

# OUR SOUTHERN HOME

SCOTTSBORO TO MONTGOMERY TO BIRMINGHAM

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTH  
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Waight's Taylor Jr.

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# 1.

## A SHAMEFUL DAY

1967

*Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.*

Martin Luther King Jr.

Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

**M**Y SINGLE ENCOUNTER with Martin Luther King Jr. came in 1967 and is not a proud moment in my life.

In 1966, my family and I moved from Seattle to the Atlanta area for a new job I had just accepted. My wife Darlene, while supportive of the career move, was quite apprehensive about moving to the Deep South. She was from Montana and had never been to the South, much less lived there. It was a time of turmoil and terror: civil rights marches, murders in Mississippi, and politicians such as Lester Maddox of Georgia and George Wallace of Alabama inflaming public opinion with their bigoted statements and perverse leadership.

After we settled in Atlanta with our two young sons, ages two and three, Darlene had a terrible nightmare that plagued her for twenty months until we moved from the South back to the West Coast in 1968. In this dream, she is always walking alone in a large city (presumably Atlanta or Birmingham) looking for the boys and me. As she rounds a corner, she sees me leaning against a building. I have been attacked by a group of redneck

racists, castrated, and left bleeding with our two young sons crying in fear as they cling to my legs. It was a recurring image of the South that haunted her for many years. She still remembers it with a sense of foreboding.

One evening in 1967, my wife and I went out for a quiet dinner alone at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, located on one of the ubiquitous Peachtree streets in Atlanta. We parked our car in the hotel's underground parking garage and had a pleasant dinner in a restaurant in the hotel.

After dinner, we returned to the garage and waited for our car. Waiting with us were two separate groups of people: Martin Luther King Jr. and three or four well-dressed black people were on the other side of the car return area, and a group of four well-dressed white people, two men and two women, stood near us.

I turned to Darlene and said, "Look over there. That's Martin Luther King."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Oh yes, that's him," I said.

At that moment, one of the two white men yelled something like, "Well, lookie there Billy, if it ain't the savior of the colored folks. I'll betcha he ate coon livers for supper."

I looked at the men in disbelief, as the other white man yelled out an even more racist epithet. King and his party said nothing and stoically waited for their car as a barrage of racial slurs was hurled at them. King's car arrived first, and he and his party left without saying a thing or acknowledging the presence of the two white men.

My wife and I said nothing during this dreadful encounter. We stood silently, observing a scene that I'm sure King experienced daily. Our car came after King's, and we left the garage in silence. We said nothing to King, we said nothing to the white men, and we said nothing to each other as we drove home. We were shocked and ashamed.

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I AM STILL ASHAMED.

*PART ONE*

**BOUND FOR SCOTTSBORO**

**1897-MARCH 25, 1931**



## 2.

# MARCH 25, 1931

### Clarence Norris

CLARENCE WAITED QUIETLY in the shadow of an abandoned warehouse building on the western edge of the Southern Railway yard in Chattanooga for the overdue departure of the freight train. He had chosen this spot carefully to avoid any railroad employees, as he planned to jump the train when it pulled out and hobo his way to Memphis in hopes of finding some work.

Unlike the house in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, the railroad yard was a bleak, unsafe place. Only railroad employees or a person trying to jump a train to catch a free, but illegal, ride would choose to be here. Sets of parallel tracks coursed through the yard, interconnected by manual and automatic switches. The yard was littered with material, some useful and some discarded, including railroad ties, rail, switches, frogs, and other track, locomotive, and freight car parts. Loose rock and gravel—the primary building ingredients of a railbed—were everywhere. Numerous buildings, scattered about the yard, were designed in a concrete bunker or shack-like motif and ranged from new structures to old, dilapidated structures long past their useful life.

The forty-three-car freight train finally pulled out of the yard on an unseasonably cool morning at 10:20 a.m. on March 25, 1931. Although its final destination was Memphis, most of the route would be through northern Alabama, roughly paralleling the Tennessee River through the bucolic Tennessee Valley. As the train moved slowly toward the main line, Clarence ran from behind the warehouse, grabbed the side rail of a boxcar, and pulled himself up onto the train. He saw a number of others boarding the train, black and white alike, and more would continue to do so until the

train departed the Chattanooga area. He thought little of jumping the train; riding the rails as a hobo had become a standard form of transportation for many of the unemployed in this second year of the Great Depression.

Clarence Norris was eighteen years old, the second of eleven children of poor, black sharecroppers in Georgia. He had finished only the second grade and had started working the cotton fields at age seven. His hard-scrabble life consisted of a string of ever-changing menial jobs for little pay and frequent run-ins with white southern cops; he was arrested and jailed for vagrancy more than once, and he had been taunted, beaten, and told to run for his life by the railroad cops in a Birmingham railroad yard. He had just recently arrived in Chattanooga, having taken up the life of a hobo after quitting his job in a Goodyear plant in Gadsden, Alabama, when his girlfriend left him.

Clarence was about to experience a number of unexpected connections that would alter and dictate the course of his entire life. This train wasn't bound for glory. No, this train was bound for infamy in the town of Scottsboro in northeastern Alabama.

## Waight's Taylor

AS THE TRAIN pulled out of the yard, another young man was on the move, walking across the Quadrangle at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa for one of his beloved Shakespeare classes. Although Waight's would be early for the eleven o'clock class, he hoped to have a private chat with the professor about a recent lecture.

The beautiful tree-lined campus, only two hundred miles to the southwest of the Chattanooga railroad yard, was anything but bleak and might as well have been in another universe. The Quadrangle, over twenty-two acres in size, was its centerpiece. Bounded on the south side by Denny Chimes, a bell tower named after the university's president, and on the north side by the university library, the Quadrangle consisted mainly of open green space interspersed with majestic water oak and elm trees.

Waight's recited to himself the Shakespearean passage he had recently memorized, Henry V's famous St. Crispin's Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt. He knew the entire passage, but one part kept eluding him as he repeated to himself:

*This story shall the good man teach his son,  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by  
From this day to the ending of the world  
But we in it shall be remembered,  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.*

He continually committed to memory famous Shakespearean passages and exhibited an extraordinary ability to match a Shakespearean quote to the conversation or the events of the day for the next sixty-six years.

Waights Taylor was eighteen years old, white, and one of five sons of upper middle class parents from Birmingham. He grew up in a family that enjoyed the pleasures and advantages of education and travel. He received an excellent elementary and secondary education, and was now finishing his freshman year at the university, following in the footsteps of his two older brothers, continuing a tradition his two younger brothers would also follow.

Waights walked slowly across the campus absorbed in his intellectual reverie. Little did Waights know on that cool March morning, as he was bound for class and Clarence was bound for Scottsboro, that in five years he too would become a bit player in the soon-to-unfold tragic drama in the northern part of the state.

## **Rosa McCauley**

WHILE WAIGHTS WALKED to class and Clarence boarded the train, a young woman was also on the move in Alabama. Rosa walked along the beautiful oak-tree-lined sidewalks in the white neighborhood of Pine Level, a small town about seventeen miles north of Montgomery, the state capital of Alabama. She walked to her job as a “domestic” in the home of a white family. She worked two days a week in the home and three days a week in a local shirt factory. Although all work available for young black women was menial, she preferred her days as a domestic, as the working conditions were better and less demanding than in the shirt shop.

In September 1929, Rosa had been a student in the high school associated with Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes in Montgomery. Soon after she started her junior year, she had to drop out of school and return to Pine Level to find work to assist her mother and grandmother, both of whom were in poor health and needed her support.

Rosa McCauley was eighteen years old, the oldest child of James McCauley, a carpenter, and Leona Edwards McCauley, a teacher. She was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, the home of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (later called Tuskegee University), the black college founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881. When she was a toddler, her parents separated, and her mother, Leona, took baby Rosa and moved to her parents’ small farm near Pine Level. Rosa’s brother, Sylvester, was born soon after they arrived in Pine Level.

Rosa walked slowly toward the house thinking of the mistreatment she and her family consistently received from whites. As a young child, she and

her brother were taunted and threatened by young white children. One time her grandfather had to bolt the family door and stand ready with a loaded shotgun as the Ku Klux Klan terrorized the neighborhood. There was also the constant insult of segregated facilities and bus service. Every time she went to Montgomery and used the local bus service, she was reminded of her second-class status in the community.

Rosa approached the front door of the white family's home, trying to let go of the anger, helplessness, and sadness she felt. She wanted to enter the house feeling positive about her day and the work to come. Of course, just like Clarence and Waights, she had no idea that she too would soon become involved in the Scottsboro drama.

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THREE YOUNG PEOPLE, all eighteen years of age, each calling the South home—a young black man, a young white man, and a young black woman—with three very different life stories and outcomes. One would seek and receive redemption and offer forgiveness to his tormentors; one would start his political life as a Franklin Delano Roosevelt liberal and end his life a staunch neoconservative; and one would become an iconic figure of the twentieth century. But, on this day, March 25, 1931, all three were bound *for* Scottsboro.

### 3.

## WARM SPRINGS, GEORGIA

The geology of Warm Springs, Georgia, provided the natural hot springs that attracted Native Americans and the early white settlers to the area. The later arrival of a single individual from Hyde Park, New York, left the area a legacy that today attracts over one-half million visitors a year.

