

The William Walter (Will) Maddox I Knew

by Jack S. Butler Sr.

It must have been in late 1928, or early 1929, that the Will Maddox family moved into the old Shirley home, which was at that time, located across what is now U.S. Highway 43 from our home. ("Home" was the Waller E. Butler residence which was on property now occupied by Town and Country Shopping Plaza.) The old Shirley home had passed through several owners, and in the late 1920s, it was owned and lived in by the Vergil West family. Then it was purchased by the Will West family sometime in 1928. The Will West family never occupied the residence. However, soon after Mr. West purchased the place, a family that I came to know so very well, the Will Maddox family, moved in. Mrs. Will Maddox (Josie South) was the sister of Mrs. Will West (Lucy Jane (Minnie) South), and I am sure that because of the family relationship Mr. West asked Will Maddox to move in and sharecrop the some 40 acres of cropland that went with the residence.

William Walter Maddox was a professional cattle trader. Regardless of what other jobs, he worked at, whether it was running a grocery store, farming, logging, etc., he always turned to trading livestock as his favorite way to put bread on the table.

Will Maddox was a most pleasant kind of person, and he was especially kind and friendly to youngsters such as myself. Will was a great talker, having a way of holding your attention, even though his stories covered all the details which made the waiting for the key phrase all the more exciting and interesting. Never, it seems, did he tire of telling of his experiences, and very often when he repeated some of the stories he had told before, with a few changes here and there, it never occurred to me to doubt anything he said.

With seven children of his own, during the depression years, when times were so difficult and earning enough to feed a large family was paramount, one would not think that Will would always find time to be neighborly to a youngster who lived next door. If I ever had a better relationship with an adult, I can't recall who it might have been.

William Walter Maddox's heritage probably was English, at least members of his family think so. We do know that his father, John Wiley Maddox, was born in South Carolina in the year 1859, and came to Alabama from Abbeville, South Carolina. Will's mother, Phoebe Jane Winters, married John Wiley Maddox in Tuscaloosa County in the late 1880s, probably as late as 1888. John Wiley Maddox lived to be 80 years of age, and died in 1939. John Wiley's wife, Will's mother, was born April 17, 1869, and died in 1891, at the age of 22. Will never remembered his real mother and knew only his stepmother, Mary Alice Broom Maddox, as a mother.

Will was born February 14, 1889 in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, and left home at the age of 16 in 1905. Sometime after 1905, he settled as a hired hand on the Levi Woodruff South farm. There he met, courted, fell in love and married Levi's daughter, Nancy Josephine South, on April

6, 1911. The marriage was a community affair with a Rev. George White, a Baptist minister, presiding.

Between April 6, 1911 and 1929. When I first knew his family, seven children were born to this union. There were Mary William, Lucy Karey, Kenneth Bruce, Robert Leon, Dorothy Mozelle, James Levi, and Sarah (Sadie) Joy.

Two of this number have passed on. They were my old fishing buddy, Bob (Robert Leon, 1978) and Jimmy (James Levi, 1951).

The year 1929, our country was riding along under the presidential leadership of Herbert Hoover. Prices for most farm products were good enough that most farmers were making not only a good living, but were also buying land, building new homes, buying their first automobile and believing that everything next year would be better.

My father not only farmed, he also was in the lumber business and was a partner in the Ford auto dealership. Things were going great and the future looked even better, that is, until the fall of 1929. Earlier in the year, the prices of most items began to fall. It seemed that there was too much of everything. Then, in October, the stock market crash occurred. Most did not know what had happened, but it was not hard to understand that what you had today would be worth a great deal less tomorrow.

For the first time in my young life, I not only heard the term depression, I learned what it was. Cattle prices dropped to five cents per pound, and often there was no market at that price. Eggs that in early 1929. So for \$0.40 a dozen were \$0.10 per dozen by December. The \$0.25 allowance. I usually received on Saturday to go to a movie and buy candy or popcorn and still have some change left, simply was no more. In 1930, money, all but disappeared to youngsters as myself.

In rural Alabama, almost all industry came to a halt. Even Brown Lumber Company, our largest industry, employing over 1000 people, had "slowdowns", "layoffs", and cut wages to the point that one dollar per 10 hours was a standard wage. The cotton mill, relatively new in 1930 struggled to keep its doors open. They only paid \$6 per week for 60 hours work. Farm produce would have sold if only there was someone with the funds to buy.

How did we get by in those trying times? When everyone is in the same situation, all poor, it doesn't seem so bad. If we went anywhere. We nearly always had to walk, and this wasn't too bad for everyone else was walking too. Those who had, shared with those who did not. If someone's house burned, neighbors took them in and shared with them until they could get going again. If someone died, a carpenter friend made the casket. Friends dug the grave, and if someone purchased the services of an undertaker, an expenditure of maybe \$25-\$50, he was talked about as being wasteful, and besides, where did he get the \$50 for a funeral?

Such were the times in the depression years of 1930, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35. The years from 1936 until 1941, when the great war that we all remember as World War II began, were somewhat better for our country.

