

# Merle Robert Travis

## (1917-1983)

By Jerry Long  
c.2024



### **Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville, TN:**

Merle Travis had an unequalled blend of talents as an innovative guitarist, songwriter, vocalist, guitar designer, and author.

His influence on several generations of performers—from Chet Atkins to Merle’s son, entertainer Thom Bresh, and hitmakers like Marty Stuart—is beyond question.

Merle Robert Travis, son of local farmer Rob Travis and his wife, Etta, grew up in the heart of western Kentucky coal country. When Rob Travis took a job at a nearby mine in 1925, the family moved to a coal company-owned farm near Ebenezer, Kentucky. At age twelve Merle became obsessed with learning Muhlenberg County’s unique guitar finger-picking style, which involved picking syncopated accompaniment on the bass strings with the right thumb while simultaneously playing lead on the treble strings with the index finger. To learn their style, Merle followed coal miners Ike Everly and Mose Rager as the two played local parties and dances.

After graduating from high school and serving in the federally sponsored Civilian Conservation Corps program in 1936, Travis moved to Evansville, Indiana, where he worked with two local bands. In 1937 fiddler Clayton McMichen hired Travis as one of his Georgia Wildcats. Soon Travis joined the Drifting Pioneers, a Chicago-area gospel quartet that moved to WLW radio

in Cincinnati, joining the station's Boone County Jamboree when it began in 1938. Travis remained at WLW after the group dissolved, and worked with the Delmore Brothers and Grandpa Jones. In 1943 Syd Nathan recorded Travis and Jones as "The Sheppard Brothers," the first artists for his Cincinnati-based King Records.

Travis moved to California in March 1944 and played radio shows and recording sessions. He also recorded solo material, under his own name and pseudonyms, for various small labels. Signed to Capitol as a singer in the spring of 1946, his first single, "Cincinnati Lou," b/w "No Vacancy," became his first hit. Following that he reached #1 with "Divorce Me C.O.D.," which remained at that position for fourteen weeks in 1947. It was one of many songs Travis co-wrote with Cliffie Stone, at the time an assistant A&R man at Capitol. Other song successes included 1947's "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed" (also a #1 hit for fourteen weeks), a vocal version of "Steel Guitar Rag" with lyrics by Travis and Stone, "Three Times Seven," and "Fat Gal," and, in early 1948, "Merle's Boogie Woogie." Travis's and Stone's 1947 composition "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)" became a hit for Tex Williams and Capitol's first million-seller.

Appreciating the sound of solid-body electric steel guitars, Travis designed an electric Spanish solid-body guitar; in 1948 he had it built by Paul Bigsby, a California patternmaker and steel guitar builder. Now in the collection of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the guitar may have inspired Travis's friend Leo Fender to design what was to become the legendary Fender Telecaster electric guitar.

After a brief stay in Richmond, Virginia, in 1949, Travis spent the 1950s in and around California, appearing on local TV, recording, and touring. He landed a cameo role as a guitar-picking soldier in the classic 1953 film *From Here to Eternity*—starring Montgomery Clift, Burt Lancaster, Frank Sinatra, and Deborah Kerr—and sang "Re-Enlistment Blues," which was used as the movie's leitmotif. Then, in 1955, Tennessee Ernie Ford's recording of an imaginative coal mining tune Travis had written in 1946, "Sixteen Tons," became a multimillion seller. Travis had recorded this song using acoustic guitar, along with two other folk-flavored originals and a few traditional songs, on the 78-rpm album *Folk Songs of the Hills*, which had drawn little attention at the time. With Ford, "Sixteen Tons" became an American standard and renewed interest in Travis.

Travis and his third wife, Bettie, moved to Nashville in 1968. In 1973 he joined his friend and musical disciple Chet Atkins to record the LP *The Atkins-Travis Traveling Show*, which won a Grammy in 1974 for Best Country Instrumental Performance. Inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1977, Travis spent his later years living in eastern Oklahoma with his fourth wife, Dorothy, ex-wife of Hank Thompson, and often wrote superb memoirs of his career for music magazines. In 1979 he started recording for the Los Angeles-based traditional country label CMH. His 1981 *Travis Pickin'* LP received a Grammy nomination. On October 19, 1983, he suffered a massive coronary and died in an Oklahoma hospital the next morning. His ashes were later interred in Ebenezer, Kentucky, under the Merle Travis monument, which had been dedicated in 1956 to honor both him and his success with the song "Sixteen Tons." —Rich Kienzle

– Adapted from the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum's *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, published by Oxford University Press.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 21 September 2004, Connections section, p.54:**

Guitarist Travis considered music legend

By David Blackburn, Messenger-Inquirer



Muhlenberg County's Merle Travis performs

Merle Travis wasn't just a guitar virtuoso and pioneer.

The southern Muhlenberg County native also helped design what would become one of the most enduring versions of the instrument.

And among the 900 or so songs he wrote was one of country music's best known songs that he first recorded with an acoustic guitar.

But his biggest claim to fame was introducing a style of playing guitar that originated in the county's early 20th century coal fields and later influenced music of all kinds.

Travis popularized the thumbpicking style, using a thumb pick to play the bass and rhythm while using his forefinger to play the melody.

He and Ike Everly, father of the Everly Brothers, learned the style in the late 1920s. Travis then moved north, then to California, where he played on numerous TV shows and movies in the 1940s and early 1950s.

