

**HOW MY FATHER, WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT SHIPS OR SHIPBUILDING,
CAME TO TEACH SOME THIRTY THOUSAND COUNTRY BOYS, INCLUDING
HANK WILLIAMS, AND ROSIE-RIVETING WOMEN,
HOW TO BUILD SHIPS AT ADDSCO DURING WWII**

by
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My father John Tilmon¹ Bagwell died at almost age 85 in 1995. He went by “J.T.” all his life, even when he was a little boy. He was born in Alpharetta, Georgia [now part of greater Atlanta] on a small productive farm in 1910, to a family which, as a part of the great Scots-Irish or Ulster Scots migration, had moved from Virginia to North Carolina to South Carolina and, just before the Civil War, to Georgia. Both of his grandfathers served in the Confederate Army². Daddy went to church in what he once fondly recalled as a “surrey with the fringe on top” [but, he once called it “a wagon” to me, and said he sat in it on a “tobacco box” which is what plugs of chewing tobacco came in] and he remembered the first automobile that ever drove through Alpharetta, and the first airplane that ever flew over it. Before there was rural electricity their farm, like so many others, had a Delco generator driven by a “make-or-break”/“hit-or-miss” flywheel gasoline engine. He made a battery-powered lamp with which to read in bed, and a crystal radio³.

When he was ten in 1920 his mother Lizzie Magnolia died from pneumonia supposedly contracted going in an open touring car in the rain to play the organ at church for a funeral. When he was thirteen in 1923 his father Tilmon died from rabies contracted from an unknown little feist dog which ran out of the woods and bit him, as William Faulkner once wrote, “the kind of dog that Negroes call a fice”. That year at age thirteen he rode in his first car, a Dodge; it must have been his brother’s because he told me he told on his brother to his parents for going thirty miles an hour.

¹ We are from the same family which in South Carolina produced “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman, late nineteenth-century South Carolina populist politician, who I figure is my third cousin, twice removed. At some point we started spelling the name differently.

² One of them, Nathan Bennett Bagwell, whom he called “Grampaw Bennett”, had been a Sergeant in the 38th Georgia Infantry, which suffered 81% casualties in the bloodiest part [“The Cornfield”] of the bloodiest battle in American history [Antietam or Sharpsburg], where he was left wounded on the battlefield and a Yankee doctor saved his life by amputating his leg. He “retired from the Confederate Army” and returned home on the wooden leg the Confederacy issued him in Richmond, married, produced ten children and became the County tax assessor, dying in 1909, the year before J.T. was born.

³ I understand that Radio Shack sells a Crystal Radio Kit (part number 28-178) that contains the earphone, diode, wire and a tuner (which means that you don't need to stand right next to the transmitter for this to work), all for \$10.

Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen his older sisters took care of him in while they sold the farm, and when he was fifteen his sister Effie, one of his two old-maid lifelong schoolteacher sisters, got him in the Berry School for Boys in Rome, Georgia, at the head of the Coosa River, which is one of those schools which [like Berea College in Kentucky] requires its students both to go to school and to learn to work or learn a trade. Miss Martha Berry, who started the school, had the theory that both work and education would be good for people in the region [the students laughingly called it “the Berry School for Children of Limited Minds and Means”], and there as his job he worked in the laundry, which experience after graduation was his ticket to the next step. He remembered Henry Ford’s coming there with a “carload”, a boxcar load, of apples for the school.

Daddy said “the depression kept me in college”. During the depression, being an orphan, he went to any college where he could work for a living and support himself while going to school: Black Mountain College, the YMCA Graduate School⁴ in Nashville [now part of Vanderbilt], Vanderbilt, and finally Alabama, from which he graduated. He did any job he could; while he was in North Carolina he bought a truck and went into Kentucky to buy coal and delivered it to houses himself, shoveling it in the basement; once, coming down a mountain, the truck’s steering wheel fell off; somehow he put it back on and drove on, but later in life he was understandably terrified of driving in the mountains.

