

# Southern Journal

Reflections on the South

## Simple Annals

Stories from an American family

By ROBERT HOWARD ALLEN, MA'85, PHD'90

**T**hese stories are based on family legends and folk tales that Robert Allen heard as a child in rural West Tennessee. They form part of his collection *Simple Annals: 200 Years of an American Family*, published in 1997 by *Four Walls Eight Windows*.

### AUNT IDA'S HAIR

It's getting grey now and that's the third color it's been. They say, though, you'll never be whiteheaded if you's ever redheaded and I was redheaded as a pecker-wood when I was a girl. One time Aunt Calline Bateman come to stay with us. She was Granma Thomas' sister—married Henry Bateman—he died right after the War and Aunt Calline stayed around with her folks after that. She's a big, fat woman, like Granma and nasty! She never would change her dress—she wore one dress over the other and when one of 'em got too dirty she'd just pull it off and there was another dress under that. She dipped snuff and there was always a ring of snuff around her mouth—never did wash nor nothing.

Well, she slept on my bed. I had a little old trundle bed—rolled back under Pa and Ma's big bed during the day. That was that big old bed of theirs Pa made when they first got married, called it the Horny Bed. Aunt Calline stayed with us sev'l weeks and I slept on a pallet on the floor.

Well, after that Aunt Calline went to stay with Uncle Zer—heh! She didn't stay long, though, cause Aunt Mary couldn't put up with her—poor old thing!—Aunt Mary was

awfully curious—she had her ways. So I went back to sleeping on my little trundle bed, and first thing I knowed I had head lice. Aunt Calline had left 'em in the bed you see. Well I done ever'thing I knowed to get rid of them head lice—washed my head with lye soap and ever'thing. Finally somebody told me to wash my head with coal oil and that would kill 'em off. Well, I took a quart of coal oil and I went down to the spring and I done it. And shore enough ever' hair on my head fell out. I'se as baldheaded as a watermelon there, but it was in the summer time. Come to grow back, it growed in black—just as black as a crow and I'd had the prettiest red hair 'fore that—took after Pa's folks, they was all redheaded. An' that's how come me to be getting the third color of hair now. They say, though, that you'll never be whiteheaded if you'se ever redheaded, and that's why it's coming in in streaks. Killed them lice, though.

### JIM A-COURTING

I went over to Ben Gooch's for Sunday dinner one time—that was when I'se courting Mandy and come to set down to eat, her old mammy tuck the biscuits and put 'em in a basket, kept 'em in her lap—anybody wanted a biscuit she'd reach down there and pass 'em one. I didn't know what to think of them.

Well, I'd 'bout decided to marry Mandy and I bought her a set a' vases and bowl of the prettiest Carnival glass—give nearly fifty cents for 'em at Opp's store. I'se gonna ride over and propose to her that Sunday. Well, come Friday I got a letter from Mandy—said her Daddy had promised to buy her a parlor



JIM HSIEH

organ if she wouldn't have nothing to do with me. She always wanted a parlor organ and she'd tuck him up on it. Give them vases to Zade when I married her. They was curious people, them Gooches was, cur—riss, I tell you.

### PA BUYS SALT

One time me and Will drove over to Perryville to buy salt—that was right after the War and salt 'us scarce—people used to dig up the dirt under their smokehouses, boil it in a washpot, then pour off the water, and boil that down to get back the salt that had been spilled.

We bored a hole up in the underside of the wagon tongue, put our money up in there and put a stopper in it, so if there was any bushwhackers stopped us, they couldn't find our money. We crossed Tennessee River there at the Puryear Ferry, and got our salt. There was hoop snakes over there in Perry County—we'se coming downhill one time and one of them took out after us—put its tail in its mouth and rolled down that hill like the rim of a wagon wheel—went right past us, on down the hill. I seed a joint snake too—put together in joints, like cane. I hit at it with

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**A.P.O.V.** *continued from page 71*

thing—I wish everyone would stop that. It’s OK to read an escapist book. It’s OK to go to the movies.

Earlier this year I came across something Flaubert said that captured the way I feel when I sit down to write stories. It’s part of the reason I get so excited to do this so many days of the year:

“It is a delicious thing to write . . . to be no longer yourself, but to move an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as both man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the wind, the words my people uttered, even the red sun that almost made them close their love-drowned eyes.”