"From Merle, it went to the world," said Bobby Anderson, a Drakesboro historian, author and acquaintance of Travis'. "This sound had not gotten out of Muhlenberg County at that time.

"It was he that Chet Atkins first heard and wanted to play that way," Anderson said of the late guitar legend. "The Everly Brothers were influenced by what Merle and Ike did."

Travis, as well as Atkins, later influenced a young British quartet called the Beatles before they hit it big in the United States, Anderson said.

When Travis was a child, his coal-mining father moved the family from Rosewood, where Travis was born on Nov. 27, 1917, to Ebenezer just west of Drakesboro.

During the midst of the Depression, Travis performed with bands in Evansville, Louisville and Cincinnati. During his travels, he recorded with Grandpa Jones, later of "Hee Haw" TV fame, as "The Sheppard Boys."

A short stint in the Marines ended with his discharge in California, where he found work signing with the then-fledgling Capitol Records in 1944.

In 1947, he had hits with "Divorce Me C.O.D." and "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed," both of which stayed at No. 1 for 14 weeks.

Six other songs went gold, most of them reaching the charts' Top 10, said Claude Travis of Beechmont, a distant cousin who owns nearly every one of Merle Travis' 36 albums.

"He was as big as anybody," Claude Travis said. "He was kind of the Garth Brooks of his time."

About the same time, Merle Travis wrote "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)" that became a No. 1 hit for Tex Williams and was Capitol's first million-seller.

In 1948, Merle Travis sketched, and had made, an electric solid-body guitar that featured a thin body, arm rest and tuners on one side of the end of the guitar.

Guitar maker Leo Fender modified the design and created what would become his famed Fender Telecaster guitar, variations of which have been used by guitarists for decades.

Merle Travis appeared in several Western movies in the 1940s and appeared on local Los Angeles TV programs.

He landed a cameo role in the 1953 classic "From Here to Eternity" as a guitarist. His song "Re-enlistment Blues" was used in the movie.

Two years later, Tennessee Ernie Ford did a cover of "Sixteen Tons" that Merle Travis wrote and recorded in 1946 about his memories of his father's coal mining life.

The song later sold more than 4 million copies, according to the Country Music Hall of Fame Web site.

Merle Travis was inducted into that Hall of Fame in 1977, three years after he and Chet Atkins won the Grammy Award for Best Country Instrumental Performance for their 1973 duet album "The Atkins-Travis Traveling Show."

Following his Oct. 20, 1983, death, Merle Travis' ashes were buried in Ebenezer. In 1991, part of Drakesboro's Main Street was renamed Merle Travis Highway. In 1997, his childhood home was moved to Paradise Park in Powderly, site of the International Home of the Legends thumb-picking contest each August. People often visit those sites in Drakesboro and Paradise Park, Anderson said.

"There is still a great influence. His influence is not dying out, but his disciples are," he said.

"The people that Merle influenced are beginning to go by the wayside," Anderson said. "You're getting into a decade of people who don't remember Merle at all."



**The Times-Argus, Central City, KY, Wednesday, 21 June 2000, p.5A:**

Travis book is published

By Bobby Anderson



Merle Travis

A newly-published book, titled "A Scrapbook of My Daddy, Merle Travis," should be of vast interest to many Muhlenberg Countians. The book was written by Travis' daughter, Pat Travis Eatherly of Fort Worth, Texas, and is compiled in scrapbook form, utilizing many of the pictures, letters and other documents passed on to his daughter by the late Hall of Fame country guitar legend.

Merle Travis is a native of Muhlenberg County. He was born at Rosewood on Nov. 29, 1917 to Rob and Etta Latham Travis. After a short time with his family on a farm near Browder, Travis was transplanted to Ebenezer, where he lived until 1937 when he entered the world of professional music In Louisville and Cincinnati.

During his lifetime, Travis became widely known as America's greatest thumb style guitarist, and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. He later also became a member of the Song Writers Hall of Fame, after writing such hits as "Sixteen Tons," "Dark as a Dungeon" and "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette." After his death In 1983, he was also enshrined in the newly formed National Thumbplckers Hall of Fame.

The new book covers all the stops in Travis' life, from Rosewood, to Ebenezer. to Cincinnati to Hollywood, where he also became known for his roles in many movies, including "From Here to Eternity."

Copies of personal letters, rare and previously unpublished pictures, plus many of Travis' cartoons and caricatures are re-printed in the 140 page book.

Writing of the many times friends have said to her that someone needed to write the story of Merle Travis, the author said, "Yes, I agreed, but certainly not me!"

But utilizing her vast scrapbook of personal memorabilia about her father, Pat Eatherly compiled one of the most fascinating volumes to date on the popular guitarist, including many photographs of a young Travis, those of his first wife, (Pat's mother) Mary Johnson, daughter of the Reverend Will Johnson, also of Muhlenberg County, and of Travis' other wives and children.

Pat Travis Eatherly is married to Gene Eatherly, who is an Insurance executive in Fort Worth. Her other effort in writing Is in the form of her first book, "In Search of My Father," which was also about Merle Travis.

Copies of the book may be obtained through Mrs. Eatherly. The cost is \$24.95 plus \$3 postage and handling. Her address is 3424 Overton Park Drive West, Fort Worth, Texas, 76109-2504 or she may be e-mailed at [peatherly@aol.com](mailto:peatherly@aol.com).



