

PRETTY POLLY

Book

Don Baker and Ron Short

Original Music

Ron Short

Directed by

Dudley Cocke

Original Cast

Tommy Bledsoe, Angelyn DeBord,

Ron Short

Singers and Musicians

Tommy Bledsoe – banjo and vocals

Angelyn DeBord – vocals

Ron Short – fiddle, guitar, and vocals

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Original Music ©Ron Short

Pretty Polly is a story about a storyteller, Polly Branham Johnson (1864-1947), who lived around Roadside Theater's home in the central Appalachian Mountains of far Southwest Virginia and East Kentucky. Polly Johnson's stories and songs were collected in the 1930s by local writers who were part of the Federal Works Project Administration's oral history project.

Pretty Polly requires an intimate relationship with the audience, which is encouraged to banter with the actors. As in all Roadside Theater's plays, there is no theatrical fourth wall; Roadside actors speak directly to the audience.

In Act I, Ron and Tommy are storytellers, who slip in and out of the stories' characters. Angelyn assumes the character of Polly Johnson throughout the play.

In Act II, Ron assumes the character of Lovell, Polly Johnson's son. Tommy assumes the character of Jessee, a family member.

ACT I

(Actors enter, greet, and engage in welcoming conversation with the audience. Ron steps forward to introduce the play.)

Ron *(as himself)*

Good evening. We're a part of Roadside Theater, from Whitesburg, Kentucky. Whitesburg is in far eastern Kentucky where Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Virginia kindly back up on one another. We're here tonight to tell you a story. It's a story about a storyteller. Polly Branham Johnson was born over on Big Beaver Creek in Kentucky in 1864, and died across the mountain in Wise County, Virginia in 1947. Aunt Polly left behind 83 years of memories and stories for all of us who come along after her. You know, back home *(maybe here in _____, too)* sometimes it seems like the only history that counts is the history that's written in the history books. Seems like people's own memories and stories don't count for much, that they're just a shadow of some bigger truth. But now when you get to listening real close and studying on it, you might find out that it is the history books what have always been the shadows of the stories and memories of people just like each one of us.

Angelyn *(as Polly Johnson)*

Now you was talkin' about that there history. Well, I'll tell you a history story. When I was just a little thing my Papaw used to get me up in his lap. He'd say, "Polly, it is time for your history lesson . . . Our forefathers come over here on boats with big sheets on 'em. When they got here they got sorty wild, took to runnin' a'ter game. The weakest of 'em died out. But the strongest of 'em kept climbin' up into the mountains, and we've all been up here ever since!"

(Sung by Ron, Tommy, and Angelyn; acapella)

INDIAN TRIBES OF TENNESSEE *(Traditional)*

When we were out on the ice and snow,
It hailed and stormed how the wind did blow.
And some of us did mourn and cry.
It was so cold we almost died.

But bless the Lord relief was found.
We landed here both safe and sound.
A lonesome place, but a fertile soil.
Here's milk and wine, here's corn and oil.

If we on earth are to meet no more,
We'll laugh and sing on Canaan's shore.
Extend to me the parting hand,
And bid me safe to the Cumberland land.

Tommy

Now Aunt Polly – it seems like she was raised up on all them old stories.

Angelyn

I know another 'un about when people just come to this country. I heard it from my Papaw when I was just a little girl.

Ron

One way of tellin' it, there's a shipwreck. Only one man survived.

Tommy

The other way of telling it is about when the long hunters first come out here to the mountains. Fore there was any other white people come into the mountains, way back in the 1740s and '50s.

Angelyn

Anyways, the story goes like this

Ron

this feller is lost, and give up any idea of ever findin' his way back home to his people. He'd been months and weeks all by hisself. He come upon a deer and killed it. He's awful hungry, don't you know. He looked around for someplace to build his fire and cook it, and find him some shelter. He seen a cave not too far off, and he drug the deer over to it.

Tommy

The entrance to the cave was all wore slick like somebody

Ron

'er some thing

Tommy

had gone in and out of it right regular.

Ron

The man, he took some notice of this

Tommy

but not too much because he was wore out from luggin' that deer around

Ron

so he just went on in. Gathered up some firewood, built him up a fire

Tommy

and commenced to broil that deer.

Ron

It was gettin' about done and all of a sudden right behind him he heard

Ron & Tommy (*unison*)

a great big growl

Ron

looked around, and there stood

Ron & Tommy

a great big hairy woman. (*Angelyn stands over the men growling*)

Tommy

Now let me tell you that fella was scared. That woman must a been seven

Ron & Tommy

or eight feet tall

Ron

and she's a standin' there with a deer throwed over her shoulder.

Tommy

She just stood there and looked at that man and looked at that fire. I don't reckon she'd ever seed a fire before

Angelyn

ner a white man neither.

Ron

Well that man, he didn't know what to do. So he just reached over, pulled off a deer leg from where it was cooked, blowed on it, and reached it to her.

Tommy

She hesitated for a little, sniffed at it, then she took a bite out of it, and then she gobbled it all up.

