

THROUGH THICK AND THIN tells the story of Floyd Martin and Christine Mosley, who come of age during the Great Depression of the 1930s and get married. They make their home in Gulfport, Mississippi, a small town that was born in the early days of the twentieth century. As Floyd and Christine raise their family, the town also grows, and by mid-century the roots of both the town and the Martin family are firmly planted...

Through Thick And Thin

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THROUGH THICK AND THIN



The Coming of Age of
Floyd and Christine Martin
in Southern Mississippi
1922-1952



William Neil Martin

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CONTENTS

BEGINNINGS	1
PART ONE: The Early Years (1922-1929)	27
PART TWO: The Depression Years (1929-1941).....	85
PART THREE: The World War II Years (1941–1945)	199
PART FOUR: The Post-War Years (1945-1952).....	273
Afterword	339

Chapter 1

IN THE SPRING OF 1922 NEIL left the newspaper business. This decision was not based on any loss of interest in journalism, and certainly not on any lack of desire to write in general. The decision was based purely on economic grounds.

A year or so earlier Neil quit his job with the established paper in Muskogee where he was employed, and went into partnership with another man in a small trade union paper called *THE LIBERAL*. The paper was published weekly and almost all of the reporting and editorials were done by Neil and his partner. Most of Neil's editorials were devoted to castigating British Prime Minister Lloyd George and praising the efforts of the Irish rebels in their attempts to establish an independent republic in Ireland. The paper struggled during the entire time that it was in the hands of Neil and his partner, and, in 1922, Neil decided that he had had enough. Whether he sold out to his partner, or the paper simply went out of business is not known, but in the spring of that year Neil left the newspaper business for good.

Deciding to return to the sign painting trade, he teamed up with another sign painter by the name of Charlie Hudson. The economy was not very good at the time in Oklahoma, and sign painting was a service that was low on the list of priorities of most businesses, so Neil and Charlie decided to find work elsewhere.

Loading their paints, brushes and related equipment into Charlie's car, they hit the road, plying their trade from town to town – in essence, as itinerant sign painters. They headed in a generally south by southeast direction. Charlie had his eye on Florida. Neil, however, was not interested in going that far. In Memphis they decided to go their separate ways.

Neil packed up those brushes, paints and other essentials that belonged to him and moved southward, through Mississippi. In Meridian he stayed over for several days, having found work painting gold leaf lettering for the local Western Union office. He was particularly adept at gold leaf lettering. In every town that he was able to earn some money he sent most of it to Vivian.

After finishing the job for Western Union he continued his trek southward until he reached the coastal town of Gulfport. Shortly after arriving in the town he walked down to the harbor and looked around. Standing on one of the piers and looking back up toward the town, it suddenly occurred to Neil that he had been here before. Years earlier he had sailed into Gulfport Harbor as a young merchant seaman. He recalled how much he had liked the town at the time. There was something pleasant and peaceful about Gulfport. It seemed to be a good place to raise a family. And it was then and there that he decided. This is where he wanted to make a home for Vivian and the boys.

The Good Lord must have been of the same frame of mind because, once Neil made the decision to settle down in Gulfport, things began to fall into place for him. Gulfport was a young, thriving, growing town. The port of Gulfport was attracting businesses to the community, and there was a need for sign painters. Within a day or so of arriving in town Neil visited the Berry Sign Shop, at 1315 28th Avenue, located roughly midway between 13th Street and the L&N Railroad depot. In 1922 that was considered a prime business location. Neil introduced himself to Jack Berry, the owner, and after a short interview he was hired. Business was booming and Jack needed the help. Soon after demonstrating his skills, Neil was

assured of steady employment for as long as he wished to work for the Berry Sign Shop. With this guarantee, and a few paychecks deposited in a bank account, Neil sent for Vivian and the boys.

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SOON after Neil left Muskogee, Vivian sold all of their furniture and packed up the smaller items. At her request, her sister and brother-in-law, Edna and Ed Thomas, and their two daughters, Charlotte and Ethel, drove down to Muskogee and picked up Vivian, Floyd, Ed and all of their belongings and took them to stay at their house in Newkirk, Oklahoma until Neil sent for them.

As Floyd recalled in an interview many years later, they stayed with the Thomas's for several weeks. Then, at last, they heard from Neil. He sent them the money for train tickets and arrangements were immediately made to depart for their new home.

