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The Days before Dyess: Johnny Cash's Early Arkansas Roots

by Colin Edward Woodward

Johnny Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas, in February 1932. Kingsland, located in Cleveland County, has always been a small town, never numbering more than 600 people. Cash's birthplace is about ten miles south of Rison, a larger town and the county seat. Today, there are roughly 450 inhabitants in Kingsland, about the same size as when Cash was born there. Kingsland has two signs that mark the town as the birthplace of Johnny Cash. The oldest is a rough, hand painted sign placed just off of highway 79 as you approach from Rison. The other is a newer, iron structure, closer to town, which has Cash in silhouette, with a guitar.

One can drive through Kingsland very quickly. For Cash fanatics, there is a marker dedicated to him that was put there in March 1976, the same month Cash visited Cleveland County to perform a concert at Rison's high school football field. At the time, Cash was an unofficial ambassador for the United States' bicentennial, and the show was the first he ever played in Cleveland County. Despite the fact that Cash is Kingsland's most famous resident, there is no "Johnny Cash Lane" or "Man in Black Street." Those looking for anything related to Cash might have to rely on the locals for guidance.

Kingsland is no longer the cotton hub it once was, but it serves as an excellent example of the small southern town. Churches outnumber walk-in businesses. Visitors might see chickens roaming freely on a Kingslander's lawn. Kingsland gave birth to Johnny Cash, but in terms of what it offers visitors

and country music fans, it is about as far removed from Nashville glitz as one could imagine.

Those interested in Johnny Cash can find no shortage of biographies about him.¹ Cash historians have generally devoted few pages to the early part of his life. They usually pass over his Kingsland years in order to get to Dyess, where he lived for fifteen years and began playing music. Kingsland, however, deserves a more prominent place in the Johnny Cash story.

¹ For a good early biography on Cash that also contains much information on the Cash family and the history of Kingsland, see Christopher S. Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too: The Life and Legends of Johnny Cash* (New York: Ballantine, 1971). Wren's book, however, is an exception among cash biographies. Since it was written in the early 1970s, it examined more of Cash's early life than would later biographers, and Wren was closer to his subject than any later biographers. For a comprehensive look at the singer's career, see Stephen Miller, *Johnny Cash: The Life of an American Icon* (New York: Omnibus, 2003); Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend* (Nashville, Tenn.: W Publishing Group, 2004); Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2006); and Robert Hilburn, *Johnny Cash: The Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2013). For other, less scholarly biographies of Cash, see George Carpozi, *The Johnny Cash Story* (New York: Pyramid, 1970); Sean Dolan, *Johnny Cash* (New York: Chelsea House, 1995); Garth Campbell, *Johnny Cash: He Walked the Line, 1932-2003* (London: John Blake, 2003); Anne E. Neimark, *Johnny Cash: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: Viking, 2007); On Cash's newfound religious faith and association with Rev. Billy Graham, see Charles Paul Conn, *The New Johnny Cash* (Old Tappan, N.J.: F. H. Revell, 1973).

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Cash later settled in Tennessee, and lived for some years in California. But he had deep roots in Arkansas, not only in terms of his family history, but in the sense that the songs he wrote were grounded in the people, places, and very soil of his native state. Cash was the godfather of many musical forms in America – not just rock and roll, gospel, and folk, but what would later become known as “roots music.” Perhaps the best example of his roots music can be found in his album *Songs of Our Soil*. One of the album’s tracks, “Five Feet High and Rising,” immortalized the 1937 flood in Mississippi County, Arkansas. But Kingsland had a deep effect on Cash’s life, too. When he visited his birthplace in 1994, he said it was to “touch my roots again.”²

Ironically, one of the most American of America’s singers was born in a town named Kingsland. Perhaps no town is less the domain of kings than Kingsland, which Cash himself once referred to merely as a “wide place in the road.”³ Kingsland’s name was about as close as the Cash family or any other residents had to royalty. Kingsland has always been a small, working class town. Cash’s time there was brief, but it was a fitting beginning for a man who became one of the great poets of small town America in a home state, Arkansas, known for its rural character.

² *Cleveland County Herald*, April 6, 1994.

³ Margaret Robin, “Johnny Cash: Behind the Myth,” *Hit Parader* (February 1970), 37-42.

The Cash family made its way to Arkansas via Georgia, Virginia, and Scotland. The patron of the Cash family in America, William Cash, was born in Glenrothes, Scotland, in 1653. He settled, as so many men from the British Isles did, in Virginia, when he was in his twenties.⁴ William lived in Westmoreland County in the Northern Neck of Virginia. Westmoreland County was plantation country, home to some of the most prominent members of the so-called Virginia “gentry.” The county was the birthplace of George Washington, James Monroe, and Robert E. Lee. William Cash, too, was of the planter class. When he died in 1708, he had his plantation divided among his wife and children.⁵



Johnny Cash with his father Ray and his aunt Mable Cash McKinney at a Cash family reunion in Rison, 1970. *Courtesy of Stan Sadler, Rison, Arkansas*

William Cash gave birth to a son, Robert Howard Cash in 1703 in Westmoreland County. Robert, who died in 1772, gave birth to Stephen Cash in 1730. In 1757, Stephen’s wife Jemima gave birth to John Cash, who fought in the Revolutionary War. By the

⁴ Cindy Cash, *Cash Family Scrapbook* (New York: Crown, 1997), 154. For a more recent discussion of the Cash family’s roots in Scotland, see Roseanne Cash, *Composed: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 2010), 208-213.

⁵ Will of William Cash, signed 16 February 1708. The will was recorded in Westmorland County on 25 August 1708. A copy of his will can be found among the data sheets kept by Marie Cash that are part of the Cash Family Papers, which are in the possession of Wayne Cash of Maumelle, Arkansas [hereafter cited as Cash Family Papers].



William Henry Cash (Johnny Cash's grandfather) and family, ca. 1911. *Courtesy of Wayne Cash*

time John was born, the Cash family had moved to the southwestern part of Virginia, to Amherst County, a considerable distance from the Northern Neck.