Angelyn

(burps loudly)

Ron

Then she tore a leg off that deer she was a carryin' and reached it over to the man to cook it. Now as the white man was a startin' to put it on the fire, he heared another growl

Angelyn

a long, low growl

Ron

looked up and there stood the hairy man. He knowed he's a goner fer shore. But the hairy woman jumped on the hairy man, and they fit and rolled over and over, and fit. 'Til finally the hairy woman kilt the hairy man and

Tommy

dragged him on outside.

Ron

So that feller, he just stayed on there at the cave, and finally he took up with that hairy woman

Tommy

lived with her, you know.

Ron

When she'd go out a huntin', she'd carry him out with her and set him on a log while she kilt the game and drug it back to the cave.

Tommy

That feller had it made. He didn't have to do nothin'!

Ron

Then after about a year, that hairy woman had a baby.

Tommy

Well I reckon he must a' done somethin'.

Ron

That feller he'd stay at the cave and mind the baby. Keep the place tidied up

Tommy

cave keepin' they called it.

Ron

But he was awful lonely. Didn't have nobody to talk to. Hadn't talked to his own people in over a year, and he didn't know what he was gonna do. Then one day it come to him. He'd teach his baby to talk his language!

(talks to baby)

Angelyn *(Hairy Woman tries to get Man's attention with no result, so finally says)*

Hair. Baby. *(To man)* Purty.

Ron

You know she was awful smart.

Tommy

Then one day, while the hairy woman was out huntin' game, some people from his own country found him.

Ron

He knowed this was his only chance to get back to his people, and he wanted to take his baby with him.

Tommy (*as "people from his own country"*)

"No! A half hairy baby would never make it in our country."

Ron

He begged them to let him take the baby.

Tommy

"No! Leave that brute."

Ron

So they started out and got down to the boat. And as they's a shovin' off, they heared a great, long growl.

Tommy

They looked up

Ron

and seed the hairy woman a runnin' towards 'em with her baby. She waded in after them

Angelyn

but the water got too swift and deep and she couldn't go no further. She looked out towards the boat as it was leavin' and held that baby up over her head

Ron

like she was a sayin' to that man not to leave on account of our

Angelyn (*as Hairy Woman*)

"BABY!"

Ron

The man was a cryin'

Tommy

motioning to her to go back

Ron

tryin' to to tell her he had to leave. Then she looked out at that man and she let out a great loud growl, and tore that baby clean in two, and flung one half out to that desertin' man in the boat

Angelyn

then huggin' the half what looked like her, she turned away

Tommy

and walked on back to the cave.

Ron

Now that there ain't no easy story, but it's one of the oldest stories in the mountains. People are still telling it today. Tryin' to figure out who they are, where they come from. Aunt Polly said when her Papaw finished that story she set there puzzlin' over it for the longest time. Finally she looked him square in the eye, said

Angelyn

"Papaw, which half are we?"

Ron

I'm gonna let you all decide that fer yourselves.

Did you all hear about that Civil War . . . you all probably heard about that Civil War, didn't you? Well, in the mountains, it was a little different than some other places. Where we come from is border country. One day the Rebs would come through and grab up a bunch of men to fight in their army. The next day the Yanks would come in right behind 'em and grab up another bunch. In the mountains you had neighbor fightin' neighbor, brother fightin' brother, father fightin' son. The mountains was torn apart not too much different than that little baby, and Aunt Polly's family was smack dab in the middle of the whole thing.

Angelyn (*as Polly*)

My daddy wouldn't go in that Civil War. He was layin' out scoutin' from the Yankees. Uncle Tan, his brother, was scoutin' out too. Daddy said one night he was layin' out in the woods, and he said it seemed like one of the loneliest nights he ever seed. He was a sittin' there all alone and one of them little "willer-the wisps," you know, one of them little bobs of light you heard about come up and jist dandled and dandled right around his feet and legs. Directly he said somethin' started comin' down the hill towards him, like somebody draggin' a big empty box down through the brush. He said he had the awfulest feelin', and it so lonesome out there – nobody around anywhere but jist him. He said he knowed somethin' had happened. Mother was stayin' at home with little Adeline at the time. She was crippled, little Adeline was. She had the fever and it settled in her legs. They was fixin' to go to bed and they heard the Yankees ride up. Mother was slippin' her dress over her head, and when they knocked she slipped it back on and told them to come in.

Ron (*as Yankee*)

Evenin', ma'am.

Tommy (*as Yankee*)

Where's Mr. Branham at?

Angelyn (*as Mrs. Branham*)

He's off huntin' game.

Ron

He better come in and give up his guns.

Tommy

I reckon you heard about Tan Branham being kilt didn't you?

Angelyn

I never.

Ron & Tommy (*in unison*)

Yeah, Yankees kilt him today.

Angelyn

Then they left. Mama acted hardhearted, but she said her heart was a bustin'. They intended to kill my daddy too. They would have if it hadn't been for that willer-the-wisp and that box bein' drug down the hill. That was what it was fer you know, to warn daddy that Uncle Tan, his brother, had been kilt.

