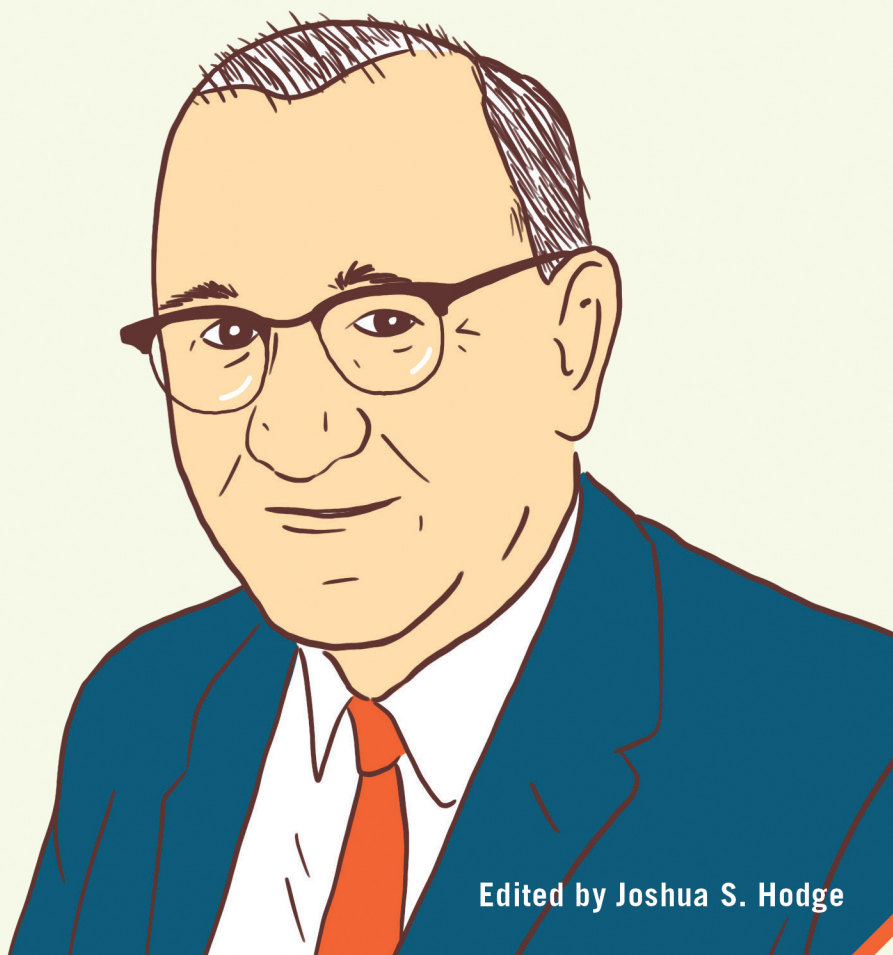


CAS WALKER

STORIES ON HIS
LIFE AND LEGEND



Edited by Joshua S. Hodge



CAS WALKER

Stories on His Life and Legend

★ ★ ★

EDITED BY

Joshua S. Hodge

The University of Tennessee Press ★ Knoxville



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I think he will always be talked about. Good or bad, I don't know— but I think as time goes on, there will be more stories about him, because people that were there and dealt with him directly are gonna be gone.

And some of the people will be sitting around: “This is what I heard. . . . This is what I heard.”

“This man couldn't have been like that! This man couldn't have done that!”

But he did! He did. That's what attracted me to him.

He'd go somewhere, and crowds—you could see them: “Cas is gonna be here!”

I'd go to that store on Magnolia, because it was closer to me. “Cas is gonna be out in the parking lot this afternoon at 2:00!”

“Doing what?”

“Just be out in the parking lot talking to people.”

And people would come from all over, just to see him, me included.

I'd get across the street on a little bank, and sit there for thirty, forty minutes waiting on him. I couldn't hear what he was saying, he was across the street. Just to see him.

—JACK SHARP, Knoxville City Councilman

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Many people and institutions have contributed to this project. I am so pleased to take a moment to thank everyone who provided stories, insights, and commentary about Cas Walker. However, any and all mistakes within these pages are my own.