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 11 June 1987, p.1C:**

**Merle Travis' daughter writes about separation**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

In Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame, Merle Travis is referred to as a legend. But the Muhlenberg County native was also a troubled man, frequently estranged from his family, his daughter's autobiography says.

Pat Travis Eatherly was in Owensboro Wednesday to autograph copies of "In Search of My Father" at the Baptist Book Store. She also spoke at First Baptist Church, where she is a former member.

Today Mrs. Eatherly will be in Nashville promoting the book, which she said has sold 60 percent of its first printing in six weeks.

The book was published by Broad-man Press, the publishing house of the Southern Baptist Convention. James A. Lowry, a spokesman for the publishing company, said the sale in six weeks of 3,000 copies out of 5,000 printed "is very good."

Although the 191-page autobiography doesn't pull punches in dealing with Mrs. Eatherly's estrangement from her father, it's not a "Daddy Dearest" either.

"I've found some people are surprised it's not that type of book," the 48-year-old free-lance writer from Fort Worth said. "It was written with honesty, but respect. It's also a book about my mother and all my relatives."

Travis died Oct. 20, 1983. He wrote such songs as "Sixteen Tons" and "Dark As A Dungeon."

Mrs. Eatherly was born in Cincinnati. Her parents divorced when she was 5 and she went to live with her grandparents in Butler County. She moved to Owensboro with her mother six years later.

After graduating from Owensboro High School in 1957, Mrs. Eatherly attended Georgetown College, worked in the classified advertising department of the Messenger-Inquirer and then, after being named Kentucky Derby Queen of 1958, moved to California.

She and her husband, Gene, return to Owensboro every summer, she said. "Something keeps drawing me back to Owensboro."

Her growing-up years in Owensboro are a major part of the book. There are many references to Owensboro people and places in it.

She spent 10 years working on the book, beginning in August 1976.

"Ten years of writing came out of the pain of losing my mother to cancer" in 1968, she said. "Until Dad and I reconciled two years before his death, I couldn't have written it." The book begins with Mrs. Eatherly as a child at a movie theater watching her father on the screen in a western called "Gallop Thunder."

"I idealized him," Mrs. Eatherly said. "We had summer vacations together but we were on our best behavior and he tried to entertain me. It wasn't a real relationship. It was such a transition from Owensboro to Hollywood. It's just a fantasy world."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 22 October 1983, pp.1A & 8A:**

**Travis dies at 65**

Merle Travis, a Muhlenberg County coal miner's son who achieved international fame as a singer and songwriter, died Thursday of cardiopulmonary arrest at his home in Oklahoma. He was 65.

Travis was a member of the Country Music Association's Hall of Fame and writer of such songs as "Sixteen Tons," "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! That Cigarette," "Dark As a Dungeon," "Divorce Me C.O.D.," and "Double Talking Baby."

He was pronounced dead at a Tahlequah, Okla., hospital. He had lived on the shores of Lake Tenkiller in northeastern Oklahoma for several years.



Merle Travis 'A great innovator'

In 1977, Travis was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Three years earlier, the Academy of Country Music awarded him the Pioneer of Country Music Award, and in 1970 he had been voted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

He also teamed with guitarist Chet Atkins in 1974 and won a Grammy Award for their duet guitar record "The Atkins-Travis Traveling Show."

Born Nov. 29, 1917, in the Muhlenberg County community of Rosewood. Travis recalled his early days in show business in an August interview with the Messenger-Inquirer.

He won \$5 at an amateur contest as a child and turned professional in 1937, playing with the Knox County Knockabouts and later the Tennessee Tomcats on radio station WGBF in Evansville, Ind.

"We played mostly schoolhouse auditoriums in the area," he recalled. "Sometimes we made \$1 a night. Those were the big nights. Then you could have two hamburgers instead of one."

In 1938, he joined the Renfro Valley Barn Dance near Lexington and the following year toured with Clayton McMichen's Georgia Wildcats, a top country band of that era.

Then Travis joined the Drifting Cowboys and settled at WLW in Cincinnati. When that group broke up, he formed the Browns Ferry Four with Louis Marshall "Grandpa" Jones and the Delmore Brothers.

World War II intervened, and Travis joined the Marines. When the war was over, he settled in southern California and became a television star on "Hometown Jamboree" and "Town Hall Party."

He appeared in 40 films, including the 1953 Academy Award-winning movie "From Here to Eternity," westerns and Clint Eastwood's "Honky Tonk Man" in 1982.

Travis credited his Muhlenberg County idols, Mose Rager and Ike Everly, for the guitar technique that made him famous. The Travis style influenced Chet Atkins and a whole generation of country musicians.

"It's hard for young people today to realize how different he was as a stylist and what an influence he was on everybody," Atkins said. "He was so talented in so many ways – he could draw you a great cartoon, write you a great story or fix your watch if it broke. My wife and I loved him very much.

"He was a great innovator. No country musician should ever forget what he did."

Although songs of the mines are among his best-known. Travis said he never worked in a commercial mine. "I dabbled around some as a kid of 14 or 15." he said. "People would open up a hole and dig out enough coal for the winter. I did that some."

His last appearance in the Owensboro area was Aug. 13 at the Diamond Lake Jubilee in West Louisville.

"We had a good crowd that night." Ray Wilson, Jubilee emcee, said Friday. "They gave him a standing ovation at the end. It was an excellent show."

