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Stepping Over Cockleburs: Conversations with Ned Cobb

I was a new-model missionary. In June 1971, I returned to Alabama behind the wheel of a trusty but fading Mercedes, the kind of automobile you would expect to see a European driving in the colonies. It was suited for adventure: under an iron-gray exterior its transmission was minus one forward gear and reverse, a condition that reflected not optimism on my part but the want of money to repair it. I had made certain, however, that the rearview mirrors were in working order, so that I might pick up anyone trailing me on my rounds in the countryside.

Why should I be a target for trouble? For one thing, there was no hiding the fact that I was a northerner. I switched the license plates on my car and modified my appearance with a haircut, but my voice and manners gave me away. So did that most telling aspect of my outlook on life, my apparent lack of a job. Local men my age were out working and home raising families. Here I was, a professional student, come to pry into peoples' pasts and tell them how to live. In recent years, outsiders like me had been greeted with violence in other parts of the state. Some were beaten, some shot, and some terrified when, for example, the buses they were riding were

stoned and set on fire. I should say immediately that no hand ever was laid on me in Alabama that was not a loving hand. I do not belong to the ranks of legitimate heroes who gave of their flesh and emotional well-being to overthrow segregation. True, I had fantasies of adding something to their labors, but I relate to them mainly as a beneficiary. Ideas of racial justice and economic fair play had long preceded me. I have come to understand that they are as native to Alabama as hickory and sweet gum. This is not to belittle the contribution of the freedom riders, only to point out that they nurtured, rather than planted, the seeds of justice and revolt. By the year I got there, it was already evident that henceforth the state as well as the federal government would stand with the person abused by discrimination. So, the more zealous segregationists were fighting at the county and municipal levels. In one county, the chairs were removed from the public library to keep white and black children from sitting at the same tables. The children promptly sat on the floor! In another county, the public swimming pool was drained to keep the races from mingling in the water. Tallapoosa County, where I stayed, was quiet. This had not always been the case, and in my fears I imagined my work might rekindle old grudges and grate on the consciences of people who felt assured of salvation. Forty years earlier, the county was the scene of sensational violence leveled at black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who were trying to organize a union. Now I was there to interview a survivor, an old man who had shot it out with the sheriffs and served twelve years in prison. Surely his story would offend *someone*, and if the right people knew he was telling it they might want to stop him—or me.

I quickly assembled a band of protectors. LG Cobb, Ned Cobb's half-brother—because I am talking about them as people I knew and not as characters in a book, I will use their real names. Besides, the cat has long been out of the bag. Ned Cobb is the Nate Shaw of *All God's Dangers*. LG Cobb is TJ Shaw—So LG Cobb would not allow me to live below

Carrville in a derelict farmhouse exposed to the road and far from neighbors. Nor would he be happy if I found a place in Wall Street, a stretch of sand hills tucked away near the county line, where city water, paving, and medical service did not reach. So I looked elsewhere, and with the aid of my friend John Oliver, a Dadeville lawyer, I landed in a Pullman car in the hamlet of Jackson's Gap. The car stood stately in caterpillar green, adorned with the rampant kudzu vine, on a fragment of track just twenty yards from live rails of the Georgia Central Railroad. It had been renovated and presented years ago to a loyal engineer, now dead, upon his retirement from the railroad, perhaps in lieu of a gold watch. Four times a day trains streaked through the hollow and whistled halloo to the ghost of the engineer. I got to know the railroad men when they stopped to use the well, bashful yet candid men who, for buckets of ice on hot days, defended my house and passed the word along the line that I was to be looked after and left alone.

Thus insulated from external dangers, my mind fell prey to its own demons. No one seemed to feel threatened by my presence—at least not the people I thought *should* feel threatened. Did this mean that the community was ready to air out its history, to absorb a point of view it heretofore had regarded as subversive? Or was disinterest a judgment on me? Was the sight of a disheveled young man hiking around with a tape recorder in the morning and a fishing rod in the afternoon merely laughable? Did people take me for a tourist or an antique collector? I would have minded less if people saw in me an old-timey, door-to-door salesman, a purveyor of buttons and pins—I had heard of folks naming children after country peddlers.

Indeed, history had *not* lost its power to agitate; southerners never have been able to keep history at bay. In 1971, history was happening to them—to paraphrase Toynbee—right there and then. Events came so close they seemed to cut off the air to breathe. I should have considered

that people were too busy living their lives to notice me anywhere near as hard as I was noticing myself. Middle-class white men listened dispassionately as I explained my work with Ned Cobb, then collared me with their own sad concern: their children were being "niggerized"—a misnomer for the effects of the invasion of youth culture into their homeland. Sons were smuggling in dope, flashy clothes, and Rolling Stones albums; daughters were sleeping with their boyfriends and boasting about it. What could I say? Meanwhile, near the mill town west of Ned Cobb's settlement, men in mixed pairs of black and white stood at crossroads, leafletting workers on their way to the mill. They were organizers for a textile union that was giving the company its toughest fight of the century. This organizing drive consumed all of the town's attention for outsiders and demonstrated to me the difference in risk for those who come to give the word and one who comes to take it.