Early in his college career he fell in with Black Mountain College, in Black Mountain, North Carolina, near Asheville, and near the Presbyterian and Baptist Church’s summer retreats. Black Mountain College was an amazing place, a very revolutionary new school then, which has been the subject of several notable books. Its founder John Andrew Rice, Rhodes Scholar but non-PhD son of a Montgomery Methodist Minister, was a rebellious Rollins College Professor in Florida who fell out with Rollins and with his coterie of supporters, started a new college in Black Mountain, N.C., making good winter use of the wonderful YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly ground there⁵. The new college needed somebody who could run their laundry and somehow the Berry School recommended him and he moved to Black Mountain to run its laundry [it was my *father*, not my mother, who taught me how to iron a shirt right]. The school had a lot of rich rebellious students [“all Yankees but two” my father said] who dressed in East European peasant garb and played at being a communist, but Daddy said that none of them could do anything useful, and before long he was working with the grounds manager [a North Carolina Quaker

⁴ Daddy got in with The YMCA Graduate in Nashville [which was across 21st Avenue from Vanderbilt’s main campus in a building now gone, but in my years at Vanderbilt it was where Vanderbilt’s Psychology Department was] at the suggestion of Dr. Willis D. Weatherford, who was active in promoting Christian race relations improvement in the 1930s, and who was the founder of the YMCA’s Blue Ridge Assembly Ground in Black Mountain, NC, and who lived in an amazing mountain house above Black Mountain. His namesake son became President of Berea College, the closest cousin to the Berry School, in 1967.

⁵ The 1942 first edition of Rice’s autobiography, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century*, had a chapter on the creation of Black Mountain College which was apparently dropped in later editions.

poet⁶ named James Peale Parker, after whom my brother is named] keeping the place running. Black Mountain College hosted some of the Bauhaus alumni, emigré refugees from Hitler, including the famed artist Joseph Albers, who hosted the German-speaking table at meals, where my father, oddly to me, sat with “Herr Albers”. It was there at Black Mountain that my father and mother met; Rice called them “applesauce⁷ and SuperSuds⁸”. They lived the first year of their married life there, spending a cold winter in a cottage at Black Mountain where the water on the tables froze. They had no car but had a horse, and their neighbors had a horse, and the two couples would lend horses so each couple had a pair of horses they could ride on alternate days. One evening they climbed the high mountain nearby to watch the sunset, lingering ‘til dark, when a mountain lion⁹ screamed. They scrambled down the mountain in the dark— no flashlight— falling and tripping, with the mountain lion seeming to follow them down, but they made it down without a mauling.

They sold their Black Mountain house and with the money moved to Tuscaloosa where Daddy sold appliances at Sears part-time—they said he was their best salesman¹⁰--and graduated from Alabama. Daddy noticed that the Yankees who came there to school [including all kinds of people like Gay Talese] wore white shoes or saddle oxfords all winter, on the apparent misguided theory that Tuscaloosa was a Southern resort and subject to the “Southern Resort Exception” to the normal white shoe rule’s ending date.

My parents taught school for a year in Montgomery in the mid-1930s and then sometime in the late 1930s, moved to Montevallo, where both taught in the teacher training program at the Demonstration School at Alabama College.

About 1938, on the strength of all this and a good many vocational education courses which he had taken at Alabama where he got his degree, Daddy was offered a job as a state supervisor in the administration of the WPA program. The WPA— it was actually the “Works Progress Administration” and later “the Work Projects Administration”, though derisively called “We

⁶ His poetic works on the North Carolina mountains, including *Hemlock Twigs and Balsam Sprigs*, were still in print into the 1960s.

⁷ To support her summers there my mother, who graduated from Alabama College at Montevallo where she edited the yearbook, worked in the serving line of the dining room.

⁸ “Supersuds” was an early detergent.

⁹ A mountain lion and a panther are the same thing. Once twenty years ago I encountered a panther in the Alabama river swamps; I was armed to the teeth [high-powered rifle, .44 magnum and a flashlight] but I was scared to death anyway. I cannot imagine doing it unarmed with no flashlight.

¹⁰ He always laughed about how Hudson Strode, the famous but self-important teacher in the creative writing classes [and author of a great series on Jefferson Davis] was incensed when he tried to cash a check with Daddy and Daddy did not know who he was.

Piddle Around”— was the New Deal program which hired all kinds of people simply to give them a job, from laborers on up through artists and architects, who as I recall measured buildings for the Historic Buildings Survey of the National Archives. Somebody had to organize all this disparate work and workers, training and supervising workers and placing them in private employment, and Daddy was one of them. His papers show that his job title at the end of his work there, just before the war, was “State Training and Re-employment Supervisor”.

At the beginning of The War, the old Mobile shipbuilding firm Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company [ADDSCO] had maybe a thousand irregularly-employed workers, and when the war came and we needed ships, the place went to at least thirty thousand or even more workers during the war; women, and country men, many of whom couldn’t even spell their own names, which required ADDSCO to develop a phonetic employment records system.

Somebody had to teach all of these people how to build ships, and oddly enough my father – who had never had anything to do with ships, or even been on one– was an important one of them.

