

South of the Mountain

**Playwright
Ron Short**

**Composer
Ron Short**

**Directed by
Dudley Cocke and Ron Short**

**Original Cast
Tommy Bledsoe, Ron Short, and Nancy Jeffrey Smith**

**Singers and Musicians
Tommy Bledsoe - banjo and vocals
Ron Short - fiddle, guitar, and vocals
Nancy Jeffrey Smith - vocals**

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All three Actors enter, greet and engage in welcoming conversation with audience. Thad steps forward to extemporaneously introduce the play's theme, ending with the following line.

THAD

My Daddy tol' me, "How you look at a thing depends entirely on . . . how you look at a thing."

Thad begins singing acapella; Eb and Ma join.

CITIES OF GOLD

Tell me where do you come from,
Tell me where will you go.
To the mountains around you
Or the Cities of Gold.

(Chorus)

Cities of Gold, Cities of Gold
Oh so lonely and so cold.
You can lose your very soul
Living in the Cities of Gold.

And the land of a million secrets
And the land that gave us life
Gives up all its treasures
Sadly hides its face and dies.

(Chorus)

Won't you listen to the music
Flowing sweetly through the air.
They're the songs of our fathers and mothers
Aren't you glad they're still here.

Begins line as actor talking directly to audience, then becomes character of Ma.

MA

Ma used to say, "I don't reckon they thought I'd ever get married." I was twenty-one when I did. I never did have much interest in gettin' married, and anyhow they wadn't that many men around that seemed to me like they was worth havin'. Henry was a friend of my sister's boyfriend and the first time he come to the house he didn't even come to see me, he just come along with Charlie. I don't reckon we even talked much,

or me even thinkin' much about him 'til after they had left. Dora got to making fun about how homely he was, and I got right mad and told her to mind her own business.

Well, they started teasin' me about him, saying he was my "sweetheart" and I was struck on him and the next time he come back, he come a-courtin'. My Daddy was a preacher and married us and give us a set of dishes to start out housekeeping. I've still got that platter. Momma give us a feather tick and some quilts and two wool blankets she weaved herself. Just before we got ready to leave for South of the Mountain, Momma called me aside and give me a fifty dollar gold piece and tol' me to save it to a time when we'd need it. That fifty dollars that she give me helped get me and Henry started, helped buy our first piece of land. Together, me and him worked out what we've got.

I was bigger'n him and he wadn't so good lookin', but I never one day regretted a-marryin' him and if I had it to do over, I'd do it again. He was a good man.

THAD

Them good men just tend to run in our family. That there was my Pa she was talkin' about. I know you've all heard that story before, the one about "Ma & Pa" meeting up, gettin' married, startin' out a brand new family. This story you're fixin' to hear ain't no more, and it ain't no less than that, it's the story about one of these families.

EB

When Pa first bought the place on the creek it was all in woodland, and outside of what was put into barns and buildings he just cut the timber, piled it, and burned it. There was log piles burning day and night, weeks at a time all over the country.

THAD

The sky'd be lit up red at night from the log piles a-burnin'.

EB

Now that's what went with a lot of the timber in the mountains. Hit was cut all right, but a lot of it was cut down

EB & THAD

piled and burned.

THAD

It went on continuously.

EB

About two years was 'bout as much as you could get out of new ground. Then you had to drop back

THAD & EB

clear up another one

EB

and that went on and on

THAD

'till your land run out

EB

and they wadn't no more to clear.

THAD

They'd have these big workings.

EB

They would be maybe as high as twenty people that'd show up for a workin'.

THAD

They'd go out there in the field and do a big, hard days work helpin' out their neighbor, and come the end of the day they didn't get one red cent for a-doin' it.

EB

Didn't expect nothin'!

THAD

what they'd do, they'd cook dinner for 'em.

EB

Usually there'd be a gallon a' liquor at the end of the day they passed around too.
(*makes motion of passing jug*)

THAD

"Hey, you went by me a little fast that round didn't you?" Yes sir, it's true. This whole country was cleared on chicken and dumplin's and

EB

corn liquor. We used to have all kinds a' dances and parties.

THAD

They was corn shuckin's

EB

bean stringin's

THAD

molasses stir-offs

MA

and they'd get a lot of work done too.

EB & THAD

Blamed if they wouldn't.

MA

But I think mostly it was an excuse to have a dance a'terwards.

THAD

They'd clear ever'thing outa the middle of the floor. Somebody'd drag out a fiddle, and they'd get down to some serious dancin'!

Thad plays "Sour Wood Mountain" on the fiddle.

EB

They's boys that'd play all week 'long as the moonshine held out. Fiddle and banjer music, "Sourwood Mountain," "Hey Ho Diddle 'Em Day." Yes sir, and "Turkey in the Straw," all night long. (*Starts dancing*) I can't dance by myself . . . (*Goes in search of a partner in the audienc, and brings her on stage to dance with him.*)

Fiddle Tune ends, dance finishes, Eb escorts partner back to her seat.

EB

I'm a dancin' fool, 'specially with a little liquor in me and a purty girl on my arm. I don't rightly know which I liked better. Depended on which one I had, I reckon. I spent enough time a-lookin' for both. And wherever I found a woman who drank, honey I was home!

MA

Everette, he was my first born, Thady was my last, and I had six more in between. Thank God I never lost one youngin' like some women done. Everette, he weren't hardly no trouble, and I was just so happy that he had all his arms and legs and such. Seems like with the first one you worry more about stuff like that. Henry's Ma helped me, and three days later I was up doing work around the house. I never could stand to lay in bed when there was work to be done.

Everette was as normal a baby as you could see 'til he was about two. When the first fit come on him I thought it was the fever, but he wadn't hot. And it passed, and he didn't have another for about a week. I had seed people take fits before but I didn't want to believe that was what it was. But it was. I doctored him as best I could, but it weren't no use. They kept right on. The best we could do was keep an eye on him for when he fell and get to him as fast as we could to keep him from hurtin' hisself, swallerin' his tongue. He went to school for a while, but it was hard on him with the other youngins and it scared the teacher. Hit never changed his manner though. He went right on. Matter 'a fact, he got into more devilishness than any of my other youngins. He had all kinds of friends and he'd go off with 'em regular. His drinkin' worried me though, more ways than one, 'cause he never knowed when a fit was gonna come over him. The summer 'fore Pa died he stopped having 'em. Just like that, he never had another one. That was the summer Thad's boy was born. That was the summer I joined the church.

EB

We had church once a month and most ever'body all around came to that.

MA

Now they was church somewhere 'bout ever week but most of the time hit was just too far to go.

THAD

Mostly it give the preachers a chance to go off to different places and use the same old sermons over again.

MA

Now your Grandpa used to go into Tennessee and Kentucky, all around. They wadn't a week passed that your Grandpa didn't preach somewhere.

THAD

People didn't work on Sunday 'cept in dire emergency. If they was gonna lose a crop or somethin' from rain – wheat, or oats, hay – somethin' like that. You could run and gather it up. Reckon the Lord didn't count that against you.

EB

There wadn't much else to do on Sunday, and I'm sure that took a lot a people to church.

MA

They'd always be a lot of people, specially at Memorial Meetin', people come from ever'where.

EB

People'd ride their horses in from all over the South of the Mountain, tie 'em up in them woods behind the church. Grandpa would stand up a'ter church and say,

THAD

"Anybody who'll go home with me is welcome."

EB

and they'd be a lot of 'em that'd go too.

THAD

Grandpa set one of the finest tables around

MA

mostly due to Grandma!

THAD

See, it was too far for people to go home for dinner, so they'd eat with the people of the church. I've seed the time they'd be 75, 100 people up at Grandpa's. Grandpa had this nice row of maple shade trees in the side yard. They'd take saw horses and lay planks on 'em under them shade trees; then they'd start laying that food out. Lord, I've seed the time they'd be a half mile a' tater salad alone down through there. Then them people would start up at the end and eat their way all the way down to the other end, and then some of them ol' boys would double back. And when they was finished eatin', they'd go down to Grandpa's corn crib, which was always full of corn, go ahead and feed their horses and their mules too.

EB

Grandpa not only fed their souls

THAD

fed the souls

EB

He fed the people

THAD

fed the people

EB

And he fed their ol' horses and mules.

THAD

You can't hardly ask more of a feller than that.

MA

Joining the church ain't never helped nobody. You're just exactly what you are when you come out of there as you are when you went in. Ever' tub has to stand on its own end. Now being baptized is the answerin' of a good conscience. They preach if you ain't changed before you're baptized, you don't need to be baptized in the first place. Some people believe you can't go to heaven less you are baptized, and some believe it don't make no difference. Most people believe what they want to believe, and the majority of 'em believe what suits their case.

Sung by Thad, Eb, and Ma; accompanied by banjo and guitar.

MOUNTAIN MEMORIES

You know I can smell my Mamma's fried chicken.
Sunday after church, folks stopping by.
Corn bread and sweet taters, biscuits and gravy.
You know you could eat, Lord, until you die.

And the air's so heavy in the sweet summer time,
You can smell the lilacs a half mile away.
My Granny's swinging, singing Rock of Ages,
Angel Band carry me away.

(Chorus)

Cumberland Mountains, home sweet home.
Old mountain memories won't leave you alone.

Laying on the riverbank, fishing pole in your hand,
it don't really matter if them fish don't bite.
That ol' sun keeps a sunnin', ol' river keeps a runnin'.
That's all that it takes to make ever' thing worthwhile.

Peaches in the summertime, apples in the fall,
If you can't get the girl you want
don't get one at all.
Sweet Jenny Lind, Ol' Molly Hare, bound to make your feet move
as they float through the air.

(Chorus)

Little country graveyard, where the old folks lay,
nestled in the bosom of the land they called home.
Long as I can remember, just as long as I can
The lives they lived will never be quite gone.
The old home place is falling down.
The fields have grown up and the creek's gone dry.
As much as I want to, I can't bring it back,
But I can keep these memories 'til the day I die.

THAD

Now them fits that Ma was talkin' about that Eb took

EB

Now don't you start.

THAD

Some people may not know what we're talkin' 'bout

EB

Talkin' about me that's what.

THAD

Eb had what they call epilepsy. Got medicine that you can take for it today, but they still ain't no cure for it. I reckon they's some things that don't change.

EB

There wadn't no such a-thing as goin' to the doctor ever' time you had a little pain.

MA

Even if you could get there, they wadn't that many doctors around.

EB

Ma had ever' one of us youngins at home.

THAD

Yeah and e'god, she used to tell us about it regular. She'd look at you with that look on her face . . . "Look here youngin, I never told you it were easy."

MA

But, I done it! We got by on yaller root and willow bark tea.

THAD

Slippery elm and Balm 'O Gilead Salve.

EB

But now there are some things that's got their own particular cure as Thad here can tell you.

THAD

I know what your talkin' about.

EB

Yeah, you know. *(laughter)*

THAD

I had this toothache one time.

EB

It was just a toothache.

THAD

Yeah, just a toothache. Just the worst toothache God ever created

EB

and he give it to him

THAD

and I didn't want it. I decided something had to be done.

EB

There was an ol' man named Dan'l McFall, run a blacksmith shop.

THAD

Uncle Dan'l, we called him, didn't live about a mile from where we lived. Down on the Pound River.

EB

Old Man Dan'l had a big, long beard about a foot long.

THAD

He also had a pair of tooth pullers.

EB

They called 'em "drawwwwwers"

THAD

They was a pair wire pliers was what they was. Uncle Dan'l had done welded him some cow horn lookin' things on to 'em so he could reach back and sock out them jaw teeth.

EB

That's what they called it, "Sockin 'em out."

THAD

Hell, that ol' man thought he was a dentist!

EB

Well, he was. He was the only one we had around.

THAD

They told me he was purty good. Said he'd been pullin' teeth for people all around that had a toothache the way I did.

THAD & EB

Yeah, if'en you was tough enough to stand it.

THAD

Well, I thought I was, so I begin tryin' to talk Eb into goin' down with me to get my tooth pulled.

EB

I didn't want to go too much, but finally I agreed to go hold his head.

THAD

I didn't know about that "head holdin'." I soon found out after we got down there.

EB

Old Man Dan'l lived in a ol' log house

THAD

and they was kind of a drop porch on the front. That's a porch where you step out of the house, and just sort a drop off into the yard.

EB

I sat down in the doorway there.

THAD

I laid my head in his lap. I thought he was going to aid and comfort me.

EB

Ol' Man Dan'l, he got his tooth pullers out. I got a good firm grip on his head.

THAD

I opened my mouth, showed him that tooth.

EB

Dan'l clamped down on the tooth pullers and went to work.

THAD

That was the slowest working ol' man in the world, and I laid there and stood it just as long as I thought I could possibly stand it and finally hit made me mad and I begin to fight and try to tear loose. Well, the more I tried to tear loose, the tighter Eb helt me down

EB

and the faster Ol' Man Dan'l tried to go a'ter that tooth.

THAD

But they made one big mistake.

EB

We didn't tie his hands.

THAD

I didn't know what else to do. I looked and all I could see was beard, so I just reached up, grabbed Ol' Man Dan'l with both hands by the beard, and yanked him right toward me.

EB

Now you talk about lettin' somebody loose

THAD

he let me go. And you know what? That tooth never bothered me another day in my life.

EB

Got the cure!

MA

'Nuf of this foolishness. Work is what you do in this life. It's what you learn. It's who you are. You work to live! I worked from the time I was big enough to help out and so did my youngins, and it put food on the table, clothes on your back, and a roof over your head.

EB

When I was a youngin, I's thinning corn 'fore I was big enough to hoe.

THAD

If you can count to two, you can thin corn.

EB

You'd leave two stalks to the hill and pull out the rest. And it was a big help. I can see now it was a big help.

MA

You worked, hit was as simple as that. Whatever you done, you seed the results of it.

THAD

Pa used to tell me,

EB

"Boy, you learn a little everyday and in a few years you're bound to know something."

MA

Corn was the staple. I don't know what we'd a' done without it. I reckon somehow ever'body could grow a little corn.

EB

They'd clear up new ground

THAD

long as they had new ground

EB

and plant corn.

THAD

You fattened your hogs on corn

MA

fed your chickens in the winter

THAD

Fed your horses & cows.

MA

Corn not only took care of all the livestock, you got all your meal, and you could take a big pot a' white corn and make hominy out of it.

THAD

Oh, I loved Ma's hominy.

MA

You'd use ashes to husk it with and then wash it good and clean.

EB

It'd come out purty and clean

THAD

just as white as it could be. If you do it right.

MA

It boils down to one thing. You could make do with just about anything there was, but without corn you couldn't a' made it.

Sung by Thad, Eb, and Ma; accompanied by banjo and guitar.

DOWN ON THE FARM

Cornmeal bread and cornmeal gravy

They'll make you fat

But they won't make you lazy.

Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

Pinto beans and collard greens

They'll fill you up, and they'll keep you clean.

Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

(Chorus)

London, England, Paris, France

Ain't none of them places stand a chance.

Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

I don't care 'bout Betty Crocker's Gold Medal

Ain't nothin' no better than my Mamma's Iron Kettle.

Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

Rabbit stew and squirrel gravy

They'll drive you wild,

But they won't make you crazy.

Talking 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

Fried squash and fried maters,

Fried corn and fried taters.

Talking 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

(Chorus)

Apple pie and blackberry jam
Make me sweet as I am.
Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.
Wild Turkey and wild corn
Make you glad you were born.
Talkin' 'bout the good ol' things down on the farm.

(Chorus)

THAD

It was about this time I found out ever'body didn't live like we did. Not only that, people begin to change, move off the farm gettin' jobs, movin' into them coal camps where they could make some money. I tol' my Pa 'bout it, but you couldn't get him off the farm with a case of dynamite.

MA

He worked for Ritter Lumber Company at one time, but as far as ever leaving home to work, he didn't.

EB

He took a peddlin' load across the mountain into Kentucky into the coal camps once a week as long as I can remember.

MA

He'd take eggs, chickens, just anything he could buy and sell.

THAD

You need to know now, he didn't get it all off a' that dirt poor hillside farm of ours.

MA

But if we had anything offen' the place he could use, he'd take it.

EB

He was kind of a combination peddler and farmer.

THAD

Pa'd take produce into the coal camps and swap it for scrip money.

EB

Now that scrip money ain't real money; its coal company money.

THAD

You could take that scrip to the company store and swap it for meal, flour, sugar, Hershey bars

EB

and he'd bring it back across the mountain.

MA

He'd always try and get enough money though to where he'd have some to buy more chickens and so on with.

EB

When me and Thad was kids growin' up, we'd go out all over the country buying frying chickens or old hens and bringing 'em in.

THAD

And, whenever anybody in the family caught a rabbit or a 'possum

EB

or anything like that

THAD

you could always sell it to them people in the coal camps. Now we was poor, but them people was what you'd call "meat hungry"! But now whenever people is desperate, they's always somebody what'll take advantage of 'em, and it got to where you had to skin the critter out

MA

Now I don't want you a-tellin' that.

THAD

Now I'm just tellin' 'em the truth 'case times might get hard again. You had to skin that critter out and leave a foot hangin' on the end of it.

EB

Now that was the law.

THAD

'Cause some of them peddlers got to sellin' cats to them people in the coal camps.

EB

It got to where you was supposed to leave a foot on it so they could be sure hit was a rabbit or be sure hit was a 'possum

THAD

'stead of somebody's sold a big, fat, tomcat for supper.

EB

I guess when you was eatin' it, it was a little too late to tell the difference.

General laughing, commotion between Thad and Eb

THAD

Yeah, I reckon grease is grease!

MA

Hush that foolishness! Your Pa used to say he never did have to look for work, somehow or 'nother it always found him.

THAD

You could count on my Pa for stuff like that; he was full of it. Sure, there was always plenty of work, but they wadn't no such thing as a job. Not 'till the W.P.A. come in, started building roads, things like that. 'Fore that, you couldn't make no money a'tall.

EB

Money, money, money, that's all you talk about is money. 'Fore that you lived off the land.

THAD

Yeah, you lived off the land or you died on it.

EB

Well, I never heerd of nobody starvin' to death.

THAD

Well, you wadn't listening real close then.

MA

I'm sure a lot of people may have went hungry, didn't have what they wanted by a long shot, but I never knowed of nobody starving to death.

EB

As far as money was concerned that was just somethin' you heard about. Very few people had any money.

THAD

Well I'll tell you, I don't know how people survived them times.

MA

People'd raise what they eat and they'd put up ever'thing from fruit to hay.

EB

Raise 'Arsh taters and sweet taters, and we always kept a cow.

THAD

You remember that cow, did we even get a drop a' milk out of her? I wonder who was keepin' who on that deal.

EB

Well, we didn't feed her nothin' but a few little hard nubbins.

THAD

That's cause we didn't have nothin' but a few "little hard nubbins."

EB

That was enough!

THAD

Enough? You want to live on hard nubbins?

MA

Now people got by! No, there's never been a time, I don't reckon, if people would work they couldn't have somethin' to eat.

Sung acapella by Ma; Eb and Thad join on Chorus after Ma sings first chorus.

THIS OLD FARM

(Chorus)

This old farm
Birthed by father,
Raised my children,
Buried my Man.
It's as much a part
Of life as breathing.
There's nothing more precious
Than this land.

I remember the winter of '42,
Wind so cold we thought we'd freeze.
Then the springtime brought the sunshine,
Warmed the ground to plant our seeds.

(Chorus)

You say this old farm ain't good for nothing
But long as I'm here, there's the land and me.
And when I'm gone, the land will still be here
To raise and feed another family.

THAD

I was a great big boy 'fore I ever left the farm. Tell you the truth I was a great big ol' boy 'fore I was ever out a' sight of the house. The first time I ever remember going out from home, me and Curt Vanover stole Grandpa's two ol' grey mules. Grandpa had this set of matched grey mules. You didn't see grey mules much. And these two, you couldn't tell 'em apart. They's named Jack and George, and whenever Grandpa would want 'em, he'd just go out to the barn lot and holler, "Ho Jack." And whenever that 'un come, he'd holler for George. Long as they knowed who they was, we didn't have to. Anyway, me and Carl stole them mules and rode 'em lickety split, hell-bent-for-leather, into the heart of Clintwood, Virginia.

EB

He had to go to Clintwood to get his little books for school.

THAD

And I don't know how we got there and back without gettin' killed at that. I never knowed there was so many automobiles in my life, and neither did Jack and George.

EB

If a car passed by the creek once a week it was a big show.

THAD

But now they was a bunch of 'em in town, and seemed liked nobody knowed which way they wanted to go.

He's making fun of me goin' a'ter my "little school books." I always liked to read. Don't know when I learnt. One day I was out back looking at the Sears Robuck catalog and it just come to me, "Why son, you can read!" and I could.

I always liked geography. I used to look at them maps and wonder how they drewed them lines and if them people on the other side of the line was different.

I went to school at Osbornes' Gap through the seventh, and passed into the eighth, and then you had to go to the Bear Pen School. Bear Pen was a big school. Two rooms a' schoolin' down there. Youngins come from all over South of the Mountain, Pound River. . . On the first day I was ready. Had my new geography book, a Blue Horse notebook pad, and a new number two yellow pencil, which my pa sharpened for me ever'day. Pa said, "Them pencil sharpeners don't care whose money they eat." So the first day there, I was ready.

Somehow though, it wadn't ready for me. I never did figger out exactly what happened. See, I thought ever'body was the same in this world. But somehow hit was me that was different. They called me names -- called me "Country," but when they said it, it sounded nasty. Made fun of my clothes, and 'cause I didn't keep my hair cut the way they did. They'd catch you coming across the school yard, and then when ever'body could hear em' and know exactly who they was talking about they set into hollerin', "Look yonder boys, yonder comes ol' Ragatag."

I learnt me an important lesson there. There are people in this world who believe they are better than other people. There are people in this world who believe they are better than other people because of the clothes they wear. I'd like to know how in the hell a pair britches can make one man better than another man? Well, I may not a' had much, but I had something them people didn't have . . . I had me. And I didn't have to put up with that foolishness. I showed 'em. I knowed what I had to do . . . I quit. I's twelve year-old the last year I went to school.

MA

I hated to see him quit school. I wanted all my younguns to get an education, but he never had his heart in it. He always seemed like the one that might take to it. He could read 'fore he went to school. Don't know how he learnt, but he did. Seemed like he always cared about things that the others didn't much think about. He always wanted to dress up. Get new clothes. Asked me one time why the wool mittens I knitted for him was always grey. Couldn't he ever have some blue ones?

EB

First time most fellers in the mountains ever was away from home was to go to the C.C. Camps. I never did go, but a lot of fellers did. You had to be eighteen to go, but this'n here signed up when he was sixteen.

THAD

I'd a' went a lot sooner but they turned me down, so I just kept on goin' back. I turned 18 four times that summer. I was ready to do somethin' with my life, ready to go some where, and that C.C. Camp looked like my chance. I never will forget it. That was the biggest adventure of my life. Tells you how excitin' my life had been up to then. We started out over at Bristol. Bristol Virginia/Tennessee. (*speaking directly to an audience member*) Notice how I said that – Bristol Virginia/Tennessee. You ever been to Bristol? You know why they call it Bristol Virginia/Tennessee? (*Thad answers, if audience doesn't*) State line runs right down the middle of the street! On one side you got Virginia . . . on the other Tennessee.

EB

I've seed that!

THAD

Tell 'em what they call it.

EB

State Street.

THAD

Now that was purty excitin' for me. That was the first time I'd ever seed one of them lines for real. I started feelin' like a world traveler. I decided e-god I was gonna go to Tennessee. *(Steps across imaginary line)*

You know it wadn't a hell of a lot different in Tennessee, so I just come on back home. *(Steps back across imaginary line)* Least ways they know me over here.

I was standing down there on State Street when a bunch of fellers from Knoxville come by. Tol' me to come on, they was goin' to the motion pictures. Now I hadn't never seed no motion picture, so I was ready to go.

Cost me a dime to get in. That was a lot a' money, and soon as I got in there I knowed that I'd done been cheated. They wadn't nothin' in there but a bunch a seats lined up in a row with people sittin' in 'em sorta starin' straight ahead.

(Turns his back to audience, stares upstage, then turns back to audience)

Now you can laugh, but they had a lot less to look at than you're lookin' at now! Well, I thought to myself, I don't know what this is, but its gonna take a hell of a lot of it to get a dime's worth out of it, and it kinda made me mad. All right, I says, if that's the way it is I bet I can sit here longer than anybody. I got me a seat, and about that time the whole front end of that buildin' lit up. Scared the livin' hell out of me. I was almost to the door when this feller with a flashlight tol' me to sit down, the picture was startin'.

"I knowed that," I says. And I seed my first motion picture. They was these Indians, and they had these cowboys sorta penned up and they was runnin' and jobbin' at 'em with these big long spears. These ol' cowboys was a-dancin' and dodgin' . . . if you think they was movin' you should a seed me. I was on top of that seat, behind it, under it . . . I couldn't hardly stand it. See, I thought them was real people just blowed up bigger than life, and that they was really gonna kill each other before my eyes. I didn't

mind that so bad, but I was afraid I'd be called a witness to court and miss goin' to the C.C. Camp.

EB

When Thad come home from the C.C.'s he's all the time goin' on about what he'd seen. 'Bout all the cars and fancy clothes and stuff. First car I seen was one that Ted Swindall got somewhere. Brought it in here when they wadn't hardly more than sled roads. We had a time with that thing. Only trouble was, you had to keep puttin' gas into it. Well, there wadn't no place around to get gas 'cept in town. That was a good fifteen miles, one way. Many's the time we'd be comin' back from courtin' 'round the South of the Mountain or somewheres, run out a gas, and just get out and leave her sittin' there. The automobile, I mean. Sometimes it'd be three or four days, a week 'fore we'd got gas to go back a'ter it. Seemed to me like them autymobiles was just about as much trouble as they was worth.

THAD

A'ter I got to the C.C. Camp them people went to the movies ever' Saturday night.

EB

If'en you had the money.

THAD

I just got five dollars a month.

EB

They sent twenty-five home to Ma. He got five.

THAD

Yeah, and it seemed to me like I was doin' most of the work. But that five dollars would keep you in supplies if you was careful. You could get you a Pepsi and a bag a' peanuts ever' now and then, as well as a movie. I liked to pour my peanuts into my Pepsi. (*Mimes pouring peanuts into Pepsi*) You ever do that? We used to call that a "meal in a bottle."

EB

Sounds like a "bellyache in a bottle" to me.

THAD

In that C.C. Camp they had radios you could listen to, books, cards. All sorts of things to do. I never will forget the first day I heard one of them radios.

EB

'Ceptin' for Uncle Dave Macon and some of them boys on the Opry, they wadn't nothin' on them radios that was worth listenin' to. I'd ruther hear my hounds run than that. Fox huntin' makes a whole lot more sense. All you need is a good dog and a place to lay down in the woods. Most people don't understand that fox huntin' ain't got nothin' to do with huntin'. That dog needs to chase that fox cause that's what he was born to do. That fox needs that dog to chase him so's he can stay in shape. 'Bout all a body can do is just set back and learn to appreciate that relationship.

THAD

I learnt me another lesson there in that C.C. Camp . . . money will make you dumb.

EB

It sure done a job on you!

THAD

It can! That five dollars a month, that was more money than I ever had before. I got to thinkin' I was rich. I used to pile it up and count it. One day I was sittin' on my bunk countin' my money when the thought come ringin' into my head just as clear as a bell. It sorta scared me. 'Cause I heard the voice say, "Son, you can buy things now that you don't even know what they are."

Sung by Thad and Eb, accompanied by fiddle and banjo.

I'M GONNA CHANGE MY STYLE

I'm gonna buy me an automobile,
Get me a job with time to kill,
Find me a woman with them curlicue eyes.
I'm gonna change my style.

I'm gonna throw away my old work clothes,
Quit picking my teeth, quit picking my nose,
Get me one of them Colgate smiles.
I'm gonna change my style.

(Chorus)

A boy from the country's what you may see,
There's gonna be some changes in me.
Gonna try a new dance, sing a new song.
It won't be long 'til the old me is gone.

I'm gonna smoke ready-rolls,
Get me a suit of them Sears and Rareback clothes,
Find me some shoes made from alligator hide.
I'm gonna change my style.

(Chorus)

I'm tired of eating soup-beans and cornbread,
I'm gonna eat steak till my face turns red,
The devil may be waitin', but in the meanwhile
I'm gonna change my . . .
I'm gonna change my . . .
I'm gonna change my style!

MA

I don't rightly know when things started to change. They never did for me really. Saw all my youngin's 'cept Eb marry off and leave, but even 'fore then it wadn't the same. I never liked the idea of my children movin' off, nor goin' to work in the coalmines, but they wadn't nothin' I could do about it. Once they knowed about all them things they didn't have, it was too late.

We worked hard, and I can rightly say my youngin's never went cold or hungry for lack of somethin' to wear or food to eat. We never had much, but we always had plenty. It ain't what you've got, it's what you're satisfied with. I know children are different from their parents, but they's things that they want that I don't even know about, nor care to. But I guess that's the whole thing – you know what you know. It's kind a like that story 'bout Adam and Eve. Hit wadn't the apple that got 'em into trouble, it was what they knowed a'ter they eat it. And they ain't no turnin' back from that.

Stage lights go out, and actors leave stage.

INTERMISSION

Thad, Mabel, and Eb enter; Thad plays guitar and sings with Mabel.

WEDDING BELL WALTZ

Run and tell Momma she'll never believe
Her little girl is going away.
Run tell Poppa surely he knows
That every little boy grows up one day.

(Chorus)

We'll dance, dance the Wedding Bell Waltz,
Dance all our cares away.
Dance, dance the Wedding Bell Waltz,
'Cause we're getting married today.

Run tell the preacher, come quick as he can,
There's a woman down here in love with a man.
And there's a man down here who's ready for a wife,
Together we're starting out a new life.

(Chorus)

MABEL

Mommy didn't much want me to get married. Said I was too young, but I think mostly she just didn't want me to leave home. I was a big help to her. But, the first minute I laid eyes on Thad, I knowed he was gonna be the man I married.

EB

When Thad and Mabel first got married they didn't have nothin'. They lived with us, me and Ma and Pa. By that time all my brothers and sisters was married, wadn't nobody home except me. But there ain't no way two families can live under the same roof. I don't care how good you get along, it just ain't natural. But he didn't have no job and no money. He was twenty and she was fifteen, and they didn't know nothin'.

MABEL

I was a Dutton 'fore I got married.

EB

Her Daddy was from over 'round Skeetrock. He wadn't from around South of the Mountain.

MABEL

I was born in a coal camp over in Kentucky. Mommy's first husband died in the war, World War One. He didn't die in battle, he died of diphtheria in Georgia somewhere. Mommy married Daddy, and then they moved into Pike County, Kentucky, and Daddy went to work in the coal mines. Lotta people was going to work in the coal mines. That coal camp was just about the most excitin' place in the whole world, but Daddy couldn't stand it, and that last man that got killed in the mines my Daddy rode out with the body and that's the last time he ever went in. He said there had to be a better way to make a living, so we packed our few things in a sled and come back over the mountains.

THAD

A'ter we got married, I tried to find work. Worked on the N.Y.A., that's a government work program, but they laid me off. Then I got on the W.P.A., but they laid me off too. Them government work programs don't always work.

MABEL

I was twelve years old when Daddy died. Mommy already had a job 'cause Daddy had been sick all summer before he died. Now it was hard for a woman to get a job. It was some kind of relief program. She made 94 cents a day sewin' clothes for people on welfare, and you know, her a widow with six youngins, she couldn't get one stitch of them clothes for her own family. But my people was proud people, I guess is what you'd call it, 'cause we never let on if we didn't have something or 'nother, and that was alright 'cause nobody knowed nothing about it. I didn't know 'til I started school that ever' body didn't live like we did. There was very few that was different, but them that were was cruel. I don't know how you can have a dozen younguns and ten of 'em are poor and two ain't, but them two can make the other ten feel bad.

What I thought was the best eating in the world was an egg and a piece of corn bread for lunch, but you know I'd go up in the hills behind the school and hide and eat that cornbread 'cause they'd make fun of you for eatin' cornbread and not bringin' biscuits. But to me that was the best eatin' ever was. That was better than anything I could a' took to school. Hit wouldn't bother me a bit in the world now, but it did then.

Thad plays the guitar and Mabel sings.

IF I CAN BE ME

The world keeps on changing,
Everyone knows.
Some people change their lives
Like they change their clothes.
But there's got to be someone

I can believe.
I'd like to think that someone
Is me.

(Chorus)

I don't want to be anybody else
If I can be me, if I can be me.

Sometimes I don't know
Who I am,
But I like me okay anyway.
If I keep going, if I keep growing,
I'm gonna get to me
Someday.

(Chorus)

I don't want to be anybody else
If I can be me, if I can be me.
I don't have to be anybody else
If I can be me, if I can be me.

THAD

I shunned the coal mines as long as I could. I always kinda dreaded gettin' started in 'em. I just didn't like the idea of goin' underground. I guess I'd been walkin' 'round on top of it too long. But that's all the work there was around, 'ceptin' farming, and I already knowed where that would get you.

MABEL *(with the excitement of a happy memory)*

In the coal camp they was houses on each side of the holler and the houses was connected.

THAD

One great big row of houses on one side

MABEL

and one great big row of houses on the other.

EB *(with disdain)*

There was no separation between the buildings, just walls. It saved the coal company money by not having to have wall and a roof for each house. Just one big long house.

THAD

One side was called the Titanic

MABEL

and one was called Noah's Ark.

THAD

Right down at the end of all them houses was a big company store.

MABEL

There wadn't no hospital, but they was a doctor's office.

THAD

All furnished by the coal company

EB

but they got ever' cent of it back. 'Cause they wouldn't let you get ahead.

THAD

The coal company furnished the housing, electricity, they had the commissary for the food. Come the end of the week, they took it outa your pay.

EB

And they paid you so little hit wadn't much more than a labor camp.

MABEL (*laughing*)

You talk about a raggedy, black bunch of youngins from fightin' through the coal camp from one end to the other in the coal dust in the summertime and all the mud in the wintertime. From hand to mouth, they just lived.

THAD

It got to where we had to go to the store each day and buy what we could draw in scrip for that day's work.

MABEL

Then you had to go back the next day. I'd buy a pound of soup beans and cook 'em

THAD

and go back the next day

MABEL

'cause the man had to work the next day to get some more scrip.

EB

I've heerd people say they'd rather do anything than hoe corn

THAD & MABEL

so that's what we done.

EB

It was hard to tell when they was workin' and when they wadn't.

MABEL

But people follered it and lived with it right on up.

THAD

Up to that time in the mountains, people had never been that close to where people was makin' some money.

EB

Money, money, that's all you ever talk about! They wadn't but one man that I remember ever'body kinda talked about as having any money, and that was ol' man Henry Whitt. He had got shell shocked in the Army, during World War One, I reckon, and he drew a pension. Seemed to me like it was about thirty dollars a month, and that was total disability.

But Henry kept a bull. Wadn't many people had enough money where they could afford to buy a bull, and when you took your cow down there to Henry, I mean to his bull, that'd cost you a dollar, that is if she got with calf, otherwise it didn't cost you nothin'. But, they wadn't many people that had that kinda steady income.

MABEL

There's a difference between wantin' and needin'. When you want the things you can't have, then you're poor!

EB

Yeah, and they's a difference between wantin' and gettin'.

MABEL

We started kinda fixing the house up, him with a regular income. Got linoleum for the floors, curtains, a new couch, things like that. He was making good money, but it was hard work.

THAD

They was somethin' funny 'bout the whole thing right there from the start, but I just couldn't see it. They said they needed all this coal to generate all this electricity. Well how come we never got to use none of that power ourselves? I have shot many a cut a coal with a breast auger – that was a drill where there was no power whatsoever, you cranked her by hand. You'd drill, shoot, and load your own coal for a dollar a car, nothin' fer the rock, and you handled as much rock as coal. You didn't use nothin' but a pick and shovel – it was the sweat, muscle, and blood of the coal miner what generated the power fer this country.

EB

When Thad first started working in them mines, told me he figgered he'd just get a little money ahead and get out, but he never did seem to get no money ahead.

THAD

For the first time in my life, I had to ask another man for credit. It wadn't much, just a little ol' store up from the house. Feller kept a "runnin' tab" on you . . . a "runnin' tab". I went in once a week and tried to catch up to it.

MABEL

It was easier that way, 'cause you could send one of the kids. We just got the things we needed – meal, flour, sugar, lard, stuff for his bucket.

THAD

Yeah and they's real glad to write it down on your tab for you. Truth was that we never had no money in our pockets.

MABEL

'Til we got the refrigerator you couldn't keep nothin' fresh. We'd keep milk and butter in the root cellar, but in summer it wouldn't keep long. You had to can, pickle, or dry ever'thing you raised. You couldn't keep leftovers, you eat 'em or they was fed to the animals. We'd never had ice. After we got the refrigerator, we'd just make ice water 'cause it was so good. I made ice cream for the kids. Used to, you could buy this mix from the store and make ice cream in the ice trays. That refrigerator sure made things a lot easier.

THAD

We used carbide lights then. It was a pretty rough go.

EB

Hits a wonder they hadn't been a lot more men killed than there was. Said sometimes the roof was so low you couldn't even take a drink settin' up.

THAD

Lots a times you had to lay down on your side so you could tilt your head back. But that smoke from the dynamite was worse, that stuff'd make you so sick.

EB

There wadn't enough air in the mines to push it out.

THAD

Give you a headache to where lots of times you'd have to come out just for the like of air. No dust control. Controlling the dust just depended on how much you could eat that day. I swear to God, there's times you couldn't see your hand before you or nothin' else with all that dust.

EB

I don't know why it didn't kill a feller in thirty days.

MABEL

With an electric stove you can cook a meal in half the time it takes on a woodstove. When we got ours there was a special deal where you got an electric mixer too. I always liked to bake, and this made it so much easier. You wouldn't believe it. They come out with cake mixes that most cases was better than cakes baked from scratch.

Canned biscuits too. We didn't like 'em too much, but I bought 'em ever' now and then.

EB

First car in our family, I reckon he bought it.

THAD

You ain't gonna let me forget that are you? It was a Chrysler, which just about put us in the poor house

EB

deeper than we already was.

THAD

I give *(pause)* 75 cash dollars for that Chrysler. That was the most money I'd ever had.

EB

Oh, hit was worth 75, maybe 75 cents.

THAD

Yeah, I'd a been better off without that Chrysler.

MABEL

I've seed him come in with his clothes froze stiff on his body where he'd worked in them water holes, got wet, then come outside. Then when he could get a ride, ride home in the back of a truck in the middle of winter. I've seen him come in where I could have cried he looked so pitiful. But even still it was better than not having a job at all. You had to make it one way or another. But I always vowed if ever there was any way that I could get him out of them mines that I was going to do it.

(moves toward Thad)

THAD *(to Mabel)*

Now, don't let people see you that way!

(To audience) Sure it was dangerous, everybody knowed that. I've seen it fall and I've had it to fall around me. I was loadin' one day down on my knees when I felt like my whole chest tightened up. I couldn't hardly breathe and I looked up in time to see the

shimmer on the top. Hit's like a wave in the earth, and I knowed that roof was comin' down! I started to run, but before I could a big slab come down and I only had time to flatten myself in the mud and pray. The coal car caught that rock. That was all that kept it from catchin' me. You constantly lived with that. It was just a way of life. You didn't question it. They wadn't no other work around. I tried not to think that much about it. You didn't run out asking for help. A job was all a man asked for.

I got ulcers though, and never could get rid of 'em long as I was in the mines. Kept a vomiting and vomiting, couldn't eat nothin'. A'ter John L. and the Union come in we got medical benefits, so I went over to see this doctor in Harlan. He took some X-rays and run a bunch a tests on me and he tol' me, "Go hunt you a job outta them mines. You get out and stay out, if you want to live."

Thad plays guitar and sings.

RUNNIN' ON EMPTY

I'm leaving these mountains
So far behind.
My money's all gone
And there's no work to find.
And I'm all out of patience
And about out of time.
And my heart
Is runnin' on empty.

I never thought
That I'd see the day
I'd leave my wife
And my kids this way.
And my woman she don't
Have nothin' to say,
'Cause her heart
Is runnin' on empty.

(Chorus)

Hey mister a job is all I need.
I'll work for you 'til my fingers bleed.
I can stand the pain, and I can live with the greed,
But I can't keep runnin' on empty.

I cuss the day
That I left the mines,
And I cuss the day I went down the first time.
'Cause that ol' coal dust

Will make you blind
'Til your heart is runnin' on empty.

(Chorus)

EB

I never did marry. Lived at home all my life. I coulda married, I reckon, but never did. I stayed here with Ma 'till she died. Seemed kinda funny a'ter all them years, not having nobody to nag at me, tell me what to do. I used to hide out in the hayloft and read. I'd go off for the barn like I's going to work, and come dinner she'd blow the steer horn for me to come home. I'd come to the house and eat, then go back and read. Wadn't nothin' fer me to do. We hadn't tended a big crop in years. Even put the 'bakker 'lotment in the soil bank. Hell, if they pay me not to grow it, I won't! Chickens and a garden's all we had, but she acted like we's still raising crops and clearing new ground. She knowed we wadn't, but she just couldn't stop. I don't reckon she could remember not having somethin' to do.

Now days, it ain't what you got, it's how much money it's worth. Well I don't reckon I can live like that. I never have and I ain't gonna start now. The rest of 'em has gone off someplace or other. I'm the only one left here, so I guess I can do what I want to. I don't want to go back, and I don't want to go on neither. I guess I'm stuck in between. Least ways I know where I'm at.

Thad plays guitar and Eb sings.

GIRL WITH THE RED HAIR

I used to work in the fields all day long,
Foxhunt most of the night.
My Pa and me we couldn't agree,
But we never was known to fight.
He worked all his life to raise eight kids,
But his life didn't last that long.
And when he was gone all we had left
Was to keep on going on.

(Chorus)

And the changes don't come slowly.
They happen overnight.
From day to day your whole life can change,
But somehow it don't seem right.

I could dance to the music all night long,
'Till the fiddler laid down his bow.

But I haven't danced now in thirty odd years,
And my legs they won't hold me no more.
There was a girl with red hair, she laughed like a man,
And sometimes I'd take her home.
They tell me that she was buried last year,
And I wish that I could have gone.

(Chorus)

If I was meant to live by myself, I wish that I had known,
'Cause waitin' and wantin' for someone is worse than bein' alone.
There was a girl with red hair, she laughed like a man,
But I guess I said that before.
There once was a time when we could have been,
But I guess that don't matter no more.

(Chorus)

THAD

Ma and Eb set there on the creek, and they didn't have nothing. A'ter Ma died, Eb just lived in his own world. Me and my family moved off into a real different world. I've thought about it and thought about it, whether they coulda done any better or was just willing to settle for what they had. But Ma and Eb was happy. I know that. They was home.

I ain't exactly talkin' 'bout that little ol' house where you was born, or that town. I'm talking 'bout home. I reckon it's a place that when you're there, ain't nobody has to tell you. I never thought I'd have to leave my home. Whenever I had to go off for work, I never intended to stay. Of course, when I was a young man hit was a big adventure, but then it got to be a necessity of life. There's some people who has roots I reckon, and there's some people who don't. I've come to believe ever'body needs a place to come home to, but I don't know as you can always find home the way you left it. It seems instead of coming back home you carry a little more of it away with you each time you leave, 'til finally they ain't nothing to come home to no more. There's things we lose and there's things that we learn, living in the times we all grow up in.

Thad plays the guitar, and Thad and Mabel sing.

DREAMS

They all tried to tell me
You weren't the settling kind,
But all it takes to dream
Is two people one lifetime.

We've wandered far away
From the life that we have known.
Together I know we
Can go back home.

(Chorus)

Take me back to the time
When the dreams I dreamed were mine,
And old memories were friends I could talk to.
I've lived my life without regrets
And I'm not through living yet,
but its a whole lot easier
knowing I've got you.

Dreams they twist and turn.
They'll leave you high and dry.
And just when you think you caught one
It'll find a place to hide.
And even with the one you love
You sometimes feel alone,
When the things that you left home for
Are the things you left at home

(Chorus)

After Applause

EB *(to audience)*

There's one more song, and we want to sing this one with you.

Thad plays the guitar and sings with Mabel and Eb.

WINTERTIME IN THE MOUNTAINS

Wintertime in the mountains
And the snow is falling down.
Daddy's loading the pickup truck,
Hauling 'bakker into town.
There'll be new shoes for me and Carrie,
And for Momma a new gown.
Peppermint sticks and orange slices
When Christmas rolls around.

(Chorus)

We believed in the family
And the Old Regular Baptist Church.
We believed in John L. for a while
'Till things couldn't get much worse.
They tell me times was harder then
And I remember that for a while.
But I remember the way my Daddy laughed
And the way my Mamma smiled.

Daddy would come home from work in the mines
With his shirt froze to his arms.
And every time my Momma would cry
He'd say, "It ain't gonna do me no harm."
You know a man's got to work for a living today
And come spring I want to build a new barn.
But a man can't raise a family no more
On a rocky hillside farm.

(Chorus) Acapella

--END--