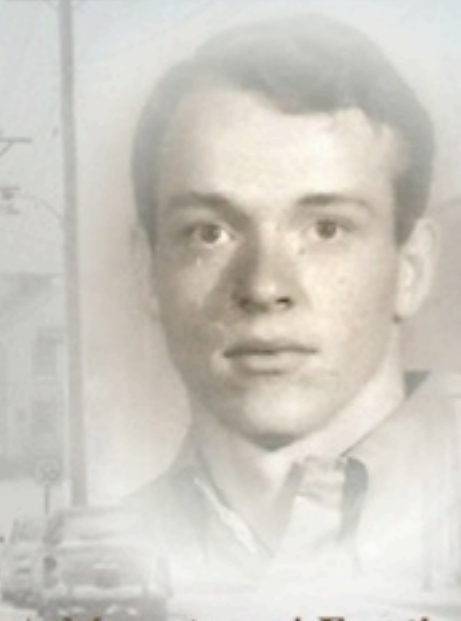


# TOMMY MACK: Unsettled Years

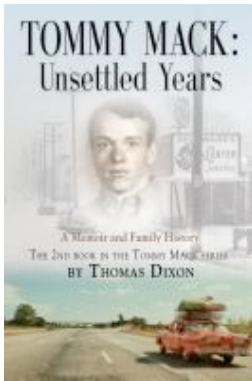


A Memoir and Family History

THE 2ND BOOK IN THE TOMMY MACK SERIES

BY THOMAS DIXON





*It's spring, 1964. Beatle mania crashes the American shores. The Vietnam War and push for black civil rights divide the nation. Tommy Mack and his proud, beat-up, poverty stricken family have traded the freshness of Appalachia for a malodorous chemical plant in the suburbs of a small, east coast metropolis. Surrounded by traffic, congestion, and as much culture shock as one can imagine, they put down new roots-and pray for the best.*

# **TOMMY MACK**

## **Unsettled Years**

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TOMMY MACK

Unsettled Years

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TOMMY MACK: An Appalachian Childhood



# **TOMMY MACK**

## **Unsettled Years**

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**A Memoir  
and  
Family History**

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> book in the Tommy Mack series by:**

**THOMAS DIXON**

TOMMY MACK: Unsettled Years  
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The events and times herein are all true, gathered from the best of memory and written record. All photos were taken by the author or a family member unless otherwise stated. Permission to use family photos has been granted in writing. The names of some people and places have been changed for privacy reasons.



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## Close Quarters

**M**y mother had called ahead from a payphone to announce an approximate time of arrival, and our little family caravan arrived at Aunt Katherine's house in Delaware around eleven the next morning. It had been a 500-mile drive that spanned more than two days.

As we pulled into the driveway, I took note of the huge house looming before us. *This must be the place*, I thought. We exited Ronnie's Oldsmobile in time to avert another bout of motion sickness. While stretching out the travel kinks, we spotted my aunt and her six-year-old son Edward coming out to meet us.

"Gracious be the Lord!" she said. "How is everybody?"

"A little worn and ragged," Mom said, "but we're all safe and sound." The two sisters embraced; they'd not seen each other for years.

"Myrtle, it's so good to see you."

“It’s good to see you too, Kitty.”

We spent several minutes milling about the yard, getting acquainted and talking about the long and uncomfortable trip. Then Kitty asked us to come in for refreshments and to discuss storage and sleeping arrangements. As we moved from the sunny outdoors to the cool shade of our aunt’s front porch, I felt relieved to be freed from vehicle confinement and to have safely reached our destination.

The journey had been an adventure for some and pure torture for others. Numerous detours, various stops, and the heavy load—which included two adults, two teenagers, four children, and 500 pounds of belongings, packed into an eight-foot U-Haul trailer—had slowed our progress. Many of the mountainous interstate highways were in various stages of construction. Hundreds of workers, together with dozens of huge, powerful earthmoving machines, were parting mountains to form the freeway that would become Interstate Highway 77.

Except for my big brother Ronnie, none of us were aware of the massive amount of federal and state spending, all in the name of progress. These highway projects had been going on for months and months, while the family had been eking out a simple hand-to-mouth existence in the small Virginia coal mining towns of Boissevain, Pocahontas, and Falls Mills. We didn’t fully understand the ways of the busy, complicated world outside Bluefield, West Virginia.

Highway construction had caused detours around and north of Washington D.C. and Baltimore, a route that added fifty miles to our journey. Most of us had rarely ventured out of the Boissevain-Bluefield area, and we initially enjoyed watching the oh-so-beautiful mountains, rivers, and valleys fall away behind us. Soon, however, the heat and close quarters began wearing on us. At about the two hundred mile mark the younger kids began quarrelling and smacking

each other, behavior that required Mom to place Paul in the back seat to squelch potential free-for-alls and keep the peace.