The Revolutionary War erupted just a few weeks after John's eighteenth birthday. He was of ripe age for military service, and John ended up serving with his fellow Americans against the British. Cash was involved in the Cherokee Expedition, also known as Christie's Expedition (named after Colonel William Christie, who led the pro-revolutionary forces). The fighting in which John Cash took part began in August 1776, when members of the Cherokee tribe attacked patriot forces in Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

Private John Cash was among the men who served along the Holston River, which runs from southwest Virginia into Tennessee. The campaign lasted until December 1776.⁶

After the war, John moved from Amherst County to neighboring Bedford County, Virginia. He lived there until 1802, when he and his wife Lucy moved again, this time much farther south to Elbert County, Georgia. On June 7, 1832, the United States passed a pension bill that granted full pay to men who had served two years or more in the American Revolution, while men who had served six months or more were granted partial pay. Most Revolutionary veterans were dead by then. But John Cash, then living in Georgia,

applied. Unfortunately for him, that same year, his service records were destroyed in a fire. With the help of a lawyer, Cash signed an affidavit concerning his wartime service.⁷ Shortly before his death in 1836, John Cash received a pension from the federal government. His wife Lucy lived until 1848. The couple had seven children.

⁶ John Cash affidavit, November [no date] 1832. A handwritten copy is in the Cash Family Papers. On a summary of the Christie campaign, see Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 194-197.

⁷ John Cash affidavit, November 1832, Cash Family Papers.

John Cash's son Moses was born in 1784, the year after the American Revolution ended, in Amherst County, Virginia. Like the children of the post-World War II era, Moses was part of a baby boom. Yet, the post-Revolutionary War population explosion was even more dramatic than that of the later boom of the 1940s and 1950s. In the decades after American independence, the population of the United States doubled every twenty years – a rate that far surpassed any later proportional population growth in the United States.

In 1802, Moses moved with his family to Georgia, where he rose to the ranks of the middling slaveholders. One twentieth century source notes that Moses Cash was of "considerable means, owning a large number of slaves, land, and stock."⁸ Cash's holdings, however, were more modest than such a description suggests. According to the 1820 census, he owned one slave. Twenty years later, he owned five.⁹ Moses was far from being a planter, but he was doing better than most small farmers in Georgia. Most southerners owned no slaves, and those that did owned an average of five. And yet, even though he was not a planter, Moses was living the southern version of the American dream: the passage of time brought him greater wealth.

Moses's son Reuben (sometimes referred to as Moses Reuben Cash) is the man responsible for bringing the Cash family to Arkansas. Reuben was

born in 1814 in Elbert County, Georgia. In 1836, he married Phelitia (spelled various ways in written accounts) White Taylor, a native of Elbert County, who was in her teens. The couple had their first child, Mary, the year after they wed. In 1838, another child was born, whom the couple named Nancy. Ten more children followed, all of whom lived past childhood. Given the childhood disease rate and primitive medicine of the mid-nineteenth century South, it is miraculous that all of Reuben's children lived to adulthood.¹⁰

Moses Cash died in 1845 in Elbert County. In his will, he had his land divided among his three sons: James G., Reuben, and Seaborn J. Cash.¹¹ As equitable as Moses Cash's will may have been, it was hardly a windfall for his sons. In 1858, Reuben Cash and his family left Elbert County for Arkansas.¹² The exact reasons for Reuben's move are unclear. The most likely reason for his trek west was that Arkansas had greater opportunities for land ownership for men willing to travel far to a state that was very much still a frontier.

In 1857, the United States suffered a financial downturn, which was then known as a panic. The South did not suffer the worst of the crisis, but in Georgia – Reuben's home – the economy, more specifically, banking, was hotly debated among politicians.¹³ In

⁸ Cleveland County Historical Society, *Cleveland County, Arkansas: Our History and Heritage* (n.p., 2006), 108.

⁹ 1820 United States Census (Free Schedule) for Moses Cash, Wards, Elbert, Georgia; 1830 United States Census (Free Schedule) for Moses Cash, Elbert, Georgia; 1840 United States Census (Free Schedule) for Moses Cash, District 199, Elbert, Georgia. All census information used in this article was accessed through the Ancestry.com database.

¹⁰ Data sheet for Reuben Cash, Cash Family Papers.

¹¹ A typed copy of Reuben's will can be found in Cleveland County Historical Society, *Cleveland County, Arkansas*, 109; a handwritten copy is in the Cash Family Papers.

¹² Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*, 25.

¹³ James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 53.



Welcome sign in Kingsland, Arkansas, 2012. *Courtesy of Colin Woodward*

the wake of the 1857 panic, the struggling Reuben might have thought Arkansas a more promising place to raise a family. Arkansas had good land for farming, and much of it was cheap. Settlers could get land for \$1.25 an acre in the area that later became Cleveland County.¹⁴ To put that in perspective, a common laborer in the late antebellum era might earn a dollar a day.

The Cash family settled in Bradley County, in the Mount Elba region, which had been established in the 1830s. Mount Elba – today located to the east of Kingsland – is located on the eastern bank of the Saline River, which flows south into the Ouachita. Migrants to Bradley County were, of course, not the

¹⁴ Cleveland County Historical Society, *A Historical Review of the Timber Industry in Cleveland County, Arkansas* (n.p., 2004), 4.

first inhabitants of that land. Native Americans were there long before the Cashes were. But well before Reuben Cash arrived, Indian tribes had been forced out of Arkansas. Native Americans in the states and territories of the United States faced threats both internally and externally. White Arkansans wanted their state to be a “white man’s country.” Arkansas was at the center of the forced migration of Native Americans from the East Coast to the frontier. The infamous “Trail of Tears” passed through central Arkansas, including areas of modern day Little Rock.

Not until the 1960s would whites begin reassessing how they and their ancestors had treated Native Americans. Johnny Cash would take up the cause of Native Americans in his 1964 album, *Bitter Tears*, well before other prominent musicians took Indian culture seriously.¹⁵

In the territorial period, southern Arkansas had been the domain of the Quapaws, though the area also included Tunicas, Caddos, and Osage.¹⁶ The Quapaws were one of the three major tribes in what later became Arkansas, living in much of the eastern part

¹⁵ See Antonio d’Ambrosio, *A Heartbeat and a Guitar: Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

¹⁶ Cleveland County History Society, *Historical Review of the Timber Industry in Cleveland County, Arkansas*, 2.

of the state. In 1824, a treaty was signed that opened the land in southern Arkansas to white settlers. The removal of Native Americans left much land for farming and cotton production. But Native Americans had left their stamp on the land. The first roads used by whites in Kingsland followed the foot paths that Native Americans had worn into the soil.¹⁷

Mount Elba, where Reuben Cash settled, was not a mountain at all, but rather a rise in an area east of the Saline River. The place was a transportation nexus. Inhabitants took advantage of a road that connected Pine Bluff to the north and Camden to the South. A ferry also helped commerce in the area. The town prospered due to the river traffic, which thrived on the trade in cotton and other goods that characterized the antebellum period in the South. In the 1850s, the Masons of Mount Elba built a college for women. A sawmill was the largest single employer in the area.

