

GAITHER AUGUSTUS BILLINGS

June 15, 1886 - July 3, 1959

Gaither Augustus (Gaither) Billings was the fifth of seven children born to Bayless Winslow and Rachel M. Cooley Billings. At the time of Gaither's birth, on June 15, 1886, the family was living in their log home on Bayless and Rachel's 78 acre farm in McMinn Co., TN. The farm was very near the Surprise community. The house faced the confluence of Sewee Creek and Blue Springs located about 100 yards downstream from the house.

Gaither's son, Theodore "Ted" Douglas Billings, says his Father lived, as a child, near Dog town which is South of Kingston in Ro., TN. Bill Kyle says Dogtown can be reached by going North from Ten Mile on hwy. 58 about two miles past the Roane/Meigs Co. line, look for an old silo standing alone on the right, turn right at this silo, travel this road through two intersections, at the third intersection you are near the Winfred Sensaboy farm and also near Dogtown where iron ore was once mined.

Bill Kyle and Gaither were first cousins because each man's Mother was a Cooley and they were sisters. Bill told this story about their Grandfather Benjamin F. Cooley. The old man was

nailing wooden shingles on his roof one day. The roof was very steep and he was working near the peak when he began to slide toward the edge as he neared the edge of the roof Ben said, "Oh Lord I'm a goner." Just before he went over the edge of the roof his overalls snagged on a nail which stopped his fall and Ben said, "No by God, I'm not! Bill thought perhaps his Grandfather might be religious only when he needed it most.

Bayless was a carpenter and taught Gaither the trade from the cradle up. Bayless, his sons Bayless Winslow Jr. and Gaither built the "Green House", to which Bayless Billings moved his family around 1906.

Bayless had sold the farm on Sewee Creek to his daughter Sarah Myrtle and her husband James Hardin Blair for the sum of \$500.00, according to Maude Blair Bowers who was the daughter of James and Myrtle Blair. Traveling northwest, the "Green House" was located on the right side of present day TN. hwy. 68 near the three mile marker located near the Pisgah Church. Present day relatives refer to the old house that Bayless built as the "green house" because that was the color it was painted. Pearl Blair Creasman said the area where the green house was built was called Bulah's Chapel at the time the house was built.

On Sunday morning, April 16, 1906, Gaither's future wife Anna

Sophia Evans and her brother William Evans joined the New Bethany Baptist church and were baptized, according to New Bethany Church Records. Their brother Sylvester Evans was one of the six original members of the church and was a deacon of the church. Other Evans family members who belonged to New Bethany were, Lafayette, Elizabeth and Celia Bookout Evans. New Bethany was organized in 1906 in the Head of the Creek Community in McMinn County, TN.

In 1908 Gaither met his future wife Anna Sophia Evans in Sweetwater, TN., where she worked in a knitting mill while living with her parents in the nearby Head of the Creek community in McMinn Co., TN. where she was born Nov. 28, 1888. The time Gaither and Annie met is an assumption based on the Jan. 23, 1908 date on a postcard from "Annie" to "Mr. Gaither Billings" RFD #2, Niota, TN. The postcard is a picture postcard, the picture being of Annie. This type of card was in vogue at the time. Annie writes that she had seen Gaither's picture in the studio where she had her picture made for the card.

According to New Bethel Baptist Church Minutes, Anna Sophia Evans called for her letter at the New Bethel Baptist Church, in the Head of the Creek Community, On Oct. 17, 1908. She did this in preparation to join the Sweetwater Baptist Church. Her Brother, Sylvester resigned his office as clerk the same day. Gaither

and Anna were married Oct. 17, 1909. Annie's parents were Andrew and Sophia Clutter Evans. Andrew was born in Ohio and Sophia in Austria. Sophia was four years old when she and her family arrived in the USA from Austria in 1856 through the port of Baltimore MD. Her arrival time is based upon that of her Father Florian Glatter listed as #29 KLOTTER, FLORANCE, Naturalization Record Book Vol. #1, (1856-1884)

Maude Blair Bowers recalled that she and her sister Pearl Blair Creasman visited Gaither and Annie around 1909 when Annie was pregnant with Gus. Annie played the organ for Maude and Pearl. Pearl later described Annie as "a woman of quality". At this time Gaither and Annie lived very near the Green House.