Indians of the Creek Confederacy were the first known users of the warm mineral springs that flow from what is now called Pine Mountain. Legend has it that the Creeks would allow the injured warriors of the Cherokee Nation access to the area to benefit from the springs' healing properties. The U.S. government moved the Creeks out of the area in 1827. The Cherokees followed them in 1838, as they were forced out on the infamous march called the "Trail of Tears." The first resort was developed in the Warm Springs area in 1832, and in 1893, Charles Davis built the 120-room Meriwether Inn that was quite successful until the early part of the twentieth century.

It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, however, who put Warm Springs on the map. FDR first visited the small town on the southern edge of the Piedmont Plateau, about sixty miles southwest of Atlanta near the Alabama state line, on October 3, 1924, to try the waters that were touted as a balm, and some said cure, for the ravages of polio. While FDR did not experience a cure, he was taken with the soothing effects of the spring waters. His trips there over the next few years certainly restored his body and soul for the tasks that befell him as he led the country out of the Great Depression and through World War II.

In 1926, Roosevelt purchased twelve hundred acres including the old Meriwether Inn, calling it the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation. Over the next several years, he rebuilt the inn, refurbished the pools, built a golf course and tennis courts, and created the first treatment center for polio

victims. Roosevelt and a local physician, Dr. James Johnson, also developed the first hydrotherapy treatments used for this debilitating disease.

In 1931 and 1932, FDR built a modest six-room cottage about five miles from his institute to use as a residence on his frequent trips to Warm Springs. The cottage became known as the Little White House when FDR was inaugurated President in 1933. He was sitting for a portrait in the Little White House when he suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage on April 12, 1945, and died a few hours later. April 12, 1945, is a date as memorable to my father's generation as November 22, 1963, is to my generation, and September 11, 2001, is to the current generation. Where we were and what we were doing at the moment we heard the awful news of those events is etched in our memories as indelibly as if it were an engraver's etching on a memorial plaque.

### **Clarence Norris**

CLARENCE NORRIS was born on July 12, 1912, on a farm near Warm Springs. Clarence was the second of eleven children. He had two surviving brothers and six sisters; a brother and sister died in infancy.

His parents worked as sharecroppers. Sharecroppers worked a portion of the property of a landowner and were required to share the crops resulting from this shared agreement. Most often, but not always, the white landowners would demand a larger share of the crop than agreed on, thus exploiting the labor of the black sharecroppers and their families.

As with many black families in the South, there was little family history available to Clarence. He did know that his father was born a slave, was said to be part Indian, and was much older than Clarence's mother. His father was a tall, handsome man, who worked hard as a sharecropper his entire life to provide for his family, but he was a stern taskmaster. Clarence never developed a close and loving relationship with his father, especially after the day a white man falsely accused Clarence and one of his brothers of setting a fire that destroyed the white man's beehives. Clarence later said, "Daddy stripped us buck naked in front of this man and beat us like we was mules."

Clarence adored his mother, Ida, a loving woman who struggled against the insurmountable odds of racism and poverty to provide for her family. Fishing was one of her real passions, and, from a young age, Clarence would frequently accompany her on her all-day fishing trips, which usually rewarded the family with a large catch of catfish and perch. Clarence said of those days, "Those were good times."

The family always had a large garden of vegetables—potatoes, collards, okra, turnips, tomatoes, beans, cabbages, and yams—since a poor family at

that time had to be as self sufficient as possible. They also had several cows for milk, and they raised hogs, some of which were slaughtered each year for their meats.

Beyond their garden and animals, the family subsisted on the cash crops—cotton, wheat, and corn—Clarence's father raised for the white farmer he sharecropped for. All his children and his wife worked in the fields. The children were put to work in the fields when they were six to seven years old. Clarence went to school only a couple of days a week and stopped going altogether after the second grade.

The family moved twice in Clarence's younger years because of the following incidents related to the low status of black sharecroppers in the South.

While living in Warm Springs, Clarence's father bought a red horse and a brand new buggy with rubber tires, quite an elegant rig for the times. It was the family's only mode of transportation and their pride and joy. One day Clarence's father found the horse in a nearby stream shot to death. Again he beat Clarence and his brother unmercifully, thinking the boys had killed the horse. The next day his father found a note on the porch that said, "Your children didn't kill your horse, I did and I've got my shotgun loaded to kill you on sight."

Clarence's father immediately moved to Neal, Georgia, entered into a sharecropping agreement with another white farmer, and sent for his family four months later. Clarence never knew what caused the white man to react so violently; perhaps, he was either jealous or thought the Norris's were being uppity black folk in owning a horse and fancy buggy.

Sharecropping in Neal came to an abrupt end after the white landowner tried to rape Ida while Clarence's father was away. Clarence described the scene saying, "He had mamma on the floor, tearing her clothes and forcing hisself on top of her." The white man left when the children started "screaming and hollering." The family moved to Molena, Georgia, the day his father returned, and they entered into yet another sharecropping agreement with another white man, Mr. Watts. In Molena, Clarence and his brother became good friends and playmates with Watts's sons, George and Zach. Their friendships came to an end in the boys' teens, when George said to Clarence, "Bubba, Momma wants you to call me Mr. George now. Call me that in front of her, but otherwise you don't have to do it."

Clarence didn't care for the farm life and sharecropping, and he constantly sought permission to work elsewhere, much to his father's consternation. In an attempt to punish and control Clarence, his father started beating him as almost a daily ritual. He would be tied to a tree and whipped with tree branches. Both his mother and Mr. Watts beseeched Clarence's father to stop the abusive treatment. Naturally, Clarence's hatred

of his father was solidified at this time, and he never let go of the feeling or forgave his father.

In 1928, Clarence's father died in Molena. The family started to drift apart soon after his death: several of his siblings were either married or were soon to marry; his mother started working for a white family as a live-in maid; and Clarence returned to Warm Springs, where he would find work at FDR's institute.

## 4.

# BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

**B**irmingham's early history is defined by two disparate sets of circumstances—one that is well beyond our control in time and outcome, and the other, well within the human will and endeavor to shape. The geology of the area shaped its physical appearance and economic *raison d'être*, while the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, and the resulting imposition of harsh legal and social racial barriers warped its heart and soul.

The Appalachian Mountains, as unimposing as they are now compared to the Rocky Mountains or California's Sierra Nevada, were a defining presence in the formative years of this country. The thirteen original colonies were bounded to the East Coast by the Appalachians, and the mountains proved to be an economic boon for many areas in their shadows. However, many other areas became home for the poor, white Scotch-Irish, English, and German settlers who would be known as "hillbillies" or, more derogatorily, "poor white trash." In fact, the southern parts of the Appalachian Mountains were called Appalachia, which became synonymous with the poverty in the area. Many people still think of Appalachia as consisting only of illegal moonshine stills, stock car racing, and "backwards" people like those portrayed in the 1972 film based on James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*.

While geological evolution took millions of years to shape the Appalachians and the northern Alabama landscape with the coal, limestone, and iron ore mineral deposits necessary for Birmingham's creation, the white settlers to this land took only three hundred years to evolve a social order that would bring this country to civil war in 1862. The war led to the emancipation of the slaves in 1863, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery in 1865, and then a period of so-called "Reconstruction" that sought to right the wrongs of the slavery period. Finally, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, southern states

imposed segregation laws that warped and compressed the society as completely as the geological forces had shaped the Appalachians.

The first recorded instance of the sale of an indentured servant into the New World was in 1619, when a Dutch ship sold twenty blacks as indentured servants to the English colony of Jamestown, in what is now the state of Virginia. Although indentured service continued for some time, it soon evolved into slavery, and in 1661, the first reference to slavery appears in Virginia law. As the southern colonies and territories expanded more and more into a plantation-style agricultural economy, the need for a large number of cheap field hands moved the South to formalize slavery as a way of economic and social life.

In 1705, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Slave Codes, which stated, "All servants imported and brought into this Country...who were not Christians in their native Country...shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion...shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resist his master...correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction...the master shall be free of all punishment...as if such accident never happened." The other colonies used the Virginia law as a model for the slave codes they developed in subsequent years.

New York and New Jersey were the last northern states to pass legislation abolishing slavery in 1799 and 1804, respectively; however, all vestiges of slavery did not end until 1827 in New York, and in 1865 in New Jersey with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The southern states, with their reliance on slavery to support their plantation-style economy, continued the practice until forced to change by the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment.

Reconstruction, as envisioned by President Lincoln, could possibly have been a successful and noble endeavor. In 1863, Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, a plan based on forgiveness and the hope for a speedy reunification of the states. He intended to let the southern states take the lead in self-reconstruction if they accepted emancipation of the blacks and rejected the reinstatement of slavery. He also planned to grant full pardons to most southerners and to respect property rights. However, with Lincoln's assassination, the Reconstruction period proved to be a failure from almost all perspectives, and it was formally ended in 1876 after the election of Rutherford Hayes as President. Southern whites slowly regained control of their state legislatures and soon passed laws that formalized the segregation of the races.

