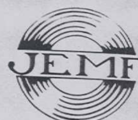
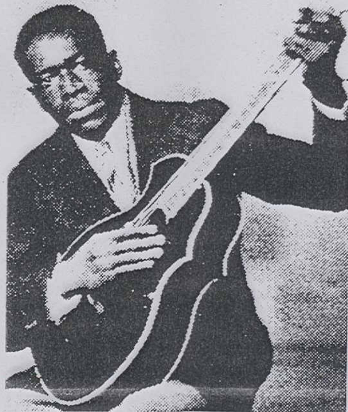
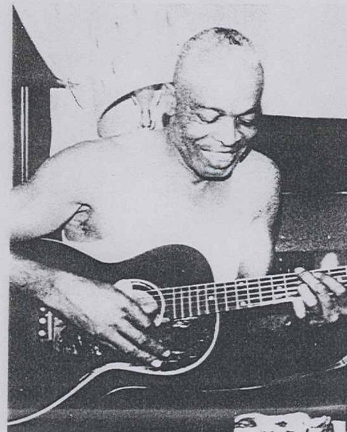
Atlanta Blues 1933



JEMF-106

A Collection of
Previously Unissued
Recordings by
Blind Willie McTell,
Curley Weaver
and
Buddy Moss





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Production of this album is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency.

Included with this album is an illustrated booklet containing an introductory discussion of the blues in Atlanta, biographies of the performers, and text transcriptions and annotations for each of the selections.

Album notes by David Evans and Bruce Bastin
Cover design: Grant Swanlund, Publication Services, UCLA

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The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, Inc.
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INTRODUCTION

The sixteen tracks on this album are previously unissued pieces recorded by Blind Willie McTell, Curley Weaver, and Buddy Moss in 1933 for the American Record Corp. Test pressings of these recordings were preserved by Art Satherley, who directed the sessions from which they derive, and ultimately were donated by him to the John Edwards Memorial Foundation and the Country Music Foundation. These recordings are in no way inferior to the issued pieces from the same sessions, and their lack of appearance on record in the 1930s can probably best be ascribed to the depressed state of the American economy at the time. Altogether twenty-three previously unissued takes of sixteen different pieces were available to us. In almost all cases alternate takes were virtually identical to each other, and in a few cases the original test pressings contained skips or volume fluctuations. In view of these facts as well as the limitations of space on an LP record, a decision was made to issue the best available take of each piece on this album. It is hoped that most or all of the remaining seven takes can eventually be issued.

The greater part of this booklet is devoted to biographical sketches of the artists. Information on Buddy Moss comes primarily from himself and secondarily from various friends and musical associates. Information on Curley Weaver comes almost entirely from relatives, friends, and fellow musicians. Blind Willie McTell gave three short interviews during his lifetime, but most of the information on him also comes from relatives, friends, and musical associates. Very few contemporary documents on these three men exist apart from their recordings, and even some of the documents that we do have, such as McTell's marriage and death certificates, contain false or misleading information. Consequently the bulk of our information consists of people's recollections. Not all of these recollections are reliable, and some are inconsistent with each other or with known facts. We cannot, therefore, vouch for the accuracy of all of the information presented here, but we have utilized that from those sources who seem most reliable and closest to the events that they describe, and wherever possible we have cross-checked our information. The biographies of Weaver and Moss presented here are more complete than any previously published, while the biography of McTell represents the first substantial body of information on this artist covering his entire life. Previous research on McTell was hampered by the fact that he traveled widely throughout his career, was known on record and in person by several nicknames, and used several different spellings of his surname.

Many people have helped with the production of this record. First we must thank Art Satherley for having the foresight to obtain and preserve the test pressings of these pieces and for generously making them available for scientific and historical research as well as for the pleasure of listeners. We are also grateful to John Hammond of Columbia Records for expediting the release of this material as well as to Eugene Earle, Norm Cohen, and Paul Wells of the John Edwards Memorial Foundation and the staff of the Country Music Foundation for their help in locating the material and encouraging the completion of this project. Most of the material on Blind Willie McTell could never have been collected without the untiring efforts of the late David H. Evans, Sr., and Mrs. Anne M. Evans of Savannah, Georgia, who located and interviewed many relatives and friends of that singer. Other researchers who gave generously of their time and collected information are Peter Lowry, John H. Cowley, Cheryl Evans, Beth Parrish, Bez Turner, Karl Gert zur Heide, and George and Cathy Mitchell. Previously published information has been drawn upon freely, and the sources are listed in the Bibliography. Indispensible to this project has been the help and information provided by the following people who knew and recalled McTell, Weaver, and Moss: Pearl Bellinger, Olliff Boyd, Ruby Boyd, Cora Mae Bryant, Randolph Byrd, Eddie Colquitt, Ira Coney, Roy Dunn, Frank Edwards, Henry Ellis, Nathanial Ellis, Ethel Floyd, Robert Lee "Sun" Foster, Robert Fulton, Emmett Gates, Larry Gaye, Johnny Guthrie, Judge Carl M. Hair, Gold Harris, Albert Noone Hill, Edward "Snap" Hill, Shorty Hobbs, Willie Hodges, Willie Mae Jackson, Bradford Johnson, Naomi Johnson, Edward Jones, Mittie Jones, Reverend Patrick Jones, Herman Jordan, Laura Ann Jordan, Buddy Keith, Mr. and Mrs. L. "Big" Lewis, Mr. and Mrs. James Baxter Long, Clarence McGahey, Hazel McTear, Mr. and Mrs. Horace McTear, Mr. Bonnie Morris, Eugene "Buddy" Moss; Mae Ola Owens, Robert Owens, Willie Perryman, Charlie Rambo, C. W. "Dusty" Rhodes, Ernest Scott, Ruth Kate Seabrooks, Judge Calvin M. Simpson, Mamie Faisson Owens Smith, Mrs. Willie Battie Smith, Emma Stapleton, Alfred Booth Story, Lavinia Strictland, Irene McTear Thomas, Richard Trice, Willie Trice, Saul Wallace, Jack Watts, George White, Reverend W. A. Williams David Wylie, and Sister Susie Weaver Young. Finally, we wish to thank the National Endowment for the Arts for funding this project.

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ATLANTA BLUES

by
Bruce Bastin

This album is a study of a few Georgia bluesmen who came together in Atlanta and who epitomize the black secular style of the region as well as any. It is not proposed to make a specific case for a Northeast Georgia regional style of blues, although such a style might well exist. Writing in the 1930s, Alain Locke reminded us that "we must never forget that Negro folk music is regional. That is, it belongs to a particular locality and has many local differences."[1] On the basis of the selected group of sessions documented on this album, it would be inappropriate to attempt to analyze the specific characteristics of this region within the spectrum of the Piedmont blues in general, for the existence of which a case has already been postulated.[2]

Culture may be defined as "a common way of life which characterizes some or all of the people of many villages, towns and cities within a given area." This culture system will be shared by persons within the social system or society. "In a rural setting the folk stratum is coterminous with the entire community; in an urban setting the folk stratum is merely part of the community."[3] In the Piedmont region in the 1920s and 1930s such a society based on a common culture was still largely valid for the poorest black socio-economic groups. It grew out of an earlier antebellum and subsequent post-Reconstruction culture, but the historical bases for this geographical division are practical rather than arbitrary.

The common feature of the blues scene in Atlanta in the 1920s and 1930s was its mobility. Although many musicians lived there for years, many others passed through, stopping over briefly, as part of the general migration patterns: rural to urban, Deep South to the northern east-coast cities such as New York. The first country bluesman to be recorded on location — in Atlanta as it happens — was Ed Andrews.[4] His recording there in April 1924 suggests that by this date the influx of rural musicians had commenced. It is interesting, too, that he was listed in the City Directory in Atlanta in 1924 only, probably one of the continuous stream, like Fred McMullen, who travelled through the city, ever hopeful of finding a more permanent home. The date is significant in terms of prevailing economic conditions in northeast Georgia.

Between 1910 and 1920, in every Georgia county except two, there was an increase in black farm owners, but a subsequent decline between 1920 and 1925. For the state as a whole, there was a 2.1% increase in black farm owners between 1910 an 1920 but a 37.4% decrease over the next five years. Similarly, there was a 6.7% increase in black tenant farmers in the decade after 1910 but a sharp decrease of 35.4% between 1920 and 1925. Not only was there a drastic change in status and job occupation among rural blacks but judging from interviews conducted among white owners at the time, there was a sudden migration of blacks from farms between 1920 and 1925. This was more marked than the earlier period of migration for Southern blacks during the war years of 1915-1916. Of seventy white farmers interviewed, 75.7% gave the years 1921 and 1922 as those of black migration from the farms. The report concluded that "the principal movement began in the fall of 1921 and extended up into the spring of 1922."[5]

This relates directly to cotton production in these "black-belt" counties. As the following table shows, the total acreage of cotton and cotton production fell between the years 1919 and 1922.

YEAR	ACREAGE	PRODUCTION OF BALES
1915	4,825,000	1,907,000
1917	5,195,000	1,884,000
1919	5,220,000	1,660,000
1920	4,900,000	1,415,000
1921	4,172,000	787,000
1922	3,418,000	715,000
1923	3,421,000	588,000

One of the main reasons for leaving the farm was the advent of the boll weevil. Entering the United States from Mexico in the 1890s, it continued its inexorable spread across the southern states. It reached Northeast Georgia as early as 1920 and by 1922 was firmly established.[6] 55.7% of black farmers stated they had left the land because of poor farming conditions, low yields, and decreased profits. The total reliance on a one-crop lien systems, is indicated by the fact that the cotton acreage remained high during the advent of the boll weevil despite a sharp reduction in production. It seems that as much as 54.9% of the land might have been lying

idle as a result of the lack of labor.[7]

There was therefore a migration of rural black labor from the land, and Atlanta would be an obvious center of attraction, with anticipated higher wages and better economic conditions. The following table gives the population of Atlanta between 1910 and 1940:

1910	154,839
1920	200,616
1930	270,366
1940	302,288

The greatest increase is in the decade 1920-1930, despite the fact that it has been estimated that between 1920 and 1940 over 50% of Georgia's young people had left the state because of the lack of job opportunities.[8] That Atlanta was not to be the Mecca for the underprivileged rural influx, both black and white, rapidly became apparent. The panic of 1921 coincided with the spread of the boll weevil and with depletion of the land through poor husbandry, an overworked monoculture in cotton, and soil erosion. Hardly surprisingly, Georgia failed to ride out the troubles despite the supposed boom of the Coolidge Era as Atlanta was mainly dependent on agriculture. Not only was cotton unable to withstand the economic collapse of 1929, but many persons had quit farming, though they continued to live in rural areas, earning a livelihood in non-agricultural occupations. Later, they moved to Atlanta in search of jobs and relief benefits. Small, locally prosperous market towns of that period, such as Shady Dale (Jasper County) and Willard (Putnam County), both to the east of Atlanta, are almost ghost towns today.

These were the socio-economic circumstances which led the Walton/Newton/Morgan County bluesmen to join the migration into Atlanta. In 1923, Peg Leg Howell came to the city from Madison, county seat of Morgan, with a rougher, older blues style and rapidly teamed up with fiddler Eddie Anthony (who was probably from Macon) and guitarist Henry Williams. This group tended to remain separate from the Walton/Newton County group of Curley Weaver, harmonica-player Eddie Mapp, and the guitar-playing Hicks Brothers, Robert and Charlie. Musically there are few links between the Howell "gang" and the Newton County bluesmen, except inasmuch as all their music was part of the broad fabric of the Piedmont blues.

Negro Quarter, Atlanta, March, 1936 (Walker Evans, Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Atlanta rapidly became a center for blues recordings, featuring not only Georgia artists, but also artists from other southern states, and became a blues melting-pot. The Mississippi Sheiks, Memphis Jug Band, Blind Willie Johnson from Texas, Ed Bell from Alabama, Lil McClintock, Blind Gussie Nesbit, Willie Walker and Pink Anderson from South Carolina all recorded in Atlanta. Following the Ed Andrews session, Columbia and Okeh recorded sessions in Atlanta on eighteen occasions between 1925 and 1931, making it their favorite recording location. Victor and Bluebird recorded sessions there twelve times between 1927 and 1941. Brunswick's first field-recording trip was to Atlanta in 1928. The American Record Company never bothered to record under field conditions in Atlanta but took its artists from that region, such as Buddy Moss, Curley Weaver and Fred McMullen, and its artists from the Carolinas, such as Josh White and Blind Boy Fuller, to their New York studios to record. However, by the time of the sessions documented on this album, the boom of field recording of "race records" was past, especially for Atlanta. Only five further field trips were made there, all of them for Bluebird. Apart from one 1940 Bo Carter session, they were all of gospel material.[9]

Thus, within a period of only a decade, Atlanta had experienced the urban compression of a flood of rural, undereducated workers. Transitory or permanent, they brought with them such aspects of their own subcultures as would facilitate this traumatic shift in lifestyle, so easy for sophisticated, socially mobile, ethnocentric critics of the 1970s to overlook. These musical sub-cultures, linked only within the general pattern of the blues scene of the Piedmont, merged into a series of unmistakable "schools" or "cells" of musical styles. Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony, with their rougher, rural heritage did not really fit with the smoother guitar style of Buddy Moss, who felt more at home with the proficient Curley Weaver. The remarkable twelve-string style of Barbecue Bob and Charlie Lincoln (the Hicks brothers), perhaps a Newton County style, had nothing in common with the more melodious style of Blind Willie McTell, although the enigmatic Willie Baker, reportedly from Patterson in southeastern Georgia, sounded uncannily like Barbecue Bob. The oft-mentioned twelve-string guitar "school" in Atlanta was less a "school," in the sense of shared close musical characteristics, than a number of idiosyncratic musical styles, loosely grouped within the Piedmont blues framework.

Charles Keil stated that "pragmatic explanations of a musical style will define it in terms of the common features of the situation in which it is used."[10] The release of these previously unissued items from 1933 will bring that possibility one step closer.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), p.30.

[2] Bruce Bastin, *Crying for the Carolines* (London: Studio Vista, 1971).

[3] George M. Foster, "What is Folk Culture?", *American Anthropologist*, 55, 1953, p. 170.

[4] John Godrich and Robert M. W. Dixon, *Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942* (London: Storyville Publications, 1969), p. 48. Tony Russell, "The First Bluesman?", *Jazz and Blues* (June, 1972), p.15.

[5] John William Fanning, "Negro Migration," *Bulletin of the University of Georgia*, 30, (June 1930), pp. 12-13. Fanning cites only eight Georgia counties specifically, as they were those in which he was involved in his research, yet they seem generally typical for the state as a whole. Those that he cites are Jackson, Jasper, Jones, Madison, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe and Putnam. They are contiguous and historically and geographically related, and it seems valid to consider general conclusions for these specific counties to relate to others in a similar condition.

[6] Ibid, pp. 20-21.

[7] Ibid, pp. 38-39.

[8] G. S. Perry, *South East Post*, August 22, 1945.

[9] For further details see Godrich and Dixon, op. cit., pp. 11-20 and R.M.W. Dixon & J. Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), pp. 106-107.

[10] Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p.209.

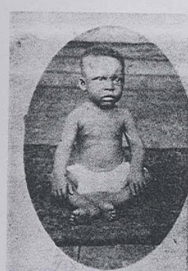
CURLEY WEAVER

by
Bruce Bastin

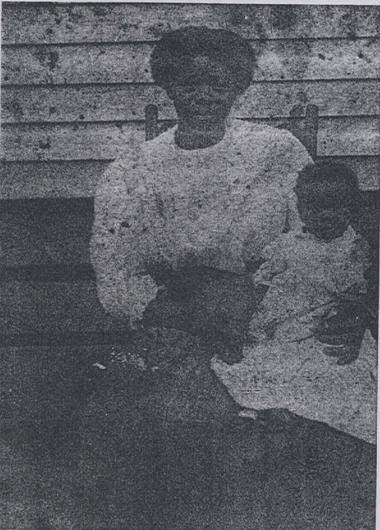
His death certificate states that Curley Weaver was born on 25 March 1906, to Jim Weaver and Savannah Shepard in Newton County, Georgia. Newton County was some 25 miles east of Atlanta, and Curley grew up on his cousin Tom Brown's farm at Liviston Chapel, just outside Porterdale, to the south of Covington. Curley's mother, Savannah, better known as "Dip" to her friends, was an accomplished guitarist and played both guitar and piano in church. Curley certainly learned "good songs" from his mother, although he never recorded religious songs under his own name. He began to learn the secular music of the region at an early age, and there were plenty of fine musicians in and around Newton County to hear.

Curley's parents were close friends of Charlie and Mary Hicks. Originally from near Athens in Clarke County, the Hicks had moved about the turn of the century to Walnut Grove in Walton County. Their elder son, Charlie, was born in 1900, possibly in Clarke County but their second son, Robert, was born in Walton County in 1902. In the 1920s these two brothers became well-known blues artists, recording for Columbia under the names of Charlie Lincoln and Barbecue Bob. The three boys were great friends and soon started playing around Newton County. The Hicks Brothers' sister, Willie Mae Jackson, thought that Robert learned to play from Charlie, while Albert Noone Hill, who went to school with Robert Hicks "three months in the summer and four in the winter" believed that Robert began playing before Charlie. Whichever was the case, Robert was to become the better known. It is entirely likely that they both learned some of their playing from Savannah Weaver. A close childhood friend of Curley Weaver's, Edward "Snap" Hill, knew him from the time Weaver was ten years old, and never knew him when he wasn't a musician. Weaver's own daughter, Cora Mae

Jim Weaver, Curley's Father (Courtesy of Cora Mae Bryant and Peter Lowry)



Curley Weaver as an Infant (Courtesy of Cora Mae Bryant and Peter Lowry)



Curley Weaver and his Mother (Courtesy of Cora Mae Bryant and Peter Lowry)

Bryant, vaguely thought her father first began playing at a rather later date. However, she was not born until 1926, and in view of other evidence, it is quite possible that Weaver was playing guitar reasonably well by 1916.

Besides his close association with the Hicks Brothers, Curley was exposed to a great deal of music in an extremely musical county. There is detailed documentation about the black secular music scene within the county both from interviews with local musicians who were playing at that time and from a unique collection of black secular material collected in Newton County between 1906 and 1908 by Howard W. Odum, a remarkable sociologist teaching then in Atlanta.[1] Sadly, Odum collected only lyric transcripts and at no time took down the names of his informants, but a perusal of his listed songs and his perceptive appreciation of the changing pattern of black rural music more than suggests that Newton county was a musically stimulating area for a young man with an ability to play guitar.

Robert Lee "Sun" Foster was born on Christmas Day, 1894, and moved to Covington in 1915. He had begun to play banjo as early as 1903 and was playing guitar by 1912. He had known Curley Weaver almost all his life and, like most other friends of Weaver's, had been located by Cora Mae Bryant herself, only too helpful and anxious to fill out the picture of her father for whom she had a very real affection. Foster lived in Porterdale, almost next door to his brother-in-law George White, who was born in 1901 and moved to Newton County in 1907. They used to play together as early as 1915 and were playing almost every night of the week for white audiences. As such, they never really ran with the nucleus of musicians like the Hicks Brothers and harmonica-player Eddie Mapp, who moved in from Social Circle, just over the county line in Walton County. Foster and White would play at any time; "we'd just pass the hat 'round and whatever they took up they'd give to us." Perhaps their music was also some distance from the blues of the others. When Weaver was still at school, White and Foster taught him to tune a guitar, perhaps in tunings unfamiliar to his mother. They also helped him with tunes. One of Weaver's favorites even at a later date was "Candy Man." This had been the first tune that both Foster and White had learned, Foster as early as 1903.

There were many other good musicians for the young Curley Weaver to hear. Foster claimed that Weaver used to go and listen to Judge Smith, an older man than Foster, and also to Nehemiah Smith; both were fine guitarists but unrelated. Both of these men were recalled by Blind Buddy Keith, resident in Atlanta since 1924 but born in Newton County in 1894. Keith was from Mansfield and mentions no musicians there. However, the two Smiths and Spencer Wright were fine early musicians. Keith knew Robert Hicks while in Covington — George White never did meet him! — and in view of the reputation Keith had among both neighbors and Atlanta bluesmen, it is quite possible that Weaver learned some from him. In later years only Keith ever played with Blind Willie McTell, himself a close friend and associate of Weaver. He recalled both Jim and Doc Smith in Covington, while Buck and Tom Smith were recalled as guitarists before 1920 by Sun Foster and George White; surely some of these must have been related to either Judge or Nehemiah Smith! George White was taught by guitarist Joe Berry who died as recently as 1969-70. He was "all the time pickin' at home, y'know," and it is possible that Weaver also knew him. White also thought that Weaver learned a great deal from Harry Johnson, a fine guitarist and mandolin-player. They became close friends and often played together, though Johnson had been playing some years before he met Weaver. Another close friend of Weaver's in his Covington days was guitarist Charlie Jackson, who apparently did not move to Atlanta. There is no doubt that Weaver's playing flourished in this sort of environment. It was a very close group of the Hicks Brothers, Weaver, and Mapp. As Sun Foster said of Mapp:

> *He used to get blowin' in Covington, and folks would get to crowdin' 'round, and if they didn't give him no money, he'd just walk on away. But he sure could blow a harp!*

Mapp moved into Newton County about 1922-23 and the family lived on the Smith farm. The family came to know the Hicks and Weaver families well, and naturally the boys, all musical, helped one another. Mapp was playing harmonica well by the time he arrived in Covington and moved on to Atlanta in 1925-26, about the time that Weaver went. The song for which he was best remembered was "Careless Love," which he eventually recorded with guitarist Slim Barton in 1929, and it is interesting to note that Odum had collected "Kelly's Love" in Newton County back in 1906-08, perhaps even from the same source as Mapp.

Before long the country offered less to the restless musicians than did the big city of Atlanta, still a good journey away in the years before surfaced roads; but Covington was linked to Atlanta by a railroad. Charlie Hicks led the way in 1923 and was soon followed by his brother. Weaver was to follow in 1925, age 19. During the 1920s and 1930s, many other of Weaver's musical friends came to town: Buddy Moss, Eddie Anthony, Eddie Mapp, Buddy Keith, Harry Johnson, Johnny Guthrie, and Blind Willie McTell.

Once in Atlanta, the Hicks boys quickly came to the notice of Dan Hornsby, talent scout in Atlanta for Columbia Records:

> *They worked at a Drive-In [restaurant] near Buckhead, a suburb of Atlanta about five miles out, and were heard by Mr. Hornsby as they went about singing as they worked. He employed them to make records for the studio.*[2]

Robert, using the pseudonym "Barbecue Bob" was to become Columbia's most popular country bluesman, and it is no surprise that he was able to arrange for Curley Weaver to record for Columbia in October 1928, immediately preceding two more recorded numbers by Robert. On "No No Blues," whether by choice, out of deference to Barbecue Bob, or because of Columbia policy, Weaver plays guitar in the same idiosyncratic, flailing guitar style that marked Robert Hick's playing. He was to return to this style on subsequent occasions, notably "Tippin' Tom" and "Birmingham Gambler" for the American Record Company session of 19 January 1933.

Although Weaver did not remain with Columbia, his 1928 session marked the start of an extensive recording career, for which he has never received full credit. Within some three years, he had recorded under his own name for both QRS and Okeh. In 1930 Barbecue Bob brought Weaver back into the Columbia studio along with a young harmonica player from northeast Georgia, Eugene "Buddy" Moss. As the Georgia Cotton Pickers, they made four superb small group numbers, and Weaver gained a reputation as an accompanying guitarist. The following year he was used by Columbia to back two female singers, Ruth Willis and Lillie Mae. However, music was still not his full-time employment, and he was listed in the Atlanta City Directory in 1929 as a laborer — the usual occupation for a black male if without a trade — and his address was given as 144 Fulton SE; the street next to where Buddy Moss lives today, although 144 has vanished under the Atlanta Stadium. It is interesting to note that an Anderson Mapp then lived further down the same street at 132.

By 1933 Weaver was close friends with Moss and Blind Willie McTell. Barbecue Bob was dead. Charlie

Hicks never recovered from the trauma of losing his brother at the age of 28. As Pete Lowry states:

> *The Georgia Cotton Pickers...as well as his last solo dates, indicate that Robert was capable of more than just distinctive frailing. He appears to have died just when his ability as a guitarist was broadening in scope, for death came on October 21, 1931, a year after his wife had passed away and two years after the loss of his mother.*[3]

Within a month of Robert's death, Eddie Mapp was "found dead in street: brachial artery left arm severed," as his death certificate blandly states. He had been killed on the corner of Houston and Butler in a rough section of town and where bluesmen often gathered to play. Thus the three great Newton County friends with whom Weaver had begun to meld his style were dead before he was to make his more distinctive mark upon the Atlanta Blues scene.

In Atlanta there were a number of distinctly different "sets" of musicians with whom Weaver ran. Sometimes he would play with Buddy Moss, fiddler Eddie Anthony (but not with Anthony's regular recording partner, guitarist Peg Leg Howell), and harmonica player Slim Kirkpatrick. He would often return to Covington. Harry Johnson would also return from Atlanta and the two would team up. Weaver also frequently backed non-playing Charlie Stinson, a good singer, who used to stay at Jack Wright's pool-hall in Covington. Perhaps a testimony to this friendship was recorded at the 18 January 1933 ARC session on the unissued track, "Charlie Stimpson" (which could be the correct spelling). Another Covington musician with whom he played in the 1930s was harmonica player Joe Tucker. Weaver really only roomed in Atlanta, returning most weekends to his home town. In 1932 he roomed at 595 Edgewood Avenue SE; the following year he was living in the rear of 62 Butler Street NE, both addresses in the heart of the Atlanta blues scene. In 1933 he was living with one of his many different girlfriends, Mary, and listed as being a musician. 1933 was the peak year of his recording career and the year in which the tracks which appear on this album were recorded.

In mid-January 1933, Weaver travelled to New York with Buddy Moss, Ruth Willis and the shadowy Fred McCullen from Macon, a superb slide guitarist with a delicate touch. The Georgia Browns numbers were recorded at one of these sessions. The American Record Company files of Art Satherley, the A&R man at the session, list "Next Door Man" as being an "Inst. with Vo. refrain." The vocalist is given in the files as Buddy Moss. However, the files are frequently at variance with aural evidence, and the singing does not sound like either Moss or Weaver but bears a strong resemblance to the other recorded material by McCullen from these sessions.[4] There is no doubt that earlier discographical suggestions that the harmonica was played by Eddie Mapp can be seen to be inaccurate.[5] The second take of "Next Door Man" has never been issued before; take one was issued, coupled with "Joker Man Blues." This second take is slightly slower than the initially-issued take, and Moss or possibly McMullen, obviously enjoying the session, adds an impromptu "Aw, shucks, play that thing!" which might have been the reason it was not used, as otherwise it is easily the equal of the issued version. Oddly, in the files it is not marked as meriting release at the time, along with the others from the session, on the regular ARC labels. A note is scribbled in the margin stating that there was to be a name change when issued on Vocalion, which was the case, as the tracks were issued as by "Jim Miller" on its sole label issue on Vocalion 1737. Quite possibly the whole Georgia Browns session was a conscious attempt by Satherly to recreate the fine Georgia Cotton Pickers sessions, which had incuded both Moss and Weaver. However, it is entirely probable that the idea came from the artists, as the session was the last to be recorded, apart from a single unissued track by Ruth Willis.

