give me a piece of hardtack candy that he let me choose from his tiny collection of sweets. Sometimes Momma would give me two or three pennies to buy the other kids some candy. You could buy a whole sack full for a nickel.

I'm sure Momma worried about me having to walk that distance by myself. But about the only thing we had to worry about back then were hobos, and they really were harmless. I don't know where they came from or where they were going, but there were a lot of them. Some of them were probably Army deserters. Momma would always fix them a plate of whatever she had to eat, even though we barely had enough to eat ourselves. We all watched and wondered why men would bum their way around the countryside the way they did. I always thought they looked so pitiful. They never talked to us very much. But they always told Momma how much they appreciated her sharing our food with them.

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About a year after we moved in, another white family moved onto a farm about a mile down the road from us. That's how I made my first friend. Her name was Leona Hearne. She was a year older than I was. We became fast friends. And what a treasure it was for a lonely country kid to have a true companion! I was ten years old then, and my Momma gave me my first birthday party. Only two other kids came to the party, Leona and a cute boy named Travis Motes, who lived way up the road. It was a surprise party. I was outside the house sitting on the front steps when Leona and Travis came walking up. Leona was carrying a heart-shaped box of store-bought candy. The box was as red as a Coca-Cola sign and the prettiest thing I had even seen. I treasured it as a keepsake for years and years after. Then I noticed that Travis was carrying a batch of cookies that his mother had sent. "Happy Birthday!" they yelled. It was the greatest moment of my young life.

My Momma had saved up some nickels and dimes and bought me a pair of roller skates. I'd always dreamed of having a pair of skates. Back in those days, even poor country kids wanted skates. Anything that could carry you fast and smooth on the wind was like a fairy tale, especially to those of us who were stuck hard and fast to that old rutted earth.

The first time I tried the skates, I hit a clod of dirt and fell down so hard I was knocked unconscious. I woke up to feel everybody beating on my back trying to start my breathing again. I should have learned a big lesson with those skates. Years later, as I skated my way in and out of the music business, I found life offered many big falls along with the sweet rides.

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Our social life in those days consisted of going to church and visiting Uncle Harvey and his family. When we went to Uncle Harvey's, we also got to go to Thrower's Grocery Store. Thrower's was a little bit of everything to us, our Macy's and Saks, our fashion store and country club and Disney World. A nickel or dime could buy you a jawbreaker or Baby Ruth bliss.

People from miles around would gather at the store. One of the great social activities that took place in that grand old place was the community quilting bee. My Momma always took part in the quilting and was considered a true artist at it. She did so much quilting—along with her fieldwork on the farm—that she developed a bone felon on the tip of her finger. I can remember her crying in pain with this horrible infection. There was no money for a doctor, so she healed herself with an old-time remedy Grandma Tuberville had concocted. When it finally healed, Momma was left with a big knot on her quilting finger. She was unable to wear a thimble, which was a must for pushing the needle through the heavy quilting material. But this didn't stop Momma. She simply put the thimble on her fourth finger and learned to adjust. In no time she was back at Thrower's country store, making those beautiful hand-crafted quilts. They would be called state-of-the-art today, and probably bring hundreds of dollars. Back in those days, we used them for warmth during the raw south Arkansas winters. We never thought we were sleeping under priceless artwork.

While all the ladies of the countryside were quilting, I'd get to visit Grandma Tuberville, who was living then with Uncle Harvey. How I loved listening to her tell us stories of her childhood and how she and her family had fought off the Indians and survived storms and floods. Grandma Tuberville was the best storyteller I've ever heard. She probably would have been a wonderful songwriter if she had had different circumstances. I've always thought that maybe I inherited some of her spirit, for I can still hear her sweet, sad voice talking about the people's troubles and trials and tragedies.

One morning when he was driving the company truck. Daddy dropped us off at Uncle Harvey's on his way to work. That afternoon, a terrible storm came up. Uncle Harvey kept saying, "Floyd had better get back pretty soon or you all will have to stay here for a week. That

old Tulip Creek bottom is gonna be rising." The rain turned into real gully washer. Pretty soon, no cars or wagons could get through the bottoms—the fields that lay beside the creek. When Daddy finally showed up. Momma was mad because she thought he had tarried too long and had probably taken a few drinks with the men he logged with.

