KING OF THE SLOTS

Jack Harpster

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William "Si" Redd

Jack Harpster

PRAEGER

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Acknowledgments

There are a number of individuals and organizations that played an important role in telling this life story of William Silas "Si" Redd.

First and foremost, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the family of Mr. Redd, his daughters Sherry Green and Vinnie Copeland, and his son-in-law Alan Green, all of Massachusetts. All three shared stories, photos, and recollections of this amazing man. They allowed me—even encouraged me—to tell the *whole* story of his life, the bad parts along with the good. Thanks to their spirit of generosity and honesty, I was able to write a book that pulled no punches in describing one of the twentieth century's most remarkable business geniuses.

During his lifetime, Mr. Redd graciously sat down with two university oral history interviewers and related his life story in his own words. I am indebted to the University of Southern Mississippi and the University of Nevada Oral History programs for capturing and preserving this important and often colorful information. Because Mr. Redd passed away in 2002, without these two outstanding programs it would not have been possible to see into the creative mind of this gaming legend.

Twenty-four friends, foes, employees, customers, competitors, and gaming industry observers of Mr. Redd also sat patiently for interviews and gave me firsthand knowledge about the "real" Si Redd, as they saw and understood him. Their names and relationships with him are all listed in the Bibliography, and I thank each and every one of them for their valuable contributions.

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A story without pictures is like a gambler without hope—it just doesn't work. Thus I'd like to thank the individuals and organizations that allowed me to use the great photographs that accompany the story. These are the Redd family, Marshall Fey, Dale Rodesch, *Slot Tech* and *Always Jukin'* magazines, Las Vegas News Bureau, Nevada Historical Society, and Wayne Namerow.

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Chapter 1

The Neshoba County Fair

As he sat hunched over on the bench at the rear of the rude plank dais awaiting his turn at the lectern, seventeen-year-old William Silas "Si" Redd was probably more aware of the butterflies in his stomach than of the hundreds of his friends and neighbors who were crowding into the open-sided wooden pavilion where he would shortly begin his speech.

It was not yet 9:30 a.m. at the 1930 Neshoba County Fair, but already the hot, muggy air of a Mississippi August morning was beginning to crowd in on him. The last strains of music from the early morning concert by the Philadelphia String Band still echoed in his head as he saw the master of ceremonies rise to introduce him. As he nervously shuffled his notes in his lap, Si Redd probably did not waste a single thought on the colorful history of the organization that had invited him to speak.

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It had been another typically hot, muggy August day in 1889.[1] The officers of the local branch of an east central Mississippi chapter of the Grange—the nation's oldest and largest agricultural organization— smiled at one another as dozens of men, women, and children hurried across the field to where they stood. A large hand-painted sign hanging high over their heads, fluttering gently with each passing breeze, proclaimed it to be the Coldwater Community

Fair. The officers—all Neshoba County farmers themselves—were excited because they did not know if any of their friends and neighbors would even show up for their little party.

Their expectations were modest. They charged no admission fee, and they planned to keep the event open for only a few hours. There were some agricultural displays, a colorful palette of home-grown vegetables carefully arrayed on a wooden table, a few quilts and articles of handmade clothing hanging over ropes stretched from tree to tree, and a noisy assemblage of horses, mules, cows, hogs, and chickens. Naturally there was also homemade lemonade and freshly baked pies.

There were no rousing political speeches planned, no entertainment—save Miss Kate Spivey singing "Dixie"—and none of the scrumptious jars of put-up bread-and-butter pickles or plates of sweet, sticky BBQ that would become staples of the event in years to come. But it was a beginning, albeit a modest one; and the 100 or so folks who turned out had a grand time.

Within a few years this Coldwater Community Fair would become the Neshoba Fair, then the Annual Neshoba Fair, and finally the Annual Neshoba County Fair. As the name grew, so did the crowds, and by the turn of the century, thousands of rural folks would flock to the fairgrounds, located about eight miles southwest of Philadelphia, the county seat. The fair lasted two days, then three, and finally seven. Early on, some fairgoers began constructing slapdash little cabins where they camped for the duration of the event, while others slept in the back of the covered wagons they had arrived in. A crude hotel was built to house visitors, then a second one. A simple town square was built in the middle of the field, and a giant pavilion built in the center; a racetrack was put in, and people began to build more small cabins around the perimeter of the square. The Fair grew, the crowds got larger every year, and the town square with its mélange of cabins and huts became equal in size to many of the small rural Mississippi villages and crossroads from which it drew its attendees.

