

# Jimmy & Rosalynn *Carter*

THE GEORGIA YEARS, 1924-1974



E. STANLY GODBOLD, JR.

*Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter*

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TO JEANNIE

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## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

MY APPROACH to researching this biography has been to combine traditional manuscript and documentary analysis with the use of oral history. I spent many years reading through Carter's currently open presidential and governor's papers. I searched repositories where there are papers of other Georgia politicians, United States Cabinet members, and other people closely associated with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. In selecting subjects for interviews, I chose representatives from the major eras of the Carters' lives. I combined these with dozens of oral histories collected by the White Burkett Miller Center at the University of Virginia, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, and Georgia State University. Since the oral histories are filled with contradictions, I gave priority to interviews conducted nearest to the events they described or with persons intimate with the Carters. I adhered as closely as possible to the contemporary written source as the final arbiter of conflict.

To acknowledge adequately the people and institutions who assisted me would require a book in itself. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter granted me interviews and answered questions by letter, and he freely gave me access to various collections of his papers. When I first visited the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta in August 1990, I never dreamed I would become so familiar with its collections, its people, and its ambience. As the weeks there stretched into months and years, the place did become home. Don Schewe, Martin Elzy, David Alsobrook, Jay Hakes, and Robert Bohanan introduced me to the collections and remained faithful advisers throughout. The very special people who worked in the research room, at the front desk, and with the Museum, earned more thanks and credit than I'll ever be able to deliver. They include Susan Ament, Bettie Joe Brown, Charlaire Burgess, Jim Dougherty, Betty Egwinike, Gary Foulk, Kathy Gillespie, Jim Herring, Juanita Jones, Yolanda Logan, Shelia Mayo, Ceri McCarron, Mary Anne McSweeney, Sylvia Naguib, Bert Nason, Sonia Robinson, Keith Shuler, Sara Saunders, Dave Stanhope, Chuck Stokely, Jim Yancey, and others. Likewise, at the Georgia Archives in Atlanta, I received



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The Gerald R. Ford Foundation gave me a grant to conduct research in the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. While there, I found Geir Gundersen, Helmi Raaska, and others particularly helpful. Archivist Sherrie Fletcher at the Ronald Reagan Library and Professor Michaela Reaves of California Lutheran University assisted in acquiring the Carter materials at the Reagan Library. Director David Alsobrook, who transferred from the Carter Library, and Supervisory Archivist Warren Finch at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library rendered me good advice and assistance in accessing the Carter materials in their collections.

My home university, Mississippi State, gave me sabbatical leaves and financial assistance. The following students performed ably as research assistants: David Gleeson, Richard Haydel, Kevin Hall, Qiming Han, Todd Herring, David Hirsch, Todd Holden, Tony Iacono, Craig Piper, John Selman, Brian Schneider (California Lutheran University), Ryan Semmes, Kenneth Vickers, and others. Professional historians George Robson and Scott McMurry helped on occasion with both primary and secondary research. The John C. Stennis Oral History Project at Mississippi State University assisted with my interviews and travel budget. Colleagues and students invariably showed interest, asked good questions, and offered suggestions and encouragement.

The scholars from around the world who sometimes worked beside me at the Carter Library, or participated in discussions at conferences, were helpful with their criticisms and suggestions. Carl Biven of Georgia Tech shared ideas, books, lunches, and evenings with his family. Russell Motter ran up quite a telephone bill from Hawaii and, later, Houston, talking to me about the Carter era. Annette Wise is both an encyclopedia of information about the Carters in Plains and an excellent photographer.

In Atlanta, Richard McMurry, a distinguished Civil War historian, provided me with a place to stay, discussed the project with me in many restaurants, and

finally read every word of the manuscript. Linda Matthews, Head of Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library in the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University, gave me many useful research leads. At the Library of Congress, Connie Cartledge, Mary Wolfskill, and Paul Chestnut assisted me. Louise J. Godbold, my mother, and John Glass read early drafts of the manuscript and made useful suggestions.

Thanks, too, go to the staffs of the Oral History Research Office Collection at Columbia University; the James Earl Carter Library at Georgia Southwestern University, the Lake Blackshear Regional Library, the Sumter County Historical Association, and the Sumter County Courthouse, all in Americus; the Early County Courthouse and the Blakeley Public Library; and the National Park Service in Plains. Mitchell Memorial Library at Mississippi State University, with its very helpful staff and excellent collections, proved a fine base from which to conduct research.

The people who gave me interviews include Rick Allen, Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, Morris W. H. Collins, Jr., Juanita Edmundson, Dan Edwards, Marty Franks, Rod Goodwin, O. M. Harrelson, Mary Finch Hoyt, Howard Jones, Billie Larson, Jackie Lassiter, Edmund Muskie, Tip O'Neill, Abraham Ribicoff, John and Julia Saunders, Gary Sick, Scott Singletary, "Miss Allie" Smith, Rear Admiral James R. Stark, U.S. Navy (ret.), Gordon C. Stewart, India Thompson, Stansfield Turner, and Cyrus Vance. Jan Handy and Jane Thorne shared with me the printed memorabilia they saved from the Carter era. Steve Hochman, Assistant to President Carter, asked good questions over several lunches and arranged some of my introductions and interviews. Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., of Decatur, granted me access to his voluminous research into the Carter, Gordy, Smith, and Murray family genealogies.

The scholars and journalists who have written about the Carters and the Carter presidency whose works are cited in the notes have provided information and inspiration for this work. This biography is built on the numerous works of scholars, journalists, politicians, archivists, and others who have created and managed the primary and secondary sources that made it possible. Scholars who read and criticized all or part of the manuscript include Professor Carl Biven of Georgia Tech University; Dr. Phil Chase, Senior Editor of the Papers of George Washington, at the University of Virginia; Professor Ruth Currie of Warren Wilson College; Dr. Martin I. Elzy, retired Assistant Director of the Carter Presidential

Library; Professor Laura Kalman of the University of California at Santa Barbara; Professor Gordon McKinney, Director of Appalachian Studies at Berea College; Professor Richard McMurry; Leo Ribuffo, Distinguished Professor at George Washington University; Rear Admiral James R. Stark, U.S. Navy (ret.); Professor T. Adams Upchurch at East Georgia State University; Professor Kenneth Vickers of Martin Methodist University; and a very perceptive anonymous reader for Oxford University Press.

Fred C. Smith, a professor of history at Lambuth University, read every word and made many useful suggestions. Susan S. Wansbrough, a journalist turned attorney in Dallas, took time from her own busy schedule to lend a helping hand, as she frequently does for so many others. Susan Ferber, Executive Editor at Oxford University Press, graciously extended indispensable assistance from the acquisition of the manuscript through the production process. Her colleagues, too, gave excellent and punctual assistance. Remaining mistakes in fact or judgment are the author's alone.

Our cat Maurice (1990–2007) made many a trip across the keyboard of the word processor, napped on every page of the manuscript, and contributed long hours of serene companionship. My wife Jeannie and stepdaughter Heidi accepted without complaint the often difficult challenge of living with someone who spent extended time away from home in libraries and archives and even more time cloistered in a forbidden study with stacks of papers and books and Maurice. During the good times and the bad, their love and support never wavered. Jeannie, especially Jeannie, made the creation of this book possible.

