

Chapter 1

From the Graveyard to the Schoolyard

*The baby's eyes are red from weeping
Its little heart is filled with pain.
A daddy cried, they're taking Mama
Away from us
On the evening train.*

*As I turned to walk away from the depot
It seemed I heard her call my name.
Take care of baby and tell him, Darling,
That I'm going home
On the evening train.*

*I pray that God will give me courage
To carry on 'til we meet again.
It's hard to know she's gone forever.
They're carr'ing her home
On the evening train.*

*I heard the laughter at the depot.
But my tears fell like the rain.
When I saw them place that long, white casket
In the baggage coach
Of the evening train.*

Excerpt from "On the Evening Train"
By Hank Williams and Audry Williams

Upon my birth on February 22, 1916, I was given the name Myrtice Mae Armstrong, and later I changed the spelling of my first name to Mertice. One of the most critical times of my life was when my mother died.

According to the calendar, March 7, 1922, was close to being spring. No one had told the sun that, however. A late winter storm that year, with an extended period of below-freezing tempera-

tures, had caused the ground to freeze, resulting in what I had heard my daddy refer to as a bark-busting cold winter. I sat on the ragged old couch staring out the window at the frozen, lifeless ground outside my Freeport, Florida, home only two weeks after my sixth birthday. Until yesterday, it had been a happy home. Poor, but happy. The excitement from my birthday had not worn off yet—until last night, that is. Last night my mamma died, only a few days after she had given birth to my twin brothers, Hilburn and Wilburn, who were born on February 26, 1922. She was one month short of being thirty-eight years of age, and now was as cold and stiff as the skeletal fingers of the laurel oaks, water oaks, and maples that tapped an unsettling rhythm against the windowpane on which my forehead rested. The only difference between them and my mamma’s lifeless body was that they would eventually flush and bear fruit again.

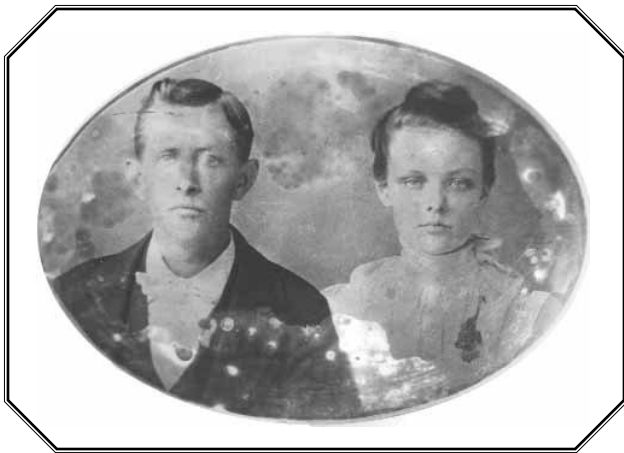
“Mertice!” a gruff baritone voice called.

“Yes, Daddy?” I could barely control the tears. They always seemed ready to burst forth.

“Come on, darlin’,” my father’s drawl rolled. “We’s gettin’ ready ta leave.” He had just come back from taking mamma’s casket to the train station. The funeral director in Geneva, Alabama, had arranged to meet the train and take the casket to Whitaker Cemetery and wait for the preacher to perform the funeral service for Ada Myrli (Whitaker) Armstrong.

As I walked out to the mule-drawn wagon, where everyone else was already packed in, I glanced at the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall: It was March 7, 1922. “From this day forward,” I thought, “I ain’t gonna have me no mother.”

The cold air slapped me in the face and froze a tear that sat on my cheek. I climbed onto the back of the wagon with my nine-year-old brother Ralph, and we sat on a quilt, our feet swinging and occasionally making a dull thumping noise on the underside of the wagon. Myrle and Myrtelee, my younger sisters, sat in the wagon on a bed of hay and cotton with the baby twins. As my daddy climbed in, the only sound that could be heard was that of our chattering teeth. Our threadbare clothes were hardly enough to cover us in the summer and were all but useless in the winter, especially one as cold as this.



Walter Eugene and Ada Myrli (Whitaker) Armstrong, my dad and mom, on their wedding day, February 17, 1900. He was born in August of 1877 and she was born in April of 1884.

“Where we goin’, Pa?” Ralph asked.

“We’re goin’ ta Whitaker Cemetery, Ralph.” My daddy did nothing to hide his anger at the trip we were about to make. “Y’all’s mamma’s people gotta church there. So, that’s where y’all’s mamma gonna be buried.”

Mamma’s grandparents, James Denard and Mary Ann Whitaker, had donated land for a church and cemetery in Geneva County, Alabama, called Whitaker Methodist Church and Cemetery. That, however, did not prevent Mamma’s parents from being spiteful.

They argued long and hard with my daddy and finally convinced him that his wife, my mother, had to be buried there. He resented

them. Resented their constant implications that he was not good enough for their daughter, that he was worthless.

As we rode, I stared at the dirt road as it trailed off behind us. I thought about my mother and how kind and gentle she had been. I thought about how much I was going to miss her, how much I already did miss her. It was a dreary, dead day. Sunshine could have made it beautiful. Rain could have made it hopeful. As it was, it was simply gloomy and depressing, as lifeless as my mother. Hopeless. Desolate.

We all huddled together that night and slept in the wagon. We had brought plenty of old quilts and some food. Although the trip only took a couple of days, it seemed like an eternity. The twins slept most of the way wrapped in their quilt, while Myrle and Myrtee played quietly with each other. Also, they would feed their two baby brothers when necessary. Occasionally, we would stop along the way so Daddy could build a fire to warm a couple of bottles for the twins. My brother Ralph, my daddy, and I spent most of the trip silently lost in our own thoughts about Mamma.

When we arrived at the church, everyone was waiting outside for us. Our aunt and uncles and older brothers, Henry, Walter, and Clyde, took turns hugging us. They all shook hands with my daddy, but in a perfunctory, half-hearted way. My mother had been the glue that held the family together. She had been the peacekeeper, the bridge that connected everyone. With her death, everyone knew that my daddy either wouldn't be able or would not want to care for us, the youngest children who had come in the wagon with him. Even my older brothers, who had already moved out of the house, realized it.

"I . . . I'm glad y'all could come," Daddy said. He was staring down at the ground, almost as if he could read their thoughts, and was painfully embarrassed.

"We loved her too, Euge," Aunt Mary said, putting an arm on his shoulder. They all liked to call him Euge, even though his real name was Walter Eugene Armstrong. And, as if her arm on his shoulder were a signal, Daddy's four brothers—Robert Lee, Benjamin Franklin, John W., and James Monroe—joined their sister in comforting him.

"She was like our sister," Uncle Ben said. They all nodded their agreement. There were people missing, though.

"Daddy," I said softly, "where's Grandpa and Grandma Whitaker?" The tears were starting to form in my eyes again. My Aunt Mary, or Aunt Nen as we called her, pulled me to her tightly and whispered in my ear, "Honey, I'm sorry. They ain't gonna be able to make it. They didn't say why."

"I know why," Daddy growled. "It's 'cause I'm here. They can't even come see their daughter buried 'cause I'm here." No one wanted to say anything, but they all knew that Grandpa Joseph and Grandma Lugenia Whitaker had never forgiven Mamma for marrying Daddy. They had always considered him no good and a ne'er-do-well.

The small church sat solitary and desolate. Its dull white walls mimicked the dark shroud of the sky. The path leading up to the front door seemed to say, "This is a place where death resides." The blood-red clay ground was covered here and there with white sand. The way the wind gently moved, the thick wet sand gave the impression that the ground was bleeding. Add to that the tombstones, laid out in an orderly fashion around the church, and one was immediately reminded of all the old Western pictures of Boothill Cemetery. You almost expected a coil of tumbleweed to blow by at any minute. Even the wind seemed afraid to blow too hard. It was just hard enough to raise

goosebumps on your skin and moan eerily as it wound through the cemetery. A sliver of light from the slightly open church door acted like a beacon, as everyone seemed to rush towards it to escape the feeling of death that hung in the air like a thick fog.

We all went inside the church and sat silently while the preacher performed the ceremony. It was solemn and heart-felt and brought us to tears. There were a lot of people in attendance. My mother had many friends and was well loved in the community. However, not one of the Whitakers showed up, not even her mother and father.

When the ceremony was over, everyone went out to the gravesite for the interment. I could see Daddy draw his breath and tense up as he caught sight of the grave. My grandmother Lugenia Whitaker had obviously paid for it. It was one of the old fashioned kind, made of a slab of bricks. There was no grave marker, just the bricks, which later would be covered over with a layer of cement.

The preacher said a few more words as the pallbearers carried her cheap pine box to the grave. Through my tears, I stared at the cavernous black hole where Mamma would be for the rest of eternity. It was cold and black. It was a gaping mouth waiting to be fed with her body. The air around the grave seemed to be colder than anywhere else. I wondered if it was death reaching out from the pit before us, waiting for its sacrifice.

When the preacher had finished, he went back inside the church as everyone left, except my daddy, his brothers and sister, and all their children. In the background, the *chit, chit* of dirt being shoveled into my mother's grave could be heard. We, the children, kept each other company; the older ones looked after the younger ones. I sat on the ground and stared at the shriveled, pathetic form of my daddy. He just sat in his chair hunched over with his brothers and sister surrounding him. Each was waiting for someone else to start talking. Tears welled in all their eyes, but they held them back, thinking of the task that lay before them. In the background I could hear the workers lowering Mamma's casket into the ground.

In all my years since that day, the most painful moment of my entire life, and the one heart-wrenching moment that I have not been able to forget, is the sight of my daddy crying, overcome by grief and pain. There was a brief pause as he broke down and gathered himself up again. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I can't care for all these young'uns. I love 'em dearly but . . ." he trailed off. It was as if a dam burst. His siblings were anxious to speak.

Aunt Nen said, "Myrle and Myrtelee can stay with us."

Daddy gave her a faint, sincere smile. She and Uncle Pete, who made a good living as a contractor and builder, only had one child, a son from his previous marriage.

Daddy's oldest brother, Benjamin Franklin, spoke next. With a firm hand on my daddy's shoulder he said, "Chairty and I will take the twin baby boys. They'll be fine with us."

Chit, chit. More dirt being shoveled.

"Ben," Daddy said, "you already got seven young'uns of your own."

Uncle Ben and Aunt Chairty loved children. They liked having a large family. "That's all right. We ain't gonna love 'em any less than our own. They'll grow up with plenty of cousins."

Chit, chit.

All but Ralph and I had been taken by one of Daddy's siblings. When it got down to Ralph and me, however, there seemed to be a dispute. At first, I thought that everyone was fighting over

us because they wanted us so badly. Eventually, I realized that they were arguing over who would take us because no one wanted us. I tried to listen to what they were saying. It was hard, but I caught a little of their conversation.

Everyone argued for quite a while about us. Daddy's brothers and sister all said that since they had taken the four youngest children, he should be able to handle Ralph and me since we were older. Daddy, however, insisted that he would be completely incapable of taking care of us. That fight lasted for quite a while.

Finally, after a long pause in the dispute, Uncle Ben let out a deep sigh of resignation and hesitantly said, "I guess we'll take Ralph, too." He looked like he had just finished a long day's work: tired, disheveled, and dejected. If I hadn't heard what he said, I might have thought it was because my mom had died. However, I did hear what he said. He was upset because he was giving in to my daddy. After a moment's pause, Uncle Ben continued, "Ralph's old enough to work. He can help out around the house and with the farm work. Besides, I don't have to send him to school."

Chit, chit.

I looked at Ralph playing with the other children and a tear rolled down my face. The tear was for Ralph and for me. If he knew how unwanted he was, it would crush him as I felt crushed. It took all of my strength to keep from crying and to hide how hurt I felt. Mamma had always made us feel loved and wanted. Now, Ralph and I were things to be avoided. If Ralph, who could work and therefore had something to offer, was taken so reluctantly, what would happen to me? I had nothing to offer. I was merely an added burden and expense.

Eventually, after some more debate, Uncle John, Daddy's youngest brother, said in the same dejected tone as Uncle Ben had just used, "Ophelia and I'll take Mertice." I didn't show it, but I could hear the reluctance and hesitation in his voice as he spoke. I was unhappy at the thought of going somewhere I wasn't wanted, but happy at least to be going somewhere. I had never met Uncle John and Aunt Ophelia before, and I was nervous about going to live with them.