These January 1933 sessions must have been successful, for within eight months Moss and Weaver were invited to return. Fred McMullen had been listed as a musician in the 1932 Atlanta City Directory, rooming at 1537 Rushton NE, but by the time of the September 1933 sessions, he had vanished. Moss remembers little of him, and he is not recalled with any certainty by anyone who knew Weaver. No one in the Covington area had ever heard of McMullen, and Moss felt that he had perhaps returned to his home town of Macon. He does not appear to have died there, but there is no further trace of this excellent musician. Kate McTell, however, recalls him living in Atlanta through the 1930s. Although he was issued as Fred McMullen he was listed in the ARC files as Fred MacMullin. Somehow it is fitting that such an element of doubt should cloud his history.

Blind Willie McTell replaced McMullen for the September sessions, which lasted a full week from Thursday the 14th to Thursday the 21st, although there were no recordings made either on the weekend or on the Wednesday. Weaver made seven recordings, only two of which were issued at the time. All three selections on this anthology, "You Was Born To Die," "Dirty Mistreater," and "Empty Room Blues," are issued for the first time. Art Satherly's ARC files lists these two numbers as "vocal with guitars" by "Curley Weaver & Partner," without being specific as to whom the "Partner" was. Moss stated that each backed one another with no special plan and felt any one of the two not singing could have been backing the named artist. Aurally it is Moss who supports Weaver on "Dirty Mistreater" and "Empty Room Blues," for not only are his well-known guitar patterns there but there is no evidence of McTell's easily recognizable twelve-string guitar. McTell does obviously play and sing on "You Was Born To Die." Whether it is Moss or McTell on other tracks we may never know for sure, but nowhere was McMullen's guitar featured, as suggested in all discographies to date.[6] These songs by Weaver are superb blues and give immediate lie to the too-common suggestion that he was really only a second-man, albeit good. They carry far more emotional conviction than do the bulk of Moss' pieces from the same sessions, even those included here. If Weaver's skill was not previously evident, rather, lost in the fine small groups of the Georgia Browns and Georgia Cotton Pickers or burdened under the image of Barbecue Bob on those tracks in which he played either in emulation of his friend or out of respect, his quality as a bluesman on these 1933 sides stands out clearly for all to see.

For whatever reasons, it was Buddy Moss who emerged from these sessions as a steady seller for ARC. Weaver recorded only one further session before the war— in the middle of a 1935 Decca session of McTell's— although he was recorded extensively after the war. In Atlanta he continued to play with Moss but also ran with a wider group of musicians, including his old friend Harry Johnson. Roy Dunn, born in 1922, had moved into Covington and met Weaver in 1935. At that time Weaver was playing a good deal with Jonas Brown, reputed by many local musicians to have been a better guitarist than most of the Atlanta men who had recorded. Weaver and Jonas Brown frequently played as a trio with the enigmatic "Bo Weavil," about whom stories are legion in Atlanta. His real name was never known to any local bluesman, although there is an outside possibility that it could have been Freeman Walker.[7] Like Weaver and McTell, his repertoire was very broad and he mainly played on the streets for whites.

The young Roy Dunn soon began to run with Weaver, and they struck up a good relationship. Roy remembers that in the late 1930s "Candy Man" and "Come On Down To My House Baby" were still great favorites with Weaver's 'set.' Weaver's daughter recalled an incident when her father was working in Atlanta with the Georgia Power and Railroad, and she was living with him and his then-current girl-friend, Mae Lizzie Norwood, in Lizzie Walker's house at 457 Bedford Place. Late one evening Weaver was out on the streets playing "Come on down to my house, baby, there ain't nobody home but me," when the sheriff broke up the playing with "We're here tonight." Edward "Snap" Hill recalled that while Weaver regularly played on the sidewalks and in friends' houses, he never played at clubs. Kate McTell, however, recalls that Weaver did sometimes play with Blind Willie McTell for whites at the Pig 'n Whistle drive-in barbecue restaurant.

Johnnie Guthrie, born 1915 in Walton County, used to come into Covington on weekends and ran across Weaver in the 1930s. This friendship remained for years, and he made up a trio with Weaver and Moss in the 1950s which played as far away as Greensboro, thirty miles east of Covington, and remained Buddy Moss' second guitar until about 1972. Charlie Rambo was an Atlanta-born guitarist, who was playing about 1920. He formed a small string band, the Star Band, which had very fluctuating personnel. This included guitarists Guitar Slim who recorded for ARC in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1937; Leroy Dallas, who followed the east coast migration route to New York, recording there first in 1949; and fine local men like Cliff Lee, Ollie Griffin, Jonas Brown, and Johnny Price. Although Weaver never actually took part in the band, he knew the musicians well and played with them all except Price.

It seems that in the 1940s and early 1950s Weaver was continuing to live both in Atlanta and back near his home town with his mother in Almon. He is listed as living at 716 South Bayard in Atlanta on three occasions between 1942 and 1950, but as Roy Dunn, his closest associate still alive, left the area in 1938 not to return until 1950, we may not know for sure. In any case, Weaver was able to return to Covington to play with Harry Johnson and local musician Herman Jordan, who plays closer to Weaver's style than any other Georgia bluesman.

In August 1949 Fred Mendelsohn of Regal Records came to Atlanta in search of country bluesmen, in itself a surprising move by a New Jersey-based label. Regal eventually recorded McTell, Weaver, Frank Edwards— an idiosyncratic guitar and rack-harp player, who had recorded in 1941 for Okeh — and Little David Wylie. Wylie recalled Weaver as being instrumental in arranging the record session. Following tests made at a hotel, the final tracks were cut at a studio at 441 Edgewood Avenue. Much material was recorded, but

only eight sides were ever issued on 78 rpm discs. Six sides were issued of McTell—four of them gospel—and two of the four that Wylie recorded were released, perhaps because they had something of the flavor of John Lee Hooker about them and Mendelsohn thought they might be commercial. The other material remained unissued for years, but most are now issued on albums.[8] No doubt Wylie would consider Weaver instrumental in getting him the session, but as Frank Edwards laconically commented, "we all knowed about it; all of us together," for it appears that Mendelsohn advertised over the radio for bluesmen.

Within a year of the Regal sessions Weaver recorded for Bob Shad's Sittin' In With label, presumably in New York. Four issued tracks emerged but, like the Regal sessions, others might well remain unissued in the SIW vaults, which are rumored to contain many unissued items. The whole session is unclear, but it could relate to a session that David Wylie recalls. It seems that within three months of the Regal session, Weaver, Wylie, Harry Johnson, and Atlanta's Washboard Sam made the journey to New York to record. Wylie did not think that any of the material had ever been issued, but it seems logical that this is the session at which Weaver cut the SIW material. To add further confusion, Wylie referred to Harry Johnson as "Slick" Johnson—a name no one else ever used—and a Harry "Slick" Johnson recorded many sides at the ACA Studios in Houston in 1951, from which only one record was issued. I know of no one with a copy. Even more mysterious, Weaver's daughter has a card, dated 1958, from a photography firm in Chicago—sadly no photograph remains—and a button from the Chicago Racetrack. These were brought back by Weaver, and she felt that it had been after a recording session but was unsure. It was patently not the SIW session, in view of the date, but it poses an interesting question. Why else would he be there?

About this time Weaver began to lose total sight in the one eye that had always given poor visibility, and his sight was deteriorating rapidly in the other. By the late 1950s he and McTell ceased to travel, and McTell began to play mainly church music. Weaver returned to Porterdale to Sun Foster's home but then moved back to Almon, where he stayed with his halfbrother Eddie Colquitt. It was here that he died on 20 September 1962. He was taken to the Sanford-Young Funeral Home on S. West and Clark in Covington and was buried in the quiet rural churchyard in Almon. Ten years later, when Peter Lowry and I were collecting information on Weaver and his associates, as well as the whole northeast Georgia blues scene, Curley Weaver was remembered with affection by all who knew him. I heard no unpleasant word about him; people heard and recognized his music with delight. Cassettes of his music literally opened doors; but then, he had really been opening doors all his life.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry As Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negro," *Journal of American Folklore*, 24 (1911), 255-294, 351-396.

[2] Ed Paterson, "Atlanta Shouts the Blues," *The Melody Maker* (May 26, 1951), 9.

[3] Pete Lowry, "Some Cold Rainy Day: Barbecue Bob and Charlie Lincoln," *Blues Unlimited*, 103 (August-September 1973), 15.

[4] Bruce Bastin and John Cowley, "Uncle Art's Logbook Blues," *Blues Unlimited*, 108 (June-July 1974), 16-17.

[5] John Godrich and Robert W. Dixon, *Blues & Gospel Records 1902-1942* (London: Storyville Publications 1969), p. 764.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Charles Walker: "My name is Charles Walker. I was born in Macon, Georgia on July 26, 1922. My father was a blues player. His name was Freeman Walker, but everyone called him 'Boweavil.'" Quoted in Tom Pomposello, "Charles Walker: Blues from the Big Apple," *Living Blues*, 18 (Autumn, 1974), 14.

[8] Blind Willie McTell was issued on *Blind Willie McTell—1949* on Biograph BLP 12008, *Blind Willie McTell—Memphis Minnie 1949* on Biograph BLP 12035, and *Living With The Blues* on Savoy MG 16000. Curley Weaver appeared on Biograph 12035 and Savoy 16000, and Frank Edwards and David Wylie also appeared on the Savoy album. Weaver, Edwards, and Wylie also appeared on *Sugar Mama Blues—1949* on Biograph BLP 12009.

Curley Weaver's Grave (Cheryl Evans)

BUDDY MOSS

by
Bruce Bastin

Buddy Moss was, without doubt, the most influential East Coast bluesman between Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller. In Atlanta he was central to the group of musicians which included Curley Weaver and Blind Willie McTell.

Born in Jewell, Georgia on 26 January 1914, he was christened Eugene, but he was always known around Atlanta as Buddy. About 1918 his parents moved to Augusta, and as a teenager Buddy joined the increasing flow of young men moving from rural communities into the fast-expanding city of Atlanta. He arrived in 1928 and seems to have quickly met the Walton/Newton County musicians in town, becoming firm friends with Curley Weaver, whose guitar style was very similar to that which Buddy had heard as he grew up. At that time, Buddy was playing harmonica and began to listen to Curley and especially to Barbecue Bob, who had already begun to record. He had always admired Blind Blake's guitar playing and Blake's Paramount records were easily obtainable in the South, either in stores or by mail-order via such papers as the *Chicago Defender*. Although Moss states that he first learned from Barbecue Bob, his guitar style by January 1933, when he first recorded on that instrument, certainly owed more to Blake.

By 1930, Barbecue Bob was well established with Columbia and obviously a solid seller. Probably at his instigation, he brought a trio under the name of the Georgia Cotton Pickers to record at the Campbell Hotel in Atlanta. On aural evidence this comprised Barbecue Bob on vocal and second guitar, Curley Weaver on lead guitar and second vocal, and Buddy Moss on harmonica. For years collectors had assumed that the superb harmonica was that of Eddie Mapp, a logical choice in view of his close association with the 1933 Georgia Browns tracks, on which Moss is listed in the ARC files, to say nothing of Buddy's own statement to this effect, proves his presence. He was thus just short of his seventeenth birthday when he made these first records. They remain superb examples of small-band blues. This may seem young, but Eddie Mapp was the same age when he recorded, if his death certificate can be believed. Moss thinks he was probably older than twenty in 1931 but it was true that young men grew up fast in the pace of the city environment.

Nothing more is heard of Moss on record until he travelled to New York for a series of sessions in January 1933 for ARC in the company of the elusive guitarist Fred McMullen and the fine singer Ruth Willis. Indeed, Ruth appears on Moss' first recording under his own name, "Bye Bye Mama," exhorting him to "Play it for Miss Willis!" Whereas the McMullen and Willis records are very rare, the Moss sides are more commonly found. Undoubtedly the sales from these sides resulted in Moss being recalled to the recording studio in September of the same year along with two of his best friends, Weaver and McTell, both of whom would have been well known to the recording executive Art Satherly, from earlier recordings for other labels. Moss was unable to repay his debt to Barbecue Bob, for he was dead by that date.

Moss recorded under his own name on every day on which recordings were made at these sessions, apart from the first, which was a relatively short session by McTell of some numbers on which Moss might well have played second guitar. He clearly recalls that all three musicians played behind one another with no real pattern, and while an attempt has been made to unravel some of the possible combinations of guitarists,[1] the final picture is far from clear. What it does show quite clearly is that they were three fine guitarists, each quite capable of playing behind the others and enhancing their music. Moss himself, one of the finest East Coast guitarists of the Piedmont school, stated:

> *I think (people) liked Curley best. Curley was a guy, he could really raise behind you and he could take up the slack. You didn't have to wait for him, he took up the damn slack, see. You didn't have to worry about him, I tell you.*[2]

It seems that Curley more often than McTell backed Moss at these sessions and his fine rhythmic sense can be heard on the selections on this anthology.

The Moss sides must again have sold well, for it is he alone whom ARC recalled to their studio the following summer to record eighteen more items, only one of

which remained unissued. This time Moss recorded alone, and his singing style became rather more bland, reminding one somewhat of Joshua White, whose 1932 records Moss certainly heard. Hardly surprising, then, that when Moss returned almost exactly a year later in August 1935 he was teamed up with Josh White and they accompanied each other on sessions. Buddy's recording contracts for 1934-1935 show that he was paid $5 per selection recorded, whether on issued sides or as second guitarist to White. His last session was on 28 August 1935, at which time he signed a new contract for one year at a flat payment per selection of $10. He was obviously set to become a major recording artist for ARC—whatever one might think of the small recording fee!—but Buddy was not to return.

To use every bluesman's euphemism, Buddy Moss "got into trouble" and went to jail. It destroyed his chance of real fame, and he remains an embittered man because of it. He did not lose his friends, and Roy Dunn remembers passing Moss cigaretters via a warden while he was still in Atlanta awaiting trial. He was found guilty and spent the next five years in jails in Greensboro and Warrenton. His recording contract shows that he was paid an advance against future recordings on $25 on 12 December 1935 and this could well have been to help with legal expenses. It is our collective loss that he was never able to complete the session to repay that advance. Roy Dunn claims that Moss played himself out of jail, which is partly true, and stayed with Dunn's family.

In fact, Moss was released on parole in 1940 or possibly early 1941 on the word of James Baxter Long, who was at that time an agent for ARC, and "manager" of Blind Boy Fuller.[3] Long had tried to obtain Moss' release in 1939, offering work and a recording contract, but he was forced to resubmit the following year. Moss went to Elon College, just west of Burlington, North Carolina, where he worked in the Long home for ten years, leaving suddenly in March 1951.

Buddy Moss in New York (Peter Lowry)

There he was Gene to Mrs. Long but still Buddy to his musician friends nearby. He made few close friends but regularly played with the Trice brothers from Durham, Richard and Willie, great friends of Blind Boy Fuller. Fuller, however, died on 13 February 1941, too late for Moss to team up with him. Much has been said in the past about Moss having learned from the very influential Fuller, but the reverse is indeed the case. While living near Burlington, Moss logically came to know "Blind Boy Fuller No. 2," as Long called him on record, Brownie McGhee. McGhee was playing with Jordan Webb on harmonica and Robert Young on washboard, but after Fuller died, he also recorded with Fuller's sidemen, Sonny Terry and George Washington, the latter better known as Bull City Red or Oh Red. All six musicians travelled to New York in October 1941 to record for Okeh/Columbia and Moss showed that he had lost none of his ability, producing some of his very finest recorded blues. The addition of his guitar on a couple of McGhee tracks enhanced their quality, and it seemed that he could well return to prominence. Fuller was dead, McGhee was beginning to make a name, and Moss was playing as well as ever.

However, the Imperial Japanese Navy cared little for Moss' possible return to recording fame, and the outbreak of war destroyed his chances. Not only did recording sessions drop away, but the shortage of shellac required for other wartime needs meant that the recording industry went through a bad period, further exacerbated by the Petrillo ban on recording in 1943. Moss remained disillusioned in North Carolina. McGhee and Terry moved to New York and subsequent international fame, and Moss finally returned to Atlanta, saddened by his missed opportunities. He is fully aware that his own musical abilities are the equal of McGhee's, and perhaps but for a sequence of events he might well have achieved similar success.

Moss' subsequent career is not really relevant to this study, but he still attends festivals and concerts when he feels like it. He still played small black country parties into the early 1970s, with such local Atlanta bluesmen as Roy Dunn and Johnnie Guthrie, and his ability remains as ever. A fine singer and magnificent guitarist, Buddy Moss fully deserves the real break that has constantly eluded him.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Bruce Bastin and John Cowley, "Uncle Art's Logbook Blues," *Blues Unlimited*, 108 (June-July, 1974), 12-17.

[2] Robert Springer, "So I Said: 'The Hell With It,'" *Blues Unlimited*, 117, (Feb., 1976), 20.

[3] For greater detail see Bruce Bastin, *Crying for the Carolines* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), pp. 12-13, and Bruce Bastin, letter, *JEMF QUARTERLY*, 9 (1973), 41, 66.

BLIND WILLIE McTELL

by
David Evans

Willie Samuel McTell was born in McDuffie County, Georgia, about nine and a half miles south of Thomson, the county seat, between Big Brier and Little Brier Creeks. The weight of evidence strongly favors 1898 as the year of his birth, but the day is less certain. The Metropolitan Atlanta Association for the Blind reported that McTell was born 5 May 1901, in Statesboro, Georgia. Although the place and year are certainly incorrect, it is possible that the day is the right one.

Willie's mother was named Minnie Watkins, and she was apparently only in her teens when Willie was born. Her family was from around Wadley, about thirty-five miles south of Willie's birthplace. His father was from the local area and was named Ed McTear or McTier. Both spellings are used by various members of his family, and some even go by the name of McNair or some similar variant. Willie's wife Kate says that the variation in spelling was deliberate because one branch of the family was notorious for distilling illegal whiskey. It is just as likely, however, that the variants represent attempts at phonetic spellings resulting from a low level of literacy among some members or branches of the family and in the community in general. There are many McTiers and McTears in this part of Georgia, both black and white. Apparently Willie was the only one to spell his name McTell, a usage he may have been taught at one of the blind schools he attended. In any case, the names are pronounced identically with an accent on the *Mc* and no distinction between a final *r* or *l*.

Willie's birthplace was about thirty-seven miles west of the city of Augusta in rich cotton farming country of gently rolling hills. In the late nineteenth century the area's rural population was predominantly black, and before the Civil War this region was a stronghold of plantation slavery with one of the biggest slave markets in the South at nearby Louisville. Not much is known of Minnie Watkins' family background except that she had at least three sisters: Mattie, Lillie, and Carrie. All of the sisters eventually became town dwellers and appear to have been relatively secure financially in later life. Although Ed McTear was a rather unsettled person known to drink and gamble, most of the other members of his family were respectable farming folks, many of whom owned their own land. The fact that Willie's family on both sides lived somewhat above the desperate and chaotic economic and social conditions that characterized the lives of many southern blacks was to prove important for him in later life, for although his immediate family broke up, he always had a large number of relatives who were concerned for his welfare and were in a position to offer him help and security. Willie frequently visited his mother's sisters and lived with some of them for long periods of time. Ed McTear had two younger brothers, Harley and Cleveland, and two sisters, Belle and Doll. All remained in the area near Thomson except Belle, who married a man also named McNair and moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Despite the distance, Willie occasionally visited his Aunt Belle on his travels. Ed's father died, and his mother remarried Tom Harris and had several more children. Willie visited his father and all of his aunts and uncles in later life, but he was especially close to his uncle Cleveland McTear, better known as "Coot," and his uncle Gold Harris, who was only a year or two older than Willie. He was also related through marriage to a number of men who became important figures in Georgia blues circles. Willie's wife Kate states that his father's uncle was Reverend Thomas Dorsey, one of Atlanta's most prominent Baptist preachers and the father of "Georgia Tom" Dorsey, a very successful blues singer of the 1920s

and 1930s who later became one of the country's leading gospel songwriters and publishers. Willie's uncle Gold Harris claims to be related to some Dorseys by marriage. Buddy Moss was another blues singer who was related to the elder Thomas Dorsey, a fact that would make Willie distantly related to Moss. Buddy was born in Jewell, about fifteen miles west of Willie McTell's birthplace, and is said to have visited with Willie's uncle Cleveland McTear. Cleveland was also married to a Moss, a fact that further suggests a relationship between the blues singers. Buddy Moss, incidentally, denies any relationship to either Dorsey or McTell, but as he has not been notably cooperative with blues researchers in recent years, the question can still be considered an open one. Finally, Willie was distantly related to the Atlanta blues singing brothers Charlie and Robert Hicks ("Barbecue Bob"). Willie's half-sister Ola McTear married Clarence McGahey, whose cousin was married to Charlie Hicks, or Charlie Lincoln as he was also known. These relationships may well have provided the young Willie McTell with a ready-made network of fellow musicians who could give him help and support when he was in Atlanta.

The marriage of Willie's parents was short and unstable. It is quite possible that they were not legally married, as one woman who knew Willie in the 1930s claims that he was an "outside child," born out of wedlock. Another woman who was related to Willie's mother claims that she was actually married to a Watkins, who was the real father of Willie, and that Minnie Watkins later married Ed McTear with Willie taking his stepfather's name. This would seem to be contradicted by the fact that Minnie had a sister named Watkins and by a strong physical resemblance between Willie and his cousins on the McTear side. In any case, the McTears acknowledge Willie as one of the family, and it is unlikely that he would have been so close to them if he had not been related by blood. Minnie and Ed McTear split up not long after Willie was born, and Minnie moved south a few miles to Stapleton with her baby. She reverted to the surname Watkins, though Willie kept his father's name. Many years later Minnie remarried and had another son before her death in 1920. Ed McTear also remarried to a woman named Pearl Hill and had a daughter Ola, now deceased. Ed McTear died around 1936.

Willie always told people that he was born blind, and all of his relatives on both sides of the family concur in this. A woman who used to help nurse Willie as an infant, however, says that he had sore eyes as a baby and that his mother tried to relieve the discomfort by putting powdered calomel on them, thus blinding him. Calomel is a salt of mercury, once popular as a remedy for syphilis but also taken internally as a purgative and spring tonic. Probably it would have harmed the eyes if applied directly to them, but we can not be certain whether this was done. Even if it was, Willie may have had extremely poor eyesight to begin with. The Metropolitan Atlanta Association for the Blind reported that he could only perceive light, and his half-brother states that he could only perceive it out of one eye. After Willie's mother settled in Statesboro, Georgia, he was given many examinations by doctors, which were paid for by Mr. Lannie Simmons, a local white philanthropist and neighbor of the family for whom Minnie Watkins worked. Willie continued to have examinations at Grady Hospital in Atlanta after he began living there in the 1920s and even at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He also had operations, possibly for cataracts, but following one of these his half-brother says he lost even his ability to discern light. According to a white man in Savannah, who may have mistaken Willie McTell for another blind street singer, Willie was also "boxtoed" on his left foot and had to have his shoes stretched when he bought them. Other relatives of McTell have denied this, however.

As he grew up, Willie showed a remarkable ability to adapt to his blindness, so much so that it could hardly be said to have been a serious handicap. Everyone who knew him was impressed with his extraordinary powers of perception, understanding, and memory. He had excellent hearing and could understand the lightest whisper in the same room. People would call to him from across the street, and he would recognize their voices and call back to them by name. He could be in a car and tell when it was passing a house. His hands were also very sensitive. He could thread a needle and sew buttons, and one friend has reported that he could tell the make, model, year, and even the color of an automobile by feeling the front fender. Many people have reported that he could count his own money. His wife Kate says of his blindness:

He said that he felt like he could see in his world just like we could see in our world. And he could tell you how long my hair was, what color I was. And if you walked up to him and spoke to him, he could tell you whether you were a black person or a white person. And he could tell you how tall you were, or whether you were short, just by listening to your voice. And he could tell you whether you were a heavy set person or a thin person. He was marvelous!

Willie McTell never needed anyone to guide him around. He was able to make his way about the streets solely with the aid of a cane, which he would tap against the ground or the curb. He also made a clicking sound with his tongue as he walked along, listening for the sound to echo off objects or people. His cousin Horace McTear calls him "ear-sighted":

He was ear-sighted. That's what he was. He'd walk that road out there. If a dog coming, he know it 'fore he got to him or anything. He'd turn his head like that and 'K-K-K-K,' he make a little noise. And he could tell if he was gonna stumble over something. He was ear-sighted. When I'd be walking with him, I'd say, 'Hold my hand,' you know, like how you leading a blind person. He'd say, 'You don't have to hold my hand.' A lot of times he'd have his head like that. You'd be talking. He wouldn't say a word. He'd turn his head around to the side like that. And he had such a good remembrance. Don't care how long it was or how long the conversation was; when it was over with, he could go right back over it and tell you everything you said. . . But now, just like you sitting over there, long as you sit still, he wouldn't know where you at. But if you just moved there a little bit, just shake yourself any way, now he'd know exactly where you were. He could shoot you too. Ha ha ha. He kept his old pistol. He didn't miss when he shot. If you move, he was gonna hit you. But now, if you stood still, he might not hit you. He wouldn't hit you. He wouldn't know where you was at. But if you just shook, he would hit you good.

Dogs are usually the scourge of blind people, but they never gave Willie much trouble, even on country roads where they were allowed to run free. He kept a cane with a lead weight on the tip that he called his "dog stick" and would hit any animals with it that gave him a hard time. His uncle Gold Harris tells an anecdote about Willie's ability to walk country roads and deal with dogs. The time is before World War I out in the country from Thomson.

You know, long, long years ago, along at that time, cars wouldn't be out there, you know, like they is now. He'd get in the road and walk to Thomson. And somebody had a bad dog up there beside the road. And he had told me, say, 'I'm gonna kill that dog if he come out there at me again.' He had hit him with a stick, kept him off further there. He said, 'If I run into him again, I'm gonna shoot him.' And he went back along there again and he killed that dog. That dog came out there on him, and he shot him and killed him. He was out there on that road, the Wrens Highway down there. That's the way he went to Thomson when he walked. And he say, 'Well, I got to go to town now. I'm gonna spend the night out there too.' And he'd get that guitar and swing it on his back, and he'd hit that highway and go right straight on to Thomson. He was a mighty walker. Wasn't no cars then much, just a very few. And no poor people had no car then. And he walked to town and walked back.

Willie also had a remarkable ability to get around in towns or cities. After a short period of time he would imprint a map of the streets in his mind and could then go anywhere by himself. He also knew bus and trolley routes and could travel anywhere by train. The folklorist John A. Lomax marveled at McTell's ability to direct him around Atlanta in an automobile. Gold Harris tells the following typical anecdote about Willie's ability to get around in Atlanta:

I went up there and stayed around there with him, you know, a day or two. He was carrying me. Now he was blind. Ha ha ha. Let me tell you, he was carrying me to places I didn't know nothing about. He knowed when the streetcars was running. And I'd catch mighty near any streetcar. And he'd stand there and listen. And I'd say, 'Come on, let's take this'n.' 'No, no, that's wrong. We don't catch that. We'd be going across town.' He knew we didn't catch that. I'd just stay there till he say, 'Let's catch it.' Ha ha ha. Yeah, he told me. I'd catch it.