A memorial service for Travis is planned for 3 p.m. Sunday at the Merle Travis monument in Ebenezer, between Drakesboro and Greenville on Kentucky 176. Funeral arrangements were incomplete Friday.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 24 October 1983, p.1C:**

**Merle Travis 'found his rainbow's end'**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

EBENEZER – They came by the hundreds Sunday to stand on a soggy Muhlenberg County hilltop beneath somber skies to say goodbye to a friend and former neighbor.

Merle Travis, the country music legend who died Thursday in Oklahoma at age 65, didn't come home to lie in the churchyard in this crossroads community where he grew up.

Travis didn't believe in funerals. At his instructions, his body was cremated and returned to his home in Cherokee County, Okla. But friends gathered anyway to say goodbye behind the limestone and bronze monument they erected in 1956 in Travis' honor. Ironically, the monument is on the edge of the cemetery at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Muhlenberg Sheriff Harold "Roadblock" McElvain, one of a dozen police officers on hand to direct traffic, estimated the crowd at nearly 1,200.

Standing in the crowd by the monument were some of the greats of country music, dozens of those who grew up with Travis and many of the curious.

Across the road and behind the trees, a giant coal shovel stood at attention, as if it were saluting the man who set the Muhlenberg mines to music with songs like "Sixteen Tons" and "Dark As A Dungeon."

Among those from Nashville were Chet Atkins, the guitar great who was widely influenced by Travis; Louis Marshall "Grandpa" Jones, who worked with Travis as a member of the Browns Ferry Four; Joe Maphis; and Charlie Walker.

Johnny Cash had been on his way from Virginia, but he became ill and returned home. Mose Rager of Drakesboro, who taught Travis to play the guitar, was also too ill to attend.

There were flowers from Hank Thompson and Don and Phil Everly.

Travis' gold-plated Gibson guitar sat on a stand as friends took turns at the microphone to reminisce about the man they had loved.

Paul Center, who had worked with Travis for the past six years, told the gathering, "Some of his last wishes were not to have "a big ceremony or any great big, drawn-out performance. He just wanted his friends to speak, informal and simple."

Musician Thom Bresh said, "He wanted no preacher here. And I'm no preacher."



Bresh bowed his head and prayed, "Heavenly Father, Merle is sitting up there in your waiting room. I think if you'll listen to all his friends, you'll let him in."

Singer Lane Brodie, representing Travis' wife, Dorothy, who is recovering from heart surgery, said, "The emptiness he leaves will never again be filled. He touched us as a common man of deep sincerity as well as a pioneer in country music."

Mrs. Travis, she said, plans to devote the rest of her life to her husband's memory. Plans are already under way for a Merle Travis scholarship and museum, Ms. Brodie said.

Maphis said, "One of the greatest days of my life was when I met Merle. I loved him like a brother. It's a sad day, but let's be happy for Merle. We know he's gone to the right place."

Jones added, "We know Merle had a lot of friends because of the crowd here today. I don't think he ever realized just how big he was in this business. So many copied his style, but there will never be another Merle Travis."

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause for the first time. Center told about Travis sitting beside the Illinois River in Oklahoma, listening to whippoorwills. "He was always looking for his rainbow's end," Center said. "Two nights before he died, he said he had found his rainbow's end in Cherokee County, Okla. 'I feel free here. I don't have to worry about anything here,' he said."

Center added, "He did not fear death. He was ready."

Then Ms. Brodie stepped back to the microphone to lead 1,200 voices in singing "Amazing Grace."

Bresh brought out a 1937 guitar that Travis used when composing most of his hits. "This guitar was Merle's best friend. It watched him laugh and watched him cry," Bresh said. "It's only right that it be here today."

With that, he picked "I'll See You In My Dreams" as several in the crowd, wept silently.

Atkins, with tears running down his face, was unable to approach the microphone.

For more than an hour, they talked and sang. And then they drifted back to their cars and went away, taking their memories of Travis with them.



Chet Atkins has an emotional moment during Sunday's service.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 12 August 1983, pp. 1D, 2D & 7D:**

## Travis: Successful songs come naturally

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer



Merle Travis

One day in 1921, William Robert Travis left the tobacco fields of Rosewood down in Muhlenberg County and moved his family over to Browder where he took a job in the coal mines.

His son, Merle, was 3.

That shift of the Travis family from agriculture to mining left a deep impression on the young Travis. A quarter century later in California, he used those Muhlenberg County memories to create two songs that remain American classics – "Sixteen Tons" and "Dark As a Dungeon."

Today Merle Travis at 65 is one of the most honored men in country music. He's a member of the Songwriters' Hall of Fame, Country Music Hall of Fame, Gibson Guitar Hall of Fame, and he has received a Country Music Pioneer award.

His memorabilia include a Grammy, seven gold records and 12 Broadcast Music Inc. awards for top songs.

But of the 400 songs he has copyrighted, the two that are best known are those songs about the Muhlenberg mines.

In a telephone interview from his home in Oklahoma, Travis recalled, "I never worked in a commercial mine, but I dabbled around some as a kid of 14 or 15. People would open up a hole and dig out enough coal for the winter. I did that some."

But his songs of the mines were written in southern California because Capitol Records, a new label at the time, wanted to cash in on a folk song boom in the mid-'40s.

"I said people like Burl Ives had already recorded all the folk songs around," he recalled. "So they said write some new songs that sound like folk songs."

