

Chapter 1

The Roots of Bluegrass - Table of Contents

Page	Title
3	Appalachian Music— The Scots-Irish, the Scots, and the Irish influence
5	The contribution of the African-Americans to bluegrass
6	Gospel music
6	First public use of the term “hillbilly”
6	Vernon Dalhart— an early country star
7	Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers
7	Uncle Dave Macon— the <i>Opry</i> 's first featured star
8	Sam and Kirk McGee “from Sunny Tennessee”
8	Clayton McMichen and his Georgia Wildcats
9	Jimmie Rodgers— the Father of Country Music
11	G.B. Grayson and Henry Whitter
11	Wade and J.E. Mainer— a link between the string bands and bluegrass
18	The Morris Brothers— Zeke, George and Wiley
22	The Carter Family of Virginia
24	The Delmore Brothers
26	Tommy Scott— one of the last purveyors of the medicine show
26	Homer “Pappy” Sherrill and Snuffy Jenkins and the Hired Hands
29	The end of the Maddox Brothers and Rose
29	Roy Acuff
30	Byron Parker— the greatest radio announcer who ever lived
31	Pete Seeger
31	The influence of World War II on our music
31	Hank Williams
32	Ray and Ina Patterson speak of the new music and the old

The Roots of Bluegrass

Dr. Dan Crary once said that “bluegrass music is a way of being in touch with your roots.”¹ By understanding where bluegrass music came from, we can build a foundation for understanding why it evolved into what it is today. This chapter is a discussion of this music’s origins.

The art form of bluegrass music is enjoyed all over the world. It is played in a traditional form, a progressive form, and styles in between. When some people speak of “bluegrass,” they actually include all of these categories of bluegrass. But when the old-timers—the pioneers of this music (many of whom are included in this book)—speak of bluegrass, they unfailingly refer to the first bluegrass groups such as **Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys**, the **Stanley Brothers and the Clinch Mountain Boys**, **Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys** and very few others. These are the groups which set the original and traditional standards for the genre.

Later groups would never say that they invented bluegrass but would probably say that they followed in the footsteps of the three groups mentioned above. To take this reasoning back in history even further however, we might eliminate **Flatt and Scruggs** from the list because three of the original **Foggy Mountain Boys** were direct descendants of Bill Monroe’s group of 1945 to 1948. Taking the same reasoning with the **Stanley Brothers**, this group didn’t play bluegrass until Ralph and Carter Stanley added a former **Blue Grass Boy** fiddler to the band and Ralph Stanley added Earl Scruggs’s three-finger style to the band’s repertoire—a style he learned from Scruggs when Scruggs was with Monroe. So in a very real sense, it’s got to start somewhere and many people start with Bill Monroe as *the* person who introduced bluegrass to the world through the very influential and powerful radio station WSM in Nashville.

This chapter often refers to bluegrass music as how Bill Monroe did it as early as 1939 (This does *not* mean that this chapter says that Bill Monroe invented bluegrass). We start at 1939 not because of the style of music being played by Bill Monroe at that time, but

because it was then that Monroe took his music to the stage of the *Grand Ole Opry*. Before this subject as described is finished, one must go back to even earlier groups who say they played bluegrass even before Bill Monroe organized his **Blue Grass Boys** in 1939. The **Morris Brothers**, for instance, say that they had already been playing bluegrass (with the same instrument combination that solidified the genre) earlier than when Scruggs joined the **Blue Grass Boys** in 1945. They had the three-finger banjo, guitar, fiddle, mandolin and bass.

This book presents the stories of each one of those mentioned above as well as many others involved in the “creation” of bluegrass music. The reader can make his/her own conclusions as to just where this music originated.

Appalachian Music— The Scots-Irish, the Scots, and the Irish influence

According to many sources, one of the reasons that bluegrass sounds like it does is because of its roots from the British Isles.

During the early 1700s, thousands of Scots-Irish immigrants left their homes to settle in the “Land of Promise” called America. Many were brought over as indentured servants to large landowners. After the completion of their period of indenture, many settled in the relatively-lightly populated hills and mountains of the South. The Scots-Irish were a distinct group, as shown hereafter.

“There were Irish Catholics among these eighteenth-century immigrants, and there were Scots, including some Gaelic-speaking highlanders,” wrote author Peter Van Der Merwe, “but by far the most important group was the rather confusingly named ‘Scotch-Irish.’² Among immigrant groups, they occupy a place in the history of American music exceeded in importance only by the Africans. They

were originally Scottish Presbyterians who settled in



Top L to R: Ollen Benfield, Homer Sherrill.
Bottom L to R: Lute Isenhower, Arthur Sherrill.

¹ From a 1994 seminar at IBMA, “Knowing the Bluegrass Mind.”

² A Scotsman once told me that that “scotch” is the whiskey they produced in their country. And he told me that he wants to be known as a “Scotsman” or as “Scottish.” So I think that Van Der Merwe’s use of ‘Scotch-Irish’ is incorrect, but accepted in general use.

northeast Ireland in the seventeenth century. Beginning around 1710, they moved on again to North America, partly because of difficulties with the ruling Anglican hierarchy, and partly because, as one observer put it, they could ‘neither get victuals nor work.’ The Scotch-Irish seem to have been a tough, truculent, fractious people not unlike some of their present-day Ulster descendants, and those who settled in New England soon showed an inability to get on with the established colonists, who, though fellow-puritans, were not Presbyterian but Congregationalist. They then migrated yet again, gravitating towards the frontier regions of the southern states. The tide of immigration lasted until 1740 and then resumed from 1760 ‘til the Revolution of 1775. During the latter period, they were joined by Scots from Scotland, some of Gaelic-speaking.

“The Scotch-Irish left a musical legacy with clear links with Scottish Lowlands” continued Van Der Merwe. “Sometimes it is impossible to tell by the printed notes which area a tune comes from. ‘Here’s to Health to All True Lovers’ happens to be Scottish, but it could just as easily have come from the Appalachians. ‘The Maid Freed from the Gallows’ is a typically Scottish tune which happens to have been collected in North Carolina. Quite often a particular American tune

can be traced to a Scottish original. A tune from a Scottish manuscript of about 1620 was collected in the Appalachians in a not very different form three centuries later. Well-known American tunes of Scottish origin include ‘Rye Whiskey,’ ‘When Johnny Comes Marching Home,’ ‘Amazing Grace’ (an obvious relative of “Loch Lomond”), ‘Run Nigger Run,’ ‘Shady Grove’ and ‘The Ox-Driving Song.’

“The Scotch-Irish, as well as being in the right place at the right time in the right numbers, brought the right sort of music with them. Scottish music at that time was among the most archaic in Europe. It was the music of a people on the fringes of urban civilization, and this helps explain why it took the fancy of Americans living in similar conditions.

“And finally, the Scotch-Irish style had the important characteristic of closely resembling African music in many respects.”³

During the first two centuries of their existence in this country, because of the relative isolation from the culture and music of the rest of the world, the people of

Appalachia developed their own culture and their own music. The music which emerged from all that isolation and all that time had changed from what it was when they moved to the mountains—as one would expect it to do—but the instruments were basically the same with the addition of a few instruments the settlers developed such as the Appalachian dulcimer. The main instrument, just as it was back in the Isles, was the fiddle. The banjo arrived on this scene quite a bit later, probably when minstrelsy was active with the instrument in the 1800s. And the Irish step dancing came out as clogging.

An additional immigration of Irish farmers occurred about 1845 when the plant disease known as the “potato blight” wiped out virtually the entire crop in Ireland. Without money to buy food—even when it was available—men, women and children by the tens of thousands died from starvation and disease; for hundreds of thousands more, the only recourse was emigration. Many of them came to America. Those who

couldn’t find work in the cities moved to areas they could farm or work in the coal mines. Still others helped build America’s railroad and canal systems.

“On the other hand,” wrote Van Der Merwe, “we should not think of the Scottish strain as isolated

from other British folk music. A look through anthologies of American folk tunes shows English, Irish, and even Welsh tunes alongside Scottish, all blended and adapted into a distinctively American style. The influence of the Catholic-Irish is well known, and even possibly exaggerated in the popular mind. The colonists usually called the Scotch-Irish simply ‘Irish,’ much to their disgust, and it has always been some Irish Catholic settlers, the heyday of predominantly Catholic-Irish immigration was the mid-nineteenth century; between 1815 and 1860 two million arrived in the United States, almost half the total of five million immigrants. They were a purely Irish strain, unlike the basically Scottish Scotch-Irish and, though of mainly peasant stock, they preferred the cities to the back country.⁴

“By the time the Irish arrived in force, American music had already acquired a distinctly Celtic tinge, mainly from the Scotch-Irish, making it easy for the Irish and American folk traditions to merge. The Irish country folk brought their rustic tastes to the cities of the United States and helped to blur the distinction

*“The Scots-Irish, as well as being
in the right place at the right time in the
right numbers, brought the right sort of music
with them.” —Peter Van Der Merwe*

³ Peter Van Der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style, The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 46-49.

⁴ Van Der Merwe continued: “They also had a special relationship with the blacks with whom they shared the bottom of the social heap. The two groups were constantly being compared with regard to laziness, dirtiness, lying, pilfering, stupidity, and so on—all the vices ascribed to subject peoples since the beginning of time. They often worked together as laborers. In 1839, when Fanny Kemble was writing her diary, gangs of black slaves and Irish were working on the same canal nearby. They were kept carefully apart for fear, as she put it, of tumult, and ‘risings, and broken heads, and bloody bones, and all the natural results of Irish intercommunion with their fellow creatures.’ Indeed, so much is the importance of this apartheid insisted on that the reader begins to wonder whether it was working all that well...”

between the popular music of the cities and the countryside—and between black and white music. A.L. Lloyd suggested that the influx of potato famine Irish into the English cities may have influenced urban English folk-song, turning it in a more ‘folky’ direction with the revival of the old modes and the pentatonic scale. Whatever the truth of this, it seems likely that such a process was at work in American cities at the same time.”

The music in the Appalachian Mountains evolved, and by the 1930s and ‘40s was of two types. One was the pure, indigenous style being played on back porches or at barn dances and other local get-togethers and it was sometimes influenced by traditional songs brought from England. According to author Tony Scherman, “The Appalachian songs packed a punch, had a ‘primordial intensity’ that the mellow, sweeter British versions often lacked. Mountain tunes were also freer, more spacious, rising or falling jaggedly in their spare five- or six-note modes. These people improvised. They ‘worried,’ or slurred, notes. Repeating a song, they might see fit to change the melody, often with a skill [Cecil] Sharp (English folklorist who moved to America and is known to prefer American-style ballads) found amazing. English singers, despite a more modern seven-note scale, seemed timid, hidebound. There were differences in manner, too—unlike English singers who were sometimes stiff and self-conscious, most hill folk tended to be loose and easy.”⁵

The other style of music prevalent in the Asheville, North Carolina, area was the commercially successful, including that which was perpetuated by **Mainer’s Mountaineers**, the **Blue Sky Boys**, Carl Story, Red Rector and many others who appeared on WWNC’s *Farm Hour*.

The contribution of the African-Americans to bluegrass⁶

Probably the greatest contribution of the blacks toward bluegrass is the West African invention of the banjo, according to author Randall Armstrong. After the Civil War, the banjo was nurtured by the southern white musicians in the mountain ranges of the eastern United States. “Black banjo players,” he wrote, “though not involved in the creation or development of modern three-finger picking, were important in the development of the older styles from which this method was derived. An interesting example is found in the playing of Dock Boggs⁷, the renowned white banjoist of the 1930s. Although noted for its unorthodox tunings and counter-melodies, Boggs’ style incorporates the use of the thumb for the third, fourth, and fifth strings, the

index finger for the second string, and the middle finger for the first string. Standard bluegrass banjo style, of course, utilizes the same fingering. The black influence to this three-fingered style is evident from Boggs’ claim that he derived his technique from ‘colored men who picked the banjo.’

“Blacks,” continued Armstrong, “also helped develop finger-style guitar playing. The name of black musician Leslie Riddles is especially important here, for he was the main influence for Maybelle Carter’s guitar style. Blacks were the sole innovators of ‘bottle-neck’ guitar playing. This style was the precursor of many resonator guitar styles. Another form of music highly influenced by blacks is jazz.

“Though blacks have written many songs, they were most noted for their gospel song contributions. Bluegrass songs of this type were ‘On the Rock Where Moses Stood,’ ‘Let the Church Roll On,’ ‘God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign,’ ‘Hear Jerusalem Moan,’ ‘Were You There’ and ‘I Didn’t Hear Nobody Pray.’ Black work songs, originating mainly on railroad crews and chain gangs, are represented in bluegrass music as ‘Take This Hammer,’ ‘Nine Pound Hammer’ and ‘Saro Jane.’ Black ballads now used in bluegrass music are ‘Reuben,’ ‘John Hardy,’ ‘Railroad Bill’ and ‘John Henry.’

“Even a slight study of the music of bluegrass, wrote Armstrong, “will reveal the presence of blues in bluegrass. Bill Monroe’s musical upbringing drew heavily from the runs and phrasings of the black guitarist Arnold Schultz. The musical form of the blues, with all of its vocal and instrumental characteristics, has probably been one of the primary influences in bluegrass music.” This style of music is characterized by repetition of stanzas and is represented in the songs “Six White Horses” (by Clyde Moody), “Doin’ My Time” (by Jimmie Skinner) and “Mule Skinner Blues” (blue yodel #8 by Jimmie Rodgers as arranged by Bill Monroe).

A 1991 interview with Rick Turner of Gibson USA gave more light on the blues in bluegrass music. “My feeling is that Bill Monroe got a strong influence from blues players from the South in the early ‘30s and used the blues scales in the context of country music. And that has a lot to do with the high, lonesome sound... A basic chord progression would be like a I, IV, V. But the use of a lot of sevenths would give you a much ‘bluesier’ sound... The use of additional sixths would cause the music to get jazzier. Also, the use of the flat third will really give you a lot of that bluesy scale... In 1965, at the Newport Folk Festival at a party, black entertainer Lightning Hopkins was sitting in the corner of one of these Newport mansions playing. Bill Monroe walked in with Peter Rowan, and Bill literally grabbed Pete by the scruff of the neck and sat him down in front of Hopkins and said, ‘Now listen to this! You gotta listen

⁵ *Smithsonian Magazine*, April, 1985, p. 52.

⁶ Randall Armstrong, “Blacks and Bluegrass: A Study in Musical Integration.” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, November, 1977.

⁷ Boggs was known to have played the banjo with a knife.

to this!” This was Monroe’s attempt to tell Rowan where a lot of that bluesy sound in Monroe’s music came from.

Gospel music

In 1922, James D. Vaughan “founded a singing school in Lawrenceburg (Tennessee) and soon branched out into the publication of songbooks, records and magazines. From the early 1920s to the 1960s, Vaughan was a major force in the development of gospel music throughout the country. He hired quartets to go out and sing his songs to publicize them, and helped promote a whole new type of singing in the South. His singing schools gave generations of Southerners their first taste of the ‘rudiments’ of music, and many a country singer started out singing gospel songs from one of his 105 songbooks.”⁸ Each songbook usually contained about one hundred songs.

First public use of the term “hillbilly”

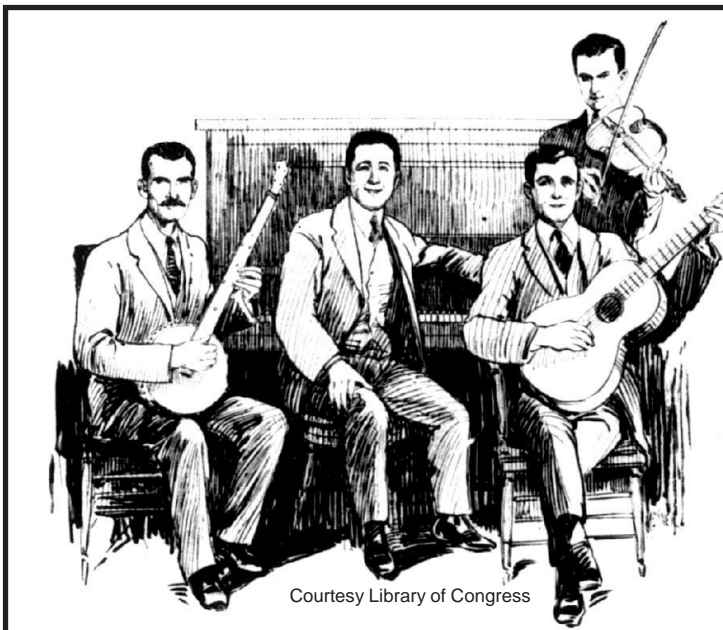
The name “hillbilly,” which categorized the mountain music which was being recorded for Ralph Peer and Okeh Records (New York), was so named when, after a 1925 session, the group was asked what style of music they played. “Shucks, we’re nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia,” said one of them. “Call us anything you want.” When the six tunes were released, the group’s title showed “The Hill Billies.” They saw this and had second thoughts about the name. “Where we came from, if you called somebody a hillbilly, you were looking for a fight,” said Tony Alderman, the last living member of the band. Pop Stoneman, after hearing the group’s name, laughed so

hard that tears came into his eyes. “Well boys,” he is reported to have said, “you have come up with a good one. Nobody will beat it.” The name became applicable to all the country music of the day.

Vernon Dalhart— an early country star

In 1924, Vernon Dalhart, a cowpuncher from Texas, recorded “The Wreck of the Old ‘97” on the Victor label. The record sold about six million copies in fifty versions by various artists through the years. The success of this record convinced Okeh and Victor Records that there was a commercial market for early country music. Because of this record, the recordings of Ernest Stoneman, Fiddlin’ John Carson and a few others during the ‘20s, the stage was set for an explosion in the popularity of country music.

Dalhart was born Marion Try Slaughter in northeastern Texas in 1883. His stage name came from two cities in Texas. A 1991 editorial by Dick Spottswood in *May’s Bluegrass Unlimited* summarized the recording career of Vernon Dalhart, “Historians generally agree that the term ‘country music’ applies to the product created by an industry, beginning with Fiddlin’ John Carson’s first efforts in 1923 and culminating with the Nashville sound and its aftermath. From the first, there has been controversy about tradition versus progress, starting with a light opera tenor named Vernon Dalhart, whose 1924 Victor coupling of ‘The Prisoner’s Song’/ ‘Wreck of the Old 97’ seems to be one of the few records of its era to have actually sold a million copies. Traditionalists then and now have dismissed Dalhart as an anemic singer whose style mocked that of genuine traditional performers; to others, he was the performer who sparked the industry in the first place. Be that as it



Article from “Talking Machine World” April 1925.