A tradition had begun in that field in 1889; and today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the Neshoba County Fair is still going on stronger than ever, one of the top summer attractions in the entire nation.

One fairgoer summed up why the event has remained so popular with rural Mississippians for more than 120 years: "It's not really a fair; it's more like a reunion, a big homecoming."[2]

****

The late 1920s and early 1930s were not a good time to be a Mississippian. Mississippi was the poorest state in the nation. The monetary chasm between the state's old wealth and the large majority of her poor citizens was huge, and devilish Jim Crow laws dealt with black citizens with a heavy hand. The Ku Klux Klan, in its second iteration since the end of the Civil War, had reached its peak, and it held sway throughout the state. The cotton crop had been sub-par for a couple of years due to a boll weevil infestation, and the threat of hurricanes and tornadoes kept folks throughout the state on constant edge. Finally, the Great Flood of 1927 left almost the entire western half of the state under water in one of the most powerful natural disasters of the twentieth century.

One of the state's greatest writers and poets in the first half of the century was William Alexander Percy. In his autobiography, he spoke eloquently of the disaster that took nearly 300 lives and washed 700,000 people out of their homes:

> The 1927 flood was a torrent ten feet deep the size of Rhode Island; it was thirty-six hours coming and four months going; it was deep enough to drown a man, swift enough to upset a boat, and lasting enough to cancel a crop year . . . The South Delta became seventy-five hundred square miles of mill-race in which one hundred and twenty thousand human beings and one hundred thousand animals squirmed and bobbed.[3]

Then, of course, there was the Great Depression that first cast its ugly shadow over the state in late 1929. But any person who believed that all this misfortune would cancel, or even constrict, the Neshoba County Fair simply did not understand the psyche and the spirit of rural Mississippians. The 1930 Fair, the 39th annual, would go on as usual. It would be the first year a carnival company was commissioned to stage midway shows, rides, and entertainment; the first year for a brand new, giant livestock barn; and the first time a generator was in place to provide electric lighting to replace the kerosene lanterns and pine-knot torches that had always lighted up the grounds and cabins after dark.[4]

Si Redd was in his second year at Philadelphia High School in 1930. The town of Philadelphia was home to just under 1200 men, women, and children, some white, some black, and a few Choctaw Indians. It had no particular claim to fame in the early 1930s, and it wouldn't, in fact, until 1964 when three young civil rights workers were murdered outside the town jail by the violent White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan—an ugly incident that prompted the 1988 movie,

Mississippi Burning. "The troubles," as the folks in Philadelphia call it, is a chapter in the town's history that most longtime residents are still trying to put behind them.[5]

It was quite an honor for Redd to have been invited to be one of the speakers at the Fair, the prize, really, for his having won the high school debating club's annual competition. He would join well-known state and local politicians addressing the fairgoers who considered these speeches one of the highlights of the annual event. Redd was to deliver a brief history of the Neshoba County Education System. It was an assignment at which he must have excelled, because he was invited back the next year to present a brief history of the Fair itself. Many years later, Si Redd recalled that he had also been selected to introduce one of the main speakers at the Fair, but he wasn't sure which year it was.[6]

However, there can be little doubt that when young Redd made that speech on the history of the county's education system in 1930, his high school sweetheart Ivy Lee Oliphant was in the crowd cheering her boyfriend on. Without a doubt, his parents Marvin and Nannie Redd were there too, busting their buttons with pride at their son's accomplishment.

After his talk was over—and judged to be a rousing success—Si and Ivy would likely have spent the remainder of the five days hand-in-hand, enjoying the many shows, displays, and special events that would draw over 30,000 people to the Coldwater Fairgrounds that year. There was a greased-pig chase and home-churned butter tasting, trotter and pacer racing, a hot-air balloon ride, Angora goat shearing, a thrilling rodeo, baseball games, and crazy quilt displays. From the grandstand, Si and Ivy may have listened to the concert by Jack Bigelow and his Sorority Girl Band, and watched a daring aerialist show by the Romanoff Troupe.

