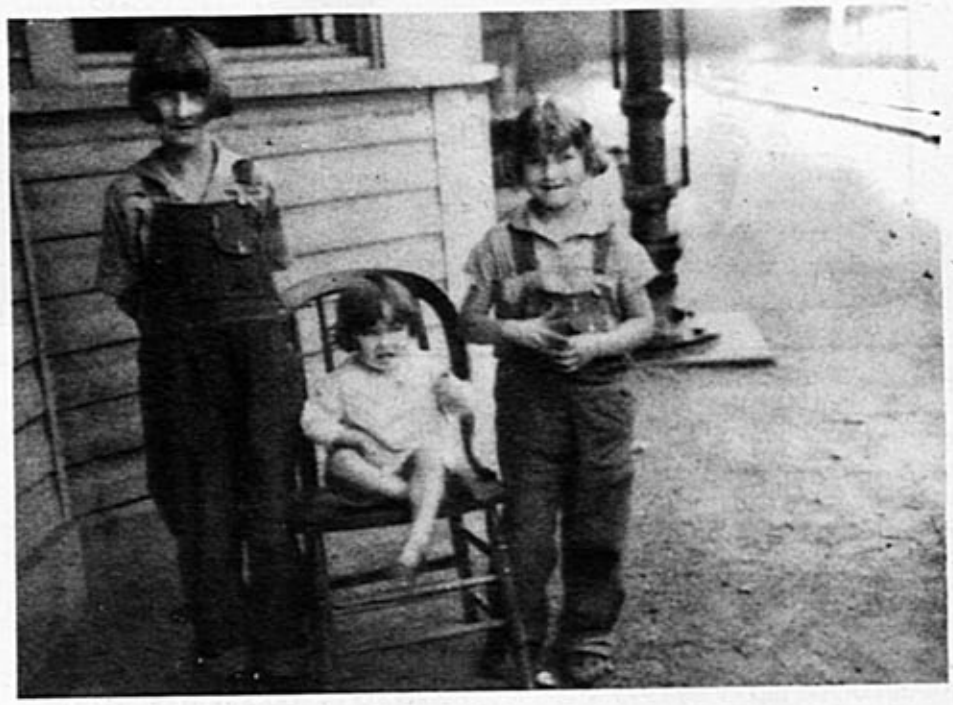
Growing Up In Jerome

My parents were Martha Gladys Duncan (1901-1990) and Floyd Edward Jones (1895-1971). I had two older sisters, Berniece (1918-1989) and Erma Louise, born in 1922.

My mother was an unusual woman. Her schooling went only through the eighth grade but when she was almost 90 years old, she would tell me things that she had learned in school. Her mother, Martha Ann Diehr, died when she was two. Her father, Samuel Martin Duncan, was a part-time farmer and a rural mail carrier. Mother was the youngest of five children. After her mother died, her brothers and sisters took her to school with them because there was no one at home to take care of her. She slept in a basket in the back of the school room. Clara, her only sister, became her mother- figure and it broke her heart when Clara married and left home. Mother was ten years old. Her father died when she was fourteen and she went to live with her brother, Perry, and his family. They were very good to her and treated her as if she was one of their children.

Mother met my father when she was working in Perry's general store in Arlington, Missouri. He was the agent at the Frisco railroad depot in Jerome. They were married three months later on December 15, 1917, when my mother was 16 and my father was 22. My dad always said that he "took her to raise." They moved into a three-room house and Dad bought her all new furniture. This was the beginning of Mother's love affair with her home and everything in it, and it lasted all of her life.

Mother was a very hard worker and a good manager of money. She always wanted money of her own and she "hid" it under the corner of the rug in the living room wherever she was. She was largely responsible for the building of five small, light housekeeping cottages on their property about 1925. Their location on the Gasconade was appealing, and Arlington and Jerome had a long tradition of tourists of vacationers coming to the river. During the summer, special trains were run from St. Louis, sometimes two a day. Also, Route 66 was not paved past Arlington then and



Bernice, Lenore and Erma Jones at the Jerome depot in 1929. Courtesy of Lenore Morris.

most vacationers didn't want to go farther west on dirt roads. There were large dance halls associated with the resorts of Tilden and Russ Andres, and at Bryant's resort. The operators imported bands from St. Louis and elsewhere to provide entertainment.

During the summer months the population of Jerome exceeded several times its normal size. Mother was able to make extra money from the cabins and in

other ways. As the occupants changed, she cleaned the cabins and washed and ironed all the bed linens. Every Saturday she baked pies and dressed chickens to sell to the "city people." We always had fried chicken for our family Sunday dinners. My grandchildren, David and Caroline Miller, have been amused and horrified to hear how the chickens were killed. She wrung their necks. This was an accepted method in those days and I suppose it was as humane as any other. It was quick and it took a strong arm, but that wasn't a problem for my mother. It was my job to retrieve the chickens as they flopped all over the hillside.

When we lived in Jerome, the closest doctors were at Newburg or Rolla, but only rarely did we need their services after Mother practiced her own brand of medicine on us. She used either Vicks VapoRub or castor oil for everything that ailed us. If we had a cold or flu symptoms, she heated Vicks, rubbed it on our chests and covered it with a hot cloth funneled to our mouth and nose. I guess it worked, we always recovered. If we complained of anything else, she gave us castor oil. It was notodorless or tasteless as it might be now. It was thick and foul tasting and almost impossible to swallow. She mixed it with orange juice. If we could possibly hide a stomach ache, we did.

My father grew up in Dixon, Missouri, where he graduated from high school and then from Draughan Business College in Springfield, Missouri. I don't know what courses he took, but he always told us that was where he learned to write in such a unique and beautiful way. After a few months of training in a telegraphy school, Dad went to work for the Frisco railroad in 1914.

My father's career with the railroad was as a station telegrapher and later as station agent. In my child's mind, I thought that he was the smartest and bravest man in the whole world. I was amazed that he could understand the clicking of the telegrapher's key sending Morse Code messages to him, and equally impressed to watch him use the key to send messages to other stations. This was the only means of communication for rail traffic, except for the written messages that were handed to moving trains as they passed through a station. This was called "hooping up orders."

View of the Jerome Depot from the front porch of Oak Grove Cottages. Courtesy of Lenore Morris.

My dad would stand on the railroad platform with a long stick that had an attached string held in position by tension. The written orders were loosely fastened to the string; and, as the moving train went through, a member of the crew would reach out and grab the string, thus getting the paper message. Dad had to stand close to the speeding train and the noise and the wind draft were terrifying to me.

Trains were a very important part of our lives. I spent a lot of time at the station with my dad. It was less than a block from our home. I can still remember the creosite smell of the wood floors. My friends and I walked the rails and put small things on the tracks to see how flat they would be after a train went through. The fathers of some of my friends worked on the "section gangs." The gangs repaired and maintained the tracks in all kinds of weather. They were often called out in the middle of the night to remove snow from the tracks on

Dixon Hill. Their transportation was a handcar propelled by leverage, or "armstrong power," as it was euphemistically called--one man pushing up, the other down, etc. As an employee, my father had a family pass which allowed us free travel for any trip on the Frisco. There was a reciprocal agreement with other railroads, but maybe not for the full amount.

My early childhood years coincided with the Depression. Jobs were scarce. My father was proud of the fact that he never missed a paycheck, even though he was transferred many times due to a process called "bumping." If you had more seniority than someone else, you could apply for his job. In turn, he would have to "bump" someone who had less time with the railroad than he did. We moved many times to small towns all up and down the line. Dad always tried to get back to Rolla or Jerome, and did so several different times in his career with the Frisco.

Just a word or two about the town of Jerome. It was very small, except during the summer months. There was a post office, two grocery stores, and a one-room schoolhouse. Most of the people in town were related to each other and there were many common surnames such as Wagner, Brinkley, Heflin, etc. In 1929-1930, Route 66 was paved through Arlington. Travelers could then travel comfortably by car to places farther west. As a consequence, Jerome and Arlington began to lose some tourist business. This caused a real hardship for the people in the area. Few had paying jobs. Most of them existed by bartering. They didn't have farm acreage but all of them had "truck" gardens to feed their families and trade for necessities.

In 1928, an automobile bridge was built across the Gasconade River. It replaced a ferry that my grandfather, John Jones, had operated for many years. The bridge was quite a progressive development for Jerome; but, when it opened, few people could afford to use it. It cost 75 cents each way. Most people in Jerome would drive to Highway 28 near Dixon and then over to Route 66, thus avoiding the toll. Others walked across the Frisco railroad bridge, which was close by and didn't cost anything. I did that on rare occasions but it always scared me because there was no place to go if a train came along. My father solved the toll problem by asking a good friend, B. H. Rucker,

Jerome School students in 1933. Courtesy of Lenore Morris.

a member of the MissouriLegislature, to help him. In fact, Dad went to Jefferson City as least twice to talk to Mr. Rucker. They worked out a set fee per month for unlimited trips across the bridge. I don't remember exactly how much that was, but it was much cheaper for our family than the alternative. I believe that the toll was collected until the mid-thirties.

Going over the bridge was an adventure. It had a wooden floor with loose planks that made a loud rumbling sound. In fact, you could hear someone crossing the bridge at our home, which was almost a mile away. Glover Courson was the operator. The front of his house was built on a level with the entry to the bridge and the back was on very high stilts. There was a large chain across the access directly in front of his house. When you honked your

horn, he would come out, often in the process of getting dressed, if it was late at night. The state has recently replaced this bridge. I wonder if the new one will last for almost seventy years as the present one did.

The one-room Jerome schoolhouse was built on a hill and served eight grades. There was a long bench in front of the room and the teacher would call a class to come to the bench to study a particular subject. There was some good in this method of teaching. Younger students learned from listening to the more advanced classes. When students graduated, they had to go to the county seat at Rolla and take an exam before they could be admitted to a high school in Phelps County.

I remember two teachers in that school. Ed Williams taught first grade. He and his wife and daughter lived in a small house close to us. He was a fine man and teacher and later became a successful businessman in Rolla. Mr. Williams was the reason that I was the youngest in my class all through school. He let me start first grade when I was just a little over five years old. At a Jerome school reunion in the 1980's, Mr. Williams told us that he did not receive any salary for two years durina the depression. The parents in the community gave him food from their gardens and the local store owner allowed him to get everything he needed on credit. He still has warm feelings about those years and the Jerome people who helped him get through that difficult time.

I also remember my seventh and eighth grade teacher. Mina Huffman was a strong willed and intelligent woman. Some of the older students who had been retained were bigger than she was, but she was always in complete control. When they misbehaved, she told them to come to the front of the room and bend over the bench, where she proceeded to spank them with a large paddle. I have often wondered why some of the older ones didn't refuse to do what she said, but in those days parents were more supportive of teachers. The rule was: "If you get a spanking at school, you'll get one when you get home."

Some of the students were very poor. They went barefoot from March through October. Their feet must have been like shoe leather because they could run over those rocky hills of Jerome as if they had on the best pair of Nikes. Their lunches almost always consisted of large cold biscuits with congealed white beans. Those families probably had beans at least twice a day instead of meat.

There was a summer in the 1930's that is still cited by weathermen for setting all kinds of records for high temperatures. I can remember my parents taking blankets out under the trees in the evening to wait for the house to cool off a little so we could sleep. My dad would tell us all kinds of stories, many of which he made up. I can remember his carrying me back to my bed after I had fallen asleep outside.

According to today's standards, you would think that it would have been hard for children to entertain themselves. It wasn't. I remember summers as being very happy times. We played for hours in a large, nearby creek, which carried a lot of water when it rained. We dammed it up, waded, caught crawdads, etc. One friend and I spent many hours one summer cracking sand rocks to make a sandpile. I don't know why we enjoyed this, but it was a game to find different colors in the rock, sift the sand and put it in a large box. That was the end of it, because we never played in it. We used to play house under a large sycamore tree in our backyard. Its exposed roots made perfect partitions for the rooms.

The ice truck came to Jerome about three times a week and we followed it all over town. If the driver was in a good mood, he would give us the slivers of ice that fell off as he chipped it into 25, 50, and 100-pound blocks. David and Caroline find it hard to believe that this was a big treat, but it was.

Winters weren't as much fun. Paper and pencils were always in short supply. We didn't have many books and I read the seven or eight Bobbsey Twin books that we had, over and over.

I remember little bits of things about the other small towns where I went to school. I can almost always recall my teacher's names and a few of my classmates and friends. We lived in Dixon for the last part of my third grade and the first half of my fourth grade. I had a special friend who lived next door to us. Her name was Cora Lou Prewett. Her father was my father's first cousin. We did everything together. There was a large porch on the side of her house and we would stay there all day playing house, dolls, jacks, pick-up sticks and hopscotch. Shirley Temple paper dolls were popular and we

spent hours and hours cutting them out and playing with them.

