Never Been Rich

Writer

Harry Harrison Kroll

The Life and Work of a Southern Ruralist

Richard Saunders

NEVER BEEN RICH

The major published works of Harry Harrison Kroll

Mountainy Singer (William Morrow & Co., 1928)
The Cabin in the Cotton (Long & Smith, 1931)
Three Brothers and Seven Daddies (Long & Smith, 1932)
Return Not Again, with Annette Heard (Bobbs-Merrill, 1936)
The Ghosts of Slave-Driver's Bend (Bobbs-Merrill, 1937)
I Was a Share-Cropper (Bobbs-Merrill, 1937)
Keepers of the House (Bobbs-Merrill, 1939)
The Usurper (Bobbs-Merrill, 1942)
The Rider on the Bronze Horse (Bobbs-Merrill, 1943)
Perilous Journey, with C. M. Sublette (Bobbs-Merrill, 1943)
Rogue's Company (Bobbs-Merrill, 1943)
Waters Over the Dam (Bobbs-Merrill, 1944)
Fury in the Earth (Bobbs-Merrill, 1945)
Their Ancient Grudge (Bobbs-Merrill, 1946)
Darker Grows the Valley (Bobbs-Merrill, 1947)
Lost Homecoming (Coward-McCann, 1950)
The Long Quest (Westminster, 1954)
Summer Gold (Westminster, 1955)
The Smoldering Fire (Ace, 1955)
My Heart's In the Hills (Westminster, 1956)
For Chloe With Love (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1958)
The Brazen Dream (Ace, 1961)
Riders in the Night (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1965)
Bluegrass, Belles, and Bourbon (Thomas Yoseloff, 1967)
Mounds in the Mist, with Mildred Payne (A. S. Barnes & Co., 1969)

NEVER BEEN RICH

The Life and Work of a Southern Ruralist Writer, Harry Harrison Kroll

Richard L. Saunders

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I have never been rich. There have been times when I needed money desperately. One never, I suppose, achieves the success he could have wished. Yet, in another way, I have got further along in the writing racket than I had dared to dream.

Looking Back, 1947

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INTRODUCTION

Readership is fickle and reputation fleeting for the vast majority of writers. Interest in a writer's work rarely transcends generations. Who today, other than the most focused academic specialist, reads or even remembers the work of Ellen Glasgow, Arthur Machen, Robert Nathan, or Elinor Wylie? Paul Leicester Ford was one of the most popular American writers of the first decade of the twentieth century, yet his work remains memorable and collectible chiefly because of his publisher's book designer, who created splendid artistic bindings that cased his work, rather than for his widely popular stories. One must wonder what sort of literary legacy will come from the best-selling work of John Grisham, Anne Rice, Tom Clancy, or Danielle Steele in another fifty years.

Occasionally an author's work is rediscovered by a later generation of readers or scholars. Herman Melville was one such resurrectee, whose work was largely ignored during his lifetime and judged relevant only long after his passing. For those who are not literary giants, like Melville, scholarly interest often grows, if sparked at all, because of the attention of book collectors or an institutional library. With luck, one or more of those collectors will be sufficiently impassioned and well informed to begin compiling a checklist. With very good luck enough of the author's and publishers' manuscripts and papers survive to document the writing, production, manufacturing, and distribution of an author's work. With extraordinary good luck, someone will join the descriptions to the source material to produce either a bibliography or biography. Because they are so labor intensive, compilation of a descriptive bibliography typically stands as the symbol that an author has taken a seat among the demigods of literature—only rarely is a writer's importance to scholarship so great that researchers are interested in the minute details about not only the texts but also the forms in which those texts appeared before the public. Descriptive bibliographies focus on the publications themselves as the measure of a prominent author's career.

Once it is laid before the collective public, production of a bibliography also generates interest in an author's literary career, provides a platform for future study, and

insures that the author's work will at least not be lost to comparative scholarship. Unfortunately, most authors that are publicly read during their lifetimes are never studied bibliographically. Later generations of scholars are often left to study those whom other scholars have already studied. This self-perpetuating cycle emphasizes the work of a comparative few authors from any given period at the expense of a great many more. Many of these writers genuinely interested the public during their career but have fallen out of notice.