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## *The Carters and the Smiths*

WHEN JIMMY AND ROSALYNN CARTER left their home in the Georgia governor's mansion in April 1972 for a trip to Brazil, they had no idea what a unique emotional adventure awaited them. Their host suggested a visit to an ancient Confederate cemetery and chapel near Americana. An unusual historical site, Americana was the surviving community settled by defeated Confederates who fled the United States at the end of the Civil War. Of the approximately twenty thousand who fled to Brazil, all vanished except those at the small settlement they nostalgically called Americana. They attempted to recreate their familiar plantation society in a country that protected the institution of slavery and welcomed the émigrés. Their lives there were harsh, causing some to leave, others to die or simply blend into the local population. Since Brazil, a strict Catholic country, would not allow Protestants to bury their dead in its cemeteries, they created their own *campo*, or field, near Americana, buried their dead there, and built a small chapel adjacent to it.<sup>1</sup>

The surviving self-exiled southerners became independent farmers whose progeny remained in Brazil but retained their language, their American and southern identities, and their long, often sad memories. Several hundred of them went four times a year to visit the Confederate burial ground and the tiny non-denominational Protestant chapel. The altar at those times was draped with the flags of Brazil, the United States, and the Confederacy. In time, their descendants erected a plain Confederate memorial bearing only the family names of the first refugees. One of them was an ancestor of Rosalynn Carter.<sup>2</sup>

When several hundred descendants of the Confederate expatriates heard that the governor of Georgia, his wife, and press secretary Jody Powell were coming

to the cemetery, they rushed to greet them. They drew a large, crude circle on the ground, writing “WELCOME” in the dirt, and marked where the governor’s helicopter should land. The Georgia visitors seemed a bit surprised by the warm welcome until they looked into the faces of the Brazilians and saw the southern faces of their ancestors. Both Rosalynn and Jimmy were intensely moved by the sight of the monument draped with a tattered Confederate flag, the chapel, the cemetery, and the courage, suffering, and faith of those lonely Americans who had fled their own homeland. Their descendants, standing before the Carters in that isolated spot more than a century later, might have been their neighbors in Georgia. Carter at first felt sad that they had left their own country, where they might have had a better life had they been able to accept the South’s defeat in the Civil War. As Carter addressed the crowd, he saw how intently they listened, then noted that both Rosalynn and Jody were choking back tears. He paused, attempting to control his own tears, as his speech evolved into a sermon and a prayer. He gave thanks for the Christian spirit of those ancient rebels, then joined Rosalynn to bury a time capsule near the chapel. Fifteen years later, when Jody Powell remembered the event and tried to make sense of it, he thought that maybe they had “been touched so deeply” because “we discovered a part of ourselves that we hardly knew existed.”<sup>3</sup> The moment ended, and Carter promised to tell their story when he got back home, then boarded the plane for Atlanta with Rosalynn and his entourage.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to their glamorous world as governor and first lady of Georgia, and later as thirty-ninth president and first lady of the United States, the Carters resumed their lives as modern southerners who despised the taint of slavery and racial discrimination in their history. They were devout Protestants—he Baptist and she Methodist—whose ambition and talents had driven them to seek and win the highest political office in their state and their country. As a political couple and international humanitarians, their public reception vacillated from adulation to hatred to unending controversy. As actors on the world stage for more than three-quarters of a century, they sought to institutionalize a world radically different from the one the folks buried in that cemetery near Americana had clung to. Remaining rooted in their past by genetic and cultural heritage, they were as determined as their ancestors to seek a new world—not by fleeing, but by changing the one they had inherited.

The purpose of this two-volume biography is neither to praise nor condemn but to challenge the popular image that the man from Plains was either saint or

sinner, for he was neither. It also elevates his wife, Rosalynn Smith Carter, to the place of equal partner in his life and career, which he insisted she deserved. The story of one is the story of the other. One of their close friends in 1976 said, “You can’t really understand Jimmy Carter unless you know Rosalynn.”<sup>5</sup>

This volume, which covers their lives from birth to the end of his governorship, and the second one to follow are drawn from more than two decades of research in the presidential library, the state archives, and other repositories where manuscripts, recorded interviews, public documents, or other materials directly related to the Carters are located. It is also based on original, unpublished interviews with a wide variety of participants in the Carters’ story. Despite all that has been written and said about them, much of it mythological, this book offers substantially more information about their prepresidential years. Presented in a format more factual than interpretative, it reveals a man who was scarcely the peanut farmer of popular myth but was the heir to a sizeable fortune and built, with the collaboration of his wife, a lucrative agribusiness. Growing and processing cotton was as important as growing peanuts in their business. Using much of their own money, they rode the changing politics of the South into the Georgia governor’s office. Carter’s shocking announcement that the time for racial discrimination in Georgia had ended attracted national attention.

Politicians to the core, the Carters skillfully moved from state to national politics by gaining control of the national Democratic party in 1974. Rosalynn sat quietly but knowingly on the stage behind her husband as he announced his candidacy for president of the United States on December 12, 1974. He was not solely the product of the indomitable mother, “Miss Lillian,” who became so well known during the presidential years. His formative years were shaped by his relatively unknown, ambitious, nurturing father, “Mr. Earl,” who set high standards for his firstborn son. Behind the facade of shy housewife, Rosalynn Smith Carter was a bright and shrewd businesswoman who helped build their family fortune and a brilliant political strategist. Vitally involved in their elections to the governorship in 1970 and the presidency in 1976, she shared every adventure, surprise, and defeat with her husband.

When they were unable to prevent their crushing defeat in their fight for reelection in 1980, the Carters comforted each other and soon emerged triumphant as cochairs of the Carter Center, a private humanitarian institution committed to “waging peace, fighting disease, building hope.”



The story of the Carters and the Smiths is the story of America from the early settlement of colonial Virginia to the culture of backwoods Georgia on the eve of the Great Depression. It is also the story of the American South, which emerged differently from the rest of the country as it imitated the British pattern of social life, imported and enslaved millions of Africans in order to gain the highest yield possible from its vast acreage and long growing season, and developed a culture and political viewpoint incompatible with the rest of the nation. The path to wealth and power for ambitious southerners lay through agriculture, and the ancestors of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter seized that opportunity.

The first Carter in America, Thomas Carter, Sr., arrived in Virginia as an indentured servant in 1637. After completing the years of his servitude, he and his progeny became prosperous through acquiring land and slaves and through marriage. Five generations later, Thomas's descendant Wiley Carter (1798–1864) was an illiterate frontiersman with landed wealth in Georgia, a colorful character who epitomized life on the southern frontier and exhibited family characteristics that would survive through many generations. He married good women, sought wealth through agricultural pursuits, showed minor interest in community service, and had a vicious temper. In 1843, while serving as deputy sheriff, he murdered his neighbor, Carrol Usry, in a dispute over ownership of a slave and in defense of his wife's honor in reaction to a disparaging remark Usry had made. At his trial the next year, a jury found him not guilty. His wife died five years later; he married the widow Sarah Chestnut Wilson, and in 1851 they set out for Sumter County, which was destined to become the home of the thirtieth president.<sup>6</sup>

By 1860, Wiley had become prosperous on his plantation about twelve miles north of Plains. He produced 147 bales of cotton that year, owned farm implements valued at \$400, and possessed personal and real property worth \$43,500.<sup>7</sup> That year, his son Littleberry Walker Carter (1832–1873), the fifth of eleven children, moved with his young family to be near his father.