They boarded the train at the depot in Arkansas City, Kansas, located about fifteen miles north of Newkirk, probably in the early evening of June 26, 1922. They traveled through the night, sleeping in the seats next to one another. When they awoke the next morning they were somewhere in Texas. It was a special day for Floyd, for it was his eighth birthday.

An incident occurred that morning that still brought a smile to Floyd as he recalled it years later. Vivian sent him for a cup of water in one of those collapsible cups that were common in those days. By the time he returned the train had slowed to a very slow speed as it approached a section gang working on an adjacent section of track. As the train crept past, the workers stepped to the side of the tracks for the train to pass. The workers, for the most part, were Mexican laborers. Meanwhile, Floyd handed his mama the cup of water. She took a few sips, then decided that she didn't want any more. The window of the train was open, so without looking she threw the remaining water out the window. Then a commotion caused her to look in

that direction. The water had landed directly on one of the Mexican workers. Fortunately his string of profanities were issued in Spanish. As the car in which she and the boys were riding gathered distance from the section gang, the last thing either of them saw was that drenched section hand shaking his fist in their direction.

The train gathered its speed again and proceeded through seemingly endless miles of southeast Texas and into western Louisiana. Shortly after leaving Arkansas City Vivian had promised Floyd and Ed that they would be crossing the Mississippi River before the end of their journey. Throughout the day, whenever the train crossed a river or any good sized creek either Floyd or Ed would ask if that were the Mississippi River. By the time they were halfway through Louisiana Vivian probably regretted having mentioned anything about the river.

As the day wore on Ed was becoming grumpier by the minute, as any six-year-old might. Then, at long last, the train slowed, then came to a stop. This was where they were to get off. A mile away was the city of New Orleans. Between them and the city was the mighty Mississippi River. When Vivian pointed this out to the boys Floyd became excited. Ed, on the other hand, was still in a grumpy mood. Crossing his arms, he replied simply, "I don't want to see no damned old Mississippi River." Under normal circumstances Vivian would have been shocked by such a response from her six-year-old, but by this stage of their journey she was too weary to make a fuss over it.

They took a ferry across the river, then a bus to the L&N train depot in downtown New Orleans. It was about a two-hour train ride from New Orleans to Gulfport. Floyd recalled that they arrived in Gulfport at one o'clock in the morning. He specifically remembered it because his birthday had ended at midnight.

Neil was waiting for them at the depot when the train arrived, and following a joyous and emotional reunion, he escorted them home. He had rented an apartment for them within walking distance of the depot. The "apartment" was actually the front two rooms of a house at the northeast corner of 25th Avenue

THROUGH THICK AND THIN

and 19th Street. Though it was small, those two rooms looked like heaven to Floyd, for he and his family were together again. They were home.

Chapter 2

SOME OF THE TOWNS ALONG THE Mississippi Gulf Coast had been established communities for well over two centuries when the Martins arrived there in 1922. Biloxi, Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis had been around as early as 1699, which even predated the city of New Orleans. Some of the earliest pioneers, with names like Cuevas, Necaïse, Ladnier, Ladner, Saucier and Moran, were prolific in their offspring, and in the twentieth century the names were still quite common all along the Gulf Coast.

Shortly after the Civil War the Louisville and Nashville (L&N) Railroad laid tracks between New Orleans and Mobile, and small settlements such as Waveland, Long Beach, Handsboro, Mississippi City and Ocean Springs began to emerge, often comprising nothing more than a depot, a hotel and perhaps a mercantile as their entire business district.

Gulfport was not among these early settlements. It would be almost another three decades before this town's roots were firmly planted. The town would be cut out of a pine and palmetto forest abutting the Gulf of Mexico, twelve miles west of Biloxi, approximately midway between Mississippi City and Long Beach. Until the surveyors and the speculators arrived to begin clearing the land, the only sign of human activity in this thickly forested area, with the exception of the L&N Railroad, was a

wagon and stagecoach road that ran east and west about three miles north of the Gulf, that connected Pass Christian with Biloxi. It would come to be known as the Pass Road. Much of that road is there to this day, and, with a paved surface, now serves as a major artery between Gulfport and Biloxi.

Though its official "date of birth" was July 28, 1898, Gulfport was, for all practical purposes, a product of the twentieth century. But the town-site was founded several years earlier, in 1887, by a man named William Harris Hardy, a Civil War veteran, lawyer and businessman who possessed a rare gift of entrepreneurial vision. He had already founded the city of Hattiesburg by bringing the NO and NE Railroad through it. In fact, the town was named after Hardy's wife, Hattie. He now envisioned a seaport town where ships could come into a deep-water harbor, unload their cargo onto cars at the pier on a railroad that he would build. This railroad would be called the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad, and it would run from Gulfport to Hattiesburg, and from there to all points north. Of course, with the L&N Railroad running east and west, there was that option also.

On the surface, the location of the seaport seemed ideal. It was a natural harbor setting. And it was believed at the time that the string of long, narrow islands that ranged from eight to twelve miles off the coast would form a natural barrier against strong hurricanes and tropical storms. The harbor, therefore, would be a safe haven for ships.

There were, however, some major obstacles to overcome, one of which arose from the fact that the harbor channel would have to be dredged. Although the channel between Ship Island, about twelve miles out, and Cat Island, about eight miles out, was deep enough to accommodate large ships, the water between Cat Island and the Gulfport harbor was shallow. A deep-water channel, therefore, would have to be dredged, and this was a costly endeavor. But it had to be done or there would be no harbor, and if there were no harbor there would be no

need for a railroad, and if there were no railroad there would be no need for a town.

Hardy attracted what he thought would be a sufficient number of investors, and work on the project began. Five thousand acres of waterfront property had previously been purchased from a woman by the name of Mrs. C. M. Soria for five dollars an acre. The land was surveyed and platted. Streets were mapped out with the central focus being on the G. and S. I. Railroad right-of-way that ran north from the harbor to the junction of the L&N tracks. The road that ran parallel to the right-of-way was 28th Avenue. It was on this street that Neil, more than three decades later, would go to work at the Berry Sign Shop. The next road to the east was 27th Avenue (originally it was called Railroad Avenue). Both of these avenues ran north and south between 13th Street (which ran east and west) and the L&N Railroad tracks. This was the very beginning of the town of Gulfport.

As construction commenced on the railroad, businesses began to emerge along 27th and 28th Avenues. Houses sprang up on the outside of the business district, and for a while it looked as if the future of Gulfport could not be brighter. Then, in the early 1890's, the rug was pulled out from under William Hardy. He had been counting on federal funding for dredging outside the harbor, but after a lengthy bureaucratic analysis of the situation, the government decided against sinking any money into the venture. This was a disastrous setback. In addition, there were financial troubles connected with the construction of the railroad. These troubles were compounded by a depression in 1893 and, in 1894, the railroad went into receivership. After all of his hard work William Harris Hardy finally had to admit defeat and abandon the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad project. Almost overnight the fledgling community of Gulfport virtually became a ghost town.

Then, in 1895, Captain Joseph T. Jones, a wealthy oil tycoon from Pennsylvania, became interested in the Gulf and Ship Island project. Like William Hardy, Jones had the vision to

see the vast potential such a venture had to offer. But unlike Hardy, he had the personal wealth and connections to see it finished. Construction on both the harbor and railroad resumed, and the sleeping town began to re-awaken.

Captain Jones was a man who thought on a grand scale. Soon after arriving on the Gulf Coast he purchased a few acres along the waterfront between what are now 20th and 21st Avenues and built a large white wooden house that he referred to as the *Chautauqua* building. He and his family lived there during his first few years of residency on the Coast.⁵ But his grand scale thinking extended beyond his personal needs. In 1902, following the completion of the harbor and railroad, Captain Jones made a speech in which more than 3,000 people were in attendance. In that speech he announced that he would build a first class union depot that would be large enough to accommodate both railroads. The depot's complex would include long platforms in the directions of both railroads. There would also be a boiler house and carpenter shop. On the south side of 13th Street, at the end of 27th Avenue, he would construct a large office building 100 feet long and 52 feet wide and four stories high, with an elevator.⁶ Jones also promised to build a bank three stories high with offices and rooms, as well as a solid square block of brick stores.

