

Brother Dog

Southern Tales & Hollywood Adventures

“**Harry Thomason’s memoir** takes us from the haunting stillness of a mid-century Arkansas night (with a serial killer on the loose) to the set of *The Tonight Show* (with a future president on the sax). It’s a sometimes-gentle sometimes-wild ride through the century, with the good-hearted Coach Thomason as a guide.

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—**Peter Johnson** author, former *USA Today* Columnist



My little brother Danny and me.

Brother Dog

Southern Tales & Hollywood Adventures

Harry Thomason



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Dedication

For LBT

Loving you has been the greatest adventure of all.

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A Note to the Reader

A FRIEND ONCE TOLD ME THAT HE ENJOYED READING MEMOIRS and biographies because he was strangely comforted to know that others who appeared outwardly successful had faced uncommon hurdles, seemingly insurmountable obstacles, seasons of crippling grief, and times of deep discouragement. My friend will find pitfalls, pratfalls, and obstacles aplenty in these stories.

I am blessed with enough aunts, uncles, cousins, and others—as well as my nuclear family—to fill a military barracks. From that family, I have learned to be compassionate, usually dutiful, and always observant. As an adult working in the business of storytelling, I've seen the power of observation, truthful reportage (even if in a drama), and reflection. These stories are the principal reflections of an old man who has found magic—and occasional profit—in telling tales that audiences bought tickets or tuned in to follow.

What won't be found in these stories are political opinions, partisan glorifications, or diatribes. This is not a book telling all I know about old friends, whether they be politicians, Hollywood actors, or musicians. Yes, you will find a few stories that touch on the interlacing of our lives with the Clintons (I have known Bill since his graduate school days). But, at its core, this is the story of a life—my life. If I ever decide to tell all I know about prominent

friends, it will come in another book (one not actively in my life-plan today). Maybe I will include friends here in a small story or two, but that's not the focus of this volume. In the pages that follow, you will read about my small-town childhood antics, my little brother, Danny, and our brother, a dog named Ted. You will follow me through high school and college antics—some well-conceived, but most from the “lucky to survive” category. And you will hear about the dreams, struggles, and coincidences that have led me from the joys of coaching high school football to the frustrations and rewards of years producing and directing films and TV programs—both series and movies.

Fate has occasionally thrown me into the path of people whose names were household words, and I have reported those incidents where I thought the moment rose to the level of general interest, insight, or entertainment. Stories—and memory—are subjective, anyone who has been in the storytelling business as long as I have has learned that lesson (probably painfully) and has re-learned it more times than he would like to admit.

Here, you will discover stories of my gratitude for a banker named Randy, an ad man named Jim, a working man who put his buddies above himself, a lawyer who stooped to protect me from myself during my early days in the film business, and a woman I have been so incredibly fortunate to call my wife. My editor tells me you will enjoy the read. All I can say is thanks for sharing the journey.

Harry Thomason
Encino, California
June, 2019

Introduction

Linda Bloodworth Thomason

THESE STORIES ARE IMBUED WITH A BASIC HUMANITY and way of life seldom seen anymore. As the person who knows him best, I can assure you that Harry is the kindest and most reliable human being I've ever known. I believe I can trace the origin of Harry's good heart and steady character to the small, Arkansas town where he grew up. His parents owned a little store, where it was said they gave away more groceries than they sold. His mother used to joke that "The whole town raised Harry." You could check him out like a library book, take him fishing, or if you were the mail or milkman, you could even take him on your rounds. He was completely free-range, part of a posse of six year olds racing through the Arkansas woods, with Harry atop his favorite horse, Old Bird and his beloved dog, Ted, running alongside. As these stories suggest, his only boundary was his own imagination.

His daughter Stacy says, "Dad's the guy who always has his arm around the most left-out person in the room."

As his friend, President Bill Clinton says, "Harry not only shows up, but also stays for the dark night."

And then there's his legendary optimism. Actor Billy Bob

Thornton—who named his son after Harry—does a hilarious, spot-on imitation of him as the leader of the ill-fated Donner party delivering an electrifying, motivational speech to his fellow travelers.

I have always suspected the reason Harry is so comfortable in his own skin is because he traverses the world as though it's his little hometown writ large. He's just as copacetic hanging out in a black church with his family's maid, May Ethel (both of them spellbound by the music of a teenage B.B. King) as he would someday be while introducing British Prime Minister Tony Blair to Chuck Berry—Blair's childhood idol. He is just as at ease sitting on the porch, chatting with his fifty-year-old special needs cousin, Mervyn—"Mama, come outside! Ha-reee's here!"—as he would one day be, when discussing football over drinks with Sir Laurence Olivier.

Even the overly-ambitious fights he had with a much older and larger town bully, no doubt helped prepare him for future bouts of having to wrestle *Evening Shade* star Burt Reynolds to the ground (usually, for threatening to beat up the writers). As one of them fondly recalls, "I'll never forget Harry's sweet, soft-spoken drawl saying, 'I'm not going to hurt you Burt, I'm just gonna hold you for awhile.'"

As I finish these warm and colorful pages, I feel fortunate to have shared my life with the man who wrote them. And lived them. And I am frankly awed by the beautiful, audacious women who made him possible. From his wise and enterprising mother to all of his aunts—especially the basketball-playing ones who often

piled into Harry's room on game nights when it was too late to make it home. They are the ladies who gave him a lasting tutorial in rowdy, Southern feminism—alternately dazzling, molding and challenging him to be a better boy—and consequently, an even better man. Harry is the sort who loves, respects, and reveres women—especially the *Designing* kind.

I never wanted to be married. But luckily, Harry, who's a pilot, rented a small plane one day and flew it to my hometown in Missouri, where he called me and said, "Okay, your childhood bedroom is blue and I'm standing in it. I've just taken your parents to dinner and given them the horrific news that I've fallen in love with their daughter and am planning to ask her to marry me, as soon as I get back to California. They're shaken but seem to be thinking about it. I hope you're not gonna make me look bad." I didn't. That was the best decision I've ever made. In the end, I followed my father's life-long edict: Never marry a man unless he loves you as much as I love your mother."

Sadly, my dad did not live to see our wedding. On the last day of his life, he called me into his hospital room. As a former prosecutor all too familiar with poor male behavior, he had been less than enthusiastic about most of the young men I dated. He wanted me to know that he was at peace now. Invoking my childhood nickname, Daddy said, "Nawson, you were always bringing home boys ... You finally brought home a man." Then, squeezing my hand, he bestowed his highest and final accolade, "Harry's a peach." I smiled. Indeed.

The Killer Just Miles Away

TEXARKANA, TEXAS, 1946. On a chilly February night, Jimmy and Mary Jeanne were talking in Jimmy's car. It was a lonely road and a dark night. They never saw the man coming. Suddenly, the door was jerked open and the intruder, a burlap sack over his head, two slits for his eyes, was screaming, "Get out of the car, now!"

They went out into the black night. The intruder beat Jimmy with his handgun. What sounded like gunshots to Mary Jeanne was really the sound of Jimmy's skull being cracked by the pistol handle. The man then assaulted Mary Jeanne but fled as, without warning, a car approached.

Mary Jeanne and Jimmy were the lucky ones. They lived that February night. Most of the unnamed intruder's other victims were not going to be so fortunate.

Ninety-five miles away, I woke up in the early morning and stumbled into the kitchen to the smell of my mother's bacon, and preparing for another day in the first grade. My dad slurped his coffee, unfolded the newspaper, and read. My mom hummed

as she stirred a pan of oatmeal for me. Something was different. They seemed distracted listening to KRLD, the radio station in El Dorado, a much larger, nearby town. Soon, I heard the news reporting last night's attack on the young couple.

In the early Twenty-First Century, we have become inured to random violent acts but in 1946 such an attack was unnerving. Nervously, I asked a few questions and was reassured by Mom such a thing "... will probably not happen again, besides, it was almost a hundred miles away! Don't worry."

At recess, my neighbor and good friend, Charlie, a third-grader, said his parents had been listening to their radio during breakfast, too. He asked if it scared me. Jauntily, I replied, "No, it's far away. It was all the way in Texas."

"No," Charlie says, "my dad says half of the town is in Arkansas." Okay, maybe I was actually a little nervous.

Over the next few weeks, the incident entirely slipped from my mind.

It was soon to return.

I came in from the yard where Charlie, a great storyteller, had just finished telling my friends about an imaginary trip to the moon. My mom stood motionless by the kitchen radio holding my two-year-old baby brother, Danny, in her arms. I listened, as the booming voice on CBS Radio recounted the grisly details of last night's double murder in Texarkana, Texas. Polly Ann Moore and Richard Griffin had been shot in the back of the head on a lonely road. Mom turned, saw me, and quickly reached to turn the radio off. At supper, when I asked about it, she told me not to

fret. The murder was far away and in Texas.

I did fret. I couldn't fall asleep while hearing the muffled radio through my door. The announcer described an atmosphere of anxiety. People were nervous for miles around Texarkana because of reports that a killer was prowling the area. A term hadn't been invented for this type of crime yet, but it was about to be.

A media circus descended upon Texarkana. Reporters, mostly hardened men wearing fedoras and carrying wooden pencils and small notebooks in which they endlessly scratched, were shouting questions. A few carried microphones and fifty-pound audio recorders. TV was still five to ten years away in most markets.