There may have been a small arcade with a few coin-operated vending machines and musical contraptions on the midway. The pinball machine was still a few years in the future, but player pianos, crude jukeboxes, and machines vending soda pop into cups, or gum and gumballs, were already popular. If so, it's a safe bet that Si Redd spent some blissful time investing his pennies and listening to the whirring and clanging of the gears, springs, and levers of those mechanical marvels. These machines seemed to be in his blood, and they would play a major role in the young man's life for the next three-quarters of a century.

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William Silas "Si" Redd was born outside of Union, Mississippi, on November 16, 1911, the second of three children, to Marvin and Nannie Redd. Si's parents were definitely *not* part of the Magnolia State's aristocratic upper crust. They were sharecroppers, barely eking out a living from east central Mississippi's grudging red clay soil.[7]

The family lived in a small log cabin no bigger than an average garage.[8] The farm wasn't much larger. "Maybe thirty acres," Redd recalled, "fifteen of it in farmland and fifteen of it in the cows and the pastures." Recollecting another fact, he added through a scrunched grin, "Those pastures had a lot of bitter weeds, so when the cows ate bitter weeds, the milk was bitter."[9]

In addition to Si—so named after the biblical Silas by the old preacher who helped in his birth—his household consisted of his parents and siblings. Father Marvin, a second-generation Mississippian whose family originally hailed from South Carolina, came from a much

The Redd family as they appear in this 1911 photo. Marvin and Nannie Redd were sharecroppers, and Marvin was also a Pentecostal street preacher. They had two children at the time. Paul was almost two and William Silas was three months old. Daughter Marie would join the family a few years later. *Redd family photo*.

larger family. The 1900 Census lists him living in Neshoba County with his father, mother, five siblings, and an unidentified 22-year-old male. Si's mother Nannie—nee Eatman—was from Meridian, Mississippi, and had married Marvin in 1908. Si's siblings were older brother Paul, born in 1910, and younger sister Marie, who would be born four years after Si entered the world.[10]

Their small farm was not located in Union proper. "[It was] about fifteen miles back of the depot in Union," Redd said.[11] The old depot, torn down in the 1970s, was a whistle stop for the Meridian & Memphis Railway, its thirty-two miles of track connecting Union with Meridian. Through connections with other small railroads, Union's citizens, once isolated, were tied to the rest of the state and Mid South.[12]

One of Si Redd's earliest memories of life in rural Mississippi had to do with a regular Saturday night ritual for a lot of country folks: the weekly bath. The entire family would take a bath, one at a time, in a large old dented tin washtub. To save both soap and water, the family's turn did not come until after the weekly laundry was completed, leaving one to wonder how clean the last person out might have been.[13]

Union township is little more than a flyspeck on a map of east central Mississippi. The town straddles the boundary between Neshoba County to the north and Newton County to the south. Today, approximately 75 percent of Union's 2000 residents live on the Newton side of the boundary; in 1911, the total population was just under 700, both black and white, with most sharing one condition: poverty.

The Redd farm was north of the boundary, in Neshoba County, and it was in that county that Redd grew up. Despite having the smaller part of Union's population, Neshoba still claimed seniority over its southern counterpart. Neshoba County was carved out of the wilderness in 1833 from the territory ceded to the United States three years earlier by the Choctaw Nation through the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. The county's name means "grey wolf" in the Choctaw dialect, a Muskogean language that bears a striking similarity to the dialect of the nearby Chickasaw nation. Less than three years later, Newton County—named, it is said, after English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton—was created out of the southern half of Neshoba County. Today, Decatur is the Newton County seat, and the grandly named Philadelphia enjoys that distinction in Neshoba County.