None of this discursion, however, really explains why the book you have in hand is about Harry Kroll, for which there are several reasons.

First, Kroll interests me as a practicing writer. The man's output is astounding. He wrote constantly. The still-growing list of his work I have kept runs to nearly 30 books, over 900 short stories and essays, more than 100 illustrations, and about as many poems. Still, Kroll produced at least twice and perhaps as three times as many more manuscripts than appears on his list of mere publications. I write a lot myself, but his volume of work is simply remarkable, and telling the story of such an active writer is important.

A second reason for my interest is, that Kroll is much more typical of the vast majority of popular writers than literary figures like Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, and the like, who arrived at a point of having publishers falling over themselves seeking their work. A widely recognized author eventually reaches a point at which their work becomes acceptable because it *is* their work, irrespective of its quality. This is not to accuse well-respected writers of producing drivel; it is merely an acknowledgement that their status is no longer that of the vast, struggling body of writers. Despite his respectable volume of published output, Harry Kroll never really made the transition from writer to literary figure. I won't argue here that he was or wasn't good enough, just that despite his strenuous effort it never happened.

So if he wasn't an important literary figure, why is Kroll important to literary scholarship and why have I lavished time and attention on this biographical project? Well, for several reasons:

First, Kroll spent much of his career as a well-respected and enormously popular professor of literature and composition at the institution where I work. When a story about him was run in the campus alumni magazine in 2004 we had alumni coming out of the proverbial woodwork to share their "Mr. Kroll stories" with us. We began building a collection of his work partly in response to alumni interest, a process which has broadened into this project. Only later did he come into focus as the teacher of seminal figures, credited with an important but neglected contribution to modern Appalachian literature, a decade before he arrived begrudgingly at our little school. Indeed, this point may be the only thing many academic readers will find interesting or important (or at least arguable) about Harry Harrison Kroll.

Second, he ranks by numbers alone—and by quite a respectable distance—as Tennessee's most-published author of the twentieth century, yet he is virtually unremembered. Only T. S. Stribling comes close in matching output. That is a curious mix of significance and insignificance.

Third, Kroll's work is so typical of popular writing of the period that it is virtually anonymous. Popular literature may be common in the pejorative sense, but it is also common in the social sense. Because it is common, popular literature provides a window into the time and a culture to which it appeals. Kroll published in venues that most of practitioners of "high literature"—literature spelled with a capital letter—would (and did) consider beneath them, but as a result, he was undoubtedly more widely read across the country than the much-better-remembered Agrarians, whom he knew. Harry Kroll was a populist and regionalist on a national stage, the rural poor white Southern kid who got literate and whose work bridges generations.

The fourth point is related to the third, in that his writing career breaks across two of the three sea changes in American reading culture from the twentieth century, and not many writers managed to do that. The first change was the decline of the popular story magazine following both the rise of commercial radio in the mid 1920s and then the introduction of sound to motion pictures in 1927. The second change is the dramatic upswing in the importance of commercial non-fiction following the Second World War. What happened to Kroll's career as a writer is emblematic of the same affect on the world of popular literature at large. I enjoyed a brief career in the production side of American book publishing, and that caught my attention.

Fifth and finally, frankly, is to do my part in encouraging scholarship to pay attention to the "everyone else" in the world of letters, not merely the pantheon of writers in the canon of literature. This is my driving motivation. We are losing too much of the world's writing as graduate schools train scholars by studying the masters that every other graduate school seems to focus on as well, leaving the scholarly understanding of the rest limited or nonexistent. As I illustrated in the opening paragraphs, the vast majority of popular writers are never studied, their work falls out of fashion and is never read, yet they contribute to the social milieu of a time (and often a place, as well) in ways that *belle lettres* never does. In that sense I am being literarily democratic with a small *d*. There will always be a place for studying giants of literature, but let us remember to include those of the second or third ranks of importance as well. "Spheres of influence" tend to come in all sizes and colors in this kaleidoscope we call literature.

