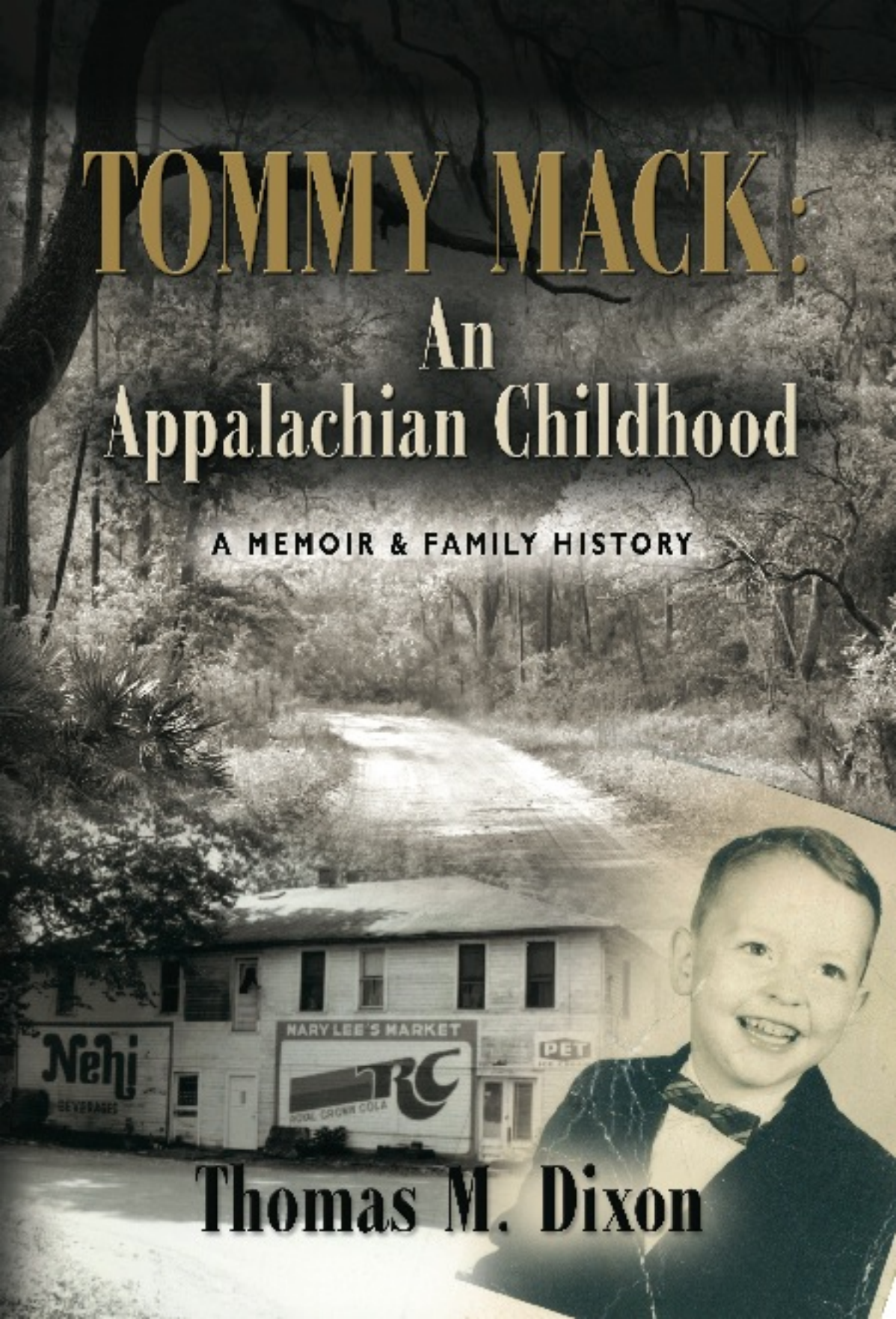


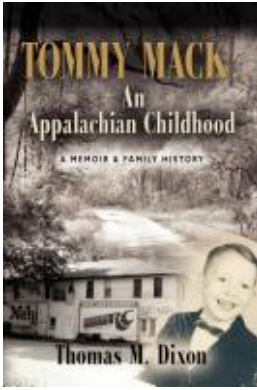
TOMMY MACK:

An Appalachian Childhood

A MEMOIR & FAMILY HISTORY

Thomas M. Dixon





*Thomas Dixon's **TOMMY MACK: An Appalachian Childhood** captures twenty-seven tumultuous - and heart-warming - years of growing up poor in the Tazewell County coalfields of southwestern Virginia, where an alcoholic and abusive father too often seemed more like predator than provider. While his father was in prison, young Tommy exalted in the times and wonders of nature, and the family planted and tended the gardens, all-the-while dreading the day when his father would return...*

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An Appalachian Childhood

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TOMMY MACK

An Appalachian Childhood

A Memoir
&
Family History

THOMAS M. DIXON

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The events and times herein are all true, gathered from the best of memory and written record. Some names have been changed.

This book is dedicated to:

Virginia and West Virginia coal miners; small farmers; and all other workers living by the sweat of their brow, through callused hands, and with a nagging hitch in their back—and especially to the children of alcoholic parents and those from broken and dysfunctional homes.

And in memory of:

Myrtle Virginia Dixon and

Odus and May Jones.



The Jones Family: Myrtle, Odus, Pauline, May, Catherine, and little Pansy, 1932.

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I wish to thank all my family for their support and contributions to this endeavor. A heap of appreciations are in line for: Daisy, Wesley, Ronnie, Ginny, and Paul for the many hours of rehashing and fine tuning of family events. Even though forty-eight years have elapsed since the end of this story, many of the events are still crystal clear in our minds. Other events were not as memorable to some, so it took several months of pestering on my part to nail down and secure all the important pieces of the puzzle. Thanks again for “putting-up” with me.

Even though they were too young, or just don’t remember certain events, I also want to give thanks to my sisters, Donna and Debbie, and younger brothers, Gary and David, for their support—just being there as family and as part of our lives holds special meaning. They will, no doubt, play a more active role in my future writing endeavors.

Also, special thanks to my editor, Al Desetta, for his assistance with this project.

Finally, I can’t express enough my gratitude and admiration for Mildred, my loving and wonderful wife. If not for her unwavering support and encouragement, this story may not have gone to print.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I considered writing about my childhood was in the mid-1970s. After graduating from junior college, I began working for a large, well-known corporation. I was also married and thinking of starting a family. By then I had shared many childhood recollections with my new wife. Surprised that I had retained so many stories, and with so much detail, she presented me with a nice notebook and encouraged me to jot down my thoughts before they faded from memory. Well, many years have passed since that day. Tommy has evolved, and so has his story.

Everyone has a history and a story to tell, and many factors influence a person's decision to set that life to print. My primary mission is to document a good part of my life, so that my family will get to know me as I know myself, with few questions. By exploring and sharing *my* early years, I hope to provide a fairly accurate glimpse into my siblings' lives and, hopefully, an understanding of my mother's life and the difficult choices she had to make. I offer this story to honor my mother: a simple, unselfish, and honest woman, who wanted so little in life, yet gave so much. It is my wish that this book (and those that follow) will be an inspiration for my children, my children's children, and for many other readers. I've come to realize that we don't have to fear our feelings, memories, and dreams.

My father and mother revealed little to us about their childhoods. That fact has bewildered me, my nine siblings, and other family members for decades. Maybe their childhood memories were too unpleasant to remember, let alone relate to others. I'm sure my mother had wonderful dreams of raising a large family, providing for our health and comfort, and encouraging us to get an education. Like most mothers all over the world, she always maintained the hope that her children would live better and have more than she had. This story will show that fate, circumstances, and bad choices can often deal good people very bad hands.

THOMAS DIXON

My birthplace, Boissevain, Virginia, is located northwest of the city of Bluefield in the southwest part of the state, across the border from West Virginia and in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains. What started as a thriving coal mining town in the early 1880s has been reduced today to several dozen homes and trailers, a new post office (the ruins of the old post office and Company Store are still standing), and an old church (which may have been called the Old Donation Church) that was used mostly by the “colored folk” of earlier days. My family would leave and return to the place of my birth several times throughout my childhood. Although small and insignificant to most, Boissevain was an important part of my early years and, subsequently, this book.

Back then my father sometimes worked in the mines; that is, when he wasn’t downtown on-a-drunk, or holed up in the woods making moonshine. He was often in trouble with the local law for selling his hooch. We never knew whether making or drinking the whiskey was Dad’s greater passion. Either way, the grueling, dirty, and dangerous job of mining coal seemed to inspire many men to various levels of alcoholism, crime, and abuse, and my father was no exception.