Birmingham was still a young city in the early part of the twentieth century, having been established in 1871 in the Jones Valley at the southern reach of the Appalachian mountain chain. Birmingham, named after the

industrial English city famous for its production of iron, was surrounded by hills possessing what, at the time, seemed to be endless quantities of coal, iron, and limestone deposits—the necessary ingredients to produce pig iron and steel. This fortunate confluence of natural resources and cheap labor soon transformed Birmingham into the “Pittsburgh of the South.” In 1910, the city also earned the sobriquet, “The Magic City,” because of its rapid industrial expansion and a population that had grown to about 132,000. Birmingham was a town with multiple personalities: it was a free-wheeling example of American capitalism and entrepreneurship; a frontier town where saloons, whorehouses, and murder were a daily norm in districts with names like Pigeon’s Roost and Scratch Ankle; a company town where the large mines, factories, and mills controlled workers through company housing and stores; and a segregated town that exploited blacks using perverse forms of neo-slavery—the convict lease program and the fee system.

The convict lease program was used by Alabama, and many other southern states, to produce revenue for state coffers by charging mines, mills, and plantations for the use of state convicts. In some years, Alabama received revenues from convict leases that covered 30 percent of the state’s annual budget. The fee system encouraged and allowed local sheriffs and court officials to supplement their incomes by arresting mostly black men, and even boys, for petty crimes or on trumped-up charges. When the men were invariably unable to pay the imposed fines and court fees, the men were sold to the mines for a fee equivalent to the imposed costs. Most sheriffs, who were paid either a small salary or nothing, approached the arrests as if dealing with objects, not people. Estimates vary, but somewhere between one hundred and two hundred thousand convicts were leased to the mines and mills. The men were worked unmercifully and treated brutally. One in ten died of accidents, diseases, or brutal beatings and torture in the mines. In 1928, Alabama was the last state to abolish the convict lease program.\*

In addition, a State Constitution was passed in 1901. The keynote speaker, John B. Knox, Esq., made the express purpose of the constitutional convention in Montgomery absolutely clear by saying, “What is it that we want to do? Why, it is, within the limits imposed by the Federal Constitution, to establish white supremacy in this State.” The State Constitution was a

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\* The most comprehensive book on the horrible convict lease program and the fee system, overt forms of de facto slavery used in Alabama and throughout the South, is Douglas A. Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. For this book, Blackmon was awarded the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.

byzantine document that studiously avoided mentioning either whites or blacks in any direct context, yet it would institutionalize laws and practices that would disenfranchise blacks and haunt the entire state for years to come. For example, the new constitution established the Poll Tax, an insidious form of voter registration control that, five years after its implementation, had reduced black adult male voters to only 2 percent of the state's black adult males. A quarter of the white male voters also lost their voting right, since they couldn't pay the annual Poll Tax of \$1.50.

### **The Taylors Arrive in Birmingham**

IN 1897, twenty-three-year-old Angus Macey Taylor moved to Birmingham from Waynesboro, Mississippi, to start a new business in this booming new city of the South. In 1899, Angus's twenty-seven-year-old brother, James Durward Taylor, joined him in Birmingham. James and Angus were in the business of buying and selling hides, furs, and tallow. They called their new business Birmingham Hide & Tallow Company. In 1909, James moved to New Orleans and opened a similar business, the Taylor Company, leaving the Birmingham business to Angus. Over the next twenty years, Angus's business grew as the demand for leather goods expanded, particularly with the shoe and leather goods manufacturers in the New York City and Boston areas. He became quite prosperous.

Angus and James were descended from English immigrants, and their grandfather, Charles Knight, was a man with a colorful past. Charles Knight's forefathers came from England and were early settlers in the Jamestown settlement in what became the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Taylor family always loved to tell the story, likely embellished in the telling, of Charles Knight's "unfortunate love affair and duel between rivals for the lady's hand." Charles apparently shot the man and immediately left Virginia for the backwoods of Mississippi.

In 1905, Angus married twenty-four-year-old Margaret Boykin McCaa. Margie, as she was always called, was born in Aliceville, Alabama, and was an elementary school teacher for several years. Although Margie did not continue to work after her marriage, she was always involved in civic affairs. She was the Birmingham chairman of the Fourth Liberty Loan Drive supporting World War I. She had a broad interest in art, literature, and music, and instilled this interest in her family. She was instrumental in bringing the first opera series to Birmingham—Massenet's *Thaïs*, and Verdi's *Aida* and *La traviata*. Margie was also quite active in the Women's Suffrage Movement, serving as the first president of the Birmingham Equal Suffrage group in 1915. She made speeches in various parts of town, standing in the back of the family car with the top down with Angus at the wheel, always

ready to drive away quickly if the crowd became unruly, as there was widespread hostility to the thought of granting women the right to vote. At this time, Margie, along with the rest of the Alabama suffragettes, was unable to convince the Alabama legislature to approve the Nineteenth Amendment. However, in 1920, two-thirds of the states approved the amendment that stated “The rights of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged...on account of sex.” Margie received a certificate of commendation from Carrie Chapman Catt, of which she was justly proud.

Margie has an interesting and very southern family history. On her father’s side, she was descended from John McCaa, a Scottish immigrant who settled in Camden, South Carolina, in 1794. Margie’s mother, Sallie Gibbs, was the daughter of Waights Elias Gibbs and Margaret Henry. Colonel Waights Elias was a slaveholding landowner in Mississippi and served in the Confederate Army. Margaret was related to the American Revolution patriot Patrick Henry.

After their marriage, while the city of Birmingham was busy producing pig iron and steel, Margie and Angus were equally busy producing babies from 1906 to 1917. Their first child, born on April 8, 1906, was a daughter named Margaret Henry Taylor. Margaret, a beautiful young girl, unfortunately died on November 12, 1918, at age twelve during the terrible 1918 flu pandemic that killed millions of people worldwide.

After Margaret’s birth, the Taylor Boys started to arrive: Angus Macey Taylor Jr. was born on April 20, 1908; George William “Bill” Taylor was born on August 9, 1910; Waights McCaa Taylor was born on September 3, 1912; Frank Marion Taylor was born on February 6, 1914; and Robert Macey Taylor was born on January 9, 1917. These five boys, whose birth recitation sounds like an Old Testament biblical passage, enjoyed their entire young years through college in the same house in Birmingham at 2121 Sixteenth Avenue South on the side of Red Mountain. The mountain, a hill by anyone else’s description, overlooks downtown Birmingham and the Jones Valley five hundred feet below.

The family home was large but not grandiose, its most imposing feature being the two tall Ionic columns framing the front. The house was built of dusty yellow brick, trimmed in white, with Victorian stained glass windows in several rooms. The main floor of the house had a large entry hall, a living room, a library, a dining room, a large breakfast room, a kitchen, and a butler’s pantry large enough to be an extra room in most homes. The upstairs had four bedrooms and a sleeping porch, which all five boys used for many years. The large backyard had a washhouse where the laundry was done by hand using washtubs and corrugated metal washboards. Behind the washhouse was a stone garage with two rooms for servants above the garage.

No well-to-do upper middle class white family in the South went without black domestic help at that time. The Taylors employed five black domestics: two “mammies,” a cook, an upstairs maid, and a butler to perform all the daily chores most of us take for granted today. The mammy in white southern homes dates back to the times of slavery; these black women became an integral part of households and were surrogate mothers to many of the children they raised from infancy. Most white children raised by these women lovingly sang their praises for the rest of their lives; the Taylor Boys joined that chorus in full voice.

Mammy Sophie was a tall, stern woman with a regal air, who dominated the other servants, and, in many ways, the entire Taylor family. Her principal underling was Mammy Jane, a younger lady who continued with the family after Mammy Sophie died in 1920. Clarence E. D. Rucker later became the family chef, chauffeur, and major-domo. E. D. was considered the family philosopher because of his colorful phrases. Two of his most memorable proclamations were “Ef you right, stay right; ef you ain’ right, git right!” and the immortal admonition, “Tell a hawg sump’n when a shoat don’t know!”

A few years after the family moved into the house, Angus purchased the empty lot alongside the house, and the family christened it the “new lot.” Margie planted a vegetable garden in the “new lot,” but it was soon abandoned as neither Margie, nor any of the boys, showed much interest or aptitude in gardening. Fortunately for the Taylor family, the garden products were not essential to their needs, and the “new lot” assumed a more productive use as the neighborhood playground.

And use it the boys did. Sixteenth Avenue South included a large number of young boys who comprised a neighborhood gang, and they called the Taylor house a second home and the “new lot” their playground. The gang included Hunter and Miles Copeland Jr., George and Bill Warwick, Burghard Steiner, “Ox” Pruitt, Billy Caldwell, Max Franke, Howard Friedel, Neil Smith Jr., Roy Cohen, and Erle Pettus Jr. and his sister Rosalie. How Rosalie was able to be included in the gang has never been clarified in Taylor family lore, except that she was Erle’s little sister.

Although the Sixteenth Avenue South neighborhood was not the wealthiest enclave in Birmingham, it may well have been the most interesting. Several of the “new lot” gang members and their families have fascinating stories to tell.

Gang member Roy Cohen’s father, Octavus Roy Cohen, a well-known writer of the time, who started his writing career in Birmingham in the 1920s, published over fifty books and numerous short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers*, and other magazines over the years. His genre was detective mysteries, sometimes featuring a dapper black man

named Florian Slappey, whom he described as “a sepia gentlemen.” He surrounded Slappey with a number of black characters presented in stereotypical roles popular at the time, complete with clownish attitudes, misjudgments of every situation, and exaggerated black dialect. In a book he published in 1921, titled *Highly Colored*, he had a black character, Mr. Anopheles Ricketts, a tailor, telling a colleague seeking a loan, “Yeh—an’ I di’n’t git it by lendin’ it out at ten puh cent intrus’ ‘thout no s’curity to no-‘count cullud folks liken to what you is.” It was pure minstrel show and *Amos ‘n Andy* type humor, popular in its day; however, today it would be judged profoundly politically incorrect and insulting to blacks.