The timber industry would prove very important to southern Arkansas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But in the antebellum era and beyond, it was “King Cotton” that reigned in Bradley County. Planters, usually those who owned 20 or more slaves, made up only 3% of the population of the county.¹⁸ But 20% of households owned slaves – a figure close to the southern average. The largest planter in the Mount Elba region was Judge Joseph Monroe Meriwether, who owned 44 slaves in 1860.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cleveland County Historical Society, *The Impact of Agriculture on Cleveland County, Arkansas, from 1830 to 1950* (n.p., 2006), 7.

¹⁹ 1860 United States Census (Slave Schedule), Joseph M. Meriwether, Smith township, Bradley, Arkansas.

Reuben Cash and his family were making their first cotton crop as a decade of great prosperity was coming to a close. In the 1850s, the South built more railroads than the North did, and it seemed the cotton boom would continue indefinitely. Reuben Cash was no planter – and apparently never owned any slaves – but he was not poor. In the 1860 census, he is listed as having \$2,000 in real estate and \$800 in personal wealth.²⁰ Unfortunately for Reuben and the white South, despite the economic good times, the nation was coming apart politically.

In 1861, Arkansas was a relatively new state, having joined the Union in 1836. A mere generation passed between Arkansas having achieved statehood and when it voted to secede from the Union. Arkansas was not a large state by the time of the Civil War. Of the eleven states that joined the Confederacy, Arkansas, with 435,000 people – a quarter of them slaves – was the second smallest. And yet, in 1860, far more people lived in Arkansas than the states of California, Minnesota, or New Hampshire. With a thriving slave economy and much land remaining open to settlement and cotton farming, Arkansas was not the poor or underdeveloped place it would later be known as.

The Civil War is the bloodiest and most destructive war in United States history. To wage it, the South mobilized an unprecedented number of its male population. The Confederacy sent 80% of its white males of fighting age into the military – a figure far higher than what the North sent to war.²¹ The Cash

²⁰ 1860 United States Census (Free Schedule), Reubin [sic] Cash, Smith township, Bradley, Arkansas. Reuben Cash is not listed in the 1860 Slave Schedules.

²¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War*

family did its part. In 1970, Ray Cash told a biographer that his grandfather, Moses, "fought for Georgia in the Civil War."²² No evidence exists, however, that Reuben Cash wore the gray, let alone in Georgia. And yet, the story had currency among the Cash family. In his first autobiography, Cash talked about his great grandfather, Moses, moving from Georgia to Arkansas during the Civil War to escape wartime destruction. Cash wrote:

In 1810, Moses Cash was one of the first settlers in Henry County, Georgia. The old Cash family homestead can still be seen there, though it is in ruins, as it has been since the Civil War. Following the burning of Atlanta and the pillage and sacking of the plantations in that area, Reuben Cash put his family in an ox-drawn wagon, and in 1866 homesteaded to Arkansas.²³

Cash's story is wrong on several counts. Moses Reuben was not born until 1814, and Cash erroneously had him living in Henry County rather than Elbert County, where he in fact lived. Cash also erred in saying Moses did not move to Arkansas until 1866.

In his second autobiography, Cash corrected his earlier story, noting that his great grandfather settled in Arkansas in 1858, not 1866. Cash corrected an earlier mistake about when Reuben settled in Arkansas, but he was suspiciously more specific about his great grandfather, noting that Moses "fought

for the Confederacy and survived the Civil War. His home didn't. Sherman's troops stripped and burned his Georgia plantation, so he moved his family farther west, homesteading across the Mississippi in Arkansas."²⁴ It is a dramatic story concerning the origins of the Cash family's moved to Arkansas.

Unfortunately, it is not factual. Several Cash biographers, however, have taken the singer at his word in describing his family's Civil War history.²⁵ Reuben Cash's plantation was not burned by Sherman's troops for the simple reason that he had no plantation to burn. Reuben certainly had no plantation once he moved to Bradley County. And he did not own one in Georgia either. He appears in the 1850 census records for Elbert County, Georgia, but only as having owned 140 acres, \$317 in livestock, and no slaves.²⁶ Another problem with Cash's story about his great grandfather is that Sherman's troops did not burn any plantations in Elbert County.

Reuben Cash was no longer living in Georgia by the time the war broke out, a war he apparently did not fight in – at least not as a regular soldier. Reuben's name does not appear in the records for Confederate soldiers from Georgia or Arkansas.²⁷ The most

Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 615.

²² Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*, 25; Goodspeed, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed, 1890), 606; Cash, *Cash Family Scrapbook*, 154.

²³ Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975), 28.

²⁴ Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1997), 4.

²⁵ Miller, *Johnny Cash*, 5; Hilburn, *Johnny Cash*, 5.

²⁶ 1850 United States Census (Agricultural Schedule), R. Cash, Elbert County, Georgia. Reuben does not appear in the Slave Schedules.

²⁷ Janet B. Hewett, ed., *The Roster of Confederate Soldiers, 1861-1865, Volume III: Buff, Aaron, to Coirier, E.F.* (Wilmington, North Carolina: Broadfoot, 1995). This information is also available at the online Soldiers and Sailors database administered by the National Park Service. The 4th Arkansas Cavalry had a Moses Cash in it but it was a Union

practical reason for why he never served in a formal unit was that he was too old for the Rebel military. Born in 1814, Moses would have been much older than most Confederate soldiers, who were mostly in their twenties, unmarried, and had little or no property (let alone slaves or plantations) when the war began.²⁸ Reuben would have been an atypical soldier in most respects. It is possible Reuben ignored his obligations to his family and – with patriotism surging in his veins – signed up anyway. But the older men who joined the military early in the war were usually those with officer's credentials. Reuben, who had little money and no formal education, had no such prospects.

It is possible, but not likely, that Reuben was drafted during the war. The Confederacy passed three drafts during the war. The third, issued in 1864, made men between the ages of 17 and 50 eligible for conscription. In 1864, Reuben Cash would have been within the upper limits of the draft that the Confederacy passed that year. Yet, any men over the age of 45 were not required to leave their state.²⁹ Reuben may have served in a reserve unit. But by then, it is unlikely that Confederates in southern Arkansas would have had the capability of enforcing the draft provisions in the Mount Elba area which had already been overrun

force and the Moses Cash was in his thirties. Reuben Cash is also not listed in the index to the *Roster of Confederate Soldiers of Georgia*. See Juanita S. Brightwell, Eunice S. Lee, and Elsie C. Fulghum, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, 1861-1865: Index* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: Reprint Company, 1982), 77.

²⁸ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), viii.