"Floyd, I can smell it on your breath," Momma accused him.

"That might be creosote too. Birdie, and right now we've got to worry about getting through Tulip Creek."

"We're not taking my babies through high water," Momma said.

Daddy was determined to go home, even though Uncle Harvey was scared about us trying to cross Tulip Creek. Nothing would do for Daddy but to pile all the kids into that old truck and strike out. When we got to the bottom of Peanut Hill, we could see the high water, and it was as scary as the parting of the Red Sea. There stood the man everybody called Peanut, the one the hill was named after.

"Better not try it, Floyd," Peanut yelled, but Daddy drove on down to the bridge. The water was already above the bridge support and rising every minute. Momma kept begging Daddy not to go onto that wobbly old bridge, but he was bullheaded and not afraid of anything. Water was up to the railings as we moved onto the Tulip Creek bridge. Daddy thought he could hold the truck in a straight line but he couldn't. The truck veered to the right and water started running into the floorboard of the truck. All us kids started screaming, and Momma yelled out that we were all going to be drowned. All of a sudden, the truck slipped into deeper water and the motor died. We were going over the side for sure. Daddy somehow got out his door and pulled J.E. and me out and lifted us into the truck's bed. The truck was leaning halfway over now, and Daddy managed to get Momma and the two babies, Raymond and Bonnie, to the side that was still out of the water. In another minute we would be goners. Even if any of us could swim—and none of us could—we wouldn't survive those rapids. Suddenly, the truck slipped again and began leaning on its side.

"Hold on, I'm coming!" yelled Peanut.

Little Raymond was almost swept away then. Daddy reached and grabbed his foot, the boot came off, and Daddy grabbed him again just before he went under the rapids. The next thing we knew. Peanut was there with his team of mules, pulling us out. Within another minute or less, we would have all drowned. Thank God for Peanut and his great team of mules! When we were back on firm ground again, we sat there and listened to Momma give thanks to the good Lord for sparing us.

The darned old truck was washed out and wouldn't start, of course. But we didn't mind. We were alive. We all started walking home. We were so cold and wet that we must have looked like war refugees. How good it felt to crawl into a feather bed and pull one of Momma's elegant quilts up over us. Years later, whenever I heard Johnny Cash singing, "How high's the water. Momma?" I would always shudder to myself and think about the raging waters of Tulip Creek.

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Grandma Tuberville came to stay with us now and again, and I was always excited to see her. One day she did something so funny that I couldn't stop laughing for hours. She was out in the field helping J.E. and me with our cotton rows, and she needed to pee. The outhouse was too far away, so Grandma just stood straight up, pulled her dress out from her legs and let it fly. Not a drop touched her skin. A few days later I was out in the field and I decided I'd try it. And I peed all over myself.

"Grandma," I asked, "How in the world do you do that?"

"Well, child," she said, "I've only got one pair of britches, and I save them for church. So I don't wear anything under there. That's why I can pee standing up." Nowadays you hear a lot of talk about adults being role models for children. I'm not sure anyone is good enough to play that kind of role in our times. But I believe if there were more Grandma Tuberville in the world, we might not have so many confused kids heading in the wrong direction. ,

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We were all growing up—me and J.E. and Raymond and Bonnie—and getting into the usual cornsilk-smoking mischief and getting the old-fashioned discipline of a leather belt or hickory switch. We still delighted in our family outings to Uncle Harvey's, especially when he was making sorghum molasses (I always felt sorry for that old mule who had to walk in circles all day to power the machine that squeezed the juice out of the sugar cane.) We went to church as often as we could, even though the Sardis Methodist Church was a long way, about seven miles, from our house. One of my biggest thrills was getting to ride in our cotton wagon to the gin in Sparkman whenever we'd picked a bale of cotton. Lord, how we hated to pick cotton. It's the hardest work in the world. I remember putting rocks in my sack to make it weigh more. Country kids just naturally worked more than they ever got to play, and maybe that's why they make better ball players and musicians, poets, comedians, and lawyers.