Erle Pettus, gang member Erle Pettus Jr.’s father, was a prominent Birmingham lawyer who was appointed U.S. Attorney for Northern Alabama in 1928. He was also a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Montgomery in 1901, where the state’s constitution was written and approved. The Pettus family was also related to Edmund W. Pettus, a brigadier general in the Confederate Army and an Alabama U.S. senator from 1897 until his death in 1907. Edmund’s brother, John, was the governor of the State of Mississippi from 1859 to 1863. In 1928, a new bridge over the Alabama River in Selma was named the Edmund Pettus Bridge in honor of Senator Pettus. Little did the family know then that a horrible event would take place on the bridge on March 7, 1965—“Bloody Sunday,” when local police and Alabama State Troopers attacked civil rights marchers as they crossed the bridge to march in protest to Montgomery.

Erle Jr. attended Princeton University and Duke University Law School, where he graduated at the top of his class. He was an intelligence officer in World War II, earning numerous medals including five Bronze Stars. After the war he practiced law first in Washington, D.C., and then concluded his legal career with his father’s law firm in Birmingham.

Another of the gang members, Miles Axe Copeland Jr. was one of Waights’s best boyhood friends; he led a fascinating life, probably the most fascinating of the “new lot” gang. After a short stay at the University of Alabama, he left, telling his parents, “I already know all they can teach me.” (Since he had an IQ of 162, genius level, it seems his judgment was not unreasonable.) Miles was an accomplished trumpet player, and in the 1930s, played with many of the country’s leading bandleaders of the time, including Erskine Hawkins, Charlie Barnet, Ray Noble, and Glenn Miller. In 1940, as the Second World War raged in Europe and Asia, he used Alabama House of Representatives member John Sparkman (later to be a senator from Alabama for thirty-three years) to get a position with Army Intelligence, and in 1942, he joined the fledging intelligence service, the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), led by “Wild” Bill Donovan. This was one of the precursors to the Central Intelligence Agency, and Miles was inti-

mately involved in the creation of the CIA under Allan Dulles after the war. Miles spent most of his CIA years in the Middle East with lengthy assignments in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. He retired in London and wrote five books on his CIA and espionage experiences, most notably *The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics*, and an autobiography, *The Game Player: The Confessions of the CIA's Original Political Operative*. In his autobiography, when he describes his interview for “special assignment” in the CIA, he is asked who were the persons who had influence on his character in his younger years, and he responds, “Then there were Waights Taylor, the neighbourhood intellectual, who taught me *what* to read, and...”

The Taylor Boys and their buddies spent their formative years in the Roaring Twenties, a robust period in American history when it seemed nothing was impossible. It was an exciting time of Prohibition and speak-easies, flappers, jazz, Art Deco, the Model T, radio, and the Harlem Renaissance. However, the boys were more interested in Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic and the era’s sports heroes: Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, and Bobby Jones. Another sports entity was about to roar onto the national scene: the undefeated University of Alabama football team was invited to participate in the 1926 Rose Bowl against the University of Washington. Southern teams were considered inferior to their eastern and western counterparts, and Alabama was invited only after several eastern teams declined invitations. The boys likely sat around the radio in their living room listening to the game as Alabama fell behind 12–0 in the first half, confirming what many had predicted: a rout of these nice, but inexperienced, football players from the South.

Alabama coach Wallace Wade said only one thing to his players at half-time. “They told me boys from the South would fight.” Alabama roared back in the second half on the heroics of quarterback Pooley Hubert and running back Johnny Mack Brown to win the game 20–19. The outcome is called “the football game that changed the South,” as southerners treated the victory as reclamation of lost honor and southern pride for the loss of the Civil War and the nation’s view of the South. The boys would have been around the radio once again on January 1, 1927, as Alabama and Stanford played to a 7–7 tie in the Rose Bowl. Alabama football was now definitely a national entity, and the team would play in the Rose Bowl four more times over the next twenty years.

The “new lot” major-domos, the five Taylor boys, enjoyed an enlightened youth well beyond Alabama football heroics. Angus’s business was doing quite well, and he and Margie were determined to see that the boys had a good education, as well as life experiences well beyond their southern heritage. Margie, with her five young sons in tow, traveled to Chautauqua, New York, the famous precursor to summer fine arts festivals, in the

summers of 1920, 1922, and 1924. Angus would sometimes take one of the boys along on his business trips to New York City and Boston. In their teenage years, the boys spent their summers traveling throughout the United States, as well as South America, Germany, the Far East, and Scandinavia.

When one considers all the chance opportunities for change leading up to a specific birth—chance meetings of individuals, marriages gone awry, immigration patterns of different cultures, and the improbability of a successful conception resulting from a single act of sex—one is certainly tempted to ask, “Am I an accident of birth?”

Whatever the answer to this rhetorical question, the Taylor Boys were the fortunate recipients of that genetic “accident,” and were born into an affluent, white, southern family.

## TUSKEGEE, ALABAMA

**G**EOLGY and a single act of the Alabama legislature in 1880 molded the history of Tuskegee, Alabama. Geology blessed the area with a soil ideal for agricultural pursuits, and the Alabama legislature provided the impetus for what would become one of the more prestigious black universities in the United States, Tuskegee University.

About ninety miles south of Birmingham, the last remnants of the Appalachian Mountains fade away, and fifty miles south of Warm Springs, the Piedmont Plateau slopes to the flatter sections of central Georgia. The rocky, red clay soil in both states gives way to an area rich in fertile, dark soil atop the chalky, limestone substrata, so much so that it is known as the Black Belt. The geological Black Belt is a swath of land about twenty-five miles wide stretching in a crescent shape for some three hundred miles from southwest Tennessee down through northeast Mississippi and across south-central Alabama, terminating as it crosses into Georgia.

However, the name Black Belt has come to have a broader and more generally accepted geographic definition. The Alabama Black Belt embraces a twenty-two county area in the south-central part of the state from the Mississippi border on the west, and through Livingston, Selma, and Montgomery to the Georgia border on the east. An even broader geographic Black Belt definition encompasses agricultural areas in eleven southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and Virginia. This broader geographic Black Belt includes as many as 623 counties, and the majority of the population in most of the counties is African American, leading many to assume the name Black Belt refers to the racial composition of the area. Many of the 623 counties continue to be among the poorest in the United States on a per capita income basis.

The first inhabitants in the Alabama Black Belt were, of course, Native American Indians—Choctaws and Creeks. Both were forced to negotiate treaties in 1831 and 1832 ceding all their Alabama lands to the state, and both tribes were part of the infamous “Trail of Tears” march to the Oklahoma Territory. After the 1832 treaty was signed, Macon County was created by the Alabama legislature in December 1832, and Tuskegee, named after a Creek word meaning “warrior,” was designated the county seat.

The expropriation of the Indians’ lands and their expulsion led to a rush of white settlers, mostly from Georgia and the Carolinas, into Alabama’s Black Belt. The migration was so intense that it was called “Alabama fever,” Alabama’s land and agricultural version of the California Gold Rush to come in 1848. One likely beneficiary of the expulsion of the Choctaws and Creeks and the “Alabama fever” period was Waights’s great-grandfather, Sanford Taylor, who moved to the Black Belt region in the 1820s or 1830s. Sanford and his wife, Frances Harbin, acquired from the U.S. General Land Office forty acres in the Black Belt’s Monroe County in 1837, and an additional forty acres in adjacent Wilcox County in 1838. Both counties are in the heart of the ancient tribal lands of the Choctaw people.

The geographic Black Belt of Alabama became the agricultural heart of the state’s plantation economy, which thrived on cotton production and slavery. The other states in the geographic Black Belt also became agriculturally dependent on slavery with crops of cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco. The social order and business interests that grew out of the Black Belt were the principal forces responsible for the huge growth in slavery in Alabama and throughout the South from the 1830s forward. The dependence on agriculture and slavery reinforced the strong political resistance to change that led to the Civil War. During the plantation years, the population of Macon County was about 95 percent African American, and even today it’s about 85 percent.

In 1880, the State of Alabama was critically short of qualified black educators and teachers. Although the state did not offer blacks equal education choices until forced to by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1954 and the modern civil rights movement, the state legislators even then realized they had a problem too large to ignore, and they passed legislation authorizing creation of Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers. The school opened on July 4, 1881, under the leadership of Dr. Booker T. Washington, the noted educator and leader in the black community. The school was renamed Tuskegee Institute in 1937 and became Tuskegee University in 1985. Dr. Washington best described the dual meaning of Black Belt in his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*.

I have often been asked to define the term “Black Belt.” So far as I can learn, the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white.