A couple of disclaimers. First, because of personal experience I am sensitive about Nettie Kroll's place, or lack of a place, in the text. This omission stems mostly from a dearth of source material. I hasten to say that Nettie contributed materially to her husband's writing process, and the sum of her influence can be glimpsed in the

discussion of one specific book of his discussed in the third chapter. The problem is that what we have of Kroll's private writing focuses solely on him and his work. There is next to nothing from or about her, although her willingness to subsume her personal interests to maintain their home and allow him to write was probably a major reason he was able to pursue the career he did. Had not Harry had a supportive wife, whether ignored, diffident, submissive, or dominated, he would not have had the sort of temporal and social platform that allowed him to write as he did.

Second, and in the vein of temporal and social platforms, some modern literary scholars may find this study to be inadequately literary. This is intentional. As an historian, I tend to harbor at best a wary suspicion of the premises of literary criticism, particularly postmodernism, which, though its grasp is weakening somewhat, still holds a grip over many approaches to literature. Postmodern views tend to privilege language and perceived meaning in its approach. The viewpoint can be useful—if tethered firmly to the factual realities around a writer, but when cut from their moorings, postmodern interpretations tend to read present sensibilities, themes, ideas, and priorities onto the past. That sort of teleological thinking is unfair to the subject, because it may assert motivations or influences an individual simply did not have.

My scholarship tends toward historicism, with its emphasis on the events of the past in their own context of time, place, and culture. This book is about Kroll, the business of his writing, and his times, not really about his literature. With the exception of an important juxtaposition against his contemporaries, the Nashville Agrarians, I do not attempt to put Kroll into much of a Southern or American literary context beyond the skimmed surfaces you will find here. I am a librarian trained in history with topical practice the U.S. of the twentieth century, the American West, and printing history. This biography is written from those perspectives (well, some of them); I do not aspire to the role of textual critic or literary scholar and simply don't have the training to tackle the mechanics of comparative literary criticism (although I do plunge in like a tyro in spots). More attention is paid to the market for popular writing of the period. My criticisms are limited primarily to narration and observation. I measure Kroll's work and his choice of subjects against literary contemporaries only rarely. This work is primarily to provide a foundation and contextual outline for Harry Kroll as a writer of popular literature and the forces during the twentieth century that made him. I will leave to other scholars the job of putting him into a broader literary context.

CHAPTER 1

A Poor-Man's Boy, 1888–1921

A factual picture of Harry Kroll's early life is obscured by the shading and stories he redrew about himself and his family in later years.[1] To his three sons he was as honest as any parent is about his upbringing, but throughout his "autobiographical" writing Kroll consistently spun the story that his parents were less-than-successful Southern sharecroppers, led by an idealistic but unambitious father and superstitious, passively aggressive mother. Where and how he grew up provided twentieth-century Tennessee novelist and short-story writer Harry Harrison Kroll with a broad, fertile field to plough for his crop of stories.

Harry once described his father, Darius Wesley Kroll as "a smallish man, dark from weather and open sunlight and hard work; his hair, jet black, was beginning to [streak] with gray; . . . his expression was placid and without meaning." Though the description sounds harsh or unfeeling, it was a solid compliment paid by Harry to his father. His son consistently portrayed Darius Kroll as one who understood and accepted bone-hard work as an inalienable right; but Harry also painted his father as a man harboring a broad streak of dreamy, impotent idealism that impelled him to hunt ceaselessly for the sure-thing opportunity, or the place where "fried pigeons would fly into his mouth." Despite the picture of a work-faded dreamer he presents, Harry Kroll's nostalgic affection for his father suffuses his writing about him, even when it seems uncomplimentary. Darius—pronounced with the emphasis on the second syllable—hailed from Indiana. Though official notices of him must exist in scattered public records, he left none of his own. The eleventh federal census taken in 1900 records him as born in October 1857. Virtually nothing is known of his early life and training. His youngest daughter, Natalie, recalled in the late 1970s that her father had worked as a machinist in Muncie, Indiana, before his marriage.[2] Given Darius's later documented work history this position was probably as a semi-skilled assistant rather than as a tradesman, a reflection of the industrializing but still heavily human state of technology in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

The picture Harry Kroll draws of his mother, Caroline or Carolina Cripe, is much less flattering but probably more accurate. Where Harry described his father's physical characteristics and hardly ever his mannerisms, his glimpses of his mother are exactly opposite. Kroll rarely described her physically beyond being "a thick-bodied, unbeautiful woman," with a sweat-stained stamina and nearly limitless capacity for hard physical work. The few photographs in which she appears show a tight-lipped woman with the beginnings of jowls on either side of her face. There is little question from which side of the family Harry inherited his own. More often he portrays her through her actions or speech, allowing her constant seeking for signs and portents, the demands she made of her children's affections, and other unflattering glimpses of personality to speak for themselves. She was furious with the picture of her Harry created in his writing, which she reviled for making her appear low and uncultured; his portrayals clearly reflect the long-held anger Harry felt toward her. Family tradition traces her Anabaptist origins indeterminately to the northwest corner of Indiana, between Indianapolis and Chicago. No precise record of her birth to John C. Cripe Jr. and Rachel Ann Fouts Cripe has been located, but the 1900 census enumeration dates it to November, 1862.[3]

Darius and Caroline Kroll were nominally a Dunkard family (more properly, German Baptist Brethren). The Dunkard sect rose in Germany in the early eighteenth century. Their identity comes from the German term for baptism, *tunken,* which assumed an initial *d* when spelled in the United States. Their distinctive practice of baptism distinguished Dunkards from other sects, even from other Protestants: only adults were baptized and the candidate was immersed face down three times while invoking the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Two mass migrations from Germany in 1719 and 1729 brought virtually the entire sect to Philadelphia among the early waves of German immigrants to the New World. From there sect members multiplied quickly and began migrating: into mountainous Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina by the Revolution, and a generation later into the upper Midwest. Those in the mountains were swept up in the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and integrated into the fire-eating Baptists widely described in Appalachian communities. Those who had moved to the Midwest maintained a tightly knit, pietistic group for another generation. They remained or re-created a cohesive social organization until the first years of the 1880s. Then in a major cultural paradigm shift, the sect stepped into the mainstream of American Protestantism by establishing Sunday Schools, adopting the practice of a paid clergy, and creating a religious revival tradition. These measures split the denomination into three groups at almost exactly the same time that Darius and Caroline Kroll began their family.[4]

That Darius Kroll and Caroline Cripe met and married is a foregone fact, but the circumstances of how and where they met do not survive in a written account, even

among their son's writing or in family tradition. Their 1880 marriage is likewise lost in a dim county record somewhere; Darius married in his early twenties, Caroline in her late teens. According to their youngest daughter's memory, about two years later Caroline delivered a baby boy, who is remembered only as Jimmy, and in 1885 another boy, Charles Blaine. Jimmy died while Charlie was still a baby, leaving the younger boy as the oldest child in the family. Harry Harrison was born to the couple at Hartford City, Indiana, on February 18 or 19, 1888. Years later he decided the eighteenth was fine with him and cited it as his birth date. A little more than a year after Harry's birth, a daughter, Mildred Catherine (Millie), was born (May 1889). Finally in March 1897, around the time they determined to move south, a second daughter, Natalie (almost always called Nattie), was born.[5]

About 1890 the family sat for a group portrait. Like many portraits it presents a study of personality and circumstance. Darius and Caroline are bookends of the group, sitting at opposite ends of the family. She sits at the left of the picture in a collarless, plain, dark work dress with Mildred on her lap, eyes caught by the camera flicking down to check Millie. A neutrality on her face comes across as forced,

The Caroline and Darius Kroll family, ca. 1890: the children, *left to right,* are Mildred (six to nine months), Charles Blaine ("Soddy," six), and Harry Harrison (two, still in skirts). Natalie (Nattie, or "Hatch") would not be born for another six to eight years.

leaving the slightest sign of a tight-lipped frown as the image was taken. Charlie stands between his parents—a meek, round-faced five- or six-year-old with close-cropped hair—wearing a sack coat over his shirt, the loose fist of his right hand holding on uncertainly to two fingers of his left. As far away from his wife as photographic convenience will allow, Darius sits with legs crossed on a wooden kitchen chair, a violin stood upright on one knee with his elbow on a table beside the chair and the bow set casually across his lap. He has a rather weak chin, which he has offset with a broad but rather thin mustache. His hair is short without being cropped, but is shaped or styled only by leaving an unruly or at least ill-combed length on the crown. Darius's eyes glance off to a place beside the camera in an ill-timed, momentary distraction—symbolically, perhaps, it may appear as if he is distracted from the richness of the present by looking for some better, golden chance elsewhere. His bow hand rests on the left shoulder of his youngest son, Harry, who stands closely beside his father in a pattern-print dress. Such attire was the common lot of young boys until they could make it regularly to the outhouse on their own. Harry looks like a typical child, until after a moment an inconsistency in the picture resolves to visual awareness: Harry's left arm is noticeably smaller than is his right. It is not a trick of light; as an infant Harry contracted a mild case of polio. The disease spared his lungs and legs but deadened many of the nerves in one shoulder and upper arm. While he had effective use of his fingers and some rudimentary mobility in the arm itself throughout his life, his left arm was essentially a deadweight. In photographs taken late in life he is often seen with his strong right hand cradling its twin protectively in front of him, or with the left hand hidden by convenient nonchalance in a trouser pocket.

Like so many rural, nineteenth-century Americans, virtually nothing about the Krolls exists in records of any sort. By the late 1890s, the family had moved south to Vincennes, Indiana. With family homes two hundred miles north, why they went to Vincennes, when they arrived, and if they remained long enough for the two girls to be born there as well is a mystery (all the census enumerator recorded on his sheets in 1900 for anyone's place of birth was "Indiana"). Beyond this, nothing at all about the Krolls' early family life is known beyond a few pet names. Darius seemed to have been addressed by his first name by all his children, though Caroline was "Ma." As he was learning to speak, before the girls were born, Harry seemed unable to pronounce the consonantal *ch* and *l* sounds in Charlie's name, which became "Soddy" in his immature speech. Among the family the name stuck. Even sixty years later when he wrote his siblings, Charles still neatly signed his name "Soddy." Millie became "Murdy." Nattie acquired the nickname "Hatch" from her oldest brother since he teased her mercilessly about being hatched under a rock rather than born. As the years passed, however, her brother's teasing took on an affectionate tone between them. On the other hand, Mildred despised her nickname with passion.[6]

In Indiana, the Krolls were among thousands of rural families uprooting from settled American farming communities, pressured from several directions. After the economic expansion of the 1880s, the panic of 1893 rippled outward from the collapse of railroad stocks into the rest of the economy, upsetting credit markets, trade cycles, and farm prices. At the same time a series of droughts in the early1890s left farmers without incomes. Drought debts fueled a round of farm consolidations at the same time that unclaimed arable property in the Midwest was becoming scarce and land prices were increasing. Family holdings of first- and second-generation immigrants were being divided among heirs in parcels too small to sustain them. The average size of land holdings was growing, as smaller parcels were consolidated in the hands of more successful farmers who, thanks to mechanization, could operate on a larger scale. Developments in agricultural implements which made farm consolidation possible also provided for the breaking and cultivation of new land in the huge open spaces of the treeless western plains. Midwesterners—particularly the Brethren, and often as entire communities—responded to territorial land promotions on the high plains of the Dakotas and flocked westward to open the last homesteads of the century. Creating the larger market-responsive farms of the Midwest and new settlement on the Great Plains was possible only through mechanization, which required capital.

A stronger draw, however, pulled rural Americans toward the growing number of manufacturing jobs in burgeoning cities. The U.S. population had gravitated toward the cities as the country industrialized after the Civil War, but even as late as the 1890s a substantial percentage of the country's population was still rural, particularly in the South. Being of German Baptist extraction, Darius and Caroline Kroll were undoubtedly aware of the general dispersal among the sect's fourth- and fifth-generation families. Though some congregations began affecting the standardized costumes that later distinguished Amish and Hutterite sects, most did not. The Dunkard communities were assimilating quickly.

For those who remained on small family holdings, self-sustaining diversification on individual prairie-state farms was shrinking. Older, traditional hand- and animal-powered agriculture was dying quickly. To maintain a working hold on traditional non-mechanical, family based agriculture, a crop succession was required, away from cereal grains to grocery crops. With the new land of the Great Plains unsuited for this type of agriculture, some of the Brethren looked southward to the newly cleared lands of the Southern Pine Belt.

Farm mechanization was slower in the South since the region retained a large, essentially captive labor force. Two races could be played against each other to control labor costs, with a third wildcard—the threat of foreign immigrants—that could be played at will by property and industrial owners if the first two did not cooperate. All three groups could be bound down by the shackles of debt and the inverted economy

of scale that family labor represented. Southern farms, tied not to high-yield grains, but to labor-intensive row crops like sweet potatoes, cotton, tobacco, and corn, tended to be divided into small operations under sharecropping or tenancy arrangements, or worked as a smallholding. Working for shares or as tenants against a line of credit, extended and accounted only by the landowner, virtually guaranteed that laborers could never progress up the "agricultural tenure ladder"—sharecropper to tenant, tenant to land-owning smallholder, smallholder to labor-contracting planter. In the 1880 census a large percentage of Alabama's white population had been smallholders, but land ownership consolidation had occurred in this section too. By 1890 most rural whites across the Deep South had sold or defaulted on their land and become tenants. By the turn of the twentieth century the vast majority of Alabama landowners never actually worked on the land they owned. A large percentage of the state's populace—often off-season farm laborers—also worked for wages in the extensive Southern pinewoods extracting railroad ties, softwood lumber, and turpentine. Still more worked in the coal mines of extreme southern Appalachia, and in the steel and cotton mills that later sprang up.[7] Life in the Deep South for virtually all blacks and most whites, native or immigrant, was a ceaseless round of hard, unremitting work and frequent migration.

Of course, promoters emphasized the opportunities inherent in the South's snowless climate and heavy forests. Nearly eighty years after the fact, the Kroll's youngest daughter recalled—or perhaps speculated—about the motivation that brought the family from Indiana to Alabama, a strange contravention to the general westward exodus of the Brethren at the time. "My dad heard that everything was wonderful down South," she said. "Somebody had made a trip to Alabama and [reported that] everything was wonderful down there, they lived in big houses like a king and queen. Then my dad decided to come to Alabama. That's where they were headed for." If Nattie's memory accurately reflects her parents' motivation, it is tempting to wonder just what Darius and Caroline Kroll had been told. It would be a guess, but a coincident German Baptist venture based in Alabama provides a tempting foundation upon which to speculate.

Among the Midwestern German Baptist Brethren communities was an undercurrent that flowed south, against the general emigration tides to the north and west. Around 1895 one branch of the Brethren had bought large parcels of public land in west Alabama and was developing it specifically for their northern kin and fellow believers. Given the timing of the Krolls' move, 1896, it is very likely that Darius and Caroline had seen or were at least aware of James M. Neff's baldly promotional *Southern Almanac and Hand Book,* published by a development company specifically to attract other Brethren families to a swath of yellow pine forest in the southwest corner of the state. In 1894 Neff had been a teacher at Mt. Morris College in

Illinois, and moonlighted at the Brethren's Publishing Company. Neff approached another educator, N. R. Baker from Mobile County, Alabama, about the possibility of establishing an educational and colonial enterprise somewhere in the sparsely settled areas of the South. In October 1895 the Brethren's School Company was incorporated. Funded with several gifts of unoccupied land, which was to be sold to finance the school operations, a primary school was established in Fruitdale. The Deer Park Academy was acquired in a town of the same name, and Citronelle College was founded in a two-story frame building there. The Brethren School Company was officially a private educational organization, yet the firm and its directors were closely tied to the Alabama Land and Development Company. The latter was actively engaged in enticing colonists south, promoting southern migration among the families of German Baptist extraction in more settled Midwestern areas across Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. The Krolls were almost certainly among those who elected to try their luck among the sandy pines, but they managed to get to Alabama only after a ten-year delay.[8]

Natalie was only an infant when the family left Indiana, but she claimed that around 1896 Darius loaded the family and their possessions into a wagon and headed for Alabama. Her information is faulty (she was born in Indiana herself the next year, so she was obviously off a bit). Seventy years or so later she recalled to one of Harry's sons that their family had managed to get as far as Dyersburg, Tennessee, before the team wore out and their wagon broke irreparably. Harry opened his 1936 book *I Was a Share-Cropper* with the same story: his narrative begins autobiographically as the weary and travel-worn family crosses the Mississippi River and pulls into West Tennessee. If the accounts are correct (and the accuracy of Natalie's memory and Harry's book are both somewhat suspect), then the family probably crossed the Wabash River and the southern tip of Illinois heading for the bridge at Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Turning south, they would have trailed through the cotton lands of the Missouri bootheel and ferried the Mississippi River about where Interstate 55 now bridges the river. Natalie, as noted above, was an infant at the time; Harry would have been eight.

Frankly, there are problems with both versions of the story. The route is hardly a direct road between Indiana and Alabama. Harry's "memoir" as a whole was essentially fanciful, based only loosely on fact, and Natalie's old-age reminiscence—the only other account of the family's early life—is suspect because it parrots her brother's book in so many details. A skeptic could speculate that because *Share-Cropper* was so prominent in family politics it is possible that the whole story about limping into Dyersburg was simply invented by Harry and unwittingly assumed to be accurate by his youngest sister because their mother hated his book so badly. Yet if Natalie's version is not accepted at face value (she was, after all, an infant at the point she describes)

it must at least be considered. So both Harry and Nattie say the family limped into Dyersburg.

The Brethren's School Company land, however, straddled the southern stretch of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad main line, which reached northward from the Gulf port at Mobile, Alabama, to St. Louis, Missouri. At Cairo, Illinois, the M&O connected with the Terra Haute & Indianapolis Railroad (Vandalia Line), which passed straight through Vincennes, Indiana. Under an arrangement with the School Company, the M&O was offering free transportation to Brethren moving to the Alabama settlements. Given the preeminence of rail over roads for interstate travel in the late nineteenth century, it is positively curious why the Krolls did not take the train. Perhaps they did, but Harry later decided that riding the train hardly met with the idea of a poor white sharecropper on the move, and wrote it out of his story. Perhaps they had money enough only for passage part of the way. We do not know. But irrespective of how the family arrived in Tennessee, they did, and the facts of the family's landing there and their reasons for settling there are probably an irrecoverable detail.[9]

The family settled into Dyersburg, the seat of Dyer County. In 1895 Dyersburg was a town of about 2,800, good-sized by nineteenth century standards. The town sits about fifteen miles inland from the Mississippi, almost exactly parallel with the bottom of the Missouri bootheel. It was a regional cotton depot, its fields and gins producing baled cotton by the trainload, destined for the Memphis cotton market. By Natalie's account, Darius found work in the municipal electric plant and the family settled into a large house "of eight or nine rooms" about a mile from town. Her account presents a far different picture than the accommodation Harry later portrayed as a ramshackle sharecropper's cabin in *I Was a Share-Cropper.* Around Dyersburg young Harry may have observed firsthand the rock-hard existence of cotton sharecropping, but the family circumstance was probably not what Harry Kroll later described. He may have worked a garden plot for family provender, and he and the other children may have done fieldwork on a seasonal basis. If Natalie's memory is accurate and Darius worked for the city, he did not remain there long. The 1900 census lists his occupation not as a city worker but as "dairy man," and notes that his house was rented, not owned, so he was likely working as herdsman or milker for another landholder. Thirty years later in the typesetter's manuscript for *Share-Cropper,* the publisher uniformly changed the name of George W. Pierce—who may have been Darius Kroll's employer—to George Washington "Wash" Kinsey.[10]

Though the Krolls remained in Dyersburg for nearly a decade, they avoided notice in virtually every public record: they neither bought nor sold land, were neither sued for non-payment of their debts nor resorted to the law to collect what was owed them. No one in the family was born, died, was declared incompetent, or became a ward of the courts. Darius never a served as witness or juror, was charged with no breach of

law, evidently paid their debts, and owned no personal property of sufficient value to tax. They did no business that required a pledge of assets against a contract, which was common in what was still largely a cash, barter, and private-credit society. The only Dyer County or Dyersburg city record in which a family member actually appears is the county tax assessment record. Darius was annually assessed a $2 poll tax. Since the poll book columns were never marked "paid," he never voted in an election, either. By 1900, when he reached an age sufficient to be exempted from the poll tax, the entire family had already vanished into complete legal anonymity.[11]

In his publishers' advertising material and while teaching college courses years later, Harry was fond of claiming that he had never been to school. The claim must be taken at face value since no contemporary records exist to confirm or disprove it, but there are historical problems with Kroll's claim. The chief problem is that his major piece of "autobiographical" writing is largely fiction, but it is virtually the only comment on his early life and the closest thing to source material that exists. Both parents were literate, and Darius was said to read music as well. The couple demonstrated some commitment to education. Thirty years later, in one of the few passages more likely to be autobiographically accurate in *Share-Cropper,* Kroll discussed his introduction to literature in listening to his mother and older brother read from the reading material common to the working class of the day—story papers, delivered weekly. The two girls made a daily rail trip to and from school after the family moved further south. Soddy became a respected architectural draftsman and later a chemical-plant worker for Monsanto, which requires specialized training, Harry's earliest publications reveal a fairly sophisticated familiarity with writing that his claim does not support.

Even if he *was* natively bright and a quick study, it is exceedingly unlikely that Harry Kroll would have developed into the sort of writer that he became, strictly on his own. The Krolls were a family with some attainments, however limited; but while the two boys were young they worked for wages instead of attending school. It would not have raised many eyebrows. "Poor whites feared the loss of wages," notes Alabama historian J. Wayne Flynt, "but also resented the way compulsory school attendance laws meddled with their children's lives."[12] Yet the family also probably realized that literacy was a means of social improvement. Harry Kroll frequently invoked a theme of "I cannot remember a time when I could not read" as evidence of individual effort when impressing someone with his rise-from-rural-poverty upbringing. What broader literacy Harry gained came from natural talent as a reader, listening to the stories read from story papers on the porch in the evenings, and whatever infrequent efforts Caroline (or more likely Darius) made in educating the children at home; but it came hard won, primarily by self-driven study. Unless he was flatly lying about never attending school, literacy and education became a lodestone for Harry Kroll quite

early in life. At twelve Harry secured a subscription to *Cosmopolitan,* which was then a literary magazine, by saving three hundred discarded tobacco-sack tags and gum wrappers.[13] Literacy became important to him.

The American working class of the Gilded Age (1869–1896), both urban and rural, read almost as avidly as the middle and upper classes, though their literature differed from the magazines and books more likely to be preserved and remembered in libraries. Most of it came in the form of cheap serials, either bought in newsstands, at drug store and tobacconists' counters, or by subscription through the mail. America's mainstream publishing industry shifted generationally in the 1880s, and its three market segments—books, newspapers, and magazines—underwent a paradigm shift as well. The popularity of sophisticated literary of writers like Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, Louisa May Alcott, and Henry James declined overall in favor of what literary historian Christopher Wilson has called "popular naturalism," stemming from the Progressive views of individuals like editors Edward Bok and Samuel S. McClure. A social conscience crept quietly into mainstream American fiction and magazine culture, one that saw its highest expression in the Muckraking journalists of the 1880s and 1890s. Concern for actual conditions over abstract ideals, sparked by endemic industrial exploitation, seeped broadly into popular writing just at the time that Harry Kroll was discovering American letters. Of course, Harry Kroll and most of the rest of working America did not read within the literary mainstream. He read the "common" or "casual literature" of the day: cheap weekly publications like the four- and eight-page story papers published by Sunday School organizations, and the children's columns of farm-life family publications like *Our Country Home* or *Progressive Farmer.* Delivered by mail and passed from hand to hand, both genres had broad rural followings. Virtually every publication available included short fiction in its pages—windows into worlds of adventure and invitations to moral development—that would have supplemented the standard education of the day.[14] For Harry Kroll, reading and rereading casual literature substituted for an education.

Even during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it would have been common for a poor rural kid, particularly in the South, to have little or no formal education at all, for several reasons. First, schools were pinned to specific locations in a community but attracted children from rural families thinly dispersed over large areas. Grandparents' and great-grandparents' stories of walking miles to school, at which later generations rolled their eyes, were not necessarily exaggerations, since non-work transportation was severely limited or nonexistent. Second, from the time they were large enough to swing a hoe or pull a cotton boll, children's labor often represented a substantial labor asset for a poor family. Working the land or earning wages at a factory was common in childhood until child labor laws were enforced in the 1920s.