Pearl Harbor was in December of 1941, and probably most of 1942 was spent in beginning to gear up for War production, and it is not likely that they built too many ships in 1942. My father came to work at ADDSCO on April 5, 1943, when he was released by WPA to help ADDSCO form a training department. The man in charge of the training program at the outset had the unfortunate name James I. Teat, who later left to become a Naval Officer. Daddy, then aged 32, initially “was one of his principal assistants”¹¹. At first Daddy lived in the LaClede Hotel, but later when momma and my two older brothers arrived they lived on Princess Ann in Springhill, in Springhill Manor, where I was presumably conceived about Mardi Gras of 1945.

The ADDSCO trainers hit the ground hard. About six weeks after Daddy got to ADDSCO, it implemented an order from the President’s Fair Employment Practices Committee¹² to promote black workers. About 7,000 of ADDSCO’s maybe 30,000 [I have heard 40,000, but I don’t know] workers were black, mostly in unskilled jobs. The FEPC ordered ADDSCO to upgrade the work of the black workers, and it finally– I’m sure they didn’t hurry too much, as the Ken Burns series confirms – promoted twelve of them to welding jobs, which promotions on May 24, 1943 led to a riot by the worst element of the white workers; historians confirm it was said to “get every one of them niggers off this island”¹³. White rednecks went all over the shipyard viciously clubbing black workers for hours. The Ken Burns documentary leaves the impression that ADDSCO just let the riot play out, but historians write that the riot ended “when United States

¹¹ Letter from F.B. Spencer, Vice President and General Manager of Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, to George Papin of the “Training Within Industry” program of the War Manpower Commission, dated March 5, 1945 [in my possession].

¹² The South always blamed President Truman for this body, but Roosevelt created it.

¹³ B. Nelson, Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile During World War II, THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY p. 952, December 1993.

Army troops from nearby Brookley Field arrived on Pinto Island to restore order”¹⁴. Daddy’s memory was that battle-hardened Army troops were at Brookley Field on some kind of temporary resting leave from the war, and it understandably took them a little while after they were summoned to arrive, but when they got to ADDSCO they put the white riot down with considerable force. Daddy saw soldiers clubbing white rioters with their rifle butts. Daddy’s notes¹⁵ say “terrible thing to watch”, and Daddy always said that the action of the soldiers was absolutely the right thing and that he never felt better about violence in his life.

Here is what he said in his notes about the ADDSCO work:

Many of you remember the pressure put on “back home” to supply, somehow, the needed people in necessary war industry. That was the job at hand. It involved liaison with public training facilities in most of the states in the Southeast, or at least parts of those states near enough to work effectively, especially to get the people to come after the completion of their training. People in the shipyard and in the field were recruited and classes set up. We had an electric welding school on the island¹⁶ where the shipyard was that was equal in size to some of our sizeable industries— and operating around the clock— 3 hour shifts of 400 total. The same story in blueprint reading, acetylene welding and shipfitting and other shipbuilding crafts.

Among Daddy’s more colorful stories is that the night shift of workers at the shipyard started bringing whores into the shipyard and ensconcing them in the ships, so all the supervisors had to start working weirder hours better to keep an eye on the workers.

A letter from the General Manager of the Shipyard says that when Mr. Teat left, apparently about the end of 1943 or very early 1944, at the height of the shipbuilding program, “Mr. Bagwell was put in charge of the [training] department and has done an excellent job” as Director of Training of ADDSCO.

In April of 1945, with shipbuilding curtailed as German and Japanese submarines no longer often sank our ships, daddy took a job with The War Manpower Commission, traveling in North Carolina to various war industries there. Near the end of the War and looking toward peace, he took a job with the Tomlinson Furniture Company in High Point, NC, where they lived when I was born in Winston-Salem in late 1945.

¹⁴Id at 952-53 and note 2.

¹⁵ Late in life Daddy wrote an 11-page handwritten account he called “Me” [I’m not sure, but I think he used it in some kind of round-robin program introductions they had at a church retired man’s club].

¹⁶ This is Pinto Island, the island across the Mobile River from downtown Mobile, on which ADDSCO was located. Until the Bankhead Tunnel was completed later in the war, Daddy rode a ferry to work across the river.

After the war, in maybe 1948 they moved to Montgomery, where both my parents taught in High School until Kennedy's presidency, when Daddy took a job with the New Deal's "Area Redevelopment Administration", which later became the Department of Commerce's "Economic Development Administration", from which he retired.