There are two local legends about how Union township acquired its name. The first claims that because the small settlement is located on the boundary between Neshoba and Newton, it represents the symbolic joining of the two counties. The second legend says there were three congregations on the site in the beginning—Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist—but they shared one church building on alternating Sundays. So the area was initially named Union Church, but there happened to be another town in the state by the same name, so eventually "Church" was dropped from its name.[14]

Neshoba County is level along the river and creek bottoms, and the remainder of the land is hilly and undulating. Pine, oak, hickory, black walnut, and beech trees dot the landscape. The Pearl River and its tributary creeks provided plenty of fresh water for those living in the southern part of the county.[15] Farmers such as Marvin Redd, who tilled the clay soil in Neshoba and Newton counties in the early twentieth century, eyed with great envy their counterparts across the state. There, in the rich alluvial soil of the Mississippi River Delta, crops flourished. Despite the weaker soil, however, few east central Mississippi farm families went hungry. Early Newton County historian A. J. Brown described a cornucopia of local produce: "Corn, peas, potatoes, pumpkins, and everything necessary to live upon were made at home. The same was true as to bacon and other provisions, which could be raised in the county. There was a good deal of wheat made in the county too."[16] Naturally, everybody also grew cotton, the region's main cash crop, and most grew black-eyed peas, soybeans, pole beans, figs, and other fruit trees. Another local farmer working a plot near the Redd's farm agreed it was an adequate bounty, and added, "[We made] sorghum molasses . . . and hunted rabbits and squirrels."[17]

In an interview, Si once explained that in Mississippi sharecropping, the land's owner normally received 80 percent of the bounty, and the family working the soil got the other 20 percent. Quoting a neighbor, he said of the situation in which he was raised, "I don't mind being poor, but it sho' is inconvenient."[18]

Despite their poverty, the Redd family got by. But it was often in spite of—rather than because of—the family patriarch, because in addition to his farming, Marvin Redd was also a freelance Pentecostal street preacher. "My father would go on the street and preach," Redd recalled. "He would say that the Good Lord spoke to him and told him to spread the word. He never had an education . . . he was a jack-leg preacher."[19]

Warming up to his subject, Redd related how his father would leave the farming to Nannie and the children while he went out to preach. "One day he told my mother that the Lord had spoken to him," Redd grinned. When Nannie asked what the Lord had said, Marvin replied, "Well, he didn't actually speak, but He gave me a sign: the letters GPC written up in the sky. He was telling me to Go Preach Christ."

The long-suffering Nannie Redd looked him right in the eye and said, "Well, Marvin, maybe He was trying to tell you Go Plow the Corn."[20]

Marvin's faith was genuine and deep-seated; it was not just an excuse to get out from behind his mule and plow. He instilled his beliefs in his children too. "We were taught religion until it came out of our ears," Si recalled.[21] But he admitted that as he grew older, the faith took hold. He remembered his mother telling him about an incident when he was three or four months old, when he fell out of bed and broke his arm at the elbow.

The doctors told Nannie and Marvin that Si's arm would be stiff for life, so they decided to take their son to a faith healer. In the middle of a copse of pine trees, a faith healer and his followers had built a temporary church—a "bush arbor" Si called it—where pine boughs were stacked high in a square formation, surrounding a bunch of felled logs for sitting. That was their church. Amidst singing and preaching and chanting, baby Si was delivered up to the healer who rubbed ointment on the arm and prayed over it. Two days later, the arm had not improved, so Nannie returned to the church in the woods for a second visit. There, a member of the little congregation put a cookie in Si's hand, on his bad side. He lifted the cookie to his mouth with the bad arm and began to eat, something he had not been able to do since the accident. The arm was healed. "Now that's a true story, so help me God," Redd said. "That's a true, true story . . . I'd just have to be a terrible hypocrite [if] I didn't believe . . ."[22]

Although Marvin Redd may have been the primary religious tutor in the family, Nannie Redd passed on her own form of wisdom to her children. She was a strong advocate of positive thinking, and she passed her message on to her children at every opportunity. His parents' religious and philosophical lessons, Redd claimed years later, helped shape his life and his business philosophy.

Early in his life Si Redd made a decision—consciously or not we cannot know—that he would not be a product of his environment

or of his time. He would be more. How, where, or by what means, he had no idea, but he had no doubt it would happen. His greatest ally in this quest was his mother Nannie.

Nannie Eatman Redd was the practical one in the family. She was born and raised in nearby Meridian, and it seemed to be her life's goal to improve her family's lot. "If we say 'better living' . . . and desire . . . to get ahead, what formed our character was really my mother," Si Redd said. "Her burning desire [was] always [that] we do better or get an education."[23]

Perhaps it was the influence of living in Meridian that had inspired the young Nannie Eatman. Between 1890 and 1930 Meridian was the largest city in Mississippi and a leading center for manufacturing in the South. It was also the regional rail center. Nannie was surrounded by culture: the huge, ornate Grand Opera House that still serves the city today, and two wonderful Carnegie Libraries, one for whites and one for blacks.[24] It is not known if Nannie came from a middle class family, but the proximity of culture and education certainly rubbed off on her regardless.