This drawing of the Hill Billies, from the cover of the Okeh record, was probably drawn to enhance the magazine’s desire to add respectability to the group.

The group, from Galax, VA, normally dressed in overalls, scarves and hats— typical of the informal groups of the day. Other photos of the group included different instrumentation which included Tony Alderman on fiddle (deceased 1983), Charlie Bowman on fiddle, Joe Hopkins on guitar and Al Hopkins on Clawhammer banjo.

This 1925 recording in New York City included six songs with Alderman (fiddle), John Rector (banjo), Joe Hopkins (guitar) and Al Hopkins (piano). Al Hopkins was probably the first person to turn the piano into a country music instrument.

may, he was *the* dominant country music figure of his time and recorded for virtually every label in the business from 1923 to 1928. Nevertheless, sales of his records went quickly into decline with the advent of the real thing by folks like the Carters, Charlie Poole, Dave Macon, the **Carolina Tar Heels** and Jimmie Rodgers in 1926 to 1928; by 1929, Dalhart's records were only being offered for sale on bargain tables in chain stores—never again was he a significant commercial force.

“It’s been more than a half century since Monroe first sang ‘Mule Skinner Blues’ at the *Opry*,” continued Spottswood, “radically altering Jimmie Rodgers’ song, itself an alteration of an older, black work song. Since then, Monroe’s music has endured and prospered by precisely that kind of re-invention of traditional music themes and values. Bluegrass works because it combines the best of new and old, making the most of contemporary resources in order to validate the past. The balance between tradition and innovation is constantly shifting but always there, and bluegrass will always be exciting as long as its practitioners discover new ingredients and new ways to combine the old ones.”⁹

Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers



Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers

Members of “Laughing” Gid Tanner’s **Skillet Lickers**, the first super-popular band in country music, in 1924 included Gid Tanner (fiddle, born in Dacula, Georgia), and George Riley Puckett (banjo, guitar, blind almost from birth). The band’s extreme popularity came in 1926 with the addition of Clayton “Pappy” McMichen (fiddle), Bert Layne (fiddle) and Fate Norris (banjo). Later, Lowe Stokes joined on fiddle, changing the dance-band style of the band toward fancy, harmony fiddling. Riley Puckett’s rather pop voice of the period was smooth and influenced by the tradition of the minstrel shows as well as black singers. His guitar style, especially his well-conceived concept of bass runs, made him a great asset as a sideman and he recorded widely as a solo artist.

Like many large string bands of the day, the band was strongly influenced by black music. The sound of this band was “blacker” than the sound emanating from

other Appalachian groups. The group recorded 88 sides, 82 of which were released. McMichen continued this style of music (which by 1945 included Dixieland) with his **Georgia Wildcats** until he retired in 1955. Gid Tanner quit performing in 1931 and returned to chicken farming.¹⁰

Uncle Dave Macon



Uncle Dave Macon— the *Opry*’s first featured star

Macon’s first public performance was probably in 1921 at the age of fifty-one. Uncle Dave’s nickname was the “Dixie Dewdrop” or “King of the Hillbillies.” His first performance earned him seventeen dollars; it wasn’t until Fiddlin’ Sid Harkreader joined his act could he make a living at music. They soon recorded in New York City. On July 8, 1923, Uncle Dave Macon made his first recordings with fiddler and guitarist Harkreader: “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy.” A year later, he was booked throughout the country on the Loew’s Theater Circuit; he suddenly found that he was a star.

Macon was able to sense the rather impersonal environment of the Victrola and its recordings. He insisted that each of his recordings be a live, mini-performance in order to entertain the audience; his record sales proved that this method was correct. Yet, most of Uncle Dave’s income came from personal appearances. He became even more successful when he teamed up with Sam McGee, a major influence on folk guitar stylings.

When Macon joined the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1926, he was its first featured star and, according to author Bill C. Malone, brought a wide variety of complex frailing and picking styles which modern banjoists might well envy. And Ralph Rinzler said that, with the exception of the **Carter Family**, Uncle Dave preserved more valuable American folklore through his recordings than any other folk or country entertainer.

David Harrison Macon was born October 7, 1870, in Smart Station, Tennessee. He passed on March 22, 1952. He was elected into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1966.

⁹ Dick Spottswood, “Guest Editorial,” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, May, 1991, pp. 14, 15.

¹⁰ The band broke up in 1931 when Stokes lost a hand in a barroom fight.

Sam and Kirk McGee



Arthur Smith and his Dixieliners. L to R: Sam McGee, Arthur Smith, Kirk McGee.

Sam and Kirk McGee “from Sunny Tennessee”

This veteran brother duo was in show business in the early 1920s and they were charter members of the WSM Barn Dance which was founded in 1925 by George D. Hay and WSM. Sam McGee, born May 1, 1894, near Franklin, Tennessee, was probably the first person to play an electric instrument on the *Opry*. Hay was appalled and told him not to do that again. Sam was evidently too “uptown” for Hay’s idea of what *Opry* music should be.

“Flat-top Pickin’ Sam McGee” created the style of playing melody and rhythm on the guitar at the same time. “The solo works of Sam McGee were little recorded in his heydays of the 1920s and 1930s” wrote Charles Wolfe. “Nevertheless, the few recordings he did make have been carefully studied by several generations of guitarists. Complex, solo, hot guitar music has been relatively commonplace in black folk tradition, but it was McGee who first thoroughly realized it in terms of hillbilly music and made it available to his country music successors like Merle Travis and Chet Atkins.”¹¹ Author Wolfe described McGee’s style as a “unique ‘flat-top’ style wherein he played both rhythm and melody simultaneously; his 1926 recording of an original piece called ‘Buck Dancer’s Choice’ was very popular and helped establish him as a major influence on folk guitar stylings. He was, in fact, probably the first rural white guitarist really to exploit the guitar as a solo instrument. Before his appearance on the scene, the guitar had been used mainly as an accompaniment to vocal or fiddle music. Even Maybelle Carter’s famous lead runs were quite simple compared to what Sam was doing.” He recorded “Sam McGee, Grand Dad of the Country Guitar Pickers” on *Arhoolie* at age seventy-six.

In the early thirties, Sam and his brother Kirk (born 1899) joined Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith in forming the **Dixieliners**, an *Opry* act which toured extensively. The brothers played together for eight years, performing on tour in tent shows with Bill Monroe, Roy Acuff and other *Opry* stars.

Sam McGee died August 21, 1975, at the age of 82; Kirk, 83, died October 24, 1983.

Clayton McMichen and his Georgia Wildcats

Country music’s recognition of Clayton McMichen began when he arrived in Atlanta in 1921 and started winning fiddle contests, competing against “Laughing” Gid Tanner and “Fiddlin’” John Carson. In 1925, he began recording tunes which were jazz-oriented and used fiddle, clarinet and guitar.

In 1926, McMichen joined **Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers** on lead fiddle, comedian and as emcee. He was one of the few full-time musicians of the time—even Gid Tanner raised chickens. He was a popular member of the **Skillet Lickers** “whose sound was at least a generation earlier than the kind of semi-pop country that (Jimmie) Rodgers was trying to develop.”¹²

Mac was influential in convincing record companies that fiddle music would sell. When he recorded dozens of sweet ballads, he used the pseudonym “Bob Nichols.”¹³ When McMichen and Jimmie Rodgers toured together in 1929, they were billed equally.

After 1929, Mac won the National Fiddle Championship eighteen of the next twenty-five years. One technique he used to win at fiddle contests included a five-minute version of “Fisher’s Hornpipe” where he would play the song in five keys: F, B-flat, G, D, and back to F. He won sixteen National Championships with “Bile Them Cabbage Down.” Some of the songs which Bill Monroe later played in his band were note-for-note the way McMichen played them, e.g., “Fire on the Mountain.”

Mac wrote “Georgiana Moon,” a standard at most fiddle contests. He professionally promoted fiddle contests such as a contest between himself and the hottest fiddlers of the day: Gid Tanner, Leslie Keith, Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith and Chubby Wise. He and the others were big names in hillbilly fiddle music and virtually assured that enough people would be in the audience to make the event financially successful.

He quit the **Skillet Lickers** in 1931, forming his own **Georgia Wildcats**¹⁴. But times were tough and almost no one could afford to buy records. Even Merle Travis recorded with Mac. They recorded on Decca,

¹¹ Charles Wolfe, from an article in *Bluegrass Unlimited*. November ,1971, p. 69.

¹² Charles Wolfe, “Clayton McMichen: Reluctant Hillbilly,” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, May, 1976, p. 56.

¹³ Pseudonyms were a common practice—Hank Williams was “Luke the Drifter;” Bill Monroe was “Bill Smith;” Sonny Osborne recorded as “Hank Hill and Stanley Alpine.”

¹⁴ Who were Slim Bryant (guitar) and Carl Cotner.

using twin fiddling, guitar and fiddle solos, tenor banjo solos, and harmony scat-jazz singing with crooner Kenny Newton on vocals.

McMichen wanted to leave the string band sound behind and pursue a more modern sound which integrated jazz, pop music, and swing. Mac's music, though similar to that of **Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys** and **Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies**, was not as popular. He was jealous that western swing was not his. Mac stuck with hillbilly music because it was his living, but resented it. And, compared with his **Georgia Wildcats**, he believed that the **Skillet Lickers** "stunk."

Birch Monroe remembered Mac, "One night Slim (Georgia Slim Rutland), I don't know if he knowed it or not, but anyway he played one of Clayton's tunes ahead of Clayton. Well, them old **Georgia Wildcats**, you know, they're full of temper and first note he made on it, why, Clayton was mad already. That was Clayton McMichen. So after Slim and the **Ridgerunners** played it, why, Clayton come on. And he said, 'Now some people play this tune one way and some another.' He said, 'This is the right way to play it.' And he just eat it up, you know. He could beat Slim a hundred ways on that tune because it was probably his tune in the first place. But he was mad as a hornet."¹⁵

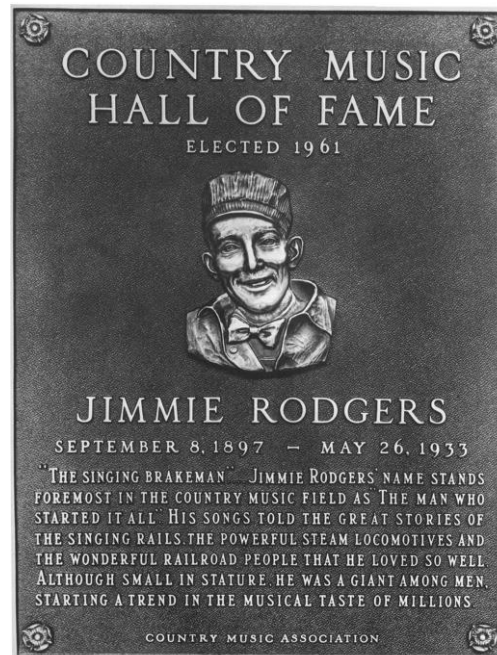
McMichen's **Georgia Wildcats** played the WLS road show at the same time the **Monroe Brothers** were beginning their four- or five-month stint on the show¹⁶

Beginning in 1945, for the next ten years he played Dixieland jazz and played on WAVE, Louisville. About that time, Mac taught George Barnes how to play fiddle tunes on the guitar. Barnes was a pioneer in playing electric guitar in country swing music. Barnes later joined the **Prairie Ramblers**, the same group which backed up Patsy Montana on WLS in 1934.

Some of Mac's old songs were re-released but he was not allowed to record his Dixieland band. Frustrated, he retired from the music in 1955 to run a tavern.

During the early 1960s, the "folk boom" made a hero of Mac for his time with the **Skillet Lickers**, but history seemed to forget his music was much more. He was stereotyped as a funky, colorful, old-time fiddler. In 1961, he accepted an invitation by Birch Monroe at the Bean Blossom, Indiana, country music show which Birch managed, to play for an appreciative audience. Mac also played at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964. A serious car accident in 1964 thwarted a planned comeback. However, he managed an occasional appearance, such as in 1966 at Bean Blossom when he performed with Neil V. Rosenberg. In 1968, he won first prize at the Kentucky State Championships. Clayton McMichen died in 1970.

Jimmie Rodgers



Jimmie Rodgers— the Father of Country Music

Jimmie Rodgers is a name as familiar as Hank Williams in the world of old-time country music, a foundation upon which both the new country music and bluegrass music are built today. His work and performances inspired many artists: Ernest Tubb and Gene Autry are probably the most famous.

The success of Jimmie Rodgers cannot be measured by the amount of money he made during his lifetime. He never learned how to read music and only played simple chords on the guitar. But when he appeared on the scene, there was simply no one else like him, and he contrasted to the immense popularity of the large string bands of the day...bands such as **Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers**, Pop Stoneman's **Dixie Mountain-eers**, **Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers**, **Earl Johnson and His Dixie Clodhoppers**, the **Fruit Jar Drinkers** and the **Possum Hunters**. These bands became increasingly extinct as bands such as that of Bill Monroe pioneered instrument virtuosity and close-harmony singing. While there may be some discussion as to what the origins of bluegrass music are, there can be no doubt as to the effect that the songwriting of Jimmie Rodgers has had on the music. And, there is no doubt as to who is the "Father of Country Music." Here is a biography of this man.

Jimmie Rodgers was born September 8, 1897, in Meridian, Mississippi. His father worked as a railroad section foreman and spent little time at home. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was four. After

¹⁵ Neil V. Rosenberg, "A Front Porch Visit with Birch Monroe," *Bluegrass Unlimited*, September, 1982, p. 59.

¹⁶ Also on the WLS road show were the Cumberland Ridge Runners, the Maple City Four, the Arkansas Wood Choppers, Karl and Harty, and the Prairie Ramblers which Patsy Montana soon joined.

being passed between relatives, Jimmie quit school at age fourteen to work on the railroad as a flag man, a water carrier, and a brake man where he associated with blacks and their music: the blues. Here he learned guitar and banjo songs from black gandy dancers¹⁷.

In 1925, Rodgers acquired tuberculosis, forcing him to quit the railroad and to seek less vigorous work, leading him to pursue music full-time. A lung hemorrhage when he was twenty-seven was almost fatal. He performed as a black-face minstrel in a medicine show, playing waltzes and sentimental numbers on banjo and guitar. In early 1927, Rodgers moved his family, wife Carrie and daughter Anita, to Asheville, North Carolina, to work as a city detective. He formed a hillbilly “ork” (a string band orchestra) called **Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers** and began playing on WWNC, Asheville.

He created the blue yodel as a combination of white music and black music with his own touch of creativity. The yodels were an expression of what the South was going through collectively: that is, the hard times of the 1920s. He became known as “The Blue Yodeler.” There were thirteen blue yodels, the last of which was sung between rest breaks on a cot in the studio the day before he died. He wrote very few of the songs he sang. Many of his early songs were written by the sister of his wife, Elsie McWilliams.

Rodgers was “discovered” in 1927 when he answered an ad in the paper placed by Ralph Peer of the Victor Talking Machine Company in Bristol, Tennessee. Peer felt that this recording session would be a good business move for his company—he didn’t really care for the music one way or the other and simply wanted to record the local artists, knowing that there was a lot of talent in the area and perhaps a corresponding market demand for such recordings. Rodgers recorded “Sleep, Baby, Sleep” and “The Soldier’s Sweetheart.” He was paid \$20.

Even at the height of his popularity, he billed himself as the **Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers**. He was with this band when the **Entertainers** auditioned for Peer without him¹⁸, and he won a recording contract with Victor after Rodgers’ devoted wife convinced him to try for a solo contract with Peer. He won it as a solo artist.

On August 4th, 1927, Jimmie Rodgers and the **Carter Family** recorded in Bristol, Tennessee.¹⁹ According to many historians, the “Bristol Sessions” became *the* big launch of country music as we know it now or knew it then. After the Peer recording session for Victor Records, the **Carter Family** went home and

planted the corn, not really believing anything would come from the session. Rodgers then labeled himself as a “vocal artist” and headed straight for New York to make the best of his good fortune. He left even before he was notified by Peer that the recordings he just made would be released. He then came back to RCA and, in November, recorded blue yodel #1 (“T for Texas”). Rodgers quickly became Victor’s best-selling artist.²⁰

For the next five years, he usually performed as a solo act at tent shows. In 1929, he recorded “Any Old Time” on Peer, one of the first labels to record country music. That same year, Rodgers became the first hillbilly star to record with black musicians. He and a group of black musicians recorded “Frankie and Johnny.” In November, he appeared in the nine-minute Columbia film short called “The Singing Brakeman.” He never toured above the Mason-Dixon Line.

In 1930, Jimmie Rodgers recorded blue yodel #9 (“Standin’ on the Corner”) with Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong (trumpet) and Mrs. Satchmo (Lillian, piano). Also that year, he recorded blue yodel #8 (“Mule Skinner Blues”) in Hollywood. He recorded “My Good Gal’s Gone Blues” with the **Louisville Jug Band** in 1931.

Rodgers built his family a lavish home near Kerrville, Texas, but high medical bills to treat his tuberculosis (also known as “consumption” because of the way it wastes the body) and expensive living later forced him to sell and move to San Antonio. He played twice a week on KMAC until late 1932 when ill health forced him to spend most of the next year on his deathbed.

On May 26, 1933, he recorded the last blue yodel (number 13) “Women Make a Fool Out of Me” on his deathbed. He also recorded several songs including “Old Love Letters (Bring Memories of You)” just before he died of tuberculosis: the same disease which killed his mother. At the studio, he had to rest several hours between each of the twelve recordings. He was propped up on a cot to reach the microphone. He was optimistic, never complaining or whimpering at his ill fate. No one ever heard him mention his illness although he was bedridden with constant medical attention at his side. He died at age 36, hemorrhaging in the Taft Hotel, New York City.

One month after Rodgers’ death, country music’s first picture disc was released. It was a ten-inch, 78 r.p.m. laminated RCA record with his picture on it. The song was “Cowhand’s Last Ride.” In 1961, Jimmie

¹⁷ Gandy refers to the Gandy Company of Chicago which made tools for railroad workers. Gandy dancers were known as those persons who used the tools, and who danced.