“Now listen!” Mom shouted. “If Paul catches another one of you kids pinching, kicking, or even touching someone else, I’m gonna have Ronnie stop this car and spank your behind right here in front of all this traffic going by! Do you hear me?”

We rolled our eyes, wondering how this could possibly work, since we were packed together like sardines. We got Mom’s message, however, and we soon calmed down.

Every now and then I’d look back to see the U-Haul trailer zigzagging back-and-forth as we barreled along the country roads and highways. At any moment I expected it to break free from our bumper and collide with the nearest object—another car, the guardrail, or one of the many tidy ranch houses decorating the roadside. If that happened, I thought we’d really be homeless. Amazingly, it never did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aunt Katherine’s house, at 507 North DuPont Road, was located just outside Wilmington in a community called Richardson Park, or simply “The Park,” a well-established blue-collar district.

Employment opportunities were plentiful. About a mile away on Boxwood Road, the General Motors Corporation and its Wilmington Assembly Plant were rolling cars off the line at a steady rate. A Chrysler production plant sprawled down the road in Newark, adjacent to the bustling University of Delaware campus. The DuPont Experimental Station, the largest research and development facility of E. I. DuPont de Nemours and Company, still sits high above the Brandywine River just north of the city limits. A pigments plant

occupied the banks of the Christina River in Newport, and the company's corporate headquarters was (and still is) located in Wilmington.

Minutes after entering the house I watched two cousins stroll warily in, looking us over. They had dashed home during the school lunch period, hoping we had arrived. Carl, about fourteen, was the oldest. He stood taller and stockier than me, and more tanned than Paul. Aunt Katherine's middle, or second born child was eleven-year-old Marlene. Mom had shown us pictures of these cousins, and I was amazed to see that Marlene looked prettier in person.

The house was a three-story post-war design, with a full basement. Unfortunately for us, the building was divided into two apartments, with the ground floor space leased to another young family—an arrangement that created some discomfort for our extended family.

After some initial chitchat, Cousin Marlene showed my sisters Debbie and Donna where they'd be sleeping; and Cousin Carl showed us boys (Paul, Gary, David, and me) our sleeping arrangements. My excitement grew as we explored the house.

They had an indoor toilet that actually flushed. The kitchen contained a large enamel sink, a fairly new working refrigerator, and pantries for food and linen storage. We were tickled to death to see our very own telephone, resting on an end table in the living room. I felt like a blind man who'd regained his sight and stepped out of the dark ages. Half of my siblings had never used a phone, and Gary, Donna, and I gazed at the contraption, wondering if we could even dial a number correctly.

Marlene and Carl finished lunch and said goodbye, returning to school six blocks away. Little Edward stayed, complaining of some illness, an excuse he'd given his mother that morning. I'm sure he'd

faked it. His mother knew it, too, but had relented and was quite willing to grant him time to spend with his aunt and cousins.

Early that afternoon, we moved our personal items from the U-Haul into the house. Ronnie unloaded the remaining furniture at our cousins' place, three blocks away on Schoolhouse Lane. Our Aunt Pauline had adult sons, Reds and Cherry. They had invited Ronnie to bunk with them at their place until we could find a suitable apartment of our own. My cousins' younger brother Van would join them there in a few weeks. Ronnie would spend his nights sleeping in a worn-out recliner chair, an uncomfortable arrangement that lasted for several weeks.

The days following our arrival proved to be pleasant times. My cousins were finishing up the school year, and I began looking forward to spending more time with them, especially Marlene, who seemed especially sweet and considerate. We also met some of the neighborhood kids, and we began to work our way into some of the cliques. Eleven-year-old Tommy Miller was in good standing with one particular group—the Park Skateboarding and Bike Team. When I saw these boys riding their bikes and skateboards, I swore that I would do whatever it took to be part of the team.

I approached my mother with a rare request. “Mom, can I have two dollars?”

“Two dollars! For goodness sakes, Tommy, do you think money grows on trees around here? What do you want with two dollars?”

“Tommy Miller has two used roller skates, and he's asking a dollar each for them.”

“You'll break your neck using roller skates around them streets.”

“No I won't. Besides, I'm gonna bolt them to a piece of wood and make myself a homemade skateboard. Tommy Miller's gonna help me.”

“Roller skates or skateboards, it doesn’t matter. You’re still gonna break your neck.”

“Ah, Mom, come on, pleeease,” I begged, following her into the living room. “Just two dollars, and I won’t ever ask you for anything again.”