Life on the farm outside Union was a constant whir of activity for Si, Paul, and Marie. In addition to the farming and the cattle, they also kept hogs and chickens; but the real workers were their mules. "I'll bet we were ten or twelve or fifteen years old . . . before we ever had the occasion to ride on a horse," Si laughed.[25]

From the Redd farm, it was five or six miles to the nearest grocery story, and the family would make the shopping trip in an old buckboard pulled by one of their mules. The closest shopping, other than for basic items, was the tiny town of Neshoba. The town had a post office, a railroad depot, a bank, a drug store, a doctor's office, a hardware store, a wagon and buggy store, a two-story hotel, and a small mercantile. About three miles south of Neshoba, down the old dirt road in Union, stood the area's most stately structure. Boler's Inn is a two-story, pre–Civil War stagecoach inn that stands as proudly today as it did almost 150 years ago when General William Tecumseh Sherman was quartered there on his march through the South. Sherman may have been impressed with his quarters, but it did not stop him from burning most of the town as he rode out.[26]

Si Redd recalled as a small boy helping his mother with chores around the farm. Doing the family wash was one of his most vivid memories. They would boil the clothes in homemade lye soap, "[made] from the fat of hogs, I would suppose," Si said;[27] then they would beat them and hang them out to dry. Si's chores also included

lugging water to the fields, mucking the hogs, feeding the chickens, milking the cows, and chopping firewood.

Despite all the hard work to be done around the farm and Marvin's frequent absences due to his street corner preaching, there was never any doubt that the children would attend school. Nannie Redd simply wouldn't have it any other way. Si recalled his first school was a little one-room log schoolhouse at a rural log camp crossroads—now vanished—named Tigville. After one or two years, the Redd children transferred to another school in Beech Springs in Neshoba County.[28]

The family moved a number of times over the next few years as Nannie Redd constantly sought to improve their position. Si recalled a small town named Shady Grove, then finally a move to the "big city" of Union itself. "I'll never forget, we moved in[to] a very poor old dilapidated house. The only way you could clean this house . . . it was so black and so much dirt that all we could do was get lime. You know, if you take lime and put it in water, you can use it for paint.

"I remember the first night we were there, it was very cold and we had to take newspapers . . . and stuff them in the holes of the floor to keep the cold air from coming up."[29]

During this period, World War I was raging in faraway places the Redds and their neighbors had never heard of, places such as Lorraine, the Ardennes, Tannenberg, and Isonzo. In school the teacher would point to these spots on the big round globe that sat in the corner, and each child would include the name of a Neshoba or Newton County soldier in their daily prayers.

Every able-bodied male between eighteen and forty-five was required to register for the draft in 1918, and thirty-nine year old Marvin Redd did his duty, according to World War I Draft Registration records. Marvin listed his occupation as "Minister," and he was described as being of "medium height, medium build with blue eyes and dark hair."[30] The Redds were fortunate, however, as the war ended soon afterwards and Marvin did not have to serve. Many Neshoba County young men did serve, however, and fourteen made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.[31]

The Redds had an uncle, a dentist, who also lived in Union, and the children loved having cousins close by. The doctor's name was Dr. Sim Red—with only one "d," Si explained. "He never did fool around putting that extra D [in]," he laughed. Actually, Marvin had originally had only one "d" in his name too, but Nannie had

changed it sometime after they married, believing it made them sound more educated.[32]

It also appears that she changed her given name at some point. Second- and third-generation Redd family members who are still living remember her as Nancy. However, every official record, including one in Marvin's own hand, lists her as Nannie.

For fun, once the chores were completed, Si, Paul, and their cousins would probably sneak down to take a cooling swim or dip a fishing line in the Chunkey River, a small river that gathered its headwaters right outside of town.