Another reason I hated to pick cotton was because I was constantly stepping on Devil's Snuff, and I just knew the devil was out to get me. Devil's Snuff was sort of like a big mushroom. When you stepped on it, brown dust would fly out. Our cotton field was full of it. I had always been told that the devil lived in the ground and that if you stepped on his snuff, he'd come up out of the ground to get you. I was so afraid I was going to hell that I had nightmares about it. So finally Momma let me stay home and take care of Bonnie and do chores around the house while she went to the cotton field in my place. This is when I learned how to cook. Daddy always bragged on my old-time butter cake with chocolate icing and often said it was better than Momma's. You can't imagine what this did for my ego back then. For the rest of his life, I took pride in making him his favorite cake.

Every farm family in those days had a dinner bell. When dinner was ready at home, I would go outside and ring the bell to let all the farm hands know it was time to come eat. (We called it breakfast, dinner, and supper. Nowadays it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner.) The dinner bell was also used to sound an alarm if something was wrong around the house. We were always told not to ring it unless something was wrong. One day, J.E. thought it would be funny to ring it as a joke. Everyone out in the field stopped what they were doing and came running. Unlike J.E., they didn't think it was fanny at all. He never did it again.

Having treats was a rarity. One day Daddy came home with a truckload of what he called "like bread." (It was lighter and fluffier than homemade bread.) The grocery store owner in Sparkman had thrown it away because it was several days old. We all thought it was the best stuff we had ever tasted. J.E. and I were in hog heaven. Instead of sausage and biscuits in our school lunch pail, we had sausage and "like bread." Another rare treat was ice. Now and then the county ice truck would stop, and we'd get enough ice to make ice cream in a molasses bucket. We kept our milk down in the well to keep it from spoiling and our ice in toe sacks to slow its melting. To make ice cream, we mixed a little sugar with the rich milk we got from our old Jersey cow. Then we put the mixture in a molasses bucket, placed it inside a big old oaken bucket, and surrounded it with chipped ice. We rotated the molasses bucket by its bail—or handle—until the mixture inside froze into ice cream. No other ice cream in the world tasted half as good!

We caught the school bus and rode nine miles to the country school. When we got home. Momma would always have something good for us to eat, whether it was a baked sweet potato

with churned butter or sugar cookies. Momma worked in the fields and did all the housework too. But she always managed to have a smile on her face. If she was ever burdened down, she never showed it in front of the kids.

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One day, a carnival came to the big city of Sparkman. We'd never seen anything like it and probably didn't know beforehand that there was such a thing. The carnival didn't have elephants and lions and dancing bears and beautiful trapeze ladies. It was just a plain old carnival with rides, sideshows, and games that beat people out of their money. Mom and Dad loaded up all us children, and we took off to Sparkman. You'd have thought we were going to the World's Fair. They had this Loop-A-Plane ride that looked totally dangerous but terribly exciting. No one had enough courage to ride it until finally Daddy said he'd take me on it. The Loop-A-Plane went way up in the air, taking my breath away as it spun around like a bullet. All you could hear was yelping and screaming. Then it stopped dead. When it did, we heard a big, fat woman up above us screaming for mercy. All of a sudden, we got a shower, even though the sky was filled with stars and no rain cloud was in sight. The fat woman above us had wet her britches! More such showers were in the forecast, too. We yelled at the top of our lungs for them to stop that infernal contraption and let us off. We were soaking wet and sick to our stomachs.

When we finally did get off, Daddy discovered that he had lost his billfold (it had fallen out of his pocket when they turned us upside down). We looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Since it had all Daddy's money in it, we had to leave the carnival. We didn't get to see very many of the sideshows. The bearded lady, the crocodile man, and the hermaphrodite were part of every country kid's education back then. We couldn't wait until the next year.

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Grandpa Brown was almost crushed to death when a load of logs fell on him. He spent months flat on his back, and I remember when we went to see him that he had that stricken look of old people. The doctor wouldn't allow him to eat anything but raw eggs (maybe that was some sort of country cure in those days). We'd gather eggs from the hen house and Daddy would either walk, catch a ride, or hitch up the wagon and go to Grandpa Brown's house so he could have his eggs.

One night my little brother Raymond woke up screaming. He kept yelling, "Paw Paw Brown! Paw Paw Brown!" He got everybody up, and when we gathered around his bed a chill came over us. "Something has happened to Daddy," my Daddy said. Right there, in the middle of the night. Daddy got dressed and walked the nine miles to Grandpa Brown's house in Sparkman. He learned that Grandpa Brown had died at the exact time Raymond had awakened screaming his name. This gave me the strangest feeling I'd ever had. Something or someone higher than this world had let us know through our little brother Raymond that Grandpa had died. I think we always knew that Raymond was a special kid. Just a few years later, when Raymond was taken from us, I got that same strange, mournful feeling that will haunt me all the days of my life. Sweet little Raymond was the love of our lives. I know there is a perfect song somewhere being sung about him.

