

# **THE BOOK OF BOB**

**By Robert Joseph Owen**

## **PROLOGUE**

**In the beginning.... was a Great Depression that covered the whole World, and the hills of Tennessee grew quiet, cold, dark and almost lifeless. Despair was spreading and it was a sad time.**

**Quietly and without fanfare, an event took place on November 17, 1929 that rapidly changed the lives of a “Coal Miner”, his beautiful wife, and two lovely young daughters.**

**For unto Floyd Newton Owen and Rossie Burr Ackerman Owen a son was born and Palmer, Tennessee was changed forever! His name was called Robert Joseph – AKA Bobby, Bob, or St. Joe. The hills were no longer quiet, or as cold, or as dark, or as lifeless and it was truly a glad and gala time!**

**This is my story and the following events, places and people have helped shape a life that has been full, exciting and overall very wonderful.**

**This book is dedicated to my children – mine, hers, and ours. Now if any sibling asks, “Who was my Papa Bob?” you can respond with – “Here, read this book!”**

**To John Newton Owen, Melinda Lee Owen James, Holly Elizabeth Ballard Winters, Kirk Brody Ballard, and Jill Marie McDaniel Owen Cline.**



## CHAPTER I

### The Palmer Story

**I was born in a very embarrassing situation. I was naked – no clothes on – nada! Red as a beet and screaming my head off in protest I greeted my world. However, that all ended soon and my Mother, Ruth, and Carolyn saw to my every need. Bobby was alive, healthy, happy and well on his way!**

**Palmer was the beginning and ending of my world for the next 10 years. Frankly, my memory of those first few years are pretty sketchy so I'll fast forward to about age 5, when sister Mary Lillian came along to steal some of my thunder. And just as I was getting used to the competition, along comes Bettie Lou (Sweet Pea). Not to worry though, I was still the only boy among a covey of girls!**

**My father was a company foreman at the mine owned by the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company - the only sizable business in the little town of Palmer. The mine employed 95 percent of the men in Palmer and surrounding towns. Daddy worked long hours and made a garden each summer, so I got about 2-4 hours a day with him. I can compare my early life with "A Bug's Life" until I got started in school. My mother was very involved in the Palmer Elementary School and the Palmer Methodist Church – thus we all were.**

**My family never did own an automobile until I came home from the Navy and bought one to leave at home. Sister Mary also purchased a car when she got her first job at teaching school. Daddy lived to be almost 95 years old and never did learn to drive. Actually he said he could – but he just didn't want to. Hummm! Anyway, any time we wanted to go somewhere, we walked. Of course the Company Store, Post**



**Office, Church, and School were only a hop skip and a jump away from our house. Occasionally we rode with our Uncle or a neighbor and if we left Palmer there was always the Trailways Bus.**

**During the summer of 1939 (I was almost ten years old) things began to change in the household and I needed to be “put away” so the birth of Martha Rosalyn could take place without the bother of “Bobby”.**

**Exile was Birmingham, Alabama, at 1108 South 13<sup>th</sup> Street. This was the home of my Mother’s brother Robert Earl and wife Ruby Ackerman. SUDDENLY, a whole New World opened up for me and I became the “adopted kid” for the summer. As the only kid in the house I was treated royally. I even learned all about “birthing babies”, and all that stuff/ Aunt Ruby thought a ten year old boy was perfectly old enough to learn about.**

**I really learned to swim at the Birmingham Athletic Club and then was permitted to ride the streetcar 8 blocks to the Five Points Swimming Pool. I also attended the Mickey Mouse Club at the Alabama Theater, which was close to Aunt Ruby's Insurance Office. My cousin, Barbara Ann Ackerman, performed there almost every Saturday. I also visited often with Charles and Jean Pierce, Aunt Ruby’s brother’s kids who lived in Leeds, about 15-20 miles from Birmingham.**

**The real highlight of my “summer in exile” was a train excursion from Birmingham to Atlanta to visit Ruby’s friends. I had ridden a train before, but never inside. I usually hung on the outside of a coal car! While in Atlanta, we went to the Fox Theater with the clouds and stars in the ceiling, and the world’s largest pipe organ playing for us. WOW! What a trip!**



