

# Woman Recalls Days of Singing with Sister in Theaters, Records

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At 90, Pauline Huggans doesn't spend too much of her time anymore reflecting on what might have been. Today, for her "what was, was good enough."

Known affectionately by her family members as "Aunt Ween," the Johnson City woman can still recall a day when the bright lights and big city beckoned her and her younger sister, Jennie, to revel in the glory of its glitz and glamour.

The two girls were one of the first — if not the first — sister acts to record their "hillbilly" singing on a major label, said Huggans' great-nephew, Bob Cox, from Columbia, S.C., but a Johnson City native.

Cox recently recorded on tape his great-aunt talking about some of her favorite memories as a young, talented girl from the South who chased her dreams in the big cities up North, in order to preserve some precious Bowman family history.

"I got the nickname 'Aunt Ween,' because so many of the little kids couldn't pronounce my name. 'Aunt Ween' is short for 'Aunt Pauline.' Everybody started calling me 'Aunt Ween.'" Huggans said.

After her famous father, the late "Fiddlin' " Charlie Bowman, who was inducted into the North American Fiddlers' Hall of Fame in July 2001, returned to his Gray Station home in 1928, he was approached by New York record producer Frank Walker about making some 78 rpm records.

These would contain recordings of Bowman and his three brothers, Elbert Bowman, Walter Bowman and Argil Bowman.

While in town, Walker inquired about also "discovering the musical talent" of Charlie Bowman's lovely young daughters, after hearing and recording their renditions of "Swanee River" and "My Old Kentucky Home" in a makeshift studio on Main Street in Johnson City.

On Oct. 23, 1929, the Bowman sisters were personally invited by Walker to travel to New York City to record two more songs, "Railroad Take Me Back," written by their father, and "Old Lonesome Blues," this time at the studio of Columbia Records. Pauline was 16, and Jennie was 14.

"Jennie and I sang country and western type music — hillbilly music," Huggans said.

"We went up in the Columbia Building. We went clear to the top of it. Back then, it was the next tallest building to the Empire State Building. When we got on that elevator, it liked to have scared me to death. It took my breath. After I got up there, I was so scared I didn't want

to come back down. There wasn't any other way of getting down, unless you walked down those stairs. I looked out the window, and the cars below looked like small toy cars."

It was the younger, more adventurous sister, Jennie, who most enjoyed "hamming it up" — both behind the microphone and in front of the camera, Huggans said.

"When Jennie and I were posing for the Bowman Sisters picture for the Loew's Metropolitan Theatres, Jennie was given something to wrap around her shoulders, because she wanted to look sexy. I just wanted to look like a country girl," Huggans said.

In addition to her vocal talent, Jennie could also play the ukulele, accordion and fiddle. Pauline sang and played harmonica.

"When we got to New York City, we stayed at Mansfield Hall near Madison Square Garden. We stayed at this big hotel where there were a lot of other performers, as well as some circus people staying there. We stayed there with the tallest man in the world. They had to put two beds together for him to sleep in," she said.

"We also stayed with the shortest man in the world, whose name was Major Mite. (He later played one of the Munchkins in the *Wizard of Oz*). He was mine and Jennie's friend," Huggans said.

"We stayed there a long time in that hotel. We were playing theaters all over New York. There was a diner right next door to the hotel. It had the best breakfast there ever was. We would go over there to get fried potatoes. They never had any gravy and biscuits. We would walk all over New York City without fear of crime. We liked to walk up and down Fifth Avenue and look at the pretty clothes in the windows."

In the winter of 1930, Bowman and his daughters had returned to Gray Station, where he was approached by H.M. "Hank" Barnes about the three of them joining his band, the Blue Ridge Ramblers.

By 1931, Bowman and the girls, now ages 18 and 16, were touring with the band on the Loew's Metropolitan Theatre Vaudeville Circuit.

Other than the short stint spent recording in New York, Huggans remembered working hard at home in Tennessee raising pigs and chickens and tending vegetable gardens, up until the time she started touring regularly with the Blue Ridge Ramblers.

"Poor old mom cried and cried when we left. I was her helper," she said.

Along with their Appalachian accents, the Bowman sisters brought a unique style of entertainment to the Vaudeville stage, billed as "Hillbilly Vaudeville."

Between each movie showing, the theater would feature several entertainment acts, with each one presenting somewhere between two and eight performances a day.

Over the next few years, the Bowmans traveled extensively all over the Northeastern United States with the Blue Ridge Ramblers. Before their tour ended, they had appeared in every state in New England.

Huggans later married Jimmy James, one of the Blue Ridge Ramblers — without her father's consent or knowledge.

While Huggans and her husband eventually returned to Gray to settle down for a while, her sister, Jennie, who couldn't seem to ever get enough of the spotlight, traveled and performed with her father for several more years.

She, too, eventually married and settled locally, but continued performing at such venues as Big Burley Warehouse, Jonesborough's courthouse and WOPI Radio in Bristol.

A talented yodeler, Jennie was even offered a part in the Gene Autry movie, *Yodeling Kid From Pine Ridge*, but had to turn down the offer, because she was pregnant with her first child. Jennie died in 1976.

Note: Pauline Bowman died on Christmas Eve in 2003,



Jennie and Pauline Bowman around 1926