Willie had an independent mind, and his wife Kate affirms:

He was a very self-independent person. He could tell money too, tens, fives, ones—I don't know how he did it—and twenties, a nickel, dimes, quarters, fifty cents. If somebody walked up and gave him a penny, he'd tell them, 'What can I do with a penny?' And if they gave him a nickel, he'd put it in the juke box.

After his parents split up, Willie's mother lived on a place called "Spread" at Stapleton. Willie stayed with her but probably continued to visit with his father's people. Around 1907, when Willie was nine years old, his mother moved southeast about seventy miles to Statesboro in Bulloch County, a place that Willie came to consider his home town. Later Minnie persuaded her mother and some of her sisters to join her in Statesboro. This move was part of a large migration of blacks there around the turn of the century, most of them attracted to the town's prosperity brought about by the local lumber and turpentine industries. After a time the other sisters moved away, but Minnie stayed on in Statesboro. At first she and Willie lived in a little shack near the S and S railroad tracks. Young Willie was apparently a fairly mischievous child. One woman remembers him throwing stones at passers by. Another incident is quite well remembered by older people in Statesboro. It seems that Willie and another boy were playing on the railroad tracks, either on a trestle or in some boxcars. Willie heard a train coming and warned

the other boy to get off the track but it was too late and the boy was hit by the train. Willie escaped injury altogether, but his companion lost a leg.

After perhaps a few years, Willie's mother obtained a job as a cook for the Ellis family, who owned a downtown pharmacy, and she and Willie moved across town to a house on Elm Street provided for them by the Ellises. Willie is well remembered from this period in his life and had many friends. There was even a blind girl named Watts living down the street from him, who could read Braille and write and who encouraged him to receive an education. Some people around Statesboro knew him as Willie, and one man remembers calling him W.S., but most of the people by far knew him as Doogie or simply Doog. His father's relatives around Thomson also used this nickname, though in Atlanta he seems to have gone mainly by Willie McTell. Considering the many nicknames he was later to use on his records, it is odd that he never recorded under the name of Blind Doogie.

It is not known when Willie first started playing a guitar, but his earliest musical memory (expressed in an interview with John A. Lomax) went back to 1908. This seems a likely date, for he would have been ten years old at the time. Actually the guitar may not have been his first instrument. A friend of his in Statesboro says that he started on a harmonica, an instrument he was known to play in later life, and his wife Kate says that he played an accordion before he started on guitar. In any case, the guitar soon became his chosen instrument. Willie told most of his relatives that he learned to play from his mother. His wife Kate says:

> *His mother played a guitar, you know. She taught him how. He always told me that, and his Aunt Mattie told me too that her sister Minnie played a guitar real good. My mother always said that...[she played] blues, 'cause a lot of people thought Memphis Minnie was Willie's mother, you know, 'cause his mother was named Minnie, you know. And when they heard Memphis Minnie, they thought that was his mother. She wasn't. 'Cause his mother, they say, could really tear up a guitar, work with it.*

Another person who is recalled as influencing the young Willie McTell was Josephus ("Seph") Stapleton, a man who had moved from the town of Stapleton to Statesboro as part of the same migration that brought Willie's mother and her family there. Willie's earliest playing also appears to have been influenced by his father Ed and uncle Harley McTear. Willie's uncle Gold Harris, who is a younger half-brother to Harley and Ed, says:

> *He just started at home, you know. His daddy used to play guitar then. That's the way he started. Both of 'em had one, you know. They used to didn't do nothing but be playing. They was pretty good sports, gamble all the time. They'd just go different places gambling. And so he just took it up from his daddy, fooling with a guitar.*

Willie was on his way to joining the ranks of the many blind and physically handicapped black folk musicians who traveled all over the South in the early decades of this century. Such musicians were particularly common in the East Coast states. Men such as Blind Blake from Florida, Peg Leg Howell and the nearly blind Piano Red from Georgia, Blind Joe Taggart, Willie Walker, Gary Davis, Simmie Dooley, and Gussie Nesbitt from South Carolina, and Blind Boy Fuller and Sonny Terry from North Carolina are among the most illustrious of McTell's contemporaries who made recordings, and many of them became Willie's friends and playing partners. Even within the vicinity of Statesboro there were three other blind musicians whose stature was almost equal to McTell's.

Willie, with the cap he always wore and his guitar, soon became a familiar sight on the streets of Statesboro. Mrs. Ethel Floyd, a white lady a few years older than Willie, recalls him well as a young teenager:

> *He used to come to the house. I was then married...We would always give him, had something to eat for him, chow like. He was a big boy. He was singing and playing then, trying. So I had a guitar up at the house 'cause I wanted to learn to play. And I didn't. And I gave it to him. So he had had an old guitar somebody had given him, but he was awful proud of it...When I found out I couldn't and he was trying and didn't have anything much to try on, I gave it to him at that time. Then later on, of course, I'm sure he got another one. But that was the beginning of it. Then he was just a boy...Well, I imagine he was in his teens...He hadn't traveled anywhere then. But finally, as he got older, he went to going. And you see, of course, my husband died, and I moved back over here. And when he'd come to town, after he went away and he'd come to town, he'd always come, come to see me. And I appreciated him. I though he was a fine little old fellow. Oh, he had a wonderful personality. And for a little colored boy like we have, why, he was one of the tops, you know. I mean, everybody liked Doog. That's all we knew about him. We never knew him by any other name. He was always Doog.*

McTell told John Lomax that he quit playing guitar for a period of eight years. This may have been from approximately 1914 to 1922. An old friend of his in Statesboro who knew him well between 1914 and 1918 doesn't recall him playing guitar during this period. But possibly Willie simply slacked off in his playing a bit at this time. It is doubtful that he quit altogether, for he told Edward Rhodes in 1956 that as a boy "I run away and went everywhere, everywhere I could go without any money. I followed shows all around till I begin to get grown." Samuel Charters also reports that Willie played with the John Roberts Plantation Show in 1916 and 1917. This doesn't sound like someone who had given up music!

Robert Owens, McTell's Half-Brother (Cheryl Evans)

Sometime during this period Willie's mother married a man named Owens and in 1917 had another child, named Robert Owens. People in Statesboro remember that Willie would take care of his baby brother at home while his mother worked for Mr. and Mrs. Ellis. Henry Ellis, their son, was a young boy at this time and remembers Willie well:

> *At the rear of our lot my father constructed a frame dwelling for Willie McTier's mother to live in, as she was cooking for my family for a great number of years...But I do remember the spending of many of my boyhood hours in playing with Willie, which affectionately was known throughout Statesboro in those days—which would be around 1918 to 1924—as Dude (sic). It was his nickname. We could even play marbles, not with holes but with some way that was rigged up, and I can not recall, except that we lined them up. And we spent many hours, even though he could not see the marbles. We had a game that we could play, marbles, and we kids in the neighborhood—he was just one of us. He was always highly respected and admired by even the youngsters in this section of town, even though he was blind. Statesboro was much smaller in those days, and he was known throughout the entire community. And as he became older, he would leave for periods of time, maybe for a month or two months or longer, and then he would come back on visits, and we would visit...The whole little community was very friendly, but he seemed to have always wanted to make his own way. He was not the type that you would see standing on the corner with a tin cup in his hand. And that I never saw him do in Statesboro, and I don't feel like that he went anywhere else and did that. He had the determination that he could make a living by himself regardless, wherever he might be, through his music. That did seem to be his whole life—thinking back to it as a child and thinking about the hours that he spent doing different things. Of course, I only saw him after school and afternoons and on the weekends, because he did not, of course, go to school. And as I went to school, I would see him every afternoon and on Saturdays...He was very friendly and outgoing, had a cheerful word for everyone. And it was amazing how many people in town that he could recognize just by their voice. I didn't have to tell him that this is Henry. And I guess there were fifty other children that he knew just by their voice, as well as grown people. He would not necessarily have to come in contact with them every few days, but he had an uncanny memory when it came to the remembering and associating a certain individual with their voice. He was up a pretty good sized boy when I was big enough to play with him. You might say he was a grown man.*

In 1920 Minnie Watkins died, leaving a three-year-old Robert Owens and Willie, who was then a young man. Willie could not possibly have taken care of Robert by himself, and in any case he was eager to get out and experience something of the world around him. At first the Ellises kept Robert and wanted to raise him, but soon Minnie's sister Lillie came from Midville and took him in charge. Later Robert's father remarried and took the boy back. From age seven onward Robert was raised by his father and his father's brother and their wives. Despite a nineteen-year difference in age, Willie kept in

close touch with his brother and visited him often when he returned to Statesboro on his travels.

After his mother died, Willie began spending much of his time with his father's relatives near Thomson. He stayed mostly with his uncle Cleveland "Coot" McTear, who went to Statesboro to fetch him, and his sister Ola, who had married Clarence McGahey. McGahey remembers Willie staying with him for long periods of time and playing his six-string guitar locally. From Thomson he would sometimes make trips to Atlanta to play, and he also often returned to Statesboro to visit his old friends and his brother Robert. It must have been during one of these visits that Lannie Smith, a neighbor of the Ellises, offered to send Willie to the state blind academy in Macon. Simmons was a self-made man from a poor background who had done well in the construction business and had a clothing store in Statesboro. Evidently he had not forgotten his own struggle to succeed in life and had developed a philanthropic disposition towards others who were also less fortunate. Willie had received some informal instruction earlier from the blind girl who lived down the street from him in Statesboro and undoubtedly understood the value of an education. He told John Lomax that he attended school in Macon from 1922 to 1925. There he began learning to read Braille and eventually became quite good at it. He also learned various craft skills, such as the making of brooms, purses, and clothing. His brother Robert remembers Willie making toys for him on his visits to Statesboro, and Willie's wife Kate says that he could model in clay and once made her an ashtray in the shape of a human hand.

Willie would visit Thomson about once a month while he was attending blind school. His cousin Horace McTear, "Coot" McTear's son, remembers Willie as a very studious young man:

> *I was a little old boy about the age of seven or eight years old. I can remember it good. He came to our house. And he had been going to school. He had a pretty good head. He was going to school then, and he had his books and things with him. So he sat down there sometimes a whole half day reading. They had dots. The pages had dots on it, and he was reading with his fingers. I used to ask him, 'How you spell that so-and-so-and-so, Doog?' That's when I was going to school. He'd tell me. He'd tell me how to spell it. Anything I asked him how to spell, he could tell me how to spell it. He sure could. I'd be studying my lesson for the next day. He'd be there at home. He'd stay there studying. But he said, after he started playing guitar, he couldn't read much then. Them strings got his fingers a little tough. You know, these fingers, when they was tender, he'd feel them dots.*

Willie had begun playing guitar more when he entered blind school, as he himself later told John Lomax. He also began making frequent trips from Macon to play guitar in various towns and cities in Georgia. Samuel Charters even reports that he operated a whiskey still in South Georgia in the early 1920s. In Senoia, which is about forty miles south of Atlanta and sixty-five miles northwest of Macon, he got involved in what may have been the first of many reputed "marriages." Emmett Gates, who was later to be Willie's landlord in Atlanta in the 1950s, remembers Willie marrying a girl named Taylor in Senoia around 1922, though the union did not last too long. Very likely they were not legally married but simply lived together for a while. Willie evidently had girlfriends in many towns and cities throughout Georgia who would take care of him when he was passing through on his musical rounds. These girlfriends served to supplement his network of other friends and relatives in places like Atlanta, Statesboro, Midville, and Thomson, whom he would also visit. Thus he would have a place to stay almost anywhere he chose to go. Naturally the local people considered him "married" when he visited a particular girlfriend over a period of time, and perhaps some of these women did too, but so far as is known Willie only had long-term relationships with two women.

Willie came back to Statesboro often to play and visit with his relatives, friends, and benefactors. The variety of places and audiences that he would play for was remarkable, as recalled by Willie Battie Smith:

> *I was born and raised here in Statesboro. And in my childhood days we girls... would go sit and listen to him, you know, play the guitar for us. And he would play and entertain for Mrs. Ellis. His mother cooked for the Ellises. Whenever she had a club or something very important, you know, he would play, entertain during the, you know, club meetings. And he'd walk the streets with his guitar, and he'd sit on the corner. We children would gather around him, you know. And he'd play that guitar. He could catch your voice easily. And you'd say, 'Hello, Doog. Who is this?' 'Oh, this is Willie, or Robbie, or Rillie,' or something like that. That was our little gang, you know. And he'd play the guitar, and we'd dance and do all those funny things. When he got to be professional, you know, when he started to playing and was playing, it was kind of like air. But after he went to Macon to blind school, he was playing by notes. It was different, you know. You can, you know, learn a different music there and know it. They'd invite him to church, you know, to play, when I knew him, you know. And right along the same street, from Elm right along here on around, circle around, was his main place of going. They know he would have that box, and they would give him, you know, money. He was a quiet person. His personality was just quiet, intelligent. He was just intelligent born, yeah. He was just that. And he was friendly. And you know, like some peoples, you ask 'em to play and they don't want to play. But if you asked him, he was always ready. He would, you know, call on you. Just if you asked him to play any song, he get through with that, he'd say, 'How you like that?' You'd say, 'Well, play this for us.' And you know, he'd go on and do that. In Macon, you know, at school he'd play 'Amazing Grace.' The older ladies there asked him for the hymn, 'Amazing grace, how sweet it sound.' And that's what he played, you know. And those notes almost spoke the words itself, you know. It wasn't like air music, hitting here and there. But the notes, they almost spoke the words themselves.*

Willie may well have had some formal music training in Macon, but it does not seem to have affected his performance style on his recordings. His brother Robert says that he knew the names of all the notes on a piano, and his wife Kate recalls him reading songbooks printed in Braille.

After spending three years at Macon, Willie went, according to his own account, "to a little independent blind school" in New York. Kate McTell recalls that it was in New York City, as Willie later took her there for a visit in the 1930s. On one of his trips to New York, possibly when he was attending blind school, he was offered a steady job playing music, but he turned it down. He was unhappy in New York, as he later told Kate and his brother, and didn't like the heavy street traffic and found it difficult to get around. After a short time he left with a friend to attend another blind school in Michigan. Kate thinks he received some musical instruction in New York, and Willie himself said he studied Braille in Michigan. By late 1927 he was back in Georgia to make his first commercial records in Atlanta.

Willie's traveling in the 1920s, although partly in pursuit of an education, seemed to mark him as a rambler for the rest of his life. Even if we knew nothing about his life, we could tell from his recorded songs that he liked to travel. In them he mentions Atlanta, Statesboro, Macon, Savannah, Rome, Augusta and Americus in the state of Georgia, and at a greater distance Baltimore, East St. Louis, Boston, Memphis, Birmingham, Newport News, Lookout Mountain, Niagara Falls, Alabama, Florida, New York, Virginia, Tennessee, and Ohio. These were not simply places on the landscape of his imagination. He had been to most or all of them. His cousin Horace gave a list of the towns and cities in Georgia where Willie used to play: Thomson, Wrens, Warrenton, Dearing, Harlem, Augusta, Savannah, Louisville, Sandersville, Milledgeville, Macon, Washington, and Athens. To these we could add Statesboro, Midville, Millen, Sylvania, and many others. Willie told John Lomax that after a period of record making in the 1920s and 1930s he followed "medicine shows, carnivals, and all different types of funny little shows." These shows usually ran in the summer and fall. In July and August he would usually follow the tobacco season in towns like Statesboro in the eastern part of the state and in the Carolinas, playing in the tobacco warehouses. In the winter he often followed the tourists and vacationers to the Georgia Sea Islands and Florida, especially Miami. There were girlfriends in many of these places, and Willie told his wife Kate that he had had a son in Florida before he married her in 1934. He also headed north and west a great deal. Paul Oliver reports that McTell and his partner Curley Weaver traveled to Nashville and elsewhere in Tennessee and the Carolinas, a fact that others have confirmed. He also knew the great Texas religious singer Blind Willie Johnson. McTell told John Lomax that he and Johnson played together in many states, "from Maine to the Mobile Bay." More specifically he mentions Union, Missouri, and Little Rock, Arkansas. Johnson and his wife Angeline had recorded in Atlanta for Columbia in 1930 in the same session as McTell, and this is where they may have first met. McTell did play a number of religious songs with slide guitar in the manner of many of Johnson's recordings, and his playing may have been influenced by Johnson's, although it should be noted that this approach is a common one in the playing of spiritual songs among many black folk guitarists. Willie also met some of the other famous blind musicians who were recording at this time, such as Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson. In fact, according to Willie's uncle Gold Harris, it was Jefferson who got Willie to switch from a six-string to a twelve-string guitar. Harris says that Jefferson was playing a twelve-string and showed Willie how to play it too. Although Jefferson never played a twelve-string guitar on his many records, this story is not so strange as it first sounds. Jefferson had played with the great twelve-string guitarist Leadbelly in the early 1920s, and it may be that he wanted to recreate the sound of this combination of instruments with McTell. Texas is also a logical place to pick up the twelve-string guitar, as it is a favorite instrument of Mexican musicians there and blues singers would have been likely to come in contact with it. Perhaps McTell brought it from Texas and in-

troduced it to the Atlanta blues scene. Certainly it was a favorite of many of the guitar players there, being featured on blues from Atlanta more than from any other area in the 1920s. It is not known exactly when McTell began playing the twelve-string, but it must have been before his first recording session in late 1927. Although all of his recordings were with a twelve-string and people remember him best for this instrument, he always kept a six-string guitar at his home for the rest of his life.

Although he began to spend more time in Atlanta after he started making records, he never gave up traveling. Because of the vast network of friends and relatives he had built up, he had few worries about being among strangers, not making enough money, or having no one to take care of him. His cousin Horace states that Willie's relatives could not keep him at home long.

> *Before he settled down he didn't have no special home. If he did, he'd call this his home, live with us. But he didn't stay here too long 'fore he'd be gone. He wouldn't stay. He knowed where to go. He knew the route, see. We'd be so glad to see him that we made him stay another week. See, several different people would want him to stay with them, and he'd want to go again, want to go with them. It was the same way at Thomson. I'd go with him out there to Thomson. And the time they'd see him, they just be all around the car, want him to go home with 'em, you know. Want him to go home with 'em. So they'd give him a free place to live everywhere he went.*

Willie's longtime playing partner, Blind Log, who worked many of the same towns in eastern Georgia that Willie did, made an apt analogy between the itinerant guitarist and the preacher.

> *Whenever one get to be a powerful guitar picker, you know he be kind of like a preacher. If you got a preacher and you his member, you know what your preacher can do. Well, just like you know what he can do, other people know what he can do. He'll preach more in other people's churches than he will in his own. He'll be gone. That's the way it is with a person what can make music.*

Naturally one of his favorite places to visit was Statesboro. An old friend of his there says, "He'd be gone about two or three months, and then he'd come back and stay a week or two and be gone again." While there in the 1920s and 1930s he would usually stay at Tom Cuspard's house on Johnson Lane. Cuspard was a bricklayer and an old friend of Willie's who would fix him food and take care of his clothes. Willie liked and trusted him to the point where he even had some of his record royalty checks sent to Cuspard's house. Sometimes Willie would stay with girlfriends in Statesboro. Robert Owens remembers a woman named Nell, and several people remember one named Gertrude in the 1930s. She would drive him around in a car he had bought her.

Willie loved to visit his old friends, both black and white, in Statesboro, and it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that he cut down on the frequency of his visits, as many of the people he had known moved away or died. One friend of his, Son Moselle, was murdered while Willie was in town, and McTell was moved to compose a song about the deed in which he named the people who did the killing. He never recorded the piece though. Willie's records were sold in Statesboro, and many people there remember owning or hearing them. They helped to boost his local reputation considerably, and young people were heard to ask, "Have you heard the latest, Doog's new record?" There were plenty of people to take him around wherever he wanted to go. His old friend Bradford Johnson, who was eleven years younger than Willie, remembers driving Willie's car around to visit friends and play at various engagements. Johnson also recalls that Willie would continue to play for children. Sometimes he would drop in to see other musician friends at their homes. Mrs. Pearl Bellinger, a piano teacher in Statesboro, recalls many such visits.

> *I used to see him passing out there, and every time you'd see him he'd have that box. And he used to come here often, to the house here, and play with me and my husband. My husband blew a trombone, because he used to play in a band. And I would get on the piano, and Doogie would have the guitar and be playing songs. We'd play several songs together. We would play some spirituals together, and then, you know, sheet music. We'd play those along together, and he'd chime in.*

Willie often played for dancing at house parties in Statesboro, in the smaller outlying towns like Register, Portal, and Metter, and at farm houses out in the country. But he was equally in demand to play at churches. He often sang and played at Tabernacle Baptist Church in town, where he was a member, and at Mt. Olive Church out in the country. Sometimes he would accompany quartets in gospel programs. At the churches the congregation would take up a collection for him. He is also remembered as playing at a "school closing" program before Christmas at the community of Nevils in 1930. At all of these occasions he played music to suit his audience, blues and other dance pieces at the house parties, spirituals at the churches, and spirituals and "classical" (i.e., sentimental) pieces at schools. For white audiences he would play many of these same pieces as well as a repertoire of "hillbilly" songs, again chosen to suit the occasion.

Willie often came to Statesboro during "tobacco season" after the warehouses opened in July. The tobacco sellers had money then, and Willie would get quite a bit of it by playing for them at the warehouses, stables, hot dog stands, and hotels. He made a regular circuit of the towns in this part of the state during the tobacco season. Mr. Olliff Boyd, a white man who used to own a livery stable in Statesboro, remembers Willie playing often at his place of business.

> *I remember Willie. He used to come by my stable and get to gathering up a crowd there and playing on his guitar. And most of the time he'd have a coca cola bottle, the neck of a coca cola bottle on one of his fingers, and he'd play the blues with that. And then when the songs would get over, somebody'd collect the money and give it to him. And he had a funny twitching sound when he was walking there on the street with a walking stick, K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K, with his mouth. And if he'd hit an obstacle, he would turn his head one-sided and click more. But he could get around Statesboro good. He didn't have nobody to lead him or nothing. I never seen him with a woman, but he talked about 'em. And he liked a drink of liquor. He used to drink. But I've never seen him drunk. I've seen him when he'd feel it, you know. He played a guitar and a bazooka, I mean, a little old horn looking thing that you hum in, and he'd play 'em together sometimes. He didn't do that all the time. Used to cost about a dime in the ten cent store. And there'd be a bunch of black friends, they'd want to hear some special songs. He could really put it on too for 'em. The stables was on Walnut Street. It was an awful big building there, and then when he'd get through there, get all the money and loose change there, then he'd go to the other side of town and play some. He played lots around tobacco warehouses. And there was a lot of people down there, and everybody would give him some money. Not everybody, but quite a few. He was not doing too badly living. Everybody was real good to him. I remember I never did call him Willie. I done called him Doog.*

Willie made quite a bit of money from the tobacco men at Statesboro's two main hotels, the Norris and the Jaekel. Willie Hodges used to work at the Jaekel Hotel in the 1930s and remembers singing with Willie for the guests.

> *He lived around here, and he'd stay around here a long time. He didn't stay here all the time. He'd leave here and go in Savannah or Atlanta some place and be a while, and he'd come back. And I would help him out a whole lot, you know. I was working at the hotel, and he'd come down, you know, and I'd be there in front of the place and sing a song or two. He sang out on the front, be playing and singing a song, draw a crowd, you know, around. We was singing all kind of blues and ragtime. It wasn't too much to 'em, just something to help you make some money. We sang a spiritual every now and then, you know. We used to sing 'Shanty Town.' We had that one Doog and me used to sing together.*

Naomi Johnson also worked at the Jaekel and remembers Willie playing there often.

> *In '43 I was working at the Jaekel Hotel. And at every tobacco season he would come and play for these tobacco men. And he would so appreciate it; they would give him nickels and dimes. And he'd play about thirty minutes, sometimes longer. And then he would go someplace else, and the next two or three days he would come back and play for them. He was their entertainment at the Jaekel Hotel after supper. We went on the dining room at six o'clock. The tobacco men would always come in and eat first. Well, about seven o'clock they would line the Jaekel Hotel, and he was their amusement. But, see, in the Jaekel Hotel I was always working. But when he come and play, he was on the front, and most of the time when I saw him, it was when I was coming in to work. And we would stand around a little while and listen to him. I worked there ten years, and he did that every tobacco season. But the last three or four years he would bring another blind man with him. He would play. But he never did come with him down to the Jaekel Hotel. I don't know where he was as good a player as he was or he wasn't the type of this other fellow. Doog was a very intelligent man. And to look at this other man, I would think he thought he wasn't the quality that should have been in front of the Jaekel Hotel.*

Jaeckel Hotel, Statesboro (Cheryl Evans)

Willie played with a great many other local musicians. In Statesboro he sometimes played with a piano player named Lester Perkins. He also played with Davey and Larry Coney, two brothers who lived between Portal and Metter. But Willie especially played with other blind musicians, and many people remember how he would lead them around Statesboro and try to help them make money. One of these was a piano player from Screven County to the north of Statesboro named Blind Ivory Moore. He had learned to play piano at blind school and knew "notes." He often played at churches, but despite his musical sophistication he could also be a rough character, as recalled by his friend and partner Blind Log.

[Ivory] lived out there in Woodcliff, about seven miles from Sylvania. Moore had a place there, a home out there. He'd be playing for frolics. He'd have a big old 45 automatic. And when they'd make Ivory mad, he'd get to whirling around there on that stool, piano stool. He'd shoot the light out. He wouldn't try to hit nobody. He'd shoot the light out, and then when everything get dark in there, you'd hear the pistol shoot once or twice. He'd be shooting up in the air, and the people'd be falling out the windows and doors getting out of the way. Bam bam bam! He'd be cussing and shooting over their heads. And some of 'em would go down. They wouldn't let Ivory hear 'em walking. He'd get up and tip in there, get him a half a gallon of whiskey, get him all he wanted, and he'd be gone. Sometimes there'd be two of 'em going like that. Someone would get the pan of food and get him a jar of liquor and the other one get the glass what the money's in. Then when the owner of the house come back, he don't find nothing. Ha ha ha!

Other blind musicians that Willie often played with were Blind Benny Paris (or possibly Parrish) and his wife, who were also from Woodcliff in Screven County. The Parises traveled about and sang together, he playing guitar and she sometimes accompanying him on accordion. They performed both blues and spirituals. In 1928 they recorded four church songs in Atlanta for Victor Records in the same session as Blind Willie McTell. This was McTell's second session for Victor, and it is possible that he brought the blind couple to Atlanta to be recorded. In the late 1930s the Parises lived for a time in Savannah, where they had several children. Benny Paris got around with the help of a guide dog. He died back in Screven County probably around 1938 or 1939.

Undoubtedly Willie's closest musical companion in this area was Blind Log, who came from around Sylvania in Screven County. He was born in 1910, and his real name is Lord Randolph Byrd, but to most people he is known variously as Blind Lord, Lordie, Log, Lloyd, or Loss. When he and McTell played together, some people even referred to them as Doog and Loog! His first instrument was an organ, and he also played a harmonica as a young man, but he was always best known as a guitarist. He began to play guitar around the age of thirteen or fourteen, learning first the repertoire of his older brother but soon picking up many songs from popular phonograph records. He often performed solo but was also in great demand as an accompanist for other musicians. Much of his guitar playing was done in the slide style, first with a bottleneck and later with a steel ring taken from an automobile bushing. He was well known in Screven and Bulloch Counties and further afield all the way to Savannah and Macon. He measures his experience as a musician by the fact that three women and six men have been killed at frolics where he played during the course of his career. Log met Blind Willie McTell in Millhaven in 1928 and they traveled together throughout Georgia for two or three years. Before that, Log had spent two years traveling up and down the eastern seaboard states between Atlanta and Washington and playing locally with Blind Benny Paris, Blind Ivory Moore, Larry and Davey Coney, and Bubba Johnson, another fine guitarist from the area around Millhaven and Girard. Log continued to play with these local musicians and with McTell through the 1950s, although he was with the latter less frequently after McTell became more settled in Atlanta. In 1964 Log suffered a stroke which rendered his left side paralyzed, and he has not recovered sufficiently to play guitar. Today he lives in Savannah with his wife and remains a storehouse of information about the musicians of Screven and Bulloch Counties. Many of the younger guitarists in this area and in Savannah were greatly influenced by him and still perform some of his pieces.

Blind Log's reputation in Screven County was equal to that of Blind Willie McTell in Bulloch County. Each musician often played in the other's home territory, and they generally got along very well together, although their local admirers sometimes tried to create competition between them. Blind Log's wife describes one such scene that took place before she married.

Doog used to play a twelve-string guitar, and Lordie, he play the six. My sister, she knowed where he was playing at. And she come back home. She told me, she said, 'Lela.' I said, 'Huh?' Said, 'I wish you could hear them two blind men pick guitars. Them two blind mens can play a guitar.' I said, 'Sure enough?' And so finally he come down to Millhaven, him and this same man. They let them stay with some people down there. They told me, say, 'But there's one they call Lordie.' Say, 'I believe he could beat the other one.' Say, 'I'd rather hear Lordie pick.' So him and Doog got in Screven over there in Millhaven, Millhaven store. And so the people that were going so crazy over his music, they take and let Doog play some. Then they take and let him with it. They called Lordie so, Doog just pulled on off from him. He'd just go his own course. He'd go his own course, and they just got to falling for Lordie, falling for Lordie, falling for Lordie. That man have made some money in his life! He haven't asked for nothing, because they'd just come quick as he get here.

Blind Log himself provides a vivid account of the life of a traveling blind songster and of his days spent with Blind Willie McTell.

Me and Willie McTell used to play together. We've been everywhere in Georgia, I believe, some parts that wasn't Georgia. Me and him together, we played like we was twins, twin boys. We wasn't really related at all, just good friends, you know. And he would find that I was staying in Sylvania, and he was staying in Statesboro. I was born over there in Bulloch, but I was raised in Screven. I run up on him ever since 1928. We got together. That was around over there, Statesboro and Sylvania. Yeah, I'd go with him. Sometimes me and him would go to Macon together, go to Darien, Georgia, together, and Atlanta. I'd go up there and stay up there about two or three weeks at a time with Doog. Now he wouldn't let me leave. When I'd leave, I'd say, 'I can't be with you now.' I never met him up there but twice. And he wanted me to stay up there with him. The last place me and him went together was down here in Waycross, Georgia. We went down there and stayed down there about two weeks. That was after I got acquainted with him good, about a year or two after I got acquainted with him. We come down here [i.e., Savannah] and went on to Waycross and come back here and messed around a while and then went to Macon. Stayed there a while. I didn't want to leave Macon. I had done got stuck on Macon. They ruint me. I knowed I could wash my own hands and face, but they wouldn't allow me to do that. They went and washed my face and hands. We'd play there in Statesboro a while and go to Carolina a while. We went on about them tobacco warehouses and drunk up all that soda water and toddy they had around there. We played the tobacco season up until he left and went to Atlanta. I played right on. I'd go to Statesboro. I left Statesboro and went to Claxton, tobacco warehouses. Went from there, went in Carolina to the tobacco warehouses. Then went to Swainsboro. That's in Emanuel County. Man, I was just like a hog running up under the crack to get out. I was just going everywhere where I thought I could get a dollar. It's kind of like a person when he follows the seasons. Just like when the season's good down south, they'd go. When the season's good up north, they'd leave and go up north. I'd be prepared to be most anywhere I wanted to be. I'd have good thick heavy clothes on, you know. If I caught the notion that I wanted to go to New Jersey or New York or anywhere up there, I'd go.

Blind Log and Friend. Possibly 1940s. Log insists that he played right-handed, but the caption on the sign indicates otherwise. (Courtesy of Randolph Byrd)

I played mighy near everywhere you could name in Statesboro, all around down there in Black Bottom and everywhere else. That's right. If you was to give me all the parts of Statesboro I knowed, where I have been, I wouldn't have nothing to worry about. I'd have enough property to take care of me, the rent off them houses they got there. They was a fool about him, all them white folks around there in Statesboro. Man, they used to have us. We used to go up there to Statesboro. And

they had them old barrooms up there, you know. 'Come on, come on, Doogie and Log.' That was some old white people. 'By God, we got to have a little tune today.' We'd go in that barroom there. Different boys'd be having a half a pint. Ha ha. Get us keyed up. Have a chicken supper.

Oh man, when I played for white folks' parties, I'd play all night. And at the colored people's dances I'd start playing about seven-thirty or eight o'clock at night. Sometimes the chickens would be coming. We'd be frolicking right on. I never would miss a day from getting out. Every morning I'd get up. I played most anything a person wanted to hear.

We were working a cane mill one time out on the edge of Millhaven. And them white folks put up a bet. I said, 'Me and Willie ain't never played against one another. We always played together.' They bet that I could beat him playing. Some of them bet that he could beat me playing. I said, 'Well, we ain't never played against one another.' So they were wanting to go to work and bet. So me and Willie wouldn't tear it up. We were just picking together. Every now and then Mr. Tom Linley would go and come back with two pints of cane juice from the mill, a pint jar apiece. Willie say, 'I'm done drunk enough now. I want to eat something now.' I said, 'I think it's time to eat.' Well, Mr. Tom had his work yonder. I know he's got his wife to do it. They wasn't gonna eat that stuff nohow. He warmed it up. I think it was chicken, rice, and biscuits and things. Come out there and serve us. He said, 'Now what you all want now? You all want a cold drink or want some juice to drink with it, what you're eating?' I said, 'I'm gonna eat first, and then if I have any room, I'll drink something.' We et and then messed around and commenced playing the guitar. But when we left from there, I was satisfied and he was too. He give us money. We had money. We didn't never play against one another. We just played to get our money.

McTell tried twice to get Blind Log to record with him in Atlanta, once in the late 1920s and again around 1936 or 1937, but Log declined both times. He didn't particularly like Atlanta, and he didn't want to wait there until the companies were ready to record him.

Barbecue Bob, Lonnie Johnson, I just heard his records. I never did meet up with him. I never did meet up with Blind Blake. I never did meet up with Blind Lemon Jefferson. I heard about all of them. I never did meet up with Jim Jackson. I just heard his records played. See, he always made records to the record shop. Well, I didn't never go there. Now Doog, he made some records. He tried to get me to go up there, and I told him, 'Well, I wasn't going up there for that. I'll let you all make 'em, and I'll help you all wear 'em out.' I wouldn't go. He told me it'd be good money. He said, 'You get seventy-five dollars on every side. If you make a record, that'd be a hundred and fifty dollars.' I wouldn't go and get that. All them what I'm talking about now, they wasn't playing no guitar routes like I was. They was in the record shop working. They was making money. I'd pick up one or two nickels on the side in the streets, but I'd never go and get on the job they was on. They tried to get me, but I wouldn't. I don't know how come I didn't. When I was there, it seemed like that was too soon, much too soon a time for me. Keep me one place too long.

In addition to playing the small towns during the tobacco season, Blind Willie frequently played in the larger cities of Georgia. In Savannah he would play in the baggage room of the railroad station. In the early 1940s he would come into Savannah and play at the Silver Moon tavern on Saturday nights. One white man in Savannah claims that Willie had a son, born around 1931, who swept up at the Silver Moon. Willie would help him out occasionally when he was in town. The boy's mother was from New Jersey and eventually brought him back there. Willie didn't stay with her, however, when he was in town, for he had another woman there named Bertha. He also played in Augusta on Friday and Saturday nights. One of his favorite spots there was Good Time Charlie's tavern near the Buckeye Mill. He often played with a man called Blind Bubba, who was proficient on both piano and guitar. Bubba is still living in the Augusta area and accompanies gospel quartets on piano, but efforts to locate him for an interview have been unsuccessful so far.

Willie especially liked to play in places where he had close relatives who could look after him. He often visited his mother's sister, Aunt Lillie Beasley, in Wrens and later in Midville where she had moved in the 1940s. He is also said to have had a "wife" at Midville named Ethel. From Wrens it was only a short distance to his relatives near Thomson, and he would often make the trip on foot if he couldn't catch a ride. From the 1930s on he would usually stay with his cousin Eddie McTear, "Coot" McTear's son, who was eleven years younger than Willie. He would play out in the yard for relatives and visitors, and people would give him nickels and dimes. In the 1940s and 1950s he would sometimes visit his cousin Horace McTear, Eddie's younger brother, and stay a week or two. Horace would hold barbecues, and the combination of his cooking and Willie's music always assured a large crowd. Women would crowd around him there. Sometimes Willie would go out to the local jukes with Horace and his wife and a local girl named Bunchie Mae. Once in a while Willie would bring another musician to Thomson with him, such as Buddy Moss whose birthplace was only a few miles away. Willie would also play with the local guitarists, including his uncle Gold Harris, his brother-in-law Clarence McGahey, and his cousin Horace's wife, who could play a few tunes. He also had a cousin named Walter Dorsey, who had quite a local reputation as a guitarist, but, as Gold Harris tells it, he was no match for Willie.

There was some man or another up there that had a six-string guitar. It was Walter, Walter Dorsey. Everybody was telling me how good he could play, how good he played. And Doogie told me, 'I ain't played a six-string in a long time, but let me see that thing.' Doogie took that six-string guitar, man, and he just made a fool out of Walter with it.

Willie also played often at Jones Grove Baptist Church down the road from Eddie McTear's house.

Jones Grove Baptist Church (David Evans, Sr.)

Horace McTear recalls taking Willie to church there often.

He really could sing them church songs. We'd carry him to church, and he really sung for them in church, and everybody was getting happy. He'd sing one song every time I'd carry him to church. He loved to go to church. He'd go there and he'd sing. He sang a song about 'Ain't it grand to be a Christian, won't it be grand?' He'd sing that, and, oh man, there'd be some preaching then. 'Ain't it grand? And it's Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, all day Sunday. Ain't it grand to be a Christian?'

But even at church secular thoughts would sometimes cross Willie's mind, as related by Horace McTear's wife.

I thought he said, 'Set me down 'side a window.' He was sitting there talking to me, tell me to set him down 'side of some womens! He was talking about womens. Ha ha ha. He want to be talking to them, you know.

Willie also spent periods of time in Atlanta during the 1920s and by the latter part of that decade had begun to make that city his base of operations. His mother's sister Mattie lived there on Hilliard Street, and this gave him a place to stay and someone to look after his needs. As the largest and wealthiest city in Georgia, Atlanta must have been especially attractive to an artist like McTell, who could appel equally to black and white audiences, to church folks and the Saturday night crowd. During the 1920s Atlanta experienced a tremendous growth in population, as people facing economic problems in the rural areas and small towns streamed in. Among them were many musicians like Blind Willie McTell.

Besides the attraction of larger and more varied audiences, Atlanta offered its musicians a role in the recording industry. As early as 1924 an obscure musician named Ed Andrews recorded two blues, accompanied by his own guitar, for Okeh Records in Atlanta (Okeh 8137). Throughout the rest of the 1920s Okeh, Columbia, Victor, and Brunswick periodically sent field recording units to Atlanta and other southern cities to record local talent for their "hillbilly" and "race" record series. For the latter they recorded not only blues by male and female artists but also preachers, quartets, gospel singers, jazz bands, and comedians.

The late 1920s and early 1930s are an obscure period in Blind Willie McTell's life, documented mainly by the many recordings he made at this time. We know that he was away from Atlanta much of this time, traveling with Blind Log and visiting many of his usual haunts. In Atlanta he probably played at house parties, perhaps some on the streets, and almost certainly at the 81 Theatre on Decatur Street, which presented the black version of vaudeville with continuous entertainment during the afternoons and evenings by singers, instrumental ensembles, dancers, and comedians. By 1928 he was playing with Curley Weaver and Buddy Moss, who had themselves recently moved into Atlanta from further east. Undoubtedly he also knew and played with most of the other prominent Atlanta blues singers, many of whom were beginning to make recordings at this time. Among these artists were the brothers Robert and Charlie Hicks (Barbecue Bob and Charlie Lincoln on records), Peg Leg Howell, Henry Williams, Eddie Anthony, Willie Baker, George Carter, "Sloppy" Henry, Eddie Mapp, and Seth Richard. McTell also met many other blues recording artists from outside Atlanta on his travels as well as when they visited Atlanta to perform or record. We have already mentioned Blind

Lemon Jefferson and Blind Willie Johnson. Others that he met were Tampa Red (Hudson Whittaker), who had lived in Savannah for a while, and Blind Blake (Arthur Phelps) from Jacksonville, Florida.

Blind Willie McTell began his recording career for Victor Records on 18 October 1927, the first Atlanta blues singer to record for that company. Ralph Peer probably directed the session. It is not known how McTell came to the attention of Victor. Perhaps one of the religious recording artists, Reverend J. M. Gates or Elder J. E. Burch, recommended him, or perhaps he was scouted by an advance agent of the company. Earlier that year Ralph Peer had advertised a session in advance in the local newspaper of Bristol, Tennessee, and he may have followed a similar procedure in Atlanta. In any case, McTell was the only local blues singer who appeared at the session. The four blues that he recorded, accompanied by his twelve-string guitar, show him to have been a fully matured artist of extraordinary expressive power. Perhaps the highlight of the session was "Mama, 'Taint Long Fo' Day" (Victor 21474) with beautiful bottleneck playing. McTell used traditional verses in his lyrics, a pattern he was to continue through most of his 1920s recordings, and his guitar playing featured jagged, shifting rhythms that were to become his trademark. Although his performances were steeped in the folk blues tradition, they mark him as an artist with a distinctly individual style.

McTell's first records could not have sold very well, for they are rare collectors' items today. But they must have impressed Victor Records either through moderately good sales or through McTell's evident artistry, for he was back in the Victor studio in Atlanta a year later on 17 October 1928. In fact, beginning with his first session, McTell made commercial recordings at least once every year until 1936, a feat matched by few other blues singers. Furthermore, McTell did this without ever having a major hit record. His four blues recorded in 1928 equalled the high standard he had set a year earlier. Among them was "Statesboro Blues" (Victor V38001), a piece evidently inspired by the town where he was raised and one that has been a favorite in folk revival circles ever since it was first reissued in 1959 (RBF RF 1). Also at the session were Andrew and Jim Baxter, a guitar and fiddle duo from Gordon County to the northwest of Atlanta, and Willie's old partners from Screven County in south Georgia, Blind Benny Paris and his wife. The Parises recorded four religious pieces accompanied by Blind Benny's guitar, two of which were issued (Victor V38503). They are fine performances, and one wishes that they had had the opportunity to record more of what was undoubtedly a vast repertoire of both sacred and secular songs.

McTell was again in the studio for RCA Victor on 26 and 29 November 1929, recording eight more blues. The Baxters were also back for more recordings, and there was another duo, Alfoncy and Bethenea Harris. McTell accompanied the Harrises on guitar for two pieces on 26 November along with William Shorler on banjo and an unknown clarinetist, surely one of the more unusual instrumental combinations to record. The next day McTell was back with the Harrises, providing the sole instrumental accompaniment on four more blues. In addition to guitar Willie played the kazoo, the only time he did so for recordings. Only two of the Harrises' six pieces were issued, one with the band and one with just McTell in accompaniment. As the Harrises had other sessions in Memphis and San Antonio, it is not likely that they were local Atlanta artists. McTell may not have known them before the session and may simply have been drafted into the role of accompanist during rehearsal. Whether McTell knew William Shorler or the mysterious Eli Framer, who recorded four pieces at the session (two superb blues were issued on Victor 23409 and two others were unreleased) is not known. Only two of Willie's eight blues from this session were issued (Victor V38580). Probably RCA Victor was beginning to feel the effects of the Depression and the consequent decline in record sales and was exercising a policy of caution in releases of blues records.

Less than a month before this RCA Victor session, on 30 and 31 October 1929, McTell recorded six pieces for Columbia Records in Atlanta under the name of Blind Sammie. This could not really be considered a pseudonym, as his middle name was Samuel, but it probably sufficed to enable him to avoid his contractual obligations to RCA Victor. Possibly Barbecue Bob persuaded McTell to switch companies, as he was also recorded at the session. Frank Walker supervised the recording for Columbia with the assistance of Harry Charles and Wilford Brown. The talent scout had been Columbia's local agent in Atlanta, Dan Hornsby, who made some unusual records himself for Columbia's 15000-D hillbilly series. Unlike RCA Victor, which had recorded strictly blues from McTell, Columbia recorded a much broader variety of his secular repertoire, including at least three ragtime tunes and the remarkable *cante fable*, "Travelin' Blues" (Columbia 14484-D). The latter piece, coupled with "Come On Around to My House Mama," went through an initial pressing of 2,205 copies and a second pressing of 2,000, about average for a Columbia race record of this period. Two other pieces were not issued until the middle of 1932 (Columbia 14657-D), and only 400 copies were pressed. The remaining two pieces from the session were never issued.

Blind Willie McTell, Probably Early 1930s (Courtesy of Lawrence Cohn)

Only a few months later on 17 April 1930, McTell was back in the Columbia studio to record two more pieces, a blues and a rag. They were issued on Columbia 14551-D, a record that sold only 975 copies. Most of Columbia's other Atlanta blues artists also recorded at this session, as did Jaybird Coleman, Pillie Bolling, and Barefoot Bill from Alabama, and Blind Willie Johnson from Texas. This may be where McTell and Johnson first met. Whether McTell knew or met any of the Alabama artists is not known.

On 23 and 31 October 1931, McTell recorded for a joint Columbia and Okeh session in Atlanta, doing five blues this time and only one rag. This session marked his first recording of "Broke Down Engine Blues" (Columbia 14632-D), evidently a favorite piece of his, for he recorded it again in 1933 (Vocalion 02577) and in 1949 (Atlantic 891). Despite his liking for it, only 500 copies of the record were pressed, and his two records for Okeh probably had about the same degree of commercial success. McTell continued to record as Blind Sammie for Columbia, but on his Okeh releases he was called Georgia Bill. The two pieces he recorded on 31 October are especially significant, for they mark the first time that McTell recorded with his longtime friend and playing partner, Curley Weaver. Weaver's second guitar beautifully complements Blind Willie's twelve-string playing on these pieces. Weaver himself recorded two vocal duets with Clarence Moore at this session (Okeh 8928), but McTell did not play on them. The two guitarists did get together, however, as accompanists on two blues vocals by Ruth Willis for Okeh in this session. McTell alone accompanied her on four other blues and sang on one of them. She recorded as Mary Willis for Okeh and Ruth Day for Columbia. Only 600 copies of her Columbia record (14642-D) were initially pressed. Ruth Willis had been living in Atlanta and performing locally with guitarists such as Weaver, Moss, and Fred McMullen, and possibly with McTell.

All the time that McTell was recording for Columbia and Okeh, he still considered himself under contract to RCA Victor. On 22 February 1932, he returned to an RCA Victor studio in Atlanta and recorded four more pieces, three blues and one rag. All were vocal duets with a woman named Ruby Glaze, accompanied by Willie's guitar. Nothing is known about Ruby Glaze. She may have been another local singer like Ruth Willis who enjoyed some fleeting popularity and happened to be performing with McTell at the time when he was scheduled to record. She turned in creditable performances but was never again heard on record. For this session McTell was called Hot Shot Willie on the record labels. This was the last time he would record for RCA Victor. He had given them twenty songs, all but one of them blues, fourteen of which were issued over a six-year period. McTell continued to receive royalties from RCA Victor through 1937, probably due to the reissue of his 1932 recordings on the RCA Bluebird label.

In 1933 Willie made his first recordings outside of Atlanta. In September of that year he, Curley Weaver, and Buddy Moss traveled to New York to record for the American Record Corporation (ARC), a subsidiary of Consolidated Film Industries. It is from this session that all but one of the pieces on the present album are drawn. W. R. Callaway and Arthur E. Satherley directed the session. McTell was probably brought to the company's attention by Moss and Weaver, who had recorded for ARC earlier that year along with Ruth Willis and Fred McMullen. Between 14 and 21 September Willie re-

corded twenty-three pieces, twelve of which were issued on the Vocalion label. This label was actually affiliated with Brunswick Record Corporation, another subsidiary of Consolidated Film Industries. Moss recorded thirteen pieces and Weaver seven. Ten of Moss' pieces and two of Weaver's were issued simultaneously on ARC's various labels: Banner, Conqueror, Melotone, Oriole, Perfect, and Romeo. On many of the pieces one artist would play the role of second guitarist. Accurate records were not kept by the company so that it is not always possible to tell with certainty who is playing a second guitar. An attempt has been made to deal with such questions in the Discography which forms a part of this booklet.

McTell described his association with Vocalion to John Lomax in cryptic fashion: "And after then I worked with the Vocalion people of 1933. Taken up for odd job. They pay me a small sum of money of fifty dollars a week, but they was getting all the records of blues that they can, which we call 'the alley'." It seems most unlikely that McTell was on a weekly salary, unless he is refering to some kind of expense allowance given to him by Vocalion during his trip to New York. The year 1933 was the depth of the Depression, and Vocalion, like most companies, was barely keeping afloat and would not have lavished money on a weekly salary for a new recording artist. McTell's statement that the company was especially interested in "alley" blues is also a bit odd. It is true that he and the other two artists recorded many blues for which the term "alley" would be appropriate, but the session also marks a significant departure for McTell from the steady stream of blues and rags that he had previously recorded. Included in his twenty-three pieces were his first two religious recordings, "Lord Have Mercy If You Please" and "Don't You See How This World Made a Change?" (Vocalion 02623), and the quasi-religious sentimental song, "Lay Some Flowers on My Grave" (unissued). These pieces hinted at the broader repertoire that McTell actually possessed and which he would display more fully in subsequent sessions. In fact, McTell appeared to be displaying his breadth in three different ways, only one of which was this stepping out from the previous format of nothing but blues and rags. His blues repertoire itself was showing greater breadth. On the one hand, he seemed to be reaching back to the very roots of the blues tradition in such songs as "Lord, Send Me an Angel" and "East St. Louis Blues," both issued here for the first time; on the other hand, he displayed a self-conscious style of composition in a number of his blues that are textually more thematic than most of his previous blues recordongs and which often utilize the couplet-and-refrain pattern instead of the familiar AAB stanza pattern. These latter pieces are similar in style to those that Buddy Moss recorded at this session. McTell's blues also sometimes showed the influence of previous blues records by such artists as Bumble Bee Slim (Amos Easton) and "Sloppy" Henry, both of them fellow Georgians. Another interesting feature on this session was McTell's re-recording of "Broke Down Engine" (Vocalion 02577), a piece he had recorded two years earlier for Columbia (14632-D). He also recorded two takes of a "Broke Down Engine No. 2," one of which is issued here for the first time. Actually "No. 2" seems to be more a variant of the original piece than a continuation or "answer." All of these recordings, along with another that he made in 1949 (Atlantic 891), show significant textual and musical variation and allow us an unusual view of the folk blues singer at work on a song over a period of years. Adding to the interest of this piece is the fact that Buddy Moss also recorded a "Broke Down Engine" (Banner 32933, Conqueror 8325, Melotone M12876, Oriole 8295, Perfect 0266, Romeo 5295) and a "Broke Down Engine No. 2" (issued here for the first time) at the same session. Moss' pieces show even further variation from McTell's, indicating a process of personal transmission from McTell to Moss. The two artists also each recorded a "B and O Blues No. 2" at this session, a piece based on an earlier hit record by Bumble Bee Slim. McTell's "Lord Send Me an Angel" was a version of "Talkin' to Myself" that he recorded for Columbia in 1930. Finally it should be noted that McTell's "Death Room Blues" (issued here for the first time) was a piece that he had earlier recorded for Victor in 1929. Both Victor and Vocalion left it unissued.

Buddy Moss went on to make many more records for ARC during the next years, as apparently his records from this session sold well. McTell and Weaver, however, did not record further for this company. Evidently their records sold poorly, not unusual for artists who recorded in this Depression year. Poor sales and the generally bad economic picture must also be the reasons why so many of the recordings by McTell and Weaver were never issued at all by ARC and Vocalion. Certainly the present album proves that the previously unissued pieces were every bit as good as the issued ones and of a standard equal to anything else that these artists ever recorded. It must, therefore, be considered especially fortunate that Mr. Satherley chose to preserve test pressings of these fine unissued pieces.

Less than three months after returning from New York Willie met Ruthy Kate Williams, who would shortly become his wife. Kate, as Willie always called her, was born in 1911 near Wrens, Georgia, only about ten miles from Willie's own birthplace. Her father was a preacher and her mother a schoolteacher, and naturally they had ambitions for their children. Kate had gone as far as it was possible to go in the black high school in Wrens, finishing there in 1929. Then she went to a high school run by Paine College in Augusta. Willie was engaged to play there at a reception for the "school closing" before the Christmas season in 1933 along with a dance band from Augusta. Kate also sang a piece on the program. She and Willie were attracted to each other as well as impressed with each other's musical abilities. It turned out that their mothers had been old friends and schoolmates and that Kate had been "promised" to Willie when she was only about four years old. Kate gives the following account of their whirlwind courtship and marriage:

> *At the school closing they used to have a reception at the hall, you know, for the different programs and things, and singing. And, of course, he played. He was the only one from Atlanta at that time. At the reception he asked them who was that singing that last song, and they told him who I was and told him I was from Jefferson County. So they called me down to meet him. And he wanted to play and wanted me to sing the song over, and I did. And he said that he wanted to take me away to record some records with him. And they said that they couldn't afford to tell him that I could do that without my parents' consent. And he asked me who my parents were, and I told him. He said, 'You know, your mother gave you to me when you was a baby.' Said, 'I used to pull your hair, and she'd say, "You want this baby?" And I'd say, "Yes, I do." And she said, "Well, you can have her when she get grown, when she get old enough."' And I said, 'Well, I'm not grown yet.' He said he would like to meet my mother and father at that time, because it had been a long time since he had seen 'em, because his mother moved him to Statesboro when he was quite young. And, of course, I agreed that I would bring him out to meet my mother and father. And I think it was about a week or two later that I did bring him out to meet them. And, of course, he asked for me again. And my mother, she was very concerned. She got out and squatted right down in front of the fireplace, and she asked him did he think I would make him a good wife. And he told her, yes, he believed I would. And she told him she wanted me to go to nursing school and finish my school career. And he told her that he would send me to school. And he did.*

Blind Willie and Kate McTell, 1930s (Courtesy of Robert Owens)

Willie and Kate applied for a marriage license on 10 January 1934, at the County Court House in Aiken, South Carolina, just over the state line from Augusta, and on the next day they were pronounced married by a notary public. Kate was twenty-three years old, and Willie was thirty-five, though he claimed to be only twenty-eight on the application. They stayed in Augusta for a month and then went back to Atlanta. There they lived in an apartment at 381 Houston St., N.E., along with Willie's playing partner Curley Weaver and his current girl friend, Cora Thompson. Willie and Kate also spent a great deal of time at the house of Willie's Aunt Mattie on 160 Hilliard St., and Kate would stay there while Willie was out of town traveling. This arrangement lasted until around 1936 when Aunt Mattie died. Kate finished her high school training in Atlanta and went on to college there. She also took nurse's training at Grady Hospital and received her certificate in 1939.