One night in 1945, Travis was on his motorcycle riding through Redondo Beach going home from a date. "I was thinking about those songs I had to write. And I was thinking how dark it was that night. As dark as a coal mine. As dark as a dungeon. So I stopped under a street light, wrote 'Dark As A Dungeon' and then went home."

That may sound too easy, but Travis insists, "I've never known a successful song that someone worked on a month. If it doesn't come naturally, it's not going to work."

"Dark As A Dungeon" had such an authentic ring to it that during the folk boom of the early '60s a number of neo-folklorists made the mistake of listing it as an old American folk song. But the chorus got Travis in trouble back home:

*It's dark as a dungeon and damp as  
the dew.  
Where danger is double and pleasures  
are few.  
Where the rain never falls and the  
sun never shines.  
It's dark as a dungeon way down in  
the mine.*

"My brother (a miner) laughed at me," Travis said. "He said that song sounded like coal miners were afraid to go to work. Coal miners love to work, he said. If they're not in the mines, they're talking about the mines."

"Sixteen Tons" was written about the same time, but it was eight years before Tennessee Ernie Ford made it a multi-million selling classic.

"I was working on a radio program with him at the time," Travis said. "He always liked my songs because they were kinda tongue-in-cheek. I never wrote many sentimental songs."

Aside from the mining songs, Travis is probably best known for "Divorce Me COD," "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed," "No Vacancy," "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke," "I Am A Pilgrim," "Sweet Temptation" and "Nine Pound Hammer."

One country music encyclopedia calls Travis "a singer and songwriter of major proportions and a guitar stylist of monumental influence."

Music historians like to play the guessing game of whether an artist is a product of his environment or if his talent is so inborn that it would be the same regardless of his childhood.

Travis says there is no answer to such questions. But, he says, "I did have a couple of idols in Muhlenberg County when I was growing up – Mose Rager and Ike Everly."

The guitar style Travis adapted from watching those Muhlenberg pickers later influenced Chet Atkins and a whole generation of Nashville pickers.

Travis has long since forgotten the first dollar he made performing, but he remembers winning \$5 at an amateur contest when he was a child. Professionally, his career began in 1937 at radio station WGBF in Evansville, playing with the Knox County Knockabouts and later the Tennessee Tomcats.

"We played mostly school house auditoriums in the area," Travis said. "Sometimes we made up to \$1 a night. Those were the big nights. Then you could have two hamburgers for supper instead of one."

In 1938, he moved to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, a top radio show of the day, and then joined Clayton McMichen's Georgia Wildcats, a top band of the era.

The following year, Travis settled in Cincinnati at radio station WLW as one of the Drifting Pioneers.

"We did just about everything there from western songs to gospel songs to acting on soap operas. Then Mr. Hitler got to kicking up his heels" and the Drifting Pioneers disbanded as some went to war and some went to factory jobs.

The radio station had a vacant half-hour gospel program. One day in the hallway, Travis was harmonizing with Grandpa Jones and the Delmore Brothers – Alton and Rabon. "We were just singing some gospel songs for our own amusement," he said.

The station manager walked by and the four singers became the Browns Ferry Four, a group that would eventually record 150 gospel songs. Although the quartet's fame rests mostly on the individual success of its members, it was commercially successful in its day, Travis said.

Today, he said, "You can walk into a truck stop and buy a Browns Ferry Four cassette with our picture on it, but there may not be more than two tracks with our voices on it." That's because the station, not the singers, owned the quartet's name and as the members left for war, new singers were brought in to keep the quartet going.

Travis joined the Marines. When the war was over, he settled in California. "It was cold in Cincinnati," he said. "I had gotten used to warm places and I decided to stay where it was warm."

He appeared on a variety of radio and television programs over the next 20 years and had parts in 40 movies. Although Travis jokes that "Usually I was the guy who opened the door and said, 'I don't know where they are,'" he won critical acclaim as a guitar-playing Marine in "From Here to Eternity."

His career has slowed somewhat, but Travis has cut six records in the past two years on the Country Music Heritage label. "I get more mail from foreign countries than I do from here," he said. "But they still sell here."

Saturday night he's appearing at the Diamond Lake Jubilee at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$7.50 for adults and \$3.75 for children.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 29 November 1963, p.1B:**

## Muhlenberg Citizens To Honor Merle Travis

GREENVILLE, Ky. Some 15,000 persons are expected here Saturday to welcome the famous folk music composer Merle Travis to his native county.

Travis, who was born in the Ebenenezzer community near Drakesboro, became famous as a folk music composer when he wrote the popular "16 Tons" folk ballad.

Greenville radio station WKYF FM-AM manager Charles Stovall and co-chairman Paul Camplin, sponsors of Travis' visit here, stated that some 40 to 50 newsmen, radio, and television representatives from Kentucky and Indiana have been invited to attend the affair which will get underway at 1 p.m. Saturday at the courthouse here.

At 3 p.m., the well - known composer will formally dedicate the new radio station, WKYF-AM at Greenville. Travis, who now resides in Hollywood, will be greeted on his arrival by city and county officials, mayors from Owensboro, Madisonville, Frankfort, Greenville, Central City, Drakesboro, and Evansville, Ind.

During his short visit to the county, he will be presented a key to Mv Old Kentucky Home at Bardstown and a key to several cities in Western Kentucky. He will also be made a Commodore of Kentucky Lake and an honorary deputy sheriff of the State Sheriff's Association.