Within the white community I was the center of my own attention, no one else's. I needed protection—not from sticks and insults but from a collapse of confidence. I was in danger of succumbing to the errantry and vain thrills of adventure. Adventure cushioned me against the test of my skills. I was an historian trained to ransack texts for gross and subtle meanings. Nowhere in that background could I call upon an iota of instruction for dealing with people. What does the historian do when his best sources are living people? Until quite recently, he generally avoided them.

But new circumstances have excited the demand for oral testimony, pushing historians and others into the field. First, the political movements of the fifties and sixties exposed us to the existence of large numbers of downtrodden people here in our own country. Those expressions of protest were not conceived the moment we happened to hear them; they had been gathering outrage and waiting. This truth knocked consensus history off the wall like Humpty Dumpty. Scholars could no longer shun the underside of the American dream—

their students would not let them. Now it is true that the biographies of dead illiterate people are almost unattainable. But the living can speak, though they may not write, and no one is more qualified than they are to tell us their stories.

Second, there is now broad agreement in the social sciences that *work* is interesting to read about. This attitude is left over from the radicals' critique and comes upon the momentary exhaustion of theory. Whether it persists or withers in the period of reaction, it has already inspired an exemplary first-person literature.

Third, the mass production of the small tape recorder turns many people into potential biographers and subjects, and we are doubtless at the gate of a flood of oral biographies. These in turn may become a major source for future written history. As Dean Rusk slyly explained at a recent annual meeting of the Oral History Association, what with thousands of papers issuing out of the offices of the Big-Decision Makers every week—signed but never seen by them—the historian can separate the wheat from the chaff only by going to the horse's mouth.

Fourth, readers seeking relief from the degraded language of politics and advertising, the language of disasters and lies, find it in the language of the heart. Truth comes to us as the seemingly unmediated word, in the confession of the grocer, or the farmer, or the policeman caught unawares by this chance to spill his life. By virtue of its publication, an oral biography is the triumph of a person over his fate. We all would like to share that triumph. But in the words of a popular song, "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die." In the end, we do not find a single life that can be imitated, or one that we would imitate if we could. This letdown is one of the chief pleasures of reading biography, the satisfaction that you are not the other person.

In the marketplace for oral history, the field worker offers up his spoken treasures as a boldfaced commodity. Here he reverts to his own social class. You would think he

would relish this chance to be himself after long months of suspending his normal behavior. But it is tough to fall back into the old groove. You come home bodily, but the integrity of the ideas you have encountered nags at your mind. What began as a kind of innocent subterfuge designed to get people to talk to you or merely to tolerate you ends as a reproach against your previous outlook. I do not know a way around this dilemma, especially for white field workers who approach colored people. (This is a twist on the familiar observation that nonwhites are always "putting on" whites.)

The field worker's artifice consists of a sudden respect for tradition and an earnestness verging on sainthood. Take me, for example: at home I had no use for religion, I harangued against the nuclear family, I scoffed at celebrating personal and public anniversaries. But in the field I was an ardent supporter of traditional elements against the attacks of modernism. I was ready to agree with LG Cobb that atheism is a symptom of mental illness. I did not feel that I was being false—conscience tells me I did not give in to wanting to be liked. But neither was I a true convert to the norms I was newly defending. In effect, I had faith without belief.

Not all of my values were so ephemeral. I believed that the country needed a revolution—I still believe it—and I was not shy about saying so. But what sounded like politics to me was religion to the Cobbs. Politics, where I came from, took in religion. But to them, religion had no difficulty taking in politics. Try as I would to say something new, they already had a way of expressing it. The breadth of their perspective should have pleased me because it meant we had a larger meeting ground than I had ever expected; but instead it frustrated me, it took away the analytical superiority that every field worker thinks he holds in reserve whenever his ignorance of the natural and social worlds threatens to betray him.

The field worker is a serious person. He appears most resolute when the purpose of his labors has escaped him

entirely. The only humor he is likely to add to a situation comes in the form of a blunder: My first evening in Alabama I committed a telling little error, one of the type that occurs unavoidably the moment a field worker steps in the field. It was the kind of thing that is good for a laugh, and had I not dreaded being laughed at, I could have appreciated both the comedy and its ingratiating effect on my hosts. They made a little story out of it and broadcasted it in the family. It preceded me from home to home, assured me of a friendly welcome, and facilitated my work as no other introduction could have done.

I drove up to LG's place and found no one at home. It was suppertime—I had a knack for showing up just as people were sitting down to eat—and his car and truck were in the yard. Going to look for him at the vegetable garden, I caught sight of four people slow-stepping along freshly plowed rows about eighty yards diagonally across the field from me. Two women were leading two men, the women bending in curtsies every few feet, the men poking harmoniously at the ground with walking sticks. They appeared not to move a muscle of their own; their figures were disassembled and put together again in new positions by the playful last light. LG and his crowd were planting sweet potatoes. I took off running across the field with a notebook in one hand and my tape recorder flapping against my side. Why hadn't I left this baggage at my car? I certainly had no intention of using it out there. Yet with sword and buckler I ran—not far, however, until I stopped short. With each running step I was mashing down the green shoots of some nameless plant. It was hard to see in the dark, but that was no excuse. A cow would have more sense. LG, his wife Glennie—Winnie, in the book—and their helpers stopped what they were doing to watch me approach. I waved and the men waved back. But I could not look up as I picked my way to them, I had to look at the ground. Here a skip, there a leap—the little green devils popped up everywhere to trip me! At last I reached them by a