Kate would perform with Willie in Atlanta when it didn't interfere with her school work, singing spirituals with him at church events and sometimes dancing behind his blues and rags at places like the 81 Theatre on Decatur Street. Sometime in early 1935 J. Mayo Williams, a black talent scout in charge of the Decca Record Company race series, came to Atlanta, heard Willie and Kate, and got them to sign a contract with Decca executive Dave Kapp. In April of that year Williams drove to Atlanta and picked up Kate and Willie to take them to the studio in Chicago. Kate took two weeks off from school to make the trip. Curley Weaver made the trip with them, and Kate also recalls a singer and pianist names Gladys Knight. The latter may actually be Georgia White from Sandersville, Georgia, who became a Decca recording artist about this time. The previous month White had recorded two pieces in Chicago that remained unissued, and then on April 10 she recorded four more pieces. It is quite possible that she did go with the McTells and Curley Weaver for their session on April 23 and 25. McTell told Alma Jamison, who interviewed him in 1951, that he knew Georgia White and that she "made records for Decca, but McTell did not remember under what name." Kate also thinks that Buddy Moss or Bumble Bee Slim (Amos Easton) made the trip to Chicago with them. Moss probably didn't go, as he was an exclusive ARC recording artist at the time. Bumble Bee Slim, however, had been recording for Decca and also did a session for them in Chicago earlier in April on the 12th of the month. Both he and "Gladys Knight" had been performing at the 81 Theatre with Kate and Willie when Mayo Williams came to Atlanta. A picture of Bumble Bee Slim with his arm around Georgia White is printed in Paul Oliver's *The Story of the Blues* (p. 108). Kate recalls that "Gladys Knight" went on to New York from the Chicago session, and indeed Georgia White did make many recordings in New York starting in January 1936.

Willie, Kate, and Curley stayed at a hotel on Lake Michigan Avenue. In the evenings they performed there as well as in a night club run by Jack Johnson, former heavyweight boxing champion of the world. On 23 April they began recording. Curley Weaver did six blues, five of them with Willie on second guitar, all of which were issued on the Decca and Champion labels. Willie did six spirituals and two blues. Two of the spirituals had vocals by Kate only, three by Willie and Kate together, and one by Willie only. Kate says that she sang her pieces from memory rather than from hymnbooks and that she and Willie had rehearsed these pieces at her parents' house in Wrens before making the trip to Chicago. These spirituals constitute some of the finest duets of this sort ever recorded and give a further insight into the breadth of McTell's music. On "Bell Street Blues" (Decca 7078) Willie was accompanied by Curley Weaver on second guitar. This piece was a remake of "Bell Street Lightnin'," which he had recorded two years earlier for Vocalion but which remained unissued on that label. (It is issued here for the first time.) The piece is derived from "Canned Heat Blues" (Okeh 8630), recorded in 1928 by Atlanta artist "Sloppy" Henry. On 25 April McTell recorded eight more pieces, all of them secular, with Curley Weaver playing guitar on some of them. Kate's role on this day was confined to some spoken comments on "Ticket Agent Blues" (Decca 7078), a variant of the "Lord, Send Me an Angel" that Willie had recorded for Vocalion in 1933 (issued here for the first time). His "Lay Some Flowers on My Grave" (Decca 7810) and "Your Time to Worry" (Decca 7117) were also pieces that Vocalion had left unissued, though the latter is issued here. "Death Room Blues" was left unissued by Decca, as it was earlier by Vocalion and Victor (in 1929), though the Vocalion version is now issued here. "Dying Doubler Blues" (almost certainly the same piece that he called "Dying Crap Shooter's Blues") and "Cooling Board Blues," both left unissued by Decca, were pieces that McTell recorded later in his career, while "Hillbilly Willie's Blues" (Decca 7117) is a remarkable example of McTell's repertoire designed for the southern white audience, complete with yodeling. Kate recalls that Willie also recorded with pianist Peetie Wheatstraw (William Bunch) in Chicago. Wheatstraw was a popular blues artist for Decca at this time, but there is no evidence to suggest that he and McTell actually made recordings together. Possibly the combination was tried out in the Decca studio but rejected by the company. A similar fate may have befallen the combination of Willie and "Gladys Knight," as Kate recalls them playing together in the studio. Ten of the sixteen pieces recorded by the McTells were issued by Decca. Kate says that the company paid a hundred dollars per record and promised royalties, which were never sent. They spent the money in Atlanta on clothes, furniture, and Kate's tuition.

In late June 1936 Willie and Kate again went on the road to make recordings, this time only as far as Augusta, Georgia. Along with them went Piano Red (Willie Perryman), a nearly blind albino pianist from Atlanta. On 1 July McTell and Piano Red recorded twelve blues for Vocalion in a studio of radio station WRDW. The recording director was W. R. Callaway, who had also been involved in Willie's earlier Vocalion session in New York in 1933. Piano Red recorded five pieces by himself and three with Willie backing him up on guitar, while Willie did the singing on four blues backed by his guitar and Red's piano. Kate thinks she may have sung on some of the pieces, though she normally only sang religious songs. None of the twelve recordings was issued, according to Kate because Piano Red was too loud and overloaded the microphones and because the two musicians could not coordinate their playing very well. She says Red played too fast for Willie. They hadn't really played together much in Atlanta and wanted to record separately, but Callaway insisted on putting them together in the studio. Red, who still performs in a saloon in the "Underground Atlanta" tourist section, states simply that "Willie played his pieces and I played mine" and claims that the master discs melted in the summer heat. In any case, Red and McTell were paid three hundred dollars each for their efforts. While the McTells were in Augusta, they stayed with Kate's mother's sister, who was paid boarding expenses by Vocalion.

Piano Red, Muhlenbrink's Saloon, Atlanta, 1976 (Cheryl Evans)

It is quite possible that this Vocalion session was done in cooperation with Decca. The two companies were recording many of the same artists at this time, such as Peetie Wheatstraw, Bumble Bee Slim, and Memphis Minnie. This suspicion is strengthened by the fact that J. Mayo Williams of Decca wrote a letter on 27 September 1937 addressed to McTell at 182 Fort St. in Atlanta. Williams was replying to a letter from Willie and said that he planned to be in Atlanta in October and would stop by to see Willie about the possibility of arranging for additional recordings. Unfortunately no further recordings resulted from this correspondence. The Augusta session was to mark McTell's last commercial recording effort until 1949.

Besides their Houston Street and Fort Street addresses and Aunt Mattie's house on Hilliard Street, Kate and Willie also lived at 131 Jackson Street and on Highland Avenue in front of the Stone Bakery during the 1930s in Atlanta. All of these locations are within a few blocks of each other in the Northeast section of the city, not far from the downtown business district. They were also close to Grady Hospital where Kate was receiving her nurse's training. All of the buildings have since been demolished to make way for freeways and urban renewal. Kate describes a typical apartment as having a living room, bedroom, kitchen, and study, which became Willie's "music room" where he kept his instruments. Willie made a good living for the two of them, paid Kate's tuition, and managed to buy good clothes and furniture. He even bought Kate a guitar, but she never learned to play it and finally gave it to Willie's brother Robert. Willie was often out playing or visiting, and when he would come home late, he would fix himself a toddy in his "music room" before retiring. During the day he would sometimes sit at home and read his Braille Bible or other books in Braille that Kate would get him at the library on Pryor Street.

Except when he was on the road, Willie worked regularly at the 81 Theatre and at a drive-in barbecue restaurant, the Pig'n Whistle, on Ponce De Leon Avenue. At the theatre Willie played for blacks, while the restaurant was for whites only. At the Pig'n Whistle he would also pick up engagements for late night private parties and dances. Sometimes Curley Weaver would work with him at these places, and Kate would occasionally dance to his music and sing along on the spirituals. The fact that her father was a preacher made her somewhat ambivalent about performing in such places, but, according to Kate, it was actually her father

who encouraged her to appear with her husband.

Willie used to play at Pig'n Whistle out on Ponce de Leon. We used to put on shows there too. Curley and myself and Willie, because every once in a while somebody would want to hear a spiritual. I wouldn't sing the blues with them, you know. I used to dance though. My father told them, he said, 'Just like a preacher has to preach to make his living,' he said, 'God gave Willie that gift to make his living. And he has my daughter, and just because he has my daughter doesn't mean that she's sinning. She's trying to help her husband make a living, and I don't mind her dancing.' He said, 'The Bible speaks of dancing.' And so the people stopped saying anything about it. He had a daughter on the show and dancing, you know.

It was a barbecue sandwich place, you know. We call it carhop. Different cars would call for him, you know. Well, this car would say, 'I got him.' And another car would say, 'I want the musician over here,' you know. And they'd say, 'Well, I got him for an hour,' or so long, you know. And they would just pay him for that length of time. And then another car would call for him. And they would take down what car he was supposed to go next to play for. He would take requests, but he was continually playing unless they requested certain songs for him to play. I'd sing sometimes with him out there. He'd sing a lot of classical songs too, like "Blue Sky." Willie sang a lot of classical songs. He'd sing most anything that you would, you know, name. He knew a lot of songs. He'd buy these records and he'd learn 'em off of 'em. The Pig'n Whistle paid him too. I've seen him come home from Pig'n Whistle with over a hundred dollars. He'd play there every night and at the 81 Theatre only on Saturday nights. We'd say, Saturday evening from about four until nine, and then he would go to Pig'n Whistle. We'd do a show from four to nine, maybe. And he didn't like me to dance with nobody else either. Soon as that would get over, he'd get through playing, and he would say, 'Where you at, baby doll?' I'd say, 'Right here.' Of course, he'd play on Auburn Avenue. He'd play at Yates' Drug Store on the corner of Butler and Auburn Avenue inside. If anybody would meet him in the street and ask him to play a piece, he said, 'Well, okay. But I don't make my living off nickels and dimes, but I'll play,' he says, you know. And he'd play for 'em. You'd never see him hardly without that guitar.

Willie also played daytime concerts at the all-black Morris Brown College and sometimes played on Monday nights at their coliseum. Buddy Moss claims that Willie even played in the governor's mansion in Atlanta. On Sundays he often sang and played at Mt. Zion Baptist Church on Piedmont Avenue, pastored by his great uncle, Reverend Thomas Dorsey. Sometimes Kate would sing with him. They also performed once at the church of Rev. Martin Luther King, Senior, on Auburn Avenue. Despite having sung and recorded some highly secular material, Willie was actually quite religious and even expressed an interest in preaching. In fact, he obtained a license to preach, although he never became an ordained minister. Kate recalls his trial sermon at his great uncle's church:

'There's a change in everybody's life at one time or another. If you don't run your race in your early age, you will run it when you get to a certain age. If you don't run your race in your younger days, you will run it in your older days.' And he said, 'I have traveled all over, everywhere, and I have run this race, and now I'm preparing myself and my soul only for God.' He says, 'I want to live a Christian life and give up everything. I don't want to die a sinner. I want to die a Christian, and I know that I have been converted.' He says, 'I know that I have been converted, because God spoke to me and said that "You are my child."' And he said, 'My blindness doesn't worry me. I don't have to see.' Say, 'God give me the words to speak to you that I'm speaking to you. I can read Braille,' he said, 'and my Bible is written in Braille. But I'm not reading from this Braille Bible to you. I'm speaking from my heart to you.' Say, 'God has shown me the right road to travel on.'

McTell had many playing partners in Atlanta, but by far his favorite was Curley Weaver. The two played frequently together from the late 1920s through the 1950s both in Atlanta and on the road, and, as we have already noted, Curley and his girl friend Cora even lived with Kate and Willie in the same apartment building for a number of years. Kate says that Willie taught Curley to accompany him, getting Curley to play his guitar more softly in the secondary role. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Willie accompanied Curley on a number of records, and in live performance one can imagine that the two artists exchanged the lead role often. Still, the recorded evidence suggests that McTell was the more versatile musician and singer, and according to Kate he was also the more dominant personality.

They would play together most of the time. Willie did most of the leading, and he was always the manager, you know. He would always book the recordings or wherever they would play at, you know. And they would pay it to Willie, and then Willie would pay Curley. . .Now Curley was awfully jealous of Willie's music, because they would cut Willie's records, you know, and then they would tell Curley he was a little too loud or something, you know. And they wouldn't cut them together. Some they got together, and some they didn't.

Curley Weaver, of course, did not perform all of his music with McTell. In fact, he made frequent trips back to his home town of Covington to the east of Atlanta, where he would visit friends and family and play with local musicians. Weaver also played quite a bit with Buddy Moss until the latter began serving a prison term in late 1935 or 1936. In fact, Buddy too sometimes acted as McTell's accompanist. Kate says that Willie also experienced some difficulty in training Moss to play behind him.

Of course, he played real worried until they could kindly get him toned in, you know, real high, you know, rattling like, until Willie calmed him, toned him down, you know. He played real loud anyway, Buddy did.

Apparently the three artists shared quite a bit of repertoire, some of which we have already noted in connection with their 1933 ARC session. Kate says that Curley Weaver got most of his songs from Willie, probably an exaggeration but at least indicative of some borrowing. Certainly Weaver's "Ticket Agent," which he recorded in 1950 (Sittin' In With 547) appears to be a borrowing from the piece that Willie recorded as "Ticket Agent Blues" (Decca 7078) in 1935. The other side of Weaver's 1950 record, "My Baby's Gone," may also be related to a piece with the same title recorded by McTell in 1933 (Vocalion 02668). Weaver's "Some Cold Rainy Day," recorded in 1930 (Banner 32685, Melotone 12621, Oriole 8204, Perfect 0228, Romeo 5204), is also related to McTell's "Cold Winter Day" (Decca 7810), recorded in 1935. Kate says that Curley and Willie together composed "Oh Lordy Mama." Weaver recorded a version of this piece for ARC in 1933, but it was never issued. Then in 1934 Buddy Moss had a big hit with the piece (Banner 33267, Melotone M13234, Okeh 05626, Oriole 8402, Perfect 0302, Romeo 5402). Curley recorded it again in 1935, backed by McTell, and this time the piece was issued (Champion 50077, Decca 7664). McTell's friend Bumble Bee Slim also recorded it in 1935 as "Hey Lordy Mama" (Decca 7126). Many similarities could also be pointed out in the guitar styles of these artists, particularly between Weaver and Moss.

Another artist who was closely associated with McTell, Moss, and Weaver in the 1930s was guitarist Fred McMullen, who is believed to have been from the Macon area. Kate recalls that he often performed at the 81 Theatre and frequently backed up female singers, particularly the pianist "Gladys Knight" and Ruth Willis, whom he and Curley Weaver accompanied on a record in 1933. Ruth Willis performed with all of these artists in the early 1930s, but Kate told her not to come to the house after she married Willie. Willie played with many other Atlanta musicians during the 1930s and in some cases later. Among those who have left recordings of their work were Piano Red and pianist "Gladys Knight" (if she really is Georgia White), and guitarists Roy Dunn, Harry "Slick" Johnson, Guy Lumpkin, Seth Richard, and Willie Baker. Others who never recorded were a Piano Slim and guitarists Blind Buddy Keith from Mansfield, Georgia, "Bo Weavil," Clifford Lee, the brothers Jonas and Hollis Brown, Bunny Tiller, Ollie Griffin, Charlie Stinson, and Paul McGuinnis. Willie also made it a point to meet other blues singers and musicians who were passing through Atlanta, and Kate remembers entertaining many of them at their home.

Now Blind Blake and Willie sounded more alike. If you walked up in the dark, you couldn't tell one from the other. A lot of 'em called Willie 'Blind Blake.' It wasn't him. I think he was from Florida. Willie, you know, he met him down in Florida. That's when he had this vaudeville show at the 81 Theatre. We had a stage show, and I remember a lot of them passed through. All I did was dance mostly then, Charleston, Black Bottom, and Twist, Trigger Toe. Along then I was young, I guess, and I didn't drink. And most of the players did drink a little bit. They did. But I always could entertain 'em for Willie. I'd entertain 'em for him and treat 'em all nice. Most of the fellows were older than me, but age didn't matter then.

Willie continued to spend much of his time away from Atlanta during the 1930s. Willie would do his own booking by telephone and while on the road would frequently call back to Kate, who stayed with his Aunt Mattie. Kate points out that Willie didn't need to travel in order to make a living, as he was doing quite well in Atlanta.

He just loved to go. He didn't like to stay. I think he said he had a wandering mind. And he would, I guess, just get bored, and he'd say, 'I'm going. I might be back in a month, and I might be back in two months. I might be back in three months.' And he said, 'I won't stay away six months.' And he wouldn't. But what I told Willie once, I said, 'Willie, you got me stuck here in nursing school, and stay gone all the time.' He said, 'Baby, I was born a rambler. I'm gonna ramble until I die,' he said, 'but I'm preparing you to live after I'm gone.'

Willie made his usual rounds to visit relatives and friends in Thomson and Statesboro. He would usually come to Statesboro for the tobacco season in the late summer and fall and play for the men at the warehouse on North College Street. He also played with Bumble

Bee Slim, who was from Brunswick, Georgia, at the tobacco markets around Brunswick and Statesboro. John Lomax noted in 1940 that McTell had been following vacationists to Florida and the Georgia Sea Islands, evidently to play at the resorts and on the beaches.

Most of the time Kate was in school in Atlanta, but during her summer vacations and other holidays she often traveled with Willie. Sometimes they would visit her parents in Wrens and other relatives in Matthews and Augusta. Willie also took her to Statesboro and to Florida and even further afield to places like Memphis, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, California. In New York they visited the blind school where Willie had attended in the 1920s. Kate still has very vivid recollections of their travels together.

It would be during the summer when I wouldn't be in school. He'd be gone all the time mostly, but when I wouldn't be in school, we did a lot of traveling. A lot of times I'd say, 'Where we going?' He'd say, 'I don't know.' And I wouldn't even know where I was gonna sleep at. Sometimes we'd sleep in the train stations. We traveled to New Orleans and Florida, Memphis, Tennessee, and Nashville, all up in there, up in Tennessee, and Mobile, Alabama. And we went to North Carolina, Durham, North Carolina. That was tobacco market. Winston-Salem. And we went to New York several times. Now when I would be traveling with him, maybe we'd stay one night or one day, and we'd be gone. He would always know where he was gonna sing before he'd go there. They would contact him and want him to come, you know, to put on a show or play for 'em. He played mostly at clubs, but he would hit the tobacco markets in the fall of the year. Curley Weaver traveled with us, him and Buddy Moss more than any of the others. I remember Fred McMullen traveling with us once or twice. I met Joshua White too in New York. We sang with him up there at the Small Paradise. I knew Leadbelly, but he wasn't playing a twelve-string guitar when I knew him in New York.

We'd take trains and busses. We had a car, but we didn't use it on the highways. You know, a lot of times we traveled, we didn't know where we was going to lay our heads. Sometimes we had money, and then sometimes we didn't. We'd just go sit in the stations all night. And a lot of times we used to come to Thomson and walk out there to Happy Valley. We'd walk out there. He never rode with strangers. He would never let anybody pick him up, you know. He said, 'No, we're just going right up the road here a little piece.' I didn't mind it. It's a long way from Thomson to Happy Valley out to his uncle's. Sometimes that train would come in there at one o'clock at night, and we'd walk up there.

There was always some good person. And the porters on the train was always nice to us, you know. They would always let him play on the train, you know. And they would carry us up in the white coaches. Then there were separate coaches. And let him play. And he would make up a lot of money. And then there would be enough for us to stop in the next town and get us a room and get to play at some of the clubs and things. And he'd make up a good bit of money, enough for expenses, you know, to travel around. And then a lot of times at the railroad station we'd be sitting there playing, and then the porter or the waitress would come around and carry us over in the white section and let him play and make a lot of money. And they'd tell them we was traveling, my husband was blind, you know, and that he was sending me to school, and I was out of school then, and we was trying to make up some money to get me back in nursing school. And of course, we just had a marvelous time. The white were always nice to us. And of course, the blacks gave us what they had, you know. It was Depression times around then.

Sometime between 1935 and 1937 Willie and Kate played for two summers in a medicine show that traveled through a number of towns and cities in Georgia and brought them as far as Louisville, Kentucky, where Willie had an aunt, Belle McNair. Along with Kate and Willie were the white owners of the show and Stovepipe Slim and another man, who told jokes. Kate recalls her travels with the show with pleasure.

We showed in Louisville, Kentucky, and we did a lot through Georgia too, you know, during the summer months when I wasn't in school. It was the year 'round, but that was the only time I traveled with it, when I wasn't in school. And that's when Willie would go with it too. He wouldn't follow it either unless I was with it. Stovepipe and somebody else was on that medicine show with us too. They were blacks, and they was Augusta boys too. Their native home was Augusta, but I think they joined that medicine show down in Florida or someplace, they said. But they were real funny, you know. Stovepipe did a lot of jokes. He didn't sing. He'd just tell a lot of jokes, him and the other one. They wore makeup and costumes. One of them was really tall, and the other was real short. They would always wear makeups, smutted their faces. They'd play blackface, you know, and they would make theyselves real sure enough black. And Willie would play. I Charlestonned and Black Bottomed and tap danced. The man was the head of the medicine show, he and his wife. He was white. He was out of Tennessee, and they picked us up in Atlanta. And they sold this rattlesnake linament, they claimed, you know, that was made out of rattlesnake hide and all that stuff. They would get up and tell, you know, what it was good for and everything. And then we would do a show. And then they would try selling medicine again. They'd draw a big crowd. We had a tent in Kentucky, but they would usually set up around courthouse squares. They had a stage. They sold real good. We met this man in Atlanta, this medicine show man, but we did go to Kentucky, because he wanted to see his aunt. And we followed them up that far, and then he told them we had to come back because I had to go back in school. We didn't follow them any further than Kentucky, but they went on up someplace. They traveled on. They would always give us bus fare or train fare. We'd come to Augusta, and they'd pick us up wherever they were set up at. They would tell us, you know, contact us, and then they would meet us there and come and get us and bring us back. They had a tent. They must have traveled with trucks. They paid Willie a regular salary. Of course, my salary was combined with his. He'd play big towns too. Like he would start in, maybe, Louisville (Georgia), Keysville, and all those small towns. Then he'd go to Augusta, and then he'd just go all the way up to Atlanta, 12 all the way to Atlanta hitting all these small towns, you know. Do maybe a two or three hour show in all these little towns.

By 1940 Willie and Kate were living at 336 Felton Drive, and Willie was continuing to play regularly at the Pig'n Whistle. It was there that the wife of folklorist John A. Lomax spotted him on the evening of 4 November 1940. Lomax was in Atlanta on a field trip for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress. He had heard about McTell from a friend only two hours before his wife spotted him with his guitar at the barbecue stand. Willie got into the Lomaxes' car and guided them back to their hotel room, naming all the turns, stop lights, and buildings on the way. Lomax asked McTell to record for him the next day, promising him a dollar and taxi fare. The next morning Willie

Blind Willie McTell Recording in an Atlanta Hotel Room, 1940 (John A. Lomax, Courtesy of Library of Congress)

showed up promptly, despite having been involved in an automobile accident after he left Lomax the night before. He filled four and a half discs for Lomax. Some writers have suggested that McTell was dissatisfied with the payment that Lomax offered. Certainly it was far below the amount that he would usually have gotten for this amount of playing. But since Lomax made the arrangements in advance and McTell showed up for the session voluntarily, it would appear more likely that Lomax had persuaded him of the scientific interest and value of his music and that Willie was satisfied, like hundreds of other singers and musicians, to aid the government's effort to document American folksong traditions for a nominal payment.

McTell's session for the Lomaxes truly displays his ability to tailor his music to his audience. The fourteen pieces he recorded included five narrative ballads, the kinds of songs that were then most highly prized by folklore fieldworkers. Another piece was "King Edward Blues," not really a blues at all but a version of a popular song hit of 1938 recorded by Bob Howard (Decca 1721). This was probably the kind of song that the more sophisticated white audiences in Atlanta liked and one which McTell considered appropriate for the Lomaxes. McTell also recorded six spirituals, which he problably also considered appropriate for a respectable elderly white couple. Included among them was "Amazing Grace," in which Willie reproduced the singing of the long meter hymn on the guitar strings with his slider. This piece was a favorite of his religious audiences and is well remembered by people who saw him perform. Willie recorded only one blues and one rag toward the end of the session. He may have considered these kinds of pieces too "rough" for the collectors, especially Mrs. Lomax, though more likely he simply gauged accurately John Lomax' greater interest in other forms of folksong. Considering the fact that McTell had already had more than three dozen blues and rags issued commercially, it must be considered fortunate that Lomax emphasized spirituals and ballads in this session, for these pieces exposed some previously undocumented aspects of the singer's repertoire.

This session also marks the first time that McTell was interviewed about his life and music. He told Lomax that he associated his spirituals with the older generations and that people sang these songs "in remembrance of their old foreparents that come up before them." He contrasted his songs with the modern religious pieces, which he said were "too fast." He also gave a remarkably insightful capsule history of the development of folk and popular blues, including the blue yodel of southern white tradition, and he discussed his own early life and travels, his education, and his career as a blues recording artist. The latter discussion was complete with accurate names, dates, places, and titles. Then he answered a number of questions about his association with the Texas guitar evangelist Blind Willie Johnson, possibly someone whom Lomax was especially interested in because of his own Texas background. McTell showed himself to be highly intelligent and articulate in these interviews, and it is a shame that more information was not recorded from him, as he obviously could have gone on at length about himself, his music, and his associates. Still, we must be glad to have anything at all in the way of first-hand information on McTell. Perhaps the most interesting part of the interview was the oddly titles "Monologue on Accidents" (AFS 4069 B-3). Certainly it is the most revealing of the attitudes and character of McTell, and perhaps of Lomax also.

Lomax: *...I wonder if you know any songs about colored people having hard times here in the South.*

McTell: *Well, that...Only songs that have reference to our elder people here. They hasn't very much stuff of the people nowadays because...*

Lomax: *Any complaining songs, complaining about the hard times and sometimes mistreatment of the whites? Have you got any songs that talk about that?*

McTell: *No sir, we haven't, not at the present time, because the white people's mighty good to the southern people as far as I know.*

Lomax: *You don't know any complaining songs at all?*

McTell: *Well...*

Lomax: *"Ain't It Hard to Be a Nigger," Nigger? Do you know that one?*

McTell: *No sir. That's not in our time. Now it's a spiritual down here, "It's a Mean World to Live In," but that still don't have reference to the hard times.*

Lomax: *It's just because of the...Why is it a mean world to live in?*

McTell: *Well, no, it's not altogether. It has reference to everybody.*

Lomax: *It's as mean for whites as it is for the blacks? Is that it?*

McTell: *That's the idea.*

Lomax: *You keep moving around like you're uncomfortable. What's the matter, Willie?*

McTell: *Well, I was in an automobile accident last night and was a little shook up. No one got hurt, but it was all jostled up mighty bad, shake up. Still sore from it, but no one got hurt.*

Lomax: *Mm hmm.*

Considering the fact that white people had often looked out for McTell's welfare and education and constituted the chief source of his income from music, it is not surprising that he answered Lomax in this manner. Undoubtedly McTell was as aware of racism and injustice as anyone, but he chose not to sing about them in any of his known songs. In fact, his whole life and musical production was a testament to the fact that he was able to overcome these and other handicaps.

