

North Georgia Bluegrass 1950 – 2000

Bluegrass Music Symposium Online Supplement

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NORTH GEORGIA BLUEGRASS PIONEERS

Fifty Years of Bluegrass 1950-2000

North Georgia has a strong and well-documented tradition of Hillbilly music. The Fiddler's Conventions, **Fiddlin' John Carson** and **Moonshine Kate, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, Riley Puckett** and others contributed to the wealth of music in the first half of the twentieth century.

Contemporaneously with these golden years of Hillbilly music, one man heard a different sound and set about assembling the components needed to create that sound. In 1938 **Bill Monroe** traveled to Atlanta where he advertised for musicians and subsequently hired a young guitarist from North Georgia named **Cleo Davis**. From this origin Monroe would soon name his group the Blue Grass Boys and begin to create the branch of Hillbilly music which would one day be known as Bluegrass.

By 1946 Monroe's distinctive sound was complete and had begun to draw imitators. By the 1950's in North Georgia as in other areas, the influence of Monroe, the **Stanley Brothers, Flatt & Scruggs** and **Jim & Jesse McReynolds** was seeping into the Hillbilly or country music of the day.

By 1968 the core group of bluegrass fans in North Georgia had organized the very first festival in Georgia, held in a transmission repair shop in Austell, GA. This was the first of dozens to follow. They ranged from small community events with a few amateur bands to large, well-established festivals featuring the best the genre had to offer. In the early 80's the Southeastern Bluegrass Association was established to foster the music and the number of bluegrass bands was counted in the dozens. Bluegrass music was establishing it's own tradition among the disciples in North Georgia.

J. N. & Onie Baxter

J. N. and Ione (Onie) Baxter have been the nucleus of the Bluegrass Five for over 39 years. After marrying in 1954 the couple regularly made music with friends and neighbors wherever they were living. Onie learned mandolin and guitar as a small child and J. N. was a natural singer who learned guitar from his young wife in the early days of their marriage. Both had been

introduced to the banjo, mandolin, guitar and fiddle but found themselves drawn more to the acoustic sound than to the electric guitars of their peers.

In 1961 the guitar playing couple joined with mandolin player **Hughie Wylie**, bassist **Howard McGuire** and banjo player **Joe Will McGuire** to make their version of bluegrass music. Two years later they were dubbed the Bluegrass Five by Howard McGuire.

The bluegrass community in the area was small but through their limited contacts they learned there was a bluegrass contingent that regularly attended the Ashville Folk Festival in North Carolina. From their first exposure to the festival they became an integral part of this community of likeminded musicians playing "real live" bluegrass music. Over the next few years they would meet and pick with many of the greats of the music. Back in Georgia the Bluegrass Five was much in demand, not only at the small rustic Wanda Auditorium in Bowden Junction, Ga. but also at major festivals across the south. During these years they performed at Union Grove, NC, the Lavonia Bluegrass Festival, the Mountain Dance Folk Festival, the Hiawassee Mountain Fair and shared bills with the likes of **Flatt & Scruggs, Monroe, the Chuck Wagon Gang** and many others. One favorite memory involved playing two shows with Monroe's legendary fiddler **Kenny Baker** at the Lavonia Bluegrass festival.

Although J. N. and Onie have been the constants in the Bluegrass Five, many other great musicians have passed through the group. Among them were **Ron Norman, Joel and Erlene Aderhold, Ralph Abernathy, John Farley, Mack Farley, Jeff Barr** and the Baxter's youngest daughter **Jane Baxter**.

In addition to everything else J. N., Onie and the Bluegrass Five have accomplished during their more than 40 years in bluegrass they have provided support and encouragement and have been a great role model for hundreds of younger musicians who have been influenced by them and their music. In recognition of their contributions they were inducted into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Honor in 1998 and in

2001 were installed in that organization's Hall of Fame.

Walter Butler

As this research was begun in the summer of 2000, we began with those we knew well, safe in our belief that they constituted the core group of Bluegrass disciples. We also identified other important personalities and groups that we hoped to include. We were confident in our knowledge that we knew who constituted that early core group.

We were wrong. And it didn't take long for us to learn that there was at least one (and possibly more) very prominent name with which neither of us was familiar. That man was **Walter Butler** and his band was the **Sun Valley Boys**. His name came up in every interview we conducted and as we delved deeper it became obvious that the next profile in our research would have to be Walter Butler.

As we began directing our energy towards phase 2 of this project we learned that not only was his home in Pine Lake Ga. the focal point for many in the local bluegrass community but that he was known to many or most of the touring Bluegrass groups as well.

This indeed begs the question, who is the best-known North Georgia Bluegrass pioneer that you have never heard of..? A contradiction in terms? Well, consider this...such highly respected practitioners of the bluegrass art in Georgia as **J.N. and Onie Baxter**, **Murray Freeman**, **Don and Ron Norman** and **Robert A. "Tut" Taylor** list Walter Butler as having the distinction of being the person around whom the music coalesced in the 1950s and sixties. One might even surmise that his house in Pine Lake near Stone Mountain, GA served as "ground zero" for the formation of the thriving North Georgia bluegrass tradition.

Born in 1919, Walter grew up in Lawrenceville, GA and always loved listening to the Grand Ole Opry and had a large collection of records. Included in the record collection were such early influences as **Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers** and the **Blue Sky Boys**. In addition, his musical influences included **Flatt and Scruggs**, **Jim and Jesse**, **Reno and Smiley** and the **Osborne Brothers**.

As daughter **Dale Talton** recalls, "We used to listen to the Grand Ole Opry and to records. At first, he just liked to sit around and strum on his guitar, but later began to play with a neighbor who played mandolin." From that, people began to congregate at his home in Pine Lake, GA which is between Stone Mountain and Clarkston. "Walter's going to have a pickin'" soon became a familiar phrase for local musicians.

That was between 1955 and 1965. He was in his early to mid thirties when this began to happen so what had been an enjoyable hobby soon turned into a sharing of his love for music with many other like minded friends.

Since there was no festival scene in Georgia in the 1960s, it was a natural thing for Walter and friends to venture out to other areas where they could get together with musicians. Asheville, North Carolina was a favorite spot with the Asheville Folk Festival. Many bluegrass musicians congregated at the Westgate parking lot and it was here that Walter met **Ralph Lewis** - more or less by just introducing himself after hearing this great Carolina group in a jam session. "Dad never met a stranger," recounts Dale. "He met Ralph Lewis in Asheville by just walking up to him and saying, "Hello, I'm Walter Butler." This was the beginning of a long-time friendship and Ralph was a familiar visitor to the Butler home in coming years. Other frequent visitors included banjoist **Tom McKinney**, the **Burches** (Curtiss, jr. of New Grass Revival fame) from Brunswick, the **Cross Family**, the **Bluegrass Five** (J.N. and Onie Baxter), **Kenneth Hood and band**, **John McAfee** and **Darryl Wilson**, the **Ridge Runners** (**Murray Freeman**, **Charlie Abernathy**, **Dillard Rogers**, among others), **James Watson** and many others. Most traveling bluegrass bands knew of Walter's home and would frequently stop and visit as they were passing through.

In the mid-to-late 1950s, Walter formed his first and only bluegrass band - Walter Butler and the Sun Valley Boys - which commonly consisted of himself, fiddler **Leonard Pickens**, **Don Norman** on banjo, brother **Ron Norman** on guitar and **'Nippy' Green** on bass. This group with some slight variations in personnel was very popular throughout the 1960s and into the early seventies and played hard driving bluegrass music reminiscent of Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs of that era. They played a weekly radio show in the area - the Dixie Jubilee out of Hapeville, GA -

and fortunately, there are still a few tapes that reveal just what an excellent, traditional group they were.

One thing that should be mentioned was a song that seemed to be Walter's favorite and one that had to be played at all gatherings... "Love and Wealth" - the Jim and Jesse number was a favorite of Walter and was christened the "Pine Lake National anthem."

One Georgia musician who quickly found his way to Walter's house was **Robert A. "Tut" Taylor** who describes those days in the early sixties as "Great, wonderful times...it was a labor of love. Little did we know then what would happen on down the road with the music." He remembers various members of these gatherings getting together to make regular pilgrimages to North Carolina to Union Grove and Asheville in addition to also making it up to Galax, Virginia. He also recalls this group of musicians playing on the noted folklorist **Bascom Lamar Lunsford's** program, "Along About Sundown." (www.folkheritage.org)

Doyle Lawson is one of the most recognized and influential Bluegrass musicians and bandleaders in the past 40 years. He began his career in 1963 with the King of Bluegrass **Jimmy Martin** and then moved thru a succession of top tier bands such as **J D Crowe and the Kentucky Mountain Boys** and the **Country Gentlemen** before leaving in 1979 to form his own group. Since that pivotal point **Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver** have had a major influence on an entire generation of Bluegrass musicians and fans.

In January 2004 Doyle shared a few early memories of the Georgia Bluegrass community and particularly of Walter Butler. His first recollection of meeting Walter and others from North Georgia was in the mid-sixties at the now infamous D J Convention at the Noel Hotel in Nashville. At that time the bluegrass crowd would take over a couple of floors at the Noel and host their own informal meetings, social events and jam sessions in conjunction with the Convention. From that meeting Doyle describes Walter as "pretty much a fixture" at any Bluegrass event in Georgia and surrounding states. He states, "Every time I would come to Georgia with J D Crowe or the Country Gentlemen we would always see **Walter and his wife Faye** and we got to be good friends. They

fixed food for more musicians than you could count. Walter was really a great guy.

He had his own band, the Sun Valley Boys and he loved every facet of the music. I remember really being surprised by the intensity of the Georgia bluegrass crowd. They had a real passion for the music. I remember one summer Walter took his vacation and went on the bus with the Country Gentlemen. He really loved that. I was always invited to a New Years Eve pickin' at their home but never got to go. When Walter got ill we (**the Country Gentlemen**) stopped at his house for a visit. Everybody knew him and everybody liked him. His passing was great loss."

An historic event for North Georgia Bluegrass came about in the early sixties. Walter and friends met with the **Everetts** in Lilburn, Georgia where they were playing at a Dairy Queen and the groups soon came together to provide the nucleus for the Georgia Bluegrass scene. By the late sixties, Kenneth Hood's shop in Austell, Georgia served as the site for the first bluegrass 'festival' in Georgia and from that came the Marietta festival - promoted for many years by **Dillard Rogers and family** - part of the Ridge Runners bluegrass group who had frequented Walter's house years before.

Daughter Dale also recalls a couple of other points as she talks about her dad. One day in 1967 a young man by the name of Tim came to one of the pickings at the house. He was a very good upright bass player and Walter immediately took a liking to him. Of course, **Tim Talton** later became Dale's husband and well-known bass player for **George English and the Blue Ridge Gentlemen**.

Also, Walter's treasured guitar was a D28 Martin. That instrument is now owned by **Brenda Cross** of the Cross Family.

Banjo stylist **James Watson** remembers meeting Walter through his association with J.N. and Onie Baxter. "He just opened up his house..he was so good. We were all packed in there pickin'. That was where I met a lot of people...Ron and Don Norman, Tim Talton, Joel Aderhold."

And has been mentioned, not just Georgia musicians were aware of Walter.

For example, Knoxville, TN musician, instrument collector/trader **Allen Collins** recalls, "Why yes, I knew Walter Butler! Met him in Asheville...we visited his house on many occasions...one time we picked there all night...in the attic!"

So why the anonymity for someone who played such a vital role? Perhaps timing may be a good explanation. Walter was playing bluegrass in the available venues and outlets before the festival scene in Georgia and therefore was playing to a much more limited audience both numbers-wise and geographically than would have been possible a few years later.

Also, during the 1970s-1990s bluegrass music was much more widely heralded in the media, both local and national, than in Walter's heyday. As a result, by the time North Georgia festivals were in full bloom and more and more musicians were being drawn into the genre by attending these events, he was not around to be a part of the scene. And though many of the most prominent musicians had come into the music through attending those musical gatherings at Walter's home, newer musicians were 'once-removed' from that experience and therefore not as knowledgeable - if at all - of his giant presence in the foundation and formation of the 'bluegrass experience in North Georgia.'

By the 1970s - music at the Butler house was slowing down - illness soon prevented Walter from playing and getting around as much as he was used to..and in 1979 at the age of sixty, Walter Butler died. Daughter Dale says, "I wish he could go to some of the festivals of today..he would be in heaven to see all the pickers...the quality of it...the young pickers coming up. He's probably smiling up there."

Mike Fleming

Mike Fleming, a native of Newnan, Georgia, met and joined forces with banjo player **Joe Partridge** and mandolinist **Eddie Turner** in October 1977 to play Bluegrass music and from this a band that was to last twenty seven years - Brush Fire - was formed. Throughout that time, Mike served as the guiding force and handled bookings for the band as well as fronting stage performances.

Joe had previously been a founding member of the band Bullsboro and he and Eddie had played

together previously to make music as Pike Trucking Company. Other members of that initial Brush Fire line up were **Mike Head** on bass and **Russell Owen** on Dobro. The group began by playing small jobs in and around Newnan but quickly advanced to playing Bluegrass festivals in North Georgia. By 1984, **John Landers, Elwood P. Suggins, Gary Sikes** and **Jimmy Ross** had passed thru the band. During this period bookings had increased and the band had become known for the tight 3 and 4 part harmonies and for the a cappella quartet numbers which were featured on every show.

In 1984 the band found themselves without a bass player and **Joe Partridge** moved to bass making room for good friend **Jay Richardson** to join on banjo. By this time the group had recorded 2 LP's and were in demand at festivals across the southeast. During this period the group recorded a third project, appeared as guests on the **Carl Tipton** Television show in Nashville Tennessee, shared the bill with renowned bluegrass songwriter **Randall Hylton** at the Worlds Famous Station Inn and been invited onstage to perform a song with **Mr. Bill Monroe** at the IBMA Fanfest in Owensboro Kentucky. Also during this period **Ted Lolley** traveled with the band as sound man and part time dobro player.

In 1989 **Kerry Warbington** replaced Jay on banjo and the band began to again move forward. Unfortunately later that year Joe Partridge fell ill and was unable to accompany the group to Oloron-Ste. Marie, France in 1999 to perform at the Pyrenees Folklore Festival with the Special Edition Dance Team. Joe passed away in Sept 1999 and was replaced by **Doyle "Red" Yates**. This group continued to play regularly and produced a fourth recording. The band remained stable until 2001 when Eddie's job required him to relocate to Florida and **Jeff Partridge** joined the group on mandolin. In 2004 Kerry retired and moved to Cleveland, Georgia and was replaced by **Michelle Phillips**. That same year Red Yates passed and away and was replaced on bass by **Joe Kelley** in 2005. In May 2005 the group was dissolved after 27 years of regular performances and thousands of shows.

Brush Fire's years of dedication was recognized by induction into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Honor in 1998. In 2000 and 2001 they were selected "Bluegrass Band of the Year" by the Atlanta Society of Entertainers. Brush Fire was a

founding member of the International Bluegrass Music Association and has been active in the Southeastern Bluegrass Association. The band was featured in "Pickin' On Peachtree: A History of Country Music in Atlanta" and was featured in "Bluegrass Unlimited" in May 1997. In particular, Mike has been active in the SouthEastern Bluegrass Association (SEBA) and the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA). He is a past President and past Board member of the Southeastern Bluegrass Association and in addition to being a Founding member of IBMA he has served on the Showcase selection Committee and the Program Committee of that organization. He also is a graduate of the very First Leadership Bluegrass Class sponsored by IBMA. He has had articles published in both Bluegrass Unlimited and the SEBA Breakdown.

Murray Freeman

Murray Freeman grew up in Arkansas and vividly remembers listening to the Grand Ole Opry on a battery-powered radio. The music of **Webb Pierce, Hank Williams, Hank Snow** and the other Opry stars of the day was a major influence in his decision to play guitar and perform Hillbilly music. Murray's first guitar was obtained for him by his mother on a rental plan. The plan included the use of an inexpensive guitar and a weekly lesson on the instrument.

In the early 1950's, married and doing his military service at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Murray met a fellow Marine who was an able guitarist. This allowed him to continue to improve his guitar skills, however this period was more important for a coincidence of geography. During this same time **Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys** were regular visitors to the schoolhouses, theaters and other music venues in the area. At least twice monthly Murray and wife Barbara would travel 50 or 60 miles to see them perform. These trips instilled in Murray a great respect for and love of this style of music.

After leaving the service Murray settled in West Georgia where he continued playing music as an avocation. In time he met others in the area who were playing the Flatt & Scruggs style of music and by the mid 60's he was an active member of the small but growing bluegrass community. He began making the trip to the Ashville Folk Festival with **J. N. & Onie Baxter** and the

Bluegrass Five. By 1966 he had formed his band, the **Ridgerunners**, which was to become one of the most prominent groups in the area for the next 20 years. The original group was **Dillard Rogers** on bass, Murray and **Charlie Abernathy** on guitars, **Ralph Abernathy** on mandolin and **Paul Rogers** on banjo. This group was among those involved in hosting the first official bluegrass event in the area in 1968.

Over the years the line-up of the Ridgerunners went through the inevitable personnel changes with each configuration maintaining the traditional hard driving bluegrass sound which was their trademark.

In 1977 the band entered the studio and produced their only commercial recording. "Down Home Pickin' & Singin'" was a collection of songs which showcased their dedication to traditional bluegrass music. At this time the group included Murray, his daughter **Connie (Freeman Morris)** who had joined the group several years before on banjo, **Tommy Nations** on mandolin and **Lee Melton** on bass. During this heyday, from the mid 60's well into the 80's, no other group was more respected in the North Georgia area and in surrounding states. Murray became particularly known for his energetic delivery of songs from the repertoire of Jimmy Martin.

After more than 20 years as bandleader, Murray disbanded the group to focus more on his career in the sheet metal industry, however, he was never completely removed from the bluegrass community as his daughter **Connie Freeman Morris** continued to perform as a member of Cherokee Rose and other groups. By the late eighties, Connie had followed Murray's lead and formed a new group, Georgia Bound, and had enticed Murray out of retirement as a regular part of the band. In 1998 he was honored by induction into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Honor.

Georgia Bound continues the tradition begun by Murray's Ridgerunners. They are a highly professional and well-respected group and an integral part of the North Georgia bluegrass community.

Donnie A. Lee

Donnie Lee grew up in Bremen in west Georgia but also spent several years living in Trieste Italy and Ft. Knox Kentucky as his father was in the

U.S. Army. As a child his mother who sang with a Ladies Quartet, and his uncle who played claw hammer banjo influenced him musically.

As has happened with many others before and since, in 1947 Donnie was introduced to the music of **Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys** at a concert in Elizabethton, Kentucky and the die was cast for his future involvement in the music.

Back home in Bremen Donnie began seeking out the sounds of bluegrass music and the search led to performances by **J. N. and Onie Baxter, Hughie Wylie, Kenneth Hood, Walter Butler** and other first generation bluegrass musicians in North Georgia.

In 1971 Donnie met **Joe Partridge** and introduced him to the banjo. This friendship led to formation of the L & P Express, which was also to include **Tommy McKoon** and **Junior Bundy**. In 1973 the name of the band was changed to Bullsboro Bluegrass Band and later shortened to Bullsboro.

That same year the group sponsored the Bullsboro Bluegrass Festival in Newnan Georgia and for the next decade hosted the highly successful event.

In the early 1970's **Mike Steed** and **Johnny Jackson** joined the group on guitar and mandolin. Donnie continued on upright bass and Joe Partridge left the group and was replaced by **Butch Adams** on banjo.

In 1978 the group recorded a live LP in Carrollton that was released on the Atteiram label. A second recording, *STILL BULLSBORO AFTER ALL THESE YEARS*, was released in 2003.

The current line up of the group consists of Donnie on bass, **Jeff Partridge on banjo, David Steed**, mandolin and **Zach** and **Mike Steed** on guitars.

As a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Honor Donnie is proud of the long list of accomplishments he and the band have accumulated over their 34-year history. They performed for 2 Georgia Governors and for President elect Jimmy Carter, and have performed at the Powers Crossroads Arts and Crafts festival for more than 30 years.

Robert A. "Tut" Taylor

Robert A. "Tut" Taylor was born near Milledgeville, GA on the Oconee Rive in Baldwin County, Georgia. His dad played banjo a bit and he made sure Tut had plenty of instruments around in his "growing-up" years. His first instrument was a Stella banjo-mandolin and **James and Martha Carson's** performances on WSB in Atlanta provided one of his first major musical influences.

Tut first met **Bill Monroe** in the late forties in Macon, GA when **Earl Scruggs** and **Chubby Wise** were playing with Monroe. However, the first music for him to perform was strictly country where he played lap steel and mandolin.

This was during WWII. His early country influences included **Roy Hall, Eddie Arnold, Pee Wee King, Roy Acuff**, and **Mainer's Mountaineers**. Tut enjoyed listening to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday nights and in particular, enjoyed the early string bands.

While living in Milledgeville, Tut met **Walter Butler** in the late fifties, or early sixties and was a regular at Walter's home near Stone Mountain, Georgia for the bluegrass gatherings. He also began going to to Asheville, North Carolina along with other musicians from Georgia and remembers performing along with **J.N. and Onie Baxter, Don and Ron Norman, Howard McGuire**, and **Hughie Wylie** on **Bascomb Lamar Lunsford's** "Along About Sundown" radio and auditorium shows. "Sometimes we got to play and sometimes we didn't..." Tut recalls.

Tut and the Georgia musicians were well-known in Galax, Virginia and Union Grove, North Carolina as well. Walter Butler's Home provided a gathering place for Georgia bluegrass pickers and Tut was a regular until his move to Nashville.

Tut Moved to Nashville about 1970 to open up a shop with **Randy Wood** -- also a Georgia native and friend from the Milledgeville area. He later formed GTR with **Randy Wood** and **George Gruhn** and performed with **John Hartford, Norman Blake**, and **Vassar Clements** in the mid-seventies and was part of one of the more influential recordings for bluegrass music - "Aeroplane."

Ever the business man, Tut was a sign painter by trade and moved from Nashville to East Tennessee in the early eighties to pursue business, crafts, and musical interests and then to Wilkesboro, North Carolina in 2003. His son **Mark Taylor** owns 'Crafters of Tennessee' and there are in addition to fine banjos, guitars and mandolins, a line of custom resonophonic guitars built under Tut's supervision.

James Watson

Banjo player **James Watson** could be considered a strange choice to be recognized as a North Georgia Bluegrass Pioneer for two reasons. He doesn't live in Georgia and he doesn't play banjo in the traditional 3 finger Scruggs style. However, as an 18 year veteran of the band **The Golden River Grass**, he became an integral and influential member of the bluegrass community.

James first musical memory is of an uncle playing "Shout Little Lula" on a banjo in the rapping or clawhammer style. James recognized as a small boy that he too would someday make music on the banjo.

Growing up in and around Roanoke, Alabama, James was introduced to a well - known local fiddler named Pappy Lee Farmer and in 1947 he joined Pappy and others in his first band, **Pappy Lee and the Chillun'**. Through Pappy's efforts the group soon had a Saturday radio program on WLR in Roanoke as well as a sponsor and stage costumes. By this time James was also playing guitar and would teach the banjo parts to Pappy Lee's son who was in the group. This configuration continued for several years as the boys matured and became **Pappy Lee and the Playboys**. James credits Pappy with improving both his musicianship and his stage presence.

Because James' home area was very near the Georgia -- Alabama line he regularly ranged into Northwest Georgia playing and attending musical events. In 1965 he heard the Bluegrass Five for the first time and saw, in person, a 3 finger Scruggs style banjoist. The player was Ron Norman. As others were doing, James began to follow **J. N. & Onie Baxter** to bluegrass events across the southeast. J. N. Baxter has observed that during this period he always expected to look in his rearview mirror and see James Watson riding on his bumper.

By this time James had returned to the banjo as his main instrument and had developed his own technique, which was a variation of the traditional clawhammer style. As he became more involved in the bluegrass scene he modified his style into one more compatible with the hard driving rhythm of the music around him.

In the mid 60's James took his first trip to Nashville, Tennessee, where by chance he met **Roy Acuff** and **Bashful Brother Oswald** at a downtown music store. Encouraged by his good fortune he then decided to look up the address of one of his heroes, **Earl Scruggs**. Once again by chance, as he approached the Scruggs home Earl was standing by the mailbox. After a brief conversation James was invited in for a visit where he bought a Scruggs tone ring for his banjo for \$33.00. He now admits that he left disappointed because Earl didn't have a new one available and he had to settle for one that was taken from Earl's second banjo.

After his introduction to the Georgia bluegrass community James became a regular at the festivals, shows and get-togethers. By 1974 the original Georgia festival had grown into a large and successful event promoted by **Dillard Rogers** at the North Georgia Fairgrounds in Marietta, GA. James remembers walking across the festival grounds and hearing someone preaching in the distance. As he approached he realized the preaching was interspersed with harmonica music. The preacher was **John "Doodle" Thrower**, a natural entertainer and West Georgia legend, who would for entertainment purposes, occasionally stop blowing his harp and singing long enough to deliver an impromptu sermon on some topic related to the events around him. James shouldered his banjo and joined in the show. After a few tunes it was obvious to Doodle that he had found a banjo player with both the style of playing and the stage presence to complement the sound of his group the Golden River Grass. For the next year James was used as a fill-in but by 1975 was accepted as a full time member of the most raucous, energetic and entertaining group on the regional circuit. While the group was more akin to an old-time string band their music was close enough to bluegrass to be accepted by the entire community.

Over the next 18 years Doodle and the Golden River Grass traveled the Southeast performing

their music. They were discovered and embraced by the National Council of Arts and were invited to perform at festivals in Dover, Delaware; Mountain View, Arkansas; Wolf Trap, Virginia and the World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. James and Doodle were also honored in The Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon where several artifacts related to the band are on exhibit.

Among James' proudest moments was meeting **Grandpa Jones** and being invited to play onstage with him. The two developed a friendship, which resulted in several subsequent joint appearances.

Doodle Thrower passed away in 1993 and shortly thereafter the Golden River Grass disbanded. James states that it was a great honor to part of the Golden River Grass and that "finally Doodle got enough notoriety that we were making gas money, but I would have played anyway and paid them".

CONCLUSION

The North Georgia bluegrass community today is larger and more diverse than ever and while there have been many people who contributed to the great tradition of Bluegrass in the area, none are more respected than **J. N. & Onie Baxter, Walter Butler, Murray Freeman, James Watson, Donnie Lee, and Tut Taylor**. They were among the first to embrace and promote bluegrass music in North Georgia and continue to perform and influence those who follow. They are our heroes.

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