**Rosie was born on July 4, 1939, but I was not returned to Palmer until August. By then, I was a seasoned traveler!**

**On my eleventh Christmas I got a beautiful, ultra-modern Western Flyer bicycle with rams horn styled handlebars. It was the classiest bike in town! For the next two weeks after Santa brought the bike I sat on it about 6 hours a day in our living room. Alas, I had a good case of the Mumps!**

**Palmer was a great place to grow up in. The summers were warm, the winters cool and we usually had 2 or 3 good snows each winter. The mountain range behind our house was about a mile away and straight up. It had an outcropping of rocks with a cliff called "The Goat Rock" by the locals, mainly because wild goats hung out up there (as well as my friends and I). We played Cowboys and Indians and camped out there every chance we got.**

**My gang of friends were: Jimmy Flynn, his cousin Mitchell Flynn, "Little Everett" Roberts, J.C. Harris, R.P. White, Hershel Finch, Doyle Moneyheffer, Corky Sandlin, Charles Barker and Johnny Hill. The girls that ran after us were Hazel Grace Sanders, Emaline Pocus, Patsy Northcut, Tootsie Cannon, and Aleene Nunley.**

**The boys played football, basketball, Set-back (a card game), Monopoly, Rook and marbles. We also entertained ourselves by daredevil rides on our bikes, picking blackberries, and riding sleds in the snow. Our chores were mostly outside – cutting stove wood, raking leaves, helping in the garden and feeding the animals.**

**The girls joined us for MYF, Wednesday and Saturday night movies, bon fires and wiener roasts, and of course Church on Sunday or Sunday night. Each Sunday night we would**



alternate between the Methodist, Christian, Holiness (2 kinds), and Baptist church. And remember – no cars! No cell phones or even regular phones as a matter of fact. Just word of mouth and written notes, “Patsy wants to sit with you at church”, or “Can Hazel Grace go with you to the bon fire?”

Very few of the girls would go swimming with us at the “Cat Hole” so we usually had that place to ourselves except for an occasional church group that would have a Baptizing. The “Cat Hole” was a wide and deep place in the Palmer Creek. This creek started at the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Mine, where most of our fathers, big brothers, uncles and grandfathers worked. As the water flowed from the mine, it was used to wash the dust from the coal before it was loaded in coal cars. The water then flowed through town, behind the schoolhouse and on to join the Collins River. Of course it contained lots of coal dust but I can’t remember it ever making anybody sick – just a little darker skin, maybe!

I guess Johnny Hill got Baptized 2 or 3 times every summer! One time he broke away from a visiting Holiness Evangelist while he was under water, and swam to the other side of the creek. The poor preacher got real scared that he had drowned Johnny when he didn’t come up!

There was no school bus for the Grammar School (grades 1-8) so we either walked or rode our bikes. Very few families had a car and if so it was used to go to work. I loved school. Especially the 20-minute recess and we had two of them each day. Lunchroom soup was the best soup I have ever tasted. We usually had that on Friday and it was made from all the leftovers from that week’s meals.

Our school, Palmer Elementary, was ruled with the heavy hand of Mr. L.D. Berry. He walked with a limp, but was



definitely no wimp! He would keep a running total of all the wrong doings of the week and on Friday afternoon would dispense his dreaded "mass punishment"! He would line all the boys on his list up against Mr. Henniger's fence and use his special belt on them (us). Of course when our parents found out, which they always did, we got it again at home! My Mother's favorite punishment was to make us go after our own switch (usually from a Spirea bush just below the pantry window). When we didn't get one big enough to suit her we had to go back for another. When we finally got the right size, we got our legs striped! If the crime was really bad she would defer to Daddy who would use his razor strap.

Christmas was the most favorite time of the year and Halloween was second. I didn't know about trick or treat until I had kids of my own. When I was a kid in Palmer, there was only "trick". Our favorite tricks were turning over "out houses", as most folk didn't have indoor plumbing then. Or gathering corn stalks and depositing them all over someone's front porch. We would throw firecrackers or spit in a can of carbide and throw it against the roof of a house. It would really explode! One time we borrowed a two-horse farm wagon, took it apart, hauled it on top of the Post Office and reassembled it. Took two weeks for the city Fathers to figure out they would have to take it apart again to get it down. Another trick was to jack up the wheels of a car, truck or wagon. Then put wood blocks under the axle, and remove the jack.

