

A BOY CALLED COMBUSTION

GROWING UP IN 1940S MISSISSIPPI



By
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Sunday Dinner at the Big House

THE DAY I RAN MY GRANDFATHER'S 1935 PLYMOUTH DOWN the gravel driveway and through the back of the garage started off like every other Sunday. After church, as always, we all went to the Big House for Sunday dinner. The Big House was my Fondren grandparents' home, not the state prison. It sat at the corner of North State Street and Fondren Place, two blocks north of my grandfather's grocery store. In Jackson, Mississippi, the names Fondren and the Big House were almost synonymous; people in town rarely mentioned one in a sentence without the other.

The Big House was a fourteen-room house with a large kitchen, dining room, living room, parlor, pantry, six bedrooms, a sleeping porch, and two bathrooms. The doors to the Big House were never locked, and all could come and go as they pleased. In addition to a constant stream of folks drifting in and out, a number of family members lived in the house over time.

Despite this, it was a warm and happy place. Other than some bickering between some of the children, I never remember an unkind word being spoken in this home. This is saying something, given that since the Big House was the gathering place of a large family, an awful

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lot of words were spoken there. It still astonishes me that you could get so many people—including six brothers-in-law—inside a single house so often and have so few words of conflict or dispute. As a boy, I apparently found such peacefulness boring, so I did my level best to infuse the Big House, and Jackson generally, with some necessary excitement. But more on that later.

As I said, the Fondrens were a large family. Granddaddy Fondren and his wife, Annie, whom I never heard called anything but “Gran,” had eleven children in all. Two girls and one boy died in early childhood, leaving seven years between the older five children and the last three. With the birth of David in 1904 the family seemed complete, with five girls and their one son. But in 1911 the Fondren begat machine cranked up again and spit out three more girls.

Nancy, who was the mother of my cousin and close pal Ann Mayberry: Emily, who was my Mama; and Dee were the three youngest. Amazingly, Nancy was born on the same day and in the same room in which her three-year-old sister died with diphtheria. Granddaddy called these last three girls—Nancy, my mother, Emily, and Dee—his “Trash Gang,” stating that all they ever got was hand-me-down clothes, toys and dolls from their older sisters. But everyone agreed that what these last three lacked in worldly possessions was more than made up for by the extra affection they received from their parents, their adoring four older sisters, and their brother David.

The household was rounded out by two black (or “colored,” as we said then) ladies who were felt to be members of the family: Liza Miller, the cleaning lady, and Lee Robbins, who my father always said was the best cook he had ever known. This was quite a statement since to my mind *all* ladies at that time, black and white, seemed to be excellent cooks. In those days we ate real food, cooked on real stoves. Biscuits were made by mixing flour, lard, and buttermilk in a mixing bowl, rolling them out with a rolling pin, cutting out inch- and-a-half circles and baking them in the oven. There was none of this whacking a cylindrical

container on the side of the counter and throwing the contents into a toaster oven for two minutes. There were no freezers. Heck, there weren't even refrigerators. We had iceboxes, and the iceman delivered a block of ice every day.

The Fondrens were a very close-knit family. Daddy said you did not have to be married to a Fondren very long before you found out you'd best not get into a disagreement with one of them unless you were willing to take on all of them. He said they were "thicker than thieves" and that the only thing that kept them from being a clan was that none of them knew diddlysquat about making moonshine.

One of the best things about growing up in the Fondren family was there were so many things you could depend on. I knew, for instance, that there would be at least 350 people in the Big House on Christmas morning. That may be a slight exaggeration and, Lord knows, if Mama told me once not to exaggerate, she told me a million times. I also knew that there would be scores of people coming from as far away as Edwards, Canton, and Lorenz Street (ten miles away, twenty miles away, and two blocks away, respectively) to the Big House for Sunday dinner.

