



Gone with the Kin

A small town in Louisiana rolls its eyes over its larger-than-life native sons: cousins Jerry Lee Lewis, Jimmy Swaggart and Mickey Gilley

The Atlanta Journal Constitution, October 30, 1988

By Jim Auchmutey

Ferriday, La. --- Driving west on U.S. 84, past the cinderblock churches and the Cajun roach-spray posters and the sawgrass roadside littered with cotton tufts that blew off bale-hauling trucks --- driving through this bottomland 10 miles west of the Mississippi River, you come to a small sign faded to the paleness of a robin's egg. "Welcome to Ferriday," it announces in humble type, "home of Jerry Lee Lewis, Jimmy Swaggart, Mickey Gilley and" --- here the letters get big and proud --- "Mrs. U.B. Evans, nationally known horticulturist."

They say the garden club put up the sign.

Hang a left a block past Swaggart's Furniture Store, and drive into the Pik-Quick convenience store. No joke, you actually drive through the middle of the barnlike building while a woman fetches your bottles and smokes from tall metal shelves on either side. Her face looks vaguely familiar, with its pointed chin, long nose and fierce, high cheekbones. No wonder. She's the Killer's kid sister, Frankie Jean Lewis Terrell, and even now, in the clear, sober light of the morning, she's having trouble explaining exactly how Ferriday came to be home to the likes of Jerry Lee and Jimmy and Mickey.

"Let's see," she says, "Jimmy's grandmother was Daddy's sister. No, his mother was Daddy's sister. Or was it my mama's sister that was Jimmy's mama? This family's so full of cousins marrying cousins, God knows what else they did." Frankie Jean finally squints her eyes and screws up her face and exclaims, "Lord, I need a drink."

Explaining the Lewis-Swaggart-Gilley kin is about as easy as dodging mosquitoes on a bayou. The family tree is more of a thicket, bearing strange fruit that includes not only the three famous cousins --- Jimmy, the snarling TV preacher; Jerry Lee, the piano-pounding hell-raiser; and Mickey, the country-singing Urban Cowboy --- but an assortment of bootleggers, bottle-lifters, Bible-wavers and skirt-chasers who marry early and often. At its extreme, the clan seems a Southern Gothic version of the Addams Family.

"They've been either horse thieves or preachers, and not much in between," says Myra Williams, Jerry Lee's former wife, now living in Stone Mountain, Ga.

The sheer trailer trash curiosity of it all amuses some of the tamer family members. Take Myra Gilley, who's been married for 36 years to Mickey's double first cousin, Arthur, nicknamed "Sonny Boy" even though he's 72. "My husband says there's a weak streak because of all the intermarrying," she explains. "He says all they had to marry back up in the woods was cousins."

Like most Americans, the Gilleys avidly followed the family's latest soap opera, cousin Jimmy's seamy backslide with a tattooed hooker in a pay-as-you-lay motel outside New Orleans. A relative sent them a copy of the Penthouse in which the prostitute re-created the evangelist's favorite positions. Myra and Sonny stashed the magazine in a tall kitchen cabinet, next to the cookie sheets, where their granddaughter can't reach it.

Jimmy's tribulations didn't really surprise them. "Sonny said he knew the Swaggart would come out in him," Myra says, laughing. "The Swaggarts always did like the women. Why, Sun's on his second Dorothy now."

That would be Willie Leon "Sun" Swaggart, Jimmy's father, an itinerant preacher who owns the furniture store and lives in a house trailer across the street from Frankie Jean, with whom he barely speaks. He thinks she talked about his boy to Penthouse and the National Enquirer. She thinks he's a hypocritical old coot who looks down his honker at her rock-'n'-rolling brother.

The town doesn't know what to think of any of them.

The mere mention of Ferriday's first family brings a grin and a disbelieving shake of the head to Sam Hanna, publisher of the local Concordia Sentinel. "If you find out how that bunch produced so many characters," he says, "please let us know."

Ferriday is not what you'd call a pretty place. Across the river from Natchez, Miss., this town of 4,400 was founded in 1903 as a railroad crossing, and most of its houses are modest white frame structures built for the blue-collar men who worked in the engine shops and sawmills.

You won't find the famous sons' ancestral homes. The Gilleys and the Lewises moved all over Ferriday --- the Lewises 13 times in one year, according to Frankie Jean --- and the Swaggart home was literally moved after Sun sold it to make way for a carwash. You're not missing much, old-timers say. Bankers' homes they weren't.

"Those families were people the white folks didn't want to claim, just like us black folks," says former Ferriday Mayor Sammy Davis Jr. (seriously).

Yet at least one branch of the family has known what it was like to live in a manor. Before the Civil War, the Welsh-born Lewises owned 150 slaves and one of the largest plantations in northeast Louisiana. But like a doomed Faulkner clan, they drank and gambled away their holdings and soon found themselves sharecropping near Monroe in an unmapped place called Snake Ridge. There they started seriously mingling with other dirt-farming families, particularly the German Swaggarts and the French Gilleys.

In the early 1930s, much of the clan migrated southeast to Ferriday, where their uncle by marriage, Lee Calhoun, owned considerable property as well as the best moonshine still in Concordia Parish. The men promptly took their places in the family business. "I thought it was a fine way to make a living," says Sun, who until then had been fur-trapping, pecan-picking and prize-fighting for his keep.

One day, when his wife, Minnie Bell, was pregnant with Jimmy, federal revenueurs raided the still. Seeing Sun's plump wife, the agents took pity on him and told him to skedaddle.

Elmo Lewis wasn't so lucky. Jerry Lee's daddy, a sometime carpenter and farmer, was still in prison in March 1935 when the Swaggarts had a son they named Jimmy Lee, for Lee Calhoun. Next came Elmo's wife, Mamie (Minnie Bell Swaggart's sister), who gave birth to Jerry Lee in September, three weeks after Huey Long was shot down in Baton Rouge. The trilogy was completed the next March as A.P. and Irene Gilley, who drove a cab and ran a rooming house, had a son named Mickey. Oh, Irene was Elmo's sister.

Cousins in more ways than one, the boys grew up close. Jimmy was the shy, religious one; Mickey the good-natured, normal one; and Jerry Lee ---well, you know

about Jerry Lee. People still talk about how the hatchet-faced hoodlum ran around town with his shirt-tail flapping, shooting pool or climbing the Mississippi River Bridge and hanging over the water from the girders just to startle motorists. For a while, he even coaxed Jimmy into an early backslide as the two burglarized local stores together. Once, Jimmy wrote in his autobiography, "To Cross a River," they stole some scrap iron off Uncle Lee's yard and sold it back to him just for kicks.

As you might guess, their reputations got around. "A couple of those boys came in here wanting jobs as bag boys," remembers Guy Serio, who has run a grocery store in Ferriday since the '20s. "I must've hired 200 bag boys over the years, but I didn't hire them. I didn't see anything in 'em."

Uncle Lee did. He bought a piano for his daughter, then watched as his nephews took it over. The boys were hungry for music; they learned chords at their uncle's, they learned gospel at church, they learned boogie woogie from sneaking into Haney's Big House, a black club on the side of Ferriday everyone called Buck Town.

In fact, Jerry Lee learned so well he was winning talent shows by the time he was 14. Grace Serio, the grocer's wife, vividly recalls how, at the opening of the Ford dealership in 1949, Jerry Lee wowed the crowd with one of his favorite carnal ditties, "Drinkin' Wine Spo-dee-o-dee."

He could have been predicting his future.

Jimmy Lee Swaggart says he got saved at the age of 8 outside the Arcade Theater. He says he was waiting in line for a Saturday matinee horse opera when a voice told him not to go inside because God wanted to use his life. He says he cried at first, then felt relieved and skipped down Louisiana Avenue to Vogt's Drug Store for a celebratory ice cream cone.

"He was a kind of peculiar boy," says Sonny Gilley.

But, then, a lot of the Swaggarts, Lewises and Gilleys were religious in a kind of peculiar way.