Kate McTell had received her nursing certificate in 1939, but there were no jobs in nursing available in the Atlanta area. Sometime in early 1941 she returned to Wrens to visit her parents and see other relatives in Augusta and then went on an extended visit to New York City, where she had some sisters living. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, her mother called up and advised her to get out of the city and return to Georgia. Camp Gordon, later to become Fort Gordon, which is just outside of Augusta, was suddenly activated for the war effort. Kate had applied for a nursing position through Civil Service and was assigned there in February 1942. This meant that Kate and Willie were to see each other only infrequently from that time on. Kate had a good job near Augusta and her family, and Willie had a good job in Atlanta. He didn't want to move to Augusta, where he would make less money and where he didn't have any other relatives. He only got to Augusta on his travels about once or twice a year and would visit Kate at these times. She would occasionally travel to Atlanta, and Willie would meet her at the house of her brother, who was a

Ruth Kate Seabrooks (Formerly Kate McTell) with her Children and Late Husband, 1976 (Cheryl Evans)

l. to r.: Helen's sister, Blind Willie McTell, Helen, ca. 1950. This photo probably captures McTell's usual playing position. (Courtesy of Hazel McTear)

preacher there. Kate retired from nursing in the emergency room at Fort Gordon in September 1971.

Sometime in the 1940s Willie took up with a woman named Helen Edwards. She was born in 1905, probably in or near Covington, and had a grown daughter named Alice in Atlanta by a previous marriage and a son living in the North. Helen came to be known as Helen McTell, and most people assumed that she and Willie were married. In 1944 and 1945 they were listed in the Atlanta

Blind Willie McTell, Atlanta, ca. October, 1955. The girl is Willie and Helen's adopted daughter. (Courtesy of Hazel McTear)

City Directory as living at 248 Houston Street and later in 1945 at 262½ Ellis Street. Both are in the same neighborhood as Willie's previous addresses. In 1947, however, Willie was listed as living with a wife named Rachel in the rear of 335 Sams in Decatur, a suburb on the east side of Atlanta. This could be simply a mistake, as there is no Sams Street indicated on a map of Decatur. McTell is, however, said to have an "ex-wife" still living in Decatur, although attempts to interview her have so far been unsuccessful. Willie's brother Robert Owens also reports that Willie had a daughter named Ethel born around this time and that Willie persuaded Robert and his wife to name their own daughter, born in 1948, Ethel after her. Possibly the woman named Rachel in Decatur was Ethel's mother. In any case, Willie was soon back with Helen, and it appears from all accounts that he stayed with her until her death in 1958. Sometime around 1950 Willie and Helen "adopted" a little girl, who may have been Ethel or some other child of Willie, though it is not clear whether the girl lived with Willie and Helen on a regular basis. A picture exists of Helen with the girl and the girl's mother. Willie and Helen's landlord Emmett Gates remembers the girl's mother's name as Josie. These facts are confusing and contradictory and indicate a need for further research into McTell's complicated domestic life. At any rate it is clear that he remained with Helen for most of the time between 1944 or earlier until 1958 and that during this time he had at least one daughter by another woman. His daughter is now said to be a pianist in Atlanta, but it is not known whether this is Ethel or the adopted daughter or whether these two girls were, in fact, the same.

Willie continued to work at the Pig'n Whistle in the 1940s, apparently making a good income. Sometime during this period the state passed a law designed to prevent begging by providing monthly checks for disabled persons. This didn't affect McTell's playing much, as he wasn't really a street singer in Atlanta, but it did have the effect of providing him with an extra income. Willie seems to have cut down on his traveling somewhat by the 1940s, although he still got out of Atlanta every now and then. Kate McTell thinks that Willie and Curley recorded in Nashville in the 1940s. No record of such a session exists, but it does seem likely that the two artists went there, and possibly they were given an audition. Willie showed Kate a picture of a female Grand Ole Opry performer that he had met, and Kate thinks he may even have appeared on the Opry. Willie also did some traveling with Helen in Georgia. Hazel McTear, who was married to Willie's cousin Eddie, remembers Willie and Helen visiting them for a few weeks at their home in Warren County. They also visited Robert Owens and his wife for a week on their farm between Portal and Metter near Statesboro, and they stayed for a while in Statesboro with Mamie Owens, who had helped to raise Robert after his and Willie's mother died. She recalls that Willie was singing mainly church songs in Statesboro in the 1940s. It would indeed appear that Willie was taking a greater interest in religious music in the 1940s. Around 1945-46 he spent some time traveling with a spiritual singing group from Atlanta consisting of several other blind men and women. They went from town to town in a van with a driver who acted as their manager. Willie sang and played guitar with the group, and apparently one of the women played piano. They came to Statesboro and stayed with Robert Owens for a short time. The group is remembered as singing at First African Baptist Church there as well as Thomas Grove Church. On at least one occasion Blind Log joined in with them.

By the late 1940s a number of small record companies had become active in the fields of jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and gospel music, filling a void created by the major companies, who had either become disinterested in this sideline of the business or had lost touch with black popular tastes. The activities of the smaller independent companies resulted in a great deal of black music of all kinds being recorded in this period and on into the 1950s, including some blues in traditional and older styles. In 1949 Blind Willie McTell had two lengthy recording sessions in Atlanta. The first was for Fred Mendelsohn of Regal Records who came to Atlanta and advertised the session over the black radio station. McTell and Curley Weaver, never ones to miss an opportunity to record, showed up. Frank Edwards and Little David Wylie also appeared, and each recorded two blues at the beginning of the session, Edwards accompanying himself on guitar. Seventeen of the next twenty-one titles were recorded by McTell, the others being by Weaver. Willie also duetted on the vocal part of Weaver's "Wee Midnight Hours," a blues based on a 1932 hit by Leroy Carr. Their two guitars were heard on all of the pieces, and this session presents some of the finest examples of their playing together ever recorded. As in his 1940 session for John A. Lomax, McTell displayed a remarkable variety of repertoire but with considerable emphasis on religious pieces. Seven of his pieces were church songs, three of them ones he had recorded previously and the others composed gospel tunes of recent popularity. They may well be the kinds of pieces he performed with the blind group, as some of them seem to need additional vocal parts. In fact, Curley Weaver did sing on three of them. Curley also sang on the refrains of three of the eight blues recorded by McTell. These blues came from a number of sources. Five of them were new versions of pieces that Willie had recorded in the 1920s and 1930s. "Don't Forget" is either an original or derived from some obscure record, more likely the latter. "A to Z Blues" is based on a 1924 recording by Butterbeans & Susie or a cover version from the same year by Josie Miles and Billy Higgins or possibly on a later 1937 version by "Uncle Skipper" (Charlie Jordan), and "You Can't Get Stuff No More" comes from a 1932 hit by Willie's friend Tampa Red and his cousin Georgia Tom Dorsey. McTell's other two pieces in the session were popular songs, "Pal of Mine" and "Honey It Must Be Love." The latter was the same piece as "King Edward Blues" that McTell recorded for the Lomaxes. Regal issued only four records from the session. One was by Wylie under the name of Little David, and three were by McTell. Two blues sides were combined on a record with McTell and Weaver listed simply as Pig 'n' Whistle Band. Two records containing spiritual songs were issued as by Blind Willie (Regal 3260) and Blind Willy (*sic*) McTell (Regal 3272). All of these records are very rare and must not have sold very well or else received poor promotion. Around 1960 Savoy issued an album called *Living with the Blues* (Savoy MG 16000) containing one piece by each of the four artists from the 1949 session. McTell was listed as Pig 'n' Whistle Red. McTell's remaining pieces have recently been made available on two Biograph albums (BLP 12008 and 12035).

Later in 1949 McTell recorded for Atlantic Records in the studio of radio station WGST. Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic, a Turkish immigrant who became a jazz record collector and researcher and who formed Atlantic with his brother Nesuhi Ertegun, heard about McTell from his company's Atlanta distributor and undoubtedly recognized him as the man who had made many fine records of blues and gospel music in the 1920s and 1930s. McTell became one of the first artists to record for Atlantic, a company that was later to become very successful in the jazz, rhythm and blues, and popular music fields. The session found Willie at the top of his form both vocally and instrumentally, and he typically recorded an astonishing variety of pieces. At first, Atlantic only issued one record from the session, combining a blues and a rag (Atlantic 891), but almost the entire session has recently been issued on a 12" LP, *Atlanta Twelve String* (Atlantic SD 7224). The fifteen pieces included six blues, two rags, two ballads, and five spirituals. Nine of the pieces were ones he had recorded at various sessions previously. The other pieces included a spiritual, "Pearly Gates," done in a relatively modern gospel style, and the traditional "Motherless Children Have a Hard Time," which had been popularized by McTell's friend Blind Willie Johnson in 1927 (Columbia 14343-D, Vocalion 03021). "Blues around Midnight" was probably derived from an earlier popular record, as were McTell's other three blues: "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie" from a 1928 record by Pine Top Smith, "Last Dime Blues" from Blind Lemon Jefferson's 1927 "One Dime Blues," and "Soon This Morning" from a 1929 record by Charlie Spand. Four alternate takes from this session remain unissued.

In 1950 Curley Weaver recorded four pieces in either New York or Atlanta for the Sittin' In With label operated by Bob Shad. McTell may have played second guitar on two of them (Sittin' In With 547). Oddly enough they were both pieces that McTell himself had recorded in earlier sessions, "By Baby's Gone" (Vocalion 02668) and "Ticket Agent" (Decca 7078). Weaver's other two pieces were done without a second guitarist and may have been recorded at a different session.

In 1950 Willie and Helen moved to 1005 Dimmock Street and then shortly after that to 1003 Dimmock next door. This was a small apartment building in the southwest section, about three miles from Willie's old neighborhood. The house was owned by Emmett Gates, who had known Willie in the early 1920s in Senoia, Georgia. It was to be Willie's last address in Atlanta.

In 1951 Willie was interviewed over the telephone by

Atlanta librarian Alma Jamison, who was pursuing some record research for British jazz writer Ed Paterson. Unfortunately for our knowledge of McTell, Paterson happened to have inquired about some records by other artists recorded in Atlanta, and Ms. Jamison duly followed up this line of research. McTell told her about various men who supervised recordings for Columbia Records in Atlanta and about blues singers Tampa Red, Blind Blake, and Georgia White, but he said very little about himself. Ms. Jamison reported that Willie had been playing on the streets and moving from address to address, probably more a reflection of her difficulty in catching up with him than of McTell's actual circumstances. Paterson published the information she sent him in an article in the 26 May 1951, issue of *The Melody Maker*, but it does not seem to have prompted any other researchers to look for McTell. Serious blues research was only sporadically pursued at that time, generally as a sideline to jazz research, and a concerted effort to document the blues and related traditions was not to begin until the year McTell died.

In the 1950s McTell seems to have turned even more towards religious singing and to have become involved with helping other blind people and singers. He is recalled as playing gospel music with a guitarist named Little Willie from Florida. He also sang spirituals over radio stations WGST in Atlanta and WEAS (now WERD) in Decatur. Around 1957 he visited Kate in Augusta and told her that God had called him to preach.

He always used to call me Baby Doll. So he said, 'Baby Doll, I don't sing the blues any more or play blues any more, but I know this is your favorite song, and so I'm gonna play this for you.' And I said, 'Oh, please do.' And he say:

Wake up, mama, don't you sleep so sound.
Wake up, mama, don't you sleep so sound.
These old blues walking all over your yard.
Blues grab me at midnight, didn't turn me loose till day.
Blues grab me at midnight, didn't turn me loose till day.
I didn't have nobody to drive these blues away.

And then he said, 'This is my favorite song now. I'm gonna sing it to you.' And he said, 'All I sing now is spirituals. I've given myself to the Lord. I'm getting older now.' And he said, 'I'm preaching and I'm singing spirituals.' And I said, 'Okay, what is your favorite?' He said:

I'm sending up my timber every day.
Yes, I'm sending up my timber to heaven every day.
Sometimes I don't know which way that I go.
But when I bow down on my knees,
Crying, 'Saviour, help me, please.'
Because I'm sending up my timber every day.
This love I have for you, my dear, will always last.
No matter where I be, I will keep you in my heart.
The day when we part, I'll be traveling on my way.
I'm sending up my timber every day.
I am sending up my timber every day.
Yes, I'm sending up my timber every day.
Each day I sing and pray,
Trying to make it along the way.
That's why I'm sending up my timber every day.
Sometimes we are together, then again we are apart.
But it's in my heart I love you, dear, and that will never stop.
That's why I'm sending up my timber every day.
Yes, I'm sending up my timber every day.
Lord, I do not know the day and I do not know the hour,
But I'm sending up my timber every day.

Willie's increasing involvement with other blind people is indicated by the fact that he sang in the tenor section of the Glee Club of the Metropolitan Atlanta Association for the Blind. Emmett Gates says he also went every year in the 1950s to a blind school in North Carolina, evidently to study rather than to entertain. Robert Owens recalls that around 1952 Willie brought a blind albino piano player with him to Statesboro and that the two musicians visited for a few days at Robert's house on Mulberry Street. The other man played Robert's piano, and Willie accompanied him on an electric twelve-string guitar. One might assume that the other player was Piano Red, but Robert claims that Willie later told him that the man died. One of Willie's most interesting friends was the guitarist Blind Clifford from Macon. Recent research by Bruce Bastin and Peter Lowry in the Macon and Fort Valley area has revealed that Blind Clifford (or Blind Cliff) was probably named Clifford William Smith and was a prominent string band musician in and around Macon in the 1940s. He and Willie would often visit each other back and forth, as Emmett Gates recalls.

He'd go to Macon too sometimes. There was a fellow down there named Blind Clifford. They had it out, if he ever stopped and sung in front of your door, somebody in the family would die. Willie told me he [Clifford] was better than he was about going different places. Now him and Willie was good friends. But he's been dead two or three years. And he'd go down there. He'd catch the bus and go on down just like I or you would, and come on back. Blind Clifford stayed in Macon. I guess he was born down there. But he'd come up here and go up the street, you know, and beg money, you know, catch the bus and go on back. See, Willie never did do that.

McTell still kept up some of his old activities in the 1950s, including visits to his relatives. Paul Oliver reports that he and Curley Weaver were seen in the 1950s in Louisville, Kentucky, where Willie had an aunt living. Kate McTell also reports that Willie mentioned a trip to Tennessee around 1957 or 1958. In Atlanta he was seen by Roy Dunn in 1959 playing at Henry's Grill on Auburn Avenue. People would turn off the juke box to hear him. His main job, however, was playing at the Blue Lantern Club on Ponce De Leon Avenue near Peachtree Street. It appears that he played both inside and for drive-in customers in the parking lot. Evidently this job replaced the one at the Pig'n Whistle. He is known to have worked at the Blue Lantern between 1949 and 1956, and he may have been there before and after also. Emmett Gates remembers Willie's work there well.

I know he played every night, every night except Sunday night. He played out there. He played for white. Now if there were colored boys, he would play some. Maybe during the break or something he'd play two or three tunes for 'em, you know. But out there he didn't fool with no colored people. He played for white all the time out there on Peachtree, you know. At that time Peachtree was the biggest entertainment place there was in the South practically, back in that time, you see, for guitar music. He played by himself. I don't know what it was, but I know they danced out there. There was parties out there every night. It was a club, I imagine. 'Cause, you know, at that time, if I'd wanted to go, I couldn't have went nohow, not here. No. They would electrocute me if I was to walk in a place like that. That's right. Ha. The white peoples just didn't allow you, didn't allow you in them places no less you was in there working. You had no business there. And so I never did go with him. He never did ask me, 'cause he know how things was. He never did ask me to go with him. So he was out there every evening, swinging that stick along. I guess he made pretty good out there. But he had some white friends out there too, I guess. They looked out for him, 'cause he never was robbed but just one time out of about four or five years that I knew him. Some white boys, when he left out from there, taken him and carried him back down below Federal Prison

Blind Willie McTell, ca. 1950 (Courtesy of Hazel McTear)

l. to r.: Helen's Mother, Blind Willie McTell, Helen, Atlanta, ca October, 1955 (Courtesy of Hazel McTear)

and robbed him and took his guitar. They didn't beat him up. They took his guitar and left him down there. Willie didn't get here until about seven o'clock the next morning. And so, where he was working at, playing at out there, they give him another one.

Willie liked to socialize with Emmett Gates and play guitar for him. For a time he even gave guitar lessons to Gates' teenage son.

There are persistent reports that McTell's health began to decline during the 1950s. He suffered from diabetes and received treatments for it at the hospital. His weight had also increased to around 200 pounds from about 160 in his younger days. It appears that he also began drinking more heavily, though apparently it didn't interfere with his ability to produce fine music. He had always liked his "toddy," and Emmett Gates recalls that he would have a drink every evening on his way to work. Atlanta disc jockey Zenas "Daddy" Sears, who attended the Atlantic recording session, told Mike Leadbitter that McTell was in constant pain and drunk much of the time and that he kept falling into the microphone. This hardly seems consistent with the outstanding music he produced at the session, but it does indicate that Willie was having some problems at the time.

McTell had one final recording session in the fall of 1956. Edward Rhodes had a record shop on Peachtree Street, within walking distance of the Blue Lantern Club. The shop catered largely to the students at the nearby Georgia Institute of Technology. Rhodes played a recording of the great twelve-string guitarist Leadbelly for a foreign student, and later that evening the student reappeared in the shop saying that there was a guitar player down the street who sounded just like Leadbelly. Rhodes went over to the Blue Lantern and found Willie playing for the customers in the parking lot. He returned there for several nights and finally approached Willie about the possibility of recording. McTell was at first uninterested, claiming that some previous record companies had treated him unfairly. Perhaps he was disappointed that so many of his recordings had remained unissued, or he may simply have felt that nothing would come of recording for Rhodes, as he had not yet produced any records and had only bought some equipment with the intention of making recordings of local talent. Finally, however, after he got to know Rhodes better and had dropped into his shop several times to chat, he agreed to record. Rhodes had the machine set up and got Willie some whiskey. He recalls that Willie was drinking heavily at this time and would sometimes fall over backwards when he walked. No doubt his blindness was just as responsible for these falling episodes as was his drinking.

Rhodes recorded one hour of music with a little bit of talking by Willie about himself. Since his interests were primarily commercial, it is to Rhodes' credit that he did any interviewing at all. Willie gave some details about his early life and some of his songs. As had become usual in his last few sessions, McTell's pieces covered a broad spectrum of his repertoire and probably give a good idea of the varied pieces he was called upon to perform at the Blue Lantern. The only missing element in the session was religious music. His singing and guitar playing were up to their usual high standard. Five of the seventeen pieces were popular songs, including jazz and swing standards like "St. James Infirmary" and "Basin Street Blues." Some of the others he had recorded in earlier sessions. "Wabash Cannon Ball" and "If I Had the Wings" had been popularized in earlier hillbilly recordings by Roy Acuff and Vernon Dalhart. "Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues" was a blues ballad that he had recorded earlier, as were the blues "Don't Forget It" and "A to Z Blues" and the rag "Kill It Kid." "Salty Dog" was a piece known in both black and white folk traditions and one that had been popularized on several earlier records. Other pieces recorded by McTell for the first time at this session came from earlier records, such as "That Will Never Happen No More" from a 1927 record by his friend Blind Blake and "Beedle Um Bum" from a 1928 record by the Hokum Boys featuring Willie's cousin Georgia Tom Dorsey. McTell told Rhodes of these pieces, "I jump 'em from other writers, but I arrange 'em my way." Willie also recorded an "Instrumental" and a "Good Bye Blues," which is related to the "Loving Talking Blues" that he recorded in 1928 (Victor V38032). One of the most interesting aspects of the session was McTell's commentary on some of his songs. He associated "Pal of Mine" with World War One and said he "figured out" Blind Blake's "That Will Never Happen No More" in Chicago. He told how he composed "Kill It Kid" from the exclamations of a northern white man named Josh Barber who was vacationing in Miami and used to listen to McTell's playing in the servants' quarters of a resort. McTell said he put together "The Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues" from other songs between 1929 and 1932 in honor of a gambler friend named Jesse Williams. Willie's friend was shot in Atlanta, and Willie brought his body back to New York and sang the song at his funeral. The song is ultimately derived from the British ballad "The Unfortunate Rake," though McTell's more immediate source is a version copyrighted by Porter Grainger and recorded in 1927 by Martha Copeland, Violet McCoy, Rosa Henderson and perhaps others. The session was a fitting end to McTell's recording career, which had lasted for thirty years. Rhodes did not issue any records from the session, but blues researcher Samuel Charters learned of the material's existence in 1960 and arranged to have most of it issued on an LP, *Blind Willie McTell: Last Session* (Prestige PR 7809).

Sometime during the summer of 1958 Helen McTell began experiencing internal bleeding. On October 31 she suffered a heart attack and died the next day at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta at the age of fifty-three. She was buried in Covington, Georgia. Willie was quite shaken by this turn of events, and his own health began to decline. Helen's daughter Alice took the girl that Willie and Helen had adopted, and Willie went off to Statesboro to visit his brother Robert Owens. Robert and his family were preparing to leave Statesboro and move to Plainfield, New Jersey. They tried to persuade Willie to come and live with them, but he declined and said he prefered to live in Atlanta. Robert and his wife remember vividly Willie's departure from Statesboro and the unusual thing that happened at that time.

I could tell there was something bothering him, but I thought it was the death of Helen, because he did something he never did before. When her and me taken him to the train at Dover, Georgia, he had done got

Willie and Helen, ca. 1950 (Courtesy of Hazel McTear)

Horace McTear (David Evans, Sr.)

Hazel McTear, Eddie's Wife. Blind Willie often sat under this tree and played. (Cheryl Evans)

out of the car, got on, boarded the train, the train had pulled off, and I was fixing to pull off, and I looked in the back seat, and his guitar was back there. He'd never leave that guitar nowhere, his brother's house or nobody else's house. I told her that something was bothering him, but I figured it was the death of Helen, you know, because they'd been together quite a while, as I know. And so I told her that I would mail it to him. So she was working up here to North Avenue, to a restaurant, and he knew how to call her there. And I reckon about two-thirty he had done called her. Told her to tell me to bring it back to the train the next day and give it to the conductor. And we did that, and he got it.

Emmett Gates recalls that about three weeks after Helen's death Willie brought another woman named Josie to live with him. Willie called her his "wife," and she had a daughter by Willie who was about six years old at the time. Whether this was the girl that Willie and Helen had adopted is not known. This arrangement did not last very long. Willie was sixty years old, overweight, drinking fairly heavily, diabetic, and suffering from high blood pressure. Sometime in the spring of 1959 he had a light stroke that caused his health to decline further and affected his speech slightly. Josie was evidently unable to cope with the situation and contacted Willie's relatives in Thomson and also Robert Owens, who had moved to New Jersey in December, 1958. Willie's cousin Eddie McTear and a friend named Alfred Booth Story drove to Atlanta to pick him up and found him sitting on his porch step. They brought him back to Thomson and later hired a man with a truck to pick up Willie's furniture and other possessions. Robert Owens also came to Atlanta and learned that Willie had been take to Thomson. When Robert arrived there, Willie didn't recognize him at first. He and Eddie talked things over and agreed that it would be best for Willie to stay there rather than go to New Jersey with Robert. Eddie's father "Coot" McTear had had diabetes for thirty years, and Eddie was fully experienced in giving insulin injections. He assured Robert that Willie would be no trouble for him to take care of and said that he would keep Robert informed of his condition. Robert went back to New Jersey, and Willie's health began to improve under the good care he received from his relatives. His speech returned nearly to normal, and he even played the guitar out in the yard. Eddie's wife Hazel says that people would stop by and give him nickels and dimes for playing, but Horace McTear says that some people would give as much as two or three dollars.

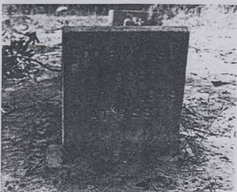
In the summer of 1959 Willie's health took a sudden turn for the worse. His cousin Horace McTear gave a barbecue, probably on August 11, that Willie attended. Horace describes what happened:

He done had one stroke in Atlanta and come home. And he was out there under that pecan tree. I give a barbecue, and you don't supposed to eat nothing like that when you have a stroke. And I just filled him up a plate and give him all he could eat. Yeah, he loved his barbecue. And I give it to him. He eat all of it, and he had another stroke that night. That barbecue run his pressure up so high, he had another stroke. And he didn't get over that. That's the reason I say I always believe I killed him. I didn't know no better.

Hazel McTear describes how the stroke took place:

One night we had to put him in the tub and give him a bath. And I got up, and when I went in there, he slipped back here in this room. And so he couldn't pull him up. I said, 'Don't you want to go to the bathroom?' And he said, 'I can't stand up.' And he had done had a stroke. And so I went on to Thomson that morning to see what I could do about getting him in a hospital. And they said, 'Well, he haven't been living down here. He been living in Atlanta.' Say, 'The onliest hospital you could get him in down here is Milledgeville.' I said, 'Don't you have to pay money to put him in there?' I said, 'Well, I ain't got no money.' And so they took him to Milledgeville, they did. See, there wasn't no free hospitals down here, and that's the onliest one they could get him in that, you know, didn't have no money. I don't think he had got but about one check after he come here. Then he paid the people for moving him down here and everything. He was getting a check from Atlanta. It was some kind of disability. I don't know how many days he stayed in there, but he wasn't up there long. 'Cause one day I was walking from here to the road, and a man come along, and he ask me, he said, 'Do you know Willie McTell?' I said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Willie McTell live with me.' And he said, 'I got a call say he done passed in the hospital in Milledgeville.' And so we went on down. Nobody had a telephone up in here. It was a white man stayed down the road, and we went on down there and called from down there. He wasn't in the hospital no time before he was dead.

Eddie McTear and Willie's uncle Gold Harris were the ones who took Willie to the state hospital in Milledgeville about fifty miles away. This is actually a mental hospital, but they were justified in taking him there, as his mind had "gone bad" from the effects of the stroke. He was admitted on 12 August under the name of Willie McTier and his occupation listed simply as "patient." He died on 19 August of cerebral hemorrhages. Gold Harris came to pick up the body and delivered it to Haines and Peterson Mortuary in Warrenton. Helen's daughter came from Atlanta the day before the funeral, apparently to notify the McTears about an insurance policy Willie had taken out. She returned to Atlanta the same day. The funeral was held at the cemetery of Jones Grove Baptist Church where Willie had attended and sung many times. A Reverend Bradshaw preached the sermon. Many people from the local area attended. Robert Owens and his wife came down from New Jersey, and Kate McTell came with her cousin. She had not known that Willie was even in Thomson and had not been informed about the funeral arrangements until shortly before the funeral was scheduled to take place. Willie was buried next to his uncle Cleveland "Coot" McTear, who had been like a father to him, and Coot's wife and daughter. Ironically, the man carving the gravestone put the name Eddie McTier on it by mistake, a fact which upset Eddie and the others quite a bit. Eddie and Horace McTear and Gold Harris paid the costs of the funeral but were later reimbursed from a $250.00 insurance check from Willie's policy.