¹⁸ According to Dr. Charles Wolfe, they were then known as the Teneva Ramblers because they worked out of Bristol which was on the border of Tennessee and Virginia. They were all there for the audition but argued about the billing on the record. The Ramblers hired a banjo player and recorded without him.

¹⁹ Rodgers and the Carters didn’t meet at this session; they first met in Louisville in June 1931.

²⁰ When one listens to an album of Jimmie Rodgers music, it may tend to be monotonous. It may even become tedious. But when one considers that the songs were all released as singles, and sometimes a year apart, perhaps this can enable one to concentrate on each song, rather than the LP.

Rodgers became the first person inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

30,000 fans dedicated the unveiling of his monument in Meridian, Mississippi, where the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Museum is located near his first home. In 1978, a U.S. postage stamp was dedicated to him. He and his wife are buried near the Museum.

G.B. Grayson & Henry Whitter



G.B. Grayson and Henry Whitter

George Banman (G.B.) Grayson was born November 11, 1887, in Ashe County, North Carolina. He was nearly blind because of severe eye damage as a baby and grew up busking his music on the street, one of the few occupations available to a person with this handicap. By the time World War I rolled around, he was married (he eventually had six children) and settled on the Tennessee-Virginia line. He began performing with his fiddle and singing with nearby musicians such as Tom Ashley and Doc Walsh.

Grayson was a good singer, and when he began recording with Henry Whitter, he took on the vocal duties of the duo. His singing was noticed by various record labels and he soon became recognized as one of the finest old-time singers to ever record.

Henry Whitter was born about twenty years after Grayson, in Fries, Virginia. He was the area's first country musician to record when he went to New York in 1923. He continued to record by himself and with others until he met Grayson in the summer of 1927. They recorded just forty sides together, from October 1927 to October 1929.

Some of the duo's recordings were good enough to make it into the Sears catalogs. But their Victor recording of "Train 45" in late 1927 actually sold 50,000 copies and stayed in print through 1934. Their next-best sellers were stifled by the Depression but still managed to sell relatively well: "Barnyard Serenade" sold nearly 9,000; "The Red and Green Signal Light" sold 6,000; "Little Maggie" sold 5,600; "Tom Dooley" sold 4,000 (released May 2, 1930); and "Going Down the Lee

Highway" (Lee Highway Blues) sold 1,385 copies only because it was released during the height of the Depression. Those 1,385 copies probably went to fiddlers who were trying to learn the tune, according to Dr. Charles Wolfe who wrote the liner notes of the 1984 Old Homestead LPs which were a collection of Grayson and Whitter's songs.

Their recording career together included many tunes which became bluegrass standards: the tunes mentioned above, "Handsome Molly," "Banks of the Ohio" (which they called "I'll Never Be Yours"), "Rose Conley" and "Nobody's Darling."

According to Wolfe, "In 1930, the pair began traveling around to take advantage of their fame; they even made a guest appearance on the *Grand Ole Opry*, and things were looking up. Then tragedy struck. On August 13, 1930, Grayson was back home and set out hitchhiking to his brother's home. He was hanging onto the running board of a car when it was hit by a log truck near Damascus, Virginia; he was thrown off and killed. Henry Whitter never really got over the shock of the death of his friend and partner. He eventually died of diabetes in 1942."²¹ The team of Grayson and Whitter won an Award of Merit from the IBMA in 1996.

Wade Mainer



Wade and J.E. Mainer— a link between the string bands and bluegrass

Wade Mainer a legendary figure in country music and

recordings. He was one of the bridges connecting old country and hillbilly music with the bluegrass music of today. Wade is not known as a bluegrass musician, but his banjo-playing style, songs, and music are very deeply entwined in today's bluegrass music.

Followers of bluegrass music, whether they know it or not, are followers of Mainer music. Wade's two-finger style of banjo playing sounds very much like the three-finger style which came to popularity within six years of

²¹ From the liner notes of "Ralph Stanley, Short Life of Trouble—Songs of Grayson and Whitter," Rebel Records CD 1735.

the time Wade invented the style. Most banjoists now prefer the three-finger style which seems to be more capable of doing hard-driving bluegrass. There is probably no truth to the idea, as some have suggested, that two-finger style is a precursor to the three-finger style; that style generally originated from a different area of North Carolina and from different musicians such as Snuffy Jenkins. Wade did learn the three-finger style a bit however, and acknowledges that the three-finger banjo style had more *drive* than his two-finger style did. As of 1997, Wade was still using this style—one of the few people to do so. He died 9/12/2011.

Joseph Emmett Mainer was born July 20, 1898. Wade Mainer was born April 21, 1907. The brothers were born in Weaverville, near Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina. J.E. took up the fiddle, learning from brother-in-law Roscoe Banks, and also played a little frailing banjo. His first fiddle was a miniature, obtained as a prize when he and Wade sold the most of a popular salve during a sales contest. He became pretty good on that little instrument, and in the early 1930s, went downtown to buy a full-sized fiddle which cost \$9. In 1910, J.E. left home to work in the cotton mills of Knoxville, Tennessee, at age twelve. Wade was three.

Wade recalled, “I was workin’ in the sawmill around about eleven or twelve years old and I guess I stayed with it for two or three years ‘cause my dad didn’t have much to do back there on the farm. And he give me about fifty cents a week to go a picture show or something.”²²

“Really, what started it all,” Wade told this writer, “was when I worked with my brother-in-law, Roscoe Banks, at the sawmill when I was ten or twelve years old. I was just a young fella growin’ up on the farm down in Weaverville, North Carolina, and we lived on Rim’s Creek. So my brother-in-law had a sawmill and I would go stay with him and he played the fiddle. On Saturday evenings they’d shut down the mill and go get cleaned up good and get ready for a square dance that night. Somebody was always wantin’ some music to play for square dances back there in the mountains. So [Roscoe] had a brother by the name of Will Banks that played the banjo but he played the frailin’ type. It wasn’t very good time with the fiddle, you know. And I’d go set in with them at the square dances. When they’d lay the banjo down to get up and take a break, I’d go over and pick up the banjo and start hammerin’ down on it. I learned to frail a banjo first!

“And then, after a while, I began to think I might just try it with my fingers and see what happens then. I got

to meddlin’ with it—pickin’ it out note-for-note with my fingers. I kept on and got pretty good with it and got to learn to use my fingers to keep the time with it. It wasn’t very long—I guess it wasn’t over a couple of months learnin’ the two-finger style—and I was workin’ at the sawmill with him and after I got to where I could play the two-finger style. I kept better time [than] with the fiddle and all, so my brother-in-law just kept me to play the banjo when he played the fiddle.”²³

By 1922, J.E. had moved to his permanent home in Concord, North Carolina, and married. He later began working as a musician. Wade was working at the Weaverville sawmill near Asheville. Will Banks played banjo with Roscoe at many square dances—the main source of entertainment in the mountains. “I guess, when I was about eighteen to twenty years old (about 1927), I left and started for Concord, North Carolina,” said Wade. “I had an old banjo and I had it with me and I stopped off in Marion and got me a job workin’ at a yarn mill in Marion, North Carolina, and stayin’ in a boardin’ house. I’d get the old banjo out in the evenin’ and the boarders at the boardin’ house, they resented me playin’ the banjo—I was makin’ so much noise they couldn’t stand me. I worked there quite awhile then moved on down to Concord and that’s where I began to join up with my brother J.E..” This is where the brothers decided to make music professionally—J.E. on the fiddle and Wade on the banjo. The brothers won fiddle contests and began playing at corn shuckings and other social events. “We got so good at fiddlers’ conventions taking prizes they finally wouldn’t let us enter for prizes.”²⁴ They became influenced by **Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers**, the **Carter Family**, Jimmie Rodgers, and **Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers**. In the latter part of 1933 or early 1934, J.E. and Wade called themselves the **Mainer Mountaineers String Band**.

Wade wrote that in the beginning “There were many times I wished [then] we’d never started playing music. For working in the cotton mill in the day, and J.E. at night would keep me up half the night or longer playing music. I’d get irritated, especially when he’d tell me to get up; he had a new tune he wanted to learn.”²⁵

*“We were the first to have the
bluegrass style—with the drive—
’til it kindly got a little bit, I’ll say uptown, faster
and higher pitched.”*

—Wade Mainer

²² This may not sound like a lot of money, but in those days fifty cents could buy a week’s groceries for a small family. The fact that kids got any spending money was kind of unusual. As Wade’s career continued into the Great Depression of the mid-1930s, an admission charge to his concerts of fifteen and twenty-five cents was a lot of money to people in rural America who could barely feed themselves. It’s no wonder that Wade quit being a full-time musician in the early 1950s to try to find a “normal” job which would provide some sort of security for him and his family.

²³ From a November 1993 telephone interview.

²⁴ From a note to this writer May 12, 1995.

²⁵ Quotation from correspondence to me, following a live interview at IBMA in 1992 and several follow-up telephone conversations.

“We were the first to have the bluegrass style—with the *drive*—’til it kindly got a little bit, I’ll say uptown, faster and higher pitched. And when it got into that, it kind of left the **Mainer Mountaineers...**” he told this writer in a 1992 interview. “I didn’t do too much lead on the banjo because we had the fiddle for a lead. Well, the fiddle finally faded out when Bill Monroe... Well, Bill wasn’t the first one to play the mandolin ‘cause the **Tobacco Tags** had the mandolin when we were working for Crazy Water Crystals back in ‘35 and ‘36. We had already established the mandolin, but when the mandolin (of Bill Monroe) came in, the mandolin took over the lead for the fiddle. But the mandolin style of Monroe was different,” said Wade. “Monroe’s style was pitched high, sung high, played high and they sung with a *drive*. We had that same *drive* when we recorded with Clyde Moody. There were two or three [tunes] that we had the fiddle and you can hear the banjo with the *drive* in it.”²⁶

Ralph Stanley was a banjoist who initially used the clawhammer style then picked up the two-finger style from Wade. Wade recalled that the Carters “was workin’ around the Bristol area when Carter and Ralph [Stanley] was just boys. So Ralph and Carter stayed around us a whole lot and learned a lot of our music. You can go back to some of the old recordings and find that they recorded a lot of songs that we already re-recorded. Ralph was just a little ol’ boy, him and Carter both, when I was workin’ professional.”²⁷ Still, “There might have been two-finger banjo players before I ever was recognized as a two-finger-style banjo player—I don’t know, I never heard of them and never heard anybody say there was anybody else. They always said I was the first they ever heard.”²⁸ A fellow named Mack Crow picked up my two-finger style and later played the three-finger style and I think he became rather fa-mous.”²⁹

In a 1991 telephone interview, Wade spoke about the difference between his music and the songs known as “bluegrass.” “This bluegrass music they play now—most old songs—that’s what they started with until they got to the point they were able to write about songs which was of a different content than the songs we wrote about—you know, the love songs that maybe I dreamed up, like I done that ‘Maple on the Hill’” (1935) in which Wade pictured himself courting his lover



Sons of the Mountaineers in New York during the 1940's. L-R Red Rector, Woody Guthrie, Fred Smith, J.E., Cisco Houston, Wade.

sitting on the front porch on a swing...or maybe out behind the house where the big maple tree was.

The Mainer brothers hired the Lay brothers, Lester and Howard Lay, in 1934, and they became **J.E.**

Mainer’s Mountaineers, working Saturdays on WSOC, Gastonia, North Carolina, on the *Wayside Program*. Then the group went to WWL for about four months in New Orleans, Louisiana. After the band returned to Concord, the Lay brothers left the **Mountaineers** to stay and work at the cotton mills. Soon Wade and J.E. were doing two shows daily at WBT, Charlotte, North Carolina, in addition to the WBT *Barn Dance*.

They hired Daddy John Love (guitar, yodeler in the style of Jimmie Rodgers, blues singer) and Zeke Morris (guitar)³⁰. The popularity of **J.E. Mainer’s Mountaineers** was enhanced with the addition of these two.

Wade told how Zeke was hired into the **Mountaineers**. The band needed a replacement for the Lay brothers. The band was based in Concord at the time when Wade went to Old Fort, North Carolina, to find a guitar player he knew about: George Morris. Wade found George playing in a band at a picnic. Wade joined in on banjo, then asked George if he wanted to join his brother’s band. George said yes. Wade then went back to verify his choice with J.E. and they confirmed their decision to hire George. But when Wade returned to Old Fort to find him, George couldn’t be found but Claude “Zeke” Morris was there.³¹ Zeke told Wade that he could play guitar. Wade and J.E. gave him a try. He fit into the new band “like a glove.”

²⁶ From a November 1993 telephone interview.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ In a separate note to this writer in 1995, Mr. Mainer related that “There may have been other musicians who have tried to copy my two-finger style banjo picking. It is different from any one I’ve heard. I have never heard anyone play the fiddle like J.E. Mainer; his fiddling and our music was different from anyone in that era of time.”

²⁹ The two-finger style was actually fairly well established in North Georgia and Southwest North Carolina by the early twentieth century.

³⁰ This was Zeke Morris’ first job as a musician. When he and his brothers, George and Wiley, later formed the Morris Brothers, they sounded similar to the Mountaineers.

³¹ Wade, in a 1994 communication said, “I think [it was] in late 1934 or ‘35 when Zeke joined the band. And George Morris, Zeke’s brother, never played in the band when I was in the band when I was with J.E.. He joined J.E. later.”

In a 1991 phone interview with Wade, he said, “Zeke was more on the guitar like Riley Puckett was with Gid Tanner [and the **Skillet Lickers**]. To tell you the truth, Barry, I think he was a little better and smoother than the guitar players now. [That’s] because the guitar players today, they give it that hard-drive music and they tune way high and they really get on them instruments and really ride ‘em—if you know what I mean.” This is not necessarily bad, Wade explained. “It’s just a different style. It’s a harder-drive music that caught on as bluegrass.”

They played the music of the day: hillbilly music. In an interview with this writer in October 1990 at the IBMA Trade Show, Wade Mainer told that Bill Monroe very well *could* be the “Father of Bluegrass Music” but said that both groups (the **Mountaineers** and the **Monroe Brothers**) were playing pretty close to the same kind of music during that period. Bill Monroe was still with his brother Charlie at the time and they used guitar and mandolin. The Mainers used banjo, fiddle and guitar.

When asked if the Mainers’ style was similar to other bands Wade remarked in 1990, “Yes and no. I don’t believe our style was quite like the rest of them...we didn’t hear nobody else playing our style of music. We had our own style and sound. I don’t think we was all that good (he laughed). But I’ll tell you one thing, our songs and records sure went over big with the good people.” Wade recalled the old days when they had to travel in a T Model Ford. Because the crowds were so great, they often had to play two shows to accommodate the audience which came on horseback, or by car, or walked up to six miles to hear them. He remembered that they were wonderful people to play music for.

About that time, the group gained Crazy Water Crystals as a sponsor and played on WBT, Charlotte, North Carolina, on the *Crazy Barn Dance*. The group changed its name to **J.E. Mainer and the Crazy Mountaineers**. Other groups sponsored by the company were the **Dixon Brothers**, **Tobacco Tags**, Fisher Hendley’s **Aristocratic Pigs**, Dick Hartman and his **Tennessee Cut-Ups**³², and the **Johnson County Ramblers**.

Their personal appearances on WBT were sponsored by Crazy Water Crystals; the sponsor kept all the money and gave them only a small stipend. But the group did gain exposure and bookings from the shows—

that’s where they made their money. Band members made twelve to fifteen dollars per week—actually a good wage; the band leader, of course, made more than the sidemen (who were generally hired by the leader to fulfill the leader’s idea of what his music should be). Wade quit the sponsor several times in an attempt to get a better cut of the profits. When the band finally split from their relationship with Crazy Water Crystals, they returned their name to **J.E. Mainer’s Mountaineers**. As useful as the Crystals sponsorship was at one time, the band no longer tolerated the situation of getting only a portion of the gate receipts. Now on their own, they were able to keep the entire gate.

The music business has always had a high turnover in band members; the country bands of this era were no exception. There was no trend to it. Most likely, a musician had to quit because of several reasons including: he was too young to understand how hard the job was; he had to return home to the farm; he couldn’t leave his day job; or there wasn’t enough money in it. A musician who stuck with it simply loved the music enough to put up with all the hardships that went with the job.³³

On August 6, 1935, **J.E. Mainer’s Mountaineers** began recording in Atlanta, Georgia. This led to a recording contract with Bluebird, RCA Victor’s sublabel (a subsidiary of RCA) which handled this type of music. They recorded “Maple On The Hill,”³⁴ a duet sung by



The Smiling Rangers after Wade Mainer left in 1938. L to R: Homer Sherrill, Zeke Morris, Wiley Morris, Joel Martin.

³² According to Wade, this was the name of the band.

³³ On the other hand, however, there are many who were not trained for anything else. Or, there were those who chose it as a profession because it was easiest thing they could think of to do for their rest of their working career.

³⁴ There was another “Maple on the Hill” written about 1895 by a black man named Gussie Davis. Wade’s unique version of the song was very popular (it was on top of the charts for two years), and became popular again when later recorded by the Stanley Brothers and the Country Pardners.

Wade explained how he came to write his own “Maple on the Hill”: “I never heard of that old song [that Davis wrote]. I heard somebody a-singin’ it, a-hummin’ it, and I picked it up and kindly got a vision of where I might be at [if I were in that song]. It might be in a porch swing or under a maple tree with my sweetheart or whatever. I changed it maybe a half a dozen times until I got it like I wanted it. I copyrighted that, and ‘Take Me in a Lifeboat,’ in nineteen and thirty-five. It’s right there in the Library of Congress. Barry, I’m not trying to go back and dig up the song and start a whole lot of ruckus over it, I just wish somebody would tell me that was one of Wade Mainer’s biggest hits of all times. I’d just like to have a little credit on it, is all. ‘Cause I put together my own way and my own arrangement. It stayed on the charts for a couple of years there and every time we were on the WBT Barn Dance we had to sometimes do it twice on a Saturday night.”



Little Smiling Rangers, c. 1938. L to R: Wade Mainer, Robert "Bucky" Banks, Morris Banks, Chubby Overcash.

Wade Mainer and Zeke Morris. Wade felt that his arrangement was different enough from the original to copyright it. He also arranged and copyrighted "Take Me in Your Lifeboat." Band members then were still Wade and J.E. Mainer, Zeke Morris and Daddy John Love. The June 1936 Bluebird session of **J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers**³⁵ helped the group's popularity to grow.