In 1896, Dr. Washington recruited George Washington Carver to join the school as the head of its Department of Agriculture. Carver, a botanical researcher and agronomy educator, remained at Tuskegee for forty-seven years until his death in 1943. Carver became one of the most noted agricultural researchers in the United States and the world. His achievements and awards were numerous. His two most notable scientific accomplishments involved crop rotation and peanuts. Years of cotton-only farming in the Black Belt had depleted the rich soil of its nutrients, and crop yield had declined substantially aided by the growing boll weevil infestations. Carver did not invent crop rotation, but he developed a training program using a mobile wagon, which he and others used to educate Alabama farmers on the need for crop rotation using alternative crops like cowpeas, soybeans, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. However, Carver is probably best known for the work he did with peanuts as a viable crop in lieu of cotton. He reportedly developed over three hundred uses for peanuts from food products to industrial products to cosmetics. This achievement was likely exaggerated, as his admirers and newspapers elevated Carver’s life and accomplishments to a mythic status.

One of the more famous programs the school was associated with was the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American flight squadrons in United States armed forces history. Their training program started in June 1941 at Tuskegee Institute, and flight training was done at nearby Moton Field and Tuskegee Army Air Field. Although the War Department objected to the group’s formation, the Tuskegee Airmen were very competent pilots, winning numerous awards in World War II.

One program the school wishes it hadn’t become involved in was the U.S. Public Health Service’s Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. The Public Health Service conducted an experiment on 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis from 1932 to 1972. The men, mostly illiterate, were from poor Alabama counties and families. The men were never told what disease they suffered from and were given no medications, as the program had no intention of trying to cure them. The program’s intent was to observe these men

as the disease progressed and they deteriorated. When a participant died, data was collected by autopsy. Tuskegee Institute let the Public Health Service use its affiliated hospital's medical facilities for the study. Other black institutions were involved, as were local black doctors and a black nurse. The experiment ended only when the story broke in the press in 1972, leading to Congressional hearings. Some U.S. government, Alabama, and Tuskegee Institute officials were unrepentant, claiming the men were "voluntary participants." One study participant said, "I thought they [the doctors] was doing me good." The moral, racist, ethical, sociological, and legal issues raised by this experiment were, and should continue to be, both profound and disturbing to both whites and blacks alike.

In the early 1900s, the town of Tuskegee and the school were doing well. Dr. Washington—a tireless orator, fundraiser, and advocate for education and self-reliance for blacks—had developed a network of wealthy American businessmen, including Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Julius Rosenwald, the head of Sears, Roebuck and Company. These three men and many others came to be generous contributors to the school's development. Dr. Washington used their donated funds to not only add to his school's needs, but to help establish over five thousand small community schools for blacks throughout the South.

### **Rosa McCauley**

IN 1912, a young married couple moved to Tuskegee from Pine Level, Alabama. James McCauley and his wife, Leona Edwards McCauley, were both twenty-four years old and had been living in Leona's parents' home in Pine Level. James, a carpenter and skilled stonemason, saw the Tuskegee building activity created by Dr. Washington's fundraising successes as a good job opportunity. James and Leona found a home near the campus, and James was correct about the job opportunities, although his building assignments frequently took him away from his home to locations throughout the county. Leona, a trained teacher, initially got a job teaching in a local school, but she soon had to resign the position, as she was pregnant with their first child. On February 4, 1913, Leona gave birth to a daughter, Rosa Louise McCauley. Leona kept encouraging James to get a job with Tuskegee Normal School as a carpenter, since the school provided employees with housing and education opportunities unavailable to blacks in most of the South. James, who demonstrated a desire for wanderlust throughout his life, preferred to seek contracting jobs, which made more money but required travel. He also decided to return to his family and hometown in Abbeville, Alabama. So, when Rosa was about two, Leona reluctantly went to Abbeville with James to live with his large family.

Rosa later learned what little she would ever find out about her father's family history from her Uncle George, James's younger brother. George told her that her father's grandmother was a slave and probably part Indian. He told her that little was known about her father's grandfather, although it was rumored he was a Yankee soldier in the area during the Civil War.

James left Abbeville after his family got settled in his parents' home to go north to seek contracting work. Leona was uncomfortable staying in Abbeville with his parents with James not present. She was also pregnant with her second child, so she moved back to Pine Level to live with her parents, Rose and Sylvester Edwards. James returned to his family in Pine Level for a short period but soon left again to find work. After he left, Rosa's baby brother, Sylvester, was born in September 1915. Rosa saw her father when she was five years old, but she did not see him again until she was an adult and married. James and Leona, unable to reconcile their differences—his need for travel and her need for some permanency in their lives—never got back together.

While living with her grandparents in Pine Level, Rosa learned quite a bit about her mother's family history. Rosa's grandmother, Rose, was the daughter of James Percival and Mary Jane Nobles. James Percival was white: a Scotch-Irishman who immigrated to this country as an indentured servant. He came into the United States through the port of Charleston, South Carolina, a major entry point for indentured servants and Africans slated for the slave auction block; he was sent to Pine Level to work for a white plantation owner named Wright. In Pine Level, James met and married Mary Jane, a slave and a midwife. They had nine children, three born before the end of the Civil War and six afterwards. Rosa's grandfather, Sylvester, was the son of John Edwards, a white plantation owner. Sylvester's mother was a slave housekeeper and seamstress in the Edwards's household. She died soon after Sylvester was born, as did John Edwards. Since Rosa's grandfather, James, was so white, she always thought her great-grandmother, Sylvester's mother, was probably a child of a black woman and a white man.

Rosa's childhood in Pine Level was typical for a black child in the South at the time. Although she and her brother generally played only with other black children, they did have occasional run-ins with white kids over racial slurs. Since Rosa's grandparents owned the house and land they lived on, they weren't considered sharecroppers as so many blacks were. However, she and her brother had to work as field hands and help pick the crops each year. Rosa's grandfather instilled in all his family members the understanding that they didn't have to put up with bad treatment from anyone, especially whites. Rosa lived her life as though that thought was genetically imprinted in her mind.

## THREE ODYSSEYS

1928

### Waights Taylor—An Intellectual Wandering

**W**AIGHTS STOOD on the promenade deck of the ship facing the strong wind, blowing a cold sea spray in his face. He wrote in the journal he kept on the trip, “The wind is whipping around the promenade so fast that you can lean against it!! It’s a Sou’Wester. Having a big time on this cold, clammy August day in the great north Atlantic.”

He and Andy Allison, his good friend from Birmingham, along with other boys from throughout America, were going to Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, where local families would host them as part of a Rotary Club exchange program. It was August 1928 and Waights was fifteen years old, although he would surely have said, “I’ll be sixteen next month.”

Andy was from a wealthy family in Birmingham that owned a large timber operation in Sumter County, Alabama, and in twenty-one years, Andy and one of his sons to be would play an important role in a life-and-death struggle involving Waights’s oldest son, Waights Jr.

Waights’s father, Angus, accompanied him by train from Birmingham to New York City to see him off on this grand tour of Scandinavia. Waights departed New York City on July 28 for the ten-day crossing of the North Atlantic. His thirty-seven day trip abroad began on a high note of anticipation and excitement. A few days out to sea, he described in his journal a rare sight for a southern teenager: “Saw an iceberg about 3 miles away. A lone sheep in a field of blue. The moon is full tonight. It is the prettiest thing I ever saw. The waves with gold tinting!”

Their ship arrived in Oslo, Norway, on August 7, and the boys went sightseeing for a few hours. They departed later that day on the same ship

for Copenhagen and arrived the next day. Andy remained in Copenhagen with a local family, and Waights departed on a small steamer for Aalborg, Denmark.

“Today is good old Bill’s birthday. I guess he is on the Pacific now. I wrote a letter to Kobe [Japan], I hope he gets it,” Waights wrote in his journal on August 9 as he steamed toward Aalborg. Waights’s brother, William “Bill” Taylor, turned eighteen working as a crewman on his youthful journey to various ports in the Far East. The Taylor Boys were anything but bound to Birmingham and the South; their parents constantly encouraged and aided them to reach well beyond the social confines and racial mores of Alabama and the times.

Waights stayed in Aalborg for ten days with a Danish family, whom he described as, “very nice, quaint people.” Andy arrived from Copenhagen on August 11. Waights was delighted, exclaiming in his journal, “I was worried about him, but he is all right, and we are together so everything is ‘jake.’” (Jake was a popular slang word used at the time to mean everything is satisfactory.) Their time in Aalborg with new young Danish friends was quixotic: they visited cabarets; played tennis, football, and baseball; went bicycling and swimming; enjoyed fine dinners; and were treated to sight-seeing trips all over the west coast of the Jutland peninsula.

On August 19, they departed Aalborg by train and continued on to Göteborg, Sweden, by boat. Their stay was brief, only one night. They left by train for Oslo early the next morning.

Andy and Waights arrived in Oslo the next day, and, much to their joy, found themselves housed in a Norwegian estate. Waights wrote, “Andy and I sure hit it off lucky. We are together in a luxurious home on a Norwegian estate of about one hundred acres. It is the most beautiful home and grounds I have ever seen.” They attended local dances, visited the National Art Gallery and the Oslo Ski Museum, and took a boat trip around the fjord near Oslo.

On August 28, Waights and Andy departed Oslo by ship and returned to Copenhagen, arriving the next day. They had lunch in Copenhagen and visited the National Museum Art Gallery and the House of Parliament. Then they took a train to the small town of Jyderup, about forty miles west of Copenhagen, where they would spend the next six days. Initially the boys complained about the slow country life; Waights even described Jyderup as “a rather crude place.” However, they came to enjoy the place and their hosts, the Hooge family, immensely. On September 3, Waights celebrated his sixteenth birthday in Jyderup. The “crude place” was now written about quite differently, “The Hooges were certainly fine to me. Mr. Hooge gave me a present, some pictures of the town. It has been a fine day.”

