

MAMMA

My mother Marjorie Helen Goff Bagwell thought for almost 65 or so years that she had been born on November 16, 1912, the year of the TITANIC's sinking. But when she was about to apply for Social Security benefits she needed her birth certificate –it's amazing to me that she didn't need it before then – and when she got it, it said she was born on November 15, 1911, so if it was right, she was a year and a day older than she had all of her life thought she was. She was mystified about how that could happen and when the error happened, but her cute old college friends told her it must have been her sixteenth birthday, and they gave her a "Sweet Sixteen" birthday party.

She was the daughter of John Wesley Goff and Ola May Engram Goff of Enterprise, Alabama.

Her father was a mostly prosperous merchant and landowner in Enterprise, although his piano store music business had gone bankrupt. His 1916 Dun & Bradstreet Report said that he had almost 2,500 acres of land in Coffee and Geneva Counties, and "devotes most of his time to his farming interest, with which he has apparently been successful". In a 1912 printed ad for tenants for his farmland, he said that "[t]he best land for cotton in Coffee county is the Greenville clay loam, and I own the majority of this land in the county". He also sold sewing machines and animals; he had "the mule dealership" [fresh mules were bred in Columbia, Tennessee and sent by railcar, where they were sold like new cars]. He sold a lot of horses, and mamma said that they once watched a Ku Klux Klan parade from the porch, but that her daddy knew who all the Kluxers were because he knew their horses.

Her mother Ola was a very sweet, quiet lady who had lost several children young, at least one from typhoid – she thought she got the typhoid from a bad well and passed it to infants from nursing – and made mamma take a jar of their own clean well water any time she spent the night somewhere else.

In 1912, Ola and John lived in Enterprise, Coffee County, Alabama. Their house had six bedrooms, three baths, a sleeping porch and a sunroom. It had stained glass windows in the living room and wainscoting in the dining room, living room and the wide hall. It was on "Silk Stocking Lane" [the actual name] but momma used to laugh and quote her brother Autrey or John William as saying that "we live on the LISLE part". That made no sense at all to me, but finally after several tellings, when I asked, she explained that old silk hose had a cotton mataerial at the top, "cotton lisle", apparently sort of like modern tee shirt material. Momma had "a room of her own" way upstairs somewhere, and carried a candle on a pewter candlestick up at night when she went.

They had an early telephone, their number was "six" if I recall correctly. It was crank phone that you cranked to get an operator to place your call. When Momma was a little girl she picked up the earpiece and spoke into the mouthpiece and said simply "can I speak to my daddy?" The operator –who could and obviously look out her telephone company window down the street of downtown, said simply "honey, he has gone to the drug store, but he will be back in a minute".

Momma loved her older brothers Autrey and John William, who apparently had outsized personalities. Once when the Circus was in town, Autrey took them to the Circus, walked up to the gate and pointed at the other children, and said “they are with me”, and they all got in free.

On one of the circus visits a trick dog broke his leg. One of momma’s brothers got the dog and nursed it back to health. It used to get on the roof of the house and jump off. Momma always claimed that a local policeman thought it was a mad dog and shot it.

Momma loved her brothers Autry and John William, but both had bad substance abuse problems and ruined lives, and likely for that reason, momma hardly ever drank. Same with daddy, whose brother Glen did too.

Momma was apparently Granddaddy’s favorite, and she loved him and worshiped him. She would go with him and drive him to the beach to “Camp Walton” [Ft. Walton Beach, FL] and stay in some wooden beach hotel, the name of which I don’t recall.

In the early fall of 1929 Momma went off to college at Alabama College in Montevallo, Alabama. I’m sure she went by train. She had not been there long when the stock market crashed on “Black Tuesday”, October 24, 1929. Granddaddy told her that he could not pay her for college and that she would have to make it herself.

Momma “made it” by coming under the influence of two remarkable people in the history of Alabama College, “Miz McCoy” and Dr. Oliver Cromwell Carmichael.

