

cheek from one of his more vicious brawls and, when he was on the bottle, was always prowling for a fight, and usually found one. So why was it that Hoyett was a teetotaling family man, like Ray, and he, Harry, grew up to be weak for the bottle and prone to fighting, like Paschal?

The questions did not evaporate, no matter how many years passed, probably because he could not know the answer. In 1996, years after Myrtice had died, Harry traveled back to Bacon County to interview, on tape, for several hours, his aunt Eva Haselden, who was the widow of Myrtice's brother Alton. Eva was nearing ninety at the time. Harry, at age sixty, was still investigating the events surrounding his birth and the tale of two Daddies, grasping for truth before the last members of the generation who might know the answers went into the ground. "Whose blood I got in my veins? I mean, it's a question that'll keep you awake at night," Harry told Eva.

Sometime after Ray's death, Myrtice acquired a plot of land directly adjacent to her brother Alton's farm, in an area of Bacon County called the Junior High Community, because of its proximity to the local grammar school. Alton Haselden, and his wife, Eva, had seven children, all living in a two-bedroom farmhouse, along with Grandma Haselden. Myrtice and Paschal settled a quarter mile down the road, in view of Uncle Alton's house. The two families farmed tobacco, corn, and cotton, raised hogs and cattle, and generally lived at the mercy of the crop. Most of Harry's early years, which he would later chronicle in his memoir, *A Childhood*, were spent in this setting.

Between his fifth and sixth birthdays, Harry escaped death not once but twice. The first occurred three months after he turned five. He woke up one night in August 1940 with a high fever, and shortly thereafter his legs began to draw up, to the point that his heels were touching the backs of his thighs. This was the beginning of a nearly year-long bout with polio, though neither he nor the doctors who treated him knew it at the time.

In the 1940s, polio, also known as infantile paralysis, was still one of the most dangerous and prevalent diseases in the world. An infection that can move from person to person orally, it attacks the spinal cord and can lead to paralysis, most often of the legs, and to death. In the first half of the twentieth century, polio epidemics were common, and treatment was limited. Indeed, the sitting president was himself a victim of the disease. Annually, thousands of people, mostly children, were killed by polio, and tens of thousands left with some level of paralysis.

The iron lung, which allowed polio victims suffering from respiratory infections to breathe while they recovered, was invented to combat the disease and became widely available in cities. For those in rural areas, however, little could be done. In victims where the virus reached the spinal cord, 50 percent recovered fully, 25 percent suffered minor paralysis, and 25 percent were left severely paralyzed. The mortality rate for polio when the virus becomes a disease is 5–10 percent. In the United States, the incidences of the disease peaked in 1952 with 58,000 reported cases. By the end of that decade, vaccines had been created that would eventually eliminate polio as a threat to the general population. By the end of the century, less than 2,000 cases were reported worldwide each year.

Harry's fever would not abate, and the pain in his legs was nearly unbearable. In the first days of the disease, two doctors examined Harry; both declared that he would never walk again. Neither was able to diagnose the disease or offer anything other than medications to ease the pain, which had little effect. A faith healer was brought in and recited Bible verse. The leader of a band of gypsies examined Harry and prescribed herbs, which Harry took for ten days, to no avail. And all the while, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, acquaintances, people from nearby farms, strangers from distant counties, all paraded through the family's shack to get a look at the little boy with his feet stuck to his rear end. The pain, combined with the humiliation, would have a lasting effect. "Right there, as a child, I got to the bottom of what it meant to be lost," he wrote later, "what it means to be rejected by everybody (if they had not rejected me, why was I smothered in shame every time they looked at me?) and everything you ever thought would save you. And there were long days when I wondered why I did not die, how I could go on mindlessly living like a mule or a cow when God had obviously forsaken me."

After six weeks, his legs began to loosen up, and he was able to be taken from the bed to the porch for a few hours a day. Soon, he was well enough to be carried around the farm, and deposited by Paschal under an old oak tree, so he could spend the day sitting with his dog, Sam, and watching the goats graze in the sun. By October, he had progressed to the point that he could be pulled around the farm in a goat cart by Old Black Bill, the most dependable of the goat herd, with his friend Willalee T. Bookatee, a quiet black boy who was about a year older than Harry, ambling alongside. When the weather turned, Harry was remanded back to the house, where his bed had been set up in front of the fireplace. But by then his legs, though still paralyzed, were no longer drawn tightly to his thighs, and he could

pull himself around the floor with his arms. While Paschal worked in the field, Harry would while away the day listening to Myrtice and the other women of the Junior High Community spin yarns of death and disease, treachery and deceit.

As the calendar turned to 1941, Harry finally regained the ability to straighten his legs completely. He was put on a home-grown rehabilitation regimen, pulling himself along the fence line to restore strength and help him relearn the ability to walk. Soon, the pain began to fade, but the shame of his disease remained firmly in his conscience.

Harry was still limping noticeably from his bout with polio when he found himself at the center of yet another tragedy and was once again plunged into the depths of pain and suffering. This time, there was no mystery to what felled him—nearly his entire extended family was watching as they witnessed what they believed to be a child being boiled to death in front of their eyes.