(Banjo and fiddle begin playing "Pretty Polly")

That song there. It's called "Polly, Pretty Polly." They used to sing that to me when I was young – just startin' to grow up.

(Sung by Ron & Tommy accompanied by banjo and fiddle)

PRETTY POLLY *(Traditional)*

Polly, Pretty Polly
Come go along with me.
Polly, Pretty Polly
Come go along with me.
Before we get married
Some pleasures we'll see.

He led her over hills
And dark valleys so deep.
He led her over hills
And dark valleys so deep.
Polly mistrusted
And she begin to weep.

Willie, oh Willie
I'm afraid of your way.
Willie, oh Willie
I'm afraid of your way.
I'm afraid you'll deceive me
And lead me astray.

Polly, Pretty Polly
You're guessing just right.
Polly, Pretty Polly
You're guessing just right.
I dug on your grave
The best part of last night.

He led her a little bit farther
And what did she spy?

He led her a little bit farther
And what did she spy,
But a new dug grave
With a spade lying by.

She fell down before him
And pleaded for her life.
She fell down before him
And pleaded for her life.
O, let me go a single girl
For I won't be you wife.

Polly, Pretty Polly
That never can be.
Polly, Pretty Polly
That never can be.
Your fast reputation
Means trouble for me.

He stabbed her in her bosom
And her heart's blood did flow.
He stabbed her in her bosom
And her heart's blood did flow.
And into that hole
Pretty Polly did go.

He threw a little dirt o'er her
And turned to go home.
He threw a little dirt o'er her
And turned to go home.
Leaving none but the wild birds
To weep and to mourn.

It's a debt to the devil
That Willie must pay.
A debt to the devil
Willie must pay,
For killing Pretty Polly
And trying to get away.

Angelyn

There's a story about Pretty Polly, but it's a little bit different from that song.

Ron

See, in the story this new feller had moved into the same settlement where Pretty Polly was living

Tommy

and he was a courtin' Pretty Polly. He finally got her to agree to meetin' him out in the wilderness late one night.

Ron

But that night, when Polly went to where he told her to meet him

Angelyn

why, he wadn't no where around

Ron

so Polly, she clumb up in a big tree

Angelyn

went to sleep up there

Ron

up in the forks of that tree. And when she come to, there was that man, but he was diggin'

Tommy & Angelyn

what appeared to be a grave.

Ron

Polly decided to keep real quiet and watch him to see what he was doin'.

Tommy

He kept on a diggin' with that spade

Ron

and it kept a lookin'

Ron & Angelyn

more and more like a grave

Ron

'til finally at last Polly

Angelyn

was shore that's just what it was.

Tommy

Most of the night he dug. Kept a lookin' around fer Polly.

Ron

About daylight he finally give up on her comin'

Tommy

and he left.

Angelyn

Polly clumb down outta that tree and hurried on home.

Ron

But the very next day that man come up to Polly's house and he asked her

Tommy

"Why for didn't you come?"

Angelyn

She told him some story or other, like she hadn't been there the night before.

Tommy

"Why don't you come up to my house fer dinner tonight?"

Angelyn

“I can't. And anyhow I don't know the way to your house.”

Tommy

“I'll mark the trail if you'll give me some ashes to spread behind me.”

Angelyn

“Well, I can do that, but I'll not be there tonight, nor will I be there tomorrow night, but I'll be there on the third night.”

Ron

But now the very next morning Polly set out a following' that trail of ashes. It led to a house setting out all by itself in the wilderness.

Angelyn

She peeked around and seed that there wadn't no one there, so she went right on in.

Ron

The table was all spread like someone was fixin' to come to dinner.

Angelyn

Polly was sorta hungry

Tommy

so she thought she'd take her a little bite.

Ron

She picked up a piece of meat and started eatin'.

Angelyn

Tasted alright

Ron

but she couldn't figure out what kind of meat it was.

Tommy

She eat it and started to pick up another one

Angelyn

but it looked too much like a person's hand

Ron

so she, put it back!

Angelyn

real quick.

Ron

Then she got to pokin' around and

Angelyn

started to look in this door. All at once she heared a voice say

Ron

“Don't go in there, Pretty Polly, or you'll lose your heart's blood.”

Angelyn

It liked to have scared her to death, but when she looked around she seed it was just an old parrot a settin' there. She tried the door, but it was locked. After a little she started to go up the stairs. But the parrot said

Ron

“Don't go up there, Polly, you'll lose your heart's blood.”

Angelyn

She went on up anyhow and went in a room at the top of the stairs where they's queer bloody-lookin' stains all over that room.

Ron

So Polly started to leave real quick like

Angelyn

but she heared somethin' comin' outside, sounded like a woman a moanin', and the parrot started to squawkin'

Ron

“Hide Pretty Polly, or you're the ninth that'll be.”

Angelyn

She run and had just got under the stairs

Tommy

when in come that man a draggin' a woman.

Angelyn

It was her cousin.

Tommy

The woman was a fightin'

Angelyn

tryin' to get away.

Tommy

She reached up and grabbed the stair post. That man brought out his sword and just whacked her hand off

Angelyn

the hand fell right down into Polly's apron.

Tommy

He drug the woman on up the stairs

Angelyn

and Polly could hear him a murderin' her.

Ron

“Run, Polly, or you’re the tenth shall be. Number ten! Number ten!”

Angelyn

“Oh, don’t tell him I’ve been here. Please spare my life's blood!”

Ron

Then she run home. The next week they had a party

Tommy

was a big corn shuckin’. Ever'body all around come to it.

Ron

An’ that man

Tommy

he was there

Ron

and Pretty Polly

Angelyn

she was there too.

Ron

That man walked right up to Polly again and asked her

Tommy

“Why for didn't you come to dinner?”

Angelyn

Polly never said nothin’.

Ron

Finally they got that party rollin' and they started
Ron & Tommy
tellin' riddles and all.

Angelyn
"I got a riddle."

Ron & Tommy
They all asked her to tell it!

Angelyn
She got out to where she could keep an eye on that feller and said. "Oh how my heart did break to see what a hole that fox did make. All night up in the lonesome pine, I thought I'd be number nine."

Ron
When Polly finished telling that riddle, that man looked sort a pale. But ever'body else was tryin' to figure out the answer and asked Polly what it was.

Angelyn
Polly allowed as how she'd answer it later on.

Ron
Well, they got to tellin'

Ron & Tommy
jokes and dreams and

Angelyn
Polly allowed as she had a dream.

Ron & Tommy
They all asked her to tell it!

Angelyn

Polly looked that feller straight in the eye, and told as how she dreamed the other night that she'd gone up to his house, follerin' a trail of ashes. They wadn't nobody there but a parrot. In my dream, I went on in the house an' eat a lady's finger. That man come in a draggin' a woman. Hit was my cousin, and he cut off her hand with his sword an' then he murdered my cousin. And the parrot said, "Run, Polly, run, or you're the tenth that'll be."

Ron

When Polly finished tellin' the dream, that man looked paler still. Then Polly reached down into her apron pocket and pulled out that dead woman's hand.

Angelyn

"The sword cut the hand you see, but Polly puts it on the fox's knee."

Ron

And when that rogue seed that hand

Tommy

he fainted.

Ron

And Polly then told how it wadn't a dream

Angelyn

but true, and what the answer to that riddle had been.

Ron

Then them good people laid holt on that rogue

Angelyn

and arrested him, and he's put to death

Ron & Angelyn

hung, you know.

(Ron & Tommy sing last verse of "Pretty Polly" accompanied by banjo and fiddle)

Ladies and gentlemen, I'll bid you farewell.
Ladies and gentlemen, I'll bid you farewell.
For killing Pretty Polly, I'll soon be in hell.

Angelyn

And a good place fer him too!

Ron

Aunt Polly always said that was a true story. She said that feller was a witch.

Angelyn

People believed in witches a powerful sight, back then.

Tommy

Aunt Polly told one about a feller got run down awful bad.

Ron

Got poorly, you know.

Tommy

Seemed like he couldn't seem to get no rest at night.

Ron *(as the feller)*

"I can't get no rest of a night. I'm tireder ever' mornin' than when I went off to bed."

Tommy

And in the mornings when he'd wake up, his hands and knees would be all scraped up and tore up.

Ron

"Have you seen my hands and knees?"

Tommy

He got to worryin' about it.

Ron

"I tell you, I'm gettin' worried about it!"

Angelyn

His wife, she'd just make light of it. Told him he was a walkin' in his sleep, an' a tryin' to pull the chinkin' outten betwixt the logs.

Tommy

But it kept on, and it got so that man couldn't even get out of the bed at all. Ever' mornin' he'd be worse off still.

Ron

"I'm worse off still! It's this dream I been havin' about bein' rid around."

Angelyn

But his wife'd just laugh at him, tell him, "You're gonna be all right. Just stop walkin' in your sleep."

Tommy

Well, one day while his old woman was off to the settlement, they's a neighbor come to visit and ask about him. They set an' talked fer a spell, an' the poor old feller got to tellin' him about his dream

Ron

"Have you heared about my dream?"

Tommy

Now that neighbor man

Angelyn

as it happened

Tommy

was a witch doctor

Angelyn

an' he told him

Tommy

“It sounds to me like you're bein' witched.”

Ron

“Witched? Oh lordy, no, don't tell me that.”

Tommy

Whenever a witch bridles somebody and rides 'em like that, iffen they could shake the bridle loose one way or 'nother the spell'll be broke, and they'll be turned back to their own self again.

Ron

“Have you seen my mouth? Are those bit marks?”

Tommy

Now the next night that feller dreamed that he's bein' ridden fer a long way

Ron

“Thru' briars!”

Tommy

and dense thickets, on up to a brightly lit house where he's tethered an' left to stand.

Ron

Now that man remembered what that doctor had told him to do, and he begin working that bridle, and after a while it slipped and fell to the ground.

Tommy

And he was again his own self

Ron

standin' before a strange house

Tommy

where they's a dance goin' on.

Ron

He looked in and they was all kinds of strange carryin's on

Tommy

and right there in the midst of 'em all

Ron & Tommy

was his old woman!

(Angelyn rises on chair, chanting and moving mysteriously)

Ron

Well, he turned around an' finally made his way home.

Tommy

When his wife got in home early the next mornin', he told her that he knowed what she'd been up to.

Ron

"I know what you been up to! You been a witchin' me and witchin' all the people all around."

Tommy

He told her she better quit that witchin', and never do no witchin' no more or else

Ron

"I'll tell on you. I will!"

Tommy

Well, they moved off from there

Angelyn

and she quit her witchin’

Ron

and that feller got his strength back.

Tommy

And things was going pretty good there fer a spell

Ron

‘til his horses an' cows started dyin’

Angelyn

neighbors started havin’ real bad luck.

Ron

An’ he knowed she had took up her witchin’ again.

Tommy

One day he told her he was goin’ off to hunt.

Ron

“I’m going off to hunt.”

Angelyn

Got his gun an’ left.

Tommy

Went off a little ways and snuck back in

Ron

an’ shot her.

Tommy

And that’s the end of that story so far as we know.

Angelyn

Now my papaw always said that a whistlin' woman and a crowin' hen will come to no good end. We'll be back to tell you a few more stories in about fifteen minutes or so.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

(Ron & Tommy enter and begin playing fiddle and banjo tune as the audience settles back into their seats.)

Tommy *(to audience)*

Are you ready to sing one? If you don't know it this is a good time to learn it.

(Ron & Tommy sing; Angelyn enters and sings with them; accompanied by banjo & guitar)

SUNNYSIDE OF LIFE *(lyrics by Ada Blenkhorn; music by J. Howard Entwisle; 1899)*

There's a dark and a troubled side of life.

There's a bright and a sunny side, too.

Tho' we meet with the darkness and strife,

The sunny side we also may view.

(Chorus)

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side,

Keep on the sunny side of life.

It will help us every day, it will brighten all the way,

If we keep on the sunny side of life.

Tho' the storm in its fury break today

Crushing hopes that we cherished so dear.

Storm and cloud will in time pass away,

The sun again will shine bright and clear.

(Chorus)

Tommy *(as himself)*

Feels good to sing, don't it? Back in the late 1930's, up on the side of Stone Mountain, people would gather up at Aunt Polly's house, sing songs, tell stories all night long. Polly Johnson's house was always a particular favorite place to go, 'cause Aunt Polly knowed so many good stories herself. Polly, why don't you tell us a big tale?

Angelyn (*as Polly*)

Watch out now. I'm liable to tell one about your family.

Tommy (*as Jessee*)

Well, it's your family too!

Angelyn

I think I'll tell one about your Uncle John.

Tommy

I got two Uncle Johns – one lives on one side of the mountain and the other one lives on the other side. Which Uncle John are you talkin' about?

Angelyn

Honey, he's the one that lives on the outside of the mountain. I'm talking about the one on your Daddy's side . . . well, I figure it's better to tell it in front of you, than to tell it behind your back. John lived in a little cabin there on the mountainside, and he was a bachelor feller. Poor old thing, bless his heart

Tommy

he was a bachelor by choice!

Angelyn

That's right – the ladies' choice. Well John had a little garden with beans and such and he grew a good bit a corn. Now you know what he was a doin' with that corn don't ya?

Tommy

Makin' a little corn liquor I reckon.

Angelyn

Now ever'body likes a little libation now and again, and for John now and again come about ever'day. Well, Uncle John also raised a few chickens, of which he was particularly fond, especially when proper cooked. It was this fondness that was responsible for the eventual depletion of his entire flock – for depleted it become – until finally they's only one old rooster left. But mercy sakes alive, honey, what a rooster that thing was – why he was two or three feet tall!

Tommy

More like one and a half foot if you ask me.

Angelyn

One morning Uncle John decided that that rooster should follow the rest of his flock up to the big henhouse in the sky. He took the poor thing by its little wing and led it to the chopping block out by the woodpile, and he cut off his head. While he's a doin' that Uncle John saw a snake sunnin' nearby, and he knowed it to be a joint snake.

Tommy

A what?

Angelyn

Now a joint snake's sorta like a earthworm or a lizard. If you go to kill it, it'll jist break up into a bunch of pieces and play snake possum 'til you're good and gone, then it'll blip, blip, blip, put itself back together again an' go on its merry, snakey way. Uncle John, he knowed about joint snakes so when he gave that snake a whack with a stick, he hunted until he found the head, took it into the house, and throwed it in the fire. Then he turned his attention to cookin' the old rooster. An hour or so later, just as that bird had begun to get tender from the constant boilin', boilin', and your Uncle John was a little tender hisself from his constant nipping, he heared what sounded jist like his old rooster outside a crowin'. Uncle John ran out the house and said he nearly fell over in a dead faint. Fer that joint snake had appropriated that rooster's head, and was crowin' with all its might! (*Polly crows*) I call that my Joint Snake Story!