²⁹ William L. Shaw, "The Confederate Conscription and Exemption Acts," *American Journal of Legal History* 6 (October 1962), 376.

by Yankees.

One can only speculate as to what Reuben Cash did during the war. With the loss of Confederate territory in Arkansas, record keeping became increasingly sparse. If he fought at all in the war, Reuben likely did so in Arkansas, not Georgia. He might have taken part in a skirmish or irregular combat. But it is doubtful that in 1861 he would have chosen to leave his family, including a pregnant wife (he had a daughter born in 1862), to embark on a journey to Georgia, just a few years after having left there, when he could much more readily have volunteered for an Arkansas unit.

Many Arkansans served east of the Mississippi, but it was not easy for Arkansans to travel across the river at any point during the war. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had only one Arkansas regiment in it. Other Arkansas regiments fought valiantly in Tennessee and Georgia. But most of those who did so were not older men with large families to support. It would have been difficult, indeed superhuman, for the 47-year-old Reuben to have completed a passage across the Mississippi, fought for four years, and then have returned home unharmed. Even odder is the fact that such a feat never found its way into the family's written records or Reuben's obituary. What is more believable is that Reuben stayed in Arkansas for the war's duration. In Arkansas, as a non-slaveholder too old for the draft, Reuben was one of the many men who fought on the home front, where he had to struggle to keep his keep family together amid war and depredation.

The Civil War devastated the South, and Arkansas was no exception. With the fall of Little Rock on September 10, 1863, U.S. forces turned their attention

to southern Arkansas.³⁰ By the time Little Rock fell, Confederate politicians had fled to Washington, in the southwestern portion of Arkansas, where they set up a new seat of government. In the spring of 1864, the Union and Confederate forces fought a series of battles in what became known as the Camden Expedition, part of the larger Red River campaign.

Mount Elba was one of the many communities ravaged by the hard war fought in Arkansas in 1864. As Union forces moved into the area, masters abandoned cotton lands. In Mount Elba, Federal troops under General Powell Clayton burned the female college and the Masonic Lodge. Rebel forces were defeated when they tried to hold a vital bridge across the Saline River. Confederates won some bloody battles in southern Arkansas in the spring of 1864, but they could not win a decisive victory.

It is possible that Reuben took part in one of the battles or skirmishes in southern Arkansas in the latter parts of the war. The conventional war in Arkansas essentially came to an end in the spring of 1864, but that did not end the bloodshed. As Daniel Sutherland has noted, "the defining element for Arkansas in 1864 became the surge of violence and banditry." Indeed, the state was home to some of the worst bushwhacking and guerrilla combat of the war, which occasionally surpassed the internecine violence in Missouri and other states.³¹

Although Reuben Cash survived the war, the

³⁰ Mark K. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863: The Battle for a State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

³¹ Daniel Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 210.

conflict had a deep effect on him and his family. Nancy Elizabeth Cash, born in 1838, was Reuben's second child. She apparently was engaged to a soldier, who died during the war. She never married, living with her parents until her death in 1880. Mary Frances Cash was luckier. Her husband, Dr. George England, joined the Second Arkansas Cavalry at Mount Elba. He was, like his wife, a native of Georgia, who settled in Arkansas in the late 1850s. George fought at the April 1864 battles at Poison Spring in Ouachita County and at Marks' Mills in Bradley County. He also served with Price's men in Missouri in late 1864. He eventually surrendered with other Rebels in Shreveport, Louisiana. Upon returning home, he became a farmer. It was not until 1877 that George England began practicing medicine.³²

Reuben Cash's daughters Virginia Ann and Pheletia were also fortunate. Virginia's husband, David Crockett Tomme, served in some of the most vicious battles of the war, including Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, Atlanta, and Franklin. David rose to the rank of sergeant by the war's end and returned to Bradley County afterward. Pheletia was married to Nathan Gunn, who fought as a cavalryman during the war, taking part in some of the major fights in Arkansas, such as Prairie Grove and Poison Spring.³³

And yet, the Cash family, like so many others in the South, endured tragedy and loss during the war. In 1861, Reuben's brother, Private Seaborn J. Cash of the 38th Georgia Infantry Regiment, died in Savannah of typhoid fever. He was only 22 years old. Before

³² On George England, see Goodspeed, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas*, 606.

³³ Information on Gunn's wartime service can be found in the Cash Family Papers.

joining the army, he had been living with his sister, Permelia Cash Craft – a widow who lived on her husband's plantation in Elbert County – and working as a carpenter.³⁴

Reuben's eldest son, John S. Cash, was another of the war's many casualties. He was born in 1840 and served in Company D [later Company B] of the 2nd Arkansas Cavalry. With his brothers-in-law, he enlisted in February of 1862. He died in the fall of 1862 in Mississippi, most likely during the Corinth campaign which concluded that October. Barely old enough to vote when he died, John was among the more than 620,000 men who did not survive the war.³⁵ His remains were never located which was not uncommon during the war.³⁶ John left behind a young bride of 17 years and a daughter, Mary, who was born the August before John died.³⁷

Reuben's second eldest son, James Wesley Cash, also fought for the Confederacy. Born in 1845, James did not serve until later in the war. He likely volunteered in 1863 or 1864. According to an obituary published in the *Cleveland County Herald*, Cash was wounded at one point, but soon rejoined his unit. The obituary claimed he "did valiant service to the end of the war." James also found time to get married

during the war to Laura J. Tomme. James Wesley survived the conflict, but like many of the Cash men of the nineteenth century, he did not live to an old age. He died in 1898, a man in his early 50s. He was remembered as a "good man, a good citizen, and a kind Neighbor. He was a hard-working, painstaking man who was always in fair circumstances."³⁸ Not all the Cash men, however, would find circumstances so fair.

Despite the destruction that came to his community, Reuben Cash never left southern Arkansas. In 1870, the family was living in the southeastern part of Bradley County, what would later become Hurricane township. The South's economy was crippled by the war and emancipation, and like so many other southerners, Reuben Cash was much worse after the war financially than he had been before it. The 1870 census lists him as having only \$800 in real estate and \$500 in personal wealth, less than half of what he was worth in 1860.³⁹

Reuben may have not been a wealthy man, but he raised a large family – large even by the standards of the mid-nineteenth century – most of whom survived the war. When he died in 1880, he was remembered as a "highly esteemed Christian and gentleman, honest and upright in all his dealings."⁴⁰ Moses died with 170 acres of land to bequeath to his children. He also left them the humble sum of one dollar each.⁴¹ Moses was not a rich man, but in the evangelical South, spirituality

³⁴ 1860 United States Census (Free Schedule), Elbert County, Georgia; Lillian Henderson, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, Volume IV* (Hapeville, Georgia: Longina and Porter, 1959), 189; more detailed information on Cash can be found at <http://38thga.com/drupal/node/100>

³⁵ See David Hacker, "Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History*, 57 (December 2011), 306-347.