Soon, however, Nannie Redd would move the family again, to the Neshoba County seat of Philadelphia, a town of 1200 people by that time. Though they continued to farm, working a twelve-acre plot right in the city, this would mark a turning point for young Si Redd, who had never known anything but abject poverty.[33]

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Chapter 2

A Goofy Beginning

The town of Philadelphia the Redds moved to in the late 1920s was a very different place from what it had been only two decades earlier. At that earlier time, it had been a sleepy village of less than one hundred people, virtually isolated from the rest of the nation. But when the railroad and the telegraph finally arrived in 1905, everything changed: its population grew, and the county seat finally began to gain some respect, becoming the entertainment hub for the area. Church festivals, minstrel shows, the Neshoba County Fair, an annual circus, traveling medicine man shows, and the Great Swain Show with its lively melodramas drew people from as far away as Carthage and Decatur.[1]

"By the 1920s of my childhood," wrote Neshoba County author Florence Mars, "some of the streets of Philadelphia were paved, and the square was filled with one- and two-story brick buildings with flat wood awnings that covered the sidewalk in front."[2]

Mars went on to paint a vivid picture of everyday life in the small but bustling town when the Redds arrived:

> On Saturday people came to town to shop for everything from plowstock to the latest in ladies' millinery. Crowds of Philadelphians—white farmers, Negroes, Choctaw Indians—filled the lawn of the old red brick courthouse and the sidewalks around the square. Most of the country people dressed differently than we did in town—the men in overalls, khakis, and flannel, the women in homemade cotton dresses. The Negroes dressed more

colorfully, the women often wearing aprons and bandanas. . . . The Choctaw men wore white shirts, black pants, and hats; the women wore colorful, ankle-length dresses with ruffles on the bottom. Almost all adults, except the Choctaw women, wore large-brimmed soft straw hats to protect themselves from the sun; some women wore their Sunday hats.[3]

Although it was still a far cry from the "metropolis" of Meridian, where she had grown up, Nannie Redd must have been delirious with joy to be surrounded by all the trappings of civilization again. Needless to say, the crowded streets of downtown Philadelphia were a boon to Marvin too. Here he was able to join other jackleg preachers and evangelicals—men and women such as Miss Nannie Ogletree, Railroad Spinks, and the Billy Sunday–trained Howard Williams—on the steps of the courthouse, or on the lawn under the sweeping magnolia tree, as they took their turns trying to save souls.

Young Si also fit right in. He could see there were opportunities aplenty for an ambitious young fellow looking to make a few dollars. His first foray into the business world had come even before he entered his teen years; later in life he said he was seven years old when he started earning some cash.[4]

Somewhere, as a young boy, he had discovered a "miracle" product named White Cloverine Brand Salve, a petroleum jelly product sold in a round tin box. According to the label, the patented medicine was highly recommended for "sores, burns, cuts, ulcers, chaffed hands, face and lips, common sore throats, chafes, galls, nasal catarrh, itching piles, sun burn, and tired, sore and aching feet." Because these were all common afflictions in rural Mississippi, the perceptive young boy saw an opportunity.

He also became aware of another product, a monthly magazine designed for rural folks called *Grit* that had been around since the early 1880s. So with a case of his White Cloverine Brand Salve and a stack of *Grit* magazines, bought at wholesale prices, Si Redd hit the road, walking to every farmhouse within a ten-mile radius.

"We were so far out in the country, you had to scare the hoot owls off the drinking dipper," Redd said years later in the folksy, homespun style of speaking that became his stock-in-trade.[5]

Si explained about the distributors for the two products he sold: "They would charge a nickel; well, you got a dime. If they charged a dime, then you got twenty cents, and that was the profit."[6]

Though never a whiz at math, young Redd understood at an early age that buying low and selling high was a very good thing. He

followed that up by learning another basic business principle probably not taught at the Harvard Business School: the concept of contract labor.

Entering their teen years, Si and his brother Paul were expected to pick a certain amount of cotton each week to help the family survive. Cotton picking was hard, painful stoop labor. "You got up at daybreak. You stopped for . . . dinner, thirty minutes, at twelve. Then you go back again, and you stopped when it was dark," Si remembered.[7]

Redd could pick about 250 pounds of cotton a day. However, the bending and stooping; the strain of the heavy, scratchy burlap sack you dragged behind you; the raw, cut fingers from plucking the hard, sharp cotton bole from its plant; the blistering sun; the gnats buzzing into your eyes and ears; and the stinging no-see-ums feasting on the salt trail left on your face and neck from sweat, made it a very, very long, arduous day.