“Tommy, you shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep. Now I know you’ll be back here next month asking me for something else. So, I’m not gonna hold you to such a ridiculous promise.” She sat down on the sofa and reached for her purse.

“All right!” I shouted, watching her dig through its contents.

Aunt Kitty must have heard my pleading. “Here, Myrtle,” she said, and handed Mom a dollar bill. “Let me split that with you.”

“Thanks Kitty, that’s nice of you. It’ll help.”

I was both shocked and elated. “Thanks Mom, thanks Aunt Kitty!” I headed for the door, clutching the money.

“Now you be careful with those things!” Mom shouted after me. “If you get hurt, I’ll take a switch to ya!”

That week, with Tommy Miller’s help, I built my first skateboard. Tommy also offered me several used parts to build a bicycle—but at a cost. You see, Tommy Miller was a businessman. He said he couldn’t let me have the parts for a penny less than seven dollars. Knowing how scarce money was, I wouldn’t dare ask Mom for any more dollar bills. So I got pretty good at skateboarding over the next two weeks. The bicycle I so badly wanted would have to wait.



## Summer of '68

Two days after arriving home we learned that Senator Robert Kennedy had been shot. He died the next day, on June 6. The stench from Dr. King's assassination, only two months earlier, still lingered in American cities. I couldn't help but wonder: *When will it end? Who's going to be next?*

I started my second summer job around the middle of June, again through Wilmington's Youth Opportunity Center. After the Center's management teams interviewed about a dozen poor white kids and eighty or so poor black kids, the agency broke us into work groups and assigned us to various sites. Four white kids and I were placed with a group of twenty black kids, and assigned to work at the Delaware State Hospital for the Mentally Disturbed and Insane (Farnhurst). Our jobs included cutting grass, pruning hedges and shrubs, raking, weeding, sweeping; picking up trash, twigs, and limbs; cleaning floors, and attending to messes in the wards. Pay was about one dollar per hour.

Each weekday morning I walked three blocks to the intersection of Matthes and Maryland Avenues and caught the city bus to Fourth and Market Street in Wilmington. From there I walked six or seven blocks to 8th and Pine Streets on the east side of Wilmington, where, with the rest of the boys and girls, I boarded a school bus for the twenty-minute ride to Farnhurst.

The first day half of us gathered around the maintenance headquarters (part of the greenhouse) to be greeted by the grounds foreman, a short, stout chap with stubby hands and an impressive

beer belly. Mr Ogle was a jolly fellow, too, but my first impression told me he was firm, not the kind of man you'd want to cross. Our new boss also seemed to be well liked and respected, and, as I would soon learn, had considerable pull around the institution.

We were also introduced to Troy and Roman, two Amish conscientious objectors working for the state to earn credits toward their military obligation. At that time there were two types of conscientious objectors: 1) a person who objected to combat duty but not to military service could serve in a noncombatant role, and 2) a person who objected to all types of military service was eligible for "alternative service." Troy and Roman fell into the second group, and they were two of the proudest, most energetic, and skilled workers I ever met. I can still see them leaning against the dump truck waiting for their morning work assignments, wearing their Amish hats, overalls, and boots, and sporting proud smiles while chewing on a fresh sprig of something. There was no doubt in my mind that these two were true objectors, operating out of genuine principles.

I spent most of my first week with a small group of kids, trimming, cleaning up hedges, and wondering which of us would be assigned to the two tractor jobs Mr. Ogle had promised. The maintenance section had an old yellow Case tractor that pulled a mowing deck, and a spanking new red Massey Ferguson tractor with a hydraulic, adjustable-lift mower deck. If I had been the least bit vehicle-crazy, I would have fallen in love with that lady-in-red.

By the fourth day, it was my turn. I spent the next two days on a small riding mower, cutting grass around the many buildings and parking lots on the hospital grounds, and I carried out the task without damaging the mower (unlike some of the other boys). That weekend I felt certain I'd earned at least one of the small riding mower jobs, and I enjoyed telling my new girlfriend all about it.

Deanna and I were spending more time together, mostly alone at local parks and at home with family and friends.

Sunday, June 16, was Father's Day. That's probably why Mr. Ogle didn't show up for work on Monday morning. With the big man away, our young college student supervisor decided to perform a little experiment. He yanked me off the mowing job that morning. I wondered: *was it his idea or the home office's idea?* Anyway, someone had decided to send me and three other boys to work in one of the male patient wards.

