

For the Joy of the Journey  
A personal memoir

## Foreword

Writing a memoir sounds a bit narcissistic, or, at the very least, presumptuous. Cool people write memoirs. People who are famous, or think they are, write memoirs. Those realities press upon me as I entertain the idea of writing a personal memoir. One might ask, “Who do you think you are?”

Well, that is precisely the problem. I’m not famous and suffer no illusions about that. Neither am I cool, except, perhaps, to a couple of grandchildren who are not old enough to know better.

I’m not a nobody but I am somebody. Even though today I am somebody, however insignificant or significant, in a few decades or more, I will be a nobody. In all likelihood the only evidence of my past existence will be scattered ashes. A quote from Anne Lamott on my website header may be the best reason I have for writing a memoir.

*In the end, the only thing I have offer is my story, for good or ill. It is my desire that my children and the generations to follow them will have the opportunity to know that story. It may not be a great story but there is no other story like it in all of history.*

Perhaps, writing my memoir is nothing but a desperate attempt to resist the inevitability of anonymity? Regardless, I believe it’s worth the trip.

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## CHAPTER 1 - Genesis

I was born by May 14, 1942 in Florence Alabama to George Robert Ezell, Sr and Clayton Aurelia Page, who are now deceased. I have one bother, William Thomas (Chipper) Ezell, born eight years later.

### Aurelia Page

I have no clear understanding of my mother's years just prior to marrying my father. As a child, she was the oldest of three children born to William Columbus Page and Nellie Thornton Page. She had a sister, Izora and a brother, Billy Rudolph. Her mother died in 1926. I do not know the circumstances of her mother's death. At age 13, mother assumed responsibility for her siblings and the household. I believe those responsibilities dominated her formative years and deprived her of a typical upbringing. Her life and relationships reflected her sense of responsibility and duty inherited from those years. William Columbus Page, better know as Papa to me, was the only grandparent that I knew. I loved him, but he was a bit mysterious. Undisputedly, hard head strong and unyielding, he was deeply religious. A devout Methodist, I remember his Bible and faithful church attendance. He read his Bible faithfully and was responsible for ringing the church bell each Sunday morning. He was fondly know as Mr. Billy in the community. I suspect that mother's acceptance of responsibility to her siblings and the family arose from Papa's expectations as much as anything else. He was a dominating figure in her life which may explain why she did not marry until she was thirty. Mother graduated high school and, by all indications, was a good student. It is not clear when she left home, but at at time she met Dad she had left Rogersville and was working in Florence.

The following story, written as a blog post, gives insight into Papa and mother's early years.

*In my mind, mother's family was a bit strange. There was the usual family drama but there were circumstances which set the Page's apart. The subject story of this post is about my grandfather, William Columbus Page aka Mr. Billy. To me he was Papa. Papa was a cotton farmer and had two brothers and one sister, Luke, Jimmy and Ninnie. My recollection is that Luke was the dominant brother, a hard, no nonsense man. Jimmy was a "good ole boy" and fun to be around. I only knew Ninnie in her later years when she came to live with Papa after being released from the "insane asylum" in Tuscaloosa. She had been confined there for decades and as a result of her shock treatments was a passive and compliant old lady who dipped snuff. Two characteristics come to mind when I think of Papa. He was a deeply religious Methodist and stubborn to a fault. Hard headed as my mother would say. There is more that could be said about Papa, but I want to get to the story.*

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*Mr. Billy Page*

*The following is a story in the life of William Columbus Page. I am sharing it as it was related to me by my mother, as best I can remember.*

*Billy Page married Nellie Thornton and there were five children born to them. Two died in infancy and three survived, including my mother Aurelia, sister Izora and brother Bill born in 1923. My grandmother Nellie died in 1926. At age 13 my mother assumed responsibility for mothering her siblings. I do not know the circumstances of my grandmother's death. As the story goes, Papa was deeply affected by her death to the point that he made a vow not to speak again until he heard otherwise from God. For the next three years he kept that vow despite his brothers' attempts to goad him into speaking. Their harassment might have seemed cruel except for the fact that Papa would read his Bible and pray aloud in the evenings.*

*On the evening of July 28, 1929, returning to his house with a team of mules ahead of a threatening thunderstorm, lightning struck. The mules were killed. Papa was struck unconscious. The metal buttons on his bib overalls were melted and the house was set on fire. As it happened there was a man passing by who came to investigate and finding Papa unconscious and not breathing administered artificial respiration until he began to breathe again. Bystanders extinguished the house fire using milk from nearby milk cans. I presume that Papa interpreted that event as the sign he was looking for, as my mother said, he never quit talking after that.*

*That's the story and I'm sticking by it.*

*As is often the case, there is more to the story. Conflicting accounts have come to light as I researched for this blog post. Beyond my memory of mother's story, there is a newspaper article that documented the events of July 28. I also had conversation with my cousin Jerry Page.*

*Here are some twists to the story as I related it.*

- Jerry remembers being told that Papa was struck by lightning twice. The first occasion came several years before 1929 and his team of mules were killed. He was unable to speak following that event. There is no mention in the later newspaper article regarding mules being killed in July 1929.*