Other dignitaries invited to attend the Merle Travis Day ceremonies include the governors of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Louisiana, radio and television personalities from Kentucky and Tennessee, and Miss Sarah Gertrude Knott, president of the National Folk Festival. Washington, D. C. Eddie Hill of television station Chanel 5 in Nashville, will emcee the event.



WELCOME HOME – This large sign erected on the west side of the Muhlenberg County courthouse in Greenville welcomes one of the county's favorite sons, Merle Travis, to his native county Saturday. Travis became a nationally - known folk music composer when he wrote the popular "16 Tons" folk ballad. Travis' appearance here is made possible through the efforts of Paul Camplin and Radio Station WKYF-AM-FM at Greenville.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 30 June 1956, pp.1 &12:

## Merle Travis Day Goes Over Big In Muhlenberg County

By Emmett Rogers



HE'S MY POP – Patty Travis and her father Merle Travis admire the limestone monument bearing a bronze plaque paying tribute to Travis' song writing, singing and guitar playing. The monument was unveiled at the end of a two-hour program at Ebenezer, where Travis spent his boyhood. On the plaque is a verse from "16 Ton," a Travis song depicting the life of a coal miner.

Up from the green valleys and the mines they came to the Muhlenberg County hilltop called Ebenezer.

From wherever the folk music of Merle Travis is sung they came to pay tribute to the guitar-playing composer who has immortalized the life of his people.

Cars lined the highways for miles around Ebenezer. State and local police found a place for every one of the thousands who arrived for Merle Travis Day.

Travis rode in a motorcade the few miles from Drakesboro and stepped from the car waving his big Stetson. He had a greeting for everyone – many of whom remembered him as a boy. He had a warm embrace for Mrs. Bunnie Baugh, in whose yard the celebration took place. There, near the house where Travis had played as a boy, a platform had been set up for the festivities.

As the celebrities mounted the tent-rooted platform, spectators poured into the enclosure roped off to give everybody a chance to see.

But this was their day Merle Travis, known the world over, had come back to Muhlenberg County to receive the tribute of his home-folks.

Ceremonies were delayed several minutes by futile attempts to move the crowd back from the enclosure. They spilled over into nearby yards and fields on both sides of the road.

They stood on trucks in the road, trying to get a glimpse of this man from their midst who creates such heart-warming ballads.

Master of ceremonies Bobby Anderson began to introduce the persons who had figured in Travis' career those who encouraged him, taught him, hired him, and boosted him along.

Gene Autry, longtime favorite western singer, was there to introduce his friend, Merle Travis.

Chet Atkins, popular guitar player, was there with Mrs. Atkins for the celebration.

Other entertainers, who couldn't get to Ebenezer, sent telegrams of good wishes. Anderson read them, from Tennessee Ernie Ford, Red Foley, and Pee Wee King. Telegrams came too, from Kentucky Gov. A. B. Chandler, Ohio Lt. Gov. John W. Brown, Tennessee Gov. Frank G. Clement.

Anderson read a letter from a secretary to the President of the United States, wishing success to Travis and his Muhlenberg County friends.

Circuit Judge Arthur T. Iler presented Travis with a commission from the Kentucky Senate, naming him admiral of Pond Creek and the town of Ebenezer.

At Travis' side on the platform was Lt. Paul Camplin, who conceived the idea for a "Merle Travis Day." Camplin saw Travis Friday for the first time since they were growing up together, 17 years ago. On active duty with the Navy on the west coast, Camplin said he had stopped by Travis' house several times, but never found him at home.

The idea picked up momentum among the people of Muhlenberg County, and its success yesterday should make it an annual affair. Travis has already approved an annual event, if it can be scheduled in June or July.

Travis paid special tribute at the festivities to two men who helped him get started on the guitar Ike Everly and Mose Rager. Both were on hand to see their star pupil.

Vachel Davis, noted mine artist, read a poem he had written about a miner. L. H. Bell, head of the United Mine Workers' safety bureau, noted in a brief talk that the days of "Sixteen Tons" are gone, and the miners didn't want to see them come back.

Ken Nelson, artist and repertoire chief of Capitol Records' country and western division, represented Travis recorders.

After nearly two hours of vocal tribute, the crowd moved across the road where Travis' friends in Muhlenberg County have set up a limestone monument, claimed to be the only one honoring a living country artist. Travis' daughter Patty, who lives in Owensboro, yanked away the covering to reveal a bronze plaque bearing a picture of Travis, a verse from "Sixteen Tons," and a few words of tribute to the attention Travis' work has focused on his home.

Before the unveiling, four-year-old Michael Ruth stood before the monument and gave out with several verses of "Sixteen Tons."

The plot of land around the monument is to be made into "Merle Travis Park." The land was donated by Mrs. Baugh, who kept up with Merle after he left Muhlenberg County. It is to be seeded and planted with shade trees and shrubs.

The parkland borders a cemetery where Travis' parents lie buried.

Musical entertainment was provided by the Drakesboro High School Band, George Vaught and The Dreamers of WMTA, The Isle Brothers of Decatur, Ill., and the Everly Brothers, Don and Phil, sons of Ike Everly.

An added feature was the baton twirling of nine-year-old Donald Larry Jobe, international baton twirling champ from Watervliet, Mich.

The Rev. Melvin Johnson, pastor of Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, gave the invocation.

