

The Arizonan desert was the childhood playground for country music legend Marty Robbins. In these vivid and heartfelt recollections, Marty's twin sister, Mamie, describes the adventures they shared long before her brother sang renown ballads about the Old West.

Some Memories - Growing Up With Marty Robbins

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SOME MEMORIES

**GROWING UP WITH
MARTY ROBBINS**

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SOME MEMORIES

GROWING UP WITH MARTY ROBBINS

**As remembered by his twin sister Mamie
and told to Andrew Means**

Chapter One

Growing Up in the Desert

— As Remembered by Mamie

From today's point of view, when children have so many toys and forms of entertainment available to them, the desert must seem a very Spartan playground. But for us it was full of interesting things to do and discover.

The memories are vivid and precious, and without doubt the inspiration for many of Marty's ballads.

We had many questions, like most kids, but could find no one with the time for answers. So we came up with our own, which boiled down to one thing: God made everything that was good and the Devil made everything that was bad. It was simple, but it satisfied us at the time.

Although raised in poverty and at times domestic violence, and with no visible guidelines to speak of much of the time, we still got a good dose of old time religion — with its accompanying feelings of guilt.

“God's going to get you for that” or “You're going to Hell” were the admonishments for doing something bad, and it all depended on who thought they had been wronged. Religion, discipline — nothing was consistent, except poverty. But we were taught never to question adults, and so we didn't.

The desert, however, gave us a refuge from the harsh concerns of the adult world. A small clump of bushes or low mesquite trees could become

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a house with many rooms, a store, a school, or whatever our imaginations decided upon. We would sing, or pretend we were in school — even before we were old enough for school. Mostly we roamed and explored. Every day there was something new to us.

When it rained real hard on the desert at certain times of year, it would bring out tiny frogs that had been hibernating in the ground. There would be millions of them, and we thought it had rained frogs. We had lots of fun putting these little critters in jars and matchboxes, and wondering if they lived by Jesus up in the sky. We were thoroughly convinced that was where they came from and no one could tell us any different.

We wandered the fresh, clean desert after the rains in complete happiness. There is nothing to compare to the scent of the creosote bush after the rain has washed the dust from its leaves.

When the rains had gone and our little frogs had gone back to the sky, the ground became very dry and hard, parched and checkered like old pieces of pottery. We then had another challenge to our imagination. The pieces of earth were easy to pick up and we stacked them like adobes to make houses.

Sometimes, for a change, we would build a fort and pretend that we were fighting off Indians. Our adobe walls were fragile though, and didn't last long before crumbling back to dirt. They were not as pretty as sand castles on the beach perhaps, but we were just as proud of our handiwork.

We were making use of the materials available to us, just as we're bidden by the old saying about doing as the Romans do when in Rome.

Besides, no one ever loved the beach any better than we loved the desert at any time of the year. Of course, the summers were the best, with more hours of daylight and no cold.

It was a love that Martin had all his life. He told me many times that when he was close, or getting close, to the desert and Arizona, he would get the urge to write. Except for the urge to write, I feel the same way.

All of our running, roaming and dreaming gave us good appetites. So when supper was ready we did not have to be called twice.

We had good food when things were going relatively well. Fresh vegetables, fresh butter and milk, plus Mom could make the best yeast rolls. All this made a feast for which we were truly grateful.

When Dad was in a good mood, we could talk him into entertaining us on the harmonica and dance his happy Polish jigs. Maybe the next day he would be in a bad mood. But for that night he was fun to be around, and I could forget the fear of him that consumed me most of the time. Martin never seemed to be afraid of him, and — when he was old enough — would join him in the dances and take turns with him on the harmonica.

Martin was always making some kind of music. When he was about four he was already playing a Jew's harp as well as mouth organ. Just sitting at the table he'd take a knife or fork and hit on everything and try different sounds.

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My sister Lillie tells a story about hearing church music, or rather what she thought was church music, coming from somewhere in the house. She knew the phonograph was not playing, and we didn't have a radio at the time. Eventually she tracked the sounds down. It was Martin in his bed, his head covered by his sheet and blanket, playing the harmonica.

Often we would gather around the big cast-iron wood stove that provided heat for the house as well as for cooking. Summers were not a problem. But I remember bone-chilling cold in the winter, unless we were running or standing huddled around that old stove. In the morning we didn't need any nagging to get us to dress in a hurry.

Fortunately wood was plentiful, and in winter there was a fire going constantly. When we came in from our chores, from school or play, there would often be a pot of rabbit stew cooking away or a big stewing hen. The old house would smell good. But whatever the menu, we ate with 'mucho gusto.'

The fear returned for all of us on those nights Dad didn't come in from his route when he was due. None of us slept well, if at all, until he came in and we knew whether he was 'good' drunk or mean drunk.

The picture of my mother keeping a vigil at the window until she could see his headlights in the distance will remain with me as long as I live. She had time then to quickly get in bed, and we would all pretend to be asleep.

We had kept the fire stoked so the house would not get cold, because we knew that a cold house would set off a fit of anger in him. Immediately he would make the boys get out of bed to build up the fire. If he was real angry, he would make Mom go out and chop wood — even though there was plenty already cut.

A terrible man? Yes, I suppose he was. There aren't any excuses I can make for him and these actions, except to try and remember the few moments of joy that he did provide. We have no way of knowing what private sorrows drove him to behave this way. As children, we certainly were not privy to our father's inner thoughts.

Early letters to my mother from him showed a very caring and loving side to his nature. The fact remains too that he did not abandon his large family — although it would have been the kindest thing he could have done.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that my mother put up with so much from him. She was a strong person. But, in her defense, she was also a victim of her own upbringing.

She was raised in remote mountain country, much the way she raised her own brood. The male in the family was always right and it was her place to stand by him, though I am sure she must have known he was wrong so much of the time. It didn't mean that she never wanted any better or that she didn't love her children. It was just that this was the life women expected in those days. She did the best she could under the worst of circumstances.

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Regardless of our dad's unpredictable behavior, he was the one responsible for first pointing Martin in a musical direction. I'm sure, however, that he was never aware of it. The talent was there from the start and Martin was never discouraged from using it. To be accurate, it must be added that he was never openly encouraged either.

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