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Back in those troubled times, poor people like us somehow always managed to "keep on the sunny side," as that great old song says. I can't remember a time when we didn't have some sort of music going. My Daddy's family had always been known for its music. From the time I was a little girl, I remember Daddy and his older brothers singing and playing. Back in those days, we had what were called "country dances." They weren't the hoedowns or barn dances you've seen in movies. My Daddy and uncles played those dances, which always took

place in someone's house. Folks would come from miles around and bring all the kids, and the dances would last way into the night. How I loved watching my Momma square dance while Daddy played the guitar! Many a time we'd ride back home in our wagon very late at night because they'd keep playing until everyone left. People always took up a collection for the Brown Band. It wasn't ever much money—a few nickels and dimes—but still the Brown brothers loved playing and singing songs like "Old Joe Tucker" and "Wait For the Wagon." One day while Daddy was chopping wood, the ax flew off the handle and almost cut his finger off. It didn't heal properly, and he was left with a crippled hand, no longer able to chord the guitar. This ended the Brown brothers' music making.

Music was still a part of our everyday lives. Even many families that were poor owned pump organs that had been handed down from generation to generation. When Grandpa Brown died, Grandma Brown came to live next door to us and brought her pump organ. She taught us how to play it, and I guess all of us kids played that grand old thing until it finally wore out. There was no way we could afford to have it fixed. So Uncle Cecil took all the strings out of it and put them on his beat up old Sears and Roebuck guitar. He whittled down the ivory from the keys and made guitar picks. Cecil gave the guitar to J.E. and taught him how to chord. Right then and there, I guess, the Brown Trio was born. J.E. played while he, little brother Raymond and I started learning how to harmonize. We were just little kids but people all around started coming to hear us and brag on us. We were "those cute little Brown kids who can sing as sweet a harmony as anything you'll ever hear on the *Grand Ole Opry*"

We never took the bragging seriously. We just wanted to sing anytime we could. Singing was always the best feeling you could have. It was better than ice cream, roller skates, or Thrower's country store. Singing was just what we country people did back in those times. We had no thoughts of anything beyond it, no hopes, ambitions, or dreams of glory. But they would come. On Saturday nights, we gathered around our old, bulky battery-powered radio and waited for the "solemn old judge" George D. Hay to toot his familiar steamboat whistle and proclaim: "It's time for the *Grand Ole Opry*! Let 'er go, boyyys!!!"

I don't think we ever missed a single Saturday night listening to Roy Acuff's "Great Speckled Bird" and "Wreck on the Highway." Oh, the mournful, soul-thrilling sound of that dobro! And I remember how my heart would break when I heard Eddy Arnold sing, "Mommy Please Stay Home with Me" and his yodeling theme song, "The Cattle Call." The next minute, though, Minnie Pearl and Rod Brasfield's antics would have us roaring with laughter.

Our radio listening was rationed. We were allowed to listen only to the *Grand Ole Opry* on Saturday nights because we had to save our radio battery—a huge boxy thing almost as big as a table radio that quickly lost its power. This was before we had electricity, of course, so a dead battery meant no radio. I can't remember a time when the battery went dead, however. If it had, I doubt that my folks would have been able to afford a new one.

It's hard now to explain just what the *Grand Ole Opry* meant to people back then. It was more than just a favorite radio show, like the *Jack Benny Show* or *Lux Radio Theater*. It was a very nourishing part of our lives. J.E. and I never thought about growing up and maybe being good enough someday to be a part of the *Opry*. Kids didn't have such dreams in our rime. They would have been too far-fetched to live with. The *Grand Ole Opry* was too special to be put on the level of a child's dream. It gave more than simple entertainment, more than songs and laughter and even hope. It carried poor people through troubled times and helped strengthen family bonds when bonds were breaking up everywhere. In a very real way, it made good on the promise of one of its much-played songs. It widened out to all of us that wonderful circle that would always be unbroken.