First and foremost, this book is the culmination of an idea Ernest Freeberg had years ago. I have been very fortunate to be the beneficiary of his superb intellect and am thankful to have him as a leader, confidant, and friend. His financial, intellectual, and moral support has cultivated my confidence as a scholar and enhanced this project in numerous ways. Without Dr. Freeberg, this book would not exist.

The people of Knoxville have also greatly enriched this book. A special thanks to Victor Ashe, Betty Bean, Robert “Bob” Booker, James Bragg, Becky Orange Dwarshius, Bennie Wallen Jean, Bob Lutrell, Larry Mathis, Zimbabwe Motavou, Bo Pierce, Bradley Reeves, Doug “Rowdy Cope” Rutherford, Jack Sharp, Julia Tucker, Randy Tyree, Ben H. Walker, Carl Warner, David West, Bruce Wheeler, and Jack Wiedemann. I spent many hours conversing with these interviewees and thoroughly enjoyed their company, even beyond their knowledge of Cas Walker. Included in this book of stories are also several previously published articles. The works of Betty Bean, Ray Jenkins, Bill Maples, Jacquelyn B. McClary, and Sam Venable contextualize the life of Cas Walker.

While conducting interviews in the summer of 2016, Bean published a short article that promoted our project to Knoxville readers and invited people to submit their own stories. In response, a variety of people contacted the UT History Department with written submissions that helped illuminate some of the more evasive events in Walker’s life. For their submissions, I would like to thank Carter G. Baker, David Correll, Louie Chester

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In addition to archives located in Knoxville, the "Archives of Appalachia" at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City also contain several videos of Cas Walker. Laura Elizabeth Smith guided me through several holdings, including film contributed by David West, Bradley Reeves, and Virgil Q. Wacks. Several of these have been uploaded to our Cas Walker website: <http://caswalkerstories.utk.edu>.

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Josh Hodge at the East Tennessee History Center
being interviewed by Georgiana Vines
for his research into Cas Walker.
Photo by Georgiana Vines.

EDITOR MEMORIAL

Joshua S. Hodge (1984–2019)

Joshua S. Hodge received his BA from Auburn University, and his MA in history from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. As a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, he concentrated on southern and environmental history. He won a number of the department's research and teaching awards, as well as several external fellowships, and was a valued member of the UT History Department's community. He received his PhD in May 2019, completing a dissertation entitled, "Alabama's Public Wilderness: Reconstruction Politics, Natural Resources, and the End of the Southern Commons, 1866–1905."

In the summer that Josh began research on his dissertation, as well as this oral history of Cas Walker, he was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer. He died on May 23, 2019. Through these years of good work and all the challenges of his illness, he was supported by his wife, Erica Spencer, and his daughter, Hazel, to whom this book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

Cas Walker, Knoxville, and the American Century

In the spring of 1902, Orton Caswell “Cas” Walker was born near “the Sinks” in Sevier County, in the hills of East Tennessee. Born to Thomas Walker and Annie Stephens Walker, Cas was the seventh of twelve children. Growing up, he heard tales from his father about fighting as a member of the “blue bills,” a vigilante group that battled the “white caps” who had terrorized the region in the post-Civil War years. In his early teens, Cas volunteered for the United States Navy. Though he was too young to serve, navy doctors fixed his wandering eye. When he returned home, Cas devoted himself to a variety of hard jobs, working to help support his family. He crossed the Great Smoky Mountains to shovel coal in North Carolina. Sometime between his first appearance in the coal camps and his arrival in Knoxville, Cas ventured to the Plains states where he baled and loaded hay. Returning to coal camps in Brookside and Ages, Kentucky, he clerked in company stores and “carried water” for card players. Whether hauling coal or peddling wares, Cas hustled. He staged “chicken shoots” in which each participant paid a nickel per shot—a precursor to a publicity stunt he used years later in his Knoxville grocery stores, throwing chickens off the roof to attract customers.

Moving to Knoxville in 1924, Walker opened his first store at 1100 East Vine Avenue with money he had saved from his early entrepreneurship. He delivered groceries to local customers, towing the wagon himself, and began to learn how to win the loyal “trade” of his Knoxville neighbors.