³⁶ See Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

³⁷ Data sheet for John S. Cash, Cash Family Papers.

³⁸ *Cleveland County Herald*, July 14, 1898.

³⁹ 1870 United States Census, Reuben Cash, Hurricane township, Bradley, Arkansas.

⁴⁰ *Pine Bluff Weekly Press*, December 30, 1880.

⁴¹ Will of Reuben Cash, November 8, 1880, Cash Family Papers.

was highly prized. And Reuben passed down to his family the importance of living a Christian life.

Cleveland County was and is one of the many notches in the Bible Belt. Although Johnny Cash would often stray from his religious beliefs, in the 1970s, he would recommit himself to his faith. It is fitting that the Johnny Cash historical marker in Kingsland – dedicated to him in 1976 – is very close to a church. Despite being one of the smallest counties by population in Arkansas, Cleveland County has a rich religious history. The Camp Springs Methodist Church was established in 1852 and stood until a tornado destroyed it in 2012.⁴² The First Southern Baptist Church was built in Kingsland in 1885 and is still in operation though it is now known as the First Baptist Church. The Kingsland United Methodist Church was also created in the 1880s. The Assembly of God Church and the Kingsland Missionary Baptist Church came later. In the 1920s, a Church of God in Christ was established for Kingsland's African American population.⁴³

Perhaps the most religious of the early Cashes in Arkansas was Rev. William Henry Cash, who was born in Elbert County, Georgia, in 1852. He was known as a travelling preacher, a "circuit rider." Johnny later noted that his grandfather never took "a penny for his preaching – though as my daddy told it, the yard and the barn and the stables were full of animals people had given him, and there was always enough to feed his twelve children."⁴⁴ William Henry

Cash, indeed, could not find a living as a preacher. In the 1880 and 1900 census (most 1890 census records were destroyed in a fire), he listed his occupation as farmer.⁴⁵ His commitment to the church, nevertheless, followed him to the end of his days. One story notes that in 1912, just before he died at the age of sixty, he was carried into his church on a chair, preached from where he sat, and was then taken home, where he died soon afterward.⁴⁶

William Henry Cash was married to Rebecca Overton Cash, who bore him twelve children, eight of whom lived to adulthood. Unlike her husband, she was a native of southern Arkansas, where she was born in 1855. The oldest of William and Rebecca's children was Susan, born in 1875, just after Rebecca's twentieth birthday. The youngest was Ray, the father of Johnny Cash. The George Carpozi book *The Johnny Cash Story* notes that Ray's mother, Rebecca, was "full-blooded Cherokee," but this was untrue.⁴⁷ The Cherokees were not native to where Rebecca was born. One surviving picture of the family shows a woman who is obviously not a full-blooded Native American. Nor would William Henry Cash, a respected minister in a rural southern community, have taken a Native American wife in a period in which white-Indian relations were at a nadir. Yet, for

⁴² *Cleveland County Herald*, January 27, 2012.

⁴³ Helen Goggans, "Arkansas Sesquicentennial, 1836-1986: A History of Kingsland, Arkansas," ([Ark]: [Helen Goggans], 1986), 8.

⁴⁴ Cash and Carr, *Cash*, 4.

⁴⁵ 1880 United States Census, William H. Cash, Smith township, Cleveland, Arkansas; 1900 United State Census, William H. Cash, Smith township. Cleveland, Arkansas.

⁴⁶ Doris Lisenby, *Taproots in Fertile Soil* (Arkadelphia, Arkansas: Autumn Years Ministries, 1993), 87.

⁴⁷ Carpozi, *Johnny Cash Story*, 20. Tom Dearmore, an Arkansas journalist, also repeated the legend of Cash's Indian ancestry, saying that Cash had "the face and stature of his Cherokee forebears." See Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Singers," *New York Times Magazine*, September 21, 1969, p. 42.

years, Johnny Cash would say, wrongly, that he had Native American ancestry.⁴⁸

In 1873, Bradley County was renamed Dorsey County after a radical Republican Congressman, Stephen Dorsey. Dorsey County was created by slicing off parts of Bradley, Dallas, Jefferson, and Lincoln County. In 1874, however, the state's Republican Party collapsed, thus effectively ending two-party politics in Arkansas for a century. The end of Reconstruction signaled Arkansas' entry into the ranks of the "Solid South," the core principles of which were white supremacy and fiscal conservatism. From the end of Reconstruction to the late 1960s in Arkansas, racial politics and small government reigned. African Americans and anyone who voted Republican were marginalized. To honor the Democratic resurgence in the South, in 1885, Cleveland County was named after Grover Cleveland, the first Democratic president following the Civil War.

Kingsland had its beginnings as a railroad town. The place got its name after the arrival of the Texas & St. Louis Southwestern Railway (later renamed the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, commonly known as the "Cotton Belt" line). The town, formerly known as Prairie, was named by Austin L. Gresham, the postmaster, in 1883, and the town was incorporated in July 1884. The Cotton Belt was a lifeline for Arkansas farmers in an age when cotton was still king in the South. The Civil War did not kill cotton production in Arkansas, nor the plantation system. And the railroads were central to the post-Civil War cotton trade. In the era before the interstate highway system, railway travel was an important part of American life.

⁴⁸ Robert Hilburn notes the fallacy of Cash's Native American ancestry. See Hilburn, *Johnny Cash*, 165-166.

Even for a country singer, Johnny Cash gave railroads a prominent place in his performances, from "Folsom Prison Blues" onward. The "Ride This Train" segment was his favorite part of his television show. And in March 1976, he and his wife rode the Cotton Belt into Rison for his concert at the high school football field, a trip that inspired him to write "Ridin' on the Cotton Belt," which appeared on his 1977 album *The Last Gunfighter Ballad*. By then, rail travel was increasingly becoming an anachronism in the United States. A rail still runs through Kingsland, but it has not been the Cotton Belt since 1996 when it was absorbed by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Yet, in the late nineteenth century, the railroads promised big things for towns like Kingsland. By 1890, the population of Kingsland had grown to 600 people, the largest population in the town's history. The town was home to three hotels, a furniture store, a lumber mill, four mercantile stores, three drug stores, and a grocery. The town had newspapers at various times, but they have long since disappeared. Today, citizens read the *Cleveland County Herald*, located in Rison. The *Herald* was opened in 1888.⁴⁹

The most important industries were cotton and timber. After the Civil War, Arkansas grew more cotton than it ever had before. In the 1890s, harvests were good. In October 12, 1897, the *Herald* reported that Kingsland had "already handled . . . more cotton than ever handled before in a whole season and the half is not yet sold. She pays a higher price than any other town in South Arkansas."⁵⁰ That same year, Kingsland could boast 150 children attending public school, a fact made possible by cotton revenue. In

⁴⁹ Goggans, "History of Kingsland," 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

1902, a farmer could get 8.25 cents a pound for his cotton, a price higher than what farmers got during some years of the Great Depression. In the early 1900s, Kingsland also added a brick factory and a newspaper, the *Arkansas Journal*.