It was February 1941, time for the annual butchering of the hogs, a ritual celebration in the community. Paschal was on one of his increasingly frequent binges and hadn't been heard from in four days, but Myrtice, Hoyett, and Harry and their current tenant farmers walked up the road to Uncle Alton's house to take part in the communal operation. While the children played and the women worked to prepare the hogs that had already been killed, the men went about the business of dispatching the live hogs, straddling them and crushing their skulls with an axe. Then they would prepare the hog corpses to be lowered into a pot of scalding water, so the hog's hair could be easily scraped. The vats of water were just above ground level, sitting on staves in holes that had been dug out, large enough so a wood fire could be made beneath them to heat the water to the correct temperature, which was just slightly below boiling.

Nearby, Harry, Hoyett, Willalee, and several other cousins were playing a game of Pop-the-Whip. The kids would line up holding hands, and the lead child would start running, pulling the rest behind. The leader would then begin to turn sharply, right, then left, causing the other kids to have to run faster to keep up. The round would eventually come to a conclusion when the child on the end was popped loose and sent catapulting off behind. When it was Harry's turn to be in the end position, the whip edged over toward the vat of water, and when Harry was popped loose, he flew directly into the steaming vat and found himself floating next to a dead, blistering hog with a newly crushed skull.

The closest adult, a farmer named John Pace, reached in, pulled Harry from the pot, set him down next to it on his feet, and slowly backed away. “I did not fall, but stood looking at John and seeing in his face that I was dead,” Crews wrote later. “The children’s faces, including my brother’s, showed I was dead, too. And I knew it must be so, because I knew where I had fallen and I felt no pain—not at that moment—and I knew with the bone-chilling certainty most people are spared, that, yes, death does come and mine had just touched me.”

The children screamed and ran in all directions, but at first Harry remained silent. Relatives alerted Myrtice, and she ran toward her son. As Harry saw her approaching from across the yard, the first wave of pain set in. Harry, beginning to scream now, touched his hand, and the skin came loose and fell to the ground, fingernails and all. The pain grew much, much worse as his mother removed his clothes, taking most of his skin with them.

There was an old, worn-out Model T on the farm that day, and Myrtice wrapped Harry in a sheet and climbed into the backseat for the sixteen-mile ride to town. (The decision to use the sheet would cost Harry more skin and more anguish in the coming days.) The Model T moved so slowly that Alton, sitting in the front seat, would periodically jump out of the vehicle and run alongside, urging the driver to speed up. For the entire interminable ride, Harry screamed and pleaded to his mother that he didn’t want to die.

He had burns over two-thirds of his body, but Harry’s head had not gone under the water, a fact that, according to the doctor who finally examined him in Alma, had saved his life. Scabs formed over the majority of his body, and a balm was applied constantly to ease the pain. Harry was now condemned to his bed twenty-four hours a day, once again an invalid for the second time in a year. He was not yet six years old.

The closest hospital was thirty miles away and unaffordable, so Harry was taken back to the farm, where, on doctor’s orders, Alton built a wood frame over his bed. Since nothing could touch his skin, the frame was covered with a sheet, and Harry spent the next few months suffering in his makeshift buggy tent, black scab crumbs littering the floor beneath.

At least in terms of physical agony, Harry’s life had bottomed out early. The scabs from the burn would take months to heal, but the scars would eventually recede. By the time he was in high school, the scars were barely visible. His bout with polio rendered him a clumsy child, prone to accident, but left few other physical traces.

The traumas he had experienced did little to dampen the thirst for ad-

venture in him. He was a chubby kid until he matured, and his mother remembered him as quick to cry, but he was considered the most courageous of the cousins, and he would often lead the other children into mischief. He was always the first to take a dare. On one occasion, he was the test case when Hoyett and their cousin Theron decided it was a good idea to jump off the smokehouse using an umbrella as a makeshift parachute. Only minor injuries resulted. Another time, the group was seeking a volunteer to bite the head off of a hornworm—a large green insect common on the farm, but not for consumption. Harry again was the willing participant. He downed the worm head, and his reputation for bravery was once again enhanced.

Life on the farm, though spare and unforgiving, allowed for many forms of rural adventure. Goats, chickens, dogs, and other farm creatures were at his disposal for entertainment much of the time. In the summer, hours could be spent at the watering hole on the Little Hurricane River, a short walk from the house. His brother, though he was Harry's main tormenter, was often up for some mischief. And school was much less of an imposition on his time than might be the case if he had lived in a more populated area.

Many of the memories Harry would later choose to recount in his memoir of his early life on the farm revolve around Willalee Bookatee. About a year older than Harry, Willalee lived just past the tenant house on the family's farm. Harry and Willalee, while both were still too young to work but old enough to explore the environs without constant adult supervision, were inseparable.

Among the poor, lives intermingled, and Harry and Willalee spent much time in the belly of each other's families. A good portion of their fun involved playing tricks on each other. Often, Hoyett was involved, helping either Willalee or Harry bamboozle whichever one wasn't in on the ruse. On one occasion, Hoyett and Harry convinced Willalee, who was deathly afraid of bulls after being trampled by one at age three, that he had to carry a twenty-pound citron fruit across the length of the farm. The fruit, they told him, would ward off charging bulls. Harry and Hoyett walked alongside Willalee as he struggled mightily to lug the fruit, which was a third of his body weight.

"How come it is you ain't got no citron," asked Willalee.

"We already carried ourn," Harry answered. "That bull don't make you tote but one. After you tote one citron, you can come out here in the field anytime you want and that bull don't pay no more mind than if you was