Although there were a good many Christian women in the family, the men never much took to the scriptures during the early years in Ferriday. In fact, Jimmy's father had never seen the inside of a church before he left Snake Ridge.

Then the Pentecostals hit town. In 1936, two Mississippi women, missionaries from the Assemblies of God, set up benches on a vacant lot on Texas Avenue and brought the full-tilt gospel to Ferriday. Sun Swaggart, a fiddler from way back, couldn't resist the sound of their sanctified music, and pretty soon he and Minnie Bell were attending the services with Jimmy in her lap. In two years, much of the extended family was going to a little white frame church built with Uncle Lee's moonshine money. One morning after the altar call, Jimmy writes, the Holy Ghost fell upon the sanctuary and Jerry Lee's mother started running down the aisle and Mickey's mother kneeled in the corner and Jimmy's mother started "hollering, dancing in the spirit, and before she got back to her seat, speaking in tongues."

It wasn't long before Jimmy himself was talking the unknown language. Once he tried to buy a three-cent stamp at the post office and gave up because he couldn't make himself understood. "For days afterward," he says, "I spoke very little English."

With that, Jimmy Swaggart was off on the path that would make him, after years of sawdust trail obscurity, a top-selling gospel singer and the most-watched TV preacher in the world.

His rowdy cousin actually thought about taking the same path. Before he went to Memphis, Tenn., and cut "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" at Sun Records, Jerry Lee briefly attended Bible college in Texas and considered dedicating his talents to God. Indeed, he played piano at Uncle Sun's first tent revival after he became a preacher in the late '40s. "I've never heard someone move people like Jerry Lee Lewis did," Sun

remembers. "He could've done great work for God. But rock 'n' roll and Christianity are two different things."

Jerry Lee has agreed in many a drunken interview. Through the years, he came to regard himself as a kind of evil twin of Jimmy's, the one too weak to preach, the one who sold his soul for rhythm and women and big cars and whiskey and pills. Every now and then, he'd promise to renounce his music and walk with Jesus, but it was never long before he was slipping and sliding again.

Jerry Lee memorably displayed his heaven-or-hell obsession in 1982 at the funeral of Mickey's father. Preaching at the graveside service, Jimmy asked, "Whosoever among you believes you wouldn't go to heaven with Uncle Arthur if you died today, come forward." To everyone's surprise, Jerry Lee did.

"Will you accept Christ as your savior?" Jimmy implored.

His cousin walked away.

"The problem is the way we were raised," says Jerry Lee's sister, Frankie Jean, now a Presbyterian. "You really got brainwashed. You'd go to hell for the least little thing. It took me years of nervous breakdowns to get over. Poor Jerry, he let it sink in. His mother and father pushed him to play music, and then he'd go to church and hear that he was going to hell for it. Play, pray, play, pray --- Jerry'll never be normal."

To this day, the family struggle between good and evil continues in microcosm on Eighth Street, where Frankie Jean and Sun suspiciously eye each other across a narrow ribbon of blacktop. They couldn't be more different. Frankie Jean, 46 and as nervous as a squirrel, keeps cussing and apologizing and then giggling about it. Sun, 73 and as stolid as a concrete block, says little and wants to say less. Whatever relationship they had soured fast this year when Jimmy was reported to be trolling for trollops in the Big Easy.

"Sun threw me out of his house," Frankie Jean snaps, as the beer trucks make their morning deliveries to her drive-through store, where the Slush Puppy machine has been known to dispense margaritas. "I went over there to return a photo album, and he accused me of helping to ruin his son, of toying with God's work. I want to know what a New Orleans whore has to do with God's work?"

"Frankie Jean likes to talk," Sun replies, wearily. "She knows what she done. She'll have to answer for it."

"I wish I could say I loved Uncle Sun," Frankie Jean answers, "but I can't even say I like him."