Our diets certainly were different in those years. My Mother was a very good cook but we didn't have a lot of sweets. One of my favorite candy treats was something called "BB Bat" suckers. I don't know why that was their name, but maybe it had something to do with the famous baseball stars of that time, such as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, etc. They were about one inch wide and three inches tall and cost one penny. They were light chocolate and chewy, sort of like Jolly Rancher candy of today. Ice cream was the most special treat of all. One of the two grocery stores sold ice cream, vanilla only, and they handpacked it. The store was owned by a Scotsman named Mr. McCarty. He and his family had come to Jerome from St. Louis because he had health problems. Mr. McCarty packed the ice cream in white, Chinese-take-out type containers and he never pushed it down. I think that the air isthe carton weighed more than the ice cream. Dividing a quart among five people may account for the fact that I never seem to get full when I'm eating ice cream. One summer a girl whose family was staying in one of our cabins gave me an orange Life Saver. Just recently I read that Life Savers were first produced in the 1930's and I suppose that is why I had never seen them before.

In 1936, when I was nine years old, my sister Berniece married Smith Gaddy. He lived in Newburg and he would come to Jerome to see her when they were dating. On Christmas Eve of 1935 he was at our home when the highway bridge over the Gasconade was closed because of floodina, so he had to stay all night with us. He slept on the living room floor and I remember running in there on Christmas morning and finding my Shirley Temple doll. I have always cssociated that doll with Smith. That reminds me of another Christmas story that was told over and over in my family. My father was a big tease and one year he dressed up like Santa Claus, knocked out the front door and came in. I was about three years old and he scared me to death. It wasn't too bad until my mother pulled his beard and he began chasing her around the house. That did it! I became hysterical and he had to leave.

In the fall of 1940, my parents made their final move to Rolla. I had started high school in Newburg and transferred in November to Rolla High School. This was quite a change for me. The school and the town still seemed big and strange. I don't remember too much about that year; but, when I was a sophomore I developed a group of friendships that have lasted my entire life. How it happened I don't know, but during the very first part of that year, four of us paired off. These girls were Ruth Hawkins (later Powell), Pauline Murry (later Wilkinson), and Roberta Heller (later Strain). All of us were in the same grade except Roberta, who was four days older than I was but a year behind in school because of my early start in Jerome. The only other one that we ever let into our group was Susan Heimberger. We went everywhere together, dressed alike, often even the same color, etc. We never missed a Sunday afternoon matinee after the Uptown Theater opened in 1941. We considered it to be very plush, and I suppose it was for the time. We were especially impressed with the automatic push- back seats.

The last job my father had with the Frisco was as station agent at Newburg, where he was transferred in 1939. A short time later, as war became imminent, the army began to build Fort Leonard Wood; and, since it was about 25 miles from any railroad, they also had to build a "spur" from Newburg to Fort Wood. Dad was the Frisco supervisor responsible for routing tons and tons of heavy equipment, tanks, building materials and other armaments in and out of Fort Wood. Troop trains went to and from the fort many times each day, especially after Pearl Harbor. Dad retired from the Frisco in 1944.

I dated a number of "Miners" during my high school years. The only one that I was ever very serious about was a Triangle from St. Louis, Les Fields. At that time my friend Ruth was dating John Powell. John was also a Triangle and we double dated all the time. I will never forget one particular experience. This involved a Sunday trip on Route 66 to Onyx Cave (now Onyx Mountain Caverns), about 15 miles west of Rolla. It was a wild cave, not usually explored. I think Les had gone into it before with a mining class from MSM (now UMR). I'm still surprised that my mother let me go because she was always very protective, but I guess she didn't know how dangerous it might be.

We took a lunch and dressed appropriately with gas lanterns fastened to hats on our heads. The entry to the cave was so narrow that we had to crawl on our stomachs for the first fifty feet or so. Then the cave opened up into a succession of fairly large rooms with high ceilings. Of course it was

Top photo - True Anderson drives over the old McKane Bridge on Highway 17 over the Gasconade River. Courtesy of Wayne Anderson.

Right Photo - "Cotton" Anderson after a successful hunt. Courtesy of Wayne Anderson.

pitch black except for the light from our lanterns. After quite some time, we reached the end of the cave and we could see daylight. It came from a hole in the roof of that last room, maybe 100 feet up. It was at this point that we could see thousands of bats hanging upside down in clusters from the ceiling. They stayed there during the day and flew out at night to feed. It was an awesome sight that I will never forget. By the time we made our way back through the cave and came out it was about two o' clock. We had been in there for four hours. I don't remember being scared, but we should have been.