broken route. We shook hands, embraced, I was introduced to Glennie's son and daughter-in-law, and they went on with their task. The women walked ahead putting down potato slips every two feet in adjoining rows. The men followed nudging the root ends into the earth with their sticks. Setting out potato slips was easygoing, sociable work. I tagged along, taking in the strange smells and sights. I felt heavy-footed, but giddy, cured of my first anxiety: Would they welcome me? After a minute, no more, LG asked me what I was doing, hopping out there like that. I said I was avoiding stepping on the plants. What plants are those, he asked. Cotton or corn, I guessed. No, the field had not been planted yet. I was stepping over cockleburs, the spiny nemesis of cultivated fields. Oh, they had a big laugh then, stepping over weeds the boy is!

Happily for my work, if not for my state of mind, I had put myself on the spot. I know now that I am fortunate among field workers for having been found out so soon. The Cobbs took an interest in my education from the start, not for any material reward—there was no prospect of any—but because my search had a religious quality they could not resist. They were stuck with me, knowing that I would keep coming back to interrupt their work and their rest with perpetual questions. If only I would be satisfied with information, the chore would have an end. But I wanted to learn a way of thinking, something more private than information, more revealing. I was seeking their reflections, the stories they told themselves about themselves. The radical in me preached about the future, but the would-be disciple asked about the past—to the obvious neglect of the present. In the absence of my people I needed to be fed and cared for, and they were glad to do it. They helped me as Christians, and beyond that by the creative effort of enclosing me in the family.

This raises the question of the place of *love* in social science inquiry. The word causes a great deal of embarrassment in the profession. We talk about cooperation and

gratitude when we mean something more profound. But without an accurate description of the feelings that pass between the inquirer and his subject, the utility of the interview or data that emerges from that relationship is seriously impaired. Perhaps we divest our motivations of love because we fear an attack on our objectivity. Yet, no claim of objectivity survives the generation in which it is made. Before the ink has dried, the writer's stake in his work begins to show through, like the watermark of a fine paper. It may be that the writer had a private interest of which he was aware all along. Or it may have nothing to do with individual ambition, but with the compulsions of social class enacted unconsciously in every relationship. To talk of objectivity, then, is to talk of concealment.

I do not say that it behooves the field worker to fall in love with his subjects. Romantic or rapturous involvement diverts him from his work and sows the seeds of the injury his subjects are bound to feel when he makes their secrets public. Given the risks, he is probably better off to leave love alone, to tread a more lighthearted path. But if it happens—what I am calling love—it should not be smoothed over in the field worker's acknowledgments.

There was one special reason why Ned Cobb's family agreed to busy itself with me, apart from the feelings between us. My work with Ned revived his will to live. The doctor had given him a prescription of small brown pills for a heart condition, but he refused to take them and would put them out in the bird feeder. At eighty-five years old, his appetite had left him: a tablespoon of peanut butter, a small piece of cornbread, and several cups of coffee a day were all he was eating. He would not eat meat or vegetables—he remembered that his father had died with a mouthful of greens. Consequently, he was losing weight. He still had the energy to keep a small garden and a hog, and the concentration to make baskets—working white oak, he called it. But he no longer had the strength to get out in the woods, cut down a

tree, and carry it home. Walking the roads was hazardous now that his sight and hearing were failing and, of course, he did not drive. He was confined more or less to idle hours in one place. Although he was a thoughtful man, it did not suit him to sit still and meditate. Inactivity depressed him; he could not stand the thought of his time lying fallow. In short, he was suffering through the most drastic change of his life. He had always been a talkative man and now talking had become his only means of engaging attention. But his moodiness, self-concern, and tendency to repeat himself chased away visitors and deepened his isolation.

Then I came along with the expressed intent of listening to what he had to say. Immediately, he perked up, as old people often do when they feel the devotion of younger ones. I had kept my promise, given four months before, to return and record his life story. Three mornings a week for three months we would sit and talk on the veranda of his toolshed or inside the shed when it rained. There, amid heaps of guano sacks, moldy harnesses, broken tools, and bottomless chairs we had our most memorable conversations. We did not miss a day, nor did I once have to urge him out of his house to begin work. He would wake up earlier than usual to get his little jobs out of the way and to clear a place for us to sit. When I showed up, at last, he would greet me with a comment about how late into the morning it was, or how he came into this world "to work out, not rust out," or how he hoped I had installed "longliving" batteries in the tape recorder this time. Many a morning he wore me out. At the end of three hours he was just getting cranked up, but my tank was empty. He would refuse to stop talking when the tape recorder ran down, as if to demonstrate his vitality over the machine and the folly of trying to cramp the shape and flow of a life, *his* life, into a little black box. On my lucky days, his wife Sarah—Josie, in the book—would rescue me with the call to come to dinner. Reluctant and mute he would show me to the washstand, then escort me to the table. I told him, politely,

that I would not eat alone—Sarah, her granddaughter, and her great-grandchildren would already have eaten—and he was obliged to eat with me. In this way we took a dozen meals together, and though he never attacked his food with much interest, he would eat enough to keep me eating.