Another thing that I could depend on was being in church anytime the doors were open. This, of course, was long before paid babysitters were commonplace. The only way other than school that Mama could get rid of me for a few hours was to send me to church. She sent me to Sunday school, Sunday morning church services, Sunday evening church services, League (the Presbyterian Sunday evening youth program), prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, choir practice, Boy Scout meetings, catechism class, and communicants' class. I think Mama may have been reprimanded for trying to send me to the weekly deacon's meeting on Sunday night and the women's circle meeting on Wednesday morning. When you think about it, all my time at church gave Mama a lot of time off. I wonder what the heck she did with it?

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I could also depend on Mama knowing anytime I did anything wrong anywhere in town. That was because everybody in town either was a Fondren, used to be a Fondren, or wanted to be a Fondren. The information superhighway had nothing on this town. The lag time between something happening and everyone knowing about it was probably less than twenty seconds. When I arrived home after one of my frequent transgressions, Mama would be standing at the door with her hands on her hips, saying, “Billy Keeton, what have you been doing?” I knew “I was had” and would immediately think, *Oh, shit!* No, no, Mama, I’m just teasing. I didn’t really think that. I would never have thought anything like that, honest! Cross my heart and hope to... well, never mind.

There were other things I could depend on, too. I knew every morning when I got up that I would be getting at least twelve spankings by the time I went to bed that night. Mama would, of course, do most of them, but there were plenty of aunts, uncles, grandparents, school teachers, maids, bus drivers, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers around to pick up the slack anytime Mama was too busy or just “plumb wore out.”

This particular Sunday started out like always, with the family gathered for dinner at the Big House. In the South of the 1940s, dinner was the noon meal and supper was “what got ate” in the evening. (I think “lunch” was something that was eaten north of Memphis, but I’m not sure anyone in Mississippi knew anything about it.) Dinner was substantial, while supper usually consisted of something like “cold ’coon and collards” and a glass of buttermilk, or maybe a bowl of clabber and cornbread. Clabber is what you get when you put a large bowl of milk out on the back porch and let it sit for a few days. First it sours, and then later it takes on sort of a greenish color and forms curds. At that point it is pronounced clabber and feasted upon. Now, between you and me, clabber is revolting stuff that would gag a maggot. But obviously I can’t admit that for fear of not being looked upon as a pure Southerner. Which I most certainly damn sure am.

That day, Lee, Gran, and all of Gran's daughters were in the kitchen busily preparing the huge meal. Granddaddy and all of the men were standing around the kitchen, screen porch and driveway, smoking cigarettes and teasing each other unmercifully. They were telling jokes and carrying on, waiting patiently for their meal, and being careful to contribute absolutely nothing to the process of actually making it.

Because there was a twenty-one year gap between Ella, my oldest aunt, and Dee, my youngest, there was also a wide age span between the cousins. On this day in 1944, Betty Ann was sixteen. Martha Ann, Little Margaret, Little Marion and Sonny were around twenty. Gladys, my older sister, and my cousin Dave were ten years old. Gladys and Dave were together, as always, and the older girl cousins were helping in the kitchen. Sonny was busy helping the men smoke cigarettes and do nothing. In other words, you would think that there were enough people around to prevent what was about to happen, but somehow even those numbers didn't stop it.

With all the women working like crazy in the kitchen and all the men busily avoiding helping out, no one was paying much attention to Ann and me. My cousin, Ann Mayberry, and I were four and five years old, respectively, at that time. Ann was my constant companion and my best friend. As bad as I was, and as much grief as I gave everyone else, Ann and I never had a cross word between us. She was as good as I was bad. She was frequently a witness to my antics, but she never participated in any of them or tattled on me.

Even at that tender age I was already known to various uncles by nicknames such as Combustion, Cyclone, Roughhouse, Tornado, the Destroyer, and Little Billy Wild Boy. Uncle Fritz, known as Honey for reasons I can't explain, said I was easy to find: Just follow the sound of breaking glass or look in the "Hoorah Patch." Going to the Hoorah Patch was a Fondren-family euphemism for getting a spanking. And indeed, the Hoorah Patch was a place in which I spent much of my

time. As one might guess from this, not paying attention to me was never a good idea.