Tommy

Now I don't know nothin' about them joint snakes. I do know a little about that corn liquor though! I like a little corn liquor. Well, it's good for you! I like about that much (*indicates one inch measure*) in a washtub about THAT BIG! I'll tell you what I do know about

Angelyn

well, we're waitin' fer that.

Tommy

I know about fishin'. I like to fish, and I'm a pretty good fisherman, too. A while back me and Johnson Dean and Dufer Dockery

Ron (*as Lovell*)

you took Dufer fishin'?

Tommy

Yes, I took Dufer. Well, I didn't actually take him, but he went along. Now they ain't nothin' wrong with Dufer.

Ron

I never said there was anything wrong with Dufer

Tommy

well there ain't nothin' wrong

Tommy, Ron, & Angelyn (*in unison*)

but he ain't exactly right.

Tommy

Well, it ain't his fault. Well it ain't! See, his mommy dropped him on his head when he was jist a baby. He got well, but he didn't get

Tommy, Ron, & Angelyn

exactly right.

Tommy

You know a lot of people makes fun of Dufer, and that makes me mad. Some of them devilish ones used to play tricks on Dufer

Ron

yes they did.

Tommy

They'd hold out a nickel in one hand, and a dime in the other'n, and they'd say, "Dufer, you take the one you want." And Dufer'd take that nickel ever' time

Ron

'ever time.

Tommy

They thought it was 'cause that nickel was bigger than that dime. So I said to Dufer one day, I said, "Dufer, honey, don't you know them fellers is playin' a trick on you? Don't you know that dime's worth more than that nickel?"

Ron

'bout twice as much.

Tommy

Well Dufer said, "I know that." I said, "Why do you take that nickel then?" And he said, "Jessee, I believe if I took that dime, they'd quit offerin' me money." Now that's Dufer. I like Dufer.

Anyway, I's goin' to tell you about fishin'. I was down at the Green Hole on Big Mocassin Creek a fishin' the other day with Johnson. Now I like to go fishin' with Johnson. He thinks he's a big fisherman, but I'll tell ya, he's lucky to just get his bait back.

So, I's up above Johnson in the creek when I heard him hollerin', "Oh Jessee, come down here and help me quick. I got a big'un." Now I knowed Johnson didn't have no big'un. I thought he'd caught hold of a mud turtle or one a them big lunker headed basses. But I knowed there was some big'uns in there, and I knowed if he had one he'd let it get away if I didn't get down there and help him.

So I went off a runnin' down the creek as fast as I could on them ol' slick creek rocks, and shore enough there was Johnson with his pole bent pert near double, and that line was a zingin' up and

down that water so fast, I swear the steam was a comin' off it! I jumped right in that river, clothes and all, to see if I could land that fish fer him. But now I clean forgot about my fifty dollar gold watch and that twenty dollar bill I had in the hip pocket of my overalls. And don't ya know that fish got away. It was Johnson's fault, but now it was a big'un, and I know 'cause I had my hands on it several times.

Well, that evenin' I missed my watch and my twenty dollar bill, and I went back down there to see if I could find 'em, but I never. A few days later I was back down there fishin', and sure enough I caught on to a big'un. I's usin' a wooley worm. Them fish is just crazy 'bout wooley worms. Well sir, I landed that fish and I guess it was just about the biggest one ever to be caught out of the Green Hole. And you know what I found in the gills of that fish? My gold watch! And when I took it home and cleaned it, you know what else I found? That's right, my twenty dollar bill, and what amounted to exactly six and three quarters percent interest, in silver coins. Just lucky, I guess. (*To Polly*) What do you think of that un? I call that my "Fishin Story!"

Angelyn

I think you're a mess, Jessee. Lovell, you been awful quiet over there.

Tommy

Why don't you tell that one about them grits.

Ron

I don't know one about grits.

Tommy

I'll tell it then

Angelyn

now Jessee, it's Lovell's turn.

Ron

Well I don't know nothin' about chickens nor fishin', but I can tell you a story about luck. It's a story about my sister Ethel. I was thinkin' about Ethel the other day – you know, about how strange it is the way things will happen sometimes.

My sister Ethel was married three times. She married a coalminer ever' time. Now that ain't the strange part, 'cause they ain't nothin' much but coalminers up around here. You get married, you're liable to marry one.

Ethel first married Clyde Blankenbeckler from over Glamorgan. Clyde was a friend of mine; we went to first grade together. Now Clyde was somewhat older than Ethel, and I thought that was just awful, her a-marryin' an old man that way, but I could see right off she loved him. You could see it written on her face ever'time he was around. They set up housekeepin' over at Glamorgan where Clyde was workin' in the mines, and Ethel set in to havin' younguns. Sometimes I'd go over and stay with 'em awhile, help with the children and all. They was a happy family . . . Clyde, he went to work one day and he never come home. We waited and waited. Found out a rock fell on him in the mines and he'd been kilt.