I am not sure of the order of things, but she was the secretary to Dr. Oliver Cromwell Carmichael, then President of Alabama College. Carmichael graduated from the “Alabama Presbyterian College” [whatever that is] and got a masters from the University of Alabama, and in 1913 became the first Rhodes Scholar from Alabama, attending Oxford along with Harvie Branscomb. Both ultimately became Chancellors of Vanderbilt, and in 1914 at the request of President Wilson, both moved to Belgium to help with the war aid effort that Wilson started. They lived in a castle. Twenty five “Yanks at Oxford” went, not all of them Rhodes Scholars, but the U.S. Ambassador asked Wilson to stop sending “such young and inexperienced men”.¹ Carmichael was President of Alabama College from 1929-1935. Carmichael became Vanderbilt’s third chancellor in 1937 [Carmichael Towers at Vanderbilt are named for him], serving until 1946 when he was succeeded by Branscomb. Carmichael became president of the University of Alabama from 1953-1957, during the time of the admission of its first black student, Authorine Lucy, but the Board of the University did not like that, and Carmichael expelled Miss Lucy and then he left in a spat with the board. Momma loved to tell the story of when Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor under President Roosevelt and the first woman cabinet member, visited Alabama College, likely in the Spring of 1933. Perkins smoked [smoking was “a shipping offense” at the college, Momma said] and took out a cigarette and held it in her hand. A

¹ “Spies Like Us”, Vanderbilt Magazine [Spring 2016] p. 18.

gentleman in that day was expected to light a lady's cigarette, but Momma says Carmichael took one kitchen match and just handed it to her. Perkins crossed her legs, and struck the match on the bottom of her shoe, like a cowboy might do. Momma – who evidently saw it – thought it was wonderful.

At some point Momma also got to be close to – maybe even became secretary to – Mary Norman Moore McCoy, whom she always called “Miz McCoy”, who in 1931 became “Dean of Residence” – I think sort of the Dean of Women, though they were all women – at Montevallo. Miz. McCoy was a spirited older woman who had served two terms [1904-1916, 1925-29] as President of Athens College, then a Methodist College, although more interestingly, she was the widow of an older husband, a Methodist Bishop named McCoy who was thought by some to be Quantrill, the notorious Confederate guerilla fighter or outlaw, depending upon your point of view, allegedly having been identified as such by Jesse James when James was in Jail in Huntsville [from which he escaped by jumping out the window into Huntsville's “Big Spring”]. Momma asked Miz McCoy about the Quantrill legend, and she said she was not sure. Miz McCoy stayed at Montevallo in that job until 1949.

Momma was Editor of the *Technala*, the college yearbook, and did a whole lot more stuff too. Among other things, she claimed to have invented “College Night”, the big college event there. She had the program of the first one, which I gave to Alabama College's archives.

Most likely in the summer of 1933 I would guess, Momma and Daddy met at Black Mountain College, in Black Mountain, North Carolina, near Asheville, and near the Presbyterian and Baptist Church's summer retreats, “Montreat” and “Ridgecrest”. Black Mountain College was an amazing place, a very revolutionary new school then, which has been the subject of several notable books. Its founder John Andrew Rice, Rhodes Scholar but non-PhD son of a Montgomery Methodist Minister, was a rebellious Rollins College Professor in Florida who fell out with Rollins and, with his coterie of supporters, started a new college in Black Mountain, N.C., making good winter use of the wonderful YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly ground there². I'm not sure how Momma got in touch with Black Mountain College, but my best guess is that Dr. Carmichael and John Andrew Rice – both Alabamians, both Rhodes Scholars -- knew each other through the Rhodes Scholar program, and that Dr. Carmichael got momma in with Rice. My best guess of how Daddy got in with the school is that for a year or so in college, Daddy had lived in Nashville and had – in addition to a job, always hard for him, which that year was driving his own coal truck – taken classes at both Vanderbilt and “the YMCA Graduate School Across the street from Vanderbilt [later bought by Vanderbilt; I had my psychology classes there]; it was run by Willis Weatherford, a famous do-gooder with the YMCA who also ran – and had a house in – the YMCA's Blue Ridge Assembly Ground in Black Mountain, where Black Mountain College operated in the winter. The school had a lot of rich rebellious students [“all Yankees but two” my

² The 1942 first edition of Rice's autobiography, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century*, had a chapter on the creation of Black Mountain College which was apparently dropped in later editions.

father said] who dressed in East European peasant garb and played at being communists, but Daddy said that none of them could do anything useful. It was there at Black Mountain that my father and mother met; Rice called them “applesauce³ and SuperSuds⁴”.