During the summer school breaks I had jobs at home, mostly keeping up the yard and helping Mother with her shrubs and flowers. Seemed like our yard was about 20 acres, but it was really only about three. I also worked for our neighbors, Mrs. Swan and Mrs. Hampton. My pay was 48 cents per hour. Most of my friends made 65 cents an hour but Mother said



that these were her friends and 48 cents was enough. I was the only boy in town who would work for them.

We had all kinds of animals – dogs, cats, rabbits, a goat, a cow, chickens, ducks and pigs. We, the Owen kids, took care of these as well as building and maintaining fires in our cook stove and fireplaces. We helped prepare meals, clean dishes and kitchen afterwards, churn butter, help with the washing and ironing. Try all of this and still get to school on time! Not always but any excuse is as good as none!

When I was about fifteen years old, Mr. Swan arranged for the Company “caterpillar” to be left at his house for a few days. The Flynn boys, Charles Barker and I learned to drive it and fashioned a clay tennis court in Mrs. Hampton’s lower yard. Did a pretty good job too and Martha and Becky Hampton taught us how to play tennis. Kids from all over town came to play tennis on that court for years.

Although I have been in “the mines” many times with my Dad, I never ever had a desire to work there. In fact, my Mother said it would never happen and “that was THAT”! Daddy was always taking groups of students or mining executives from other states on tours of the mine on Sunday afternoons and sometimes he would take us along for the ride. The main interest in that particular coal mine was that it was the first mechanical mine in the South and quite different from most of the others. Even though they were able to produce a lot of coal by this method and the labor was a little easier it was still a dangerous job and accidents did happen.

The only High School in Grundy County was located in Tracy City, which was about 18 miles from Palmer. You guessed it – we finally got to ride the school bus. Except – during football practice when we had to hitchhike (mostly hiked) home since



practice was after school and the bus wouldn't wait for us. Sometimes it was eight or nine o'clock before we got home! The driver of our bus made a habit of stopping at a store/gas station about half way home for a coke and smoke. One afternoon most of us were in a hurry to get home so we could go to the Wednesday night movie. Ralph wouldn't listen to our plea and stopped anyway. Sooo, when he went into the store I got into the driver's seat and several guys got off and pushed that school bus about two miles down the highway! Then we all got out and started walking. Most everyone caught some sort of a ride home. And we did get into trouble, both at home and at school, but that bus driver never stopped there on his way home again!

We had a 15ft. drop-off from our front yard to the road (Highway 108). The bank had Rose bushes all along the top and they ran down the bank. They bloomed all spring and summer and were quite a show. During World War II, lots of military convoys passed our house to and from military camps. When the roses were blooming, my older sisters Ruth and Carolyn, along with Aunt Royce, would throw bunches of roses (with their name and addresses attached) to the soldiers. They got quite a few pen pals that way.

Mother's sisters, Aunt Roberta and Aunt Royce, and sisters Ruth (Al) and Carolyn (Milton) all married military men. All were Army except Ruth's husband who was Air Force. Later sister Mary followed suite with a Paratrooper (Buddy). Bettie Lou's husband (Bill) was a physicist with NASA and very involved in the Space program. Rosie's husband (Terry) worked for a Jewish Carpenter and followed the Methodist Discipline.

We had wonderful friends and neighbors in Palmer when I was growing up and most of them were very much a part of my



life. However, the following people were of great influence in the person I was to become and I am indebted to them for their love and guidance.

**DADDY** – was pretty much a no-nonsense person who loved his family and worked long, hard hours as a Company Foreman in the mines. He was a pretty good gardener who always had a garden and loved doing landscaping projects in the hilly yard around our house. He was one of the “pillars” of the Palmer Methodist Church.

**MOTHER** – was “kinda” partial to her only son, but didn’t hesitate to use the Spirea bush as needed! She and daddy would take long walks in the woods on Sunday afternoons. She was a major force in teaching me right and wrong. She would say, “If you wouldn’t say or do it around me, then it’s wrong!” I used that advice a lot into adulthood and found it to be a good measure. She also taught me to wash and iron my clothes – and I still do.