It hurt me so bad to see Ethel cry. She took to her bed and me and Mommy went and stayed with her and the young'uns. I guess it was the worryin' about the children that finally got her up out of that bed . . . that, and marryin' Granny Carter. Actually his name was Granville, but everybody called him Granny. Oh, he didn't mind. He was good natured. He'd just smile. He had the purtiest white teeth! He'd come home from workin' in the mines and his face would be all black from that coal dust. He would smile and them teeth would just shine! And he loved them younguns; he treated 'em like they was his own. One day he come in and had a orange for every one of 'em. Him and Ethel never had no children. They wadn't married long enough. A piece of slate fell on Granny and it killed him.

But now right here is the strange part. Granny got kilt not more than a foot away from where Clyde got kilt. Ethel thought it was a sign. They's been lots of people kilt in rock falls, slate falls, but Ethel acted like it was her fault. She took to her bed. Me and Mommy went back to see' ater her and the young'uns. I didn't think she'd ever get out of that bed. Took a marriage to do it. This time she married a feller named Bill Lester. William Lester, I mean. He hated to be called Bill. Now I have to be honest and say I never did care too much for Bill. He just didn't have no sense of humor at all. That was his problem.

Well, we thought we needed to get this marriage started off good, so we had us a big party fer the weddin'. We was drinkin' at that party. Now, I like to drink, 'cause I'm good at it, don't you know – and a feller ought to do what he's good at. Well I got to jokin' Bill over in the corner, and I says, "Bill, don't you think you better quit workin' in them coal mines?" Now I was just sayin' what ever'body had done been thinkin'. But nobody thought that it would happen. That he'd get killed in them mines, too. But he did. In that same mine where Granny and Clyde had already got kilt. And this time Ethel was shore it was a sign.

She took to her bed and she wouldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. She just started fadin' away. Sometimes I'd sit and watch her, but she never looked back at me. It got to where we had to have the doctor come and give her these shots, just so she'd get any rest at all. One time Mommy was fixin' Ethel some soup. Thought maybe she'd get her to eat some when she come to. Now Ethel had a clock set up on the mantle, and it'd chime on the hour. Mommy said she remembered plain as day that clock set in to chimin' twelve o'clock noon and Ethel set into hollerin', "Mommy, come quick!"

Well Mommy dropped that soup and took off runnin' to Ethel. Mommy said Ethel was a pointin' toward the door, sayin' she seed her husbands, all three of them, and they was motionin' for her to come on and go with 'em. That like to have scared Mommy to death, but she finally

got Ethel quieted down. It was just that old dope the doctor had give her, I thought. The next day it was the same thing. Twelve o'clock, that clock started chimin' and Ethel started hollerin'. This time when Mommy got to her, Ethel had somehow gotten up out of bed and was draggin' herself across the floor, sayin' she was goin' to her husbands. As weak as Ethel was, it took Mommy awhile to wrestle her back to bed.

Then Ethel just quit fightin' and smiled up at Mommy – said, “Mommy, you can't hold me here no more. Nothin' can hold me here no more. That's a sign and I'm meant to foller it.” And then my sister, she died. We buried her in the Wise Cemetery alongside all three of her husbands. Mommy said it was only right as they was all family and family ought to stay together.

Now I been thinkin' about what Ethel said. Whether that was a sign. I do know this. My Mommy could see things. She had dreams and visions and such. Not long before Ethel died, Mommy said she had already seed it in a dream, and she told me Ethel wadn't gonna get no better.

(Tommy begins singing; Ron joins; accompanied by banjo.)

DARK ROAD'S A HARD ROAD TO TRAVEL *(Traditional)*

There's no need to be downhearted.
Wherever there's a will there's a way.
Tomorrow the sun will be shinin'
Although it is cloudy today.

(Chorus)

Now the dark road's a hard road to travel
And the light road is always the best.
For the dark road will lead you to trouble
While the light road will lead you to rest.

Angelyn

That there is a true story 'bout my girl Ethel. It's true that when people have dreams and visions sometimes they die soon a'terwards. My brother Clifton had a dream right before he died. I'll tell you the whole story about my brother Clifton. Clifton was hung over at Wise. He was hung fer killin' his wife. But he got into even more trouble a'ter he done that before the law caught up with him for a doin' it.

He said his wife had been unfaithful to him an' he'd found out about it. He's always said she was a witch iffen they ever was one. Course now he was in love with that other woman at the time an' that was partly the cause too. You know how men are when they're runnin' a'ter women that ain't much good theirselves. The woman he was runnin' a'ter was his cousin. Well, she was his second cousin. She was John McCarrie's girl. She was raised over on Big Beaver Creek in Kentucky and that was where Clifton hiked out to when he kilt his wife in Virginia.

He never ought to a done what he did, but he done it just the same. He kilt his wife over in Virginia then off he hiked to his sweet thing's house in Kentucky, where he knowed he'd be quite welcome.

Now John McCarrie, the father of the woman he loved, had a job fer Clifton to do and course he took Clifton in gladly. But that cost Clifton his life shore. See ol' man Ans Moore lived next door to John McCarrie over there on Beaver Creek. Ans and John never got along much no how. John claimed that Ans'd come in the night and kilt his new stock and pisened his orchard fruit somehow. They never did prove it on him. Now John was quare hisself. Iffen he had a thing agin anybody, he'd say nothin' about it, but he'd shore not fergit it neither. So ol' John saw right then where he could git Clifton to git rid of Ans Moore fer him once and fer all. Well it was soon a'ter he got there, Clifton shot Ans Moore in the back while he was on his horse, and Ans fell to the ground dead. Ever'body got stirred up about it, they got madder than the devil, and a bunch of men got on horses and come to git Clifton. But Mahalia, she got an old rifle gun and while Clifton hid in the loft of the ol' log house she went out to the orchard and shot 'til them fellers had to skeedaddle, or git shot. So they left fer more men.

Fer his job a killin' poor Ans Moore, John McCarrie give Clifton a few dollars in money, his rifle gun, and Mahalia, his girl, fer he knowed Clifton was in love with her. So late one night they left from John's house and headed down the river with the law close on their heels. The next night they's in some bushes waitin' on the riverboat to come, and they's gonna git on it. When the whistle of the ol' boat blowed fer the bend up above them a little ways, they felt shore of beatin' the law. But it must a not been meant that a way. Fer as they stepped out a the bush, the law nabbed 'em. And they wound up back in the Wise jailhouse.

While Clifton was in jail he prayed so big and sung so loud you could hear him all over town. Clifton always did like to sing, but I never knowed him to pray. I went to see Clifton while he was there in the jail, and I tol' him, I said, "Clifton, when they take you out there to hang, run, as it's shore better than gittin' hung." But he said, "No, I'll not do that. I've got to hang, Polly, shore. Jesus Christ walked by my bunk the other night in a dream I had an' looked over my way and said, 'Clifton, you deserve to die and you must hang.' So you see, Polly, I'll have no chance of gettin' away from that."

It was on the tenth day of August Clifton was hung. He eat him a big breakfast of ham and eggs that morning. He shaved and cleaned up. He'd tol' my man, Henry, to get him some gaitors, you know, like they wore then, and he got 'em an' put 'em on. At 2:00 pm, they took him to the window of the jail, which they'd took out, so ever'body in town could look up there at the man what was gonna get hung. Then Mahalia, she went out there and stood by him. Let ever'body take a good look at her, too. Mahalia went with Clifton all the way, as far as she could go. Later though, she broke down and it'd hurt your feelings to see how it happened.

While they was outside goin' towards the scaffold she got weak in one knee and slid down on the walk, but Clifton, he caught hold a her arm and he tol' her, said, "Git up. This is shore no time fer such as this." An' he pulled her up and they went on a little bit further. She did this three or four times an' then they reached the scaffold. She went right up the stairs with him, an' right up

to the door, an' into the enclosure where the noose and the trap an' ever'thing else was. But there they let her tell him goodbye an' made her go back outside and down with the crowd.

While Clifton was inside this place he tol' the sheriff an' the others what was there as officials and witnesses, said he wanted to look at the trap door, said he'd never seed no trap door before. An' he walked over to the trap and looked down at it where he was goin' to stand in just a few seconds. Then they put him on the trap door an' they tied his hands an' his feet, then they placed the black cap over his head. It was then that Clifton asked his lawyer, who was standin' there next to him, to feel of his pulse and see iffen he was alright. He took Clifton's hand and told him, he was.

Then the rope was placed around his neck. The sheriff said, "Clifton Branham, your time it is up. May God have mercy on your soul." And he pulled the lever which sprung the trap which was on hinges, and down Clifton fell with a thud. He jerked an' twisted once or twice, they told me, but then it was all over. It had broke his neck.

About a week later, Clifton come to me in a dream. He said, "Polly, I'm alright." So, you see, that's the whole story.

(Ron begins lining out song; Tommy joins in; Angelyn joins on second verse; acapella)

IN A LITTLE COUNTRY GRAVEYARD *(written by Ron Short)*

In a little country graveyard
That is where my future lies.
There's no need for you to mourn me.
There's no need for you to cry.

I'm going home to live with Jesus
In his house I long to dwell.
Sing glad songs of jubilation.
I have escaped that burning hell.

Come dear friends and carry me gently
Lay me down, cover me with stones.
Do not cry, dear brothers and sisters.
I will not stay here very long.

(Lights fade briefly, signaling the play's end, then come back up.)

Angelyn *(as herself)*

Thank you for coming. We don't pull the curtains on our story, so please feel free to come on up and tell us your story.

(Performers stay to informally talk to audience members.)

THE END