From his country upbringing, Walker rose to build a grocery empire. By 1932, at only thirty years of age, he had ten grocery stores. Though the Great Depression slowed the pace of Walker’s expanding cash stores, at the height of his entrepreneurial career he owned at least twenty-seven retail ventures. These could be found in Knoxville—on Western Avenue, Magnolia Avenue, or in Happy Holler, to name a few—but he also founded grocery stores in

Appalachia and Pennington Gap, Virginia, and in eastern Kentucky as well. Even as his fortune grew, Cas retained and even cultivated his country-boy image, wearing rumpled suits, calling himself “the ole coon hunter,” promoting the region’s many great bluegrass and country musicians, and publishing weekly columns that often reminisced about his adventures growing up in the mountains of East Tennessee.

In 1928 Cas married Virginia Grantham, a childhood sweetheart, and sired a daughter, Wilma June, in 1930. Though he and “Ginnie” had only one child, they took in other family members, including a nephew, Odell Cas Lane, who eventually became a state representative and one of Walker’s political allies.

In the mid-twentieth century Cas served two abbreviated terms as mayor, while serving for some thirty years as a city councilman. Voters first elected Cas to the city council in 1941. The first mayoral term came in 1945, but he was recalled overwhelmingly on December 3, 1946. Later, he served as “acting mayor” in 1959 after the death of Mayor Jack Dance. Though Cas’s final term on the city council ended in 1971, he spent nearly another decade in local politics while serving on the Knox County Housing Authority. There he attended meetings, decided the location of public housing, and caused a ruckus when he abruptly fired one of his political rivals, “Cadillac Jack” Cooper. Perhaps Cas’s final act in politics involved his work to help elect Knoxville’s youngest mayor, Randy Tyree, and the subsequent fight over the 1982 World’s Fair. Throughout his political career, Cas’s reputation as a “bare-knuckle” politician meant that anyone who opposed him would have to put up a fight—at least once, quite literally.

Outside of politics, Walker became a legend for his role in showcasing local talent on his radio and television shows. He began as a public announcer in the late 1940s and early 1950s for country and gospel radio programs. His first television show appeared in the evening on WATE in 1956. The WBIR station, which aired his popular morning show—Cas Walker’s “Farm and Home Hour”—did not exist until later that year. The morning show hosted Dolly Parton’s first television appearance when she was only in high school, but she had already performed on Cas’s radio program in Knoxville at age ten. Dolly and Cas sustained a friendship until his death in 1998, and Cas can be credited with nurturing the careers of many excellent musicians. But he did not always recognize quality talent on his show. His firing of the young Everly Brothers is a case in point. Nevertheless, through the years viewers watched some of East Tennessee’s phenomenal entertainers,

alongside a string of amateur cloggers and gospel singers. Rock and rollers like the band “Poker” tried their set on Walker’s show, too, only to be shuffled offstage by Cas in a huff.

Cas displayed his entrepreneurial talent in his grocery-store chain, his gruff charisma on radio and television, and his political prowess in city hall. While these were major elements of Walker’s career, he also dabbled in other areas. He produced the *Watchdog* newspaper, in which he lambasted political opponents with nicknames and folksy ridicule. He bought, trained, and sold prize-winning show horses and hunting dogs, using the latter to track raccoons in upcountry Georgia. Though his political fortunes began to wane in the 1980s, he continued his “against it”—or, as he would say, “agin’ it”—attitude until his last days. Cas died in the fall of 1998 and, in the end, left an indelible impression on the city of Knoxville. The legend of his life that has persisted into the twenty-first century—as told by local Knoxvilleans—is the subject of this book.

When I moved to the city in 2013 to join the doctoral program in history at the University of Tennessee, I had never heard of Cas Walker. As an out-of-towner ignorant of local politics, much less local folklore, I had overlooked the traces of Cas Walker still draped over the city. His picture hangs at the Time Warp Tea Room in Happy Holler. At Ciderville Music in Powell, David West and an assortment of talented pickers still sit and reminisce about the legend of the “Ole Coon Hunter.” Former politicians such as Jack Sharp, Robert Booker, and Randy Tyree still mention the man with whom they had no choice but to engage in their own political careers.