Ann and I were playing in the yard when I suggested that we get inside “Flatfoot.” Flatfoot was Granddaddy’s 1935 Plymouth, named for a popular Sam Gaillard song called “Flat Foot Floogie with a Floy Floy.” Yeah, I know. But it makes at least as much sense as “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s *amore*.”

I don’t remember ever seeing Granddaddy drive this car—he walked to work at the Fondren store, which was only a few blocks away—but it was always sitting in the driveway, waiting for whoever might need it. Not everyone had a car back then. My father didn’t buy his first car until he was thirty-seven years old. But even though most people in the family did not have a car, Flatfoot was rarely used. City buses and walking were the main sources of transportation.

Once I had convinced Ann to get in Flatfoot, we took turns playing like we were driving. Of course at that age our feet didn’t reach the pedals, and we couldn’t see out of the windshield unless we were on our knees in the driver’s seat. When it was Ann’s turn to pretend to drive, she got busy “steering.” I told her that I would get down on the floor and work the foot pedals. I did it just like I had seen the adults do, alternating between pushing the accelerator, the brake, and the clutch. To my mind this driving stuff seemed pretty easy. There really wasn’t much to it. If I had just had a cigarette hanging out the corner of my mouth, I bet I would have looked just like Daddy did when he was driving a car. Then I reached around and moved the gearshift—I had seen adults do that, too. That’s when Ann started screaming. I suddenly realized that the car was moving. It was probably thirty to forty feet from the garage, which was slightly downhill from where Flatfoot had been parked. I jumped up from the floor and watched wide-eyed as the car moved downhill with ever-increasing speed.

The garage was actually a shed with two sides and a back wall. Open across the front and wide enough for two cars, it had a roof supported

by two wooden 4x4s down the center. Flatfoot was headed straight for the center of those 4x4s. Cars in those days were made out of real steel. By the time Flatfoot reached the garage it had enough momentum to go easily not only through the 4x4s but right out through the back of the shed. With the center supports and part of the back wall now missing, the garage roof sagged all the way down to the point where it was actually touching the top of Flatfoot. I'm not sure why it didn't totally collapse.

At the sound of the crash, pandemonium spread rapidly throughout the Big House. Within seconds, it seemed like every adult that Ann and I had ever known was screaming, running toward us, and desperately trying to get the doors of the car open. They were all so relieved that neither of us was injured that we were not punished. Quite the contrary. Instead, Lee and the women admonished the men, who had stood idly by while two innocent (a word that was seldom used to describe me) children got into the car unsupervised. I heard Lee say "Lawd, you gotta watch that Billy ever second, if'n you 'spect this house ta still be standin'! I love that chile, an' he don't mean no harm, honest he don't, but dey ain't nuttin' he can't tore up in less 'an a minute, if'n he ain't watched ever second!"

As the head of the family, Granddaddy had the last word. "The children are alright, the car looks okay, and the garage can be fixed, so let's eat," he finally said. Everyone agreed, so we all filed into the dining room.

The dining room had the expandable drop-leaf table needed to seat such a large group, which was covered with a lace tablecloth, the good china, crystal, and silver. Granddaddy and Gran sat at either end, and their eight children and spouses sat around the table with the older cousins. To sit at the big table you had to either shave or wear a brassiere. Four of us—Dave, Gladys, Ann, and me—did not qualify by either of these criteria. For us there was a card table. It wasn't far from the big table but it did not have china or crystal. We had everyday

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plates, and we drank from jelly glasses. At that time jelly came in glass containers with a metal top. After the jelly was finished, the container was washed and used as a six-ounce glass. While our table settings weren't as pristine as those at the big table, we shared the same food and all the love in the room.

That Sunday in 1944, World War II was in full force. Dee's husband, Fritz, was in the Army Air Corps. Sonny, Aunt Ag's oldest son, had just joined the Marines. Both were soon to go overseas. As the dinner table discussion began to focus on the fact that it might be a long time before we were all together again, Granddaddy decided that we needed to have a photographer take a picture. Daddy said he knew just the person to do it. He jumped up and called the man, who came right over.