I had only a small inkling of what was waiting for me at the Biggs building. The four of us spent most of that morning helping the staff clean up messes (mostly bodily fluids) that some of the patients had deposited on the floors, walls, and furniture. One of the adult workers said, "This is one of the better wards. You kids wouldn't be allowed to work in most of the other buildings." Part of our job was also to monitor the patients' behavior and report any potential violence or abuse of other patients or staff, while staying away from the patients as much as possible. I prayed several times that morning: *Please Lord, get me out of this craazy place.*

The student supervisor stopped by at lunchtime and told me to report to the greenhouse after I'd finished eating. As soon as I entered the building, I knew that some sort of shit had hit the fan. I heard Mr. Ogle making himself perfectly clear. "I won't stand for any of my boys working in the patient wards," he shouted, "not even the Biggs building!"

A big-shot representative from the Y.O.C. said, "We thought it would be good for these young men and women to gain experience, to see what it's like in the hospital wards. Some of them might want to work full-time there when they graduate."

Right after that exchange we were told to wait in the parking lot, while the adults "further discussed" the issue. I don't know exactly

what the final outcome was, but I knew that Mr. Ogle had gone to bat for all of us. And although he may not have won the war, he won a battle for some of us that day. He called several of us boys into his office and assigned each of us permanent jobs on the grounds maintenance teams. As long as we performed well, he said, we could keep the jobs. I guess my prayer had been answered. I never again set foot in another psychiatric ward.

The following day Troy took me for a spin on the Case tractor. Light yellow in color, this workhorse would soon reach antique status. He demonstrated the use of its controls and showed me how to safely operate and maintain it. From that point on the Case belonged to me. I was assigned to mow the grass around the large fields on the lower hospital grounds. During those hot summer days I could often be seen wearing a long-sleeved shirt, with a white handkerchief or t-shirt draped over my head and neck, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Aside from potential sunburn, it wasn't a bad job; no one bothered me, and I cut a lot of grass without getting hurt or damaging the equipment.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Saturday, June 22, I attended Donna and John's wedding, my very first. Sporadic gusts of wind badgered the wedding party on what otherwise would have been a bright and sunny day, just enough wind to play havoc with the women's new hairdos. I made a brief appearance at the reception that followed at her mother-in-law's house. I say "brief" because someone had to drive me home early to baby sit my younger siblings.

Donna said something that day that scared the dickens out of me. She said, "Tommy, you're next." Yes, all my older siblings (Daisy,

Wesley, Ronnie, Ginny, Paul, and now Donna) had taken the plunge. In spite of my growing affection for Deanna, I saw marriage as a very distant prospect.

Married or not, Donna was determined to continue her education and become the first on this side of the family to complete high school. The newlyweds rented a nice apartment in Newport and Donna, about to join the ranks of the few married Conrad seniors, grew nervous with butterflies as the new school year approached.

Midway through July I had made a positive impression on Troy, Roman, and Mr. Ogle. Being such a responsible and capable young man, they had decided to let me operate the new Massey Ferguson tractor. Evidently, all the other trainees had somehow failed the test. Mr. Ogle understood that the mowers wouldn't be cutting much grass if they were constantly banged up and sitting in the repair shop. I soon began to sense a certain degree of jealousy and envy on the part of a few minority co-workers.

By that time, however, we all were enjoying the company of two other state workers in the maintenance yard. Granville Manlove was a short black man with salt-and-pepper hair, in his early to mid-fifties. Not only was he an employee of the state, he was also a ward of the state. A little "slow" but quite competent, Granville performed all the tasks the Y.O.C. had contracted us to do that summer. He wasn't allowed to operate any vehicles or other motorized heavy equipment, and was often teased, sometimes by me. Some of the adults teased him about the size of his "manliness" and warned us teens to avoid the subject, since Granville was more than happy to whip it out and give credence to the stories. None of us wanted that to happen, so we kept our mouths shut. One morning the adults' teasing went too far and Granville went for his zipper. Man, you should have seen us boys scatter.

Hardrock Shoun, another state worker, was a thirty-year-old black man with a pleasant disposition and remarkable sense of humor—and an embarrassing prison record. His most distinguishing feature had to be his physique: he was just a little taller than me and about twenty pounds heavier, and one glimpse could tell you he'd been a serious bodybuilder. Hardrock's handle was coined long before he started lifting weights. You could say he'd been educated in the School of Hard Knocks and perhaps that should have been his nickname. But Hardrock had been applied and it stuck.

One late July morning, Troy and Roman gathered up most of the work crew, including Hardrock, and dropped us off at the chicken coops of a small, state-owned farm on the edge of the hospital grounds. Our job was to use hand scythes and sickles to cut the tall weeds and bamboo that were slowly overtaking the farmhouse, chicken coops, and grain silo. By ten that morning we had worked up a good thirst by cutting a thirty-foot swath all around the silo. Before heading over to the coops, we took a water break on a grassy knoll in the shade of a big oak tree.