Blind Willie McTell's Grave (David Evans, Sr.)

Willie's personal effects and furniture were stored in his cousin Irene's house next door to Eddie and Hazel McTear's, but this house later burned down and everything was lost. Kate had been offered Willie's guitars at the time of the funeral but didn't pick them up then. She was upset because Willie had wanted his twelve-string guitar buried with him and this wish was overlooked in the funeral arrangements. Willie had left three guitars when he died, the twelve-string, a six-string, and an electric guitar with an amplifier. His brother-in-law Clarence McGahey took the twelve-string, but his grandchildren tore it up a few years ago and the pieces were thrown away. Another cousin of Willie's named George Harris got the six-string guitar, but Harris died a few years ago, and the whereabouts of the guitar now are unknown. No one seems to know what happened to the electric guitar. One of the few possessions of Willie's that still remains in use is his metal tipped cane that his uncle Gold Harris uses to help himself get around.

Willie McTell's death was announced over a gospel radio program in Atlanta, and word of it eventually reached most of his friends and associates in Statesboro, but most people outside the Thomson area remained very vague about the details. Willie had been taken from Atlanta suddenly, and few people there knew what had become of him. Legends persisted among blues players and others that he was still alive into the 1960s. He was reportedly seen at Curley Weaver's funeral in Covington in 1962, and the Metropolitan Atlanta Association for the Blind stated that he died in 1966 and was taken by his brother to Statesboro for burial. Ironically the year of his death, 1959, was also the year in which Samuel Charters' pioneering study, *The Country Blues*, was published. Charters devoted three pages to McTell, whom he characterized as "a brilliant, but elusive blues singer, with an almost indestructible quality about him" (p. 93). Charters' book was an enormous stimulus to serious blues research, and undoubtedly if McTell had lived just a few years longer, he would have had a very successful career in folk music revival circles.

Some discussion of McTell's style and repertoire is in order at this point. We have already noted that he could play several instruments. Kate McTell says that he started on the accordion and could also play banjo and violin. There is some disagreement among informants over whether he could play a piano, though he did know the names of the notes on it. In any case, he rarely, if ever, played these instruments publicly after he began to travel. He did, however, frequently play a harmonica and/or kazoo on a rack around his neck, especially in Statesboro, and it is unfortunate that we have only one recorded example of his kazoo playing to illustrate these talents. The twelve-string guitar, of course, was his main instrument, though he also could play a six-string, the instrument he started on. In his later years he sometimes played electric six- and twelve-string guitars.

Willie was extremely attached to his guitars and was hardly ever seen without one. Kate says, "He would never put his guitar in the back of nobody's car. He'd always carry it on his back and hold it on his lap. He loved that guitar. He called it his baby." All nine photographs that exist of McTell show him with a twelve-string guitar. When he sang, he would usually hold his head far back, close his eyes, and tap his foot to the rhythm. His guitar playing shows him to have been very much an individualist. His style does not fit clearly into any single local or regional tradition. He occasionally displays similarities to Curley Weaver and Buddy Moss and now and then to some other Atlanta or East Coast artist, but these similarities are confined to individual pieces in his repertoire and do not characterize his overall approach to the instrument. In fact, such similarities as do exist are more often due to McTell's influence on others than vice versa. His individualism is probably due largely to the fact that he traveled extensively and was able to absorb and synthesize many diverse musical elements. His twelve-string playing is extraordinary in the extent to which he picks individual pairs of strings. Most other players of this instrument exploited mainly its rhythmic and harmonic possibilities, whereas McTell used it mainly as a vehicle of *melodic* expression. In a sense, he played it as if it were a six-string guitar, and undoubtedly this approach helped to give him such a highly individual sound. Another feature of his playing is the sense of surprise and excitement that he could generate by subtle and sudden rhythmic shifts. This characteristic makes his playing almost impossible to duplicate and probably accounts partly for the fact that he was so little imitated by other guitarists. Another means of creating surprise and excitement was through extending and shortening his instrumental lines. He was perfectly capable of playing standard patterns, such as the twelve-bar blues, but he generally chose to vary these, especially when performing alone. He would usually use a great number of different variations in the same performance. Three of McTell's guitar parts are transcribed in tablature notation in Woody Mann's *Six Black Blues Guitarists* (pp. 22-35).

On some pieces, both blues and church songs, McTell played guitar with a slider. Early in his career he used a bottleneck, but during the 1920s he switched to a metal ring worn over one of the fingers of his left hand. This style of playing had an especially striking effect on people who heard him, and many people remember how he could make his guitar "talk." Naomi Johnson, who first met Willie in Statesboro in 1936, was especially moved by his playing of "Amazing Grace," as were many other people, and she makes a number of cogent observations on his performance style.

> *He came over to see this here Cousin Laura, and he had his box. He knew her from Stapleton, Georgia. That was my first time seeing him. And they was talking about old times, and then they asked him to play a hymn. And he played a hymn, 'Amazing Grace,' and it sounded like a church full of people. Peoples now fram the guitar, but he played it! And he played this 'Amazing Grace,' and that was the most beautiful thing that I ever heard. I think he had something like a thimble on his hand. It was metal. I don't think I've ever, since he left, heard a guitar sound like he did. He would make it really talk. And he could play that 'Amazing Grace.' You just couldn't hardly stand it. It sound like people used to sing, something like fifty or sixty years ago, with that harmony in it. They don't have the harmony in it today. They have a holler and a beat. That's right. And he had that harmony, and it was just so mellow and all. But now he had a blues, but I don't know too much about the blues. But he never did play what you might call a hard blues or a swing blues. He always played something mellow.*

Nothing could describe McTell's style more perfectly. It was mellow, no matter what kind of a song he was performing.

His repertoire was extraordinarily broad. He recorded about a hundred different titles and is known to have been able to perform many more. Even the pieces that he recorded on more than one occasion often show significant textual and musical variation, an analysis of which would make an interesting study in itself. His pieces are listed, with the exception of some of his 1949 Atlantic recordings, in the two discographical works by Godrich and Dixon and by Leadbitter and Slaven cited in the Bibliography. Almost all of his pieces could be classified in one of the following categories: blues, rags, ballads, popular songs, hillbilly songs, and religious songs.

McTell considered his rags to be part of his larger category of blues. The blues for him included at least six sub-categories, as he explained to John Lomax in his "Monologue on History of the Blues" (AFS 4072 A-1). It is regrettable that Lomax did not probe deeper into McTell's classification system, but the singer's brief outline suggests the following sub-categories:

1. "Blues" before 1914. McTell seems to be refering to the earliest kind of folk blues.
2. "Original blues" from 1914 to 1920. McTell possibly means the blues that were published in sheet music and sung in vaudeville theatres and cabarets. The first blues song, in fact, was published in 1912, so that McTell was not far off.
3. "Jazz blues" since 1920. McTell plays an example in a triple rhythm. The first blues recording with a jazz accompaniment by a black artist was indeed made in 1920.
4. "Fast pieces" beginning after "jazz blues." McTell plays an example with a fast ragtime progression. Papa Charlie Jackson began recording raggy pieces with guitar accompaniment starting in 1924, and Blind Blake began recording similar pieces in 1926.
5. "Blues of change" or "the alley" beginning after "fast pieces." McTell plays a blues progression in the key of E featuring the use of blue notes. The first major artist to record pieces of this sort with guitar accompaniment was Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926.
6. "Yodeling songs" of the white people, which McTell compares to the blacks' "alley blues." The white singer Jimmie Rodgers recorded the first "blue yodel" in 1927.

The majority of McTell's recorded blues appear to be original compositions. Some of these draw heavily from traditional elements, which McTell arranged to suit himself. Often the verses are only loosely related to each other in an associational way. Blues of this sort occur particularly frequently in his earliest recordings. By the early 1930s McTell's compositions were becoming increasingly thematic and self-conscious, drawing less upon the folk tradition and more on his original artistry. The same trend is observable to some extent in his rag compositions. McTell also began performing more blues in the couplet-and-refrain form rather than the AAB stanza form. Kate McTell states that Willie could both improvise during performance, most likely drawing from traditional material, and sing pieces from memory. Shorty Hobbs, a white man who knew Willie in Savannah in the 1930s, tells how Willie would improvise his "Saturday night specials."

> *All Negro players like that would twist and wring their songs around to fit the occasion. They'd have them something they could make up words to. I think it was in that time he was a good improviser, so he'd take a common old sound and put it to music.*

Kate, however, describes how Willie would compose some pieces more deliberately.

> *He'd just think up his songs, and as he'd think them up, he'd tell me, 'Write that down for me.' And then he'd come in maybe tomorrow night, and he'd think up something else, and he'd say, 'Write that down.' Then he said, 'Put that together... No, that don't sound good. Put such and such a thing together.' And that's just the way he did.*

Willie also performed many blues from popular phonograph records, some of which have already been noted. Kate recalls that they kept a fairly large record collection and that Willie would buy new records to learn songs from them. It was probably necessary that he do so for financial reasons, as he was frequently taking requests for particular songs. He often, however, introduced significant musical and textual changes into these pieces. Horace McTear notes that Willie could learn a song from a record extraordinarily quickly.

> *Any other person that put out a record, he'd put it on the graphophone, we called it then. He'd put it on there three or four times. Shucks! He'd sit there and hold his head on the side like that. When it got out, he'd put it on and play it over. Then he played the other side. He had his head like that. Three or four times. Then he'd go in there and get his guitar and play it just like he played it, sing it too. He'd learn that song just that quick.*

It is interesting to note that many of the pieces that McTell learned from records were by artists that he also knew personally, such as Tampa Red, Georgia Tom Dorsey, Bumble Bee Slim, Blind Blake, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Undoubtedly these personal associations made the songs more memorable and attractive to McTell. Among the pieces from records that he knew but never recorded himself were "It's Tight Like That" from a 1928 record by Tampa Red and Georgia Tom and "Mamie" from a 1937 record by Blind Boy Fuller. McTell also played "Careless Love," which is a traditional piece, though McTell's version may have been adapted from Blind Boy Fuller's popular 1937 recording of it. Another traditional piece that McTell knew was "Red River Blues." This song is well known among blues singers in Georgia and the other East Coast states and has been recorded by Joshua White, Blind Boy Fuller, and others. McTell's uncle Gold Harris remembers him singing the song's characteristic opening couplet:

> *Which way the Red River run?*
> *From by back window to the rising sun.*

As in the case of the above couplet, many of McTell's blues present particularly striking *visual* imagery, a fact all the more remarkable since he was blind from infancy. He was a folk poet of extraordinary talent, as a survey of his lyrics will indicate. The eight pieces by him on this album are a good representative sampling of his use of both traditional and original material. Others recall further the striking traditional lines and phrases that he sang. Horace McTear remembers the following

verses.

There's a house over yonder painted all over in green.
Some of the prettiest young women a man most ever seen.

Mrs. McTear remembers how Willie adapted a traditional couplet to their local community near Thomson.

If you go to Happy Valley, put your money in your shoe.
'Cause them Happy Valley women will take it away from you.

Willie's friend near Thomson, Alfred Booth Story, recalls another especially striking couplet.

You see them little thunderheads rising in the West.
It's gonna rain 'fore you can take your rest.

And finally, Willie's brother-in-law Clarence McGahey sings the following piece that he ascribes to Willie.

Says, mama was talking, and the baby was crying.
Hello, sister, don't you want to be mine?
I'm gonna leave you on the next train going.
Good-bye, babe. It's fare you well.
I'm going away no more to see you; count the days I'm gone.
I'm gonna leave you sure as you born.
I'm gonna roost in the treetops till the weather get warm.

McTell recorded only a few ballads, most of them for the folklorist John Lomax. These included the well known "Boll Weevil" and "Delia." His "Chainey" seems to be distantly related to a ballad that turns up occasionally in tradition, known as "Stavin' Chain." "Dying Crapshooter's Blues" is, as noted earlier, ultimately derived from a British broadside ballad, though McTell has personalized and localized an American form of it derived from a popular record. His "Will Fox" with its railroad theme is unique and could possibly be an original composition of McTell's. He is known to have composed at least one original ballad about the killing of his friend Son Mozelle in Statesboro. McTell is also said to have sung a piece called "Old Frank James," possibly a version of the ballad of "Jesse James," which is well known in both black and white folksong traditions.

Among the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley origin that Willie recorded were "Baby It Must Be Love," which he sometimes called "King Edward Blues," "Pal of Mine," and "Basin Street Blues." He is also recalled as having performed "Get Out and Under the Moon," "Blue Sky," and "Shanty Town." Kate calls these pieces "classical" songs and says that Willie knew many of them. He would purchase popular records, and she would get him songbooks in Braille from the library so that he could learn them. McTell also knew quite a few "hillbilly" songs, most of them apparently learned from records. "Hillbilly Willie's Blues," "Wabash Cannonball," and "If I Had Wings" are examples of this side of his repertoire.

He knew a great many religious songs and was constantly getting requests from church people to perform them. He began recording them in 1933 and sang them increasingly in subsequent sessions. Some of these pieces were played with a slider, and he could make the guitar play old long meter hymns. He associated religious songs, as he told John Lomax, with the older generations, country churches, and people working and singing in the fields. His repertoire ranged from old traditional spirituals and hymns to modern gospel compositions. Among the songs he knew but never recorded were "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "We Are Our Heavenly Father's Children," "Don't You Want to Be a Worker for the Lord," "I'm in My Saviour's Care," "Precious Lord," "Meet Mother in the Sky," "I'm on My Way to Heaven Anyhow," "On Calvary," "You'd Better Run," "Standing on the Highway Wondering Which Way to Go," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "Nearer, My God, to Thee," "There's a Handwriting on the Wall," and "Don't Never Drive a Stranger from Your Home." Reverend Patrick Jones of Statesboro recalls that Willie had one special religious song, possibly related to the version of "Standing Up My Timber" cited earlier from Kate McTell.

I heard of a song he used to sing. I never did hear him sing the song, but I heard a lot of people talk of it, that he had a song that he sang about, 'I can't see you through my eyes, but I can see you through my heart; and when I see you through my heart, I feel that we're never to part,' some way he had it. They told a whole lot about him singing that song. I never did hear it. And I saw him leading a blind man, you know. And so here's a man that's supposed to be blind, leading the blind. And that was when they made mention of the fact that he'd sing this song. He said, 'I'm only blind through my eyes, but I have a heart that I can see through.' And he was always amazing to me.

One aspect of McTell's performance that was not fully presented in his recordings was his ability to talk while playing the guitar. This is suggested in the "Monologue on History of the Blues" that he recorded for John Lomax and shown even better in the remarkable hobo *cante fable* "Travelin' Blues" (Columbia 14484-D) that he recorded in 1929. Horace McTear says, "He could tell all kind of jokes and be playing guitar at the same time." McTell is said to have had quite a good sense of humor, and it must be considered unfortunate that we have only traces of it in his songs but not in his prose narratives as well.

With such a broad repertoire McTell was able to aim his songs to a particular audience. He had blues and rags for frolics and his appearances in places like the 81 Theatre. He could play spirituals in the churches and in people's homes. For the more urbane white people, such as those who probably frequented the Pig'n Whistle and Blue Lantern, he had his "classical" songs, though many of them probably also liked some of his blues, rags, and spirituals. For the whites in the country and smaller towns he had hillbilly pieces. Naomi Johnson makes a typical observation about McTell when she says, "He respected people, and I think he played to what you call according to his audience. And he knew what they liked." Willie even manifestated this quality in some of his recording sessions. He himself noted that some of the companies wanted mainly blues, and he was certainly ready to supply their needs. When his wife Kate, a devout churchgoer, was with him at the 1935 Decca session, he recorded many spirituals. For the folklorist John Lomax he contributed five prized ballads. Naturally in some social situations he would get conflicting requests. Apparently in such cases he would usually come out on the side of respectability, as Reverend Patrick Jones recalls from a time when Willie played for a school closing at Nevils before Christmas in 1930.

He'd sing anything you want to sing. 'Cause just like the time we had him around the school, you know. He had a song, you know, that most of 'em considered very vulgar, you know. That would be called 'Tight Like That,' you know. But they asked him to play it at the school, but he wouldn't do it. He considered his audience when he was playing.

It is hoped that this sketch of the life and music of Blind Willie McTell has cleared up a number of misconceptions that are prevalent about him. Most writing in the past, based on little factual information beyond McTell's records themselves, has suggested that he was a street singer who lived in poverty, that he wandered continuously and at random, that he simply drifted into recording sessions and courted anonymity by using a variety of pseudonyms, and that he lost whatever popularity he had in the 1950s and faded into obscurity, dying probably sometime in the 1960s. All of these notions are false and ascribable largely to overly romanticized conceptions of the "typical" blues singer. He was above all a professional, a fact which, it must be emphasized, was not inconsistent with his being essentially a folksinger. It appears that he actually experienced little true poverty in his life, though no doubt he found himself temporarily out of funds a few times. But in this respect he was no different from most other middle class Americans. He always knew he could make money from his music, and his songs always project a mood of self-confidence. He did sometimes sing on streets, usually because people would stop him and request songs, but most of the time he sang indoors at tobacco warehouses, hotels, house parties, clubs, and theatres. He often booked his engagements in advance, and his travels usually took him either to familiar places where he had friends and relatives or where he knew he could make money. Although he might take off suddenly and be gone for long periods of time, he certainly did not travel randomly. His recording sessions likewise were carefully planned and his songs well polished. He probably used the variety of names—Blind Sammie, Georgia Bill, Hot Shot Willie, Blind Willie, Barrelhouse Sammy, and Pig'n Whistle Red—mainly for the purpose of increasing record sales through the use of interesting monickers or in some cases to avoid contractual obligations to a company that he had recorded for previously. Certainly he was not trying to court anonymity. None of these names are, in fact, truly pseudonyms. His given name was Willie Samuel McTell, and all of these *noms du disque* can be viewed as derivatives from it or nicknames. Finally, McTell could never be said to have lost popularity or faded into obscurity. It simply happened that his health deteriorated, he was taken in by relatives, and he died a few months later. Prior to this turn of events he was performing music regularly and doing quite well with his chosen profession. Certainly many lovers of blues and other forms of folk music today wish that McTell had survived longer to be "rediscovered" in the 1960s and swept up into what undoubtedly would have been an enormously successful career in the folk music revival circuit. McTell could easily have played coffee houses, colleges, concerts, and folk festivals to packed audiences. Others may even wish that he had been chosen earlier by John Lomax to be the embodiment of black folk music traditions instead of his cantankerous twelve-string counterpart Leadbelly. Such wishes are made with good intentions, but they overlook the fact that in his own lifetime Blind Willie McTell did perform his music for probably hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life and made them happier for it, and for the rest of us he left an extraordinary legacy of recordings to enjoy.

Side I, Band 1 NEXT DOOR MAN (12953-2)

Georgia Browns: Buddy Moss, vocal and harmonica; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of G; Fred McMullen, slide guitar in open G tuning. New York, Thursday, 19 January 1933.

Take 1 of this piece was issued on Vocalion 1737 as by "Jim Miller," a pseudonym used for Buddy Moss on two other Vocalion records. The above lineup is not absolutely certain but seems most likely. The harmonica is not played behind the singing and thus would appear to be played by the vocalist, who seems to be Moss. The slide guitar is probably played by McMullen, who played in this style on other pieces. The specificity of stanza 4 indicates that this song may be based on a real event. The first two stanzas are traditional, and the third may be also. The issued take 1 contains the same four stanzas but in a different order. The high number of instrumental choruses is probably a reflection of the fact that the Georgia Browns probably considered themselves largely an instrumental group. Two of their six pieces from this session are instrumental workouts, and the other four all have many instrumental choruses.

Instrumental chorus

1. Now tell me, baby, who can your sweet man be?
   Now tell me, baby, who can your sweet man be?
   Say, the reason why I ask you, would you please make 'rangements for me?

2. Mmmm, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lordy, Lord.
   Mmmm, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lordy, Lord.
   I love you, my baby, but I just can not be your dog.

Instrumental chorus

3. Said, my babe, my baby, she don't treat me good no more.
   Mmmm, my babe, my baby, don't treat me good no more.
   Aaah, she's a' got another man, and he's living next door.

4. Says, this last day of August, well, it will be one year ago,
   Mmmm, this last day of August, well, it will be one year ago,
   Aaah, when my babe, she told me she didn't want me no more.

Instrumental chorus

Spoken (Moss): Aw shucks, play that thing.

Side I, Band 2 IT'S YOUR TIME TO WORRY (14009-2)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in standard tuning, key of G; Curley Weaver, slide guitar in open D tuning (probably capoed). New York, Thursday, 14 September 1933.

This piece's refrain appears to be original, though the stanzas themselves are mainly traditional verses. This blues was unissued by Vocalion, and McTell recorded it again in 1935 (Decca 7117) with the same refrain and guitar part but with a different melody and only two of seven stanzas similar to stanzas in this 1933 version. Both versions, however, maintain the theme of the singer putting down his mistreating woman.

1. I don't need nothing but my overalls.
   I done trimmed these women, and they bound to fall.
   Your time to worry, my time to live alone.
   But your reckless disposition, mama, drove your daddy 'way from home.

2. I don't want no woman gon' run around,
   And drink her whiskey and act like a fanfoot clown.
   Your time to worry, my time to live alone.
   But your reckless disposition drove your baby 'way from home.

3. I don't want no woman with a face like a natural man.
   When she comes in your home, there'll be trouble in the land.
   But let it be her time to worry, my time to be alone.
   But your reckless disposition, mama, drove your daddy 'way from home.

Spoken: Aw, play it for me, boy, 'cause I'm worried.

Guitar chorus

Spoken: Aw, so lonesome.

4. Now, woman, if I had your heart in my hand,
   I would teach you exactly how to treat a real good man.
   Because it's your time to worry, my time to live alone.
   But your reckless disposition drove your daddy 'way from home.

5. Says, I tried to treat you good, tried to treat you right,
   But you stayed off from me, woman, both day and night.
   Now it's your time to worry, my time to live alone.
   But your reckless disposition, honey, drove your daddy 'way from home

6. Now, it's a mighty sad story, but it's understood.
   Everybody in Atlanta in my neighborhood
   Says it's your time to worry, woman, it's my time to live alone.
   But your reckless disposition drove your daddy 'way from...

Side I, Band 3 YOU WAS BORN TO DIE (14024-1)

Curley Weaver, vocal and slide guitar in open D tuning (probably capoed); Blind Willie McTell, vocal (refrains only), speech, and twelve-string guitar in open G tuning. New York, Monday, 18 September 1933.

Weaver has combined several traditional stanzas with an apparently original refrain. McTell used Weaver's first stanza in his "It's Your Time to Worry," also issued on this album. The dueting of Weaver and McTell on the refrains presents a fine example of too seldom heard blues harmony singing.

Guitar chorus

Spoken (McTell): Aw, play that thing, boy. I know you're blue.
Play it for your black beauty (?).

1. Don't want no woman that run around,
   Stay out in the streets, act like a fanfoot clown.
   You made me love you, and you made me cry.
   You should remember that you was born to die.

2. Some scream high yellow, some says black and brown.
   I got a black woman, she's the sweetest woman in town.
   You made me love you, and you made me cry.
   You should remember that you were born to die.

Spoken (Weaver): Play it now for me.

Guitar chorus

Spoken (McTell): Aw, do it, Auburn Avenue gal.

3. Come home this morning, face full of frowns.
   I know by that, baby, you been riding around.
   You made me love you, and you made me cry.
   You should remember that you were born to die.

4. Now look here, woman. Give me your right hand.
   I'll go to my woman, you go to your man.
   You made me love you, and you made me cry.
   You should remember that you was born to die.

Side I, Band 4 DIRTY MISTREATER (14025-1)

Curley Weaver, vocal and guitar in EBGDAD tuning, key of D; Buddy Moss, guitar in EBGDAD tuning, key of D (?). New York, Monday, 18 September 1933.

This appears to be Weaver's original combination of traditional verses. The song contrasts the singer's present mistreating woman with the woman he really loves, who is in jail. McTell's off-mike comments can be faintly heard in the hummed third stanza.

Guitar chorus

1. And you a dirty mistreater. You don't mean no one man no good.
   And you a dirty mistreater. You don't mean no one man no good.
   I don't blame you, mama. I'd do the same thing if I could.

2. Mmmm, the woman I love, she stays 'hind the cold iron bars.
   Ain't it hard, ain't it hard? She stays 'hind the cold iron bars.
   I ain't got nobody to get my ashes hauled.

3. Mmmm. (*Spoken* [McTell]: Aw, boy, low and lonesome.)
   Mmmm. (*Spoken* [McTell]: Play that thing, man.)
   Mmmm, mmmm.

4. And you mistreated me, baby, you drove me from your door.
   And you mistreated me, baby, you drove me from your door.
   And the Good Book tell you, baby, mmmm, you bound to reap just what you sow.

5. When I used to love you, baby, what a fool I used to be.
   Spoken (McTell): You was a big fool, wasn't you?
   When I used to love you, baby, what a fool I used to be.
   I don't love nobody. That's a fool that do love me.

Side I, Band 5 BACK TO MY USED TO BE (14031-2)

Buddy Moss, vocal and guitar in standard tuning, key of A; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of A. New York, Monday, 18 September 1933.

Like McTell's "It's Your Time To Worry" this piece seems to combine traditional stanzas with a refrain, though in this case the refrain is also adapted from a traditional blues couplet. This piece is a good example of Weaver's "busy" accompaniment style on the bass strings, also heard on many of the recordings he made with McTell. The two takes of this piece are virtually identical.

Guitar chorus

1. You mistreat me once, babe, say, you mistreat me twice.
   Seem like you want me to be a dog all my life.
   I'm leaving you, baby, going back to my used to be.
   I done got tired the way you treat poor me.

2. When I was with you, baby, I did all I could.
   Seemed to me, woman, that you didn't mean me no good.
   So I'm leaving you, baby, going back to my used to be.
   I done got tired the way you treat poor me.

Guitar chorus

3. You mistreat me, baby, and I haven't done anything wrong.
   So if you don't believe I'm leaving you, just count the days I'm gone.
   I'm leaving you, baby, going back to my used to be.
   I'm getting doggone tired the way you treat poor me.

4. I begged you, woman, to come back home.
   I'll acknowledge, babe, that I done wrong.
   But now I'm leaving you, woman, going back to my used to be.
   I done got tired the way you treat poor me.

Side I, Band 6 CAN'T USE YOU NO MORE (14032-1)

Buddy Moss, vocal and guitar in standard tuning, key of G; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of G. New York, Monday, 18 September 1933.

This is an alternate take of an issued version of this piece (Banner 32993, Conqueror 8326, Melotone M12943, Oriole 8313, Perfect 0271, Romeo 5313). Moss recorded it again in 1935 for ARC (5-12-64). All three versions show major textual differences. The song is similar musically to Moss' earlier hit, "Daddy Don't Care," recorded at the January, 1933, session. It uses a standard ragtime VI-II-V-I chord progression.