That October, J.E. and Wade Mainer split. J.E. kept the **J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers** name with musicians Snuffy Jenkins (banjo), George Morris (guitar) and Leonard "Handsome" Stokes (mandolin). Just after the split, Wade and Zeke Morris joined with Homer "Pappy" Sherrill on another Bluebird recording. This band was unofficially called the **North Carolina Buddies** and lasted only a very short time. Then Wade founded the **Smiling Rangers** which consisted of Wade, Sherrill, Zeke Morris, Homer Sherrill's brother Arthur, and Wiley Morris at WPTF, Raleigh, North Carolina. Pappy Sherrill stayed on fiddle from 1937 to 1938 when Wade quit his **Smiling Rangers** band to form **Wade Mainer and the Little Smiling Rangers**.³⁶

On April 15, 1937, **J.E. Mainer and His Mountaineers** were first heard on WIS (a part of the NBC network at the time) in Columbia, South Carolina. Though the station was then an infant of seven years, it was still rated the 38th most popular station in the U.S.. The **Mountaineers'** daily show aired Monday through Friday. The band was the station's largest puller of mail;

they received 8,305 pieces of mail during the six months from October 1937 to March 1938 without benefit of contests or free offers. They were sponsored on WIS by the Chattanooga Medicine Company. There at WIS was announcer Byron Parker.

Wade's new **Little Smiling Rangers** was formed with nephews Morris Banks (mandolin) and Robert "Bucky" Banks (guitar) with Chubby Overcash³⁷ (guitar). Steve Ledford³⁸ (fiddle), who was in the band for several years, influenced their music to sound very much like bluegrass. Ledford fiddled in the style of the old string bands. He lived near Bakerville, North Carolina. It is said that a band's sound comes from how the musicians were raised. Certainly, Ledford's roots helped the **Sons of the Mountaineers** keep the music down to earth—in the old style. Wade's two-finger banjo style also helped perpetuate this sound. They knew that Bill Monroe's music was going over big in Nashville, yet they never had any intention of sounding like Bill Monroe. They only wanted to play, enjoy their music, and make a decent living.

The last band formed by Wade, about 1938 or 1939, was the **Sons of the Mountaineers** with Steve Ledford (fiddle), Clyde Moody (guitar) and Jay Hugh Hall (guitar). They recorded on Bluebird into the '40s: songs such as Wade's "Ramshackled Shack,"³⁹ "Wild Bill Jones" and "Companions Draw Nigh." Wade, in 1990, was still drawing royalties for "Shack." Wade remembered he and the band members heard the song on the jukebox one night. They wrote down the words to the song and performed it on the air the next morning. In November 1937, Wade married Julia and they eventually worked up a duo act.

In late 1938, J.E. left his **Mountaineers**⁴⁰. Byron "The Old Hired Hand" Parker of Wisconsin took over the group. Parker added Homer Sherrill on fiddle and called it **Byron Parker's Mountaineers**. When Parker later took the band to WIS, it became the **Byron Parker and the WIS Hillbillies** with members Byron Parker, Snuffy Jenkins, Homer Sherrill and Leonard Stokes.⁴¹ Because they were sponsored by Black Draught, they became **Black Draught Hillbillies and**

³⁵ Members included J.E. (fiddle) and Wade (banjo) Mainer, Zeke Morris (guitar, mandolin), Harold Christy (guitar), Beachem Blackweller (guitar) and Junior Misenheimer (banjo). Another band member that spring was the Hillbilly Kid (Boyd Carpenter) (guitar, harmonica) who also worked with J.E. and Wade when they were with Crazy Water Crystals.

³⁶ Homer Sherrill kept the Smiling Rangers going for a short while then joined Byron Parker and His Mountaineers at WIS, Columbia, South Carolina. There Sherrill met Snuffy Jenkins with whom he would eventually partner and form the basis of the Hired Hands (a band which was to last even after Snuffy's death in 1990). The fact that the Mountaineers and the Hired Hands had all the instrumental ingredients of a modern bluegrass band didn't necessarily make them a bluegrass band as we now know bluegrass. Snuffy was indeed playing his banjo in the three-finger style, but that was a rather primitive version of modern bluegrass and didn't have the *drive* that later banjo players put into their music to make it bluegrass. Don Reno, just learning the banjo at this time, listened intently to Snuffy Jenkins while he played banjo with J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers and learned from him. Zeke joined Charlie Monroe's Kentucky Pardners, which was the band that Charlie formed after he and Bill Monroe split.

³⁷ Overcash later joined J.E.'s band.

³⁸ Recording on Rounder Records in 1973 was the Ledford String Band. Their album featured Steve Ledford (fiddle, who recorded with his own Carolina Ramblers and Wade Mainer, among others), Wayne Ledford (guitar) and James Gardner (guitar).

³⁹ "Ramshackled Shack" made a big hit like "Maple on the Hill" and "Take Me the Life Boat." Probably written by Bill Cox, it is also known as "Sparkling Blue Eyes."

⁴⁰ Earlier in 1938, J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers were Curly Shelton (guitar), J.E. (fiddle) and Jack Shelton (guitar).

⁴¹ The reader may recall that Jenkins and Stokes were in J.E.'s band at the Mainer brother split and that Sherrill and Jenkins met there at WIS.

Homer Sherrill as well as **Byron Parker's Mountaineers**. Snuffy's brother, Verl "The Old Sheep Herder" Jenkins, was actually the first fiddler but was physically unable to travel so Byron convinced Sherrill to join the band. Byron was, according to Wade Mainer, "one of the best emcees you ever seen in your life. He could sell a barrel of rotten apples on the radio if he wanted to. He was that good!" He picked up the nickname "The Old Hired Hand" at about age twenty-five from the Crazy Water Crystals Company by virtue of his experience which, by that time, was considerable. Parker had worked with the **Monroe Brothers** and managed their band for a few years.⁴² Members of the **Mountaineers** now included Jenkins, Henson Stokes, Leonard Stokes and George Morris. Leonard and George, as a duo, were known as **Handsome and Sambo**.



Wade Mainer's Sons of the Mountaineers, 1938.

Wade Mainer's **Sons of the Mountaineers** at WPTF in Raleigh was Jay Hugh Hall, Clyde Moody, Wade (banjo) and Steve Ledford. Moody and Hall were also known for their band, the **Happy-Go-Lucky Boys**, a name that they had used as a duo since 1933 on WSPA, Spartanburg, South Carolina. They again used this name while they were members of Wade's band when RCA Victor asked Wade's **Sons of the Mountaineers** to record for them. Wade had a disagreement with the label at the time and refused to do it with his **Sons of the Mountaineers**. The other members of his band wanted to do the recording but Wade was insulted that the band members would go behind his back and record under the **Sons of the Mountaineers** name. The other three members of the band, Ledford, Hall and Moody, went ahead with the recording using the name of Wade's band. When Wade found out about it, he threatened to sue so they changed their name to **Happy-Go-Lucky Boys**.

In 1939, Wade formed a new **Sons of the Mountaineers** which included Howard Dixon (Hawaiian guitar), Walter "Tiny" Dodson (fiddle, comedy) and the Shelton Brothers (Jack and Curly who had recently left J.E.'s band). J.E. played fiddle with them occasionally on WNOX's *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round*.

About the time that World War II broke out for the United States, in 1941, Wade and his band were at WNOX, performing under contract on the *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round*. George D. Hay invited Wade's band to perform on the *Grand Ole Opry* and take the place of Pee Wee King's band on the Saturday night slot. Lowell Blanchard, Wade's manager at WNOX told him that was a great opportunity for Wade and that he shouldn't miss it. But when the time came for Wade to leave, Blanchard couldn't let him go. That would break his contract with the station and Blanchard had no one to replace Wade's **Sons of the Mountaineers** on the station. Wade missed an opportunity of great potential, he said.

At WROL in Knoxville, Wade's band was sponsored by the Cas Walker chain of supermarkets (there were at least four stores at the time). Wade described Walker as "a nice guy. He was just a country boy. He was a shrewd trader, though." Walker told the bands he sponsored, "If you put things over and get people listening, I'll put you on." There at WROL, Wade and his band supplemented their income with concerts at schoolhouses. At the top of their popularity, *Life* magazine followed him around for a week, taking pictures and preparing an essay on him and his band. Nothing ever came from those activities, though; the War had broken out and gave the magazine something more critical to cover.

In 1941, Wade Mainer, with Tiny Dodson and Jack Shelton, played for President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House. The Librarian at the Library of Congress who organized the event asked for "folk music." Although this was not the first hillbilly band to play for a President, Wade recalled in 1990 that he may have been the first banjo player who did. He also remembered that Lily May Ledford, of the **Coon Creek Girls**, played for the President at some time.

Wade, still in Knoxville, quit music for a short while in September 1941 and turned his **Sons of the Mountaineers** over to J.E. who changed the name back to **J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers**. Members of the band then became J.E. Mainer, Curly Shelton, Jack Shelton and Julian "Greasy" Medlin. In 1961, J.E.'s family band, the **Mainers**, featured the Scruggs-style banjo of Glenn Mainer (J.E.'s son). They recorded for Atlantic, Arhoolie, and eventually did sixteen albums for Rural Rhythm. J.E. stayed with the music awhile longer, spending some time in St. Louis with the **Carter Family**, until he died in 1971.

⁴² According to Wade, "[Parker] took sick when he was with that band and they never did take him back. I think he was the one who started them on the road to success."

By 1945, Wade was back with his **Sons of the Mountaineers** who performed on the BBC for broadcast to the U.S. troops in Europe. This was a job which was obtained by a vote count of the soldiers away from home; the men wanted to hear *his* band more than all the others. The recording session was in New York.

Wade and his band recorded several tunes on King Records in January 1952: “No Place to Lay Your Head” and “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.” In June, King released “Standing Outside”/“I’m Not Looking Backward.” King released Wade Mainer’s “Little Birdie”/“The Girl I Left in Sunny Tennessee” in August. In 1953, Wade and Julia moved to Michigan to work for the Lord. His daytime job was with General Motors. Wade dropped out of the music mainstream for twenty years until he retired from GM.

In 1971, J.E. died just before an appearance at the Culpeper-Warrenton Bluegrass Festival. His music career spanned fifty years and he recorded over 500 songs. He died of an apparent heart attack at his home in Concord, North Carolina.

In the early seventies, Wade’s son, Frank Mainer, was at a Tex Ritter concert and introduced himself to Ritter. Ritter recognized the Mainer name and asked if he knew Wade Mainer. Frank said he was his son and that Wade was living in Flint, Michigan, working for General Motors. The word got out about Wade’s existence and, before long, he began to receive fan mail again. He retired from General Motors in 1972 and continued to play his music on tour, proving that it was still in demand. Wade then recorded on the IRMA label (one record) and on Old Homestead. He would mostly perform gospel music, having become “born again” in 1953.

Wade won the Carter Stanley Memorial Trophy (the White Dove) at McClure, Virginia, for his contributions to old-time music in May of 1979. In January 1982, at the age of 75, Wade took his first plane ride when he was hired to perform for the F.D.R. Centennial Celebration in Washington, D.C.. The event was designed to be a partial re-creation of the 1941 performance for President and Mrs. Roosevelt and was arranged on both



Wade and Julia Mainer, 1994. Wade was 87 years old.



WWNC, 1938. Wade Mainer (l) with Howard “Panhandle Pete” Nash and Steve Ledford. Pete is playing the harmonica with his nose. He was a one-man-show who played 17 instruments at one time.

dates (1941 and 1982) by noted folklorist Alan Lomax. Wade received the Snuffy Jenkins Award in 1983. In 1983, Wade, Julia, and their son Leon Spain (now deceased) took their music to the Netherlands. In 1985, he received a clock plaque from Detroit Area Friends to recognize his fifty years in music. Wade and Julia were sponsored by the International Folk Music Festival to tour Florence, Italy, in 1986.

The North Carolina Arts Council honored its hillbilly radio pioneers in 1985 with “The Charlotte Country Music Story” featuring performances by Wade Mainer, Bill Monroe, Snuffy Jenkins, Pappy Sherrill, the **Morris Brothers** and the **WBT Briarhoppers**. In 1987, Wade was one of thirteen recipients of a National Heritage Fellowship Award in honor of being an Appalachian five-string banjo picker and singer. This award is worth \$5000 to the winners and is quite prestigious because the recipients are nominated by their peers. In 1988, at Zimmerman, Minnesota’s Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Festival, a plaque was presented to Wade by Mr. Harry Teifs. It signified that on that day, fifty years earlier, Wade recorded “Maple on the Hill” in Atlanta.

In October 1990, Wade Mainer received a Award of Merit at the International Bluegrass Music Association Awards Ceremony at Owensboro, Kentucky. The award noted his significant contributions to the roots of bluegrass music. Upon acceptance of the award, Wade, a trim and healthy eighty-three years old, thanked the group and said, “It’s about time! It’s about time you started recognizing what we did in the old days.” After the trade show, Wade and Julia were driving out of town when some “force” called them back to the event. When they came back into town, he was asked to perform that weekend at the IBMA Fanfest, there on the shores of the Ohio River. He thinks it was Divine intervention.

Other awards of recognition Wade received through the years include Wade Mainer Day, a proclamation from the Mayor of Flint, Michigan, an award from the *Congressional Record*, a Michigan Country Convention Award, and a congratulatory letter from President Reagan. In September 1994, Wade received a plaque for his contributions to the preservation of traditional North Carolina music by the Charlotte Folk Music Society.

Wade plays music by ear, can't read music, and has no formal knowledge about the study of music. The duo of Wade and Julia continued to perform and record together on June Appal Records; the most recent album was issued in 1992 on Old Homestead.

Zeke, George and Wiley Morris

The Morris Brothers— Zeke, George and Wiley

The **Morris Brothers** could very well be *the* first bluegrass band. They had all the ingredients for it in the early 1940s: They had the five basic bluegrass instruments and, according to many, they had the rhythm. With the presumption that Wiley Morris' rhythm was passed on to Clyde Moody, who then passed it on to Lester Flatt, who then influenced Bill Monroe, perhaps they were, indeed, the very first.

Often, when an interview is conducted some sixty years after the event, the facts get scrambled. Some of the events included here are actually *that* old. But the interview with Mr. Zeke Morris indicated that he was very lucid and remembered much of the early days during the thirties.

Claude "Zeke" Morris was born May 9, 1916. Wiley Morris was born February 1, 1919. The oldest brother was George. All the brothers were born and raised in Old Fort, North Carolina, McDowell County, near Asheville.

The story begins when J.E. Mainer was looking for a guitarist-singer for his **J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers** with his younger brother, Wade, who played two-finger style banjo with the group. J.E. and Wade hired Zeke Morris as their guitar player in 1933. Wade had actually arrived at the Morris household looking for the older brother, George, whom they had heard about but was not at home that day. So Wade and J.E. hired Zeke.

Wade and Zeke decided to leave J.E.'s band in the fall of 1935 and partner up in a duo, **Wade and Zeke**, and later on in the **Smiling Rangers, Wade and Zeke**. Zeke remembered, "And then Wade and me come out with that 'Maple on the Hill,' you know. And that really put me and him on top, you know. And we pulled out and left J.E.. It was Wade and me for a long time. Of course, we had Steve Ledford to play with us, and we

had Homer Sherrill to play with us some. But Wade and me, we played together a long time. But Wade and me, we had a unique thing. It was old-timey and stuff, but it was good—the people thought so anyway. But my brother (Wiley) and me, we did our thing and I come out and I wrote that 'Salty Dog Blues' (1935), you know, and that's been my biggest hit of all that we've done, you know. And I still make money off that. 'Cause I was smart, you know—I was an old country boy, but I was smart. I had all the stuff copyrighted and published so I draw royalties every six months through Southern Music Publishing Company. I been pretty big into it.

"And in 1937," continued Zeke, "is when Wade and me dissolved partnership because I wanted my brother into it, you know. And I took Wiley and got him started into it, and then he and I skyrocketed then, you know, 'cause our voices were so close together, you know, in harmony. 'Cause two brothers' voices blend together better than strangers, you know."⁴³

"It was a terrible time to try to make a livin', right in the middle of the Depression. But we survived, you know. But we were popular—there's no doubt about that. Wade and me were the most popular duet of all times back in those days. That was due to 'Maple on the

"It was a terrible time to try to make a livin', right in the middle of the Depression. But we survived, you know. But we were popular—there's no doubt about that." —Zeke Morris

Hill,' you know, and 'Two Little Rosebuds' and songs like that. That's what put us over: 'Maple on the Hill.'"

Having a sponsor was necessary for a band to have a sustaining salary. "Well, it more or less helped the sponsor, really," said Zeke. "We made our money off of our show dates, you know. [The sponsor] just paid for the time on the radio, more or less, so we could advertise our show dates. And I have, in the early days, went into radio stations and bought my own time so I could work my show dates. I'd go in and buy time, you know. 'Cause it was pretty cheap in those days. But after later on down the line, then you *could* get some pretty good sponsors. But a lot of times I have bought my own times."

Zeke and Wiley became the **Morris Brothers** again as a brothers act in Asheville on a daily radio afternoon show at WWNC, sponsored by JFG Coffee (which still exists today). All the Morris brothers played the guitar, so Zeke took up the fiddle at this time to help their sound. Later, they played a daily morning show at

⁴³ All quotations by Zeke Morris are from a telephone interview with Zeke while he was at his auto body shop in Black Mountain, North Carolina, just over the hill from Old Fort, NC, on November 26 and 27, 1993, unless otherwise noted.

WPTF, Raleigh, North Carolina, and were immediately followed by the **Monroe Brothers**, Bill and Charlie, with whom they became close friends. They were not rivals because their music was so different, said Zeke.