In fact, the word abusive would be a mild description of the way my father treated my mother. In one of her earliest attempts at self-defense, she smashed a cast iron frying skillet (still encrusted with the greasy remains of the morning’s breakfast) against the side of his head. Someone in the family recalled that “he went out like a light.” But even that didn’t deter him from his regular abusive fits. Today, abuse counselors would most likely classify my mother as codependent and my father as an alcoholic suffering from a hefty dose of narcissism.

Many will probably wonder why my mother allowed such a man so many chances at redemption. I certainly don’t have all the answers, and those I do have may be somewhat biased.

First, my mother’s love for her husband had to be strong, as it took many years for that love to diminish, let alone die.

Another answer would be the historical context of their times. Abuse has no national, geographic, or income boundaries; yet its severity and frequency in and about the southern Appalachian coal mining areas in the 1940s and 1950s were only surpassed by the degree

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to which it was ignored, if not condoned, by the average citizen and law enforcement. Not surprisingly, that social attitude cast a long and dark shadow upon our family.

Finally, Mom and some of my older siblings felt trapped and paralyzed by fear. Many things my mother did (such as maintaining the status quo) or refrained from doing (killing my father) were calculated to minimize the chances of losing custody of her children. To Mom, we were the primary reason for her existence. That both my parents had so little education only added more fuel to the fire.

Since our memories have so much to do with who we are, I'm compelled to share the bad with the good—in typical Tommy Mack fashion, of course. Anything else, I feel, would be disingenuous.

I pray that family and friends see this story for what it is: a compilation of bits and pieces of family life where grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and even cousins, all play their part—albeit, sometimes an uncomfortable one. In light of this, I must say that I have no secret ax to grind here; my only desire is to write honestly about my family's life, as raw and painful as some of it may be. My intent is not to cast blame, or cause heartache; it is simply to recount a truly extraordinary story without the extremes of whitewashing and sensationalism. Yet for reasons of privacy, sensitivity, and brevity, much of this story will remain untold. In other words, I have tried to achieve a balance between what I want to say, what needs to be said, and what is better left unsaid.

I hope I have not misjudged anyone's sensitivities and that, with time, family will view this story in its totality and not miss the forest on account of a few thorny shrubs.

Now, all you readers out there: please keep an open mind and put aside any preconceived notions you may have. Let's retreat to a cozy, quiet corner and prepare for a trip through (*not-so-long-ago*) forgotten times and places. But be forewarned—it's going to be a bumpy ride.

Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him.

Job 13:15

I

THE HERALDING

1880s Aerial Sketch of Pocahontas, Virginia.

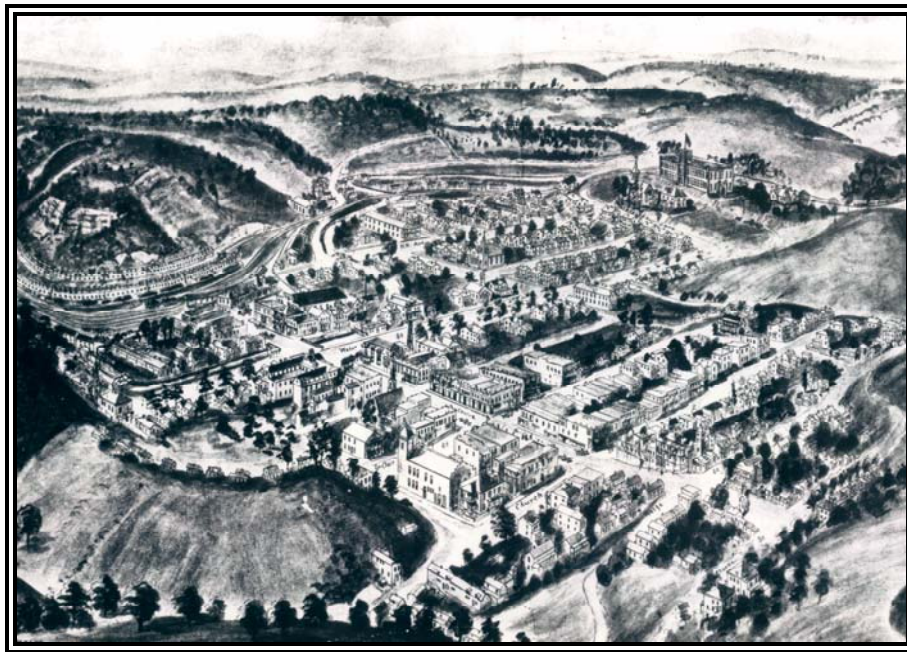


Photo courtesy of Grubb Photo Service, Inc., Bluefield, WV.