The event was filmed for television presentation by NBC's "Monitor" and by stations WSM and WLAC, Nashville, and WHAS, Louisville.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 26 October 1947, p.10A:**

**HOMECOMING TO BE HELD AT DRAKESBORO  
FOR MERLE TRAVIS, FILM ACTOR, RADIO STAR**

By Jimmy Lee Jenkins

Drakesboro, Ky. A homecoming will be held here Monday for Merle Travis, popular radio and screen star, who will bring his Hollywood troupe to his home town for a two-day visit under auspices of the Booster club.

He will be met as he enters town by Mayor W. J. Fox, his friends and admirers, who make up virtually the entire populace of this community, will escort Travis and his Hollywood troupe to the speakers stand on the high school ground. The parade will be led by the band followed by a Jeep carrying the guest of honor and Mayor Fox.

A key to the city will be presented Travis by Mayor Fox as a token of community pride in his achievement in the musical world. Among speakers on the program will be H. O. Revlett, vice president of the Booster club.

Two shows featuring Merle Travis and his troupe will be staged Monday night, October 27, at 8:00 p. m. and Tuesday, October 28, at the same time. A dinner will be given for the guest and members of his show on Tuesday evening by the Drakesboro Booster club at which Willis A. Sumner will act as master of ceremonies. Speakers will include Mr. Travis, Mr. Fox, president of the club, Robert Shaver, and others.

Merle Travis got his professional start through an Indiana "Walkathon." He went on as a guest artist to entertain the audience one night and remained to do radio work in Evansville. He appeared with such homespun musical aggregations as Knox County Knockabouts, Tennessee Tomcats and the Drifting Pioneers.

A banjo made out of a carbide can and a broomstick was Travis' first homemade instrument which he made himself at the age of six. Travis was shortly thereafter presented by his parents with a genuine guitar which gave his musical career the necessary impetus.



Travis is one of Hollywood's busiest artists. In addition to numerous personal appearances, Merle has written three top tunes that have sold over a million copies, latest of which is "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!". His "Hollywood Barn Dance" program on Columbia Broadcasting System is a top Western musical show of that network. His recordings of folk music for Capitol recordings are among the top Western Albums of that company. In addition to this professional activity, Travis has found time for a film career, his latest appearance being as a featured player with Smiley Burnette in Columbia Pictures' "Powder River."

Travis says the bazooka is his favorite instrument next to his own guitar. He became familiar with that instrument guest starring on the Bob Burns radio show. Before launching his own CBS program, "Hollywood Barn Dance," Travis appeared with such prominent radio artists as Nelson Eddy and Spade Cooley.

Travis is the only western artist in the country who has three song hits to his credit with over a million records sold. His most recent hit, "Smoke! Smoke Smoke!", which he composed and recorded, is now well over the million mark. He learned to play a guitar before he could read and write.

Smiley Burnette, the popular Western movie star, was responsible for the Hollywood career of Merle Travis. When Travis was discharged from the Marine Corps in 1944 he went to work as a singer on Cincinnati's WLW radio station. Burnette heard him and urged him to go to Hollywood. Travis was in Hollywood, performing on CBS' "Hollywood Barn Dance," before Burnette had left Cincinnati.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 19 May 1946, p.8A:**

## **Muhlenberg Countians Know Merle Travis As Local Success**

Greenville, Ky. – Even with the ten gallon hat that would indicate Merle Travis is a cow puncher, Muhlenberg countians known him as a local boy who made good with a guitar.

Merle's songs and music, to which many Muhlenberg countians have danced, and which have been heard via the air lanes of Station WLW, Cincinnati, are now going out throughout the nation on record. His first double disc on which he sings "No Vacancy" and "Cincinnati Lou," was recently released. He has also appeared in motion pictures.

The story behind Travis success toes back a little more than 28 years, and is told in typical Travis style by Merle in a feature story carried in "The Capitol." paper of Capitol Publications, Inc., Hollywood, Calif., for which he recorded "No Vacancy" and "Cincinnati Lou."

This is the way Merle tells the story of his life:

"Well, sir. I don't know 'till this day just why, but I was born one mornin' just before sun-up in a ol' house the folks up aroun' Rosewood, Kentucky, call the 'Ol Frack Place.'

"This happened on the mornin' of November 2th, 1917.

"There was four of us younguns. Taylor, my oldest brother, and Vada, my only sister; John, the brother next to me, and I'm the 'Baby,' as mom said.

"Rosewood is in Muhlenberg county 'bout five miles out from Greenville. That's the county seat.

"They raised lots of tobaccer up in that end of the county and that's what dad did for a livin' till I was about five years old. Then he went down around Browder and Drakesboro and got a job in the mines. Dad afterwards said, "I wished I'd a stayed on the farm and never seen a dad-gum coal mine."

"We lived on a road between Browder and Beech Creek. It was a great big old house called the 'Ol' Littlepage Place.' Some people by that name had willed the place to their slaves, and died off, so you see our landlord was an ol' colored man.

"His name was Uncle Rufus Littlepage and he and his wife, Aunt Roena, lived in a little ol' shack down under the hill. When he'd come to collect the rent, he'd go around to the back door and knock. Mom would open the door, ol' Uncle Rufe would take off his hat, grin, an' bow down and say, 'Good mawn-in Missus, could I please hav'd' rent? Some of you city folks compare him with your landlord.