On January 26, 1938, the **Morris Brothers**, Zeke and Wiley (with guest fiddler Homer Sherrill) recorded for RCA Victor for the first time. During this recording session in Rock Hill, South Carolina, the three brothers recorded “Let Me Be Your Salty Dog.”⁴⁴ It became the **Morris Brothers’** most famous tune. Zeke said that the idea for the song came to him after winning at the slot machines at a bar near Canton, North Carolina, called the Salty Dog. Wiley said that the origin for the name came from when they were kids growing up together in Old Fort. When one would see a girl he liked, he’d say, “I’d like to be her salty dog!” Also, there used to be a drink in Michigan called the Salty Dog.⁴⁵ The song later gained great popularity in the bluegrass world. They made much more money from royalties than from the sales of their recordings.⁴⁶

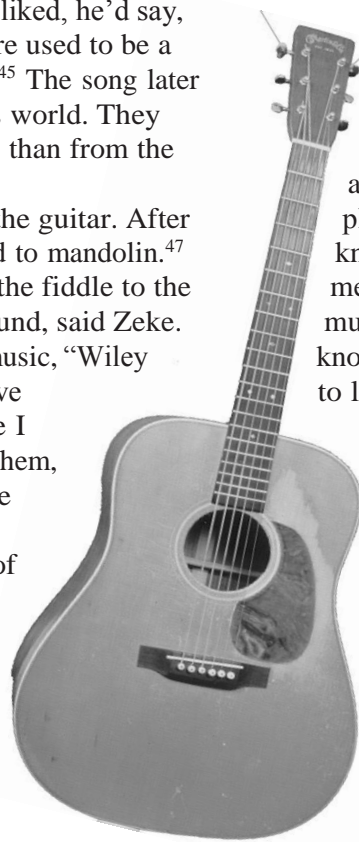
Zeke had started out his career on the guitar. After teaching Wiley how to play, he switched to mandolin.⁴⁷ They added the three-finger banjo and the fiddle to the band and they really had a bluegrass sound, said Zeke. He reflected on Wiley and their original music, “Wiley could really play that guitar. You see, I’ve always could play a mandolin ever since I started out playin’. I could play any of them, you know. But when Wiley and me were playin’, once in awhile I would get the fiddle and play a breakdown. But most of the time it was mandolin altogether. And I’ve got a style that nobody else has got.” The sound of this period is captured on Rounder’s 1972 recording and release of “Wiley, Zeke and Homer.”

“But, now listen,” continued Zeke, “I know you’ve talked to quite a few people. A lot of them will give you the wrong information. But believe me, what I’ve told you is straight from the horse’s mouth. I know all about this stuff and I’ve always had an excellent memory—[what I’ve told you] is what Wade and me did together. But Wade and me wasn’t together all that much—about three years or something like that? See, Wiley and me have spent pretty much a lifetime

together. And ever since that, I got him on to playin’ and singin’. You should have heard him when I first got him. Lord, I worked with him, mercy sakes...to get his timin’ right, you know. But after he caught on, I mean he went to town then. And I worked with him right; I had patience with him. ‘Cause you can disgust a young person and turn ‘em against that. But I’d work with him and showed him. And the first thing you know, there wasn’t any better. He come right out from the woods and in no time he was a-goin’. He was a terrific singer. That guy had a mellow voice and I mean he could sing, too. He didn’t sing through his nose at all.”

It is interesting that the country music which was prevalent in the ‘30s was mostly that of the big string bands like the **Skillet Lickers** and the **Georgia Wildcats**, for instance, and that Zeke and George didn’t use them as mentors. Laughing, Zeke also recalled, “The **Fruit Jar Drinkers**, old Uncle Dave Macon. That wasn’t music as far as I was concerned. Like I told you, I started playin’ when I was eight or nine years old. And you know, I just hit it right off. I could tune my instrument before I could play it. I had a good ear for music. I guess I was gifted from my mother, you know, and it wasn’t any problem for me to learn and to learn different instruments. At one time, I could play the fire out of a guitar. But after Wiley and me were doin’ our duets and all, just once in awhile I’d take the guitar when we was goin’ to do a trio or a quartet number like a gospel song or something. I’d play the guitar then, ‘cause I’d play with my fingers, you know; it’s a different sound from Wiley with a straight pick. I used a thumb pick and only occasionally used an index finger pick back before we got amplifiers. But after we got amplifiers I just used my natural fingers. But it didn’t really make any difference in my playin’. I just wouldn’t play as loud. And playin’ my mandolin, I don’t play it loud at all. I get right up in the microphone with it so I can get over the strings, you know.

“But I developed my own style when I first started learnin’, so I never did care about coppin’ after somebody else. I never did believe in that. I just did my own thing. Now, a lot of people started to copy Wiley and me, but they’ve never been able to get it done. There was some boys up in West Virginia, calls their



1936 Martin D-28 guitar. Over the years the Martin D-28 guitar has proven itself to be the most popular model for bluegrass music. The pre-World War II models with Herringbone trim are especially prized by collectors as well as musicians. Photo courtesy George Gruhn Guitars.

⁴⁴ Also known as “Salty Dog Blues.”

⁴⁵ In an interview with Wade Mainer in 1990, Wade spoke about Wiley’s idea about the origin of the song. “That song was created by the old, old Shelton Brothers. Now, Wiley may be getting ahead of hisself. That song was done just like I done ‘Maple on the Hill’ [by the modification of an existing song]. They (the Morris Brothers) changed it and made the different arrangements and all. But that’s the way that song was created. I remember that song many, many years before Wiley and I got together.” Finally, according to Walter V. Saunders’ “Notes and Queries” in *Bluegrass Unlimited*, May, 1990, “Salty Dog Blues” was revised considerably by the Morris Brothers from the 1925 tune by Papa Charlie Jackson.

⁴⁶ Earlier in this interview, Zeke mentioned that he was smart, and the reason why is because he copyrighted his songs. Many other artists of the day, and later, hadn’t learned that lesson yet.

⁴⁷ Zeke’s mandolin, the one which he used throughout his career, is the only A-1 Gibson in existence today, he says. Patented in 1898 and sold on the market 1906; he has been offered \$15,000 for it. He will leave it to his large family. He also will leave his large collection of 78s to his family.

self the **Morris Brothers**. They tried to copy after us but they just can't do it, you know. They don't have the voices; they can't do it like Wiley and me did. People who know all about our music are all the time writin' me and sendin' me information. But nobody in the whole wide world can do it like the Morris brothers. 'Cause when we would perform at these places, it was just like down in Charlotte in 1985. Anyway, I have my own style and I've stayed with it ever since I was a kid. Naturally, I got better in my playin'."

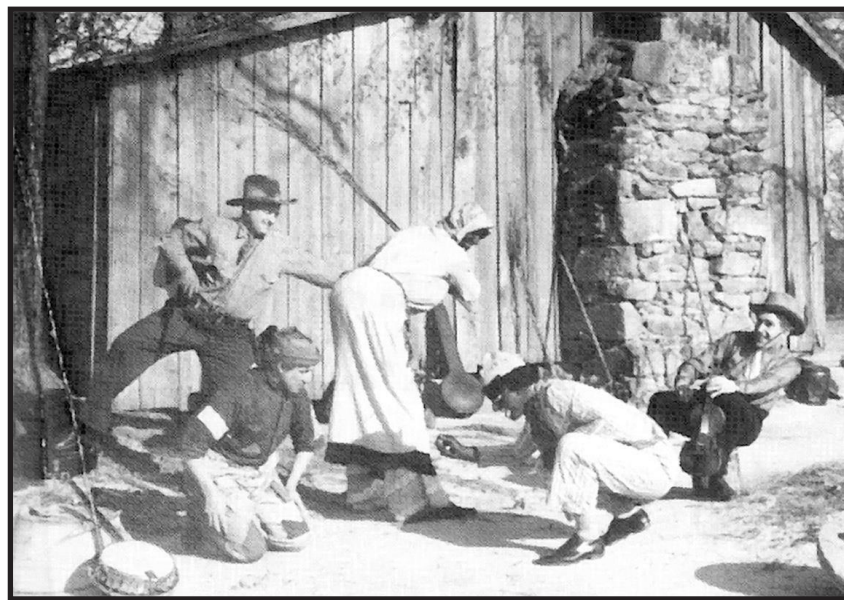
The **Morris Brothers** had as its nucleus Zeke and younger brother Wiley. They soon added fiddler Homer "Pappy" Sherrill as a three-piece band in Danville, Virginia. In April 1938, Joel Martin joined the **Morris Brothers** at WBTV, Danville, Virginia, on the Farm Bulletin Program and by early 1939 on the Western North Carolina *Farm Hour* at WWNC.

Their first banjo player, Joel Martin was one of the pioneers in the bluegrass style of banjo playing as were Snuffy Jenkins, Hoke Jenkins, Mack Crow and few others. Wiley and Zeke now had the basic combination of instruments (banjo, fiddle, guitar, mandolin) which later used in bluegrass. Martin "was a terrific banjo player!" said Zeke. "He played the three-finger style. So he's the one, really, who set the stage for the three-finger banjo pickin'." According to Zeke, Martin was largely self-taught, having no connection or exposure with Charlie Poole, Snuffy Jenkins or others. "He didn't know nothin' about Snuffy. He was from way up in the hills of Virginia—back up towards Martinsville. His whole family was musicians. Wiley and me and Homer, we left Raleigh and went to Danville, Virginia, and we mopped up there and that's where we got a-hold of Joel. He joined us on the five-string banjo. We really had a band, too! Just us three. And Buddy, he couldn't sing, you know. But he could really play a five-string banjo."

Martin played "nothin' like Charlie Poole," Zeke explained. "In other words, it was on the same style that Hoke Jenkins—Snuffy was Hoke's uncle—and Hoke played with Wiley and me for several years, you know. In fact, he was a better banjo player than Snuffy! Old Hoke was a real five-string banjo player. But Joel Martin; you couldn't beat him. That guy was terrific! He's another one who couldn't sing a lick (Zeke laughed). Well, Snuffy couldn't sing either." Martin stayed with the **Morris Brothers** about two years; he was replaced on the five-string banjo by Hoke Jenkins, followed by Don Reno, then Earl Scruggs.

"Wiley and me started the Western North Carolina *Farm Hour* on WWNC," continued Zeke, "and stayed there until '41 when the War come on. Of course, we went back and played several times after that, you know. But we stayed there from '39 through '41. And we played the whole territory for WWNC 'cause we had two programs. We was on at 5:30 in the mornin' and then we'd come on at 12:05 'til one durin' the day. And we were really popular back in those days, too." It was at WWNC that brother George joined them for two years.⁴⁸

Members of the **Morris Brothers** in late 1939 were Zeke (mandolin), George (guitar) and Wiley (guitar) Morris with Hoke Jenkins (banjo) and Tiny Dodson (fiddle). They were very popular with "Get on Board Little Children" and "Walking in Jerusalem Just Like John." The brothers' harmonies were impeccable. They featured comedy skits of black-faced George, Wiley, Zeke and Hoke. Back in those days there was no racial problem with this kind of entertainment.



Wade Mainer's *Sons of the Mountaineers*, c. 1938. L to R: J.E. Mainer, Wade Mainer, Clyde Moody (in black-face and dress) Jay Hugh Hall, Steve Ledford. Black-face comedy was common as a form of entertainment in country acts of the day.

In 1941, the band was on WSPA in Spartanburg, North Carolina, with young Don Reno on banjo (Hoke had left for the military). As with many a musician's career, W.W.II interrupted the professional musical career of the **Morris Brothers** and a shortage of gasoline and tires made travel difficult. Zeke recalled that "Don Reno came in after Hoke Jenkins who was with us on the *Farm Hour*. But I got Don Reno, I believe it was in '41⁴⁹ 'cause I went to Spartanburg and started a

⁴⁸ The next time the Morris Brothers returned to WWNC was "in the '70s," told Zeke. "They saw the film that Earl (Scruggs) and Wiley and me made, you know, at Oklahoma State University. We had over 12,000 people. Wiley and me were feature attraction there on Friday night and we had over 12,000 people there watch us. And Earl called there from Nashville, Tennessee. Him, his outfit, and Bill Monroe and his outfit was gonna be at another place there on Saturday night and Earl wanted Wiley and me to stay over so he could do 'Salty Dog Blues' with us on his program. So we did. And after that, Wiley and me left, comin' on back home. But Wiley and me could really sing together."

⁴⁹ Other sources say it was September 1941 when Reno joined the band.

program there and I got Don and taken him with me and a couple of his relatives. They was one boy named Howard Thompson that... He went with us and we stayed down there. And then Wiley joined me down there a little bit later after he got out of the service. See, they drafted Wiley into the service but he didn't have to stay; he got a medical discharge. So he joined me in Spartanburg. I didn't have to go into the service. I worked in a shipyard in Newport News, Virginia, for a while on a defense job. But I didn't stay there long and then I come on back.

"Don stayed a good, long while—a year or maybe a little more. Anyway, while I was a-playin' on Spartanburg, WSPA, Grady Wilkins⁵⁰ from up in Shelby, he brought Earl Scruggs down. We was a-playin' Gaffney, South Carolina, that night and he brought Earl Scruggs down there just right out of high school. We liked Earl's playin' so I gave Earl a job. That was the first professional playin' Earl ever did. And I paid him twenty-five dollars a week. He stayed with us a pretty good while. Then, somewhere along the line, he got a chance to go with Bill Monroe."⁵¹

In November of 1945, although the Morris brothers hadn't played together since early in the previous year, they re-formed and recorded for RCA Victor in Charlotte, North Carolina. The songs included two Wiley Morris originals, "Tragic Romance" and "Grave on a Green Hillside," and Zeke's "Somebody Loves You Darling." In those days, when Zeke wrote a song and put music to it, they often recorded it after only one practice run-through. Wiley read the words right off their scribblings on the paper.

The brothers performed together from 1937 up through '85. "That's the last concert we did: in '85." They never called it "bluegrass". It was still "country" music—a more derogatory term was "hillbilly" music. The Morris brothers feel that they played bluegrass music before the name became known, that the bluegrass sound was there in their band. They had banjo players such as Earl Scruggs, Don Reno, and Hoke Jenkins, and fiddle players such as Benny Sims and Tiny Dodson.

Zeke feels that bluegrass music as we know it today became popular only because of its exposure on the *Grand Ole Opry*—in this particular case, through **Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys**. He is adamant that bluegrass was already in existence before Monroe—he and Wiley had been doing it for years already. He knew the **Monroe Brothers** well because he worked with them in North Carolina, but was neither impressed nor influenced; Zeke and George Morris had already been professional musicians for several years before they met Bill and Charlie Monroe.

Zeke elaborated on the music which he played, "But really and truthfully, there ain't no such a thing as bluegrass music; it's just something they come up with. It ain't a thing in the world but country music. They've added a little stuff here and there. 'Cause if you could hear our records—the **Morris Brothers**—you could see where it come from right there. I've got all kinds of records—78s down in my basement—of Wiley and me. Then I've got a reproduction album that RCA Victor done of Wiley and me. Now, Boy, that's terrific in full stereo. You see, those old 78s wasn't in stereo. They can really make you sound terrific nowadays. You can take the sorriest entertainer and they can make him sound terrific! All of my recordings with RCA Victor was done on wax. Now, this album, the master, was done on tape. The engineer that done that come down here from Washington, D.C., and we did it in the band room on account of the acoustics at Owen High School. And that guy knew how to bring it in and cut you down and level your music out. That's the reason that album sounds so good—such good harmony on it—he knew how to record it.

*"We really had somethin' back in those days.
If we could have waited and come along now,
it would have been somethin' to see and watch."
—Zeke Morris*

"It's not just me a-sayin' it. The whole country—'cause I've had feedback from it—that we were the best. There just wasn't a duet nowhere in the whole world that was like us. Old Joe Clark come all the way from England to see Wiley and me. And he said that we were the world's best! He said, 'Nobody can sing like you fellers.' I've had numbers of people visitin' me from Ireland, Japan. And I'd talk to 'em on the recorder.

"We really had somethin' back in those days. If we could have waited and come along now, it would have been somethin' to see and watch. See, back when we was doin' our recordin', you couldn't play 'em on the radio. They wasn't licensed for broadcast—home use only! Now, the first thing they do when they make one is they send it to all these disc jockeys and they play 'em over and over and over every day. I guess that's what sells for 'em. That's the reason I said we come along forty or fifty years too soon (he laughs). But we didn't have any control over that."

⁵⁰ This may have been "Wilkie."

⁵¹ On the liner notes of "Wiley, Zeke and Homer" which was recorded in 1972 by Rounder, Zeke mentioned that Earl Scruggs was with the Morris Brothers "until he got his notice to report for induction into the Army." This is the only time I have heard mention that Scruggs went into the service.

Unfortunately, the Morris Brothers did not record during the time either Reno or Scruggs were in their band. As a result, the Morris Brothers' place in bluegrass history may be lost or incompletely appreciated.

Although the brothers continued to sing and play together through the years, 1972 was their first opportunity to record in many years. It was for Rounder Records where we read on the liner notes, “The Morris brothers have a quiet, gentle appeal and a firm mastery of everything they sing.”

Wiley Morris died of pneumonia September 22, 1990. Zeke lived in Black Mountain, North Carolina. He quit performing when Wiley died. And on the topic of what he thought of the new music that followed in the footsteps of the **Morris Brothers**, “Well, some of it is okay. And they’re callin’ it ‘country’ that definitely is not country. You take Garth Brooks, for instance. He’s a terrific singer—he’s bound to be to make the money that he has. I couldn’t call him a country singer. Now Clint Black, you can call him a country singer. He’s got the voice for it! Now, Conway Twitty was a country singer. You can listen to his voice and tell. But Garth Brooks and Kenny Rogers do not have the country sound.”

Zeke didn’t like how bluegrass has changed through the years. “They’re ruinin’ it! They’re just cuttin’ it up. I think that they’re just messin’ the true country music up. Look what’s sprung off from it. And they’re callin’ everything ‘country’ anymore; and it’s *not* country.”

“That’s the reason, when Wiley and me walked out on that stage and hit our instruments, no matter how many groups were there it just sounded like a new world had opened up it was so much different, you know. And our voices—we had strong voices but we didn’t sing all that loud—we didn’t need to. The type of music that Wiley and me did was the *true country*. It changed when they started addin’ all this electrical stuff to it like the recordin’s they do now. ‘Cause you listen to the guys in person and they sound terrible! But the way they record ‘em now, it makes ‘em sound terrific. They’ve got all that extra added into it and it makes ‘em better than what they are.

“This bluegrass music is the offspring of the music Wiley and me did many years ago. You can listen to the sound and to the bluegrass—they call it now—and you can see where it come from.” Zeke died August 21, 1999.

“This bluegrass music is the offspring of the music Wiley and me did many years ago.

You can listen to the sound and to the bluegrass—they call it now—and you can see where it come from.” —Zeke Morris



The Carter Family of Virginia

The **Carter Family** is important in any history of this music because they bridged the gap from the way bands played music before them to the way bluegrass is now arranged. Before this, there was considerable participation by each member of a band in a song, but not much sophistication or thought went into its presentation.

Banjoist Alan Munde described the band in this manner, “I’m not an historian or anything—I’m just a curious observer and I haven’t listened to all the music of that era—but it seems to me that the **Carter Family** were important in the sense that they set the model for how a band structured itself. For instance, how a band used the guitar kickoff, and then a verse, and then the harmony joining in on the chorus, and then there is a guitar break. Just the form of the music they played is a model of those that came afterwards. Because a lot of the early string bands—they just played sort of [haphazard] and when somebody was compelled to sing some words—while they were singing, the instruments were just played away. And the **Carter Family**, partly because they were small and were not a string band, were organized. Jimmie Rodgers and the **Carter Family**, I think, were very strong models for all of country music.”⁵²

Renowned country music historian and author Dr. Charles Wolfe wrote of their importance in country music, “In the past, picking styles had been adapted to voices, leading to all manner of odd tunings and instrumental techniques. But A.P. Carter incorporated this group’s vocals into the instrumental sound, which often involved simplifying both melody and rhythm. Others were doing the same thing around the same time, but few got results like A.P. did. The **Carter Family** songs were reduced to three chords played in steady 4-4 time, and this simplification was undoubtedly another key to their success. Keeping the music simple meant keeping

it down to earth, and it's hard to get much earthier than the **Carter Family**.⁵³

Alvin Pleasant Carter, patriarch of the **Carter Family**, was born at Maces Spring, in Poor Valley, southwestern Virginia, near the Clinch Mountains in 1891. "A.P. got his early training in church quartet music about the turn of the century," wrote Wolfe. "It was all-day singings and singing schools that eventually paved the way for gospel music, modern day country music's religious counterpart. In fact, religious music was commercialized and adapted to modern mass media as fast or faster than traditional secular music..."⁵⁴

In 1898, Sara Dougherty was born in Wise County, Virginia. She and A.P. were married in 1915. She played Autoharp and guitar. Maybelle Addington was born in Nickelsville, Virginia, May 10, 1909. Maybelle married Ezra "Eck" Carter, A.P.'s brother, in 1926. She was sixteen; he was twenty-seven. She already played guitar and joined A.P. and Sara Carter as a guitar soloist in the trio they called the **Carter Family**. They soon recorded for Victor, songs including "Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow" and "The Poor Orphan Child." In May of 1928, the **Carter Family** recorded "Keep on the Sunny Side," "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone" and "Wildwood Flower" on Victor Records. They recorded on Victor until 1935 when they switched to the American Record Company and Decca.

In 1926, Maybelle bought a Gibson L-5 guitar for a hefty \$125. She played melody or harmony notes on the bass strings of the guitar while chording the bottom strings for rhythm. Charles Wolfe wrote that "she played the melodic line in front of an Autoharp rhythm back-up, has indirectly influenced almost every country guitar picker, her solo on 'Wildwood Flower' is one of the most imitated in country music history."⁵⁵ She used a thumb pick and two steel finger picks, thereby creating a style which some use today. A major influence on Maybelle's guitar style came from A.P.'s partner, black guitarist Leslie Riddles of nearby Kingsport, Tennessee. He and A.P. would take long trips to find new songs. When they found one they liked, A.P. would write down the words (or change them at will), and Riddles would learn the melody on the guitar in order to teach Maybelle. As a group, the **Carter Family** did little touring and changed their style negligibly in spite of the influence of the evolving Nashville sound.

The music of the day was known as "hillbilly" to describe its origins and style. Most often, the music would be supplemented with vaudeville-like comedy which was part of the total entertainment package brought to the people by the bands of that time. An

outlandish costume for the main comedian was popular. The practice was carried on for several decades after this period.

On August 4th of 1927, Jimmie Rodgers and the **Carter Family** began recording in Bristol, Tennessee. Author Nolan Porterfield wrote, "Music historians and others fond of dates and places have a special weakness for 'Bristol, August 1927.' As a sort of shorthand notation, it has come to signal the Big Bang of country music evolution, the genesis of every shape and species of Pickin'-and-Singin' down through the years."⁵⁶ Though both the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were at the studios at Bristol at that time to record for Ralph Peer (who was then with Victor Records), they didn't meet until their next Peer session in Louisville in June 1931.

At the peak of their career in 1938, the **Carter Family**'s music was broadcast live on 500,000 watt XERF, Del Rio, Texas, on the border of Mexico and Texas. With coverage all over the U.S., they could simply stay at one place and sell their records by mail. There were two shows daily. The group played there until 1942 even though they stopped recording in 1941.

June Carter (Cash) remembered the original band, "When I listen to some of those old things now, I'm really proud that we came out of Poor Valley and sounded like we did—especially the amazing sounds that Mother, Uncle A.P. and Aunt Sara made. I mean it was just two instruments and three voices, but it sounded like an orchestra. If it needed an oboe, Uncle A.P. was the oboe. Then he would lay out and come in later like a violin section. It was amazing. My uncle, A.P. Carter, when he'd walk into a room, everybody would know A.P. had walked in. He had a charisma that changed everyone. To hear the original **Carter Family** is something I will never forget as long as I live."⁵⁷

The **Carter Family** was elected into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970. A.P. Carter died November 7, 1960. Maybelle Carter died October 2, 1978. Sara died January 8, 1979.

The music of the day was known as "hillbilly" to describe its origins and style. Most often, the music would be supplemented with vaudeville-like comedy...

⁵³ Charles K. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), p. 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁶ Nolan Porterfield, *Country, the Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Life* magazine—"The Roots of Country Music" September 1, 1994, p. 70.

The Delmore Brothers

The best duet harmonies seem to come from the same families, with the similar voices that siblings seem to have. Such duets included the **Delmore Brothers**, the **Callahan Brothers**, the **Monroe Brothers**, the **Shelton Brothers** and the Bolick brothers (**Blue Sky Boys**).

One of the first duet acts, the **Delmore Brothers**, retained its popularity longer than any of the others which began back in the formative days of country music. The brothers' style was innovative and their new songs were often good enough to "cross-over" to the pop charts—"Beautiful Brown Eyes" and "More Pretty Girls Than One" were two of these songs. Alton did most of the songwriting for the duet, including "Brown's Ferry Blues," "Til the Roses Bloom Again," "Blue Railroad Train," "Gonna Lay Down My Old Guitar," "Back to Birmingham" and "Nashville Blues." They pioneered the style called "Hillbilly Boogie" after World War II.

Their style was important in country music history because it linked the blues, ragtime and shape-note (gospel) singing which were prevalent in the South during the 19th century, with the newer styles of the 1930s and '40s which were more complex, polished and commercial. The radio media was important here because professional performers couldn't earn a living playing their music without having a weekly radio show. The shows gave them a salary, a place to advertise their items for sale, and the ability to tell listeners about their upcoming performances.

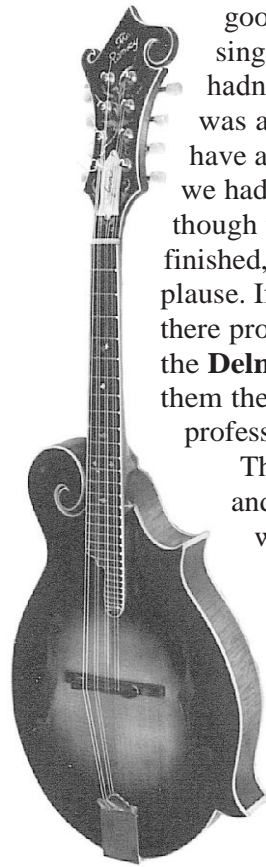
In addition to bringing sophistication to hillbilly music, the Delmores served in several other ways to provide significant influence on future groups—specifically brother duets:

- they developed a harmony style for Jimmie Rodgers' blue yodels.
- their intricate and delicate harmonies, now made possible by better microphones, became the forerunner for other close-harmony groups such as the **Monroe Brothers**, the **Blue Sky Boys**, the **Callahan Brothers**, the **Girls of the Golden West** and generations of others to follow.
- their songs were more sophisticated than those of the string bands before them. They crafted songs which could be sung delicately and with the feeling that the new, sensitive microphones allowed.
- Alton Delmore was a formidable flattop style guitar-ist. He taught Rabon how to play the tenor guitar. They were the first group to take an instrumental break on it. They were considerably better instrumentalists than many of their contemporaries and their twin-guitars gave them a sound like no others.

When Rabon (pron. Ray'-bawn) was ten (he was born December 3, 1916), he sang duets with eighteen year-old brother Alton (born December 25, 1908) in the close-harmony style for which they later became famous. Rabon played a little fiddle; Alton, the guitar. They won many talent contests. One early performance was related by Alton, "It came time for Rabon and me to play, and some of the fine bands had already been on the stage and made a big hit with the crowd... The only thing was, we could not play as loud as the others had played... We picked out two of our best ones, I think the first one was 'That's Why I'm Jealous of You.'

We sang it a lot in those days and it was a good duet song. When we first began to sing, the crowd was kind of noisy. But we hadn't got through the song before there was a quietness everywhere. You could have almost heard a pin drop. Then we knew we had a good chance at the prize even though there were only two of us. When we finished, there was a deafening roar of applause. If the crowd had not quieted down, there probably would never have been an act called the **Delmore Brothers**."⁵⁸ This success gave them the confidence to pursue their music professionally.

The professional brother act of Alton and Rabon Delmore then began in 1926 when Alton (18) published a shape-note gospel songbook called *Bright Melodies*. After an audition with Columbia Records in 1931, they cut one record then returned home to Elkmont in northern Alabama. They were feeling even more confident about their possibilities of earning a living from the music because Columbia was *the* dominant record company in the old-time music record market. The Great



The Ramsey

Depression hit them hard: They sold only 500 copies of "Got the Kansas City Blues"/"Alabama Lullaby." Alton recalled, "We were still playing schoolhouses and any other place we could book, and still the old fiddlers' contests, and we brought home some money nearly every time—precious money that kept some food on the table, along with Daddy's help. We were treated almost as celebrities in our home, Limestone County, Alabama, but we didn't have the money to make the thing real."⁵⁹

By 1933, the **Delmore Brothers** had twenty-five original tunes. Finally, with five dollars between them, they were given an audition for the *Opry* by its manager, Harry Stone. Stone asked them to perform one

⁵⁸ Charles Wolfe, "The Delmore Brothers on the Opry," *Bluegrass Unlimited*, October, 1989, p. 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18. The "thing" he was referring to was the realization that he and his brother could earn a living from this music. This would be a big step for them; very few who played music professionally were doing well.

song; they chose “Silver Haired Daddy of Mine.” They were hired and replaced the **Pickard Family**⁶⁰ on a regular thirty-minute slot. The Delmore’s first appearance on the Opry was April 29th, 1933, following the “Harmonica Wizard,” DeFord Bailey. There on the weekly show, the **Delmore Brothers** often provided accompaniment for stars Uncle Dave Macon and Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith.

In December, the **Delmore Brothers** began recording for Victor’s Bluebird label in Chicago. Two of the songs were “Brown’s Ferry Blues”/“Gonna Lay Down My Old Guitar.” This gave them the popularity needed to convince the *Opry* to let them go on tour, which was necessary to supplement the meager wages paid by WSM. But even though they got almost as much mail as Uncle Dave Macon, they were not allowed to tour until the success of these recordings proved their worth.

By 1935, Uncle Dave Macon had noticed that the Delmores were getting almost as much fan mail as he did so he asked them to tour with him in a proven circuit of profitable school houses and small-town meeting halls. Macon had used these venues for many years and knew they would work. Alton wrote, “If he (Uncle Dave) wanted to play a week in a certain part of the country, all he had to do was write someone a letter and they would book him and he always made money.”⁶¹ These earnings were in addition to bookings arranged by WSM’s Artist Service Bureau for its *Opry* stars which took fifteen percent of the money from the gigs it set up for them. This began a conflict with WSM. A disagreement of the Bureau over the separate tours of Macon with the Delmores caused Harry Stone and Judge Hay to split up the trio. Stone also felt that there was no need to pair up two of the biggest *Opry* acts together.

In 1937, Stone then paired the Delmores with Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith who had just finished four years with Sam and Kirk McGee as the **Dixieliners**. This trio also worked well, but when Smith gained prominence for himself with his recordings on Bluebird, WSM split this group up as well. After the separation, the Delmores were paired with other acts which featured a more primitive, informal fun, and hard-drinking style of music which was still popular. But the Delmores sought to professionalize the music and present it to a more sophisticated audience. Their complaints were noted by Judge Hay and Stone but given little heed. Hay’s direction for the *Opry* was to “Keep it down to earth, Boys.” He dressed his acts in overalls and baggy pants to perpetuate the “hay seed” and “hillbilly” image which he felt helped bring the music to the average

country person better. Those who wanted to professionalize the music were treated as outcasts. This conflict caused much friction between the two parties.

By 1937, the **Delmore Brothers** were at their peak of popularity on the *Opry*. They recorded some eighty sides for RCA’s Bluebird label and for Montgomery Ward’s mail-order label. They sold 100,000 copies of “Brown’s Ferry Blues”—incredible figures for the middle of the Depression—three times that of other top sellers. In 1938, Roy Acuff was hired onto the *Opry* to take the place of Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith. The *Opry*’s manager, David Stone, put Acuff and the Delmores together and soon Acuff and his band became popular enough to tour on their own. The Delmores were then teamed with Pee Wee King’s **Golden West Cowboys**.

The **Delmore Brothers** quit the *Opry* in September of 1938, mostly because of Alton’s unwillingness to conform to the *Opry* as it placed changing demands upon them. And he disliked the iron-firm grip of control the *Opry* had on its performers; it placed an overbearing friction on the brothers. Alton and Rabon then moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, where they accepted a regular-paying job at WPTF. They toured wherever they could book until they broke up in 1952.

Their style was important in country music history because it linked the blues, ragtime and shape-note (gospel) singing which were prevalent in the South during the 19th century...

In 1944, the **Delmore Brothers** signed with King Records, an independent record label which had just been founded (1943) by Cincinnati record store owner Syd Nathan. To a large extent, their recordings on King were merely re-recordings of the work they had done on Bluebird. They had many hits on King and had good success using electric instruments and the modern sound of “Blues Stay Away from Me.” As a result, much of their subsequent work was not released because it was considered too traditional and not up to the caliber of “Blues.” They played on Cincinnati’s WLW radio as members of the great gospel group, the **Brown’s Ferry Four** with Merle Travis and Grandpa Jones.

The **Delmore Brothers** broke up in 1952. Rabon died soon after. Alton continued solo for a while, even recording a hit, but he eventually became bitter and died in 1964. Alton had written more than 1000 songs.

⁶⁰ Quotation from Charles Wolfe, “The Triumph of the Hills: Country Radio, 1920-50,” *Country, the Music and the Musicians* (The Country Music Foundation: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 69.

The Pickard Family joined the *Opry* in 1926 and became its first star singers. Said Dad Pickard, “I am mighty glad of the opportunity to play and sing these old ballads and folk songs. I feel that we are doing something worthwhile, for we are helping to preserve something very sweet and fine, which would otherwise be lost.” It is interesting to note, even at this early stage of country music history, that performers were interested in preserving country music, knowing that it would be lost if someone didn’t do it.

⁶¹ Wolfe, op. cit., *Bluegrass Unlimited*, p. 19.

Tommy Scott— one of the last purveyors of the “medicine show”

Tommy Scott was one of many musicians willing to pursue any avenue to earn a living in music—especially difficult during the Great Depression. M.F. “Doc” Chamberland hired Scott during this period and taught him the secrets of entertaining the people and selling Herb-O-Lax Tonic. He was given the formula for the elixir after a year, and he started his own show which he called “The Last Real Medicine Show” which included sharp-shooting, bullwhip acts, juggling and magic, sales pitches for his snake-oil liniment, Herb-O-Lax, and lots of live, hillbilly music.⁶² Scott soon became “Doc” Tommy Scott.

By 1933, Scott was entertaining on WAIM, Anderson, South Carolina. Later, he performed on WPTF, Raleigh, North Carolina, on WFBC, Greenville, South Carolina, on WBIG, Greensboro, North Carolina, and on WWVA’s Jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia, where he met Charlie Monroe. Monroe and Scott (both on guitars) founded the original **Kentucky Pardners** with Fiddlin’ Dale Cole, Tommy Edwards (mandolin) and J.R. “Curly” Seckler (mandolin, tenor banjo) in 1939.

Late in the 1930s, Scott and Seckler formed a business which sold the tonic “Vim-Herb.” They performed on WRDW, Augusta, Georgia (later owned by soul music singer James Brown), WAIM, and WSPA, Spartanburg, South Carolina. The duo bought a used circus tent with their last pennies.

Scott remembered, “We set out the first week of April that year and encountered a freak, heavy snow storm that tore our tent to pieces. It wiped us out. Curly went back with Charlie Monroe and I continued with my medicine show.”⁶³ In the 1980s, the show played to 352 different cities and his traveling show included 100 workers, seven show vehicles and eighteen acts which included old-time sharp-shooting, magic acts, country and bluegrass music. Scott recorded with Clyde Moody for Old Homestead Records in 1980.



The Blue Sky Boys, Bill and Earl Bolick.

Homer Sherrill & Snuffy Jenkins



Homer “Pappy” Sherrill and Snuffy Jenkins and the Hired Hands

Going back to the late 1920s, we find thirteen year-old Homer Sherrill playing his fiddle at square dances for fifty cents per night. The fad at the dances was to shuffle and drag your feet through corn meal sprinkled on the floor to enhance the dancers’ shuffling effect. Sherrill’s professional experience, though, began even earlier when his father promoted his seven year-old son’s interest in music in 1922 by buying him a Sears and Roebuck tin fiddle for Christmas that cost \$1.98. (As of 1991, he still owned that fiddle.) He took lessons from Dad Williams, Mooresville, North Carolina. “I used to fiddle for my Daddy to help him sell watermelons. By noon, all ours would be sold and we’d leave the other farmers standing out in the hot sun.”

About 1934 in Hickory, North Carolina, **Homer Sherrill’s East Hickory String Band**⁶⁴ played at the Saturday night *Barn Dance* on WBT, a 50,000 watt station in Charlotte. When the dance became sponsored by the Crazy Water Crystal Company, the band’s name was changed to **Crazy Hickory Nuts** and the dance name became the *Crazy Water Barn Dance*.

The Crazy Water Crystals Company was a significant source of income for hillbilly musicians beginning in 1933. The product had its beginnings in 1877 when sulfate waters were discovered near what is now Mineral Wells, Texas. The company, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, marketed the crystalline residue left after evaporation of the water. The crystals were packaged and sold as a laxative to be mixed with water before usage. “The appellation ‘crazy’ derived from the name of the original well and was not intended as jocular although the company’s insistence that its performers incorporate the

⁶² People who worked for Tommy Scott’s Last Real Medicine Show in America included Stringbean, Clyde Moody, and old-time western stars Kit Carson, Johnny Mac Brown and Colonel Tim McCoy (with more than 200 movies to his credit).

⁶³ Don Rhodes, “Bluegrass Medicine Man—Tommy Scott,” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, January, 1981. A quotation from Mr. Scott.

⁶⁴ This band consisted of Lute Isenhour (banjo, from Taylorsville, North Carolina), Homer Sherrill (fiddle), Ollen Benfield (guitar, sometimes spelled Olin) and Arthur Sherrill (mandolin, Homer’s brother).

word into their stage names, led to such billings as **Fred Kirby, the Crazy Cavalier** (peculiar for a serious singer of heart songs)...⁶⁵ Other bands during the 1930s who were associated with the sponsor included the **Monroe Brothers, J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers, the Blue Sky Boys, the Dixon Brothers, the Morris Brothers** and the **Tobacco Tags**.

Most of the radio programs were remote broadcasts from school auditoriums in the larger towns of North and South Carolina. Unlike WSM and WLS, WBT had nothing to do with programming the broadcast; it only put it on the air waves, for which it was paid by the Crazy Water Crystal Company which produced the one-hour show. Announcers would introduce the bands and advertise the sponsors.

Many of the entertainers on the *Crazy Water Barn Dance* consisted of talent from various towns and cities in the Carolinas. It was very common that the artists received no money for their services at the dance, with the exception of mileage expenses and the opportunity to be heard over a 50,000 watt radio station. When Sherrill's group became sponsored by Crazy Water Crystals, they made \$10 per person per week—more money than he had ever been paid previously and very good wages for that time. Bill Bolick, in a 1991 interview, told of the station, "At this time, WBT was the only 50,000 watt station in the Carolinas. WSB, in Atlanta, Georgia, was the only 50,000 watt station in Georgia. If an artist could obtain a decent across-the-board spot on either of these stations, he was almost assured of limited success as these stations had possibly ten times as much coverage as smaller stations."

By 1935, Sherrill was working with Bill and Earl Bolick (who later became the **Blue Sky Boys**) in Asheville, North Carolina, where they were sponsored by the JFG Coffee Company. The trio was known as the **Good Coffee Boys—John, Frank and George**. They played for \$10 per week per person. The brothers really hadn't played or sung much together until this time, but with Bill singing harmony and Earl singing the melody, the sound gelled and immediately became successful. Bill began playing the mandolin more and more due to fan mail requests. Certainly, the popularity of Bill Monroe's mandolin with the **Monroe Brothers**, an unqualified success at this time, was a factor in the taste of the audience and a reason for the requests.

In 1936, Sherrill joined Wade Mainer's band which soon became the **Smiling Rangers**. When Mainer left this band, he formed the **Little Smiling Rangers**. Sherrill kept the **Smiling Rangers** awhile longer in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Soon Sherrill partnered with Bill and Earl Bolick and they became the **Blue Sky Boys**. He was a good breakdown fiddler.⁶⁶ In 1938, Homer Sherrill learned "Orange Blossom Special" from its co-composer, Ervin

Rouse; Sherrill is credited for making it one of the all-time popular fiddle tunes in the North Carolina and Columbia, South Carolina, area of the country.

After some time with the **Blue Sky Boys**, in 1938 he went back home to Hickory and stayed until **Byron Parker and His Mountaineers** came to Granite Falls, North Carolina, along with Snuffy Jenkins, George "Sambo" Morris, Leonard "Handsome" Stokes, and Snuffy's brother, Verl, on fiddle. Sherrill joined the band in Columbia, South Carolina, and replaced fiddler Verl "The Old Sheep Herder" Jenkins.



Homer Pappy Sherrill in 1934.

At WIS in Columbia, the group's announcer was the self-proclaimed "Old Hired Hand," Byron Parker. Sherrill began earning "big bucks" (five dollars per night) as a full-time member of **Byron Parker and the WIS Hillbillies**, a.k.a. **Byron Parker's Mountaineers**. The group was featured in 1938 on NBC's Saturday Showcase called *Symphony from the Hills*. Their comedy act, with George in black-face, was **Handsome and Sambo**. Some famous people who played on the *WIS Barn Dance* in Columbia at that time (sometimes as guests of **Byron Parker and the WIS Hillbillies**) included Mel Tillis, the original **Carter Family**, Tex Ritter, Red Foley, and Loretta Lynn when she was getting started. Sherrill had earlier played with Fiddlin' John Carson (when Carson was a guest of the **Blue Sky Boys**), and more recently Pee Wee King, Eddy Arnold and Jimmy Davis.

John Morris, of Old Homestead Records, wrote about Byron and J.E. Mainer's band, "It is the same group that recorded on Bluebird Records as **J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers** featuring Leonard 'Handsome'

⁶⁵ From the liner notes of "Crazy Water Barn Dance, Snuffy Jenkins and Pappy Sherrill." Notes by Mark Wilson (Rounder 0069)

⁶⁶ Actually, breakdown fiddling was what he did best at this stage of his fiddling career and he did very little playing behind the close-harmony voices of Bill and Earl Bolick. Sherrill later became more accomplished and could "do it all" when he was with the Hired Hands.

Stokes and George ‘Sambo’ Morris on harmony and, for the first time, the exciting three-finger style banjo of Snuffy Jenkins. You might say this is actually when recorded bluegrass music began because even though it was not called ‘bluegrass music’ then, it had the exact ingredients and pretty much the same sound (a time at which, I might add, Bill and Charlie Monroe were still singing harmony duets only).⁶⁷

Sherrill then teamed up with Dewitt “Snuffy” Jenkins to begin a duo which continued until 1990 when Jenkins passed away. Jenkins was one of the few people to play the banjo in the three-finger picking style at that time and is known as the first person to play this style on the radio. He had learned from Smith Hammett in Rutherford County, North Carolina. Earl Scruggs was also a student of Hammett. Jenkins was also the first person to play a washboard at Carnegie Hall in New York City. He redesigned the washboard to be a rhythm instrument, playing it with thimbles on his fingertips. He is credited for bridging the gap between old-time and bluegrass music.

Sherrill was known by his first name, Homer, until he and Snuffy established themselves as top-notch entertainers. The name “Pappy” came as soon as he had his first son (July 4, 1940) (named Wayne Irvin Sherrill after the radio station WIS where they played).

These were the days of the “kerosene circuit” where kerosene lamps lit the stage. The roads were muddy, unpaved, and seldom well-marked. Winter snows made it very difficult to make a living in this music. During the summer it was very hot; Pappy recalled the sweat literally dripping off the fiddle at times. In their travels, they wore out cars very fast. Concerts were usually in schools, as southern towns were spread apart and the local school was usually the largest public building which could house a country music performance. There was little advance publicity; word of mouth, hand bills, and radio announcements the day of the concert were often the only advertising for a performance that night. A sign in the local grocery or hardware store helped. Many bands of this era pulled a trailer in which they carried their instruments. The trailer often had the name of the band or the band’s sponsor.

In 1948, the band began recording on Bluebird Records with Byron Parker (on vocals only; he didn’t play an instrument. He was more an emcee than a singer and he booked the shows). After Parker’s health failed him this year, the band soon won a recording contract with Capitol Records, beating out seventy other bands from all the southern states. Sherrill wrote “C.N.W. Railroad Blues,” “Cherry Blossom Waltz,” “Miller’s Reel” and others recorded by **Byron Parker’s Mountaineers**.

Byron Parker died at age thirty-seven on October 6th, 1948. The band changed its name to **Snuffy Jenkins and Pappy Sherrill and the Hired Hands** at Snuffy’s suggestion.

When Sherrill had stomach ulcer problems in 1958 and had to quit the road awhile, the fiddler for **Snuffy Jenkins and Pappy Sherrill and the Hired Hands** was Roger Miller. This was the same man who later became famous in country music for songs such as “King of the Road” and “Dang Me.”

At the 1966 Country Music Jamboree attended by more than 10,000 people, the Country Music Association of South Carolina presented an honorary lifetime membership to Snuffy, Pappy and Greasy Medlin, noting that these three men represented over a century of performing country music. The first Snuffy Jenkins North Carolina Bluegrass Festival was held in Harris, North Carolina (Snuffy’s home town), in 1975. Also, the festival park was named in Snuffy’s honor. The next year, Pappy Sherrill won first place at the National Fiddlers Championships in Washington, D.C..

In 1982, Snuffy, Pappy, and Greasy appeared with Roy Acuff in the PBS production, “The Last Free Show.” Medlin died shortly thereafter.

Dewitt “Snuffy” Jenkins passed away April 30, 1990, in Columbia at age 81 following a recurrence of colon cancer. After Snuffy’s death, band members continued as a foursome. **Pappy Sherrill and the Hired Hands** continued to be active in the 1990s and played as much as they wished until Pappy died May 19, 2010.



⁶⁷ John Morris, from the liner notes of “Bluegrass Roots,” Old Homestead Records, 1985. The LP was made from Bluebird 78s made about 1940.

The Maddox Brothers and Rose

The story of this band begins in 1937 when they made their radio debut in Modesto, California, on KTRB. That first week, they got 10,000 letters. The studio was five miles out of town but people would still walk to see them perform. Rose Maddox was about eleven. She sang and read commercials on the air. One show in February 1940 was recorded and released on an Arhoolie Records LP. Many of their recordings and transcriptions were aired over the powerful Texas/Mexico border station XERB at Rosarita Beach, Baja California, Mexico.

The group played their raucous kind of American country music up and down the West Coast. Their pay varied between fifty and a thousand dollars. At one time, they owned twenty-five uniform changes. The costumes were elaborately embroidered and profusely decorated with appliqué flowers, hearts and other designs—a custom-made shirt and pair of pants would cost up to \$700.⁶⁸ They traveled so much that a new Cadillac—they each owned one—lasted about six months on the road. Between 1949 and 1959, Fred Maddox owned fifteen Cadillacs. They appeared at their gigs, each with their own car, in a convoy.

A 1941 audition for the *Opry* was unsuccessful because Jack Stapp, an *Opry* official, didn't consider them "hillbilly" because they were from California. Nevertheless, they appeared on the *Opry* as a guest in 1949. The *Opry* brought them in because of the national popularity of their song "Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet." This appearance on the *Opry* was recorded and later released on Arhoolie Records.

When W.W.II came along, Cal, Fred and Don Maddox were drafted. Cliff had medical problems and didn't qualify for the military. Henry was too young for the draft. They reorganized after the War and continued until they split up. In 1946, the group began their recording career with a 78 on 4-Star Records. In 1952, they received top billing at the *Louisiana Hayride* where they shared the stage with Hank Williams, Red Sovine, Faron Young, the **Wilburn Brothers**, Jim Reeves, Slim Whitman, Bill Carlisle and the **Browns**.

According to veteran bluegrassman Roland White, the **Maddox Brothers and Rose** were the last word on entertainment. He felt that even though the **Stonemans** were lively and very good at entertaining, the **Maddox Brothers and Rose** band was "Great! The best!" and that the **Stonemans** were trying to imitate this California band. Rose Maddox is Roland's favorite woman singer.

The group was driven apart in 1957 by rock and roll. Rose Maddox recalled, "We could see the change was



Vern Williams and Rose Maddox, 1980.

coming. The big dance halls were going out. The night clubs were not hiring groups. They would pay a single artist as much as they would pay a full group."⁶⁹

Cliff died in 1949, Cal died in 1968, Henry died in 1974, Fred became a night club owner/operator and retired in Delano, California. Rose recorded a bluegrass album in 1962 at the invitation of Bill Monroe and Carlton Haney. Her backup band was **Don Reno, Red Smiley and the Tennessee Cut-Ups** with Monroe on mandolin. This led to many appearances at West Coast bluegrass festivals through 1995 and she continued to entertain despite cardiovascular bypass surgery. Rose died of kidney failure April 15, 1998.

Roy Acuff

Roy joined the Grand Ole Opry in 1938. He was its first international star. Roy personifies qualities which lie at the heart of the Opry. A warm, direct human being who treasures the honesty and simplicity of America's folk music, truly he has earned the title of "The King of Country Music."

These sentences, written on the bronze plaque on the *Opry* house, only begin to tell the story of Roy Acuff, his entertaining prowess, and his importance in the country music publishing business. It is for these reasons, and because a few of the sidemen in some of his bands are well known in bluegrass circles, that he is included in this book which is a history of the country music which became "bluegrass."

Roy Claxton Acuff was born September 13, 1903, near Maynardville, Tennessee, into a musical family. His fiddling father was a Baptist preacher, a lawyer and a judge. Acuff's performance in high school baseball earned him an invitation to join the New York Yankees but an attack of sunstroke in 1920 changed those plans and he knew he had to find an occupation which he could do out of the sun. While recuperating at home, he learned to play the fiddle from the records of the popular old-time bands of the era. After his health returned, he joined George Stevens' touring medicine show.

⁶⁸ According to a brief conversation with Rose Maddox in 1995, the costumes were sold to Marty Stuart.

⁶⁹ Wayne W. Daniel, "The Saga of the Maddox Brothers and Rose—A Country Music Success Story," *Bluegrass Unlimited*, December, 1990, p. 57.

An early Acuff band was the **Tennessee Cracker-jacks**. By 1934, he was on Knoxville's WROL as **Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans**. An early sideman with Acuff's band was Archie Campbell of *Hee Haw* fame. Acuff and his band began recording in 1936. One of his first recordings was "Great Speckled Bird."

His later bands made extensive use of the resonator guitar, Pete Kirby being one of the first and most notable. Kirby played in a rather simple style compared to what it would become in the early 1950s in the hands of Josh Graves. Acuff's band name was changed by *Opry* manager Harry Stone to the **Smoky Mountain Boys**⁷⁰. The success of this band led Acuff to ten movie contracts with Republic and Columbia studios.

In February 1938, Acuff and his **Crazy Tennesseans** joined the *Opry* and were immediately accepted by the fans.⁷¹ He had tried unsuccessfully for years to join the *Opry*—they weren't accepting any new members. It wasn't until Fiddlin' Arthur Smith was suspended from the *Opry* for four weeks that Acuff was given a chance as fiddler/singer/entertainer. He auditioned with the gospel song "Great Speckled Bird," forgetting the words the first time, but was invited back and then was successful—the *Opry* managers understood stage fright.

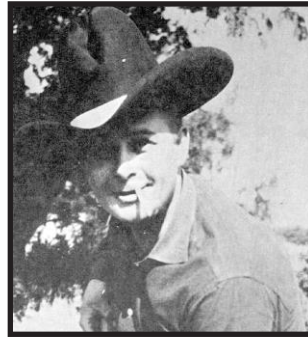
By 1943, Acuff had stopped fiddling on stage to focus his energies on singing and showmanship. His singing was extremely intense on stage; he often wept during a sad song.

In 1943, Acuff and Fred Rose formed Nashville's first song publishing company. Acuff was a prolific recording artist who knew the importance of keeping new records on the market for his fans to buy. This was an important source of income for the touring musician. Of course, being in the publishing *and* recording businesses gave the royalty checks from each sale an extra boost. Indeed, he was probably one of the wealthiest people in country music. In 1953, Roy Acuff, Fred Rose and Wesley Rose founded Hickory Records. Acuff's own hits on the label sold millions of copies.

Roy Acuff ran for Governor of Tennessee in 1948...unsuccessfully. Dallas Smith (of **Dallas Smith and the Boys from Shiloh**) recalled the event, "I can remember...Roy gettin' up on the stage. And they was wantin' a speech out of him and he says, 'Well, I'm not too good at speeches but I'm gonna show you what I am good at,' and he cut loose on the fiddle."⁷²

Acuff's first nickname was "King of the Hillbillies," later modified to "King of Country Music." Roy Acuff passed away November 23, 1992. His funeral was unannounced and attended only by his closest friends.

Byron Harry Parker



Byron Parker— the greatest radio announcer who ever lived

Some have given Parker most of the credit for the popularity of the **Monroe Brothers**. This may not be exaggerated because, according to some musicians in this industry who knew them, the two brothers were not a good duo. If this is true, then truly Byron Parker deserves much of the credit for the success of the **Monroe Brothers** duo.

Byron Parker was born September 6, 1911, in Hastings, Iowa. He first performed with the **Gospel Twins**. In 1934, he became an announcer for WAAW, Omaha. After he met Bill and Charlie Monroe there, they all moved to South Carolina in 1935 where he became their booking agent for personal appearances, announcer for their radio shows and show dates, and product salesman. The **Monroe Brothers** began playing school houses and worked at WIS and WBT.

"Byron very seldom used scripts," wrote author Pat Ahrens. "His gift was one of perfected ad-libbing. He has been called, by many, the greatest radio announcer ever heard on the air."⁷³ Someone once said he could have sold struck matches. Wade Mainer said that "he could sell a bushel of rotten apples even if there was only one good one in it." Parker called himself the "Old Hired Hand" for, even though he was young, he had considerable experience in the music business. After every radio show, he signed off the air, "And now, until we meet again either in person or on the air, this is your Old Hired Hand, Byron Parker, saying good-bye, good health, and God bless you every one."

All were saddened by his death in 1948 at age thirty-seven. Perhaps God needed an announcer, was one person's thought. Bill Monroe reminisced that "We liked Byron right off. He had a pleasant disposition—always smiling. He was an asset to our programs and

⁷⁰ Band members included Pete Kirby (who later became "Bashful Brother Oswald"), Jimmy Riddle (who later appeared on "Hee Haw"), Lonnie "Pap" Wilson and Oral "Odie" Rhodes.

⁷¹ "When I came to the *Opry* in '38, I'd never seen any of the other performers' shows," he said. He had no real idea of what a show on the *Opry* should be except to entertain an audience.

⁷² From a telephone interview with Dallas Smith of the Boys from Shiloh, February 1993.

⁷³ Pat Ahrens, "A History of the Musical Careers of Dewitt 'Snuffy' Jenkins, Banjoist and Homer 'Pappy' Sherrill, Fiddler," p. 14.

later on he helped us out by singing bass on our hymns. He had a fine bass voice. He was well-liked by fans. It was a pleasure to have known him.”⁷⁴

Pete Seeger

According to *The Folk Music Sourcebook*, “The importance of Pete Seeger cannot be overlooked or overstated. Even today [1976], his audience casts him in the role of cheerleader, but his musical contribution has been great and influential nonetheless. The man’s repertory and his acquaintance with a number of musical styles are awe-inspiring. He developed a personal banjo style, with Appalachian roots, and became the first instrumental virtuoso of the urban revival. The contribution to the understanding of traditional banjo technique, and later contribution on six- and twelve-string guitar, paved the way for later generations of revivalist players whose main interest was in style and instrumental technique.”⁷⁵

Author Dick Weissman explained that as important as Earl Scruggs was on the banjo, the other main protagonist in the commercial success of the banjo was Pete Seeger. Weissman, as well as Eric Weissberg, initially followed the teachings of Seeger.

Hank Williams

Just a quick note on Hiram “Hank” Williams, probably the most famous country music artist who ever lived. Hank Williams began recording in 1946, songs which were a reflection of the honky-tonk era which was popularized by Ernest Tubb, Hank Thompson and Lefty Frizzell. His “Honky Tonkin” didn’t do well, but his 1947 hit, “Lovesick Blues,” reached number one on the charts. He became the first country music superstar.

June 11, 1949, was the date of Hank Williams’ first appearance on WSM’s *Grand Ole Opry*. Minnie Pearl said that the applause that night was awesome. Every time he sang “Lovesick Blues” he’d bring down the house. She spoke of the time after she agreed that the new singer could open for her in Great Bend, Kansas, “Poor me. I was standin’ back there in a dumb-lookin’ outfit with a price tag and they were screaming for Hank. When I finally did get on the stage they were still hollerin’, ‘We want Hank.’”⁷⁷ “I never saw anybody have an effect on the *Opry* crowd the way he did when he was here,” said Ott Devine, then an announcer and later a manager of the *Opry*. “Nobody could touch Hank Williams and the only one who came close was [Red]

The influence of World War II on our music

“*Grand Ole Opry* star Minnie Pearl once wrote about [how country music was affected by W.W.II], ‘I think the War did more to spread and further the popularity of country music than any other influence. World War II and the subsequent wars caused the military personnel to carry the love of country music literally all over the world. This was at a time when country music really needed to gain a foothold...’⁷⁶ The way this was done is really quite simple. The War’s participants included many country music lovers who would, say, bring out their guitars and sing and play a few tunes for his soldier buddies. Eventually, many of them who had never heard of the music became fans and subsequently took it home with them after the War.

“The *Opry* was growing by leaps and bounds during the War years,” continued Pearl. “We were being joined by new artists practically every month or two as the interest in country music grew. The crowds were large in spite of rationing gas. We all performed at war bond rallies, outside on truck beds, and inside on truck beds, and inside, wherever!”

One of the most important things Ray and Ina Patterson pointed out to this writer is the tremendous influence of World War II on country music throughout the world. The War was effective in taking many country musicians into many countries heretofore unfamiliar with our music. They would carry their guitar, or whatever instrument, and show the world about country music as it was played in America. This was a *definite* influence on the rest of the world and helped create venues for touring Americans later on.

⁷⁴ Letter from Mr. Bill Monroe; Nashville, Tennessee, (December 10, 1969). This quotation came from “A History of the Musical Careers of Dewitt ‘Snuffy’ Jenkins, Banjoist and Homer ‘Pappy’ Sherrill, Fiddler,” by Pat J. Ahrens. A 1970 publication.

⁷⁵ Larry Sandberg and Dick Weissman, *The Folk Music Sourcebook* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 100.

⁷⁶ Don Rhodes, “Bands on the Run—The Johnson Mountain Boys,” *Bluegrass Unlimited* December, 1981.

⁷⁷ Article by David Zimmerman in *USA Today*, late 1992.

Foley.”⁷⁸ According to Hank Williams Jr.’s manager, Merle Kilgore, the “only two people I ever saw who laid everybody out was Elvis and Hank Senior.”⁷⁹ By 1950, his popularity was unsurpassed and he was clearly the leader of commercial country music. At one time, he was earning more than \$100,000 a month. 1950 brought the release of “Long Gone Lonesome Blues.”

The promoters pushed him until his health began failing; he worked anyway. His wife, Audrey, pushed him and they had marital problems. He began to drink more, which created performing and attendance problems.

Soon, Hank and Audrey reconciled, remarried, gave birth to Hank Jr., and experienced a very productive period. But this didn’t last long either. Even though they loved each other, they couldn’t live together. They parted ways again. In May 1952, they divorced. He gave up his son and half of future royalties.

Williams’ 1951 recording of “Cold, Cold Heart” became a #1 pop hit. Williams pined for his faithless wife, Miss Audrey, drank excessively, took drugs⁸⁰, drank some more, fell down and cracked his skull, and drank some more. Certainly, his addiction to morphine as a result of the pain from his back operation in 1952 didn’t help him kick his drug problem either. He experienced even more highs and lows. Doctors told him that his back problems were caused by malnutrition during his poor youth when all he had to eat for a week at a time was peanuts. It is now accepted that Hank suffered from spina bifida.

He would drink for four or five days straight. He wouldn’t eat. His friends put him into detox, which worked well, and he wished that he could stay sober. His reputation for missing concerts hurt his fame. He was dismissed from the *Opry* August 1952. He was told that if he was able to “clean up his act” for one year, they would consider hiring him back.

On October 19, 1952, Williams married nineteen-year-old Billie Jean Jones Eshliman of Bossier City, Louisiana. He made the event quite a spectacle by charging from \$1 to \$2.80 to the estimated 28,000 in attendance; he needed the money. They had two “shows” and made \$30,000 from each one.

After his departure from the *Opry*, his life there at KWKH, Shreveport, Louisiana, continued downhill. He became thinner and looked pathetic. He continued taking drugs, painkillers. Ten weeks later, en route to a concert in Canton, Ohio, on New Years Day 1953, Williams died in the back seat of his Cadillac from an excess of drink and drugs. He was twenty-nine.

“When Hank was ready to leave,” recalled Billie Jean, his bride, “he came and sat down on the edge of the bed. He just looked at me, not saying a word.

‘What’re you lookin’ at, Hank?’ I asked him. ‘I just wanted to look at you one more time,’ he said. I stood in front of the mirror, my back to him, and he came over and kissed me on the cheek. Then he said good-bye and left.”⁸¹ His song, “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive,” was on the charts.

Ray & Ina Patterson



Ray and Ina Patterson speak of the new music and the old

Ray and Ina have been singing a style of music very similar to the **Blue Sky Boys** and a few other close-harmony duets since the 1940s. “We consider the music we done as ‘mountain folk music,’ said Ina. “It’s not exactly college folk or modern folk. It’s a homespun version of string band [music]. String bands, you see them more for country dances or get-togethers. The duet or family-type harmony that we do is more or less homespun. It stayed within family and close friends. It takes somebody that’s been together awhile to do the close harmony. You can’t just go out and find somebody that does harmony and immediately get the sound you want even though it’s possible to sing together—and it’s pleasant. But if you’ve been singing together awhile, it’s just like a band.” For Ray and Ina, it took several years of practice before they were ready to go on tour.

“I would say that the style of string band and the folk music that we done is what started [bluegrass music],” said Ina. You see, Bill and Charlie Monroe started out as a duet. They didn’t have the close harmony. They featured more of the high harmony that Bill Monroe is noted for. But still they were a brother duet. That’s were they started and now, of course, he is now known as the ‘Father of Bluegrass Music.’

“Bill Monroe presented bluegrass music to the world over WSM,” continued Ina, “but I believe there was other performers or pickers that helped to establish

⁷⁸ Jack Hurst, *Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975), p. 177.

⁷⁹ Zimmerman, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Choral hydrate

⁸¹ Quotation from Nick Tosches’ “Honky-Tonkin”: Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, and the Bartender Muse” chapter in *Country, The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 250.

the bluegrass sound. The fact that Bill Monroe was on the *Opry* made a big difference. But if it hadn't been for the others, bluegrass music wouldn't have evolved as fast or as quick as it did. I don't know anything that evolved that only one person caused it to evolve. Anything that evolves must have several outside influences to make it what it is. Now, I'll admit that Bill Monroe had a very big influence. In fact, he may have been the sole, one person that had the strongest influence. But there were other people around him that had a little of the input in order for him to be that influence. I think that bluegrass began before 1945 (even before Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs were in his band)."⁸²

On the liner notes on the Patterson's second County album, Ray and Ina described the change in music, "Some folk music authorities have stated that 1952 was the year of the great change in country and folk music. This may have been the year when everyone became aware of the change, but we feel commercialization began as early as 1945. It was right after the War that we first noticed that radio stations were selecting their records with a certain sound, and pushing aside the basic country type. The only way you could hear the old-time sound was to request it and as time went on, they no longer played requests, and folk, cowboy ballads and mountain music were almost taken off the air entirely. All that was left was the new, modern sound of country music. The sound was described as an 'upgrading' of country music, switching from fiddles to violins to make the music easier to listen to and add appeal to another type of audience. But somehow in the process, they seem to add a false quality and lose the real meaning that is connected to basic country music."

"One of the main gripes we have," said Ina, "is that they are making a conglomerate for sale. You can't identify any music in it. It's a little of this, a little of that, a little of something else, and they put it all together trying to suit everybody with one type of music—and that's our main gripe. I like to keep things separate so you can tell what you're listening to. You can also find out what the roots are and what brought it up to this point. If you have a conglomerate of music it's just a mixture of everything. The biggest thing that I can say that is a drawback to the music, or any artistic adventure, is commercialism. Now anytime you make something strictly for sale, you weaken the product. You've got to make the product what it is and make the market for it. If you can keep it that way, you can keep it true, and clear, and clean of all outside influences."

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, there seemed to be a conspiracy at some radio stations against bluegrass and folk music. Ray Patterson told a story which occurred during this time. "We was doing a live radio program on KGFL in Roswell back about 1948

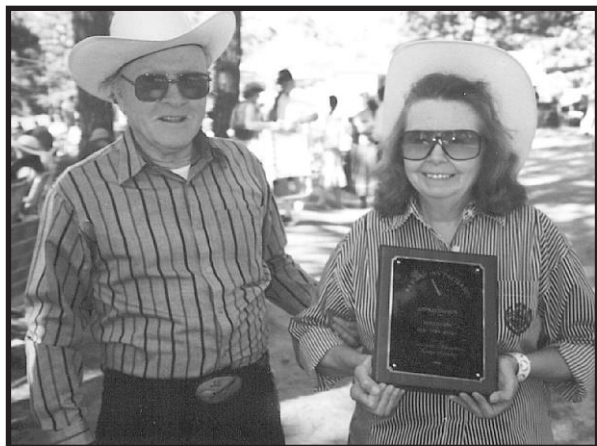
or '49 or '50—back about that time. The program director said, 'I'll give you all a daily program but I don't want you to even suggest that anyone should send in requests. If we allow any kind of requests to come into the station we'll be hearing from the whole kerosene lamp section up here on North Hill.'" Ray laughed, then added, "People would be playing their wind up phonographs." Ina added, "This showed that a few people would say things like that which, in other words, would mean that they looked down on a certain kind of people or a certain kind of music. Then, they would turn right around and hire us for a job because we was different and the other groups was a dime a dozen. They wanted something to break up the form a little bit. We could get jobs when some of the others couldn't. And it would make them mad at us because they didn't think that our kind of music should be hired above them. It wasn't because we was better than them; it was just that our style was rare.

"Now that's why we had the folk boom. Music had gone so far out you couldn't hear a banjo or a standard guitar which was recognizable. If it was a standard guitar, it was played in the bar chord pattern which sounded like a rhythm beat and all. But it didn't have the open string rhythm they are noted for. The mandolin almost went out completely. The Dobro®...you hardly ever heard of. You heard an electric steel, but the Dobro®, no way. Fiddle, you'd still hear it; they never went out. But it was in a little different style. They was doing a different style with the bow. You still heard some of the Texas swing style fiddling." The folk boom of the early 1960s brought back the early music of the string bands and the early country bands "but they done it so well that they improved on it, said Ina. "They done it better than the old timers did but they didn't lose any of the flavor of the music. They didn't polish it to the point to where it sounded artificial."

Ray spoke of touring in the 1950s, "We got along with a lot of the Nashville guys we would be working with—in the big shows there would be twenty-five or thirty entertainers. But we were the only ones who would stick to this basic kind of music because it was basically off limits [for them] to do that. Some of these Nashville-type boys who would play in all the honky-tonks, they'd have their cigarettes all going and that smoke would rise up," Ray grinned humorously. "When they'd see us come in the door they'd jump into an old **Carter Family** style position and they'd imitate 'Wildwood Flower' or something when they saw us come in the door (Ray laughed). Those was two things which would mix about like oil and water."

Ina spoke of the hard times, "During the early '50s when many of Nashville's stars were having trouble getting good attendance, they would often use only one band and have as many as six stars in one show. Even

82 1990 interview at the Patterson's home in Colorado Springs.



Ray and Ina Patterson, c. 1994

then the crowds were often small. One of the reasons for this was that the record companies were overproducing albums. One store had Eddy Arnold albums on sale for fifty cents with a sign, 'There's nothing wrong with these albums. They are just molding in the jackets.'

"It used to be that when you were hired by a radio station you advertised whatever they wanted. You might advertise dCon® rat poison one day and insurance the next day. The announcers did that. You didn't have to do any of the commercials. The station paid you a salary for the programs. You could advertise show dates, or your songbooks. That was a side benefit. Then whenever radio stations got away from doing that, they would only take you if you were sponsored or they'd give you a sustaining program and try to sell you—but they wouldn't hire you. Then, the first thing you know, they started going to the top 40/top 50 format and all live entertainment pretty much went out.

"When we played live, the stations usually had two studios: one small and one large. When you did the early morning show we'd use the small one and not many people would come by to see you play. Ray and I did that. But if your show was, say about six or seven a.m., they used the big auditorium so maybe 100 people could attend in that big studio. You'd be surprised how many people would attend the show."

As of 2011, Ray and Ina Patterson lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The Crazy Water Crystals of Mineral, Texas

The Crazy Water's souvenir booklet (see photo page 79) boasted thirty-one different bands and one-man acts. Others listed here are Fred Russell's Hillbillies, The Crazy Tobacco Tags, James B. Grady's Huckelberry Pickers, Hilo Hawaiians, Leroy Smith's Moonlight Serenaders, and others which the company sponsored during the 1940s and 1950s.

The photo on page three is from "Souvenir of the Crazy Barn Dance and the Crazy Bands" published by The Crazy Water Crystals Company of the Carolinas and Georgia. The caption for this photo of Homer Sherrill's band (1935) reads:

"Homer Sherrill's Crazy Hickory Nuts are 'adopted children' in the great 'Crazy Water Crystals Family.' They hail from Hickory, the Furniture City, at the gateway to the mountains. Homer Sherrill and the boys have been broadcasting with us on our Barn Dance programs from their very beginning. Just recently, Homer Sherrill's Crazy Hickory Nuts, formerly called the East Hickory String Band, have been employed by the Crazy Water Crystals Company of the Carolinas and Georgia and are at present broadcasting daily from radio station WWNC, Asheville, at 12:00 noon. You will have the privilege of hearing this popular band on most of our Barn Dance programs, and in various personal appearances throughout the Carolinas."

Photo and book courtesy of Homer Sherrill. Reprinted by permission.



J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers with Byron Parker and Snuffy Jenkins on WIS about 1938. This band was also known as Byron Parker and the WIS Hillbillies. Photo courtesy Pappy Sherrill.



Here is a photo (above) of the Jenkins String Band in 1934 on WBT, sponsored by Crazy Water Crystals Company on the *Crazy Barn Dance*. This was probably the first time that this 3-finger style of banjo was heard on the air. (Authors note: This was Snuffy's first professional appearance in a band.) Caption for this photo from "Souvenir of the Crazy Band Dance and the Crazy Bands":

"The Jenkins String Band of Harris, NC, 'The Farmer Musicians,' comprise one of the finest string bands in the country playing the old-time mountain tunes like very few can, and in that 'peppy' style that is peculiarly their own. Thousands of listeners are always delighted when the Jenkins String Band is announced on the Crazy Barn Dance program. The group is composed of C.V. Jenkins, DeWitt Jenkins, Dennis Jenkins and Howard Cole. If you want to hear the genuine, old-time music at its best, don't miss the Jenkins String Band."

The J.E. Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers photo below is also from "Souvenir of the Crazy Barn Dance and the Crazy Bands," published about 1935. The caption for this photo reads:



"J.E. Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers have put more Crazy Water Crystals programs on the air than any other group, with the possible exception of Dick Hartman's Tennessee Ramblers. These boys receive many hundreds of letters each week from their friends and admirers throughout radioland. This band is composed of J.E. Mainer, Wade Mainer and John Love, all of whom hail from Concord, NC, and also Dorsey M. Dixon and Howard Dixon who came to us from Rockingham, NC. J.E. Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers have been heard by thousands over WWNC, Asheville, and during the past six months over WBT, Charlotte, as well as hundreds of personal appearances throughout the two Carolinas."

Photo and booklet courtesy of Pappy Sherrill.

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CRAZY
Water CRYSTALS

Sold by Nearly 2000 Druggists and Dealers
In the Two Carolinas and Georgia

WHEN you use "Crazy" Water Crystals, you get undiluted minerals in their natural state, taken from the natural mineral water, by evaporation, with nothing added. A PRODUCT THAT CANNOT BE DUPLICATED IN A LABORATORY.

Salts and other cathartics cause a harsh, chemical action in the bowels, setting up violent irritation and inflammation. The continued use of cathartics actually defeats the very object for which it is taken. Instead of benefiting, cathartics aggravate the condition, actually causing constipation.

"Crazy" Water Crystals, when used properly as a mineral water, will gently and thoroughly cleanse the intestinal tract, stimulate the kidneys, and assist in throwing off poisons through the skin—all without the slightest irritation.

For fifty-six years "Crazy" Water has come to the aid of the weak and the ailing, and it has made of them men and women ready to face life's hardships. It has added years to their lives—it has given them more life while young and old alike, as a sure remedy for constipation, or faulty elimination.

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are the minerals extracted from natural Crazy Mineral Water by evaporation—nothing added