Both the burden of history and the weight of family tradition fell heavily on Littleberry. At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, he and three of his brothers—William Archibald, Wiley, Jr., and sixteen-year-old Jesse Taliaferro—enlisted as privates in Captain A. S. Cutts's Sumter Flying Artillery. In 1863, they fought at Sharpsburg, Maryland, and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and a year later in the South's victorious Battle of the Crater near Petersburg, Virginia.<sup>8</sup>

When their father died on December 6, 1864, these Carter brothers were with their company in Virginia; he left Littleberry \$24,052.91 in inflated Confederate currency.<sup>9</sup>

Like his ancestors, Littleberry Carter rose in fortune and esteem, despite the physical devastation and political chaos of post-Civil War Georgia. He owned a peanut farm near Americus and was a partner in a business in town, an enterprise that caused him to fall heir to the violence that had dogged his father. On November 21, 1873, his business partner, Daniel P. McCann, murdered him during an argument over gambling receipts from a machine they owned, known as a “flying jenny.” Littleberry was forty-two; his grief-stricken widow died on the day of his funeral. McCann fled to South America and never returned. Littleberry’s estate sold for a pittance during the depression of 1873–1874, the flying jenny bringing \$20.75. He and his wife left four orphans.<sup>10</sup>

Littleberry’s oldest son, Billy (grandfather of the president), then fifteen, moved with his siblings to Plains of Dura, where their aunt and uncle could care for them. Settled in the 1840s in one of the state’s best farming areas, Plains of Dura lay in Sumter County, eleven miles west of Americus. The village home of farmers who owned land in counties to the north, west, and south of Sumter, Plains also attracted a doctor, businessmen, preachers, and craftsmen. They named the settlement for the Babylonian meadow described in the Book of Daniel where King Nebuchadnezzar II built his golden image and cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the blazing furnace for refusing to bow down to the idol. By remaining faithful to their own God, the three Israelites survived their trial by fire unharmed.<sup>11</sup> The citizens shortened the name to Plains, incorporated it in 1884, and in 1885 moved it a mile south, near the recently built Americus, Preston, and Lumpkin Railroad.

Before the town relocated, Billy had moved about fifty miles southwest to Early County. With a small inheritance, good opportunity, and hard work, during the 1890s he acquired 450 acres, three sawmills, a cotton gin, a store, and a ten-acre vineyard, from which he produced and sold three thousand gallons of wine per year. He and his wife, formerly Nina Pratt, from Abbeville, South Carolina, and their four children lived in the town of Arlington. Billy then built them a seven-room house for his large family in the Rowena community that faced the railroad tracks and stood in the shade of two giant oak trees.

Billy was a hard worker and a tough character. Once when the flues at his cotton gin clogged, Billy decided to go inside the boiler to clean them himself. He

wrapped himself in burlap sheets, soaked them with water, and to the amazement of his hands and spectators, walked into the blistering-hot boiler and cleaned the flues, emerging unharmed. On another occasion, when he accidentally cut his knee deeply, he used a needle and thread to sew up the cut himself and went on with his work.<sup>12</sup>

Nina was not so tough. When she became ill with malaria in the swampy, mosquito-infested environment, her adoring husband built her and the children another house thirty miles to the north in Cuthbert. He commuted between Rowena and Cuthbert by train. The children were Ethel, born in 1887, William Alton in 1888, Lula in 1891, James Earl in 1894, and Jeannette in 1904. For Nina and Billy, however, the Georgia frontier, where the law was lax and murder was common, posed tough challenges. On September 3, 1903, when she was pregnant with their fifth child, her husband, like his father before him, was murdered.

Will Taliaferro killed Billy Carter in an argument over a piece of furniture. When Taliaferro vacated a store he had rented from Carter, he took with him a thread cabinet. Carter accused Taliaferro of theft, became very angry, and confronted him at Taliaferro's new store. They fought with bottles, breaking them and cutting each other severely. Billy drew a small pocketknife and cut Will across the abdomen with sufficient force to eviscerate him. Holding his organs in with his left hand, Will reached behind himself with his right hand, fetched his .32-caliber pistol, and shot Billy in the head. Both men were badly wounded. Nina rushed to Rowena in a horse-drawn buggy, brought her husband back to Cuthbert by train, and there watched him suffer miserably and die, despite their doctor's care, on September 4.<sup>13</sup>

Taliaferro recovered from his wounds and faced charges of voluntary manslaughter. In the October 1903 term of the Early County Superior Court, the judge declared a mistrial because the jurors could not agree on a verdict. At a second trial the next year, the jury acquitted him.<sup>14</sup>

Four months after her husband died, Nina gave birth to their fifth child. Nina's brother-in-law, Jeremiah Calvin Carter, sold her property for a substantial sum, and she moved to Plains. Still immersed in agriculture, she bought thirteen hundred acres of land in nearby Webster County. She rented the land and moved in early 1904 with her five children into a small, stylish Victorian house on Thomas Street, directly behind the site where the Methodists built their church in 1910.<sup>15</sup> She lived well on her husband's estate, and her elder son William Alton worked

at a general store until about 1915, when he opened his own store on Main Street. Ruled by the land, the desire for money, austere religion, and the memory of his murdered father, Nina's son James Earl Carter, father of the future president, was ten when the family moved to Plains.

Rosalynn Smith Carter's ancestry, likewise tied to the land of Georgia, was embedded in the history of the South. Her people were not violent; they were better bred and more educated and pious than the Carters. Notable characteristics of Rosalynn's ancestors included their tenacity, quiet demeanor, willingness to serve their communities, closeness to the land, and religion.<sup>16</sup> Rosalynn's great-great-grandfather, George Lynch Smith, a North Carolinian, moved to Georgia in 1807 as a frontier missionary, broke with the Disciples of Christ Church, and founded his own Methodist church near Richland.

His son Tenderson, born in 1815, became a farmer in South Georgia in the 1830s. His handsome son Wilburn Juriston Smith (b. 1858)—doctor, farmer, and Methodist—married the very pretty and serious-minded Sarah Eleanor Bell in 1893. The second of their eight children, Wilburn Edgar (father of the future first lady), born November 20, 1896, inherited his father's good looks. He was twenty-two when his father died in 1918. His widowed mother, "Mama Sallie," moved into Plains and later lived in her granddaughter's childhood home. She died in 1951.<sup>17</sup>

For more than three centuries, as the Carters and Smiths made their way by happenstance into South Georgia, none of them could have known that the eventual union of their families would hurl them and Plains upon the world stage. Growing up in the 1930s in rural southwestern Georgia, Jimmy and Rosalynn were part of a society that was becoming fluid, as the Great Depression and the looming World War II began to change it. These events challenged the very heritage of the South by forcing its natives to scrutinize their economy, class structure, race relations, and post-Civil War isolation from the rest of the country and the world. It was both a society dying and a society being born, painful events that in the South produced some of the world's greatest creative writers, who attempted to explain in the most elemental human terms how the present must be reconciled with the past. Among them, William Faulkner of Oxford, Mississippi, became one of Carter's favorite authors, and Carson McCullers of Columbus, Georgia, one of Rosalynn's. Faulkner used characters from his native Mississippi to suggest how people, rich and poor, powerful and weak, black and white, male and female, shared a common humanity with each other and all

peoples of the world. McCullers's mentally and physically handicapped people rose above their infirmities to become productive members of their families and society. From their changing South and its writers, Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Smith acquired an optimistic world view in which human beings might break free of inhibiting shackles, and, as Faulkner states in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, not only "endure" but "prevail."<sup>18</sup> Together, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter hoped to help make it happen, for themselves, their state, their country, and the world.

## *A Boy in Archery*

EARL INSISTED THAT HIS FIRSTBORN SON be named James Earl Carter, Jr. Most babies of that time and place were born at home, but since the baby's mother worked for Dr. Sam Wise, he allowed her to deliver her baby at his hospital in Plains. The first American president to be born in a hospital, Carter arrived at 7 A.M., Wednesday, October 1, 1924, weighing eight and a half pounds. Lillian Carter kept a baby book in which she recorded some of the details of his first months. He would be called "Jimmy" now—but later of course t'will be 'Jim,' she said, having no inkling of his future. Well-connected with affluent people, the family received a bounty of baskets, blankets, bootees, dresses, rattles, socks, a quilt, and \$5 cash. The infant "smiled" at one month, "laughed out loud" at two and a half months, wore "short clothes" and said "Dad-da," "Bye-bye," and "Hey there" at six and a half months. At nine months he could stand alone.<sup>1</sup>

The infant boy had two powerful parents standing behind him. His father, James Earl Carter, who was ten at the time he moved with his mother and siblings to Plains, grew up fast. Driven by a family ambition to succeed, he was, according to his older brother Alton, a hardworking "hustler."<sup>2</sup> After attending high school in Plains, he entered Riverside Military Academy in Gainesville, northeast of Atlanta. That school enforced a rigid code of discipline for boys, many of whom had behavioral problems.<sup>3</sup> Earl joined Company A of the cadet corps during the 1910–11 session. The 1911 yearbook listed him as "Early Carter" of the "South Georgia Crackers" for the school year and simply as "Carter" in the summer Naval School and Camp.<sup>4</sup>

With a tenth-grade education, then the equivalent of high school, Earl Carter had more formal schooling than any of his ancestors, and he was as anxious as

they had been to become financially successful. From age seventeen through nineteen, immediately after he left Riverside, he sought his fortune in Texas, where he sold “pressing irons,” cast-iron flatirons that women used to iron clothes. In 1913 he returned to Plains and invested his savings first in an icehouse and later a laundry.<sup>5</sup>

After the United States entered World War I, Earl registered for the draft on June 5, 1917, requesting an exemption on the grounds that he had to support his mother, but his sisters remembered that he did not want to leave a young woman with whom he was in love. The army denied the exemption and inducted him on October 1, 1917. He was, according to his draft board, twenty-two, of medium height, stout, with blue eyes and light hair, a farmer and a clerk at his brother Alton’s store. Earl served in Company I, 121st Infantry Regiment, and rose from private first class to sergeant, but he never left the country. He attended officer training school at Camp Lee, Virginia, where, on August 6, 1918, the army discharged him. He later accepted a commission as second lieutenant in the Georgia National Guard.<sup>6</sup>

Earl returned after World War I to an agricultural boomtown, where, according to his brother Alton, he transformed all that he touched into gold. In the 1920s, Plains had banks, churches, drugstores, a funeral home, a hospital, a hotel, a consolidated high school for whites, and another school for blacks. Earl seized the chance. He bought timber and farmland, worked beside hired black laborers in his fields, and dabbled in other business ventures. He bought and sold peanuts and in time entered the insurance, fertilizer, grocery, and mercantile businesses. When the Georgia Seed and Supply Company in Americus went bankrupt, Earl bought its stock cheaply, then opened his own grocery and mercantile store in Plains. In 1923, he bought seven hundred acres of good farmland in Webster County, borrowing \$7,000, the only debt he ever incurred, which he paid off quickly.<sup>7</sup>

Already wealthy at age twenty-nine, Earl married Bessie Lillian Gordy on September 26, 1923. With brown hair flowing down to her waist, Lillian was twenty-five, a Methodist, vivacious, smart, and ambitious. She had moved to Plains from nearby Richland to work as a nurse at the Wise Sanitarium. Although she at first did not find Earl attractive, she listened to Dr. Wise’s advice that Earl was likely to be very successful financially, and she did apparently grow to love him in what would become a rocky marriage. The groom dominated the wedding plans and their lives

together. Their marriage took place at Earl's home, with only family members in attendance and his Baptist minister officiating. After an inexpensive, small reception at the groom's home, Lillian went back to work. As a symbol of her independence and continuing devotion to her father, she continued to keep her hair down to her waist, to please her father—until her first child, Jimmy, was born.<sup>8</sup>

Earl had married a strong woman in a political family. Lillian was the fourth of the nine children of James Jackson ("Jim Jack") Gordy and his wife Mary Ida Nicholson, a stern and intelligent woman. The Gordys, of Scotch-Irish descent, had moved into southwest Georgia a generation later than the Carters. The first, Peter, came from Maryland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, settling finally in Muscogee County in the 1830s on lands vacated by the Indians. Two of his grandsons died in the Civil War. Another, James Thomas Gordy, flourished in Chattahoochee County; he was a wagon master for the Confederacy and a private in Company B, Sixth Georgia State Militia, when his son Jim Jack was born in 1863. A Baptist and a farmer, he became a tax collector after the war.

Jim Jack—tall, dark, handsome, and stern—grew up with a keen interest in learning and a passion for politics. He was a Democrat and a Methodist. After their 1871 marriage, Jim Jack and Mary Ida moved to Richland, in Stewart County, where for twenty-one years he was postmaster. A nimble politician, he never held a public office but managed to keep his appointive job as postmaster under four presidents and both major political parties. Apart from his postmaster appointment, he owned a gasoline station and drove Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs. He knew the state's powerful politicians.<sup>9</sup>

When the state legislature met, Jim Jack journeyed to Atlanta to talk politics and run errands for those in power. He idolized Tom Watson, a schoolteacher and writer from Thomson who served one term as an innovative U.S. representative in the early 1890s. Jim Jack managed Watson's campaign in Georgia's Third Congressional District and allegedly suggested to him the idea for rural free delivery of the mail. An early advocate of reforms for blacks and farmers, Watson received the Populist party's nomination for vice president in 1896, and later for president. Jim Jack named one of his younger sons for him. When Tom Watson visited him at the post office, Lillian said, "It was just like Jesus dropping in." After losing an election in 1892, when some blacks voted against him, Watson became a notorious southern demagogue. He condemned Jewish citizens and African Americans alike and helped foment the kind of hate that fueled the



Ku Klux Klan. Jim Jack Gordy did not share those opinions and drifted away from him. Jack had at least one black friend whose company he relished. William D. Johnson, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop, often visited the postmaster and his daughter Lillian and may have had some influence on her belief that blacks should be treated equally with whites.<sup>10</sup>

