

ROARING RIVER MEMORIES

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'Writer's Corner'

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The truth is, I spent only the first four years of my life in the idyllic, rural, and somewhat isolated community of Roaring River. My family moved in 1948; my father having taken the opportunity to follow Pa, my mother's father, to work a large 400 acre Cumberland River Bottom farm in Carthage, a somewhat larger and less isolated community in Smith County, Tennessee.



(Pictured: Robert "Bob" Rogers Chaffin)

Daddy, however, left Roaring River in body only, and in my family an ongoing dream remained of moving back one day. In retrospect, however, it seemed to me my mother was somewhat less enthusiastic about the prospect. To Daddy, and therefore to me, Roaring River remained always the garden spot of the universe, the place that God had smiled on in a special way, the most desirable place to inhabit this side of the promised land, and we often traveled the 25 miles or so there to hunt and fish or to visit the numerous relatives who still lived on "the River."

Generally, as we made this trip, Daddy's memory would be kindled and he would share with us the adventures of his youth and stories about the people, places and times of Roaring River, Gainesboro, and Jackson County. He was a wonderful storyteller and was famous in our family and in our community, for the skill with which he could wield his craft.

In my pre-teen years, my great uncle Encel, a brother to my Grandfather (Charlie Rogers Chaffin) began work on the Chaffin family history along with Congressman Carl Albert, one time Speaker of the House; and Uncle Encel would occasionally come to our house for visits and to spend time with Ada, his sister who lived with us, and to do the genealogy work. This required long hours in musty smelling records rooms and countless trips to talk to "the old folks" who still had memories of days gone by and remembered who was related to whom.

Through their eyes and interest, I began to develop a deep appreciation for the courage, determination, and sheer grit of my ancestors, and at the same time a love for the stories of days gone by. When I graduated from David Lipscomb University in 1966, I was offered a job on the financial staff of General Motors in Detroit, MI, and along with my new bride, Jan Lafever, we struck out on our own great adventure, embracing much the same pioneering spirit of Old Abner when he came across the mountains from North Carolina. In many ways launching out into the heart of this enormous Northern city of millions was probably just as scary for me, a small town boy from Middle Tennessee, as

venturing into the real wilderness had been for Abner. On some days, working in a ghetto plant in downtown Detroit, where fights, killings and robbery were weekly occurrences; I thought it might be nearly as dangerous.

During all those years of absence from the hills of Tennessee, we always spoke of our numerous trips back south as “going home.” Our dream, like many southerners in the industrialized and cold north, was that one day we would be able to “come home” to the warm sunshine and green hills of Middle Tennessee. As someone said, east, west and north are just directions; ah but South – that’s a place.

In all of those years of absence, when I thought of an ideal day in Middle Tennessee I would remember one particular June morning when I was about nine years of age. School was just out and the earth had warmed as the sun made it timeless and perennial journey north once again. The days were long and lazy and the sun came up early in June. At that time we lived on the outer edge of Carthage, a small town, but most of the houses behind ours had been built on land that once was my grandpa’s front pasture. It was only a short walk up the street to the wooden steps, or styler that crossed over the pasture fence and I made that walk every summer morning, heading for the farm and the excitement that was everyday life on a large agricultural operation.

I no longer remember what work lay ahead that particular day; perhaps it was setting out the burley tobacco plants which had been pulled from the canvassed plant bed the night before. As I walked along a well-worn path that traversed what remained of the front pasture, I came upon a hedge apple tree. It was covered with “June Bugs” and they buzzed around its branches and hung from every limb. I stood for a moment and considered collecting a few for “flying” on a piece of sewing thread tied to one of their legs, but thought better of it since I was on a mission this morning. The little yellow wild flowers that covered the pasture were nearly all attended by brown winged butterflies that were drinking the early morning dew formed as the moisture laden air from the previous day met the cool of the night. I was only nine years old but I remember thinking how perfect that morning was and being filled with wonder that I was blessed to actually live the life of which every little boy dreamed.

After 35 years of life as a corporate migrant worker for General Motors and numerous relocations from one industrial city to another, I was able to take an early retirement package and at 56 years of age my wife and I returned to Middle Tennessee. Today we raise Black Angus cattle, and I serve as a teacher/elder at our local congregation at the Maple Hill Church of Christ. I also did part-time consulting work for GM and other Corporations, as long as it did not require extended travel from our beloved home in the rolling hills. During all those years of high pressure, 12 hour days in the corporate environment, my remembrances of the sights and sounds of the rural community of my birth, along with the stories my daddy told, kept swirling around in my head, looking for an escape. My own life was also full of richly varied cultural experiences, having gone from the near Amish-like lifestyle of an isolated rural community of the 1940s with no electric lights, wood cook stoves, horse drawn wagons and outdoor plumbing, to a far

place both geographically and socially, where numerous comforts, conveniences and electronic toys filled our “good life” in an affluent suburb of Detroit, MI.

Always, I longed to have the time to capture those changes, thoughts and stories so that they would not be lost by time from my own children and grandchildren. As my cousin Morris said speaking of those days at his mother’s funeral, “it was a story that needed to be told.” This is my effort toward that end, and I hope that in some way these stories will bring to the reader’s mind the sights, sounds and stories of your own past or will develop in you a greater appreciation of the courage and energy of your own ancestors.

*Read more stories by Robert “Bob” Rogers Chaffin at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>