Gaither and Annie's only child, Augustus (Gus) Evans Billings, was born at a Niota address in McMinn Co., TN. on Aug. 11, 1910. Laura Bessie Billings Fox remembered, ✌ as a baby, Gus had eyes the color of autumn skies and hair the color of Buttercups. He was the most beautiful child I ever saw. ✎

According to Jessie Williams Jacobs, daughter of Hannah Elizabeth Evans Williams, Annie's brother contracted typhoid fever while moving the family's outdoor toilet in Sweetwater, TN. The family doctor place Lafayette Evans in quarantine at his home. Though her brother Sylvester begged her not to go, Annie

crossed the quarantine to be with Lafayette, saying she was going to see her brother regardless of the quarantine. This visit cost her life! Annie died Dec. 23, 1910 in McMinn Co., TN. leaving her husband and their four month old son, Gus. Lafayette and Annie had been baptized together four short years before on May 5, 1906. Gaither buried Annie, in an unmarked grave, beside his parents at Blue Springs Cemetery near Erie in Ro. Co., TN. Annie's obituary in the Sweetwater News says she was "buried near her home in Blue Springs". Several Billings relatives say Annie is buried at Blue Springs Cemetery in Ro. Co., TN. near the Erie community

The Baskets, who were Gaither's neighbors, cared for Gus after Annie's death just long enough to pay Gaither for Annie's organ which he traded for Gus' care, according to Pearl Blair Creasman. Later Gaither's sister, Myrtle Billings Blair took care of Gus. Myrtle's daughter, Pearl Blair Creasman, recalls they began caring for Gus when he still wore a dress and diaper. When Gaither brought Gus to Myrtle around 1911 he brought all of Gus' clothes in a woven wood shopping basket, his clothes consisted of five or six button up the back dresses, some diapers and a baby bottle full of milk lying on top of the clothes according to Pearl Blair Creasman who was Maude's sister.

It was the responsibility of Maude's Blair's sister, Blanche, to care for Gus. In 1911 Gaither presented Blanche with a large hand blown glass Easter egg bearing a verse and hand painting. The verse on the egg read, " So will thy heart to quiet and calm, so wilt thou gather the wayside balm. So will the blessings of Easter Tide deep in thine inner life ever abide." Maude says they took care of Gus from the time his Mother died until Gaither married Bertha Wallis.

Gaither and Miss Bertha Wallis were married Sept. 21st 1913. Bertha was a few days past her 16th birthday. Bertha was the daughter of Joseph William "Barlow" and Artie S. Kennedy Wallis of the Ten Mile Community in Meigs Co., TN. Gaither took his son, Gus, back from his sister Myrtle, who had cared for Gus for three years by this time.

On 21 Aug. 1914 Bertha presented Gaither with another son who was named Theodore Douglas Billings. Pearl Blair Creasman says Gaither lived in a house on Pine St. in Athens around the time Ted was a baby. The Pine St. house had no front porch, to prevent Ted falling out the open front door Gaither nailed boards across the door.

In 1914 Gaither moved his family to Niota, TN where they lived on the farm of Gaither's 2nd cousin Amos Walter Billings as

related by Amos Walter's daughter, Laura Bessie Billings Fox. At this time Gaither and his Father, Bayless, built a house for Laura's widowed Mother, Mary Alice Nelson Billings.

On Dec 27, 1916 Gaither's 19 year old bride of just over two years died of typhoid fever leaving Gaither alone again to care for two young sons, two and a half year old Ted and six year old Gus. Bertha was buried near her parent's relations at the Pond Hill Cemetery near Athens in McMinn Co., TN.

Zelda Newton Billings says that after Bertha died Gaither "lived high and wide" leaving someone else to raise his two sons. Zelda said Gaither loved dancing and drank until his later years. On the other hand, Bernice Wallis Thompson says Gaither's drinking never affected his family life.

Bearing the responsibility of earning a Living and having no one at home to care for his sons Gaither now turned to Tim and Lydia Ann (Annie) Kennedy Carpenter, to care for Ted and Gus, according to Maude Blair Bowers. Lydia was the sister of Artie Kennedy Wallis, the Mother of Gaither Billings' second wife Bertha Wallis. According to the 1920 McMinn Co., TN Census, only Gus is listed in the Tim Carpenter household. In the same

census Gaither Billings was living as a boarder with David Lee and Lee Ann (Edgemon) Sliger, about 2 miles down the road from the Carpenters

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Gaither apparently took Gus and Ted back to his sister Myrtle Billings Blair after they had lived with the Carpenters because Ted Billings, said that after Myrtle Billings Blair's husband, James Hardin, died in 1922 he and Gus were cared for by the Tim Carpenter family who were related to Gaither's second wife, Bertha Wallis.

Later Gus and Ted were cared for by Bertha Wallis' sisters, Maude and Bernice Wallis, who lived in Athens, TN in a house near the Cedar grove Cemetery according to Pearl Blair Creasman.

Ted Billings recalls going to school hungry and in rags because he says Gaither "farmed him out" to different families after his Mother, Bertha, died. He continued, " If Aunt Mert (Myrtle Billings Blair) hadn't taken me in I don't know what would have

happened to me."

Gaither moved his sister, Myrtle, to Athens, TN around 1922 after myrtle's husband, James Hardin Blair, died. Myrtle told her daughter, Pearl Blair Creasman, they should always take care of Gaither if he ever needed help because he had helped Myrtle at a time when no one else would.

Between 1927 and 1930 Gaither owned an International Harvester thrashing machine according to Ted Billings. During 1930 Gaither had such a severe intestinal problem that Gus and Ted had to plant their crops alone according to Ted.

Even in this condition Gaither would contract with the local farmers to harvest their wheat. Since these were depression years and most people couldn't afford to pay cash Gus and Ted would harvest their crops for one tenth of the harvest. They then had the wheat converted to flour, paying the miller with a portion of the flour and then selling or eating the rest.

Around 1928, Gaither bought a new John Deere tractor. Ted recalls that Gus had an asthma problem which the dust and wheat chafe aggravated, to partially escape the dust problem Gus drove the new John Deer tractor pulling the thrasher while Ted worked at the rear feeding the wheat into the thrashing machine.

According to Billy Thompson, who married Bertha Wallis' sister Bernice, Gaither bought a large tract of timber on the old Cunningham place in Ten Mile around 1928. Gaither and his two sons Gus and Ted lived on the 600 acre Cunningham farm in a house they rented from the Cunninghams. The house they lived in is located on the right side of hwy. 58 immediately past hwy. 68 traveling South in Meigs Co., TN. The Billings family remained here four or five years. Bernice Wallis lived with Gaither and his two sons, keeping house for them, until she married Billy Thompson.

James Marion Keylon thinks it was about this time (1928) that Gus met Molly Hair, who lived next door in her Grandmother Cunningham's home, with her parents Ruben and Edna Cunningham Hair. Molly probably thought Gus intended to marry her since they had gone together 3-5 years and the relationship had become an intimate one but when Gus met Ellen Irene Keylon he fell hard for her and forgot Mollie.

Around this time Gaither may have dated Edna Cunningham, according to Gladys Cunningham of Ten Mile, Tennessee.

Ted Billings said that in Gus' younger years Gaither owned a steam powered sawmill that he bought from his brother Bayless

Winslow (Wins) Billings Jr. A lot of time was spent providing wood and water for the boiler so in 1928 Gaither traded it for a new sawmill and a new John Deer tractor, which had steel wheels. This was used to power the sawmill, pull the threshing machine and anything else it could be used for.

Bernice Wallis Thompson said "I can tell you that both Gaither and Gus were good and honorable men." Bernice knew both men well because she lived with them at the Cunningham place keeping house for them until she married Billy Thompson. She continued, Gaither loved his music and was a really good banjo player as was Gus, Ted played the guitar. Billy added, "They (Gaither, Gus and Ted) loved a good time so this and their music led to having dances at their house pretty often. They drank a little, not too much, just enough to have a good time. Neighbors came from far and near to dance and have a good time".

Bea Hair Keylon, Molly's sister, said it got pretty loud at the Billings' home during the parties. Bea was the daughter of Ruben and Edna Cunningham Hair and was living with her parents at her Grandmother Cunningham's only a stones throw from the Billings home.

Bea said her Grandmother Cunningham had a lot of money but her Uncle Lije Cunningham "ran through it" and Gus was the biggest

duck in the puddle with Lije, meaning that they drank and partied the money away. Bea added, "You needn't think we got any rest when Gaither, Gus and Ted threw a party". "You could always tell when Gaither was drinking because he was funny, carried on and told everything he knew", Bea finished.

Bernice Thomson says that around 1933 Gaither, Gus and Ted lived in Bayless' "Green House" on hwy. 68 in McMinn Co., TN, Bayless having died March 29, 1923 and his wife Rachel Oct. 29, 1909.

Bernice relates the following story which occurred at the time the Billings men lived at the Green House. ✌ I (Bernice) loved to play tricks on anyone so Livery Henry and I made a lifelike dummy of straw which looked almost like a real man. One evening as the Billings men were eating supper I crept silently into the bedroom and placed the dummy at the foot of the bed. By this time it was almost dark and there was very little light in the bedroom. I then hid nearby to watch the events unfold. Gaither came in first and, glimpsing what he thought was a visitor on the bed, simply said "how do you do". Receiving no answer, Gaither quickly figured something was going on at which point I came out of hiding and asked for Gaither's cooperation in my prank. Gus came in next and though I can't recall exactly what Gus said to the straw dummy, I remember he was pretty "stirred up" at having a prank pulled on

him.

Gus had to leave to go somewhere in his car Shortly afterward. Bernice sensing she already had Gus pretty "stirred" up, decided the time was ripe to aggravate Gus a little more and really "get his Goat." While Gus was gone, Bernice and Livery positioned the straw man dummy near the Billings' second automobile in such a way that it appeared to be someone stealing the wheel off the car. When he returned home and saw what he thought was someone stealing the wheel off his car right there by the house, Gus flew into a rage!

In his rage Gus attacked the straw man, whereupon he soon realized Bernice had fooled him a second time in the same day and then he became even madder and tore the straw man to shreds! After he realized what a good laugh Bernice would have at his expense, Gus carefully picked up all the pieces of the straw man and hid them under the porch, hoping to avoid Bernice's gleeful satisfaction the next day. For the remainder of his life Gus never admitted how completely Bernice had fooled him.

Bernice says "we hunted and hunted for that dummy before finally finding it where Gus had stuffed it under the porch. ☹ Bernice says she never did say a thing about the incident to Gus but knowing her love of fun it is safe to say Gus had not heard the last

of the Straw Man.

Around 1934-35 Gaither and his two sons lived on the old Hackler place near the Barnard farm, which was then owned by Bill Kyle's Father according to Bill Kyle who was their neighbor at the time. The Hackler Farm was located on the old Ten Mile rd. in Ten Mile near the Meigs Co/ Roane Co. line. Gaither had bought timber rights and had set up his sawmill on the old Barnard place nearby.

Bill Kyle says, ✌ the Ten Mile Rd. runs from River Rd. , in Euchee on Watt's Bar lake, past Ten Mile School, then past the rock quarry and up by the old Bostic place to hwy. 58 in front of the old Kyle place near the Roane/Meigs co. line. Ten Mile rd. originally continued on from this point all the way to Kingston.. There was a store on the left just as you crossed Ten Mile Creek; a short piece beyond the Ten Mile post office was in an old shack of a building. 🗑

Bill Kyle says his Father loaned Gaither's brother, Bayless Winslow Billings Jr., money to buy the farm that belonged to the parents of Cora Barnard who was Winslow's wife. When he loaned the money to Winslow, Bill's Father told Winslow, now don't get mad I'll have to ask for this money back one of these days. Gaither may have made a favorable deal when he bought the timber because either his brother owned the timber or was married

to the woman whose parents owned the timber.

Ted Billings said it was Gaither's habit to operate the sawmill September through June sawing lumber which was stacked to dry as it was sawed. The lumber was hauled from July through August to a local lumber yard and sold, long oak boards with very few knots bringing \$16.00 per 1,000 board ft.

Bill Kyle says that when the Billings men lived on the Hackler place in Ten Mile, TN, Bill, his little brother and one of their friends planned to steal a watermelon out of the Billings' family's watermelon patch. Bill let Gus in on the scheme and together they planned to scare the pants off Bill's brother and the other boy.

Having "hatched" the plot with Gus, Bill innocently returned home and that evening after dark led the unsuspecting boys into the waiting trap. Gus had hidden in the thick woods armed with his double barreled shotgun. Bill remained behind as his little brother and the other boy crossed the fence into the watermelon patch. Just as the last boy entered the patch Gus screamed out at the top of his lungs and fired both barrels of his shotgun at the same time.

The friend made a fast U turn and dove through the barbed wire fence and ran at top speed for the cover of the deep woods. Bill's

little brother was scared completely out of his mind and could only manage to scream over and over as he ran in small circles through the watermelon patch trampling everything in his path.

By 1937 both Gaither's sons had married and in 1942 Gaither began living with Ted and his wife Zelda Newton Billings in Powell, TN. Except for a brief time with Gus, Gaither remained with Ted and Zelda for the next seventeen years. Gus had married Ellen Irene Keylon of Ten Mile where they first lived in an extra house belonging to Irene's Mother Katherine Melissa Sensaboy Keylon.

Around 1945 Gus and Irene separated and Gaither moved back in with Gus. The two men continued saw milling as they always had done but this wasn't destined to continue for Gus died on May 23rd 1946. By this time Ted and Zelda had purchased a 228 acre dairy farm in Charleston, Bradley Co., TN. Ted's farm was on both sides of He.11 at the Southern city limits of Charleston and Gaither went to live with Ted and Zelda.

By 1947 or 48 I (Wayne Paul Billings) was allowed to spend a month or so at my Uncle Ted Billings' dairy farm in Charleston each year during our school vacation. To a young boy of my age the big attraction of that was being with my Grandfather Gaither who I thought the world of. He was a very patient and caring

Grandfather known to me as Pap Paw.

One of my most treasured possessions today is a small cedar chest built in 1946 by Pap Paw and given to me. Other treasures he would make for me during my summer stays in following years were whirligigs, a wooden wagon, whistles made from the bark of a sapling and a crossbow.

Pap Paw would make whistles for me out of the bark of a Sourwood sapling. It had to be in the Spring when the sap was rising, he would select a small limb about the size of a man's finger and gently tap the bark all around causing it to loosen from the wood thus allowing him to pull the bark off, he would plug one end of the tube of bark and cut the other end at a slant and partially plug it, then cut a hole in the bark at that end. The final result was an ear piercing whistle any boy would be proud to own. Those summers with Pap Paw were the high light of my young life.

Zelda Newton Billings said "when Gaither was born his insides came out and that his sister Agnes Gertrude always catered to him". Ted Billings said Gaither never felt really good his entire life and around 1930 rode the train to Ft. Sanders Hospital in Knoxville, TN where he was diagnosed as having colon cancer and was advised surgery was necessary.

Gaither refused the surgery and caught the train back to Loudon, TN where he visited his family doctor who prescribed medication for the intestinal problem which he lived with for the remainder of his life fearing the surgery was more dangerous than the cancer.

During the last years of his life with Ted and Zelda, Gaither continued to help Ted as much as he could, during his spare time he enjoyed sitting in the front yard reading mystery stories, whittling or reading the newspaper.

On July 3rd 1959 Gaither said to Zelda "I'm going to go wash my feet because I'm going to die." Later that day Zelda found Gaither in the bathroom dead of a heart attack. Gaither is buried beside Gus and Ted in the Cedar Grove Cemetery in Athens, McMinn Co., TN. He was seventy three and has been much missed.

Compiled by Gaither's Grandson, Wayne Paul Billings Sept. 25, 1997, revised July 2001.

Sent to; Sandy Keylon, Roane co. USGenWeb site, Jane Creasman Douglas, My Family.com, Laura Bates