**UNCLE REYBURN ACKERMAN** – was my mother’s brother. He was severely injured in a mine accident in the late thirties and was paralyzed from the waist down. He learned to walk with a cane and wore braces on both legs. We would wrestle and I would hit him and try to get away but he was fast and would catch me with the crook in his walking cane. Then I would get a bruise from a knuckle lick or a pinch, etc. He treated me pretty rough at times and teased me a lot, but I loved him dearly and would visit him every chance I got. Oh yeah, he roasted my billy goat on an open fire one fall – I did not eat any! I think my admiration for him stemmed from his determination to live as normal a life as possible. He got a job delivering Dry Cleaning as he had learned to drive a car again. I would help him during the summer and he would let me drive his ’39 Chevy. Once his dog, Penny, bit him and he



**grabbed the German Shepherd and bit him right back on the neck. Penny never bit him again. Later in life he was the official Mayor of Palmer, whatever that means.**

**RUTH - was my oldest sister and more like a mother than a sister. She was always sweet and kind to me (except when I heard her whistling and thought she was a bird – I was a good shot with my BB Gun).**

**CAROLYN – Beat up on me a couple of times but all in all was a pretty good sister. She wouldn't tattle on me, nor I on her and that was a priceless attribute!**

**MARY – was always a Sweetheart as was BETTIE (Sweet Pea). They were younger sisters and I went away to school at age sixteen, so I remember very little interaction with them. However, I have been “told” that I was a pretty pesky big brother in my heyday!**

**ROSIE – was always the baby and I treated her that way until she got married (and I still do really).**

**All together we had a good and loving family and I really missed them when I went away to school. Mother and Daddy were a little worried about the influence of some of my “buddies” who were a little rough around the edges and decided to send me away to high school. They chose a boarding school with an excellent reputation for building character as well as a strong work ethic and academics. Baxter Seminary became my home away from home and I never lived at our home in Palmer again.**

**Others in the community who were a large part of my life in Palmer were:**



**MRS. SWAN – Our close neighbor and without a doubt my “Fairy Godmother” who thought I could do no wrong.**

**BURTON CAGLE – The Cagles (Mr. & Mrs., Eston, Bonnie and Burton) could fix anything. They helped me keep my bicycle going. When World War II started Eston and Burton went to Hawaii to help rebuild our Navy in a civilian work force. They became real heroes to my gang.**

**DR. HARRIS – The “Company” pharmacist gave me advice on how to be a nice person. He always took time to talk to me anytime I came into the Company Store and showed interest in my interests.**

**MR. BURNETT – Mr. “Boggie” lived just up the hill from us and shared our garage. He had a car and no garage and we had a garage and no car —go figure! He was very interesting to talk to and was the only Republican I can remember from my Palmer days.**

**Rev. P.M. Clayton – was the Methodist Preacher. He was famous for the remark to his congregation, “The reason preacher’s kids are sometimes mean is because they have to grow up with your mean kids!” And his boy Paul sure was mean!**

**MRS. WILLIAMS – was a dear soul and my favorite Sunday School Teacher.**

**Then there was THE KLAN... Jimmy Flynn, Johnny Hill and I witnessed a KKK meeting and cross burning once which nearly scared me to death! The threat of them coming after me for something was a REAL influence! We recognized several men we knew which added to the scare. They were tough on men who mistreated their families, drank too much,**



or didn't look after them very well. It wasn't a Black, White, or foreigner thing, as there were no Blacks or foreigners in Grundy County.

Law enforcement was mainly provided by the Klan, decent citizens, parents and a once a week visit in town by a Sheriff's deputy. There was no local police force.

There were many others who helped direct my path, as most adults in Palmer didn't hesitate helping your parents keep you on the "straight and narrow".

All in all, I feel Palmer at that period of time was a great place to live. The Depression years were tough and Palmer was a cold harsh place at times, but my parents provided a comfortable home, plenty of nourishing food, and lots of love and care. Most of all they taught us to be grateful for what we had. They also managed to provide each of their six children an opportunity for a formal education. Mountain people probably fared better during the Depression than others due to the fact that they had a tenacious will to work and "make do" with what they had. Actually, the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company took very good care of their people and provided most everything needed in a town that size. Being a "coal miner's son or daughter" was actually a privilege for the Owen kids!

Thus the first chapter of my life has been revealed. Stay tuned for there is much more to come!