Go write a book. It’s fun.

On the other hand, sportswriter Red Smith once said, “Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at the blank piece of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.”

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Here’s a great sports story: When I was at Vanderbilt as a graduate student, Vanderbilt beat Alabama in football.

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When I was in my early 30s, I was very much in love with a woman in New York City. One Saturday morning we went out to get breakfast and stopped in the post office on Broadway, and she fell over in the post office. We both thought she was dying. It turned out that she was having a seizure. And it ultimately turned out that she had a brain tumor and a very limited amount of time to live.

People react to situations like this in a lot of different ways. Some people will spend the rest of their time together shaking their fists at the sky and saying, “Why us?” Some people will weep and weep and weep.

What we did was to tell each other a story. The story and the point of view we took was: Isn’t it lucky that we have this time? Isn’t it lucky that you didn’t die in the post office and we have this day to take this walk? Isn’t it lucky that you didn’t die in the post office and we have today to spend with our friends? That story, that point of view, made that year and a half the most precious of my life.

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One last story: When I was a boy, I grew up in a farm town on the Hudson River. In the summer my grandfather used to take me on his truck route once a week. He delivered ice

cream and frozen food. At 4 o’clock in the morning, we would get up and pack up his truck. By around 5 o’clock we’d be going over Storm King Mountain in the direction of West Point. That’s not the most glamorous thing to be doing six days a week—packing the truck at 4 in the morning, getting home at 6:30 at night, delivering frozen food.

My grandfather was a joyful guy who’d lived through the Depression, and virtually every day I was with him he would go over Storm King Mountain singing at the top of his lungs. He had a terrible voice. He’d sing all those old songs—“Oh! Susanna,” “Put Another Nickel In,” “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain”—and he said to me, “Jim, I don’t care what you do when you grow up. I don’t care if you become a truck driver or a surgeon or the president. Just remember, when you go over the mountain to work in the morning, you have to be singing.”

And I do. I hope you do, too.

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*Best-selling author James Patterson, MA’70, has nearly 30 books in print encompassing the mystery, suspense, science fiction, romance and children’s genres. This essay was adapted from his address as part of the Chancellor’s Lecture Series.*

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a stick and it scattered in a hunnert pieces. Later on, they’d come back together.

Well, when we come back to the river it come up a cloud, and me and Will run and got in a hollow oak tree there by the river. Biggest tree I ever did see. So big in there I took a 16-foot fence-rail and held it out level and I could turn plum around in there. And if you don’t believe it, you can ask your Uncle Will.

**HAMPTON**

I jes’ barely remember Ol’ Ebb Hampton. He was a old, old man when I was a little girl. Him and his daughter Rosey and his daughter Lindie used to go around, sing at churches. They was awful religious folks. Old Ebb died with a cancer on his face. They had put him up in a screen-wire cage to keep the flies from a-blowing him, ’fore he died.

Lim and Abe was his boys—they was

both of them so ’fraid of women, woman was to come to their house, they’d fight each other to see who could get up the chimbley first. Well, after Lim married, Abe bought him a house there in Buena Vista; place was hainted. One day he was out in the stable and he heard the ghost a-mumblin something—mumblin and mumblin. Well, Abe said to it, “In the name of Jesus, speak to me,” and he said that three times and the ghost had to answer him—told him to go over there in the south corner of the stable and dig there—and sure ’nough there was a iron dinner kettle full of gold money.

**LILLIE LOREEN**

We named her Lillie Loreen—Lillie after Pa’s sister, but we called her Digs ’cause of the way she walked, her toes diggin’ in the ground.

We thought she was going to die that first winter. The deathwatches ticked in the wall

and there was a mourning noise under the house; we thought it was a sign, but come to look, it was just dogs fightin’.

Then spring come and Digs got well. One day she run in the house with mud on her hands and left a handprint on the screen door there. That summer we put her out in the sunshine with Little Roy and had her picture made. Digs pulled up the blanket in her mouth just as they made the picture—that’s the only picture we have of her.

When Christmas come, Opp give us a hoop of cheese out of the store. Little Digs never had had any before and she ate so much it give her the colic. They called Dr. Massey from Buena, but he couldn’t do nothing.

When we moved away from there, we throwed the broom back in the house because it’s bad luck to move a broom. But we took down the screen door and moved it with us—there’s the print of her hand on it in mud.