By 1902, however, the population of Kingsland had dropped to 364 people. The town – and Arkansas at large – was still unrefined and worthy of the frontier. A photograph of downtown Kingsland in the first decade of the twentieth century shows a pig on the street sniffing for food.⁵¹

And yet, great change was coming to Kingsland. In 1907, the Fordyce Light and Power Company (later Arkansas Power and Light) provided the first electricity to the town. The automobile was another welcome innovation. The first Ford appeared in the town in 1904.⁵² A decade later, Arkansas Highway 3 was built, which passed through Kingsland. By the early 1930s, the *Cleveland County Herald* was writing about the exponential growth of automobile speeds, thinking that “in another decade automobiles will travel at a rate of 150 miles an hour on an ordinary highway.”⁵³ The *Herald* might have been overly optimistic about average car speeds. But Kingsland clearly had come a long way from the early 1900s when the town had passed an ordinance that fined anyone who went faster than 25 miles per hour on a

horse or in a vehicle.⁵⁴

Despite the arrival of the automobile, a new car was beyond the means of most Arkansans, including Ray Cash. Ray was a “typical country boy,” a smoker who rolled his own cigarettes.⁵⁵ He was born in 1897 and dropped out of school when he was fourteen, around the time his father, Rev. William Henry Cash, died. Four years later, Ray's mother died.

The 1910s were not a good time for Ray or the country. By the mid-1900s, timber mills began shutting down in Cleveland County, leaving hundreds without work. In 1914, war broke out in Europe, becoming what was the bloodiest conflict in history up to that time. The United States did not enter the war until April of 1917, and it would be even longer before it had large numbers of troops in combat. Yet, by the time the United States entered the Great War, Ray Cash had already enlisted. He chose the military, undoubtedly, for the same reason his son Johnny would: to avoid the cotton fields or some other type of back-straining labor.

The military gave Ray a job and a taste of the larger world. His military experiences began as a soldier in the Arkansas National Guard which was federalized in order to fight Pancho Villa's forces along the United States-Mexico border. Ray's unit was the Second Arkansas Infantry which was first stationed at Fort Logan Roots – then located on Big Rock, which overlooks the Arkansas River in present-day North Little Rock. Ray was eventually sent with other Arkansans to the southwest where his unit acted as a

⁵¹ Cleveland County Historical Society, *Cleveland County, Arkansas*, 17.

⁵² Cleveland County Bicentennial Committee, *Cleveland County Potpourri: Recollections from History and Folklore* (n.p., 1976), 3.

⁵³ *Cleveland County Herald*, March 30, 1932, quoted in Leland C. Ackerman, *Here and There: Weekly Columns from the Cleveland County Herald* (n.p., 2003), 7.

⁵⁴ Goggans, “History of Kingsland,” 10.

⁵⁵ Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*, 25-26.

border patrol trying to track down the elusive Villa whose men had killed Americans along the border. The United States never captured General Villa who died in an ambush in 1923 at the hands of other Mexicans.

The fighting along the Mexican border was relatively light compared to the trenches of France and Belgium but it served as a warm up for America's entry into the World War. Ray had avoided bloodshed along the Mexican border and he proved similarly lucky in France. He served not in the infantry fighting Germans but in a support role. To get to France, he rode on a captured German ship, *Leviathan*, with thousands of other men. When he arrived in the port of Brest, he remembered the place for its constant rains.⁵⁶

By his own admission, Ray was not a very good soldier. At one point, he claimed to have lost a train he was supposed to be guarding. According to him, he had left his post in order to go to St. Lazare to visit a girlfriend. Upon his return, the train carrying needed supplies was gone. Cash admitted his mistake to his superior officer who cursed him for his incompetence. Cash later went to the officer saying he had no money and asked the man for train fare.⁵⁷

Despite his occasional bungling, Ray was honorably discharged from the army on 25 June 1919. Garth Campbell, in his biography of Johnny Cash, notes that when it came to World War I, "Ray never revealed the

truth about the ugly scenes of death and destruction he had witnessed."⁵⁸ But Johnny Cash's father never actually saw combat and his wartime service was less than exemplary. Ray was a hard worker but he was no glory hound or leader of men.

Ray must have thought of returning to Kingsland with some feelings of anxiety. He had no job, wife, or children to which to return. He had no high school diploma and no business training. The army had provided him with employment, allowing him to travel overseas and walk the streets of Paris. Since he had not seen combat, he did not return physically or emotionally shattered the way so many thousands of Americans did. But Ray had few options back in Arkansas. He spent the 1920s roaming from job to job and dwelling to dwelling in and outside Cleveland County, but never venturing too far from where he grew up.

While working cutting lumber to construct a bridge over the Saline River, Ray stayed with the Rivers family. There, he met Carrie Rivers, a girl of sixteen. On August 18, 1920, he married Carrie, with whom he would spend the rest of his life. Although lucky in love, Ray was not lucky in finding regular employment. Like many men in the area, he made some money working at a timber mill.

The timber industry in Cleveland County thrived on the large pine and hardwood trees that grew in the area. Before the timber trade began slashing its way through southern Arkansas, the region was one of majestic trees. Some were between 4-6 feet in

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24. Although Brest has more days of rain than what Ray might have been used to, the city gets less rain annually in inches than Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the closest city to where Ray Cash grew up.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *Johnny Cash*, 2.

diameter and over 100 feet tall.⁵⁹ Ray Cash recalled the efforts of men to take down a cowoak (a type of white oak) that was eight feet in diameter. Eight men were needed to finish the job.⁶⁰ In 1975, on his *Children's Album*, Johnny Cash included a song he had written called "(The) Timber Man." The song does not refer to his father but it was a tune that more aptly described Ray's experiences in Kingsland.

