

Dorothy Farmer Roosvall

A Kentucky WAVE



## Kentucky Roots

Now in her tenth decade, Dorothy “Dot” Farmer Roosvall lives in a city of over eighty thousand people in a state that is home to more than thirty-eight million. Yet she spent her childhood and young adult years on a farm in Kentucky where the nearest communities were so small that they did not even warrant a place on a map. The world she grew up in was one that has long since faded away. In the Kentucky of Dot’s childhood, seventy percent of the state’s two and a half million people lived in rural areas, often on family-owned farms. Except for Louisville, no major industrial centers existed in the state.<sup>1</sup>

Like most Kentuckians, Dot’s father worked the land and raised livestock. The family ate what it grew and sold some items at market. The Farmers had no electricity, although a telephone and radio were inside of the house, powered by batteries. Dot grew up, too, without indoor plumbing. An outhouse served as the Farmer’s bathroom.<sup>2</sup> Her elementary school did not offer every grade each year; instead students could enroll in some grades one year and the others the next year. When Dot graduated high school, her senior class numbered only fifteen students. Even phrases and words Kentuckians used now speak to a bygone era. Her father would direct Dot to “get your trottin harness on,” meaning she should get ready to leave on an outing. When confused, Dot might hear someone admit that he or she was “bumfuzzled.”



This agrarian world was the one Dot left after her 1940 graduation. For the first four years, she lived with married sisters in Detroit, Michigan and then Evansville, Indiana. Detroit had a population of over one and a half million and Evansville about ninety-seven thousand. The world she navigated through after high school had grown so much larger, but Dot had no regrets about that. In the fall of 1944, during World War II, she became part of an even larger community when she joined the United States’ Navy’s WAVES (Women Accepted For Voluntary Emergency Service). That voluntary enlistment sent her to New York City and, for a brief time, to Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas of close to seven and a half million and over six hundred and sixty thousand respectfully. In deciding to leave home after high school, and then in deciding to join the WAVES, Dot physically moved away from the agrarian world of her Kentucky home. It, however, has never left her. Her Kentucky roots run deep.

Family and community defined Dot’s world. While the former remains a major source of identify for most Americans, the latter is no longer as relevant as it was in Dot’s childhood. Without much thought, Americans move easily around the country today, and many relocate more than once. Modern transportation and communications allow

families to stay in touch. That was not the case in Dot's Kentucky. Her birth state is far from a large one. Kentucky measures only four hundred and twenty-five miles east to west; at its widest point, it is only one hundred and eighty-two miles.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, that distance could prove to be a problem. As Dot puts it, "transportation being what it was," when she was growing up, visits hardly ever occurred between her immediate family and three of her father's siblings. Two sisters and a brother lived only some twenty-thirty miles away in Wheatcroft, a coal mining community. But Dot's parents had no reliable automobile capable of making that trip. (Repairing their Model T often proved problematic. Sometimes her father could work on it, but if not, he was in a bind since their rural community had no mechanic's shop.) The distance to Wheatcroft, Dot adds, appears short by today's standards, but during her childhood it was "too far by buggy, horse, or wagon."

While her Kentucky relatives might move from one town to another, perhaps even from one county to another, a move to a different state might mean a person would seldom see parents or siblings. In Dot's case, one would have to go back to her great-grandparents to document a move from one state to another. Michael and Margaret Farmer, her paternal great-grandparents, immigrated to Kentucky. Michael had been born in Virginia, Margaret in Tennessee. We know they welcomed their first child in Alabama around 1856 and the other five in Kentucky, so it appears they immigrated to the Bluegrass State around the time that the Civil War began. (Twins were born in Kentucky to Michael and Margaret about 1861. We will never know what role the War Between the States had on the Farmers' decision to move north, if any.) Dot's maternal great-grandmother, Lewrany Hughey, also had been born in Virginia. Family lore has it that she traveled from her home state to Kentucky on a mule. Looking at a map of the Upper South, it is apparent that even what would have been a major relocation in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, namely a move from Tennessee or Virginia to Kentucky, was really only a move from one state to an adjacent one. Yet three generations later, Dot's family shows that the lack of modern transportation in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kentucky still limited family visits.<sup>4</sup>

Dot made her appearance in this world on July 1, 1921. It was a time though, as she puts it, that "birth certificates were so poorly done that it was almost illegal." There is no question, though, that her birth date is a correct one. While she does not know why her parents named her "Dorothy," she does remember that people called her "Dot" early on in her life. She came from three generations of Kentuckians. Her parents, James Bryd Farmer and Annie Addie Lowry Farmer, lived in the western part of the state. Like their daughter, both were Kentuckians by birth. Dot characterizes her father as "a good, kind man, honest as the day is long," but, she adds, "he had the temper of an Irishman." As the last of seven children born to James and Annie, Dot never had the opportunity to meet either of her paternal grandfathers. Both died before her birth. Her great-grandfather, Michael Farmer, had been born in Virginia around 1819. Michael's wife, Margaret, was ten years younger than her husband. At the time of the 1880 census, Dot's great-grandparents lived in Marion, Kentucky. Even though Marion was a mining area, the Farmers made their living from the land. At the ages of sixty-one and fifty-one, they then provided a home for a total of thirteen people. In addition to themselves, in 1880 Michael and Margaret still had six unmarried adult children living with them; they ranged in age

from fifteen to twenty-four. Their son George (Dot's paternal grandfather) was one of them. At age thirty-three, not only did he live with his parents, but so did his wife Frances Woodall Farmer and their four young children. Six-year-old James Bryd Farmer, who would become Dot's father, was the oldest of that group.<sup>5</sup>