The summer of 1934, just after Momma graduated from college, she lived in Birmingham and did research for Dr. George S. Mitchell, who at some point became Assistant Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, one of the New Deal Agencies doing quasi-charity work in the rural areas. He was writing a book with Horace R. Cayton, which came out in 1939 from the University of North Carolina Press, called “BLACK WORKERS AND THE NEW UNIONS”. Momma did a bunch of research for them in Birmingham that summer, and was supposed to go to Chicago to research for them unionization in the Stockyards there, but she and Daddy decided to get married instead. Dr. Mitchell sent her a copy of the book in 1939 with a letter saying “I flicked a few pages and noticed the results of some of your researches into the files of various Birmingham newspapers. I dare say 75% of the words in the parts I wrote went through your typewriter”.

Daddy went to Granddaddy J.W. Goff and asked to marry Marjorie. Granddaddy said “can you support her?”; he said “yes”.

They got married in the Goff house. Grandma, a tea-totaler, and a dry county, but she found a bottle of blackberry wine in the trunk with the mothballed sweaters. Naturally it tasted like mothballs but nobody told her.

They went on their honeymoon – to Atlanta maybe? – and the heater on the car was stuck wide open, in the summer time.

They lived the first year of their married life there in Black Mountain, spending a cold winter in a cottage at Black Mountain where the water on the tables froze. They had no car but had a horse, and their neighbors had a horse, and the two couples would lend each other one horse so each couple had a pair of horses they could ride on alternate days. One evening they climbed the high mountain nearby behind Robert E. Lee Hall, to watch the sunset, lingering ‘til dark, when a mountain lion⁵ screamed. They scrambled down the mountain in the dark– no flashlight-- falling and tripping, with the mountain lion seeming to follow them down, but they made it down

³ To support her summers there my mother, who graduated from Alabama College at Montevallo where she edited the yearbook, worked in the serving line of the dining room.

⁴ “Supersuds” was an early detergent.

⁵ A mountain lion and a panther are the same thing. Once twenty years ago I encountered a panther in the Alabama river swamps; I was armed to the teeth [high-powered rifle, .44 magnum pistol and a flashlight] but I was scared to death anyway. I cannot imagine doing it unarmed with no flashlight.

without a mauling.

Momma could not cook when they married. Once Uncle Lin Linnville asked Grandma, “Miz Goff, why didn’t you teach your daughters to cook?” She said in her sweet way, “I never thought they would *have to*”.

Early in their marriage, maybe at Black Mountain where they lived one year just after they married, Momma bought some oysters and was going to make an oyster stew, which as you know is very simple: oysters, milk or cream, butter, salt and pepper. The recipe called for the cook to pour “the liquor” in too, meaning the oyster liquor or juice from the container. But momma and daddy were tea-totalers during their marriage until very late – both had alcoholic siblings-- and they did not have any “liquor”. Momma called up daddy in tears to tell him she could not make it because “we don’t have any liquor!” Finally they got it straight.

In the 1950s they had a pint bottle of “Ancient Age” brand bourbon under the sink, where it stayed for probably a decade, since they never used it except to make cough medicine [honey, whisky and lemon juice] or to put a spoonful in the Foremost Dairy industrial prepared eggnog at Christmas.

Speaking of Christmas, and Thanksgiving, Momma would always cook a turkey, cornbread dressing [not stuffing], English peas and cranberry sauce. On Christmas she would add Ambrosia. My job, once I got old enough anyhow, was to take the grinder out in the yard and grind up the oranges and cranberries for the cranberry sauce. Sometimes her brother John William would call to see if he could visit on Christmas, and they would always ask “are you drinking?” If not, they might invite him, once or twice maybe.

Momma and Daddy both taught at “the Demonstration School” of Alabama College. John was born in 1938, and at some point Momma became a housewife. In the late 1930s they lived on National Street in Montgomery [across the street from Bart Starr’s family, Mr. & Mrs. Ben Starr; Bart would later be a famous football quarterback at Lanier High, and at Alabama and in the pros and in the first Superbowl game].

When we lived at 603 Federal Drive – later renumbered to 609– we had a couple of big pear trees, and we would harvest the pears by shaking the branches with a stick, with us boys to catch them on a tarp we held taut. Momma would borrow Aunt Hazel’s pressure cooker and would make pear preserves for the winter, and also “watermelon rind preserves” or pickles. In the summer time we would sometimes make ice cream with a wooden bucket and hand crank.

The earliest car I remember – when we lived on Federal Drive before 1954--was an old Buick “woody” station wagon with a straight eight engine and straight shift. I wish I still had it. Just before we moved in 1954 we bought –Daddy bought it without telling Momma and she was not pleased – a 1950 two-tone green, four-door Chevrolet with an automatic transmission. We kept it until at least the fall of 1956, and it is in the background of the photo of us three boys the day

we put John on the train to the University of Chicago.

When I was little and not in school yet, Momma taught “speech”, sort of speech therapy, for people who stuttered or something. They made amazing progress and at the end of each year had “a recital”. Wayne and John and I ended up learning most of the poems she taught her speech students.

About when I was maybe eight and in school, Momma decided to go back into teaching, but in order to get a teaching certificate, she had to be certified, and to do that, had to take some more college classes of some kind. She took some at home, but one summer when I was ten or twelve she went to summer school at Montevallo, and she and I lived together in a girl’s dorm there, possibly Ramsey Hall, not sure. While she was going to class, I rode my bike, went swimming, slid down the steel circular fire escape slide at the main building, and drank one Orange Crush per day. I don’t know what her courses were, except that she took philosophy and kept talking about “pragmatism” and “existentialism”.

When we lived on Federal Drive before moving to Augusta in 1954, she taught the sixth grade at Dalraida Elementary School in East Montgomery. Later she taught typing and “business law” at Lee High School for many years, and was elected to the Lee High School Hall of Fame after her retirement. Momma commuted many years to Lee with Josephine Grissette, the Lee home economics teacher.

Momma took a bunch of classes at night at the Jones Law School, and thought she knew a lot of law, but like most people who think they know a lot of law, she didn’t.

Momma was in several clubs, including “the Panjandrum Club,” a Montgomery literary club, and a sewing group.

Momma and daddy were very active in the First Methodist Church, both serving on the Administrative Board. They were mostly in separate Sunday School classes. Daddy sang in the choir but not momma.

They were very good parents and we loved them and they loved us, and we had a lot of fun, even though we had no money. We would borrow an old outboard motor, and go rent a wooden boat at Lake Martin, and with a couple of canvas tents and a steel ice chest, go out to “Poorboy Island” in the middle of the lake and camp out for a couple of nights. Or, we would drive to Milbrook to “Mortar Creek”, which I now believe to have been named for a Creek Indian Chief who went by the name “The Big Mortar” for some reason. We swam at Oak Park, the City Park, until in maybe 1955 or 1956 the city fathers closed it to prevent race mixing, and we had to go to Willow Creek out Norman Bridge Road, or to Harrogate Springs near Wetumpka, to the coldest pools in the world, spring fed.

It was a good life.

Momma sold her house – the closing was set on the day of “9-11” but had to be cancelled while I was en route to the closing. Afterward she lived in several places in Montgomery or Fairhope designed for old people who need some help, finally needing complete help and care. Momma died peacefully at age 96 on May 3, 2008 in the Mercy Medical Nursing Home in Daphne, Alabama, of respiratory failure due to congestive heart failure and valvular heart disease.