In the 1920s, Ray Cash struggled, but the family grew every few years. Their first child, Roy, was born in September of 1921. Another, Margaret Louise, followed in March of 1924. The next, Jack Dempsey, was born in January of 1929, the last of the Cash children born before the depression hit. Ray often worked for his older brother Dave, a prominent land owner, who also served as a sheriff and judge in Rison. Dave Cash's education stopped with the fifth grade but he was successful in the timber trade, buying pine and hardwood that had once belonged to the Meriwether family which before the war had been the most prominent planter household in Mount Elba.⁶¹

Dave Kelly Cash was something of a real life version of one of the characters from William Faulkner's Snopes novels which chronicle the Snopes family's ruthless pursuit of wealth and prestige. Dave Cash had a reputation as a hard man, capable of horrible behavior. According to Kathy Cash, Ray's

⁵⁹ Cleveland County Historical Society, *Historical Review of the Timber Industry in Cleveland County*, 3.

⁶⁰ Helen Beatrice Goggans and Harold Sadler, "Footprints in the Sand of Time," <http://www.argenweb.net/cleveland/footprints-in-the-sand.htm> (accessed December 10, 2014).

⁶¹ Cleveland County Historical Society, *Historical Review of the Timber Industry in Cleveland County*, 19.

granddaughter, Dave once forced the much younger Ray to look at the burned body of a black man, the victim of a lynching in which Dave apparently had taken part.⁶² Long after they left Kingsland, neither Ray nor Carrie had good things to say about Dave Cash. When he died in 1959, his obituary notice in a Pine Bluff newspaper is noticeable for its lack of superlatives.⁶³

And yet, like all men, Dave Cash was no stranger to troubles. In 1924, his wife, Mary Leona Foster Cash, died after an illness. She was remembered as a "woman of ability and made friends easily."⁶⁴ Her death left David with five children to support, one of whom was a three-month old infant. Dave Cash's two later marriages ended in divorce.⁶⁵

In the 1920s, the modern world – with the automobile, radio, and new ideas about women, sexuality, and human evolution – came to America.

⁶² Richard Buckelew's 1999 dissertation, "Racial Violence in Arkansas: Lynchings and Mob Rule, 1860-1920," lists no lynchings in Cleveland County in the time period that might have corresponded with the Cash family story. However, the lynching might have occurred in a neighboring county, or might not have been reported at all. Lynchings were so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that they did not always arouse local or state media attention. And participants, while not worried about recriminations, were not interested in documenting such activity. For an insightful look at the difficulty one historian had in researching a mass lynching in early 20th century Arkansas, see Vince Vinikas, "Specters in the Past: The Saint Charles, Arkansas, Lynching of 1904 and the Limits of Historical Inquiry," *Journal of Southern History* 65 (August 1999), 535-564.

⁶³ *Pine Bluff Commercial*, June 18, 1959.

⁶⁴ *Cleveland County Herald*, May 29, 1924.

⁶⁵ Data sheet for Thomas William Davis Cash (always called Dave Kelly Cash), Cash Family Papers.

Kingsland, however, was more receptive to some modern ideas than others. Technological innovations were more welcome than theories that would have challenged the existing social order based as it was on racial segregation and evangelical Christianity.

By the mid-1920s, E. R. Buster, who owned several businesses, had put gas pumps in front of his general store. In 1926, the Kingsland Oil Company was established, one of the many petroleum-related businesses created to capitalize on the oil boom in southern Arkansas – part of a rush for oil wealth that consumed many Americans in that decade. In 1926, some Kingslanders listened to the fight between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney on the radio. Johnny Cash's brother Jack, who would die in a tragic sawmill accident in 1944, was named after Jack Dempsey. The radio brought popular music to millions of households. It proved one of the most important luxuries in the Cash family, inspiring young Johnny to become a musician.

The 1920s was an era of great prosperity for Arkansas and the United States. But the good times did not last forever. The stock market crashed in October 1929, which set off the worst economic crisis in United States history. With no safety net, many people lost everything. The South, which was the poorest and least developed part of the country, was made even poorer. Farmers and others who made a living in agricultural communities were hit hard. Ray Cash remembered that by the early-1930s, cotton "went down to almost nothing. A year before the Depression, cotton would bring \$100, \$125 a bale. In 1931 and 1932 – they were the hardest years – I only got \$25 for a five-hundred-pound bale. In Kingsland between crops, I'd get out and get any kind of job I

could find to get through the winter. I always tried to work locally." Locally, however, meant that Ray had to cover long distances on foot. "Sometimes, I'd walk three miles to the job I was on," he remembered – a journey that must have taken roughly an hour to complete. Yet, Ray was happy he found work at all and that he could return to his wife and children every day. At one point, he said he "was getting fifteen and twenty cents an hour – a dollar and a half or two dollars a day. But I was home with my family at night."⁶⁶

No one could escape the negative effects of the depression. The Cleveland County Bank in Kingsland closed and never reopened. It was not until 1979 that the town had another bank.⁶⁷ In 1931, teachers and bus drivers in Cleveland County had their salaries cut by 20%. One of those teachers was Clara Marie Cash, the daughter of Dave Kelly Cash.

Marie never married, and though she never had children of her own, she was a dedicated teacher and guidance counselor for most of her adult life. She also worked at the Jerome War Relocation Center during World War II, one of the two major internment camps for Japanese Americans in Arkansas. Marie became the Cash family's most accomplished genealogist. She would write at one point that the two years she spent on the family history: "I have never enjoyed anything more in my life."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*, 27.

⁶⁷ Goggans, "History of Kingsland," 11.

⁶⁸ On Marie Cash's life, see scrapbook in Series 1, Box 1, Folder 9, Life Interrupted Collection, UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture, Little Rock. The quotation concerning her thoughts on her genealogy project can be found in a note underneath, "The Reuben Cash Family: Native of Elbert County, Georgia," Cash Family Papers.

Despite the economic depression, Ray and Carrie Cash continued to have children. Johnny Cash was born in Kingsland on February 26, 1932 at a place known as the Crossroads, a few miles north of Kingsland center. The house he was born in is no longer there. He was the fourth of the Cash children. While Johnny Cash was in Cleveland County, the family spent considerable time in an area known as Saline Siding, which took its name from the Saline River, a tributary of the Ouachita, and siding, a railroad term for a loop off the main line of railway where cars are loaded and unloaded.

Much about Cash's life is shrouded in myth, including his very name. Cash was later known as Johnny Cash but early in his life he went by J. R. Cash. In the late 1960s, Cash noted somewhat proudly that the R didn't stand for anything.⁶⁹ Some writers on Cash have stated that he was not called John until later in life. But the origins of Johnny Cash's name are probably not as obscure as legend has it. The family called him John long before he was famous. A March 1932 announcement printed in the *Cleveland County Herald* noted the birth of "an eleven pound boy, February 26. He has been named John R."⁷⁰ There were Johns in the Cash and Rivers family. John's maternal grandfather was John Lewis Rivers. Also, Ray had an older brother named John Reuben Cash.