With praise came scorn, however. Many younger and more cosmopolitan Knoxvilleans found Walker’s outlandish antics and bumpkin image an embarrassment. But even many of his critics came to grudgingly admire the grocer’s knack for marketing ploys. Whether scattering freshly ground JFG Coffee beans along his store floors to stimulate sales, attracting crowds by throwing chickens off the roof, or luring customers by burying a man in the parking lot of his Chapman Highway grocery store, Cas Walker knew how to command everyone’s attention. Who could forget the photo of Walker attempting to punch a fellow councilman that was published in *Life* magazine and distributed globally? Indeed, this conflict with J. S. Cooper showed the outside world just how “scruffy” the city could be. He believed there was no such thing as bad publicity, as long as they said, or spelled, his name right.

Any Knoxvillean born before 1980 remembers the gravelly voiced grocer-millionaire. Nearly twenty years since his death, stories of Walker’s marketing

antics and dominating personality retain an important place in the city's collective memory. He is the hero, the underdog, the truth-teller, and often the joker of the city's urban folklore. He stayed in the public eye for much of his life—through radio, television, and newspapers—which spanned most of the twentieth century. From “coon-dog” peddler to marketing mastermind, from his fight against fluoridation of the city's water to his manipulation of local elections, Cas spoke his mind—and in colorful ways that many still remember.

This book brings together the recollections of various Knoxvilleians who agreed to share their own Cas Walker stories in long-form interviews. These are supplemented with stories submitted by many in the region who never met the man but certainly knew his legend. Our interviewees consist of many Knoxville notables, including former mayors and councilmen, political opponents, civil rights activists, historians, and musicians. Written submissions contain stories ranging from newcomers' first impressions of East Tennessee through Cas's television programs to awkward job-interview experiences at his Tennessee Valley Advertising Agency and, of course, Dolly's first television appearance. The collected stories include much truth, but they also contain a dose of mythology. I hope that they help capture the cultural richness surrounding the many memories of Cas Walker that reveal so much about twentieth-century Knoxville. Yet, to strike a balance between fact and fiction, I have also scoured Cas Walker's biographical clippings files, his *Watchdog* newspaper, and other archival materials held at the Calvin M. McClung Collection at the East Tennessee History Center (ETHC). By melding together previously published materials with recent recollections of this millionaire man of the people, this book gathers a rich set of resources for the people of Knoxville and the students of its history.

I was invited to join this project by my advisor and UT history professor Ernest Freeberg. When Freeberg arrived in Knoxville, he happened to purchase a quaint home on Gaston Avenue, the house in North Hills in which Walker had lived for most of his life. Multiple visitors came by, eager to tell some of their Cas Walker stories. As the sale proceeded, he found stacks of paperwork and knick-knacks in the basement of the home and, as a proper historian, thought that a local museum or archive would surely want this cache of primary resources produced by Cas. By the time the sale had finalized, Freeberg returned to find that all the items had vanished into thin air. While those relics of the past have yet to be found, members of the

Knoxville community, Freeberg thought, would still remember Walker as his pronounced presence had been burned into their memories.

In the pages that follow, the reader will find new and old materials that consider key moments in the twentieth century: the Great Depression, the “red scare” era, and the civil rights movement, to name a few. While these vignettes from Walker’s life do not offer an exhaustive examination of each subject, one does gain a sense of how regional, national, and global events affected Knoxville. Through his sustained relationship with local television and newspaper media, Walker commented frequently on essentially every topic the city council or mayor’s office tackled. Known for being “agin’ it,” Walker earned a reputation among many for standing against progress and holding the city back. Some even claim that Knoxville would be only a little country town if it had been left up to Cas Walker. But, as this book shows, Walker served as an important balance, if a negative one, to the newest trends in local government and the progressive ideas that he so often viewed with suspicion.

Walker was a walking contradiction, and this may be one reason why his story continues to fascinate so many. He was a millionaire who intentionally dressed down so that the less affluent could identify with him. He sent flowers to funeral homes and provided burial money for the needy but simultaneously reinforced his reputation as a bare-knuckle politician and entrepreneur by threatening to “whoop” any potential robbers. Love him or hate him, Cas Walker’s shadow continues to shape perceptions of Knoxville’s past and visions of its future. One can only hope, as I do, that the legend of Cas Walker is memorialized in this book for Knoxville’s benefit as a new century without him has dawned.



The following chapters contain transcribed oral history stories, previously published newspaper articles, and written submissions. In an effort to capture the genuine voices that make up this book, I have chosen to publish the stories as close to their original forms as possible. As he said about his own editorials—and as is mirrored in this book—Cas Walker stories are “supposed to have mistakes.”