Sometime in July, Ned's sister-in-law died in Birmingham and her body was brought home for burial. After the funeral, Ned's sons "caucused" to take up the matter of the young white man from the North who, in full view of the settlement, was interrogating their father. I learned about this meeting several years later. The upshot of it was, they resolved not to interfere in our business and even to assist it if they could. This decision might appear to have been easy to reach, seeing how talking strengthened Ned. After all, what are the suspicions and jealousies of neighbors next to the health of a father! But when fathers talk about their lives, they must talk about their children; and what is social history to the outside reader is really Papa talking about family affairs. No one doubted Ned's loyalty, but no one had much faith in his discretion, either. I was ignorant at the time of the children's courage in allowing our work to flourish; unaware, too, that I was encouraging the very impetuousness in Ned that could lead to their betrayal.

Ned Cobb had no hesitation. He was racing against time to give his last confession. From me he wanted the affirmation he felt he had never gotten from his children—that he had always tried to do the right thing. Moreover, he was speaking to a higher judge. By offering up his good works as proof of his intentions, he pinned his salvation on God's justice, not mercy. If he erred on the side of righteousness, he gambled that this last deed would win him forgiveness. The lies he exposed were monumental compared to the lies he concealed. He wanted his testimony to oppose the stories told about people like him in newspapers, court records, congressional reports, merchants' ledgers, and school books. He did not know—to paraphrase Marcel Griaule's estimation of

the unforgettable Ogotemmeli—that he was contributing mightily to revolutionizing society's ideas about the mentality of black people.

Our collaboration was the meeting of a hero of the past with a young man who needed to make something of himself; of a person of extraordinary verbal skills with one poorly trained to listen but who knew how to operate a tape recorder. I never considered myself an oral historian, nor the field I was working in oral history. I have always felt that the term is misleading, condescending, and plain bad speech. Oral history stresses the means, not the end, and it does a poor job at that. The technique involved is more *aural* than oral, though "aural history" won't do, either. When you think of social history or political history you have a pretty good notion that you are dealing with recognizable people and institutions; but oral history tells you nothing of the historian's special area of concern, which can be as varied as that of the historian who works from written artifacts. Oral history suggests a fad, like 3-D movies or see-through clothing. But in fact it has been around a very long time. Oral history is the incarnation of the ancestor of all written histories—the epic poem. Of course, not all oral histories are epics, and some epics are epic bores.

I used a tape recorder in my work because my subject demanded it. Some people start with technical expertise, then go looking for a subject, but that was not the case with me. Inevitably, my work was full of mistakes that might have been avoided had I been taught to interview. But I was taught to distrust the spoken word, especially if the speaker were still alive. Are we to believe that the dead tell the truth and the living tell lies? This morbid attitude cripples the study of the recent past and discourages contact with humanity, or with that great part of humanity that has neither the time nor the learning to write things down.

But the view of the tape recorder as a gimmick and as a conspirator in the devaluation of language is not a frivolous one. Oral history—to bow to popular usage—may be an

unwitting tool in the extinction of the oral tale. Frequently it is the stopping place of the tale; recording and transcribing remove it from the orbit of the teller, putting an end to his creative intervention. You could argue that by the time the tales are recorded they no longer produce the teller's desired effects; that the social and economic worlds of the tales are defunct and the lessons we draw from them are worthless in modern times. As late as 1950, for example, a cotton farmer in Alabama needed to know how to break and drive a mule; soon afterwards, mules disappeared and the farmer who could not work a tractor had to withdraw from the field. Tales about mules lost their utility, except as amusements. The tape recorder, coming on the heels of radio, television, motion pictures, and other mechanical voices of culture that have invaded the exotic society and blunted the urge to hear a story, saves these cheapened scraps of wisdom from oblivion.

But it can be said of oral tales in writing, as of organic objects preserved by glaciers, that the soul has fled. Not that the tales lose their capacity to entertain or to teach, or that the personality of the teller fails to shine through; but the fixity of the form shifts to the reader the power to vary the meanings of the tales. It is true that the tape recorder carries the tales to an audience the size and variety of which the teller never dreamed. Well, yes; but the teller in his native setting does not intend the same tale, told exactly the same way, for every listener. I heard Ned Cobb tell a particular story five or six times to different people. He would vary a mood, add or omit a detail, shift himself from foreground to background, to produce the effect he wanted. He had one version for his family, one for the neighbors, one for traveling salesmen, and one for me—and they were all the same story, each told with the personality of the listener in mind.

Take the story of Ned's shootout with the deputy sheriffs. In the version for outsiders, he happens to be visiting his brother-in-law one morning when he hears a ruckus across the road at Cliff James's (Virgil Jones's) place, and he goes to investigate; in the general version for family and

friends, he is determined to take his stand the morning of the trouble, though the gunplay catches him by surprise; and in the version told to like-minded allies, he packs a .32 Smith and Wesson and expects to have to use it. What you hear depends on how much he trusts you. Yet no version is false, once you know all the versions. Each reveals one of the hats he wore—bystander, soldier, plotter. Each is a step on the way to the next, contained in but not contradicted by his other positions. Privately, no one version satisfied him. He spent hours upon hours listening to himself on tape, all the while scolding the voice for leaving out some detail or including the wrong ones, or misrepresenting some attitude or feeling. Talking to me he unquestionably favored his more heroic positions, but at the cost of a certain peace of mind. Among his everyday contacts he could count on having opportunities to tell his tale a little differently, to bring out the innocent or un-self-conscious self lurking in the other tellings.

Take the story about doping a hog with his urine and turning it into a pet. I heard him tell it one morning to his "great-grands," his wife's great-grandsons, who were pestering his hog some way; he left out the urine part and made it a lecture on the affection a man should feel for his beasts. Telling the same story to a band of men who walked out of the woods one day hunting a loose hog, Ned emphasized how he had fooled *his* hog, and what a trifling mind a hog has compared to man. Sitting and listening to Ned was as good a way as any to hunt the hog, for the hog was sure to circle back to its trough in time for its next meal. The tale was reassuring insofar as it forecast the hog's return. But it disturbed the listeners, too, because the moral of it was: Don't waste your time hunting a hog that's bound to come home on its own.

Two shocks—the first like the sudden throwing of a railroad switch, the second like a derailment—shaped the

course of my work. The first came at the beginning. After three hours of talking with Ned I had not asked him a single question from the more than one hundred pages of questions I had on my lap. I had spent the last eight months devising the questions from my readings on cotton culture, Alabama state history, the black family, the black church, etc., any material that could help me anticipate the language Ned would use to talk about his life. *He* had spent much of the past forty years—from the time he went off to prison—sorting out his experiences and putting them into a life history. He divided his life into four periods that corresponded conceptually to what I knew as "life stages": from birth through reaching his majority; from marriage through the formation of his family and the day he took his stand; prison; and the confounding years of old age. Actually, there was a fifth period. I became aware of it the day he told me about a swap he had made involving a horse, some dogs, and a shotgun. I asked him exactly when that was, and he said, "Oh, that happened when I was an old man." He stopped smiling and sank into alarm, as if by realizing he was outliving old age he was bringing bad luck on himself. "If I was an old man then," his countenance asked, "what am I now?"

He had it all on the tip of his tongue, "the diagrounds" and "the marrow." All I would have to do is sit still and listen and he would tell it. This meant setting aside my questions, all of which I considered crucial. They were the foundation of my composure, and what they lacked in spontaneity they made up in astuteness—or so I thought. I was glad to give up some of the day-to-day responsibility for carrying us forward, but I was distressed at having to surrender my will. When it came to transcribing and editing our talks I would recoup my power, but I did not know that at the time. I was reeling from a collision with this foreign intelligence, and I had to adapt in a hurry.

Ned began by talking about his father. It was more like wrestling, the way he was agitated. I turned to the page in my

notebook entitled "Family Relations," but the questions seemed flat, artificial, and hopeless. As prompters they made good roadblocks. Pretty soon I abandoned them and began to listen to what *he* was saying. I heard Isaac rail against Abraham, the son against the father who, in the ancient heretical tradition, was ready to sacrifice the boy as much out of recklessness as for gain. His father did not know how to provide for his wives, his children, or himself. He hastened the death of Ned's mother by overworking her; he denied Ned, the eldest son, the chance to go to school and put him behind a plow before he was big enough to do the job. While his family worked he was out gratifying his passions—chiefly hunting and carousing with outside women. He toted a gun against imagined enemies but when it was time to stand up to the white men who periodically came to dispossess him, he did not have a word or deed to offer. Ned softened the portrait by adding that his father had been brutalized by slavery and carried within him "slavery ways"; that there was nothing wrong, per se, in pursuing pleasure, though the old man went overboard; that the white man was too strong to oppose in his father's day; that his father had to conceal his knowledge of the world or incur the wrath of those who controlled the purse strings and the police.

As he laid out his life in the course of the summer, Ned discovered a good deal of his father in himself. There were fundamental differences between them, of course. Ned was a great provider, a fighter, an enterprising and sober man. Everyone who knew him verified these qualities. Outwardly, the contrast between Browne Cobb (Hayes Shaw) and Ned Cobb could not be more pronounced. Inside, the son like the father was a *hard* man—loving, but hard. Sometimes his meanness flew off in the wrong directions, as when he disciplined his boys—which he does not tell us about—or simply blamed them for things that were not their fault, or failed to give them credit for what they achieved on their own. The stories of his adult years are full of fatherly

disrespect—the very "flaw" he condemned in his father. Of his quick temper and stubbornness he would say, "I was *natured* that way." At first it was an embarrassing admission; then he took pride in that, too, because he saw that his distinction lay in his heredity.

He did not consider what he may have inherited from his mother, only from his father. He grew up in a patriarchy and he believed that fathers should attend to sons and mothers to daughters—at least until the daughters reach courting age. Ned credited his father with instilling in him the power to "interpretate" events and to size up a white man. Browne Cobb, despite his localized sphere of interests, had an eye to the larger world. Many times Ned would unravel a situation with one of his father's aphorisms, a bit of poetic advice culled from a long life of ducking punches. It made Ned happy to think that his father was a man who used his mind, and that he had picked up the habit.

But his inheritance included the *hardness*. In him flowed the "isms" or habits of slavery that had worked their way into his father like worms into fruit. Ned had cut out the most debilitating of these habits, but the others, he feared, would pass on to his sons. He detected in them the "weak point" he so hated in his father—the neglect to ever tell *him* that he had done the right thing. How was a father to think well of himself without the validation of his sons? Come judgment day, who would intercede for him if not them? But to tell the truth, Ned's sons—and daughters—recognized him to the world for his good works and protected his reputation against outside criticism. If they failed to acknowledge to his face the stand that he took in Cliff James's yard, it was not because they opposed his ideals or lacked his courage. Rather, they believed he had miscalculated his support the morning of the shootout. They, not he, bore the brunt of hardships when he was away in prison. *They* lost a father; *they* watched as the task of leading a large family through perilous times took a fatal toll on their mother. When Ned returned he tried to take up

the reins to his family and his farm; but his children were grown and would not be bossed about things they had mastered in his absence, and the farm was prospering in the hands of his older sons. All of this sensitive history was debated in the universal family way: with avoidance, petty quarrels, sulking, shouting matches, and silence. Ned clung to his old thoughts but the day had changed. Time had dealt him a blow that his enemies could never muster. A great economic depression had been overcome, a world war had been fought, the tractor had been introduced to southern agriculture. Where in all of this did he belong? His struggle to recover his old authority over house and field was sure to lose. He fell into talking about the man he once was; the older he got the more clearly he recalled his boyhood days.

At some point in his recollecting he must have begun to see that one experience after another yielded the same lesson: figure out the enemy, stand up with a clear conscience, and you can win! Not by a throw of the dice did he find himself standing up for justice in Cliff James's yard that morning. He was there because his whole life led him there; everything before had been merely preparation. The shootout put all of his early skirmishes into perspective. It was the grandest piece of a design, a fate, sealed in his character. It was also the end of his epoch, the years of his climb. He belonged back then.

One of those fortunate turns in the histories of oppressed peoples enabled Ned to see himself in a new light and to shed the despondency of isolation. The Civil Rights movement carried his spirit forward in time: it was *of* him, just as he had been *of* it. He perceived himself as part of the advance guard and as an agent of prophecy. When I met him in 1968 he told me his grandmother had told him that white people had come from the North after "the surrender" to help black people secure their freedom, but they had left the job undone and someday would return to complete it. Ned met them in the thirties when they came in the form of the

Sharecroppers Union. "The organization," as he called it, "was workin to bring us out of the bad places where we stood at that time and been standin since the colored people has remembrance," but it, too, was stopped short of the goal. In the fifties and sixties they came again, a shock and a "wonderment" to many, but "expectable" to Ned.

To his way of thinking, social and economic salvation would bring about a change in human personality. The movement in all of its eruptions meant "a turnabout on the southern man, white and colored." This means first of all the redistribution of power, the bottom rail rising and the top rail falling. But the predicate, "man, white and colored," implies a psychological shift as well. Whites will stop feeling superior, and blacks will stop acting inferior—in the sense of acting badly to themselves. Then the "isms" of the past, embodied in law, custom, and personal conduct, will be rooted out at last. By the measure of one lifetime the process seems interminable. Even across three lifetimes the velocity of change would frustrate a snail. But if a person cannot hope to savor the ultimate victory, he can improve himself by taking part in the movement of his day. Such participation does not have to be voluntary or self-conscious. Everyone may benefit from victories won by a few—victories over disease, over manual labor, over economic exploitation. The standards people live up to become a force against backsliding. Ned's father could never have been reenslaved, and now his children would never accept segregation. Ned, standing between the two generations, separating and linking them, occupied all of the possible positions in the social and family struggles. Factually, he was the son of his father and the father of his children. But in jousting with his father he performed the part of his own sons against himself, and their grievances unfolded. By projecting his father's points onto them, he suggested a response Browne Cobb might have made to Ned's complaints about him.

The morning this cathartic drama opened, I was

fumbling with my papers in my lap and asking myself: How does this fit into history? Will my teachers think I am crazy? I meant: Is life history *history*? If Thoreau is right, and all anyone has to report is a human experience, then isn't this a breakthrough, because it is so alarmingly human? These were not bad questions, but it was the wrong time to be asking them.

Back at the railroad car, I played over the morning's tape to check out the machine and to hear how *I* came across. I was astonished at how little of Ned's talk had reached my inner ear. The problem was, I had set out to question, not to listen. My mind was full of chatter and thoughts about my questions. I had not listened at all. I had allowed my machine to do the listening for me, when I should have done it for myself. Let the machine record, and you listen! Afterwards there will be time to listen to the recording with an adversarial ear. This listening is really a kind of deliberation, and it is different from the listening appropriate to the performance of a tale.

You need to listen both ways. Listening is the key, pure listening and deliberate listening. They do not overlap. If you are making mental notes you cannot be emptying your mind of thought. Whenever I was stymied, I found it incredibly relaxing to listen to our talks with no conscious thinking, neither seeking nor judging. Going back to pure listening had the effect of sharpening my *sense* of Ned. That sense was *in the listening*, the way that meaning belongs to a process and not to an end. In putting together Ned's autobiography, I tried to choose those tales and versions of tales that most closely conformed to this sense—or essence—of him.

I got into a pattern of listening deliberately to our tapes the evenings of the days we recorded. In these hours I planned questions to ask at the start of our next session—a prerogative I had to fight for. I listened for gaps in the stories, and I would ask Ned to fill in wherever I thought a *reader* would need it. I took my ignorance as the standard, especially in regard to the natural world. Out of one such request for elaboration came the lyrical passages on the boll weevil.

I listened for allusions to people or incidents I wanted to hear more about. We could not take all roads, but I wanted to minimize my regrets for the roads not taken. My interest in a character might have led Ned to give him more weight in his narrative than he had in life. Beaufort Jackson—Lemuel Tucker, in the book—comes to mind, a white landlord who tried to sell him the shoes off his feet and died broke in a boarding house in town.

I listened for extraordinary events dispassionately told, such as the burning down of the prison barns; and mundane events told with great emotion, such as taking a ride on a milk truck. These reports clarified the distance between us that would never be overcome. What was exceptional to one of us might be ordinary to the other because of the discrepancy in our experiences. I did not find a way to render Ned's inflection in prose. Nothing I asked elicited a satisfactory substitute in words for these lost facts of feeling.

I listened also for inconsistencies. For some reason I thought these were very important, and that the way to deal with them was to challenge Ned to justify the facts. Does it matter that a horse is brown in one story and gray in another? Or that Ned drove his '28 Ford to town in 1926? It matters, but more for what it tells us about the teller's method than his memory. When I pointed out these inconsistencies, Ned grew indignant. They were not questions of remembrance, he assured me. And he would say no more. His silence was his way of telling me I was impinging on his right to choose the elements of his stories. We were collaborators, true, but we each had discrete functions and privileges. I chose the day, the hour, and the duration of our sessions; I would make the cruel choice of closing down the talks; I would choose where to take our "report" and what to do with it, how to edit it, who to publish it. But the choice of words was his.

No book worth the paper it is printed on will please everyone. I was not disheartened, therefore, when *All God's*

Dangers had its immediate detractors. They argued that a black man never tells a white man the truth; that the writer molded the teller's words to fit a flagrant bias; that the protagonist is not typical, and therefore his narrative is esoteric; that I was guilty of "sharecropping" off a helpless black man. More friendly commentaries showed how I had misheard words and phrases. For example, I wrote "dew rock" when Ned said, or should have meant to say, Duroc, the hardy American red hog. Except for the strange insinuation that my ignorance of farming disqualified me from learning about it, I was grateful for the corrections. I was totally unprepared, however, for the judgment that came from a very different quarter, from people I had wanted most to please—Ned Cobb's children.

There are nine children: five who live in cities outside of Alabama and four who never left, three of whom live within a mile of Ned's last home. The children did not know me only, or mainly, as the person who had questioned their father; and I did not know them only as Ned Cobb's children. They were, in the words of one of the sons, their "own self-ladies and own self-men." My awareness of this was a condition of our friendship. I had interviewed most of them in their homes with the tentative aim of producing a family history. When I visited I often stayed over—as a guest, a courier among brothers and sisters, and—I do not think it farfetched to say—a loved one. Like any nine individuals, the children of Ned Cobb have their own minds about things; and like any children of a single family they have intrinsically more to agree or to disagree about than strangers do. They did not all respond the same way to their father's autobiography. Yet they did not exactly disagree, either. I am talking about gut feelings, first feelings, what transpired when a two-pound book as thick as a standard Bible, with a picture of their father as a young man on the cover, arrived out of the blue, brimming with his old man's voice, his old man's stories, his old man's philosophies and complaints. I delivered copies first

to the two children in Alabama who had nourished me and waited on me since I had been coming south. I hung around Tallapoosa County to give them a chance to read it, or to read their part in it, what their father had said about them. When I went back to see them they told me straight out: they were deeply offended. Ned had told too much and I lacked the sensitivity to leave it out. His obsession to talk had betrayed them, and I had published the betrayal! In those terrible moments I lost my youth and godliness. Oh, to be stepping over cockleburs again! My world caved in. I was never so shocked in my life.

Wilbur Cobb—Vernon, to readers—is the hero of the second half of the book. It was he who, along with his mother, held the family together when Ned was off in prison. Sturdy and gentle as the fiber of cotton, he is the last of the Cobbs still farming. Ned had told me of a quarrel they'd had about a year after Ned married Sarah, three years or so after the death of his first wife, Viola (Hannah). The story is curiously absent of motive, like the melodrama of a still-life painting. They were driving home from a funeral in Wilbur's truck, Ned, Wilbur, and Wilbur's wife, "just talking like people would talk . . . and it come like a shot—." According to Ned, Wilbur raised up and hollered, "'You just ain't got no sense!'" This was followed by brooding silence, an exchange of threats, and other "bad words." Nothing much came of it except that for one week they kept their distance and did not talk.

Why would Wilbur tell his father he had no sense? Between strangers the remark would be gratuitous. But between a son and a father it may be the judgment of a lifetime. Then again, it may not. We do not know from the text. Ned suggests that Wilbur had been drinking—but the accusation is absurd. He does not drink. Furthermore, there is no room in the story for him to have slipped off to drink. Something is missing here.