It was early May, 1964. Birds were singing and not a cloud shielded the brilliance of the Saturday afternoon sun. Showtime had arrived for the mail-order tulip bulbs Mom had planted late last fall. She wasn't disappointed. Her prized daffodils had withered a bit too soon, but it was just as well; her prized tulips were now stealing the show along the banks of our property line. After several days of balmy weather and little rain, the steep and rocky land about our home was dry enough for spring planting and other outdoor tasks. The morning's work was done, and the afternoon's was waiting.

I was in the front yard with my brothers Paul, 16, and Gary, 10, taking a break from our chores. We'd finished our lunch and were roughhousing and playing fetch with our dog Prince, a black Lab with a silky coat that glistened in the sunlight. Mom was standing on the front porch enjoying the show.

Gary held on tight to Paul's worn-out baseball mitt as the dog snarled and growled, yanking at the leather in a vigorous tug of war. Prince weighed near 70 pounds, and every time Gary eased up the dog buried his canines deeper into the glove's stuffing and an inch closer to his hand.

"Gary, you better let go," Mom warned, "he's gonna take your hand with it."

Gary let go, startled by the blaring of a car horn. My brother Ronnie and his friend Ricky were dropping off our father. As Dad climbed out of the car, I could tell in an instant he'd been drinking too much.

THOMAS DIXON

“He’s all yours Mom!” Ronnie shouted from the car window. “The sheriff down in Pocahontas told me I should take him home before he got himself locked up.”

Mom just smiled as Prince rushed to greet Dad.

Dad shouted, “Get out of the way, you mangy mutt!” and followed this with a fierce kick to the dog’s chest. I could hear Prince whimper in pain.

Mission accomplished, Ronnie and Ricky wasted little time leaving Dad and the developing ugly scene, far behind.

“Did you kids get that trash pile cleaned up, or have you been goofin’ off all day?”

“We have most of it done,” Paul said.

My father walked to the edge of our yard and gazed down at our progress. “You were told I wanted to start plant'n here this weekend. You should have finished the job by now.”

Again, Paul came to our defense. “We’re tired and just takin’ a break, Dad.”

“Dammit,” Dad shouted, “I want all of you to get in the house, now!”

Paul and I hesitated, staring at each other. When our father told us to go inside the house, it was usually because he was about to say or do something pretty darn mean and ugly, and he didn’t want the neighbors to overhear and call the sheriff.

“I said *now!*”

We rushed to the porch and into the house.

Pretty soon I found myself cowering with my brothers on the sofa. Dad stood over me, a wide, black leather belt in his hand. It seems that I had sassed my father by telling him I didn’t want to work on the trash pile anymore that day. With each strike of the belt, I could feel its searing heat through my pants. I raised my knees to my chest and released a flurry of hard kicks, hoping to repel him and the burning belt. This only infuriated him more. Grabbing my arm, he jerked me off the sofa.

“I think you’re overdue for a beat’n, boy!”

TOMMY MACK: An Appalachian Childhood

Around the corner, out of sight, Mom was busy preparing our father's lunch. She had learned which battles to pick with her husband, and this wasn't going to be one of them.

After giving me the worst beating of my twelve years, Dad finished me off with a vicious kick to my behind. While he turned his attention to his next victim, I stumbled my way up the stairs and dove onto my bed.

As I cried, I questioned how my young life had progressed to the point where I despised my father. He had been in jail so often that I hardly recognized him when he arrived home from prison in September, eight months earlier.

A few months into his last incarceration, I visited him at White Gates Jail in Bland, Virginia. It was late 1959, just before he was moved to Richmond State Penitentiary. Dad had been rotting at White Gates for a while when Mom decided to bring some of her children to visit him. I remember standing on a cold stone floor with some of my siblings, gazing up at a heavy steel door and the iron bars of the visitors' conversation window. As a seven-year-old, I was too short to see anything more than the top of Dad's head, so Mom picked me up and held me in front of the window.

