

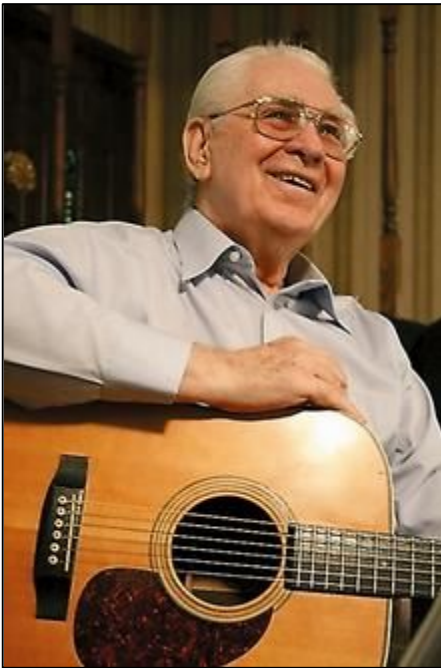
HISTORIAN TRACKS DOWN SURVIVING MEMBERS OF RANDOLPH FAMILY BAND

By Morgan Simmons
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Ruby Randolph Simmons, left, and her brother, Carl Randolph, sing and play guitar in Randolph's Cookeville, Tenn., home on May 21. They are two of the three surviving members of the Randolph Family Band.

East Tennessee History Center



Carl Randolph of the Randolph Family Band is one of three surviving members of the band, which was started by their father Norman Randolph in 1939.

COOKEVILLE, Tenn. - The only evidence was a 1946 photo that showed the Randolph Family Band posing with their instruments in front of a 16 mm movie camera.

In Bradley Reeves' line of work, this was tantamount to a treasure map. As director of the Tennessee Archive of Moving Images and Sound in the East Tennessee History Center, Reeves spends his time preserving the region's rich heritage as captured on old records and film.

In most cases, Reeves works hard to track down and preserve the moving images and sound recordings stored in the archives. Normally, a fair amount of detective work is involved. In the case of the Randolph Family Band, the lost material fell into his lap.

Reeves knew that the Randolph Family Band - Norman Randolph, his wife and their five children - was a fixture around Knoxville throughout the 1940s. He knew they did a lot of traveling, and he could only assume that the fresh, smiling faces captured on the black-and-white publicity photo had passed on, or disappeared without a trace.

A few weeks ago Reeves got a phone call from Ruby Randolph Simmons, the youngest member of the Randolph Family Band. Now 72 and living in Cookeville, Tenn., Simmons was looking for an old photo of her sisters taken by the News Sentinel. She wasn't aware that Reeves had spent nine years trying to track down her family based on a single photo.

Simmons, it turns out, was still singing with her older brother, Carl, who also lives in Cookeville and plays guitar. Reeves also discovered that Geneva, the band's dobro player and oldest sister, is now living in Oklahoma.

What's more, Simmons had the 3-minute promotional film shot in Knoxville by Sam Orleans, who launched his career documenting the early days of the Tennessee Valley Authority. She also had seven acetate recordings of the band made at radio station WNOX, and on a home disc cutter.

These rare recordings provided Reeves his first opportunity to listen to the Randolph Family Band, and he liked what he heard.

"My jaw dropped," Reeves said. "Their unspoiled harmonies harks back to the 1920s - it doesn't sound like 1945. Nashville at that time was playing slicker music and looking ahead. Knoxville was looking back - not stuck in time, but paying allegiance to the mountain music of the past. The Randolph Family Band just sounded so natural."

At 81 years old, Carl Randolph hasn't lost his touch on the guitar. And neither has his younger sister, Ruby, lost her ear for the lilting harmonies she sang when she was a little girl with bows in her hair.

During a recent practice session for their Saturday performance at the Palace Theater in Maryville, the two brushed up on their favorite gospel songs and reminisced about spending their childhood on the road.

"I can remember playing at school houses and traveling half the night to get back home," Ruby said. "We strapped the bass on top of the car, and squeezed in the best we could. I rode many hundreds of miles asleep on my mother's lap."

For Norman Randolph, Ruby and Carl's father, not playing music was never an option. In 1939, Randolph began teaching his wife and five children how to play and sing. Norman was already an accomplished songwriter and fiddler, and his wife, Jim Henry, played banjo.

Clyde, the youngest brother, learned stand-up bass, and Carl took up the guitar. Ruth played mandolin, and Geneva played the dobro. Ruby, who was 6 years old, sang and played the kazoo.

Before long, they were the largest family band on the radio.

For over a decade the Randolph Family Band played schoolhouses, churches, and movie theaters. From 1939 to 1944, Knoxville was their home base. When not making music, Norman ran a key shop on Western Avenue. The band played on radio station WROL, then on WNOX. They were sponsored by Hub Department Store, located on 29 West Market St. in Knoxville.

They made no commercial records. They were a throwback to the days when music was made at home, and no ensemble was tighter than the family unit.

From Knoxville, the family moved to Cookeville. Carl, the oldest, got married and went into the Army in 1945. One year later, the Army gave him a discharge so he could support his family, and the Randolph Family Band continued to play.

For years, Norman had been battling tuberculosis. He died in 1952 at the age of 47, and with his passing, the Randolph Family Band lost its musical and spiritual core.

"After dad got sick, that took the wind out of it," Carl said. "The band was his dream, and we followed him with it."

"He was good to us kids," added Ruby, who was 13 when her father passed away. "I know one time the doctor wanted him to go into the hospital. They said it would cure his TB, but he couldn't leave his family. If he had, he might have lived longer."

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The Randolph Family Band, from left: Geneva, Clyde, Norman, Ruby Ann, Jim Henry, Carl and Ruth.

MUSICAL FAMILY CHRONICLES ITS HISTORY INTO BOOK

COOKEVILLE – After 17 years, the Randolphs have finally written a history of their musical family, starting with the background of their father, Norman Randolph.

"He was 7 years old when they bought him a fiddle. He'd take that fiddle in the bed with him, lay under the sheets and play while his daddy and step-mama were awake," said his son, Carl.

That one fiddle was the start of what would eventually be the Randolph Family Band. Norman married Jimmie Henry, who played the banjo, and together they had five children: Clyde, who played stand-up bass; Carl, who played the guitar; Ruth, who played the mandolin; Geneva, who played the dobro; and Ruby, who sang.

“He was too sick by that time to teach me (to play an instrument),” Ruby said.

The family was well-known throughout Knoxville in the 1940s and even had a short promotional film made.



It was Ruth who decided to write down the family’s history, and after her death in 2008, her grandson, Chris Huskey, finished the work. She encouraged her brothers and sisters to write down what they could remember about their pasts and took trips to the library to help uncover things they had forgotten.

(Picture: Siblings Ruby Randolph Simmons and Carl Randolph sit with their new book, *The Randolph Family*. Photo by Ty Kernea, Herald-Citizen Staff.)

After collecting all of the information, she started to put it in book format.

“It took a lot of digging,” Ruby said. “Everybody kind of dug up what they had.”

The result was a nearly 200-page book titled, simply, “The Randolph Family,” that contains the family’s photos and memories of the past.

Some of the Randolph family’s favorite pictures include a newspaper clipping of Geneva and Ruth holding a 13-foot string of 2,000 keys that they had collected and were donating to the government.

“When the war first started, they were wanting everything to be turned in that could be reused back into the government,” Carl said. “We had a locksmith in town and that’s where we got all those keys.”

Another favorite picture depicts the family’s old house on Washburn Street in Knoxville where a lot of old memories still remain. Ruby recalled the one day she accidentally touched a live wire from the family’s trailer behind the house and screamed out in pain.

“Dad, he was laying in bed, and he jumped out of the widow (to get her) and broke his wrist,” Carl chuckled.

Once their father passed away from tuberculosis at the young age of 47, the Randolph family retired their musical instruments until they were recently rediscovered by Bradley Reeves, director of the Tennessee Archive of Moving Images and Sound in the East Tennessee History Center.

Her found a photograph of the performing family and had been researching their history for nine years without much luck. As fate would have it, Ruby called Reeves while searching for old photographs to use in the family’s book she was still helping to compile.

Reeves was delighted to find the family and persuaded them to play a concert in April, with their three still-living family members, Ruby, Carl and Geneva. It was the first time the siblings had sung together since 1946.

“We’d been out of circulation for a long time,” Carl said.

These days the Randolph family’s only musical involvement involves singing in the community, but the siblings say they are glad they got this chance to record their family history, despite the 18 years of hard work to compile it.

“I think it is (worth the work) because my kids haven’t read the book yet, but from what they’ve heard, it’s tuff they’ve never dreamed of,” Ruby said. “It was tough times back then.”

The Randolph family plans to donate a copy of their book to the Putnam County Library. To order individual copies, contact the publisher at (580) 357-7711 or order from www.amazon.com.

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*See History, Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>