I know that things were most difficult in the Will Maddox family during those years, and I am sure that Will spent many sleepless nights worrying about their situation. However, with a good live-at-home program, a farm family was better off than most families who lived in urban areas. There was always a cow or two for milk, and almost every farmer kept several hogs, so there was nearly always milk, butter, and meat.

Chickens were also there, so there were eggs and often fried chicken on the table. One must remember, however, that having such on a farm did not just happen. There had to be feed, fodder, etc. But by and large, the Will Maddox family, like so many others, got by.

Getting a job, regardless of how menial the work, was at times impossible. It was in times such as these that cattle traders such as Will Maddox had to really be careful. It was not unusual for a trader to work all week and wind up with less cattle and money than when the week began, I remember Will telling me on more than one occasion that every cattle trade was a lesson. As time passed, we not only adjusted to the depression years, we learned to smooth out some of the rough spots. We learned to get by on less as well as to use only what we needed. Markets stabilized, though prices remained low. Many who were unemployed found jobs as a response to President Roosevelt's National Recovery Act.

One of the favorite sports that William Walter Maddox enjoyed was listening to the prize fights through the medium of radio. In the year 1932, a prize fighter named James J. Braddock defeated the heavyweight champion whose name was Jack Sharkey¹. For some reason Will was a real fan of James J. Braddock, especially after he became the heavyweight champion of the world. At about the same time there was a young black prize fighter named Joe Louis. This young man had been born in Alabama, but his family had moved north to Detroit where Joe Louis grew up. As Louis grew and developed, it was quite apparent that he and Braddock would meet in the prize ring with the world's championship at stake. Louis was a black man. Braddock was white and a Scotch-Irishman. Louis was about 21 years of age and Braddock was almost 30.

As these two fighters headed for a championship fight, interest in who would win grew with Mr. W. W. Maddox. He told his son, and me time and again, "Boys, you can bet your bottom dollar on James J. Braddock. He'll knock out that colored boy by the fifth round." Of course, I did not have \$.50, let alone, a dollar. However, when I went home and told my grown and married brother Albert about what W. W. Maddox had said, he assured me that if Mr. Maddox offered to bet me again, I could rely on him to back me up as far as five dollars. Five dollars! To me, that was an astronomical sum, and the thought of winning or losing that amount of money caused me much concern. Even though I knew I should not be thinking of really betting, the thought intrigued me because deep down I knew Louis would win.

When the Good Lord made me, he, maybe on purpose, failed to give me my just share of shyness or bashfulness, so when I was again at the Maddox home, as I was nearly every day, I made it a point to bring up for discussion the coming Louis and Braddock fight. If Mr. Maddox was in the next room, I would talk loud enough for him to hear. Sure enough, it wasn't more than a minute that he joined Bob, Bruce and me, telling us not to worry for Braddock would most likely knock out Louis before the fight was half over. This is where I spoke up and said, "I'll bet Louis wins and by a knockout." At that, W. W. Maddox gave me his best trading looks, saying, "How much would you bet that Louis will knock out the champion?" Lord help me, he had me backed into a corner in front of friends and everybody. I had to back up my statement or shut up. Suddenly I heard myself saying, "I'll bet \$2.50 he will knock out Braddock by the 10th round." I said it, but I felt like a fool, and I immediately thought what if I lose, and Albert doesn't have the \$2.50 to pay the bet. You can also write it down W. W. Maddox heard what I said for it didn't take him more than 10 seconds to say, "Jack Butler, if you mean what you said I'll take that bet." I felt awful, but there was no way I could back out. To back out would be the same thing as being called "yellow", and that would never happen, not to me.

That night when Albert, my older brother, got home from his coal hauling job, I was there to tell him that I had made the bet. Well, Albert, my brother, was eight years older than me and already married. He had a job that some weeks made him as much as \$20 above expenses. In 1934, that was fantastic. All the same, Albert wanted to hear every detail of the bet. But when he heard that I had bet in front of witnesses that Louis would win by a knockout by the middle of the fight, he quickly said, "Jack, that's a damn fool bet. Why didn't you just bet that Louis would win?" While he was saying that, my mind was racing along with thoughts of what if Albert doesn't back me and I lose. Where could I get \$2.50? I wouldn't dare ask my brother Caine for it because he would tell my dad. My brother Joe was living in Jasper. What would I do? I guess Albert could read my expression for he told me, "I'll still back you, but will have to work out a way for you to pay me back because you will lose that bet. Come by on the night of the fight and get the \$2.50 for you will have to have it to pay that bet."

What a relief. Now I was sure I would lose that bet, but at least I was covered. Let's keep in mind that my mother and dad did not know a thing about this, and I certainly did not plan to tell them.

Before I was ready, the night of the fight arrived. I met Albert as he drove in the yard at his house to pick up the \$2.50. There were two \$1 bills and a \$.50 piece of pure silver. By this time, I had worried so much about my predicament that just getting it over would be a relief. When my brother gave me the money, he also gave me about a hundred things I was going to do for him around his house to pay it back. All this did not matter for I was ready with money in my overalls pocket to pay my just debts.