When John Carter Cash, Johnny's only son, asked relatives about the origin of his father's name, he encountered a "mild controversy." Apparently, Johnny's mother wanted to name her son John Rivers Cash, while Ray wanted to name him John Ray Cash.

⁶⁹ See Tom Dearmore's article, "Arkansan Johnny Cash is Now a National Sensation," *Arkansas Gazette*, September 29, 1969.

⁷⁰ *Cleveland County Herald*, March 9, 1932.

As a compromise, the couple gave Johnny Cash a middle initial of R.⁷¹ Whatever the origins of his name, well into his high school years, Cash was mostly referred to as "J. R." It was only until his music career took off in the 1950s that the singer went by the name Johnny Cash.

Cash is the best known person ever born in Kingsland. And yet, in March of 1932, the world was not concerned much about the birth of a new baby to the Cash family. Instead, the *Cleveland County Herald* discussed the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in New Jersey, a case that had been in the headlines for a month. It was not until May of that year that the toddler's body would be found, not far from the Lindbergh home.⁷²

Also in the news was Prohibition, which the *Herald* wrongly believed would survive "for a longer time than any of the present generation will be directly concerned."⁷³ In fact, national prohibition would be undone the next year. Kingsland, nevertheless, was the kind of community where the churches would have preached against alcohol consumption, regardless of whether Prohibition was in force. As was America as a whole, the Cash family was divided on the issue of drinking. Ray Cash was no stranger to alcohol, while Carrie Rivers abstained. Johnny Cash was no teetotaler, but it would be pills, not alcohol, that most plagued him later in life.

Ray Cash failed to benefit from the prosperity the

⁷¹ John Carter Cash, *House of Cash: The Legacies of My Father, Johnny Cash* (San Rafael, California: Insight Editions, 2011), 33.

⁷² *Cleveland County Herald*, March 30, 1932.

⁷³ *ibid.*

1920s brought to America and southern Arkansas. The depression only made things worse for him. In early 1932, when Johnny Cash was born, Ray was struggling to keep his family going. Luckily for Johnny and the rest of the Cashes, Ray was a hard-working man.

Ray's jobs during the depression included sharecropping and traveling to Mississippi to dismantle a factory. During one particularly unpleasant day of work, Dave Cash asked him to kill fifty head of cattle. Dave offered Ray a hundred bullets, but he only needed fifty. Ray was a good shot, but the slaughter was horrifying. Before Dave could have his "nigras . . . take them," the cattle were devoured by pigs. Ray was no soft touch, but the experience made him sick and gave him nightmares.⁷⁴

Ray was not the only person desperate for any kind of work. His brother Russell, born in 1891, also struggled. He worked as a farmer as well as a lumber man, a trolley conductor in Pine Bluff, and as a road grader. Some winters he worked at a box factory in Pine Bluff. He also spent time as a carpenter. Russell had some talent as a musician, who was capable of playing the piano and the fiddle. His son, David, remembered he could "get more music out of a comb and a cigarette paper than I can get out of a radio."⁷⁵ But Russell never pursued music seriously.

Russell showed that the Cash family had some music in its blood. But so, too, did the Rivers family. Johnny Cash's mother, Carrie, assured that her children grew up with music, mostly hymns and spirituals. As was the case with Ray, Carrie was a first generation

Arkansan. Her father was John L. Lewis, the son of William and Lydia Rivers of Chesterfield County, South Carolina. John was born on May 2, 1866.

Carrie's grandfather had served in Company B of the 26th South Carolina Infantry during the Civil War. The regiment was organized in Charleston and later saw action in the battles of Jackson, Mississippi, and Petersburg, Virginia. What remained of the regiment by April 1865 surrendered with the rest of Lee's army at Appomattox Court House.

Carrie's father married Roseanna Lee Hurst. They couple wed before settling in Arkansas where they built a house on the present-day location of Crossroads Cemetery. Unlike Ray Cash's family, Carrie's was much smaller. Her parents only had four children – three daughters and a son.⁷⁶ Carrie enjoyed much greater stability as a young person than Ray did. As of 2014, descendants of the Rivers family are still in Cleveland County.

In March 1933, the country passed under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the first Democrat elected to the presidency since the World War. In his first hundred days, Roosevelt put forth his "New Deal," a host of government programs aimed at alleviating the depression. One of the new government agencies was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration which publicized the creation of a new community in Dyess in Mississippi County. A few hundred families would be provided with a new house, land, and livestock which the family could pay for later.

Ray Cash was one of the applicants. The

⁷⁴ Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*, 31-34.

⁷⁵ Lisemby, *Taproots in Fertile Soil*, 94.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

government was not willing to accept families on a first come, first serve basis. Heads of households like Ray were reviewed for their good character as well as their qualifications for land ownership. Only a few families from Cleveland County were chosen for Dyess. Ray's application initially was denied, then later approved. Cash biographer Michael Streissguth believes that Dave Cash, Ray's politically influential brother, might have pressured someone to approve Ray's application.⁷⁷ Whatever the reason for Ray's good luck, in March of 1935, the Cash family hopped on a truck for a two-day trip along icy roads to Dyess. That journey would begin the second, much longer chapter in Johnny Cash's early days in Arkansas.

Johnny Cash was a great spokesman for Middle America and the rural southern experience. He drew on American folklore and history to become one of country music's most accomplished artists. He lived only three years in Kingsland but the town personified what Cash sang about in his later music – small, working class towns, where men earned their bread through lumber and picking cotton and making the railroads move. The Cash family was made up of

farmers, preachers, and soldiers. Cash was too young to remember Kingsland but it was a place where the ghosts of the Civil War and Native American culture lived on. These ghosts would follow him and his family northward.

Cash also sang about family ties, and his family's history in southern Arkansas was an interesting one which spanned the Civil War to the great Depression. Johnny Cash, unfortunately, was not a great genealogist. Much of the information he had was at times inaccurate – at other times, plain wrong. But what is indisputable is that Cash had strong roots in Arkansas and the South. Cash's parents were first generation Arkansans, and his family was thoroughly southern, coming as it did from Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina. The Cash and Rivers families could boast of men who had fought during the Civil War, worked farms, and were pillars of the evangelical churches.

For Johnny Cash, the chapter in his early life concerning Kingsland was a short one but it is nevertheless important, both to him and the history of Arkansas.

⁷⁷ Streissguth, *Johnny Cash*, 9.