Everyone was there except Aunt Bob. This aunt, whose name was actually Ella, was married to Granddaddy's only son, David, who was called Snooks. Aunt Bob should not to be confused with Uncle Bob, who was married to Aunt Margaret. If you knew them you would probably never make that mistake. Uncle Bob was bald and always had a shirt pocket full of pencils, cigars, and extra eyeglasses. Aunt Bob, on the other hand, had lots of hair and rarely smoked cigars. Aunt Bob had not come to dinner that Sunday, because she had the flu. Since she lived just across the street, however, she could be quickly summoned. She was told to get out of bed and get dressed immediately. She reluctantly obeyed, and we assembled on the front steps for the picture.

Photos were still taken with film back then, and film wasn't even made in lightproof rolls yet. Loading and unloading the camera had to be done in the dark. The photographer ducked under the black cloth hood of his camera and got everything lined up. Before the man could take the picture, Granddaddy yelled, "Wait a minute Somebody go get Lee! We can't have a family picture without Lee!" Lee was even more reluctant to be photographed than Aunt Bob, but with gentle coaxing she finally came out. Liza certainly would have been included as well,

but she did not work on Sundays and no one would have intruded on her day off, even for that momentous photograph.

After the picture, the family reconvened in the dining room for dessert. I had gone ahead of the crowd to investigate what was always my favorite part of the meal. On the kitchen table rested two large, beautiful pies. Each pie was covered with meringue, which was peaked and delicately browned. They were gorgeous! But the meringue made it impossible to tell what kind of pies they were. Lee, who knew how much I loved chocolate, teased me that both pies were lemon, which she knew I did not like at all.

I stood on a stool carefully inspecting the pies, putting my elbows on the table on either side. Resting my head on my hands, I looked ever so closely for any sign of chocolate around the edges. As I did my inspection, my hand slipped and my face went directly into the pie. Sure enough, it was chocolate, but no one other than me seemed very interested in eating it by then.

Lee constantly tried to protect me from the much-deserved trips to the Hoorah Patch that I made on a daily basis. She would say, “Now, Miss Em, he didn’t go to do it.” Although she was rarely successful in these interventions, this time it worked. I think that was partly because the family was still relieved that Ann and I had not been obliterated when Flatfoot crashed through the garage, and partly because I must have been a pretty sad sight, crying and with my face completely covered with chocolate and meringue. But, between you and me, that pie was delicious ... and I had it all to myself.

“A Boy Called Combustion is a downright funny, while poignant, tale of family survival and patience told by a masterful storyteller—a unique coming of age story for a young man in Mississippi that will reach readers well beyond the Deep South. Dennis the Menace ain’t got nothing on Billy Keeton.”

~ Darden North, IPPY award winner and author of Wiggle Room

“Bill Keeton’s memoir is chock full of wit and homespun wisdom, a modern day Mark Twain recalling his youth in 1940s Mississippi. ... A Boy Called Combustion will leave you yearning for a time when families lived next door and the Saturday double-feature was the only babysitter you ever needed.”

~ Larry Kahn, author of The Jinx and King of Paine

At once heartwarming and hilarious, *A Boy Called Combustion* celebrates the adventures of childhood, the bonds of family and community, and the joys of life in the 1940s South. Bill Keeton—nicknamed “Combustion” for reasons readers will immediately understand—grew up as part of the Fondren family, a clan large enough to give its name to a section of Jackson, Mississippi. Accidentally knocking down his grandparents’ garage, “helping” neighbors paint their house, and denting his mother’s brand new stove with his BB gun, young Billy constantly surprised all who knew him. The book’s linked stories savor the vivid imagination behind a child’s comic exploits, the wisdom gained in the aftermath, and the colorful family and friends who shared both the lessons and the fun. *A Boy Called Combustion* is a memoir deeply rooted in a particular time and place: the Mississippi of the 1940s, where folks never cook from prepared mixes and kids have a weekly date with the movie serials. Yet it is also a timeless American story of life, love, laughter, maturation, and the gifts of family strength.



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