The boys traveled by train on September 4 back to Copenhagen, where they would spend the last eight days of this marvelous trip. Over the next

several days, Waights saw his first opera, Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, at the Det Kongelige Teater (Royal Danish Theatre) with the King and Queen of Denmark in attendance; he visited Kronberg Castle, Hamlet's castle in Elsinore, about thirty miles north of Copenhagen, as he had already started a love affair with Shakespeare that would continue his entire life; he toured Fredericksberg Castle near Copenhagen and visited the local museums; and, on the last night of their stay, he attended a farewell banquet held at a famous Copenhagen restaurant. Waights wrote of his last days in Scandinavia, "We are really having a wonderful time these last few days in Copenhagen. It all seems like a dream almost."

On September 12, Waights, Andy, and the other boys left Copenhagen at noon on the S.S. United States bound for New York City. The return crossing took twelve days, with brief stops in Oslo and Halifax, and the ship arrived in New York City on September 24. The next day, Waights and Andy left New York City on the Southern Railway Special for Birmingham. As they approached Birmingham, a homesick Waights, eager to tell his loving family about all his adventures and give them the gifts he had bought for each of them while abroad, excitedly wrote, "We'll be in tomorrow, boy it's going to be good. Oh you engineer, open up that throttle!!"

They arrived in Birmingham on September 26, concluding a sixty-six-day odyssey that would serve as a stepping stone in their transition from teenagers to young adults. Waights's last entry in his journal was, "Home at last! Boy it's great!!"

Waights spent the school year of 1928–1929 as a junior at Phillips High School in Birmingham. He spent the summer of 1929 in the White Mountains of New Hampshire; however, he did not keep a daily journal, so a peek back at those experiences is not possible.

In January 1930, Waights graduated from Phillips High School, and, in September, he entered the University of Alabama, where he would prove to be an eager and excellent student, earning a Phi Beta Kappa key for his efforts, and where he would find himself walking across the Quadrangle on March 25, 1931.

Waights and his brothers enjoyed an upbringing best described by Waights in an unpublished memoir he wrote years later. Borrowing from one of Birmingham's nicknames, he wrote, "Could any other world ever have been filled with half the magic of those twelve years from 1918 to 1930?"

### **Clarence Norris—A Wandering Filled with Challenges**

CLARENCE STOOD BESIDE the third tee at the golf course FDR had built in Warm Springs. He wasn't waiting his turn to tee it up; he was working as a caddy for three dollars a round.

He returned to Warm Springs in the summer of 1928 after his father's death, and he, like Waights, was fifteen, going on sixteen. Clarence stayed with relatives, and his cousin Johnny was able to get him a job at FDR's Georgia Warm Springs Foundation. The foundation offered the major employment opportunities for blacks in the area, but, of course, the jobs were all service related—cooks, porters, waiters, gardeners, maids, chauffeurs, caddies, and grounds personnel.

Clarence was hired as a caddy in the daytime; at night, he and another caddy, nicknamed "Red" because of his light skin, would work as green-keepers, mowing the greens and lawns. Once a week they were allowed to swim in the pool, but only just before they drained it, cleaned it, and refilled it for the white patrons. For this additional work, Clarence and Red were each paid thirty dollars every two weeks.

One night after the two had finished mowing the greens, Red asked Clarence, "Do you want some ice cream?"

Clarence said, "Yeah, but where you gonna get it?"

Red answered, "Follow me."

They slipped into the clubhouse through a back window that was easily opened. When they got inside, Red said, "Eat, take all you want, they never miss nothing." They helped themselves to all the ice cream they could eat and left with golf balls, candy, and a box of cigars each.

Well, Red was wrong; the items were missed. Several weeks later on payday, the boss approached the boys, and noticing a few cigars in Red's shirt pocket asked him, "Boy where did you get those cigars?"

At first, Red tried to bluff by saying, "I bought them." The boss persisted, and Red finally confessed that he and Clarence had stolen them. The boss threatened to call the police but instead fired them on the spot and refused to pay them their back wages.

Clarence returned to Johnny's house and related to him what had happened. Johnny also worked in the clubhouse, and he was tired of both his job and his home life. Johnny said, "Let's go to Birmingham. I've got some money saved and I'll get paid today." That evening Johnny, Clarence, and two other boys jumped a freight train headed for Birmingham.

Clarence was about to start an odyssey over the next three years similar to the journeys Odysseus took in Homer's *Odyssey* and Inman took in Charles Frazer's book, *Cold Mountain*. All three men faced life-threatening events and challenges along the way leading to their destinies.

Clarence departed Warm Springs with a head cold that got progressively worse over the next few days. He left Johnny and the other two boys at one of the stops along the way and struggled to find help until he happened upon a black family's home in the country. He collapsed on their porch, was taken in, was nursed back to health, and then worked for them in their

fields for fifty cents a day. After several weeks, they told Clarence he should go home, gave him money for the train ride, so he wouldn't have to illegally ride the rails, and drove him to the depot to return to Molena.

Clarence stayed with his sisters in Molena for a short time and heard there were jobs to be had at a lumber company in West Point, Georgia. He went to West Point, only about twenty miles from Molena, got a job, and moved into a boardinghouse for black men. After about a week, all the men went out for a Saturday night on the town. Clarence decided not to go, since he knew few people in town, and he went to bed early. He awoke later in the night to find the old black man who owned the boardinghouse on the side of his bed, fondling his penis. As Clarence rushed to dress and get out of the house, the old man begged him to stay and promised Clarence anything he had, if only Clarence would cooperate with him.

Clarence moved to another boardinghouse in West Point, owned by a black lady. The old man from the other house found out where Clarence was staying and came over to complain that Clarence was a thief and had stolen his clothes. His new landlady looked through all of Clarence's clothes and saw that none of them were nearly large enough to fit the old man. She told the old man to get out of her house and to leave Clarence alone. The old guy persisted in going around town accusing Clarence of being a thief, but no one believed him.

Clarence soon met his landlady's niece, Annie Pearl. She was a beautiful, tall, brown-skinned woman about two years older than Clarence. He was immediately smitten with her. After a brief courtship, she persuaded Clarence to move with her to Gadsden, Alabama, where good jobs were available in a new Goodyear plant under construction.

Annie Pearl had some education, and she taught Clarence how to recognize numbers and do simple addition. Clarence got a job with Goodyear and worked lots of overtime, using his money to furnish the house they rented. For almost a year, he enjoyed happiness and contentment he had seldom experienced until Annie Pearl fell in love with another man, left Clarence, and moved in with the new man. One night, he talked Annie Pearl into going for a walk with him. As they walked across a bridge in the moonlight, Clarence fully intended to kill her. Annie Pearl, sensing his mood, looked at him and said, "Are you going to kill me, Bubba?" Her question broke the moment, and Clarence soon left Gadsden, his good job, his house, and all its belongings. He went back to the life of a hobo, riding the rails for transportation while seeking that elusive nirvana.

A later stop along the way found Clarence in Birmingham, where he sought overnight shelter in an empty boxcar in the railroad yard. Unknown to Clarence, the railroad cops had seen him in the yard, and they searched the freight cars until they found him. The cops yelled at him, "Get outta

there, n-----.”\* They taunted him, beat him, and finally said to him, “We are going to give you a chance to run for your life.” Knowing they were about to shoot him, Clarence jumped into some high weeds just behind a big billboard and ran low in the weeds for some distance as shots rang out behind him until he felt safe. He slept overnight at that spot and awoke the next morning behind a house in a white, well-to-do neighborhood. He knew if he were spotted, he would be in big trouble; he waited until it seemed safe, and then he ran between houses to the street and escaped with no further trouble.

Continuing his life as a hobo, Clarence scratched for an existence throughout Alabama and Georgia, existing alongside the many whites and blacks caught in the same web. Prostitution was rampant among the women as a source of money for survival, and in the hobo jungles there was little racial bias for their services; a black man with a white woman was as common as white on white. Survival and the need for money for the next meal were the common denominators. The threat of arrest for vagrancy was constant, especially for blacks. At one of his stops along the way, Clarence was arrested for vagrancy and received a ten-day sentence at hard labor busting rock in a local quarry.

And then, on March 25, 1931, Clarence found himself in Chattanooga waiting to hop a freight train for Memphis.

Unlike Waights, Clarence never personally wrote about his life from 1918 to 1930. Clarence was illiterate.

### **Rosa McCauley—A Journey for an Education**

ROSA FINISHED PACKING HER SUITCASE, already feeling nostalgic about leaving home again on this hot August day in 1928. She was preparing to make the short trip to Montgomery for the start of the school year. She had spent the summer in Pine Level with her family, but now it was time to return to her Aunt Fannie’s house in Montgomery.

Rosa was fifteen years old, and she was about to start the tenth grade in the laboratory high school at Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes. Since there were no public high schools for blacks in the Montgomery area, the college had a laboratory school where young black students studying to be teachers could be trained. This was Rosa’s only choice unless she traveled ninety miles to Birmingham.

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\* The N-word is used and quoted in full form throughout the references used for the events in this book. Historical purists, grammarians, and educators may fault me, but I refuse to use its full form in my book. I heard the word used so frequently in the South as a racial epithet and insult that I will not use the word today.