The inventive Redd discovered he could hire three or four young neighborhood boys—black or white, it didn't matter to the budding entrepreneur—to do the picking for him. Then he could go downtown and get a better-paying job working as a helper on a lumber truck at the local mill. To the best of his recollection years later, Redd believed he was paying the young boys a nickel each a day, fifteen or twenty cents total, while he was making forty or fifty cents a day at the mill. The work was much easier to boot. Again, this was a math the young man could understand.

At some point in his midteens, Redd entered Philadelphia High School, and he found a job at a local dry cleaning plant. "I'd get up in the morning at, oh, six o'clock and solicit—pick up dry cleaning," he said. "Then I'd go on to school, and then in the afternoon I'd come back and work in that dry cleaning plant . . . and on Saturday and Sunday."[8]

About the dry cleaning job, he told *Forbes* magazine with a grin in 1982, "I'd go out and walk the streets and talk men into giving us the hats off their heads so we could block them."[9] Having discovered the pride and value of having some money jingling in his overalls, Redd also worked at a bakery on Saturday night. Between the two jobs, he was making about three dollars a week, a princely sum in the late 1920s in rural Mississippi. Then came October 29, 1929—Black Tuesday—and the beginning of the Great Depression.

The Depression affected different people, and different areas of the country, in different ways. To go from being rich, or even financially

comfortable, to being poor was a stark, life-shattering change. To go from being poor to being dirt-poor was not nearly so traumatic. Perhaps a poor Mississippi farm family such as the Redds would eat potatoes with greens or turnips five times a week, rather than the customary three times; or maybe a small sack of butter beans, rather than a nickel, would be dropped into the collection plate at church on Sunday morning for the preacher's wife, or to be shared with the congregation's less fortunate. Or perhaps the annual family outing to the Neshoba County Fair would have to be cancelled, and the year-long dream of cotton candy and exciting midway rides and two-headed cows would exist only in the memories of the young ones.

The Great Depression was all a matter of one's perspective and one's position in life. Eudora Welty, Mississippi's marvelous writer and photographer, toured the state during the Depression for the Works Progress Administration, recording her thoughts in words and snapshots as she traveled the rural roads of the state's eighty-two counties.

"The Depression, in fact, was not a noticeable phenomenon in the poorest state in the union," she wrote in the foreword to her first photo collection book, *One Time, One Place*. "In New York [where she did graduate work at Columbia University] there had been the faceless breadlines; on Farish Street in my home town of Jackson, the proprietor of the My Blue Heaven Café had written on the glass of the front door with his own finger dipped in window polish: . . . 'The cook will be glad to serve U with a 5 and 10c stew.'"[10]

It was all a matter of one's perspective.

By his senior year at Philadelphia High, Redd was still working at a number of jobs. Despite his work, he still found time for fun. Redd had a girlfriend, probably his first one, a pretty girl named Ivy Oliphant who was also attending Philadelphia High. Si and Ivy had been sweethearts since the eighth grade. In fact, he admitted, it was Ivy's help that had gotten him through most of his math tests.

The Oliphants were a reasonably prosperous Philadelphia family. They owned and operated Spivey & Ross Furniture store. Like most of the town's middle-class white families, the Oliphants were very traditional and conservative.[11]