Dot's childhood memories of her maternal lineage center on two Lowry women, her grandmother Louisa M. Crider Lowry and Dot's own mother, Annie Addie Lowry Farmer. Although she never met her grandfather, Finis Euin Lowry, she does have a visual memory of him. When Dot was young, a large, convex photograph of Finis hung over a mantle in one of the bedrooms. The picture, though, was somewhat frightening for little Dot. As she explains it, wherever she moved in the room, "it always looked like his eyes were following me." Finis and Louisa had married just three months before the South formally surrendered to Northern forces in April 1865, ending the American Civil War. Louisa, however, was not Finis' first wife. In fact, upon marrying Finis, Louisa acquired not only a husband but two young stepchildren; the census identifies them as Frank and Sarah, although within the family they were known as Milton and Belle. Sometime in the early 1860s, Finis' first wife Mary had died.<sup>6</sup>

Less than a decade after marrying Louisa, she and Finis had three children of their own. Like her husband, Louisa was a Kentuckian from birth, he in Caldwell County and she in Crittenden County. Their daughter Annie Addie was

Louisa Lowry



born in November 1881. As noted earlier, Annie married James Bryd Farmer; from the beginning of their life together, they lived with Finis and Louisa. The 1900 Federal Census documents a multi-generational household made up of the senior Lowrys and the young Farmers. Five of the relatives lived together at that point in time--seventy-one-year-old Finis, fifty-four-year-old Louisa, their daughter eighteen-year-old Annie, twenty-six-year-old James Bryd Farmer, and one-year-old Ina (Annie & James' first child). Dot recalls how much her father respected her grandfather, so the living arrangements probably posed no problems for the younger couple. Annie's siblings received various pieces of land from Finis. According to Dot, her grandfather had acquired a substantial amount of property, which he divided among his six children.

Ten years later, Annie & James still lived in the main house on the Lowry farm. By 1910, however, Finis had died. The 1910 Federal Census shows five Farmer children at that point in time--Ina (age nine), Leslie (age seven), Floy (age six), Richard (age three), and Ethel (one year old). Louisa remained the matriarch in the family for many years. Born in 1845, she lived until 1925. Even though Dot was not quite four when her Grandma Lowry died, she remembers the older woman taking strolls with a shawl over her shoulders. Louisa would fold her arms behind her back. Dot walked after her, assuming the same pose. Next to her family, Dot is rooted, too, in the Kentucky land that she still speaks wistfully of. It has been written of those who love the Bluegrass State that

“Next to his family, a Kentuckian’s home community occupies the [next] place of importance in his fancy.”<sup>7</sup> For Dot, that community is Caldwell County in the Pennyrile region of the state.

Eighteenth-century settlers carved Kentucky out of the western slope of the Alleghany Mountains. The Ohio River separates it from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio in the north. West Virginia and Virginia lie on its eastern border. Tennessee lays to the south, and the Mississippi River forms its western border. Six geographical regions define the state. Dot comes from what she describes as “hill country” in the western part of the state, near the Tennessee border. Topographers call her region Pennyrile. It is a large area, almost eight thousand square miles, which lies at the southern end of the state’s central plain. The region’s name comes from the way Kentuckians pronounce the word “Pennyroyal,” a mint plant that is bountiful in that section of the state. Parts of the Pennyrile range from seven hundred feet to four hundred feet above sea level. Long before settlers called the area home, the flow of streams created wide valleys. Underground and surface water, a critical resource for families such as Dot’s who were so rooted in the soil, furnish Kentuckians with an ample supply for irrigation and personal use. Cliffs and forested, rocky hillsides mark some spots in the Pennyrile. It would have been, however, the rolling farmlands and the open fields that attracted those who wanted to work the land, such as the Lowrys and the Farmers.<sup>8</sup>

Over seventy years ago, a Kentuckian observed that even though some residents may move from one part of the state to another, that person would still look “with reverence upon the place of his birth.” For Dot, that place is Caldwell County. In the Kentucky of her childhood, only two units of local government existed, the county and the city. Unless one lived in a city, and Dot did not, a man or woman identified with his county. This explains the pride in Dot’s voice when, if asked where she was born, she replies, “In Caldwell County in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.” If the state is formally identified, the word “commonwealth” precedes “Kentucky.” Only four states officially identify themselves as Commonwealths--Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. (The word itself simply means a political unit, such as a nation or a state.) When Dot was a child, the counties provided the political glue that administered the state, much more than the distant state government did. County judges (elected by the voters) acted in executive capacities. Below them, justices of the peace exercised legislative and judicial powers.<sup>9</sup>

Very few of Dot’s great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents ever lived anywhere but in Caldwell County. Within that region, census records sometimes identified the Lowrys and the Farmers as living in areas such as Williams Mill or Donaldson. Dot points out that neither of those locations were towns, however. They merely refer to landmarks, a mill and a creek respectively. Fredonia was a town located just a few miles from the family farm. The family used its post office. But Fredonia was so small that it did not appear on a map in the 1939 *WPA Guide to Kentucky*, nor did that volume devote any space to it. The same would be true of Farmersville, where Dot later went to high school. Creswell, the community closest to Dot’s family, had a small store, a gas pump, and a Baptist church. It, too, does not appear in the WPA coverage of that

state. The town of Princeton does, however. Dot estimates that it was about twelve to fifteen miles from her parent's farm. Her family did their shopping there rather than in much smaller Creswell's one store. Princeton offered more in the way of shopping. As the seat of Caldwell County, Princeton's population of almost five thousand reflected the town's status in a center of sales and industry.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of her birth, Dot became the seventh and last child of James Bryd and Annie Addie Farmer. Although Dot's birthplace was the family farm, a doctor from Princeton assisted at the event. Including Dot, the family had three boys and four girls. Her two closest siblings were Edith and Ethel; respectively, they were seven and twelve years older than Dot. Given the years between herself and the rest of the children, Dot claims she was "almost like an only child." With her birth mother and three older



Ethel, Edith, and Dot

sisters, Dot explains that she "had a lot of mothers, young and old." But she quickly adds, "my mother told me I wasn't spoiled." And friends of hers today would all agree that she does not act like a pampered woman. In fact, Dot's description of her mother, "a gentle, kind lady," a woman who others would say of, "To know Miss Annie is to love her" applies to Dot as well. She tells the story of how, when her mother attended elementary school, Annie's brother was the teacher. The brother once "swatted" Annie's hand to discipline her. While Dot believes this incident happened, she has trouble understanding why it occurred. As she puts it, Annie Addie "never misbehaved in her life." Dot's mother did not attend high school, a common occurrence with women of her generation, especially in an agrarian society.

Dot's father similarly never acquired a formal education beyond the elementary school years. Dot thinks he might not have gone past the fifth grade. That is not, however, to say that James Bryd was not an educated man. He most definitely was, but he was self-taught. Late in 1896, James Bryd acquired two McGuffey Readers. These were the most popular type of textbook used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One is McGuffey's *Eclectic Spelling Book* and the other is *McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader*. Dot still has these volumes. Both bear a cursive signature, "J.B. Farmer's Book," and the same date, November 30, 1896. According to Dot, however, her father did not put his name in these books. She still recognizes his signature, and what appears in these volumes is not something he wrote. One can only speculate as to why James Bryd had someone else sign his name to the McGuffey Readers. Did he, perhaps, think his handwriting was not good enough? In any event, by including the word "book" along with his name, one could argue that a degree of pride accompanied his ownership of these volumes. Was it that pride that moved him to ask someone to write his name in the volumes in a script he must have thought appeared better looking than his own? He was twenty-three years old at the time, a fact he duly noted on the last page of the *Fifth Eclectic Reader*. Dot's father must have felt that using these two books either filled in

some gaps in his formal schooling, or they added to what he already knew. It could also be that the messages the McGuffey Readers imparted were as important to James Bryd as the lessons and stories they contained. The books emphasized the dignity of work, moral standards, love of country, and the importance of religion.<sup>11</sup> In any event, reading them must have been a positive experience because less than two months later, James Bryd acquired a third schoolbook. It was not, however, an English text. Entitled *Ray's New Practical Arithmetic*, Dot's father probably used it to practice his computation skills. He again asked someone to write his name on more than one page, "J.B. Farmer's Book," with the date January 14, 1897. James Bryd appears to have been single when he acquired all three texts. He kept the books his entire life, as has Dot.

Another mark of James Bryd's love of learning can be seen in how much he valued reading the newspaper. Dot calls him a "news person." She recalls how he subscribed to Louisville's *Courier-Journal*. He could have chosen a lesser newspaper, but instead he chose Kentucky's most prominent one. Issues came through the mail, with a one-day delay in when the edition was printed and when it arrived at the Fredonia post office. James Bryd clearly enjoyed keeping up with current events. A "dyed in the wool Republican," he showed his open-mindedness by reading the *Courier-Journal* since it supported the Democratic Party. Dot does not remember him talking politics around the house. She does recall, however, his displeasure at some of the federal government's New Deal legislation of the 1930s. In Dot's recollection, the Agricultural Adjustment Acts acted as "a burr under the saddle" for her father. Those laws attempted central control of the national farming economy. Understandably, a Kentuckian like James Bryd, raised in a political culture that valued local control in politics, might voice displeasure at such central planning.<sup>12</sup>

Even though many decades have passed, Dot recalls episodes from her early childhood years. Two sources of heat warmed the kitchen. Wood burning in a fireplace heated the room. A stove, with its burning sticks of wood, provided another supply of warmth. The Farmer kitchen emitted what Dot calls "good kitchen smells" as her mother cooked and baked. As a toddler seated in her highchair, Dot recalls the aroma of coffee that permeated the kitchen. Annie Lowry grounded the beans, a step in the making of the coffee that might have added to the smell. Dot cried for a taste of it. Her mother gave in, but only after heavily diluting the coffee with milk. At 11:30 A.M. each workday, Annie Addie stepped outside of the kitchen to ring a large dinner bell that hung on a post. It called her father, a sharecropper who worked the fields with James Bryd, and any relatives who were helping out to the kitchen for the substantial midday meal, "dinner" as it was called. Reflecting on how busy her mother's days were, Dot wonders how Annie Addie accomplished all that she did. Cooking for many people was just one of her tasks. Another was doing the laundry.



Before Dot started school, Mondays were “long draggy days,” as she puts it. That was because married women designated that day for washing the clothes. Dot felt, by her own characterization, “so lonesome on Mondays.” Her sisters Edith and Ethel were at school, and her mother occupied with laundry. Looking back on that task as an adult, Dot sees it as just one example of how “nothing was easy” when it came to work around the farm.

By the end of laundry day, women in rural areas without electricity often had a sore back from all of the labor involved in washing clothes. Annie Addie used three large zinc washtubs for the task. Dot remembers her mother using the first to scrub the clothes in, the second to rinse them, and the third for items that needed to be starched. A washtub held about eight gallons of water that had to be changed after a woman did each load. The



eight gallons weighed about fifty pounds. With no indoor plumbing, Dot’s mother brought the water into the kitchen in buckets from the outside well, located not far from the main house. She carried in only enough water, however, to fill them half way. Annie Addie needed hot water to wash the clothes, so she would mix the well water with water that she boiled on the stove. In the scrub tub, Dot’s mother rubbed the clothing against a wooden washboard to get the dirt out. Just the apparently simple task of lifting each piece out of the tub required strength since the clothing was soaking wet. Annie Addie held the item over the tub to allow the dirty water to drip off of it before putting the clothing into the second washtub, the rinse tub. Dot recalls that “bluing,” a process in which the piece of clothing was rinsed in a liquid to counter the yellowing of white fabric, happened in her

mother’s rinse tub. Dot’s mother had to wring every piece out individually. That happened three times, once when the article came out of the scrub tub, then after it came out of the rinse tub, and lastly, after the item was starched.<sup>13</sup>

Ironing the clean clothing occupied Tuesdays. The word to describe this job comes from what women used to perform it. The iron was originally what its name implies, namely a piece of iron that weighed six or seven pounds. Like other women, Dot’s mother heated three irons on the hot stove. Note the plural. An iron retained its heat for only a matter of minutes, so while Annie Addie used one to get out the wrinkles, two more remained hot on the stovetop. The most inexpensive irons had not only an iron base, but an iron handle, as well. Such a handle conducted the heat. Dot’s mother used one of the better irons. It had a wooden, detachable handle that allowed her to switch irons when need be by just moving the handle back and forth between the two iron bases. Annie Addie had an ironing board, but she preferred ironing on a big wooden table since it had a larger surface. When Dot was old enough to help with that chore, she stood on a box next to the table. While in elementary school, Dot learned how to quilt. “You made every scrap count,” she seriously explains. No piece of material was wasted, however small it might have been. Annie Addie had a large quilting frame that hung from the

ceiling; Dot believes it belonged to her maternal grandmother, Louise Lowry. Once Dot quilted, she used a stationary one that sat on the floor.

When it came to playing, Dot explains that there was “no limit to the imagination.” Toys were homemade or adaptations of everyday objects. Dot played with “stick dolls” that had no face, arms, or legs. The doll was just what its name implies, namely a piece of cloth tied to a stick. Before the Great Depression began in 1930, Dot remembers receiving inexpensive, celluloid dolls for Christmas. There was an unusual doll that Dot admits she coveted during her childhood. Annie Addie’s half-sister, Dot’s Aunt Belle, owned it. Dot describes as “a half rag doll and a half regular doll.” It was larger than any of the dolls she had. The body was stuffed with straw but the face was a manufactured one. Every time Dot visited, Aunt Belle went upstairs to a trunk where she kept the doll. The woman allowed Dot to hold it. And on each such visit, Dot hoped her aunt would give it to her, but that never happened. Neither birthdays nor Christmas meant store-bought toys. While her family acknowledged her childhood birthdays, there were no parties, gifts, or cakes. In fact, Dot received her first birthday cake when she was in the Navy. The mother of a fellow WAVE baked one for her two years in a row.

While small toys might have been under the Christmas tree for Dot in her earliest years, that changed with the coming of the Great Depression. She characterizes Christmases as “sad” ones in that decade. Fruit and candies became two of the dominant gifts. Throughout her early years, whether in the 1920s or the 1930s, Christmas trees and their decorations were all homemade. Her father usually cut down a cedar tree for the family home since those were abundant on the farm. Dot remembers decorating it with paper rope chains. She colored the loops red and green. Stringed popcorn also hung from the holiday tree. Every year, however, there was one anomaly. Dot recalls a single string of tinsel that the family used each December 25<sup>th</sup>.

In those early childhood years, Dot did not see her father for any length of time during the day since he worked the land. Dot estimates that the farm covered about two hundred acres. She describes it as possessing ample “woods, fields, and bottom land.” For market, James Bryd grew some of the major farm products the state was known for,



corn and tobacco. Her father had a “tobacco barn,” as Dot describes the building, where he smoked the tobacco leaves, hanging them from stalks. Using a phrase from her Kentucky childhood, Dot admits that “it tickles the memory” to recall the pleasant smell that came from the smokehouse when the tobacco leaves were being cured. She remembers her father also selling wheat and creamery products. He raised hogs, cows, and once, even sheep that he sold at market. Neighbors helped with the harvesting of

the wheat and the slaughtering of the hogs, both labor intensive jobs. In particular, Dot emphasizes the work involved in just lifting a hog. Each one had to be put in scalding

water. In return for the neighbors' help, James Bryd shared some of the meat with them. He also showed up at their farm when they required assistance come harvest time.

For just the family's consumption, cattle and chickens could also be found on the Farmer's land. "We ate a lot of fried chicken," Dot points out. Annie Addie's method of preparing that, in her daughter's opinion, has never been equaled. Cows provided milk and chickens eggs. Several acres of an apple orchard allowed the family to enjoy the fruit. After picking them, the Farmers kept them in a bin upstairs. The cold temperature allowed the apples to be kept for a long time. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Farmers "never went hungry," as Dot observes, although there were times when food for the table was not always in abundant supply. "What we did not have much of was money," she explains.<sup>14</sup>

As a farmer not only by surname but also by occupation, James Bryd's days were long ones, with the outcome of his labor subject to forces beyond his control, such as weather and fluctuations in the market. It was the latter factor that lowered the income of farmer more than any storm or drought, though. Throughout Dot's early childhood in the 1920s, a national agricultural situation impacted her parents just as it did all Americans who made their livelihood from working the land. Farmers were overproducing crops, which in turn lowered prices. To compensate for decreased income, farmers tilled even more acreage to get more crops to market, hoping the end result would be a higher income. But their extra labor only aggravated the problem as the additional crops depressed prices even more. Men such as James Bryd experienced the Great Depression a decade before the rest of the country.<sup>15</sup>

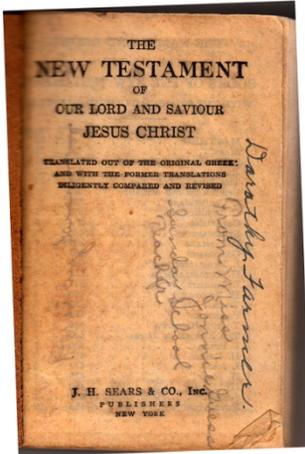
Twice during Dot's childhood, her father left the farm to try a new occupation. The first time he did this, Dot estimates she was about five years old since she had not yet started school. That places this first move around 1926. One of

Dot on right



James Bryd's brothers was a Caldwell County sheriff. He urged his older brother to move to Princeton to become his deputy. James Bryd did so, bringing his family with him-- Annie Addie, Ethel, Edith, and Dot. (The Farmer's oldest daughter, Ina, and her husband Mark Dorris, moved from a smaller house on the property to the main house.) The transplanted Farmers rented a house in Princeton. As Dot recounts the story, one of her father's major responsibilities in Princeton was locating stills used to brew alcohol, illegal at that time. (The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to the US Constitution forbade the manufacture and distribution of alcohol. The 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment in essence "repealed" it.) This move to Princeton occurred when Prohibition was still the law of the land. Riding through the countryside on horseback and confronting his fellow Kentuckians as he tried to enforce federal policy proved not to be to James's liking. Dot's father lasted only about two years as a deputy sheriff.

For Dot, a significant moment occurred in her young life while the Farmers lived in Princeton. She began school. First it was Sunday school where the teacher, Jonnie Guess, gave her and the other students a small New Testament Bible that she still has today. Elementary school followed when Dot was old enough. Since the district did not offer kindergarten, Dot entered the first grade. She was about 6 years old. Dot still remembers today how excited she was in anticipation of the beginning of the school year. As she phrases it, “I could not wait to go to school.” Dot loved books before she could even read. Edith read them to her. Dot came to know the stories so well that if her sister did not read every part of it aloud, Dot corrected Edith. But in that first week of the Princeton school year, Dot came down with the measles. The illness delayed the beginning of her formal education. She completed her first year in school, but soon after starting second grade in the fall of 1928, the family moved to Detroit. Dot remembers seeing a parade in support of Presidential candidate Herbert Hoover. That recollection puts the Farmer family in Detroit sometime before the election early in November, perhaps in October since Dot recalls starting the second grade in Princeton.



That large city, built around the car industry, became the site of James Bryd’s second attempt to provide for his family in an occupational field aside from farming. Sons Hubert and Leslie worked in Detroit’s automobile industry. Their father did the same. While Dot does not recall the particulars of James Bryd’s job, she knows it was a physically taxing one. Six members of Dot’s family--herself, her parents, her sisters Ethel and Edith, as well as her brother Hubert--lived together in a rented house. Ethel married another automobile worker, William Byard, and he moved into the Farmer home. Edith and Dot attended the city’s public schools. “I had a ball,” is how Dot describes her years in Detroit. To a “kid from the sticks,” to quote Dot, Detroit seemed like a different world



from rural Caldwell County. She loved her school. It was located across the street from a city park whose slides beckoned her to play. In addition to academic classes, the school’s curriculum offered a gym class that Dot enjoyed. On weekends, she and a girlfriend who lived on the same city block went to the movies. But James Bryd never liked his job, and all of the Farmers felt the cultural shock of the big city. In particular, Dot remembers how the family’s slow, Southern drawl contrasted with the more rapid speech pattern of Northerners. After about three years, the family returned to the main house on the family farm in Caldwell County, probably sometime in the summer of 1931. As Dot explains, her father “moved back to the weeds and rocks he loved so much.”<sup>16</sup>

Back home after about five years, Dot was about to enter the fifth grade. But since the one-room schoolhouse in Creswell did not offer that grade level that year, Dot had to choose between repeating 4<sup>th</sup> grade or skipping ahead to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She decided on the

former. Dot walked the mile from home to school “by myself,” she emphasizes. Because of the fact that their community was a small one, everyone knew everyone else. But after the kidnapping and death of Charles A. Lindbergh’s infant son in the spring of 1932, her family cautioned her never to accept a ride from strangers. One time, a person she did not know offered her a lift. When that happened, she “took off into the woods” where she got lost. Late on getting home, the family had “combed the hills for me,” Dot explains.

Dot displays a love of learning, even in these early years. She did not like to miss school. As Dot proclaims, “It was against my religion.” She made the daily two-mile roundtrip regardless of the weather. On bad days, clothing was meant to protect her against frigid temperatures and rain. Dot wore “goulashes” (boots) when necessary. Some winter days were what she categorizes as “bitter cold” ones. It was not unusual for Kentucky’s December, January, and February temperatures to fall below zero degrees. The average thermometer reading for a Kentucky winter hovered around 36 degrees. Understand that schools did not enjoy a Christmas vacation break. While classes might be cancelled on December 25<sup>th</sup>, it was only for that one special day. Similarly, Dot recalls no spring or Easter vacation.<sup>17</sup>

In cold months, heat from the fire in the potbelly stove at the front of the classroom made the room feel “cozy,” as Dot puts it. Once the coats and jackets came off, lessons began in the one-room schoolhouse. A large blackboard dominated the front of the room. Directly below it was “a raised, front stage with a bench,” as Dot describes it. It was known as “the recitation bench.” Students sat in desks by their grade level. When a teacher was ready to instruct a particular group, for example, children in the third grade, those boys and girls went up to the bench. The other grade levels stayed at their desks and worked independently while the teacher concentrated on the third grade class. While arithmetic “bored” Dot, to use her characterization, she delighted in reading and spelling. She represented Creswell School two years in a row at a county spelling bee.

At lunchtime, Dot took out her metal school box and ate what her mother had lovingly packed. She drank water with either a sandwich or Annie Addie’s fried chicken that her daughter so enjoyed. What Dot really looked forward to, however, were the chocolate rolls that accompanied each lunch. Her mother made them every morning. Annie Addie mixed chocolate, sugar, and “oodles of butter” as Dot puts it. She “folded the dough,” in her daughter’s words, over portions of the mix before baking the rolls.

While content with their Caldwell County community, Dot’s parents were still interested in a wider world. When she had the time, Annie Addie enjoyed reading, especially fiction. But as Dot remembers it, while growing up there were not many books at home. They would have been luxuries for families such as the Farmers. Instead, the newspaper offered a chance to read daily. Dot especially remembers how much her mother delighted in the vocabulary challenges posed by crossword puzzles. With pencil in hand, Annie tested her language skills with the puzzles carried in the Louisville *Courier-Journal*. James Bryd’s subscription to that newspaper, like his seemingly proud possession of the McGuffey Readers, gives evidence of how much he valued learning. One could argue that both parents passed on such an interest to their youngest daughter.

Some children delight in the social connections that school affords them. While Dot liked being with others her own age, she loved school because of the education it brought her. She certainly never begrudged doing her homework in the evenings. She sat at a family desk in the living room, often “in front of a big, roaring fireplace,” she recalls. Two kerosene lamps illuminated the desk even more.

As Dot advanced from one grade to the next, she carefully saved her report cards in a special cardboard box. They were a sign of her academic progress. But at one point, years after she left home, someone threw the box out. Similarly lost were journals that she kept as a child. If they had been saved, the diaries would allow us to document in more detail Dot’s childhood and adolescent years. Most assuredly one of the journals would have recorded what would have been a major academic transition for fifteen-year-old Dorothy Farmer. In the fall of 1936, Dot left her one-room schoolhouse in Creswell to begin high school in the town of Farmersville. When asked if such a move from a small school to a much larger one intimidated her, Dot’s reply was characteristically nonchalant--“Nothing frightened me.”

As a sign of how anxious Dot was to begin high school, she seized an opportunity to familiarize herself with her new school in the spring of 1936. Creswell School had finished its academic year before Farmersville High School. Having thus completed her eighth grade year at Creswell, Dot decided to attend the last weeks of Farmersville’s eighth grade class. The decision to do this was all Dot’s. No one else from her Creswell class joined her. No, they could wait until September to see what the new school was like. This was not true for Dot, however. She willingly made the trip to Farmersville for a few weeks until that school also dismissed its students for the summer break. In order to get to the town, Dot walked about one and a half miles to a highway where a school bus stopped that would take her to Farmersville High School.

In Dot’s recollections, the town of Farmersville offered residents and visitors a country store and a church. A central telephone operator worked in a small office to connect local Kentuckians to each other and the outside world. On what Dot describes as “the same piece of land” where the high school stood, a single-story building offered classrooms for grades one through six. One teacher taught the first through the third grades, what the district defined as the primary grades. Another teacher was responsible for the fifth and sixth grades, or the intermediate grades. Students in both of those levels might total one hundred. A two-story building housed the high school and the junior high grades seven and eight. Dot thus showed up at the eighth grade classroom, located inside of the high school building, during Farmersville’s remaining school weeks in the spring of 1936. She remembers thinking that the high school was “huge,” with its classrooms, study hall, and administrative offices. In comparison to the Creswell School’s one-room schoolhouse, it was.<sup>18</sup>

Creswell employed one teacher for grades one through eight. In Dot’s senior year of high school, Farmersville had five faculty members for its ninth through twelfth grades. One-room schools usually employed female teachers while high school staffs invariably have included men. The teachers’ assignments, however, reflected the gender beliefs of

that era. The principal, the highest administrative position at Farmersville High School, was a man; he taught Agriculture as well as carrying out his administrative duties. The other two men taught History and Industrial Arts. The two women taught English and Home Economics. They oversaw the secondary education of well over fifty students. (Sixty-eight students attended the high school in Dot's senior year.)<sup>19</sup>

Come the fall, Dot formally entered Farmersville High School as a freshman. While she enjoyed her years at Creswell, Dot liked high school even more because, as she explains it, she was in the company of "more friends my age." The change from a one-room schoolhouse to a high school must have appeared as a dramatic one for fourteen-year-old Dot. The academic year 1936-1937 began with what Dot characterizes as "a goodly number" of students in her freshman class, but students dropped out of school in the next few years. The Great Depression persisted throughout the decades and some male classmates perhaps left to seek a job somewhere in order to help out their family. Others probably left school to help out on the farm. Of Dot's three brothers, only one of them, Floy, graduated high school. In respect to the four sisters in the Farmer family, Dot became the only one who graduated high school. Edith and Ethel attended high school in Detroit when the family briefly moved there. Dot believes the change in residency "disrupted" her sisters' secondary education. As she puts it, "they lost interest." As noted earlier, Ethel married while in Detroit. Edith returned to the family farm with her parents and Dot after their time in Detroit, but she did not return to high school. Dot never wavered in her desire to complete her years at Farmersville High School. "I never thought of not finishing," she declares unequivocally.

Statistically, beginning in 1890 more girls graduated from high school than boys. One major reason for this related to career opportunities for young women--female high school graduates qualified for better jobs. Teaching, for example, became a profession associated with females, especially in the lower grades. A high school degree meant that they could strive toward that such a career goal. In 1940, the year of Dot's graduation, 52.7% of high school graduates nationwide were female. In that same year, the high school graduation rate for Americans twenty-five and older is estimated at 24.5%. Understand that this last statistic is a national one. Rural areas such as western Kentucky might have had even less of an overall graduation rate since older children, especially boys, were expected to help out on the farm.<sup>20</sup>

Details for Dot's junior and senior years can be documented because she saved the yearbooks for those two grades. Farmersville High School graduated students as far back as at least 1923, yet it may not have produced a yearbook until Dot was a junior. The two volumes she has are both entitled *The Key*. Yet the one for the school year 1938-1939 is identified as Volume I of *The Key* and the other volume for 1939-1940 is Volume II. Dot does not believe there were yearbooks printed before these two, and based merely on the numbering of her volumes, she may be right. Because it took so much work to put each book together, it is understandable that yearbooks may not been produced before 1938. Dot called the volumes "a labor of love."<sup>21</sup>

Each yearbook was assembled individually. Many pages were printed, such as the ones with advertisers that appear at the very back of the book. “We really hoofed it,” Dot points out, “to get that support [from the business community].” But most of the pages were typed by students, including Dot who recalls working on the typing project. The



typed pages form the core of the yearbooks. Pages list the names of students by grade. Other pages are dedicated to various clubs or activities. There are no visible corrections to disguise typing errors. The reason for this, according to Dot, is because the “Commerce” students were not allowed to make mistakes on these pages. If one did, the sheet was thrown away and the student began typing it again. (What Farmersville High School called “commerce students” was what other schools identified as business students, those who learned the rudiments of the business world, including how to type and take shorthand.)

Central to the yearbooks, of course are the pages dedicated to the freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The first page of each of those four sections has the name of the class at the very top of the sheet. Under that is a class picture of the students, and below the photograph are the names of the students. The group picture of the class was affixed to the page by hand, glued to the sheet. In volume II of *The Key*, the one from Dot’s senior year, about twenty of the eighty-seven pages (roughly 23% of the yearbook) have photographs students glued to the pages, one by one, in every copy of the yearbook produced. Once the printed pages were combined with the ones typed by the Commerce class, the resulting sheets of paper were placed in a “loose-leaf yearbook,” bound together by two screws. For Dot’s senior yearbook, the total high school students numbered sixty-eight. (The two junior high classes did not get the yearbooks, according to Dot.) Presuming that each student and each of the five teachers received a copy of the yearbook, over seventy volumes were assembled by hand for distribution. Dot does not recall paying any money for the volume.

These two volumes furnish a litany of details about Dot’s high school years. While she might have forgotten all of the clubs and offices she held throughout her four years at Farmersville High School, the yearbooks identify them. She appears to participate in more activities with the passage of each year. Only one extracurricular event is listed in Dot’s high school activities for her first year at Farmersville High School; it is the annual freshman play, *Elmer*, in the spring of 1937. Dot took on more responsibilities in her sophomore year (1937-1938). We know, for example, that in her second year Dot served as president of a new school organization, the Home Economics Club. It grew out of the Home Economics requirement for the school’s female students; Dot recalls it as a two-year requirement, with one year dedicated to sewing and another to cooking. Organized in the fall of 1937, the club initially had twenty members. That number probably represented most of the female students in the high school.<sup>22</sup> It is a nod to Dot’s popularity that they chose her as the club’s first president. Her sophomore year saw Dot active in the student body as well as in clubs. She served as Treasurer for her class.<sup>23</sup>

In her junior year (1938-1939), Dot became much more active. Volume I of *The Key* identifies eighteen in her class, although the class picture shows only sixteen students, eight girls and eight boys. They elected Dot as Class Secretary, and at one point they voted her as the “Best all-around girl.” She also served as treasurer for the Commerce Club in her junior year. The organization’s twelve members selected Dot, all of whom were girls. The club worked outside of the classroom to help its members learn basic business skills through its focus on how to write effective business letters. Her aptitude in



Dot’s Junior Class Picture--she is in the back row, second from left

the business class made Dot a natural for the offices she assumed. She held the title of “best Commerce student,” for example, in her junior year. Among her high school memorabilia is a Certificate of Proficiency from the South-Western Publishing Company. Dated May 19, 1939, at the end of her junior year, Dot demonstrated a typing speed of fifty-eight words a minute. Aside from the academic aspects of her junior year, Dot participated in the junior class theatrical production, *Hobgoblin House*. Billed as a comedy, the play took place in a mansion where ghosts terrorized some servants. Dot assumed the role of Marian Carter, the owner’s niece. When the four girls and six boys who constituted the Class of 1939 graduated, Dot and her peers prepared to become the school’s senior class in the fall of that year.<sup>24</sup>

In her last year at Farmersville High School (1939-1940), offices, awards, and peer-voted titles added to Dot’s list of accomplishments. She acted as secretary for the Senior Class, received the Scholarship Medal, and her classmates voted her the Most Popular Girl. Sixteen seniors gathered for a class photograph. Each “willed” a gift to a student in the then-junior class (a student who, come the fall, would be a senior). Dot chose Mabel Horning to bequeath what Dot identified as her “Sunny Disposition.” When some of the seniors came up with a “prophecy” for each graduating classmate, the future envisioned for Dot made sense given the business skills she had demonstrated over the course of the last few years. Dot, it was predicted, would become “head of the commerce department of one of New York’s largest schools.” Her time at Farmersville High School formally ended on May 8, 1940, the night of her graduation.<sup>25</sup>

Along with her yearbooks, Dot kept a short newspaper story with the headline “Farmersville, KY., School Destroyed.” She thinks the article appeared a few years after she graduated in 1940, perhaps in 1943. A fire had destroyed the “consolidated grade and high school building.” It happened on a Monday when students were in class, but all two

hundred and fifty of them got out safely. For the rest of the academic year, Dot believes students were bused to another school in nearby Princeton. The school superintendent

Dot is in the front row, dressed in a black sweater



estimated the damage at \$20,000. (That is over \$250,000 in today's money.) Because of what the article called "the shortage of materials," it was unlikely, the newspaper wrote, that the school would be rebuilt. This was probably because by the time of the fire, the United States was fighting World War II. As such, material resources were overwhelmingly allocated to the war effort, not to domestic construction.

According to Dot, Farmersville High School was never reconstructed.

By the time of the fire, Dot had moved far away from the farming life that had been her world. If it would have been possible, after her high school graduation, she would have liked to have moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky. The Western Kentucky State Teachers' College was located there. Dot had always loved the world of education as a student, and she would have liked to have become a teacher. But her parents did not have the tuition. Dot points out, too, that she did not know enough to pursue the idea of a scholarship. Following in the steps of her sisters and brothers, Dot left not only the family farm, but also Kentucky itself.

Recall that her grandparents and parents had been born and raised in Kentucky, and after their great-grandparents had initially settled in the Bluegrass State, they never left. Yet none of her three brothers had wanted to follow their great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents by making their livelihood from the land. All three moved out of the state. Given the Farmer's family's history, the decision by James Bryd and Annie Addie's children to leave Kentucky was unusual in a historical sense but not in an economic one. Dot believes that financial considerations explain why her three brothers left. The Great Depression that hit the agricultural sector of the economy in the 1920s undoubtedly made them consider seeking jobs in the cities. In the very years when Dot and her family lived in Detroit, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, agricultural income dropped by close to sixty percent.<sup>26</sup> (The New Deal's agricultural programs did help to increase, nationally, the income of farmers, but by the mid-1930s when that happened, James Bryd and Annie Addie's sons had long left the family farm.) While older generations had been content in Kentucky, Dot and almost all of her siblings felt the pull of a wider world. Of the seven children, only Ina stayed nearby, farming some acreage with her husband and family.

Given Dot's personality, her decision to leave home after high school makes sense. She loved learning and displayed an interest in a world outside of the small one she had been born and raised in. Both of her parents encouraged her reading, and books by their very nature can transport us to distant places very different from home. Dot's world had been a limited one, not large at all in size. The communities that surrounded her family's farm were so unpopulated that most were not even classified as towns. Creswell School, the one-room schoolhouse she attended, also symbolizes the small world that she came from. Although Dot judged Farmersville High School to be "huge," with freshmen through senior classes that numbered some fifteen or so students each, it was little in comparison to ones in large communities. As a child, Dot had experienced the big city world of Detroit, and she loved it. When her sister Ethel and brother-in-law Bill came for her graduation ceremony, Dot decided, on her own, to leave with them when they returned to their home in Detroit. She would live with them and find a job in the city.

The only downside to her decision was one consequence of it that still bothers her today, over seventy years later. Dot wonders if moving away was the correct decision, not in respect to herself, but in respect to her parents. In 1940, her father was sixty-six



left to right, Ina, Ethel, Mama, Edith, & Dot, 1940

and her mother fifty-eight. With Dot's departure, they would be alone on the family farm. Only their daughter Ina and her family lived nearby. But being the loving parents that they were, James Bryd and Annie Addie would probably have encouraged their youngest child to follow her heart if Dot had raised the issue with them. Certainly they did not protest when she announced her move to Detroit. The rural world of Kentucky Farmers might have been enough for three generations of Dot's family, but it was not enough for her. Like any young person, Dot certainly yearned for, as she puts it, "money of my own." Moving away represented more, however, than financial independence. It also meant living in a much larger world than the one that had surrounded her for most of her life. Dot knew that such a place offered opportunities that her beloved Kentucky could not.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics on the Kentucky of Dot's childhood are taken from the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Kentucky, *The WPA Guide to Kentucky* (New York, 1939; 1996 edition, F. Kevin Simon, editor), p. 3. Hereafter cited as *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*. Dot's recollections were ones shared with the author in 2012-2013.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Kennedy, in his Pulitzer-prize-winning book *Freedom From Fear, The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 1999) notes that even in 1934, only one farmhouse in ten had an indoor toilet, and only one in five had electricity (p. 192).

<sup>3</sup> *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Information on birth dates, residency and family composition for Dot's family is taken from Federal Census records found at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) (accessed November 30, 2011 and July 21, 2013). Information

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on Lewrany Hughey is found in the Kentucky Death Records, 1852-1953 for Louisa M. Lowry ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mary and Finis Lowry married on October 26, 1854. The 1860 Federal Census shows her as still alive in early 1860; at that time, she and Finis had two children, Frank, age three, and Sarah, two months old. Kentucky Marriage Records and 1860 Federal Census at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>7</sup> *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 360. Dot recalls a hosiery mill in Princeton, and it was near a tobacco-producing area.

<sup>11</sup> [www.mcguffeyreaders.com](http://www.mcguffeyreaders.com). Dot came into possession of her father's books decades after his death. Her brother Floy offered them to her once when she visited him. Being "bookish," as Dot calls herself, she of course wanted the volumes, especially since they had belonged to her father.

<sup>12</sup> *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> An excellent description of "doing the laundry" can be found in Robert A. Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, The Path To Power* (New York, 1982), p. 509. Caro describes the laundry process for the hill country of Texas, but as Dot notes, one hill country is like another.

<sup>14</sup> *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*, p. 55 on Kentucky's primary farm products.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, pp. 69, 141, 199.

<sup>16</sup> The 1930 Federal Census puts James Bryd and his family in Detroit with the Byards. Ethel and her husband remained in Detroit when the rest of her family returned to Kentucky.

<sup>17</sup> *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*, p. 11 on Kentucky weather conditions.

<sup>18</sup> The two lower levels at the Farmersville School were identified as "primary" and "intermediate," with one teacher for each level. *The Key, Vol. II*, page unnumbered [Dot's high school yearbook from her senior year, 1939-1940]. Volume I of *The Key*, from Dot's Junior year of 1938-1939, gives the total student population for the primary and intermediate grades as one hundred (page unnumbered). Dot recalls grades seven and eight as being called "junior high."

<sup>19</sup> Volume II of *The Key* includes photographs of the five staff members and the subjects they taught (page unnumbered).

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women, A History of Women and Higher* (New Haven, 1985), p. 46. Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York, 2006, 4<sup>th</sup> edition), p. A-3. [www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-24.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-24.pdf) (accessed July 18, 2011). After Edith returned to the farm with the family after Detroit, she found a job in Princeton where she moved in with Floy and his wife. Eventually, perhaps around 1934, Edith returned to Detroit.

<sup>21</sup> Both Volume I and Volume II of *The Key* lists alumni in the back of the book. The list in Volume I begins with a 1923 graduate and Volume II starts with an alumni from 1924.

<sup>22</sup> Information on the founding of the Home Economics Club is taken from Volume I of *The Key* (page unnumbered).

<sup>23</sup> Volume II of *The Key*, for Dot's senior year of 1939-'940, lists the clubs and offices she held under her class picture.

<sup>24</sup> Details on the Commerce Club, and Dot's position as club treasurer, is in Volume I of *The Key* (page unnumbered) as is information on the junior class play.

<sup>25</sup> Volume II of *The Key* gives information on Dot's senior year; Dot's graduation announcement gives the time and place (the high school auditorium) of the event.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, p. 141.