Rosa's mother, Leona, knew and understood the importance of education and was determined to do everything she could to see that Rosa was well educated. Leona had attended Payne University in Selma, Alabama, where she received a teaching certificate. She taught grade school in Tuskegee before Rosa was born and in a school near Pine Level as Rosa was growing up. She started teaching Rosa to read at age three. Rosa could read when she entered first grade in Pine Level, a one-room, one-teacher school with about sixty children in grades one to six.

Rosa was eight years old in the summer of 1921. She'd just finished the second grade, when Leona took her to Montgomery for the first time. Leona had to attend Alabama State Normal School, a black teachers' college (later called Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes) each summer to take courses to keep her teacher's license current. Leona enrolled Rosa in the school's laboratory grade school classes, where the student teachers worked with the children. When Leona and Rosa returned to Pine Level, they learned the Pine Level School had closed, and Rosa and Sylvester had to go to school in Spring Hill, eight miles from Pine Hill. Spring Hill was the church school where her mother had been the only teacher for several years. The children went with Leona in a horse drawn wagon each week to Spring Hill, where they stayed in a friend's home and walked to school each day. They returned to Pine Hill in the wagon for the weekends.

After Rosa finished fifth grade at Spring Hill School, Leona sent her to Montgomery to attend school and to live with Leona's sister, Fannie. Leona had enrolled Rosa in the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, more commonly called Miss White's School, exclusively for African American girls, run by two white women, Alice White and Margaret Beard from Massachusetts. The teaching staff was all white, and, as one would imagine, the school and the teachers were not well received in the segregated South—the school was burned down at least twice. Leona initially paid Rosa's tuition, although Rosa later had to accept a scholarship and perform menial tasks in the school. The school did receive some support from local white churches in Montgomery, and from Julius Rosenwald, the Tuskegee Normal School supporter.

Rosa had suffered from tonsillitis since she was about two years old, causing her to frequently miss school. Leona decided to have Rosa's tonsils removed by a Montgomery doctor before she started school at Miss White's, but the recovery period caused her to enroll late. Miss White elected to start her in the fifth grade because of her late start, but she did so well, she was moved up to the sixth grade at midterm. Rosa was an excellent student and obeyed the school's strict Christian-based rules without question. Her schoolmate Johnnie Mae Carr later said that Rosa was "very quiet" and always "staying out of trouble." Even though school policy prohibited danc-

ing, most of the girls ignored the prohibition. Carr made it clear that Rosa was not one of those girls; “She was a straight Christian arrow.”

After Rosa completed the eighth grade, Miss White, now quite elderly, closed the school. Rosa’s experience at the school was probably life altering; she was taught that she had as much self-worth and dignity as any other person—white or black—and that she should aspire to do whatever she wanted with her life.

With Miss White’s school closed, Rosa attended Booker T. Washington Junior High School in Montgomery, which had opened specifically for blacks, for the ninth grade. Rosa successfully completed the ninth grade and went back to Pine Level for the summer of 1928 wondering where she would next go to school. Rosa shouldn’t have worried; Leona had registered her in the only available high school for blacks in Montgomery, a laboratory class at the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes.

Leona hugged Rosa goodbye as her suitcase was loaded into the car trunk. She got into the car and waved goodbye, and a family friend drove her to Aunt Fannie’s house in Montgomery. Rosa completed the tenth grade at Alabama State and started the eleventh grade at Alabama State in 1929. Unfortunately, she had to drop out after only a month when her grandmother became ill. Rosa returned home to Pine Level to help care for her grandmother, who died a month after her return.

After Rosa’s grandmother’s death, Rosa returned to Montgomery and found a job in a factory that made men’s work shirts. She went back to Alabama State for a short period, but then her mother became quite ill. Rosa had to go back to Pine Level and care for Leona, who suffered from migraine headaches and swelling of her legs and feet. Sylvester had to drop out of school as well to work to support the family. Leona did get somewhat better, but the stress on family finances and dynamics forced Rosa to remain in Pine Level, doing domestic work and taking care of the farm. Rosa, displaying the stoic and self-effacing attitude that would mark her life, did not want to drop out of school; however, she knew it was her responsibility to take care of her grandmother and mother. She later said, “I did not complain; it was just something that had to be done.”

In the early spring of 1931, Rosa, now eighteen, sat on the porch of the Pine Level home with her mother waiting for the arrival of a gentleman caller. She had met the man recently when a mutual friend introduced them. He was a barber in Montgomery and was ten years older than Rosa.

The man stopped the car, walked to the porch, and probably said something like, “Hello Rosa. Hello Mrs. McCauley. I’m Raymond Parks. Just call me Parks.”

## CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

*Double, double, toil and trouble,  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, the weird sisters—the witches—add fillet of fenny snake, eye of newt, toe of frog, tongue of dog, adder's fork, lizard's leg, an owlet's wing, and prophetically, the liver of a blaspheming Jew, to make a brew most potent, as they continue their chant:

*For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.*

Had the witches been in Chattanooga the night before the freight train departed for Memphis, their brew would have included a mix of racial prejudice, abject segregation, stereotypical views of black men's sexual prowess, the hallowed sanctity and sexual purity of white southern women, a southern pathological fear of miscegenation, illiteracy, prejudicial lawyers and judges, the U.S. Communist Party, a New York Jewish lawyer, profound anti-Semitism, a biased southern press, outside pressure from places as far flung as Poland and Germany, the Great Depression with its high unemployment, the Alabama Supreme Court, and the U.S. Supreme Court. All of these ingredients led to events that would “*like a hell-broth boil and bubble*” for years to come.

As Clarence waited in the railroad yard for the train's departure, others were gathered in the yard and along the railway through and out of the city, also waiting to jump the train to ride to various points on its route to Memphis. The others included a number of white and black male youths, and two young white women who would serve as the catalyst to ignite the witches' brew.

The sequence and number of people who boarded the train is not absolutely clear, but before the train left the Chattanooga area, all the major participants were on board. Reports vary, but it seems that from six to eight white male youths and from ten to thirteen black male youths boarded the train. There is no doubt that only two young white women were on the train, and thereby hangs a tale. Because of their presence and the events to follow, Clarence and eight of the other young blacks on the train would soon be labeled “the Scottsboro Boys” for the rest of their lives.

Four black youths jumped on the train together as it passed the 23rd Street area in Chattanooga—Haywood Patterson, Eugene Williams, and the brothers, Andrew “Andy” White and Leroy “Roy” White. They were friends and all lived in Chattanooga at the time. They had decided to ride the freight train to Memphis, where they heard government jobs were to be had hauling logs on boats on the Mississippi River.

### **Haywood Patterson**

HAYWOOD PATTERSON, who would become one of the more tragic figures in this unfolding drama, was eighteen years old. Like Clarence, he was the son of poor sharecropper parents, Claude and Janie Patterson. He was born in 1912, the fourth of nine children, on a farm near Elberton, Georgia, a town about one hundred miles east of Atlanta. His father and mother worked long and hard to provide for the family, and Haywood later said the family never wanted for the basics of food and shelter.

In 1921, when Haywood was nine years old, his father purchased a car, an almost new Model T Ford. The white landowner, the boss, came to Claude and told him to put the car away and get back to work in the fields. Claude was so upset by this incident that he left the farm and looked for work elsewhere. However, at the time, a black man could not easily leave a sharecropper agreement without risking arrest for violation of the contract and likely leaving behind debts incurred to the white landowner. Claude and Janie agreed on a plan, knowing “You had to fox your way out of such a spot.”

The day after Claude’s departure, Haywood later wrote, “The day after my dad slipped off, my mother, she went crying to the boss. She told him that the old man had left her with the kids and she didn’t know where he had gone.” The landowner believed her and let the family go, although he insisted they leave behind livestock that was rightfully theirs. They stayed with Haywood’s grandfather for a month and then moved to Chattanooga, where Claude had settled and found employment.

Considering how similar this event was to the circumstances of Clarence’s father’s experience with his red horse and new buggy, it becomes

clear that a black sharecropper had little opportunity to climb out of his impoverished situation in spite of his best intentions. Any attempt to better one's lot was seen as a threat by the white social order and was thwarted at every turn.

Haywood was able to make a number of friends his own age in Chattanooga, unlike at the farm, where his only playmates were his brother and sisters. He and his friends frequented the poor black neighborhoods, Blue Goose Hollow and Tandry Flat, and occasionally visited the more upscale black areas of Bush Town and Hog View (the names certainly don't evoke an upscale image). His father had a good job with the American Brakeshoe Company, making forty or forty-five dollars a week until after 1929 and the start of the Great Depression, when his wages dropped to fifteen dollars a week.

Haywood quit going to school at age thirteen, was functionally illiterate, and in 1926 at age fourteen, made his first ride on the rails to Dayton, Ohio. He did so to free his parents of the responsibility of caring for him so they could better provide for his younger siblings. He continued to ride the rails over the next several years, going as far north as Ohio, south to Florida, west to Arkansas, and ending up back in Chattanooga in March 1931.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of detail available on the early lives of the other boys that boarded the train that day. There are even discrepancies about their ages in the various accounts. This is likely attributable to the attention given Clarence Norris and Haywood Patterson in the court proceedings about to unfold, and the subsequent attention they received from their autobiographies.

## Eugene Williams

EUGENE WILLIAMS WAS THIRTEEN years old when he boarded the train. Eugene was born and raised in Chattanooga, and he worked as a dishwasher. He was described by the press as a mulatto—a person with one white parent and one black parent, generally of light or chocolate brown color.