They don't come home much anymore. Mickey, living in Houston near the cavernous country nightclub that bears his name, hasn't visited since his mother died three years ago. Jimmy, trying to remake his gospel wonderland downriver in Baton Rouge, usually sends for Sun when he wants to see him. His father takes care of the low-rent apartments Jimmy still owns in Ferriday. And Jerry Lee, living with his sixth wife in a big house with a piano-shaped pool near Memphis, hasn't come back since 1985. His parents are gone too, buried in the family cemetery north of town along with two of his sons and Jimmy's mother.

"There's really nothing [in Ferriday] for me anymore," Jerry Lee told one interviewer. "It's just bad memories. I'll be buried there someday, if God's willing."

There aren't many relatives left around Ferriday anymore, either. Mostly there are just people who may or may not have known the cousins, and have followed their careers with a mixture of sadness, amusement and disbelief.

Some people are still a little ticked at Mickey for changing the pronunciation of his name from Jilley to Gilley, presumably because he thought the hard "G" sounded classier.

People tend to smirk over Jimmy's misfortune --- unless they're followers who believe he really was mightily tricked by Satan. Or unless they're relatives who have heard themselves mentioned on the evangelist's broadcasts. "He got on there one time," Myra Gilley says, "and talked about Sonny's daddy selling his soul to the devil because he had slot machines in his cafe. Well, we could tell a few tales about Jimmy's grand-daddy."

As for Jerry Lee, the first great ball of fire out of this Roman candle of a family, a lot of people around still have a fondness for him if only because he once stood up to Ed Sullivan. When Jerry Lee wanted to be introduced on the Sullivan show as being from Ferriday, La., the Great Stoneface is said to have protested, "No one will know where that is."

"They'll know," the kid insisted.

"We remember that around here," says R.T. Bonnette, a retired postal worker who has lived in Ferriday all his adult life.

But they also remember Jerry Lee shooting his bass player, Jerry Lee getting arrested with a gun in front of Graceland, Jerry Lee being prosecuted for tax evasion, Jerry Lee coming under suspicion for the mysterious death of his fifth wife, Jerry Lee showing up for his uncle's funeral so blitzed that he didn't even recognize Myra and Sonny Gilley when he saw them.

"If he'd just conducted himself right, we'd be more proud of him," Mr. Bonnette says. "To tell you the truth, I'm more proud of another one of our native sons."

Drive back down U.S. 84 and take a second look at that sad little faded sign at the city limits. There's another name up there: Howard K. Smith, the TV newsman. They say his father was a railroad man who lighted in Ferriday about the time his son was born.

"Howard K. Smith," R.T. Bonnette repeats slowly. "Now that's someone you can look up to."

Sidebar: Marriages for these three are all in the family

Jerry Lee Lewis's marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Gale Brown, was one of the most celebrated scandals in rock 'n' roll. After he revealed it during his first English concert tour in 1958, tabloids howled, promoters backpedaled and the mad man from Ferriday was banished to rockabilly purgatory.

Looking at the Lewis family tree, you realize that Jerry Lee was just doing what came naturally.

Intermingling had long been a way of life for the Lewises and the families of cousins Jimmy Swaggart and Mickey Gilley. "I tried to diagram it once," says Myra Gilley, Mickey's cousin by marriage. "I gave up after five minutes. It was awful."

In the generation before the three famous sons, the Lewises had four men and seven women, the Gilleys seven men and four women, and six of them paired off in three Lewis-Gilley marriages.

Now comes the confusing part: The other Lewis man, Elmo, married one Mamie Herron, whose sister Minnie Bell married Willie Leon "Sun" Swaggart, the son of Willie Harry Swaggart and Ada Lewis, Elmo's sister. Think about it.

As Nick Tosches analyzes the situation in "Hellfire," his biography of Jerry Lee Lewis: "Damned if Willie Harry and Willie Leon had not somehow configured themselves into brothers-in-law of one another, or maybe an uncle and a nephew, instead of a father and a son . . ."

"If Willie Leon and Minnie Bell had a child, Minnie Bell might somehow wind up as the child's aunt as well as its mother, and its grandfather Willie Harry would likely pan out to be its cousin, and in the end that poor child would be lucky if it escaped without being rendered its own uncle, bedridden grandmother and long-lost forgotten son."