I saw a familiar face from the past—pale yellow from years of heavy cigarette smoking and minimum exposure to sunlight, wrinkled beyond its years. The voice was far from soothing and calm. Instead, he seemed to squawk and cackle like a witch on steroids, salivating over the chance to toss an unsuspecting child into the oven.

Dad told me I was becoming a big boy and should visit him more often. His smile and tone of voice chilled me, and I began to squirm. Mom, sensing my discomfort, lowered me to the floor.

There were plenty tales and rumors about the bad times my older brothers and sisters had endured when Dad was at home, and especially when he was drinking. Outside, a glorious spring day full of promise and adventure beckoned. Instead, I was alone in my room, licking my wounds, having just received a small dose of my old man's medicine.

Gary and I had been baptized two years earlier. We'd committed ourselves to behaving in God's way and accepting Him as our savior.

THOMAS DIXON

Now, as I lay in bed sobbing from the beating, I prayed that God would look over the family and keep us safe from Dad's harmful ways. I also had another request.

"Please God, if you can make my dad go away forever, I'll never ask you for anything again."

With those words, my eyelids grew tired and closed ever so slowly. Sleep took me, and I was at rest.

More Adventures

In a flash, the summer was over. Looking back, I faced the new school year with a surprising degree of determination and grit.

One thing was different this time. My neighbor Clarence—well, he was my buddy. I knew it the instant I saw booger stains on his front pockets. A few weeks after classes started, we began working on homework together. Whenever I didn't quite understand something, he was there with an answer, although not always the correct one.

One Saturday morning I dropped over Clarence's house. Susie opened the door, her mother standing behind her.

"Hi Tommy."

"Good morning, Tommy."

"Good morning Mrs. Snowdecker. Can Clarence come outside and play?"

"Clarence is upstairs getting washed and dressed, Tommy. I don't think he's feeling well."

"I'll tell him you're here," Susie said, charging up the stairs.

"You can wait here, Tommy," she said, pointing to the freshly waxed stairway landing. "Feel free to watch the cartoons on television."

As she walked away, I got the impression Mrs. Snowdecker had noticed how dirty my pants looked. Her suggestion that I sit on the stairs and not on her upholstery was a good idea. My pants were pretty dirty.

Mrs. Snowdecker didn't have to ask me twice to watch cartoons. I hadn't seen more than a couple hours of them in the last month.

Susie returned, informing me her brother was in the process of washing and dressing and would be down in a few minutes. For a while Susie and I sat on the stairway watching Mighty Mouse, one of our favorites. I enjoyed that little bit of quality time with her. During commercials I glanced around, admiring how well constructed and fresh their house was. I even stood up and walked around a little to get a better view of the new kitchen Susie said they had put in. All

sparkling and clean; it sure wasn't like ours. I found myself wishing that someday my family could have a house like theirs.

Before I knew it, half an hour had elapsed and Clarence was finally walking down the stairs.

"Oh, you're still here," he said.

"Of course I'm still here. What took you ...? Wow! What did you do to your hand?"

With his right elbow tucked into his ribs, Clarence held his bandaged right hand motionless in front of his chest.

"I cut it yesterday on a piece of glass in the backyard," he replied. It sounded like bragging when he added: "I have two stitches."

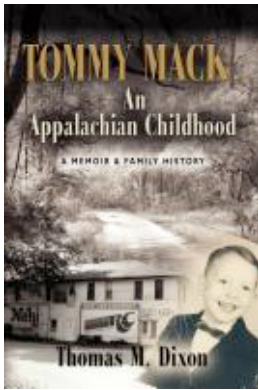
Clarence was fresh and clean and, you guessed it, in no mood to play. So we watched more cartoons and around noon I went home.

For several days Clarence favored that hand as if the entire arm was broken. Again, I couldn't help thinking I had the biggest sissy for a friend.

The day after he had the stitches removed he still wore a bandage. In a casual manner I grabbed his wrist, asking, "Hey, can I see your scar?"

He jerked his elbow into his rib cage, screaming, "Noooo!" You'd think I had committed bloody murder against him.

He wouldn't let anyone see his wound for several more days, saying it was sore. After two weeks I finally got a peek; the wound was nothing more than a scratch. It took about a month for Clarence to stop favoring that injury.



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