Perhaps the most ambitious announcement during his speech was his plan to build a grand, up-to-date hotel, three stories high, with baths, hot and cold water in every room and a beautifully landscaped lawn with flowers, shrubbery and a fountain. The hotel would have balconies on every floor overlooking the sea, and large dining rooms and commodious kitchens. All of the rooms in the building would be heated with steam and lighted with electricity from its own plant, located

⁵ During the 1940's and '50's this building was referred to as the Eastside Community House. It has since been torn down. WNM

⁶ This would be the Gulf and Ship Island Building, commonly referred to as the G. and S. I. Building, built in 1903, which is still standing at the time of this writing. WNM

nearby. An ice plant would also be built and wells would be dug to provide all of the hotel's water needs. Jones added that the hotel would feature a promenade that would extend from the hotel out over the water for one mile and would be 100 feet wide, with a large pavilion at the end and a shed every 1000 feet along the way. He promised that the pavilion would be one of the highlights of Gulfport.

It wasn't long before Captain Jones proved to be a man of his word. Every promise he made was fulfilled. On July 25, 1903 the Great Southern Hotel, located on the west side of 25th Avenue between the beach and 13th Street, was dedicated. It was a wooden structure, painted dark green with a red-tiled roof. Balconies extended from each of the 250 rooms, facing outward. Each suite of rooms, as promised, had hot and cold running water, steam heat, electric chandeliers ... and even telephones. It was an elegant, first-class hotel in every respect. Soon after it opened, Captain Jones moved his family from the *Chautauqua* residence to the hotel, where he would reside for the rest of his life.

The building that housed the power plant, steam laundry and icehouse for the hotel was located south of 13th Street and west of the G. and S. I. Building. The icehouse portion of the building would actually survive the hotel itself and provide ice for Gulfport residents for many decades.

Gulfport's roots were now firmly planted. It was a city on the move. Ships were coming in and out of the harbor almost daily. In addition to the freight from ships, the railroad was picking up lumber along the route from towns springing up along the line between Gulfport and Hattiesburg.

The business district was also spreading out. The growth was mostly to the east and north. Buildings along 14th Street were being erected to join the existing Hewes Brothers Building located on the south side of the street between 25th and 26th Avenues. 25th Avenue was promising to become a major artery as well through the up-and-coming city.

In 1908 a program was inaugurated to cover the dirt streets with a hard surface, and soon afterward most of the downtown streets between 24th and 30th Avenues south of the L&N tracks were paved with bricks.

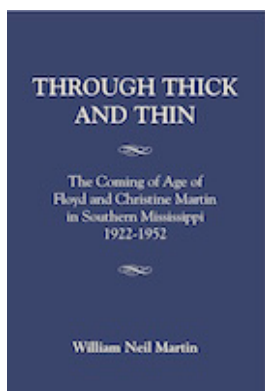
In 1910 the post office opened at the southeast corner of 25th Avenue and 13th Street, across from the Great Southern Hotel. The post office is still there at the time of this writing, and looks much the same as it did then.

Captain Jones also built a trolley system that ran along the beachfront between Gulfport and Biloxi. In time a road would be built adjacent to the trolley-way to accommodate the increasing number of motor vehicles.

This was a boom period for Gulfport, and its growth attracted businessmen, craftsmen, entrepreneurs and laborers from all over. Some came to stay and some came perhaps to do a specific job, then move on. During this period of growth George Morgan undoubtedly made several trips to Gulfport from his home in Meridian to ply his trade as a house painter and wallpaper hanger. This would have been during the early growth period between 1902 and 1920. It is also quite possible that his son, Claude, accompanied him on some of the trips when he was in his early teens. This is all speculation, of course. It just seems odd that, as a self-employed house painter, George Morgan would not have taken advantage of the tremendous housing boom taking place on the Coast when the economy in Meridian was actually slowing down. And while he probably did make trips on his own to engage in temporary jobs, it would be a few more years before he would pack up his family and move to Gulfport permanently.

This was, in essence, the Gulfport that the Martins found when they arrived in 1922. The downtown section covered the area, roughly, from 24th Avenue to 30th Avenue, and from the L&N Railroad tracks southward to the waterfront. The streets in the downtown area were covered with bricks. The tallest building in town was the five-story Hewes Building. Numerous one, two and three-story buildings comprised the rest of town.

The G. and S. I. Building and post office were already standing when they arrived, and the Great Southern Hotel was a thriving tourist center. Vessels alongside the piers in the harbor were topped with either the smokestacks of steamers or the masts of sailing ships.



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