Guitar chorus

1. Baby, what made you come back to me? I just can't use you no more.
   Baby, what made you come back to me? I told you, you could go.
   I got a gal, say, that want to lay in my bed.
   Ain't going away for no other's else.
   Now, woman, what made you come back to me? I just can't use you no more.
   I mean, I just can't use you no more.

2. Baby, what made you come back to me. I just can't use you no more.
   Baby, what made you come back to me? I told you, you could go.
   You left me sick, couldn't even raise my hand.
   You quit me, woman, for a no good man.
   So now, woman, what made you come back to me? I just can't use you no more.
   I mean, never. I just can't use you no more.

Guitar chorus

3. Baby, what made you come back to me? I just can't use you no more.
   Baby, what made you come back to me? I told you, you could go.
   You were pretending but really didn't like.
   But this is one time I ain't gon' take you back.
   So now, baby, what made you come back to me? I just can't use you no more.
   I mean, I just can't use you no more. I mean, never.
   I just can't use you no more.

Spoken: Aw, play that thing, boy.

Guitar chorus

Spoken (McTell): Play it real rowdy.

Side I, Band 7 BROKE DOWN ENGINE NO. 2 (14037-3)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in standard tuning, key of E. New York, Monday, 18 September 1933.

Another take of this piece exists (14037-1). It is like the take issued here through the first three stanzas but then has five stanzas that are different. It lacks the whistling of take 3. It mentions "Hudson" (probably he means the Hudson River), Tennessee, Long Island, and Virginia. At this same session, immediately before this piece, McTell recorded a "Broke Down Engine" (Vocalion 02577) with different lyrics but with falsetto moaning similar to the whistling in stanza 6 of the version issued here. McTell's 1931 recording of "Broke Down Engine Blues" (Columbia 14632-D), however, combines lyrics from both of these 1933 Vocalion pieces. McTell also recorded a shortened "Broke Down Engine Blues" in 1949 (Atlantic 891), following the lyrics of Vocalion 02577. Buddy Moss recorded a "Broke Down Engine" and "Broke Down Engine No. 2" at this same 1933 session, the latter being issued on this album for the first time. The lyrics of McTell's version issued here are partly traditional and partly original. He used the same melody and guitar part on "Runnin' Me Crazy" (Vocalion 02595) from this same session.

1. Feel like a broke down engine, mama, ain't got no drivers at all.
   Feel like a broke down engine, mama, ain't got no drivers at all.
   What make me love little Sara, she can do the Georgia Crawl.

2. Lordy, Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord. Eeeeeeh, eeeeeh. Lord, Lord, Lord.

3. Feel like a broke down engine, mama, ain't got no whistle or bell.
   Feel like a broke down engine, baby, ain't got no whistle or bell.
   If you's a real hot mama, come and drive away Willie's weeping spell.

4. But it's Lordy, Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord. Eeeeeeh, eeeeeh.
   Spoken: Lord, have mercy.

5. Everybody screaming in Hudson, and, mama, you know I ain't drinking no booze.
   Everybody crying in Hudson, baby, and you know I ain't drinking no booze.
   They got me wandering around in the North with the broke down engine blues.

6. But it's Lordy, Lord, *(whistles)*. Lordy, Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord.
   Spoken: Lord, have mercy.

7. Everybody's screaming and crying, drive away my Georgia...
   Everybody's screaming and crying, baby, drive away my Georgia blues.
   Must be the women around in Georgia with the broke down engine...

Side I, Band 8 LOVE-MAKIN' MAMA (14045-1)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in open G tuning; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of G (?). New York, Tuesday, 19 September 1933.

This piece is a mixture of traditional and original verses with probably an original refrain. It illustrates an increasing self-consciousness in McTell's compositions as compared to most of his blues recordings at earlier sessions. A second take of this piece exists with a full sixth stanza. Otherwise it is virtually identical to the take issued here.

1. You may fall from the mountain down in the deep blue sea.
 But you ain't doing the right falling till you fall in love with me.
 You's a love making mama, sweet as you can be.
 Ah, you may be a little rocky, but, baby, you all right with me.

2. Now for your love, baby, I'll be your slave.
 When Gabriel blows his trumpet, I'll rise from my grave.
 'Cause you's a love making mama, sweet as you can be.
 Ah, you may be a little rocky, but, baby, you all right with me.

3. Now I'm going to put in my order, mama, for two weeks ahead.
 I'd rather eat your cooking than my own home bread.
 You's a love making mama, sweet as you can be.
 Ah, you may be a little rocky, but, baby, you all right with me.

Spoken: Aw, play it.

Guitar chorus

Spoken: That's the way I like it.

4. Now, give you all my money, your clothes I'll buy.
 I'll give you my loving, baby, till the day I die.
 You's a love making mama, sweet as you can be.
 Ah, you may be a little rocky, but, honey, you all right with me.

5. Now from your feet, baby, to the top of your head,
 I'll give you my loving till the day I'm dead.
 Sweet loving mama, sweet as you can be.
 You may be a little rocky, but, honey, you all right with me.

6. Love making mama, sweet as you can be.
 You may be a little rocky, but, baby, you all right with me.

Side II, Band 1 DEATH ROOM BLUES (14048-2)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in open G tuning; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of G (?). New York, Tuesday, 19 September 1933.

Two virtually identical takes of this piece exist. McTell also recorded versions of it for RCA Victor in 1929 and Decca in 1935. None of the three companies chose to issue it. The piece is possibly autobiographical. McTell's mother died in 1920 in Statesboro. Whether the "friend I love" in stanza 3 is a different person from the singer's mother is unclear. The text utilizes some traditional lines, but on the whole it appears to be an original composition.

1. Tombstones is my pillow, cold grounds is my bed.
 Tombstones is my pillow, cold grounds is my bed.
 Blue skies is my blanket, the moonlight is my spread.

2. Early one morning Death walked into my room.
 Early one morning Death walked into my room.
 Oh, it taken my dear mother early one morning soon.

3. She left me moaning and crying just like a turtle dove.
 She left me moaning and crying just like a turtle dove.
 Death walked in and taken my mother and came back and got the friend I love.

4. Eeeeeeeh, eeeeeeh.
 Eeeeeeeh, eeeeeeh.
 Hey, crying, Lord, have mercy. She came back and got the friend I love.

5. Every since my mother died and left me all alone,
 Every since my mother died and left me all alone,
 All my friends have forsaked me. People, I haven't even got no home.

6. Mmmmmmm, feel like moaning and crying.
 Mmmmmmm, feel just like moaning and crying.
 And death walked in and got my mother. That was the only friend of mine.

Side II, Band 2 LORD, SEND ME AN ANGEL (14050-1)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in standard tuning, key of E. New York, Tuesday, 19 September 1933.

Two virtually identical takes of this piece exist, the only difference being that take 2 has a guitar chorus in place of the final stanza. It would appear, then, that McTell had memorized the order of his stanzas for this session, even though they have no overall thematic unity. The stanzas are essentially traditional ones with some adaptations by McTell. This piece must have been a favorite of his. He recorded it in 1930 as "Talkin' to Myself" (Columbia 14551-D), singing the same first five stanzas as in the present 1933 version but concluding with seven completely different stanzas. He recorded it again in 1935 as "Ticket Agent Blues" (Decca 7078) with the first four stanzas of the version issued here followed by thirteen different stanzas, which show only slight overlap with the 1930 version. He recorded a quite different version in 1949 as "Talking' to You Mama" (Regal 3277). Its opening stanzas are not the same ones he recorded in the 1930s, though later in the piece he sings four stanzas from the 1935 version and two stanzas (9 and 10) from the present 1933 version. McTell also used variants of stanzas 9 and 10 in his 1928 recording of "Three Women Blues" (Victor V38001), which is otherwise unrelated to this piece. Curley Weaver recorded a "Ticket Agent" in 1950 (Sittin' In With 547). It contains the first five stanzas of McTell's 1933 version printed here, several stanzas from other McTell versions, and a few new ones never recorded by McTell. It would appear, then, that a performance of this piece usually consists of a core of four or five stanzas, which appear at the beginning of the piece, followed by various other traditional stanzas, some of which frequently recur in this piece.

Guitar chorus

1. Good Lord, good Lord, send me an angel down.
 "Can't spare you no angel, will spare you a teasing brown."

2. That new way of loving, swear to God it must be best,
 'Cause these Georgia womens won't let Mister McTell rest.

3. There was a crowd down on the corner. I wondered who could it be.
 Weren't a thing but the womens trying to get to me.

4. I went down to the shed with my suitcase in my hand.
 Crowd of women running and crying, say, "Mister Mac, won't you be my man?"

5. And my mama, she told me, when I was a boy playing mumble-peg,
 "Don't drink no black cow's milk, and don't eat no black hen's egg."

6. My baby studying evil, and I'm studying evil too.
 I'm gonna hang around here to see what my baby gon' do.

Spoken: Play it.

Guitar chorus

7. I can't be trusted, and I can't be satisfied.
 When the men see me coming, they go to pinning their womens to their side.

8. ...about my loving, take it any time of day.
 I don't get my right loving, I'm going to Georgia right away.

Spoken: Play it.

Guitar chorus

Spoken: Oh, sure is good.

9. I got three womens; that's a yellow, brown, and black.
 Take the governor of Georgia to judge the one I like.

10. One's an Atlanta yellow, one is a Macon brown.
 One a Statesboro darkskin, will turn your damper down.

Guitar chorus

11. So bye bye, mama. I'll see you some sweet day.
    You'll be awful sorry you done Mister Mac thisaway.

12. Oh Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord.

Side II, Band 3 BROKE DOWN ENGINE NO. 2 (14054-2)

Buddy Moss, vocal and guitar in standard tuning, key of E; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of E. New York, Tuesday, 19 September 1933.

Two virtually identical takes of this piece exist. Moss sings a combination of stanzas that are variants of ones used in McTell's "Broke Down Engine" and "Broke Down Engine No. 2" from this same session. Moss must have learned the piece through personal transmission from McTell rather than through McTell's earlier record (Columbia 14632-D). Moss gives a close approximation of McTell's melody and guitar part. Prior to recording Moss sang a "Broke Down Engine" (mx. 14053-1) that may have been derived from McTell's 1931 record, as it duplicates several stanzas from it.

1. I feel like a broke down engine, ain't got no drivers at all.
   Feel like a broke down engine, ain't got no drivers at all.
   And the reason why I love my baby, she can do the Georgia Crawl.

2. Feel like a broke down engine, ain't got no whistle or bell.
   Feel like a broke down engine, ain't got no whistle or bell.
   And if you're a real kind woman, drive away my tears.

3. Lord, Lord, Lord. Lord, Lord, Lordy, Lord.
   Lord, Lordy, Lord. Lord, Lordy, Lord, Lord, Lord.
   Lord. Lord. Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord. Lord, Lord, Lord.

4. Some screaming Long Island. I'm screaming Newport News.
   Some screaming Long Island. I'm screaming Newport News.
   I'm still wandering around in Atlanta with these broke down engine blues.

5. Don't you hear me, baby, knocking on your door?
   Don't you hear me, baby, knocking on your door?
   Can I get down in the snake level and tap that flat, tip light 'cross your floor? (?)

6. Lord, Lordy, Lord. Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord.
   Lord, Lordy, Lord. Lord, Lordy, Lordy, Lord.

Side II, Band 4 EMPTY ROOM BLUES (14058-1)

Curley Weaver, vocal and guitar in EBGDAD tuning, key of D; Buddy Moss, slide guitar probably in open D tuning. New York, Tuesday, 19 September 1933.

This piece basically is composed of traditional verses, though the mention of Chicago in stanza 2 may represent a personal touch by Weaver. In the manner of many folk blues there is a thematic contrast between the first two stanzas and stanza 3. This blues, then, deals with the problem of unfaithfulness from two points of view, that of the victim (stanzas 1 and 2) and that of the stealer of someone else's spouse (stanza 3). The two parts are separated by an instrumental chorus, lending a symmetry to the text's structure.

Guitar chorus

1. Don't your room feel lonesome, gal packs up and leaves?
   Don't your room feel lonesome, when your gal packs up and leaves?
   You may drink your moonshine, but your heart ain't pleased.

2. Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmmmm.
   I done drinked so much whiskey, staggers in my sleep.
   That gal in Chicago sure, Lord, worrying me.
   Spoken: Play it low and lonesome, boy, 'cause I'm worried.

Guitar chorus

3. I got a new way of loving, green man can't catch on.
   I got a new way of loving, green man can't catch on.
   When your woman get my loving, you can't keep her at home.

4. Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmmmm.
   Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmmmm.
   Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmmmm.

Side II, Band 5 SOME LONESOME DAY (14065-2)

Buddy Moss, vocal and guitar in standard tuning, key of A; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of A. New York, Thursday, 21 September 1933.

Two virtually identical takes of this piece exist. The lyrics use some traditional lines but are mostly original. The guitar part is similar to that of Moss' "Back to My Used to Be." It is not known whether the lyrics are based on some real incident or not. Hundreds of blues singers have sung about this kind of situation.

Guitar chorus

1. Way last winter, one cold January day,
   I come to your house, baby, you shut your door in my face.
   But it's coming home, coming home to you some lonesome day.
   And you gonna be sorry that you did me thisaway.

2. Way last winter in the rain and snow,
   You put me out, babe; I didn't have no place to go.
   But it's coming home, coming home to you some lonesome day.
   And you gonna be sorry that you did me thisaway.

Guitar chorus

3. It's coming home to you, baby. You ought to know.
   You got to reap, woman, just what you sow.
   And it's coming home, coming home to you some lonesome day.
   And you gonna be sorry you did me thisaway.

4. When I had money, babe, I saw you every day.
   Meet you on the street now, woman, you turn your head the other way.
   But it's coming home, coming home to you some lonesome day.
   And you gonna be sorry you did me thisaway.

Side II, Band 6 B AND O BLUES NO. 2 (14066-2)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in standard tuning, key of E; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of E (?). New York, Thursday, 21 September 1933.

This version is almost identical to the issued take 1 (Vocalion 02568) except for a difference in the last line of stanza 4 and an extra guitar chorus at the end of take 1. Kate McTell says that Willie went to Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore for an eye examination as a young man, so that this piece may have had an added personal association for him. "B and O Blues" was first recorded, however, by McTell's friend Bumble Bee Slim (Amos Easton) in 1932 (Vocalion 1720). Easton's piece was evidently inspired by Walter Davis' 1930 hit of "M. & O. Blues" (Victor V-38618). McTell's version is textually quite different from Easton's. Buddy Moss also recorded a "B and O Blues No. 2" (Melotone M12808, Oriole 8273, Perfect 0259, Romeo 5273) at this same session. Moss' version is very similar to McTell's issued here.

1. I'm gon' grab me a train, going back to Baltimore.
   I'm going to grab me a train, going back to Baltimore.
   I'm going to find my baby, 'cause she rode that B. and O.

2. I'm going to act like a rambler, and I can't stay home no more.
   I'm going to act like a rambler, and I can't stay home no more.
   'Cause the gal I love, she rode that B. and O.

3. She said, "Daddy, I'm leaving, and I ain't coming back no more."
   Spoken: Tried to not care.
   She says, "Daddy, I'm leaving, and I ain't coming back no more."
   And if she don't come back, I'm going down in Ohio.

Spoken: Aw, play it low and lonesome.

Guitar chorus

Spoken: Aw, it's bad, boy, when she's gone.

4. I done never would have thought that my baby would treat me so.
   Says, I never would have thought that my baby would have treated me so.
   And if she don't come back, I'll look for that B. and O.

Spoken: Aw, play it low and lonesome.

5. And now if she want to come back and I can't use her no more,
   Now if she wants to come back and I can't use her no more,
   I got another hot mama, and she lives in Baltimore.

Side II, Band 7 BELL STREET LIGHTNIN' (14068-1)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in open G tuning; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of G (?). New York, Thursday, 21 September 1933.

This piece was unissued by Vocalion, and McTell recorded it again with little change in 1935 as "Bell Street Blues" (Decca 7078). Except for stanza 4 it is close to "Canned Heat Blues" (Okeh 8630) recorded in Atlanta in 1928 by Waymon "Sloppy" Henry, an artist whom McTell probably knew. Henry's piece is itself partly based on Ma Rainey's 1924 recording of "Cell Bound Blues" (Paramount 12257). "Canned Heat" was Sterno, a cooking fuel with a paraffin base that could be strained and made into an alcoholic drink. It has potentially dangerous side effects, but it was popular in some lower class circles during the Prohibition. By 1933, when McTell recorded, Canned Heat was no longer popular for drinking, as legal liquor was back. "White lightnin'" (homemade corn whiskey) was probably the nearest equivalent as a cheap and powerful drink. Bell Street was in the northeast quarter of Atlanta in McTell's neighborhood.

1. Live down in Bell Street Alley, just as drunk as I can be.
   I'm down in Bell Street Alley, just as drunk as I can be.
   Seem like them Crow Jane women, man, done got rough with me.
2. She done drinked so much of that Bell Street whiskey, they won't sell her no more.
   She done drinked so much of that Bell Street whiskey till they won't sell that poor child no more.
   She got the bottles and labels laying all around her door.
3. Now this Bell Street whiskey'll make you sleep all in your clothes.
   This Bell Street whiskey will make you sleep all in your clothes.
   And when you wake up next morning, feels like you have laid outdoors.
4. You can get some booze down on Bell Street for two bits and a half a throw.
   Can get some booze down on Bell Street, two bits and a half a throw.
   It'll make you cuss out the judge in the courthouse and break out the jailhouse door.
5. Walked in my room the other night.
   Man come in, he wanted to fight.
   Took my gun, my right hand.
   Hold me, people, I don't want to kill no man.
   When I said that, he rapped me 'cross my head.
   The first shot I fired, the man fell dead.
   I said, Bell Street whiskey have drove me to the county jail.
   Got me laying up here on my old bunk, got nobody to go my bail.

Guitar chorus

Spoken: Lord, that Bell Street whiskey's bad, boy.

Side II, Band 8 EAST ST. LOUIS BLUES (FARE YOU WELL) (14071-1)

Blind Willie McTell, vocal and twelve-string guitar in standard tuning, key of E; Curley Weaver, guitar in standard tuning, key of E (?). New York, Thursday, 21 September 1933.

McTell recorded this piece again for Savoy in 1949 (issued on Biograph BLP-12035, 12" LP), singing eight of the same stanzas that he uses in this version and adding two new stanzas. This song combines elements of two very old traditional blues. The "East St. Louis" stanza was noted in the 1890s by W. C. Handy, who later published an arrangement of the song with a melody related to McTell's. Many other blues singers from all over the South, such as William Brown, Leadbelly, and Jimmy Rogers, have sung versions of this traditional song. The "fare you well" refrain has also been used by many folk blues singers, including Johnnie Head, Joe Calicott from Mississippi, and Leadbelly from Texas/Louisiana (in his version of "The Titanic"). A version called "Fare Thee Honey, Fare Thee Well," composed by John Queen and Walter Wilson, was recorded as a "darkey song" by white vaudeville singer Marie Cahill in 1916 (Victor 45125). Perry Bradford later copyrighted a version called "Fare Thee Honey Blues" that Mamie Smith recorded in 1920 (Okeh 4194). It was also recorded by jazz groups in the 1920s and 1930s. McTell's version does not appear to be derived from either of these earlier published versions but seems instead to be purely a product of folk tradition.

Guitar chorus

1. I walked all the way from East St. Louis.
   I never had but that one, one thin dime.
2. I laid my head in a New York woman's lap.
   She laid her little cute head in mine.
3. She tried to make me believe by the rattlings of her tongue,
   The sun would never never shine.
4. I pawned my silver, and I pawned my chain.
   Would have pawned myself, but I felt ashamed.
5. I tried to see you in the fall,
   When you didn't have no man at all.
6. I knowed to meet you in the spring,
   When the bluebirds all was ready to sing.
   Fare ye, honey, fare ye well.
7. You can shake like a cannonball.
   Get down and learn that old Georgia Crawl.
   Fare ye, honey, fare ye well.

Spoken: Play it, boy.

Guitar chorus

8. And I laid my head in a barroom door,
   And I can't get drunk, drunk no more.
9. Now if you can't do the shivaree,
   Get yourself on out of this house from me.
   Fare ye, baby, fare ye well.

Guitar chorus

10. I tried to see you in the spring,
    When the bluebirds all was ready to sing.
    Fare ye, honey, fare ye well.
11. And I walked on back to East St. Louis.
    Never had but that one, one thin dime.

Guitar chorus

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Label abbreviations:

ARC	American Record Company	Or	Oriole
Ba	Banner	Pe	Perfect
Cq	Conqueror	Ro	Romeo
Me	Melotone	Vo	Vocalion

THE GEORGIA BROWNS

Fred McMullen vocal-1/speech-2/guitar, Buddy Moss vocal-3/harmonica, Curley Weaver vocal-4/guitar.

New York, Thursday, January 19, 1933.

12951-1	Tampa Strut	-2	Ba 32785, Me M12720, Or 8239, Pe 0242, Ro 5239, Vo 1740
12952-1	Decatur Street 81		Ba 32785, Me M12720, Or 8239, Pe 0242, Ro 5239, Vo 1740
12953-1	Next Door Man	-3	Vo 1737 (as JIM MILLER)
12953-2	Next Door Man	-3	*JEMF LP 106*
12954-1	It Must Have Been Her	-1, -4	Ba 32691, Me M12615, Or 8210, Pe 0234, Ro 5210
12955-1	Who Stole De Lock?	-1, -4	Ba 32691, Me M12615, Or 8210, Pe 0234, Ro 5210
12956-1	Joker Man Blues	-3	Vo 1737 (as JIM MILLER)

New York, Thursday, September 14, 1933.

BUDDY MOSS vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver guitar.

14005-1	Midnight Rambler		Ba 32993, Cq 8326, Me M12943, Or 8313, Pe 0271, Ro 5313
14006-1	Best Gal		Me M12808, Or 8273, Ro 5273, Pe 0259
14006-2	Best Gal		Me M12808, Or 8273, Ro 5273, Pe 0259

Me M12943 as BUDDY MOSS AND PARTNER.
Reportedly only one guitar on 14006-2.

BLIND WILLIE vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver vocal-1/guitar.

14007-	Lay Some Flowers On My Grave		Vo unissued
14008-2	Warm It Up To Me	-1	Vo 02595
14009-2	It's Your Time To Worry		*JEMF LP 106*
14010-1	I's A Good Little Thing	-1	Vo 02622

Friday, September 15, 1933.

BUDDY MOSS vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver guitar.

14016-1	Restless Night Blues		Ba 33096, Me M13060, Or 8351, Pe 0286, Ro 5351
14017-1	Married Man's Blues		Ba 33023, Cq 8345, Me M12982, Or 8325, Pe 0275, Ro 5325

Monday, September 18, 1933.

CURLEY WEAVER vocal/guitar, Blind Willie McTell vocal-1/guitar-2/speech-3, Buddy Moss guitar-4

14024-1	You Was Born To Die	-1, -2	*JEMF LP 106*
14025-1	Dirty Mistreater	-3, -4	*JEMF LP 106*
14026-	Oh Lordy Mama		ARC unissued

Files suggest only one guitar on 14026-

BLIND WILLIE vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver vocal/guitar.

14027-1	Lord Have Mercy If You Please		Vo 02623

BUDDY MOSS vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver, guitar-1, Blind Willie McTell, speech-2.

14030-1	Somebody Keeps Calling Me	-1	Ba 33023, Cq 8345, Me M12982, Or 8325, Pe 0275, Ro 5325
14031-1	Back To My Used To Be	-1	ARC unissued (test exists)
14031-2	Back To My Used To Be	-1	*JEMF LP 106*
14032-1	Can't Use You No More	-1, -2	*JEMF LP 106*
14032-2	Can't Use You No More	-1, -2	Ba 32993, Cq 8326, Me M12943, Or 8313, Pe 0271, Ro 5313
14033-2	Travelin' Blues	-1	Ba 33096, Me M13060, Or 8351, Pe 0286, Ro 5351

Me M12943 and Pe 0275 as BUDDY MOSS AND PARTNER.

BLIND WILLIE vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver vocal-1/guitar-2.

14034-1	Don't You See How This World Made A Change	-1, -2	Vo 02623
14035-1	Savannah Mama		Vo 02568
14036-2	Broke Down Engine		Vo 02577
14037-1	Broke Down Engine No. 2		Vo unissued (test exists)
14037-3	Broke Down Engine No. 2		*JEMF LP 106*
14038-2	My Baby's Gone		Vo 02668

Tuesday, September 19, 1933.

It is not known whether Moss or Weaver is the second guitarist on -3.

14045-1	Love-Makin' Mama	-2	*JEMF LP 106*
14045-2	Love-Makin' Mama	-2	Vo unissued (test exists)
14046-	Let Me Play With Your Yo-Yo	-3	Vo unissued
14047-	Hard To Get	-3	Vo unissued
14048-1	Death Room Blues	-2	Vo unissued (test exists)
14048-2	Death Room Blues	-2	*JEMF LP 106*
14049-1	Death Cell Blues	-2	Vo 02577
14050-1	Lord, Send Me An Angel		*JEMF LP 106*
14050-2	Lord, Send Me An Angel		Vo unissued (test exists)

BUDDY MOSS vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver guitar.

14052-1	Bachelors' Blues		Ba 32933, Cq 8325, Me M12876, Or 8295, Pe 0266, Ro 5295
14053-1	Broke Down Engine		Ba 32933, Cq 8325, Me M12876, Or 8295, Pe 0266, Ro 5295
14054-1	Broke Down Engine No. 2		Vo unissued (test exists)
14054-2	Broke Down Engine No. 2		*JEMF LP 106*

CURLEY WEAVER vocal/guitar, Buddy Moss guitar.

14055-	Black Woman		Ba 33120, Me M13087, Or 8362, Pe 0290, Ro 5362
14056-	City Cell Blues		Ba 33120, Me M13087, Or 8362, Pe 0290, Ro 5362
14057-	Mistreatin' Baby Blues		ARC unissued
14058-1	Empty Room Blues		*JEMF LP 106*

BLIND WILLIE vocal/guitar

14059-	Snatch That Thing		Vo unissued

NB: Files for the above give Blind Willie and Partner with Guitar. Thus there may be two vocalists. *Godrich & Dixon* gives Curley Weaver on second guitar.

Thursday, September 21, 1933

BUDDY MOSS vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver guitar.

14064-1	B & O Blues No. 2		Me M12808, Or 8273, Pe 0259, Ro 5273
14065-1	Some Lonesome Day		ARC unissued (test exists)
14065-2	Some Lonesome Day		*JEMF LP 106*

BLIND WILLIE vocal/guitar, Curley Weaver guitar.

14066-1	B & O Blues No. 2		Vo 02568
14066-2	B & O Blues No. 2		*JEMF LP 106*
14067-1	Weary Hearted Blues		Vo 02668
14068-1	Bell Street Lightnin'		*JEMF LP 106*
14069-2	Southern Can Mama		Vo 02622
14070-1	Runnin' Me Crazy		Vo 02595
14071-1	East St. Louis Blues (Fare You Well)		*JEMF LP 106*

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