Both Jim Jack and his wife Mary Ida were strict disciplinarians who reared their children to appreciate a larger world than Richland.<sup>11</sup> Lillian worshiped her father. She worked with him in the post office from the time she graduated from high school until she moved to Plains in 1921. She grew up on stories of state politics, the need for reform, and even the possibility that a Georgian might have a national political career. After her marriage, her father spent many hours with her and Earl, analyzing elections and telling his grandson Jimmy stories about Georgia politics. Jimmy was twenty-four when his grandfather died in 1948.<sup>12</sup>

Both the Gordys and the Carters welcomed baby Jimmy as a possible standard-bearer who might take forward their dreams of financial and political success. Earl Carter, swelled with pride, nicknamed his son “Hotshot.” At this point, the family lived in rented rooms in a private home on Main Street directly across from the Methodist church. After an argument with the landlady about a pet dog, however, they moved to another house on the same street. Two years later, Earl bought a house on Bond Street, next door to what was to be the home of Rosalynn Smith.<sup>13</sup>

At twenty months, Jimmy contracted a disease that almost took his life. Like many young children in the area, he suffered from colitis, or uncontrollable bloody diarrhea. Lillian put him in the hospital, where she treated him herself with a slow-dripping, dense, cornstarch enema. The treatment worked. While enduring it, Jimmy cried for a pet goat. Head nurse Gussie Abrams, a friend of Lillian and Jimmy’s godmother, brought one to visit him at the hospital and to have as a pet when he went home.<sup>14</sup>

Two months later in 1926, Lillian gave birth to Gloria. Nicknamed “GoGo” by their father, she resembled Jimmy but was physically larger and often had the advantage in their childhood fights. A rebellious child, she received more spankings from her father than Jimmy did. In 1929, after the family had moved to the country, a third child, Ruth, arrived. The apple of her father’s eye, she was a pretty baby and later a pretty woman. A “curly-headed blonde,” Ruth, in her father’s opinion, was “prettier than Shirley Temple.” When Ruth suffered with

pneumonia and her family thought she would die, Earl stayed home and fed her liquids himself one drop at a time, held her up to the sunshine, and prayed with his wife and son until she got well. He called her “Boop-a-Doop,” and she grew to adulthood convinced that she could do no wrong.<sup>15</sup>

In 1928, Earl purchased a farm in Archery, located two and a half miles south of Plains. The spacious, six-room house facing the railroad tracks became Jimmy’s home until he left for college. Lillian set high standards for her children and established herself as someone who must be obeyed, but she was often an absentee mother. As a nurse, she sometimes worked twenty hours a day. She reared her children by memoranda, leaving so many notes on a desk for Jimmy and Gloria that they jokingly said that they thought the desk was their mother. “The strong memory in my mind,” Jimmy said, “is coming home [from school] and Mother not being there.”<sup>16</sup> They had household help, and Earl could easily come home from tending his fields and business to check on the children.

For a working woman, Lillian did the best she could to care for the children. She employed a series of African-American nannies, and she had other black servants who would draw water, build fires, clean the house, cook meals, and help with household chores. On weekends and special occasions, she photographed the children, cooked their favorite foods, and gave them parties. Sometimes she baked cookies and served them to Jimmy and his black playmates in the back yard. Just as her parents had reared her, she demanded that they read. They read at the table during meals, in the living room with their parents at night, and later alone in their bedrooms. When asked to tend to a chore, they sometimes begged to be excused on the grounds that they were reading.<sup>17</sup>

At Christmas, Lillian joined Earl, Jimmy, Gloria, and Ruth to search the farm for the perfect Christmas tree. She decorated it, shopped for gifts, cooked, and talked about the baby Jesus. One year when all three children were sick with the measles, she telephoned a radio station in Atlanta to ask for help. On Christmas morning, she and Earl carried the battery-powered radio into the sickroom. Soon they heard a popular entertainer, Little Jack Little, announce that he would sing especially for “Jimmy, Ruth, and Gloria.” Then he burst into the popular saga of “Wooden Head, Puddin’ Head Jones,” who “didn’t know beans from bones.” The children perked up, bounced on the bed, and sang along, as their tearful parents watched. Despite the fact that the song had no relationship to the Christmas

season, “Wooden Head, Puddin’ Head Jones” became one of Lillian’s favorite “Christmas carols.”<sup>18</sup>

Lillian worked in Plains but was not of it. She sometimes skipped church, smoked cigarettes, and in the evenings sipped whiskey or wine with her husband. She played poker and attended wrestling matches and baseball games in nearby towns.<sup>19</sup> She kept the sizeable income she earned as a nurse and from the annual sale of pecans from their large grove. She was not a joiner. Standoffish, she offended some members of their Baptist church by caring for African-American patients. She never worried about being excluded from church functions, she said, because “We had too much money to be ostracized! . . . we were the biggest contributors.” A loving but distant mother, she was a powerful presence in her family.<sup>20</sup>

Earl became the nurturing parent to “Hot,” “GoGo,” and “Boop-a-Doop.” Jimmy revered his mother, but he preferred to take naps with his daddy. Earl’s own father had died when he was only nine, and he took an unusually passionate interest in rearing his own children. He made Jimmy feel proud the day they moved into the house in Archery. Since Earl had forgotten to bring the key, he boosted four-year-old “Hot” through a window with instructions to open the door from the inside. After settling into their new home, Earl sometimes roasted marshmallows or baked sweet potatoes in the open fire. He peeled a grapefruit, then handed sections to Ruth, Gloria, Jimmy, and Lillian, in that order, before eating some of it himself.<sup>21</sup>

Typical of the time, the house had no electricity or running water. It had porches on the front and back. Three rooms stood on either side of the hall that bisected the dwelling. To the right, ranging from back to front, there was a kitchen with a table for weekday meals, a dining room, and a living room. To the left of the hallway were three bedrooms, the front one for the girls, the middle for the parents, and Jimmy’s at the back. All the rooms had high ceilings and plenty of large windows. Two chimneys with double fireplaces heated the front four rooms, and a wood-burning stove heated the kitchen. The tan clapboard house rested on brick pillars that provided plenty of room underneath for dogs, cats, chickens, and geese.<sup>22</sup>

About twenty yards behind the dwelling stood a fine privy with one hole for an adult to use and a lower, smaller one for a child. A servant swept the yard down to the bare dirt, and twice a year Earl hauled in fresh, white sand to spread over it.

A large mulberry tree provided hours of climbing fun, and an aromatic tree supposedly kept fleas from invading the house. A kudzu vine shaded the screened front porch, where the children often sat in a squeaking, wooden swing. A white picket fence on one side of the yard separated it from the cotton fields. Jimmy kept pet ponies in a lot behind the house. The children visited their Grandpa Gordy, who at one time lived in a house across the road, and they walked about a quarter mile down the dirt road to a swimming “hole.”<sup>23</sup>

By the time the family moved to Archery, Earl had repaid his debts, acquired more land, and no longer worked in the fields himself. Since he owned his land and his home, had some cash, and could produce plenty of food, his family weathered the Great Depression that began in 1929 better than did many Americans. In 1934, he opened a peanut warehouse, where he stored peanuts he had bought for resale. He hunted, fished, and traveled, often taking Lillian with him on trips as far away as New York City.

At home, Earl and Lillian gathered their children around, told them about their journeys, and listened to them read aloud. Earl did not read as much as the others, but he encouraged Jimmy to collect books. Those works, gifts from his family and mother’s friends, included a complete set of Guy de Maupassant’s books, Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan adventure stories, and a full set of the *Book of World Knowledge*. The late-nineteenth-century French author’s realistic fiction, Burroughs’s exciting tales set in Africa, and an encyclopedia introduced the farm boy to a world larger than Archery and whetted his appetite to know more.<sup>24</sup>

After supper, Earl supervised the children’s homework and listened to their prayers. Before going to sleep, they practiced a ritual of goodnight kisses and calls of “I Love You the Goodest.” In adulthood, they often signed their letters to each other, “ILYTG.”<sup>25</sup>

Earl also handled the children’s religious instruction and discipline. A devout Baptist, he took the children with him to attend church in Plains, while Lillian sometimes remained at home. At the age of eleven, Jimmy proudly declared himself to be a Christian and accepted baptism.<sup>26</sup> Despite his virtues, Earl had a mean temper that he did not always control.<sup>27</sup> When Earl called his son by his name instead of by his nickname, Jimmy knew that he was in real trouble. He got several whippings he never forgot. “Daddy used to whip my tail with spiraea,” Jimmy said, recalling the flowering shrub with long, keen branches that grew by the front porch.<sup>28</sup>

“Mr. Earl,” as the sharecroppers called him, often was as kind as he was strict, and Jimmy eventually came to recognize that his father’s virtues outweighed his faults. In later memoirs, Carter revised his opinion of his father, indicating a bond of love and admiration that transcended the elder Carter’s stern discipline. “My father was my hero,” he wrote in 2004, a sentiment he routinely expressed in his mature reflections on his childhood.<sup>29</sup>

Earl believed in recreation. He dazzled Jimmy with his athletic skill. He built a dirt tennis court next to the house, and he challenged his children to defeat him at the game. They never could. In the early 1930s, Earl dammed a stream on his property to create a pond, and beside it he built the three-bedroom Pond House. He intended it to be both a safe recreational site for his adolescent children and a hunting and fishing retreat for himself and his buddies. Earl liked to dance; sometimes when his wife did not want to attend local dances with him, he took Ruth. He and Lillian gave parties, often large outdoor affairs at which they provided abundant food. At the end of the day, after the children were asleep, Earl shared a nightcap of bourbon with Lillian. Patrons and fans of baseball, he and Lillian made expensive trips to attend games, including those of her beloved Brooklyn Dodgers.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the good times Earl and Lillian enjoyed, their relationship was sometimes rocky. She admitted to her grown son Jimmy that his father was sometimes kinder to others than he was to her. After they married, she needed space to avoid his dominance, and she kept for herself the money she earned from the pecan harvest. He played poker, frequented the Americus Elks Club, and wanted her to go out every Saturday night with him and “raise hell.” She did not enjoy dancing as much as he did, but she did not mind taking a few drinks. He may have cheated on her. She resented the way he danced with other women and sometimes argued with him after they returned home.<sup>31</sup>

Earl was the first of the Georgia Carters to take an interest in politics. Like most rural white Georgians during the depression of the 1930s, he was a “Talmadge man.” Eugene Talmadge, the “wild man from Sugar Creek,” posed as the little man’s friend, a segregationist, an enemy of big business and cities, a devout Christian, and a colorful character; his promises and antics so thrilled his audiences that they elected him governor for two-year terms in 1932, 1934, 1940, and 1946. Earl disliked Talmadge’s denigration of learning but had no complaint with his segregationist views. When Talmadge gave the commencement address at

Plains High School on April 24, 1933, Earl invited him to stay at his home, giving nine-year-old Jimmy the opportunity to hear about the governor's recent trip to Washington to attend the first inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The following year, when Talmadge sought reelection, Earl took Jimmy with him to hear "Ole Gene" regale an Albany crowd with his fiery speech, sample the barbeque, and listen to a band of fiddlers and a gospel quartet. Earl disliked Roosevelt's New Deal legislation because he thought it would meddle in the private lives and businesses of Georgians. He remained loyal to Talmadge, whose agrarian, populist rhetoric gave hope to hardworking farmers.<sup>32</sup>

Since Earl supported Talmadge but not Roosevelt, Jimmy learned that Georgia Democrats did not always agree with their national party. To get elected in Georgia, a candidate had to make populist promises to rural whites, and Earl held winners of the governorship in high esteem. While still a schoolboy, Jimmy told his friends that someday he would be governor of Georgia.<sup>33</sup>

Earl cultivated the friendship of local politicians, but he concentrated on his farm and his businesses. By 1953 he had acquired five thousand acres, much of it good cotton and peanut land. He owned a grocery store in Plains, sold seed and fertilizer, owned a small fire insurance agency, and developed his peanut brokerage business.<sup>34</sup> By the standards of his time and place, Earl Carter was a wealthy man.

Paternalistic, like the large slave-owning planters of the Old South and the millionaires of the North, Earl secretly dispensed favors to the poor. Comfortable with his racially segregated society, Earl did not go into the homes of blacks himself, but he paid for the supplies his wife took to them. "He had to be on my side," Lillian later remembered, "or he wouldn't have paid for the medicine and the clothes" that she gave to black people.<sup>35</sup>

Earl Carter never had the chance to explain his life and opinions. Since he died before Jimmy became famous, he escaped the interminable interviews about himself. Earl left no record of how he felt about the murder of his father, his fatherless childhood, his struggle for success, his opinion on race relations, or his attitudes and feelings toward his children. The recollections of his widow and children, other family members, friends, politicians and others, as well as the sterile details in public records, do not adequately recreate the inner man. Jimmy recognized him as the most powerful influence in his own life, and coming to terms with his father became his driving force. At the age of seventy, Jimmy

wrote that he had finally come to understand that Earl was “the father who will never cease to be alive in me.”<sup>36</sup>

The immediate world Earl created for young Jimmy was the 360-acre farm in Archery. There Jimmy developed habits, skills, and attitudes that later affected his public career. Earl expected “Hot” to rise early and work hard at a variety of jobs. In addition to cotton and peanuts, the farm produced vegetables, watermelons, pecans, corn, and sugarcane. Earl raised beef cattle, milk cows, sheep, hogs, chickens, and geese. The size and success of the farm allowed Earl to hire two hundred black laborers, work with seven competent black sharecropper families, and purchase fifty mules.<sup>37</sup>

Jimmy treasured one African-American couple, Jack and Rachel Clark, as dearly as any family members. The Clarks worked for wages rather than shares. Their neat, clean home, located just beyond the barn, became a haven for Jimmy. He spent the nights there when his parents were away, sleeping on a pallet on the floor near the fireplace in the living room. At the barn, Jack taught Jimmy about farm life.