I arrived at the Maddox home at about 7:30 PM where I found that they had moved their radio into the living room so that everyone could hear and enjoy the fight. That is, all but me. There was no way I could enjoy losing \$2.50. As best I can recall, everyone but me was in a happy

mood. Bob and Bruce Maddox felt as did their dad that Braddock would win. Bruce stepped close to me and said, "Let's see your money. Have you got the \$2.50?" I showed him the money.

What a relief. What if I did not have it? About this time, W. W. Maddox came in to join us. He came over to me, put his arm around my shoulder and whispered, "Jack, do you want to call off the bet? I feel sure that Louis will lose." I replied, like a crazy, cocky kid, "No sir, I don't renege on any bet." I said that, and had never bet before in my 14 years of living. W. W. Maddox, in a sort of a fatherly tone said, "Okay, we'll let the bet stand as it was made." I couldn't help but remember that bet as it was made, and that was for me to win, Louis had to knock out Braddock by or before the 10th round was over. The fight was for 15 rounds.

I suppose I looked foolish trying to show was confident of winning. I know that I felt like a fool for very soon I was sure that me and my brother's money would be parted.

The radio sounded loud. The fight began, and Braddock, according to the announcer easily won the first round. The second round Louis began to loosen up. The round, according to the announcer was all about even. In the fourth round, Louis really got going and then suddenly Louis was down. You could hear the announcer count with the referee. Louis was up at the count of eight and lost the round. Almost everyone in the Maddox house including me, agreed with the radio announcer that Braddock would surely knock Louis out in the next round, which was round number five.

The bell sounded, the fight renewed, the scene changed. Louis belted Braddock all over the rain. By the time the round was half over, everyone at ringside, as well as those of us in the Will Maddox living room knew that Braddock was being beaten into submission. Sure enough, in a matter of less than two minutes of the fifth round, Louis had won by a knockout.

The fight over, W. W. Maddox walked across the room to where I was sitting, put \$2.50 in my hand and simply said, "Jack, you won." I felt awful when I should have been happy. The others in the room were quiet as I left the house, and I know that I will always remember thinking, "Is this the way one feels when he wins a bet?"

Albert lived just across the road. I stopped by his house and gave him his two \$1bills and the \$.50 piece. Then I walked across the field to our home. It must have been 9:00 P.M. by the time I walked in the door. Poppa was already in bed, and Mama was waiting up for me.

I did not sleep much that night. I remember thinking that I should have, and wondered why I did not. At breakfast the next morning I unloaded my troubles to my mother and dad. Poppa was quick to tell me, "Jack, do you think Will Maddox would have taken your \$2.50? Of course he wouldn't. You get up this very minute and go and give him back his money. Then I'll talk to you about this later."

Now I knew what Poppa meant when he said he would talk to me later. Either he would paddle me or talk to me for a long time. Either was bad.

Even though I had my reckoning with my dad coming, the bad feeling I had was gone. I ran across the field and then across the road to the Maddox home. W. W. Maddox was getting ready to go somewhere trading I'm sure for he had his high cattle beds on his truck. When I approached him, I quickly said, "Mr. Maddox, my dad says I've got to give you back your \$2.50. Here it is." I attempted to give it to him, but he would not accept it. His answer was, "Jack, a bet is a bet and a debt is a debt. The money is yours fair and square." My reply was more like pleading, "I've got to give it back. I can't keep it. Poppa's going to find out if you don't take it back."


W. W. Maddox understood for he said, "Maybe there's something I have that's worth \$2.50, let's trade." I will always believe that he knew how much I admired his set of ropes he used to handle cattle. There was one rope that was new or practically new that I had seen in his rope box several times. W. W. did not use it for it was only about 12 feet long, not really long enough for what he used them for. He saw me as I looked in his rope box. "Would you give me \$2.50 for this short rope?" He asked. I replied, "Yes sir." The deal was closed. The cross I carried was lifted. Now all that remained was my meeting with my dad, who I knew would give me "what for" for betting which was the same to him as gambling with cards or dice.

In time, we all grew up. Bruce and I played high school football together. Bob and I hunted and fished as teenagers, and I have written about an incident with him at another time. One by one, the Maddox children married and left home. Bruce and I attended Auburn University and both went off to the war together. Both of us were wounded and we both wear Purple Heart Medals and Ribbons.

Bob Maddox survived a gasoline fire and later died of a heart attack in 1978. James Levi passed away in 1951, shortly after finishing school at Auburn. Lucy lost her only child, a daughter, to that damnable disease we call cancer. Dorothy married a young man named Cannon and moved to Texas. It seems that most Texans come from Alabama.

William Walter Maddox died in 1963 at the age of 73 and 11 months. He was followed by his wife, Nancy Josephine South Maddox, in 1968, at the age of 80 years and six months. I remember them as honest, hard-working, churchgoing people who did their very best for all their children with what they had. Who could do more?

Jack S. Butler, Senior March 1986



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ⁱ According to Wikipedia, Sharkey defeated Max Schmeling for the heavyweight title in 1932 and Braddock defeated Max Baer for the heavyweight title in 1935. The Braddock-Louis fight was in 1937. Jack Butler would have been 14 years old.