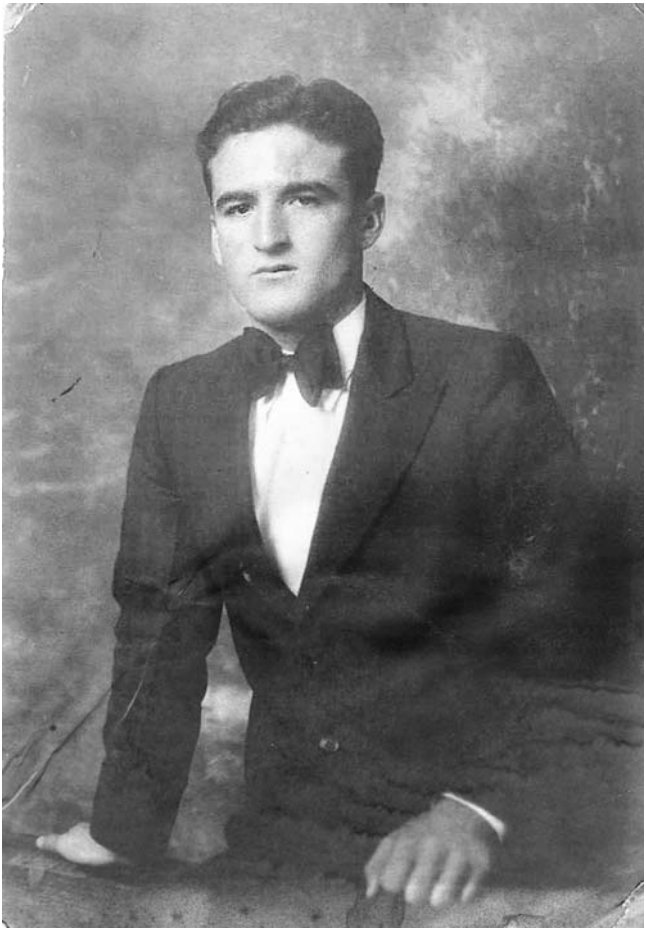
"Small towns are cliquish," Ivy's younger sister Jonnie said. "My folks didn't really approve of Ivy going with Silas. I think they probably saw each other on the sly a lot."[12]

Perhaps reflecting her parents' attitude toward the sharecropper's son, Jonnie admitted she did not particularly like Si when they first

became acquainted. "Silas was a very flamboyant boy," she said. "I always compared Silas and Ivy to Professor [Harold] Hill and Marian the librarian from *The Music Man*. People respected Si but many thought he was too big for his britches."

Because of his hard work, Redd usually had money in high school, another fact that set him apart from most other young people. Jonnie believed many classmates were jealous of him because of that, but it didn't seem to bother him one way or the other.

As for Ivy, the comparison to Meredith Willson's Marian the librarian was a good one. Although she had a spunky side, she was



Si Redd's 1929 high school graduation photo. At about the same time he made a speech at the Neshoba County Fair. *Redd family photo*.

normally prim, proper, and quiet. She was, her sister Jonnie said, very picky about who she associated with, making her interest in the outspoken, pushy Si a classic case of opposites attracting.

In high school, Redd's grades were not stellar. He would often admit that he wasn't the smartest kid in school, but he made up for it by working harder than any of his classmates. Along the way, he had also discovered that he possessed a valuable aptitude. Through all his years of selling Cloverine salve and *Grit* magazine, in addition to a natural gift of gab, Redd had developed a real talent for oration. Perhaps he had even inherited some of his splashy, theatrical Harold Hill personality from his street preacher father.

He was smooth and persuasive, and the more he talked and the more self-confidence he gained, the better he got at it. It was during this period that the Mississippi sharecropper's son first began to dream about becoming a lawyer. To advance his dream, he had joined a competitive debating club at school called the Adam Byrd Literary Society, named for a turn-of-the-century U.S. congressman who had lived in Neshoba County. A Philadelphia High graduate and successful Mississippi real estate entrepreneur, Mark Bounds, who was a member of the society many years after Si, aptly described the experience: "It was like our version of the *Dead Poets Society* and it was great inspiration for all the members."[13]

Redd was also in the drama club. He loved to participate in the annual graduation plays the club performed. It allowed the true "ham" in the comedic young man to emerge and helped him gain self-confidence in all sorts of situations. Years later, Redd recalled that the drama teacher, Mr. L. O. Todd, said of the plays, "All of those graduating plays at Philadelphia High School were nothing more than three-act comedies featuring Si Redd."[14]

It was in his junior or senior year that Redd won the right to speak at the annual Neshoba County Fair, one of the highlights of his teen years. It was also during this period, in the summers of his high school years, that Redd and a few of his cousins and friends followed the hobo life. "We'd get on a freight train from Mississippi and ride up to Memphis and then get on another freight train, ride out to Kansas and work in the wheat fields," he related. "We belonged to what you called the Four H Club . . . only then it wasn't agriculture; it was Herbert Hoover's Hungry Hoboes."[15]

He recalled that during one summer's vagabonding, the group made it all the way to Reno, Nevada, where years later Si would strike gold in gaming machines. "We . . . saw that 'Biggest Little City