Jimmy knew other black workers, but he did not become a part of their families. Fred and Lee Howard lived next door to the Clarks but never gained young Jimmy’s confidence. Another man, Tump, fascinated Jimmy with his ability to lift five hundred pounds and to get to work earlier in the morning than anyone else. Richard and Virgil Johnson, Joe Ed Walker, Felton Shelton, and their families all worked the northern part of the farm and operated almost independently of the Carters. Willis Wright, one of Lillian’s kidney patients, became so much a part of the Carter family that Earl consulted with him and felt comfortable leaving young Jimmy in his care. Earl sold Willis the farm on which he lived and helped him build a concrete block house. Since the sharecroppers supplied their own livestock and equipment, Earl gave them use of the land, two-thirds of the cash crops of cotton and peanuts, and one-fourth of the corn crop.<sup>38</sup>

Surrounded by black workers in the fields, the yard, at home, and at the Clark house, Jimmy liked their company. He witnessed their poverty and frustrations, and he absorbed some of their good qualities of character and spiritual richness. Although they loved the little white boy, like most blacks of their generation, they kept their true feelings about their poverty, their lack of class status, and their desire for equality with whites to themselves. Black families who sharecropped with Earl Carter enjoyed greater independence and profits than was

typical of most southern sharecroppers, but they remained caught in the web of dependence on benevolent white landowners. Most sharecroppers found the system dehumanizing and yearned to break out of it.<sup>39</sup>

Earl operated a small, profitable, company store located just beyond the tennis court. He stocked overalls, shoes, shirts, home-cured meat, sugar, flour, canned goods, candy, tobacco, kerosene, gasoline, cheese, and castor oil. He opened the store only on Saturday afternoons when he paid the hands for their week's work. During the week, however, Jimmy sometimes reluctantly had to leave the midday dinner table to sell a customer a nickel's worth of whatever he or she wanted.<sup>40</sup>

The Carter farm was prosperous and self-sufficient. In addition to the store, it boasted a large, symmetrical barn, located northeast of the store, and a windmill that Earl ordered from Sears, Roebuck, and Company in 1935. It boasted a six-foot-deep concrete trench for dipping sheep and cows, who were herded through it when it was filled with a pesticide that would exterminate the vermin in their coats. A cane mill, two sheds, a garage, a storage house, a chicken yard, a fenced-in garden, a smithy, and a carpentry shop provided Jimmy opportunities to learn and to work. Later, Jimmy became a master craftsman, making furniture and other wooden items. He especially liked the barn, the center of farm life. Jack Clark presided there as a manager who knew and loved the operation of the farm better than did its white owner. Jack rang the huge farm bell "an hour before daylight" to alert owners and workers that it was time to get going.<sup>41</sup>

As Jimmy grew older and stronger, he assumed more difficult tasks. The fields of southwestern Georgia required many long workdays because there was a 245-day growing season and an average annual rainfall of fifty-three inches.<sup>42</sup> Insects relentlessly attacked crops, animals, and people. Fleas feasted on the blood of both animals and their owners, and the tormenting gnat became a regional legend. These tiny, dark grey, flying gnats traveled in swarms, attacking their victims around the eyes, mouth, and nostrils. During the summer "gnat season," people blew and fanned them vigorously away from their faces.

The exhausting work in cotton and peanut fields required physical stamina and a nearly superhuman ability to endure heat and humidity. In early summer, when the cotton plants matured and the blooms and bolls began to form, workers had to "mop" the cotton in order to poison the boll weevils, a chore Jimmy hated. He dipped a rag on a stick into a pail of a stinking, sticky, brown liquid



mixture of molasses and arsenic and then applied the goo to the plants. When the bolls opened in late summer and early fall, Jimmy picked cotton, backbreaking labor for low pay in searing heat during the gnat season. He also used a mule to plow up peanut plants. That done, he endured more heat and gnats to help shake the dirt away from the nuts on the roots, then stack the whole plants with the nuts outward in a circular pattern around tall stakes that workers had placed in the fields. Stacking peanuts was a dirtier, hotter job than picking cotton.

Working after school, weekends, and summers, Jimmy stayed busy with his chores. He helped Jack Clark milk twelve cows and haul sugarcane to his father's steam-powered syrup mill. He plucked geese and packed the down, which his father sent away to be converted into comforters and pillows. When the dry goods came back, the Carters used the ones they needed and sold the rest. Jimmy turned potato vines and pruned watermelons. Earl allowed Jimmy free time on Saturday afternoons and Sundays after church. He did not compliment his son for a job done well, but he chastised him severely for a mistake or negligence.

During the hot months, Jimmy worked and played without wearing a shirt or shoes. He was small, skinny, and strong. He had big, clear blue eyes, light brown hair, slightly thickened lips, an oval face with nose and chin in decent, but not rugged, proportions. His thin skin freckled, burned, and peeled more easily than it tanned. He was a good-looking boy, but not handsome. His feet were too large in proportion to the rest of his body.

As a boy, and later as a man, Jimmy was "lonely" and "timid," words he used frequently throughout his life. He had a tree house in the backyard where he could read in solitude, and he loved pets. He cherished Bonzo, a Boston bulldog puppy, and he grieved almost uncontrollably when an automobile struck and killed him.<sup>43</sup> Later, he owned a favored bird dog, Sport, but no other pet ever quite took the place of Bonzo. His goat, which he named Old Gene Talmadge, after the governor, jumped on top of Earl's car one time too many, after which he mysteriously disappeared.

Jimmy had three ponies, Lady, Lady Lee, and Jolly, but the Shetland Lady was his favorite. He loved that pony, trained her to trot, to pull a cart, and to obey only him. Earl's exacting discipline, however, sometimes threatened Jimmy's beloved pony. Since Lady could not work to pay for her keep, Jimmy rode her on occasion, thus giving her credit for providing transportation. Sometimes he

would be too busy to ride, and his father, angry about something, would menacingly ask how long it had been since he had ridden Lady.<sup>44</sup>

The black women who cared for Jimmy and his sisters were as intimate a part of his young life as were his parents and sisters. Annie Mae Jones lived with the Carters when Jimmy was six and seven. She went to work for Lillian at age thirteen, and according to Lillian, “stole me blind, but she loved my children and we loved her.”<sup>45</sup> She did everything for the children, including cooking, cleaning, getting them to school, and loving them as if they were her own. When they became unruly, she attempted to frighten them into obedience. “I’m gonna call the Boogie Man,” she would say when she wanted them to gather around her quietly. To keep them off the railroad tracks that ran in front of the house, she told them about a bloody ghost who walked the tracks. She sang folk songs and told them exotic tales in the dialect of her own African-American culture.<sup>46</sup>

Annie Lee Lester, another black nanny, sometimes found the eleven-year-old Jimmy to be a mischievous lad who attempted to frighten her. When he prepared to throw worms on her, or jumped into a pond and pretended to be drowning, she threatened to tell his father. Jimmy, who she said was “crazy about his father,” begged her not to tell and thus escaped a whipping.<sup>47</sup>

Rachel Clark, Jack’s wife, began to help the Carters when Jimmy was an adolescent. Jimmy was “a good-sized little boy,” she said. Rachel maintained a serene dignity and aura of equality that the children learned to respect. She did not play games with the young Carters or frighten them. Illiterate but full of wisdom, she became Jimmy’s closest friend.