Chit, chit.

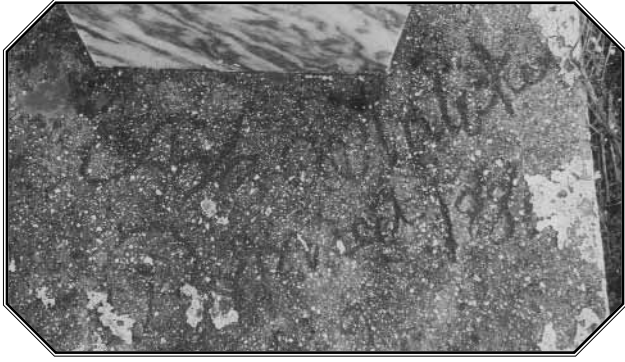
I never let Uncle John or Aunt Ophelia know that I had heard the arguing about Ralph and me. I never let on that I knew we weren't wanted by anyone. Funny thing, though, they never told me or acted like I wasn't wanted. They treated me no differently than they treated Floyd, their only child, and made my life with them very pleasant. Floyd made my time there even happier. He and I got along very well, like brother and sister, and had a lot of fun together.

When the arguing and fighting were all over, Daddy, with what sounded like relief in his voice, said, "I don't know how ta thank y'all. This really means a lot ta me."

The Whitakers were much better off financially and better suited to the task of raising us children than any of Daddy's brothers or sister. However, they had no interest in taking any of us children. They couldn't even be bothered to come to their daughter's funeral. Those were the bad terms that my daddy and Grandpa and Grandma Whitaker were on, though.

We kids grew up knowing virtually nothing about our mother's people.

There was a brief strained silence as Daddy's brothers and sister looked at each other. "Chillun," Aunt Nen called, breaking the silence. "It's time to go." All my daddy's children hugged and said our goodbyes. We girls all had tears in our eyes. Ralph was putting on a brave face and trying not to cry. The wind had died and was quiet and still. No one wanted to move. We



Hand-scribbled inscription on the grave of my mom, reading, "Ada Myrli Whitaker, born April 1884, died March 6, 1922."

werediggers patting down the cement on my mother's grave. Some time later, after we had departed and the wet cement had nearly set, in the lonely shadows of the cemetery would creep one of the groundskeepers, like a phantom in the night. He would kneel down, ever so silently, and with a stick that he had broken from one of the branches of the hardwood trees that lined the narrow road leading into the cemetery, scrawl into the cement the almost illegible inscription, "Ada Myrli Whitaker, born April 1884, died March 6, 1922," the only vestige of my mother left in this world.

Aunt Ophelia, John's wife, turned around in her seat to talk to me. As I looked at her, I could see a slight change. Her expression softened and her eyes lit up a little. She said, with a small smile on her round face, "Everythin's gonna be all right, honey. We're gonna take good care of y'all." However, her words were not as comforting as Floyd's reassuring gesture of patting my hand with his. As I looked down at his hand I noticed that his nails were a little cleaner and a bit better kept than mine. I smiled to myself and looked at the trees bending in the wind as we rode home. Suddenly, and only for a moment, a soft breeze caressed my face. It was as if Mamma came down to give me a kiss and tell me that I was safe.

When we got home Aunt Ophelia said, "All right Mertice, let me make you a pallet. Y'all had a big day and need to get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll go shopping and get you some of your own clothes." I smiled. "Besides," she said, "you have to have something to wear to school on Monday."

After everyone else had gone to bed, I just lay enveloped in the warmth of the temporary little bed that had been spread out for me on the floor, staring at the ceiling and thinking, "School!" I was excited. I was actually going to be able to go to school regularly. When I finally fell asleep, it was with a smile on my face and one in my heart.

were afraid that leaving would mean never seeing the rest of the family again. My older brothers, Walter, Henry, and Clyde, left first. They didn't want to see their father give up his young children. To them, he was giving away the last, best part of their mother.

Just then, as if by design, the clouds cracked and a single ray of sunshine poured down and washed over me. "Come on, darlin'," Uncle John said. "We'll see 'em again soon." He gently took my hand and led me to his wagon and helped me in next to Floyd. As I looked back, I could see the