Charlie said, "My dad hopes the killer comes here. Dad says he'd give that bad guy both barrels of his twelve-gauge shotgun." It was okay with me if he didn't come to Hampton, especially next door to Charlie's house.

Again, the scariness went away in a few weeks. Just as I was beginning to sleep soundly, it happened again.

Betty Jo Booker and Paul Martin were shot dead. She was attacked before she was murdered. It was all over the newspapers, magazines and radio stations. Now Satan had a name: The Phantom Killer. This was big. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Look* magazine teams arrived in Texarkana to report on it. Charlie and I sat on the doorstep as darkness slowly covered the town. "Dad thinks it might be a policeman. I want to go to Texarkana," Charlie says.

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked.

Mom interrupted before he could answer, “Okay guys, time to get inside, it’s dark. Charlie, I’ll watch until you get through the door.” Funny, she never made us come in because it was dark *before* and she had never watched Charlie as he crossed our yard into his house. She had her arm around me as she waved Charlie through his back door.

That night the radio said that people in almost every home in Texarkana were sleeping with guns near their beds. As Mom was tucking me into bed, I could hear the NBC radio network reporting that even as far away as Oklahoma City terrified people were arming themselves.

“Mom, how far is Oklahoma City from Texarkana?”

“About three hundred miles.”

“Gosh, we’re just ninety-something miles away!”

“It’s okay. Go to sleep, honey. I love you.” She kissed me, turned out the lamp, and walked out. I lay in the darkness. Scared.



Children in my town no longer stayed out after dark. Cars on the street were rare after nine o’clock at night. Teenagers stopped dating—at least in cars—after dark. The movie theaters in nearby El Dorado canceled evening showings of Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner in *The Killers* and sat empty after dark.

Charlie kept thinking of ways we could trap the guy if we could just get his dad to take us to Texarkana. Later, I heard the sound of the radio wafting through my door as my parents listened to the late-night edition of CBS news. “I’m Walter Cronkite and this is *CBS Radio News*. Tonight, famed Texas Ranger Manuel

'Lone Wolf' Gonzauillas arrived in Texarkana, the town straddling the border of Texas and Arkansas. He vowed to use every resource to stop the horrible killing spree in this small town ..." As I lay in the dark listening to the sound of distant traffic, I drifted off to sleep earlier than usual. The Rangers were here!

For a month, it was very quiet, people even began staying out late again, and the movie business in Texarkana and elsewhere went back to normal. The Rangers might not have caught anyone, but their vigilance was keeping the beast from striking again.

That illusion ended abruptly on May third at an isolated farmhouse located three miles northeast of Texarkana, when Virgil Starks was shot to death by The Phantom Killer. His wife heard the shots and ran to the phone only to meet two gunshots to the face. As the killer slipped into the woods, Mrs. Starks managed to run out the front door to a neighbor's house. She survived but could not provide a description of the killer.

There was one other thing, these victims were on the Arkansas side of the border. "Mom, the person that hurts people is now in Arkansas?"

"It's okay, he's still very far away." A little comfort but not entirely convincing. That night, I noticed my dad carrying something down the hallway into their room. I watched as he carefully placed his deer-rifle under his side of the bed. He didn't know I saw him, but it induced a terror-filled night. I loaded my Roy Rogers six-shooter with caps and placed it under my pillow. *Can't be too careful.*

I wish this story had a great ending where the Ranger caught

the killer. But sometimes life doesn't tidy itself up before it moves on. Weeks then months passed with no more killings. Finally, the charismatic Ranger moved himself and his cohorts out of town—quietly so the killer would not know they were gone.

And that was it, no more killings. The circus left town and the murders faded from the news. America was left with a new phrase in its vocabulary, *serial killer*.

In 1946, television barely existed. You could only read newspapers, listen to the radio, and let your imagination fill in the picture. No camera can ever produce an image more terrifying than your imagination. That's how we became a nation in fear for a few weeks in 1946.

On a some kind of day in 1974, I was editing a TV commercial in my office in Little Rock, and the phone rang. Someone shouted, "Charlie Pierce is on the phone!" I picked up the phone, "Hey, are you in town?"

"No, I'm in Texarkana and I'm going to make a new film. I wanted to run it by you."

"What's it called?"

"*The Town That Dreaded Sundown.*"

He didn't have to tell me what it was about. A beat, then Charlie spoke, "Do you think we can sleep at night, if I make it?" Even after all those years, I had to take a small, measured breath.

"Yeah, I believe we can sleep."

By then my childhood friend, "Charlie, the storyteller," had become an accomplished filmmaker, starting with the hugely successful *Legend of Boggy Creek*. Then *Bootleggers* was followed by

The Town That Dreaded Sundown, starring Academy Award winner Ben Johnson. It became a major success and a cult classic for him—plus, it was recently remade—a real tribute!