Rachel remembered the Carter children as well-behaved and obedient. She liked having Jimmy stay at her spotless home and found him to be quiet and religious, a loner who liked to play with his dog and to read. He followed her around, often trying to help her. He picked cotton beside her, but she always picked more than he could. He told her about the times he went hunting with her husband Jack, talked about God with her, and asked her to pray for him. He never told her what he wanted to be; he “just was what he was,” she said.<sup>48</sup>

Jimmy romanticized his adolescent relationship with Rachel and elevated her to a position almost equal to that of his father. After Rachel’s death in 1987, he memorialized her in the poem “Rachel.” In his list of the people most important in his life, and to whom he dedicated his volume of poetry, he listed Rachel fourth, after Earl, Lillian, and Rosalynn. He liked how she told him that God

gave meaning to her life. She helped him to love nature, and when he was at her house, she made him feel that he “belonged” there. Jimmy thought she was a “queen,” and later he sometimes went to see her when he was in Plains. They laughed, he said, and talked about the good times of old, and she told him what she thought he ought to do “in Washington, where I was working then.”<sup>49</sup> Lillian did not remember Rachel being so important in her son’s life, but she liked her and said that in Rachel’s old age she gave her “a can of beer or something” every time they met.<sup>50</sup>

Second to Rachel, Bishop William Decker Johnson of the AME Church befriended his white Carter neighbors. Johnson and his brother, Francis M. Johnson, both African-American ministers, had founded the Johnson Home Industrial College in Archery. Begun in 1912, the college consisted of a sawmill and a planing mill that served the dual purpose of raising money and teaching skills to the students. There were three school buildings and a windmill, the latter suggesting atypical prosperity and comfort. In 1914, the Johnson brothers auctioned off lots to twenty-five black families, who formed the town of Archery. Five other houses in town belonged to the railroad, one of them occupied by the white foreman and his family, the other four by black workers. They were the only families in Archery in 1928 when Earl Carter moved his family to the farm. Bishop Johnson persuaded the railroad to allow the train to have a flag stop in Archery, which meant that if one wanted the train to stop there, one placed an upright flag near the track. Jimmy and his father occasionally attended the St. Mark’s AME Church to hear the bishop preach and to listen to a visiting choir from Morris Brown College or some other black institution in Atlanta.<sup>51</sup>

At the Carter home, just a few miles from the church, however, there was tension between the black Johnsons and the white Carters. Lillian had fewer prejudices than Earl; when she welcomed the bishop’s son Alvan at the front door, Earl discreetly departed by the back door. It was extremely rare in that place for black people to enter white homes except as servants. The bishop himself visited with Earl only in the yard.<sup>52</sup> As did many rural white youths, Jimmy had more black than white playmates. His closest black friend, A. D. Davis, was small in stature and a few years younger than Jimmy. A. D. hunted, fished, and boxed with the white boys. Often inseparable from Jimmy at the farm, he rode Lady, harnessed the goat to a wagon for playtime, sat in the kitchen to eat with Jimmy at mealtimes, and shared Jimmy’s birthday celebrations. When they went

to Americus together to attend a movie, however, Jimmy sat downstairs while A. D. climbed to the segregated seats in the balcony. A. D. quit school after the fifth grade and later worked at a sawmill to support his family. He remembered that Jimmy always took the dominant role. “Jimmy likes to star,” he said.

Jimmy’s white friends sometimes came to visit him, usually at the Pond House, but Jimmy rarely went to see them. They included the two Watson boys, sons of the railroad’s section foreman, and Rembert Forrest, a schoolmate who rode horseback five miles to reach Archery. Rachel Clark thought that Jimmy “wasn’t very close to nobody.”<sup>53</sup>

White and black people in Archery occupied separate worlds. A. D., Annie Mae, and Rachel, no matter how close they were to Jimmy and his family, lived and worshiped in a segregated society. Black people knew their place, and whites did, too. In June 1938, Earl Carter, who was no racist according to his wife, allowed several dozen blacks to assemble in the yard and listen to the radio broadcast of the second boxing match between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling in New York City. Since the white Schmeling had defeated the black Louis in an earlier bout, their rematch had strong racial overtones. Standing outside under a mulberry tree, the neighbors listened to the radio Mr. Earl had placed in the living room window. When Joe Louis won, the black visitors politely thanked a disappointed Mr. Earl for letting them listen. Once they had crossed the road and the railroad to reach their own houses, they whooped and hollered for hours.<sup>54</sup>

Earl, like so many white southerners, viewed that match only as a contest between a black man and a white, but others saw it as a match between an American and a representative of Nazi Germany. From north to south, east to west, Americans—black and white, Jews, Indians, and Hispanics—screamed with delight and hugged each other when America’s hero Joe Louis knocked out Germany’s ambassador of anti-Semitism. One black writer declared that the happiest people in America were not blacks but Jews. W. E. B. Du Bois, the normally sedate black intellectual who led the early fight for racial equality, lost his composure in Atlanta and shouted, “Beat the hell out of the damn German bastard!”<sup>55</sup> Those few black people in Archery had millions of brothers and sisters, many of them nonblack, around the globe who needed someone to stand up for their rights.

Too young to be concerned with human rights, Jimmy passed much of his idyllic childhood outdoors. He fished, hunted, hiked, and swam. He collected

arrowheads and old bottles, the beginning of lifelong hobbies. He sat beside streams, drifted down them in small boats, and traipsed through fields and woods alone or in the company of good dogs and good people. Those times did not stir him to a life of laziness, but, on the contrary, gave him inspiration and time to think.<sup>56</sup> The times Jimmy liked best were those when he went alone with Rachel. He marveled at how she fished six lines at once and knew where to find the best fishing holes. She let him earn his way by collecting the bait and carrying the fish. With her, he felt awed in the presence of a superior being. Jimmy struggled with the mosquitoes and yellow flies that attacked him but ignored Rachel. Otherwise, he went about his work undistracted by such other wildlife as rabbits, otter, wood ducks, and water moccasins.<sup>57</sup>

Jimmy took annual fishing trips with his father to more distant spots in South Georgia. Several times they went to the Okefenokee Swamp in the southeastern corner of the state, a vast land of “trembling earth” composed mostly of floating peat. They watched alligators and bears and sighted herons, egrets, ducks, pileated woodpeckers, bald eagles, and other birds. From the lake that formed the headwaters of the Suwannee River, Jimmy pulled largemouth bass and jack. Once he panicked when fishing with his father in the Little Saltilla, a stream several miles north of the Okefenokee. He had attached Earl’s string of fish to a belt loop of his trousers, but the loop broke, dropping his father’s entire catch back into the water. Fearing his father’s response, the frightened boy began to cry, but his father hugged him and said there were many more fish in the river.<sup>58</sup>

Earl also taught Jimmy to hunt. Before he was old enough to handle a shotgun, Jimmy joined his father on early morning dove hunts, serving as pickup boy. Sometimes Earl let Jimmy carry one of his guns and gave him a cup of hot chocolate while the others drank coffee and liquor. At age ten, Jimmy acquired his own .22 Remington pump rifle and a bolt-action, four-shot .410 shotgun. When he was a bit older, his father allowed him to hunt with Jack Clark, his cousin Hugh, and other friends. While hunting alone for the first time, Jimmy fired into a covey of quail his dog had flushed from a grove of scrub oak trees near his house. He proudly picked up the bird he had killed and rushed to the blacksmith shop to show it to his father. As his approving smile vanished, Earl asked, “Where’s your gun?” In his excitement, Jimmy had dropped it. He went back and found it.<sup>59</sup>

Nearer home, the railroad tracks in front of his house fascinated Jimmy. They provided him with hours of creative play and beckoned to a world beyond