Racial labels, such as mulatto, are not only derogatory, but also illogical. The word mulatto comes from the Spanish *mulato*, originally meaning young mule, an offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Taking it back another step, it's derived from the Latin word *mulus*, meaning the offspring of any two creatures of different species. Why is a person born to a white and black parent always considered black? It's statistically a fifty-fifty proposition, and, yet, the black side always trumps the white side in racial categorization. The influential and eminent evolutionary biologist and natural historian, Stephen Jay Gould, was outspoken on cultural

oppression in all forms, particularly racism and sexism. Gould used an interesting barroom-type question to illustrate how cultural perceptions color our view of the facts. He asked, “Which Italian American player for the Brooklyn Dodgers once hit forty home runs in a season?” Few, if any, would get it right, as the correct answer is Roy Campanella. Roy’s father was an Italian American and his mother was an African American, yet he initially had to play baseball in the Negro League because society labeled him black.

White European and American heritage has assumed a cultural superiority of the white race, and this paradigm still haunts us today. Imagine our modern culture today without the likes of Halle Berry, Lani Guinier, Eartha Kitt, Barack Obama, Colin Powell, and August Wilson. All have had extraordinary lives and careers. Of course, while one should value and honor their racial roots, Morgan Freeman, the great American actor, was asked by Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*, “How can we get rid of racism?” Freeman responded, “Stop talking about it. I’m going to stop calling you a white man. And I’m going to ask you to stop calling me a black.” However, when you consider the evolutionary tract of the human species, the white paradigm needs to be reversed, as we are all “out of Africa.”

### **Andy Wright**

ANDY WRIGHT WAS NINETEEN years old in 1931, and he and his brother, Roy, and his three sisters were born and raised in Chattanooga. He did well in school but had to quit after the sixth grade to help his mother, Ada Wright, support the family when his father died. At age twelve, he took a job driving a truck with a local produce distributor, and continued to work there for seven years, until the distributor’s insurance company found out about Andy’s age, forcing the boss to let him go. He then worked in a furniture store until he heard about the jobs in Memphis and boarded the train.

### **Roy Wright**

ROY WRIGHT WAS TWELVE years old, the youngest of the nine boys destined to become one of the Scottsboro Boys. Roy quit school after three or four years to work in a local grocery store. He also started hanging out with Andy and his friends and was eager to join them on the train to Memphis. This would be Roy’s first trip away from home, and both he and Andy left without telling their mother.

In addition to Clarence Norris and the four Chattanooga boys, four other black youths boarded the train separately at different points along the way out of Chattanooga to complete the group of nine who would become the Scottsboro Boys.

### **Charlie Weems**

CHARLIE WEEMS WAS NINETEEN years old in 1931, the oldest of the nine boys, and was from Atlanta. Charlie had had a hard childhood, starting with his mother's death when he was four years old. Of his seven brothers and sisters, only one of them survived beyond childhood. He completed the fifth grade in public school but quit when his father became too old to work. He took a job in a pharmacy to support the family. Later, when his father got sick, he was sent to Riverdale, Georgia, to live with an aunt. He returned to school in Riverdale, but he didn't last long. Charlie quit school again, and he blamed it on his distraction and infatuation with girls. In the winter, he worked on a road gang, and the remainder of the year he worked on a local farm near Riverdale. He left Riverdale for Chattanooga just a few weeks before he was to board the Memphis-bound freight train.

### **Olen Montgomery**

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD OLEN MONTGOMERY was born in Monroe, Georgia, in 1913. He went to school through the fifth grade and had to repeat the third grade. He quit going to school when he was about fourteen (a familiar story with most of these young boys) to help his mother, Viola Montgomery. Olen's first job was delivering groceries, before working in construction, and finally at a fertilizer plant, where he quit when the boss cursed at him. Olen was badly nearsighted and was nearly blind in one eye from a cataract (possibly his sight problems contributed to his problems in school). In March 1931, he went to Chattanooga to seek a better job in hopes of earning enough money to buy a new pair of glasses.

### **Ozie Powell**

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD OZIE POWELL was born in rural Georgia. His father, who mistreated his mother, left them when Ozie was a small boy. His mother, Josephine Powell, remarried, moved to Atlanta, and worked for white people, probably in their homes. Ozie went to school for only one year and was essentially illiterate, unable to write much more than his name. He worked at odd jobs when he was very young, and, at age thirteen, started working at sawmills and lumber camps. At age fourteen, he ran away from home for the first time and worked at a highway camp for \$2.50 a day. He continued to travel often, and, at age fifteen, he hoboed to Chattanooga and jumped the train bound for Memphis.

### **Willie Roberson**

WILLIE ROBERSON WAS SEVENTEEN years old in 1931. Shortly after he was born in Columbus, Georgia, his parents separated. His mother died when

he was two. After that, his maternal grandmother and two of her sisters in Atlanta raised him. He went to school, reaching only the seventh grade. He quit, saying, "I just got lazy and did not care any more for school." He worked as a hotel bus boy but left in 1931, hoping to find better work in Chattanooga. Unable to find work in Chattanooga, he jumped the freight train bound for Memphis, where he planned to look for work and a free hospital to treat his severe cases of syphilis and gonorrhea.

The common denominators binding these nine boys together were many beyond the color of their skin: they all came from poor families struggling to make a living; several of the boys' fathers had died or left the mothers as the sole source of support for the families; two of the boys lost both parents at an early age and were raised by relatives; none of the boys finished elementary school; they all started work at an early age in menial jobs, as their color and lack of education dictated; and they all hoped to find a better job somewhere down the line, as they boarded the train to Memphis.

### **Victoria Price and Ruby Bates**

THE TWO YOUNG WHITE GIRLS that jumped onto the train that cool morning in Chattanooga were bound for their hometown of Huntsville, Alabama. Victoria Price, twenty-one years old, and Ruby Bates, seventeen, said they were returning to Huntsville to get their personal belongings and bring them back to Chattanooga, where they would continue with their new jobs in a cotton mill. In fact, they were returning to Huntsville after an overnight tryst with two young white men in the hobo jungle near the Chattanooga railroad yard.

Huntsville in the 1930s was yet to become the thriving city it is today, a center for technology and for the space and defense industries. In the 1930s, Huntsville was a city of about thirty-two thousand, which included those in the surrounding mill villages, and was in the declining years of its cotton mill and market-driven economy. The town had seven cotton mills that had prospered for years, but the Great Depression took a huge toll on their production and employment requirements.

Victoria and Ruby's early life stories sound startlingly similar to those of the nine black boys they would soon encounter. They were all born into poor backgrounds with little opportunity for a good education or meaningful employment. Most ironic, the nine black boys and two white girls occupied almost identical status in the southern social order, a structure that can be loosely compared to the Indian caste system. At the bottom of the social order is the Dalit, or "untouchables," which would include poor whites and all blacks. However, the South, either by intention or by accident, had developed a subtle split between the two halves of the lowest

group. Southern custom treated poor whites and all blacks somewhat equally on matters of economics to maintain a cheap labor pool available to farmers, businesses, and industrial operations. The poor whites were given latitude over the blacks only on social issues concerning the color of one's skin. The implications of this social structure became harshly apparent as the events that occurred on the train unfolded.

### **Victoria Price**

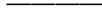
Victoria Price lived with her widowed mother, Ella Price, in a ramshackle, unpainted shack in a racially mixed part of town. She quit school when she was ten years old and started to work at age thirteen. In the 1920s, she was working full time in the Margaret Spinning Mill, making twenty cents per hour for a twelve-hour day. The Margaret Mill, one of seven cotton mills in Huntsville, was an employment choice of last resort, as it was an antiquated facility paying the lowest wages of all the mills. In 1931, the mill cut her wages to \$1.20 a day for three twelve-hour days every other week. Victoria was a hard-talking, hard-drinking young woman who would prove to be the principal antagonist of the nine boys throughout the entire ordeal. If any one individual was responsible for the injustices that were about to occur, it was Victoria Price.

### **Ruby Bates**

Ruby Bates had a harsh childhood. Her father was a drunk, and he constantly beat Ruby, her mother Emma, and her two brothers. After Ruby's father was arrested for horsewhipping one of Ruby's brothers, the family left him and moved from town to town in northern Alabama until they settled in Huntsville. They moved into an unpainted shack in a poor part of town, where they were the only white family on the block. Their black neighbors said Emma "took men for money whenever she got the chance." Ruby, who was fifteen years old at the time, took a job in the Margaret Mill. She and Victoria became friends while working in the mill, and they decided to go to Chattanooga to seek better employment.

Victoria and Ruby supplemented their meager mill incomes by working as prostitutes, not an uncommon practice for poor white and black women during the Great Depression. Life was hard and opportunities were very limited. An official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) described the girls as "notorious prostitutes." In defense affidavits presented at a later trial, one witness, a Negro boardinghouse owner, swore Victoria and Ruby had rented a room to use for prostitution; they entertained black men on what they called "negro night." Another witness said he heard Victoria "ask colored men the size of his

privates.” He also added he once heard Ruby boasting that she could “take five negroes in one night and not hurt her.”



AND SO, THE TRAIN LEFT THE CHATTANOOGA AREA, the die was cast, and the witches had indeed loaded it with a combustible brew that would soon “*boil and bubble.*”