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- *The newspaper article reported that Papa had suffered a paralytic stroke in 1922 that rendered him speechless. He was able to speak after he was revived. It was noted that his son Bill was able to hear his father speak for the first time.*

*What seems to be relatively certain is:*

- *When Papa was struck by lightning in 1929 he was unable/ unwilling to speak. He began speaking after the event.*
- *There is no corroboration of his vow not to speak.*
- *He was stubborn enough and devout enough to make and keep such a vow.*
- *In any case, his survival was a miracle as was the return of his speech.*

*Since there are no surviving witnesses or anyone who would have second hand information, I am going to hold on to the story that I was told. That's how family lore goes.*



*Bill, Izora, Aurelia*

It was not until my later years that I understood how deeply spiritual Mother was. I remember her kneeling beside her bed to pray each night and reading her Bible which remained beside her favorite chair. In the early years of their marriage her Sundays were divided between attending Sunday school at the Methodist Church and then meeting Dad and me for services at the Church of Christ.

As described in the post previously. The Page family was somewhat mysterious to me. Papa and his vows of silence, Aunt Ninnie and her mental illness. Papa's marriage to Miss Anna and subsequent separation/divorce? In my mind, there was a dark side which remains a mystery.

George Robert Ezell, Sr.

Dad was 36 and my mother was 30 when I was born. They were both natives of Lauderdale County Alabama. Dad had been married previously and his wife had died. For reasons I never understood, his first marriage or the circumstances under which his wife died were never discussed. He never knew his father who died soon after he was born. My grandfather Samuel Thomas Ezell had two

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wives. There were seven children by his first wife who died young, after which he married my grandmother Jenny. They had three children, my uncle Charlie, my dad, and his sister Leona.

I do not know the circumstances of my grandfather's death, only that he died in August 1907 after my father was born in September 1906. Obviously, Dad was raised without a father, but based on what I know of his relationships with his half brothers and sisters, it would be a fair assumption that his half brothers filled much of that void. The first forty years of his life are pretty much a mystery to me. There are a few stories he related which I will share, but all in all, the information is sparse. I have always regretted we never had those conversations. That regret is a significant reason why I am writing this memoir.

There is a picture taken of my Dad and me when I was about 12 to 14 months old. I was standing unassisted in his out stretched hand. The image confirmed his physical strength and it was prescient of his expectations for his sons. He wanted us to be strong and fearless, qualities which I came to admire in him.

As I indicated, the history of Dad's life before my memory is pretty sketchy. He related a few stories. For instance, he played football at Cherokee high school in Cherokee, Alabama. How he got to Cherokee from his birthplace in Rogersville, Alabama was never clear to me. They played with leather helmets and no face guards, he left the impression that he was pretty good player and the game was rough.

His football career was cut short. While in school, he worked at a cotton gin. His job required him to move 500 lb bales by grabbing them with a hook and balancing them on his back. Once during that process he lost his balance and dropped the bale, breaking his leg ending his football days. I am pretty certain his later back troubles were a result of that strenuous work.

By his description, he was raised in poverty. He loved to tell about getting an orange in his Christmas stocking, his only gift. We became benefactors of his poverty because it prompted his generosity toward us at Christmas time. He always wanted us to have it better than he had and we certainly did.

There were stories of a one room school house with only a pot belly stove for heat. He delighted in telling about the time someone put shotgun shells in the stove and the ensuing pandemonium. I have no understanding of what kind of student he was. He did graduate high school but went no further in his education. He read and wrote reasonably well and I remember him reading books regularly in his later years.

There were hints that he may have had some rough edges as a young man. He never mentioned imbibing in alcohol but he did not deny it either. Given most of his work experience as a young man

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was construction, I'm sure there were plenty of opportunities. He was very proud that he worked on the construction of Wilson Dam.

I always enjoyed him telling about he and friends wading the creeks and noodling. Noodling is reaching beneath under water ledges with their hands to locate and grab catfish by their gills. I suspect there was a good bit of hyperbole in the tales. Dad's life from his birth to my remembrance of him is mostly unknown to me.

I have fond memories of Dad's half-brothers Frosty (Leonard) and Bernard. They were always my uncles, just like his full bother Uncle Charlie. His other half-brothers died before I was born. Dad was particularly fond of Petty who seemed to be his hero, perhaps, because he was a respected Church of Christ preacher. His story was tragic, ending with his death in a bus crash. His other half brother, Houston died in 1941 and have no knowledge of his life. Half-sisters Dona, Maggie and Della and their families were all part of my early years. There were many cousins. Family reunions were large and joyous occasions.

When I was born it was a difficult birth and I was delivered me by cesarean section. I was told by Mother, Dad and Papa got into an argument at the hospital about the procedure and, I suppose, who was in charge. I'm not sure who was arguing for what, but it was clear that Dad let Papa know who was making decisions. Reportedly, they nearly came to blows. Over the years, Dad and Papa seem to have an understanding but there was not any affection for each other. Perhaps, my birth was the occasion when Mother finally ceased to be under her father's control.





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Ezell Family

Pictures of the Ezell family can be seen at <http://www.georgezell.com/family-heritage/ezell-family/>