Wilbur was insulted by the story. His father had

disclosed the kind of family business that ought not to travel through the settlement. On top of that was the personal hurt. How could Wilbur defend himself against cold print? Who would know what Ned had left out? It would compound my wrongdoing to tell that here, but I learned enough to know that I owed Wilbur an apology. I tried to assure him that Ned's story was not plausible; no one would believe it. But I must have believed it, he said, because I had it printed. No, I had not considered whether it was complete or true; those were not my criteria. The story was important to me because it humanized Ned. It cleansed him of purity when he thought he was cleansing himself of sin. I was ashamed for hurting Wilbur, I wished he could feel differently—but I still thought the story belonged in the book. What good is an apology if you would do the same thing over again if you had the chance? There was no way out of feeling bad.

Driving north, I delivered books to two of Ned's daughters in Chattanooga, to a son in Middletown, Ohio, to a son in Philadelphia, and to a daughter in Brooklyn. Had *All God's Dangers* been the trial for them that it was for their siblings in Alabama, I would be restoring antique automobiles or catching crabs for my living today. But the children in the North were able, by and large, to take the family business with the social history, the "ugliness" with the "prettiness," because, as one of the daughters put it, "the good is so overwhelming." Yes, most of it is true, what he said; there was more truth than you expect to find in a book. But don't think this was all Ned Cobb had been or done! His daughters recalled times he had struck out against people he shouldn't have; but a certain worldliness acquired in the years away from home made them see something positive even in these assertions. It troubled them to find so little in the book about their mother. Ned had diminished her role, they decided, not to take credit for something of *hers*, but out of common masculine forgetfulness. It had troubled Ned, too, he confessed in the book, that he had recognized his wife too late

and too little. Ned repeatedly confessed to more than he consciously knew—that, for example, if he did not worship his mules he certainly adored them; that when it came to quarreling in his house he held up his end rather than make peace. His autobiography was not the portrait of a hypothetical man, but the breath of their precious, imperfect father about whom they could say, "We know you." They could rejoice in his triumph because it was not a triumph over them, but with them and for them. Ned believed that his physical accomplishments were his bestowal to future generations. But they knew that his gift was his *mental being*, the activity and reach of his mind.

One year later—two years after Ned Cobb's death—I visited my friends in Alabama to learn the impact of the book. I wanted to see if time had soothed or exacerbated first feelings, and to test my welcome. The drive from Montgomery to Tallapoosa County seemed shorter, perhaps because the city was spreading so fast the distance between them was actually closing. How many of the old country houses had disappeared since I'd first driven through seven years earlier! In place of the single-pen, dogtrot, and saddlebag farm houses rose the bungalows, brick ranches and mobile homes of people who worked *off* the land. The old way of life and the old-timey people were finished. Ned was gone—he did not live to see his book. His brothers LG and Paul (Peter) had died suddenly within six months of Ned. Between the harvesting of one crop and the planting of another, the last of the nineteenth-century-born Cobbs had left this world. LG died not long after moving into the house he'd built on his own land. He'd built it from a plan he kept in his head, using lumber he had salvaged from two churches. You could tie your tie in the luster of the hard-pine floor. LG had been a cotton farmer his whole life, some years working in the mill by day and on his farm in the evening. Once he had dreams of playing professional baseball—he was the size of Frank Howard—and he drove to Birmingham to try out with

the Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro Baseball League. But the Barons were out of town, the stadium was locked shut, and LG returned to his farm to stay. Paul was half LG's size, a good eight inches under Ned. He lived most of his life within three miles of where he was born, on Saugahatchee (Sitimachas) Creek. He had quit farming when I met him and was living with his wife Bessie in a very old house that he got in return for minding the landowner's cows. Paul had been "quiet-lifed," as Ned called it. He decided as a young man that if he didn't have a lot of possessions he couldn't be hurt by losing them. Paul was a subsistence farmer by choice, and he prospered without money. He was revered in his settlement for his knowledge and graciousness. I've seen white men squat while *he* sat, talking under his pecan trees.

I stopped first to see Roberta (Rachel), Ned's oldest daughter. She had recently retired from a small broom factory nearby, and was devoting her energies to her house and garden. In spring her yard would be popping with tulips and gladiolas. From knowing her sons, eating her cooking, and observing her devotion to her flowers, I had concluded that if I hadn't had a mother of my own, she was someone I would want for the job. But it was not the best of times between us. She had been upset by the book, and angry with me, for unmasking old troubles. We did not get far talking about the book. To Roberta, it was a piece of bad luck slowly receding into the past; like the tree of knowledge there was no real knowledge to it, only sadness and judgment. To me, it was a history of cotton farming in all of its relations, seized upon and epitomized by a man who grew the cotton—and *that* was sacred. There was no bridging our opinions that day.

I wanted something impossible: for Roberta to regard the book from the historical point of view. But to all of Ned Cobb's children, their father can represent only himself. He could do no more than that in life; and now, living on in remembrance, he is more the father and less the man of all the other roles he played before. In the historical view, Ned will

one day be typical—but not yet, not yet! The more that is learned about his age the more he will appear to speak its language and think its thoughts, as a conformist and a dissenter. There is sufficient evidence in his narrative and in the testimony of those who knew him to call his genius unique. But I am convinced that the life stories of his contemporaries would reveal equally valiant responses to the same social forces. Ned would not fall then in our estimation any more than would the hero of a battle when it is learned that there had been other heroes as well. He was the first to convey to the book-taught world the whole life of an unlettered tenant farmer. His autobiography became an occasion to cut through the official memory of written history with the keenness of a drawknife and the immediacy of "a butterbean bursting in the sun."