While reclining there, we enjoyed a show: Hardrock and another young co-worker pretending to fist fight, or slap-box. I thought, *I guess they haven't been working very hard. They seem to have a lot of energy.* I watched them box for a minute or so, then had another thought: *I'm not that tired, either.*

For weeks I'd been wondering how I could break the ice with these young men without being too obvious. The black teens didn't seem to want to get too cozy with the white boys. Then I thought of the mild-mannered Hardrock and how the other kids looked up to him, and saw my chance.

"Hey, Hardrock," I shouted, "you know how to wrestle?"

The two stopped their sparring. All the kids looked at me, then back at Hardrock, no doubt curious as to his reply.

“I’ve done my share,” he said with a smile, walking over to me. “Why? Do you want to wrestle me, Tom?”

“Sure, I’ll wrestle almost anyone. I’d box ya too, except I’m afraid that without gloves you might mess up my pretty face.” Most of the gang doubled over with laughter, including Hardrock.

“Okay, okay,” he says, curbing his laughter, “let’s get started.”

As I faced this powerful looking man, I remember thinking: *If he’s better, I hope he goes easy on me. And if I get the best of him, I hope he doesn’t get pissed off.* That happens sometimes.

Starting from the takedown position, we circled each other, looking for an opening. All eyes were probably on me and all bets were on my opponent. I played with him a little by giving him the first opportunity for a takedown. When he finally dove for my legs I flattened out, throwing my weight on his back and shoulders. The burden was too much and he collapsed to the ground, releasing his grip. If I hadn’t stunned him with a quick, hard cross-face, he would have pulled me back in for the takedown. But my strong cross-face threw him off balance, and it was relatively easy for me to then spin around behind him for a takedown. I squeezed him hard with a tight waist hold, until he collapsed to the ground again, out of breath. I then used a half nelson to turn him over for the pin.

Our audience looked bewildered. Hardrock looked stunned, but he took what some would call an embarrassing defeat with grace and style.

“You did good, Tom.”

“Hardrock, I think I had an advantage. You must have been tired from boxing.”

“I don’t think so, Tom. You’re just better than me. Where did you learn to wrestle like that?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. I wrestled for three years in junior high, and I’ll be taking it up again in high school this fall.”

“That’s great,” he said, “keep up the good work.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay, boys,” Hardrock shouted, “grab your tools and let’s clear out around this chicken coop!”

Troy and Roman stopped by with the truck around lunchtime to take those of us who didn’t brown-bag it to the cafeteria. Before we piled into the truck, I heard a loud scream from behind. I turned around, and Hardrock almost knocked me over as he raced past and sprinted away. We all wondered where the heck he was going. I looked back toward the coops and saw Roman holding up a seven-foot-long blacksnake. Roman and Troy laughed uncontrollably as Hardrock disappeared in the distance, running until he hit the asphalt.

“Alright, men,” Roman shouted, “get in the truck! Let’s see if we can find Hardrock.”

Most of us were still chuckling as we piled into the truck, but some of the boys took the long way around Roman and the snake. Roman let the snake go and it slithered away into the brush. The poor snake. It had been minding its own business until we came along, smacking the weeds and bamboo.

We caught up to Hardrock later that afternoon. He said, “I can’t stand snakes. They scare the crap outa me!”

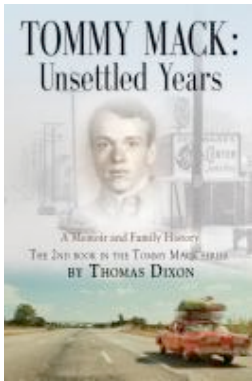
“We believe ya, Hardrock,” I said, “you proved that when ya flew the coop.”

Several days passed before Mr. Ogle could find enough volunteers brave enough to finish the job around the farmhouse and chicken coops. Hardrock said, “It’ll be winter before I go back to that place. They say that’s when snakes hibernate, ya know.”

What a man, that Hardrock.

\* \* \* \* \*





*It's spring, 1964. Beatle mania crashes the American shores. The Vietnam War and push for black civil rights divide the nation. Tommy Mack and his proud, beat-up, poverty stricken family have traded the freshness of Appalachia for a malodorous chemical plant in the suburbs of a small, east coast metropolis. Surrounded by traffic, congestion, and as much culture shock as one can imagine, they put down new roots-and pray for the best.*

# **TOMMY MACK**

## **Unsettled Years**

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