

Tribute to Berry C. Williams

*by his daughter, Cynthia Williams
as printed in the 1980 Jamboree Souvenir Program*

He remembered a calliope drawn by a white horse. When he was but four and five years old, too small to venture alone beyond the boundaries of his own yard; he would run up the hill to the town square as fast as his legs would carry him when the calliope came to town. Some townsmen would discover him and knowing that his mother would be frantic at this disappearance, would trot him home. Though Berry got a switching for his mischief, he would, at the first opportunity, run back to town, seeking the calliope. Nothing could allay his enthusiasm or check his energy.



Joe L. Evins (left) and Berry C. Williams during the playing of the National Anthem 1975

He lived for 60 years. And the foremost impression he left upon those who knew him, whether in the first five or the last five years of his life, was of his infectious and boyish enthusiasm and his incredible energy. From the beginning, this exuberance and vitality found their release in competition; he reveled in competition. Be he defending a client in court or fishing, building houses or perfecting a golf swing, juggling multi-million dollar real estate deals or pitching horseshoes, bidding for a government contract to construct invasion barges for Vietnam or playing Scrabble, he was competing, and not for any material reward, but for the sheer joy of the victory. It is wonderfully fitting that in the last four years of his life his creative and competitive energy should have been combined with his love of music, a love which began, perhaps, with a calliope drawn by a white horse, and with his grandmother, who often lulled him to sleep as a child by playing her harmonica.

In 1972, Congressman Joe L. Evins casually suggested to Berry that he consider the possibility of rounding up a few area musicians and staging a country music show in Smithville, the purpose of such an event being to draw people into the town which had recently been elected to the Federal government's Model City program. Berry got to thinking about Joe's idea and the result was inevitable. He "rounded up" exactly 714 musicians from 16 states and with tireless and imaginative promotion, an audience of approximately 8,000 people. On July 1, 1972, a man with a dulcimer stepped onto the small stage erected on the west side of the new DeKalb County Courthouse and the first Smithville Country Fiddlers' Jamboree began.

The odds against his being able to draw so many musicians and so large an audience to the relatively obscure little town of Smithville had been great; but he had competed against the odds and won. So he got to thinking. Why not do it again next year? In fact, he thought, his eyes shining with glee, why not do it again every year? Of course, it never occurred to him to simply repeat his success of the first year. No challenge in that. Instinctively, he determined to increase the number of fans and contestants.

At the second Smithville Fiddlers' Jamboree approximately 30,000 people converged upon the town to hear 1,024 musicians from 27 states compete in 13 categories of music. By 1975, the Jamboree, which the people of Smithville had, by then, accepted as an annual fact of their lives, had attracted nearly 50,000 people from 36 states and 16 foreign countries. The publicity that

had attracted these people to the Jamboree were the letters, notices and articles that Berry pounded from his smoking typewriter for months prior to and days after each festival; these notices and articles appeared in 448 daily and weekly newspapers and in many of the nation's leading magazines, and they were broadcast over 595 radio stations. In addition, in 1973, the British Broadcasting Company in London had sent a six-man television crew to film the Jamboree; their film, a one-hour documentary, was televised all over Europe for a period of six months. Leading television reporters, personalities and producers, politicians and newspaper writers from all over the state also attended the Jamborees, which in 1974, Berry improved by inviting over 100 craftsmen from more than a dozen states to display and sell their authentic pioneer and contemporary crafts during the festival.

It was a little more than a month after the second Jamboree that Berry wrote a letter to Congressman Evins. "I've been thinking..." he said. Anticipating that the Jamboree would continue to grow year after year until it simply outgrew the town square, Berry suggested to Congressman Evins that they look into the possibility of getting an amphitheater built, large enough to hold, say, 10,000 people. "It could be run as a yearly fiddlers' jamboree and arts and crafts center...and for the preservation of fold and old-time country music, and the promotion of mountain arts and crafts. This is worth thinking about..." he said. Several months later, he had the plan all worked out in his head. In another letter, he said:

"My plans include the building of:

- 1) An outdoor amphitheater, in band shell form, on a slope or hill...
- 2) A large convention hall, seating, say 10,000 people – whose main purpose would be to handle the annual national folk and old-time unamplified country music shows of fiddlers' jamborees, to which each state in the union would send its top three or four in some 14 categories of competition...
- 3) A smaller building, called the "Folk and Old-Time Country Music Hall of Fame," to which each year about five members would be elected by polling from all the 50 states...
- 4) Perhaps the most important part would be the establishment of a Mart for the encouragement, promotion, teaching of manufacturing, pricing distribution and marketing of all Mountain Arts and Crafts.

I am very much interested in this, and will give much of my time to bringing it to fruition."

For the next two years, he did just that. Finally, in December, 1975, a Public Works Bill, containing a two and one half million dollar appropriation for an arts and crafts center in Tennessee, passed both the House and the Senate. And in May of 1976, Governor Blanton announced that a bill had been passed authorizing the expenditure of 2.5 million dollars for the creation of the craft center, to be located on the Tech Aqua property of Tennessee Tech University. Berry Williams, however, had died on April 8th.

When I was a child and anyone asked me what my father did, I'd say, "He's a builder." I had heard the words "attorney" and "building contractor" and "real estate investor" applied to him, but these words were very big words and incomprehensible to me. So I'd say simply, "builder," hoping that my inquisitor would ask for no elaboration on that definition, because for the life of me, I couldn't have explained just exactly what Daddy did. Now I know about all the things that he did and were I to begin a list of his activities and interests and accomplishments, I would not finish for many hours. So I think that, in the future, should anyone ask me, "What was your father?" I shall say simply, "He was a builder."