"When I was about six years old, my Uncle Johnny Travis' boy traded for an ol' five string banjer. I got a look at the instrument and right away decided that I must have me a banjer. I got me a carbide can, cut the bottom off, and took an ol' board for a neck, unravelled the screen doors to get my strings, and you should have seen the beautiful thing I created. I won't mention how it sounded.

"My dad was a purty good banjer picker. He showed me how to pick a little ol' easy tune called 'Hot Corn.' .... Dad could play the fire out of those old ones like 'Jenny Weaver,' and 'Goin' 'Crost the Sea.'

"An old colored feller named. Les Sutton, who used to come up to buy buttermilk from us, taught me too.

"Finally, my brother Taylor made a guitar out of plywood and when he went to Evansville, Indiana, he left the old box at home. Later he wrote and told mom I could have the guitar.... Then I sorta took up guitar pickin' and forgot about the banjer.

"Fuzzy Gregory, a, friend of mine, taught me to make up the chords to 'Birmingham Jail,' then I learned a few holts myself and then I got to where I could second purty well when brother John would pick the banjer. But I really owe all the guitar playin' I do to two boys who lived in Drakesboro, Ky., and earned their livin' the hard way in the coal mines. They were Mose Rager and Ike Everly.

"I got to where I was playin' for square dances and baseball games. parties and everywhere else there was any gatherings. In them days and in lots of places these days, coal miners don't have money. But I got lots of experience.

"Once I visited my brother, Taylor, at Evansville and we went to Walk-a-show, one of them contests to see who could stay awake and dance the longest. They was broadcastin' there and I got out my thumb pick and played 'Tiger Rag,' A hillbilly band boss on a radio station heard me and I got hired.

"I played with this bunch, 'The Knox County Knockabouts.' We'd clear a dollar or two when we played. Later I went with the 'Tennessee Tomcats' and the 'Drifting Pioneers.' When I was with the 'Georgia Wildcats' for a few months we played a series of fiddler contests all over the country.

I later joined up again with the 'Drifting Pioneers' and we were together four years, Then the war broke us up and I stayed at Station WLW in Cincinnati broadcastin' two years as a single act.

"I joined the Marine Corps in '43 was discharged from Parris Island in '44, and went back to WLW. All the fellers and girls I'd worked with were gone. Then one day Smiley Burnett came

along and he said 'Why I'd rather be the poorest man in California than to be the richest man in Cincinnati.' The next day I was off to the Pacific Coast.

'When I got to Los Angeles I knew two people, Wesley Tuttle and Charley Linville. Linville didn't have a phone so I called Wes. He come down town and took me to his home in North Hollywood and treated me like a long lost brother.

"That's how I been treated oy a lot of people out here since. Like Tex Ritter, Ray Whitley, Charley Linville, Bobby Bennett, Tex Atchison, Larry Cassidy and especially Cliffie Stone.

"I've had good luck, appearin' on network shows out here and bein' in pictures, co-starrin' in one with Carolina Cotton.

I don't know yet just how the public will take my little recordin' effort, but I've got my fingers crossed and I'm gonna give'er all I got. Mom usta say, 'Always do your best. That's all a mule can do.' I reckon' she was right."



**Courier & Press, Evansville, IN, Sunday, 26 June 1938, p.3D:**

### What of Folks, Shows, Animals 'n Such

By Karl Kae Knecht

... Featured in the radio artists in person show— the Renfro Valley Barn dance of WLW at the Coliseum these two days are "The Drifting Pioneers" four young men who made their real first radio hits here in Evansville at WGBF a year or so ago. They are Walter and Bill Brown "Sleepy" Morris and Merle Travis who are natives of Springerton, Ill. They are noted for their vocal harmony and musical numbers over WLM and are just an added act for the Renfrow gang on this tour...





Merle Travis memorial, Drakesboro, KY

Monument honoring Merle Tarvis. Two miles west of Drakesboro or five miles east of Greenville on Hwy 176. Turn at Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church onto Merle Travis Hwy. You'll see Merle's monument on the left, all by itself, just past the end of the church parking lot. Merle Travis was a Grammy-winning country music star, inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1977. He wrote the hit single, "Sixteen Tons," but was best known for his guitar work, which he made an art form with his unique style of finger-picking. About a year before he died he appeared in the Clint Eastwood film *Honkytonk Man*. Merle Travis died in October 1983. His body was cremated, and his ashes were scattered around this monument erected to him in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. Travis was born and raised Muhlenberg County. The monument calls his music "folk songs" and notes that he had won "the respect of all fellow workers."

COUNTRY MUSIC  
HALL OF FAME  
ELECTED 1977



MERLE TRAVIS

NOVEMBER 29, 1917      OCTOBER 20, 1983

A MAN OF SEEMINGLY LIMITLESS TALENTS, MERLE TRAVIS OF ROSEWOOD, KENTUCKY, IS KNOWN FOR HIS INNOVATIVE GUITAR STYLE, HIS DISTINCTIVE SINGING, HIS SONGWRITING—BOTH HUMOROUS AND SERIOUS—AND FOR ACTING, AND EVEN HIS SKILL AS A CARTOONIST. HIS VARIED TALENTS GAVE HIM GREAT POPULARITY ON RADIO, RECORD, STAGE, FILM AND TELEVISION IN A CAREER OF OVER FORTY YEARS, AND HE STANDS AS ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL GUITARISTS IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN MUSIC.

COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Plaque at Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN