

Robbie Joe

by Loyd Gilbert Gilley

He was always there in my life. He was my Mama's youngest brother, but since he was only five years older than me, he was more like a big brother than an uncle to me. I looked up to and idolized him. In many ways, I followed in his footsteps. As a young boy, he got a job delivering the *Grit* newspaper on his bicycle to neighbors to earn spending money. I did the same as soon as I got old enough. Just after he got married, he got a second job delivering the *Florida Times Union* to earn a little extra money, so he could get started in life. I, too, delivered the same newspaper for five years as a second job to earn money to buy our first home and a family. We were tied together as if there were an invisible chain between us.

We did not throw the ball around when we were young; we did not have a darn ball. He did play *mumblely peg** with me using his jack knife. He also taught me how to take an ear of fresh corn from the field, shuck it, silt it, and stick it in Grandma's hot wood stove to roast. He taught me how to steal sweet 'taters, corn pone, and cold biskits from Grandma's pie safe in the middle of the afternoon. He taught me to sit on the lower bench at meal time because it was not as easily turned over. He taught me how to stick a persimmon on the end of a stick and using the leverage of that limber stick to throw the persimmon for a mile. He taught me how to be a little boy in the backwoods of Jackson County, how to survive and how to find ways to entertain myself. We rode on the mule drawn wagon, with Granddaddy to Sneads and saw a movie while Granddaddy shopped and visited with friends by the water pump.

I was seven years old on March 29, 1949, the day Granddaddy Willie died. Robbie Joe was twelve. Granddaddy was only fifty six years old, in good health, and his death was unexpected. We were all shocked and devastated by his death. Even at age seven, I could see the fear and anguish in Robbie Joe's eyes. He seemed lost. A few weeks after Granddaddy died, I saw Robbie Joe swinging on the swing at school. He seemed to be swinging as high as he could possibly go. I was afraid he was trying to hurt himself. I sauntered down near the swing, sat by a pecan tree and just watched him. I saw the despair in him, and I prayed that God would keep him safe and give him peace.

We were a part of each other's life until Robbie Joe died on February 20, 2012. That anguish in him never truly went away.

In April 2009, a group of us was fishing on Lake Seminole in my brother Larry's pontoon boat. On the boat were: my brothers: Larry, Jerry, Harry; Uncle Robbie Joe; brother-in-law, Eddie Paul Lawrence; and me. It was a beautiful spring day, and we were all very happy to be fishing together. Someone mentioned my retirement coming up in May. Robbie Joe came nearer to me and asked,

"What are you going to do when you retire?"

"I am going to write a book", I said.

A few minutes went by and he asked, "Well, what are you going to write a book about?"

"I am going to write a book about my life growing up in the Quarters."

Again a few minutes went by, and I noticed a concerned look on his face. He came back over to me and asked, "Are you going to write about me?"

I looked directly into his eyes and said, "Robbie Joe, you were a major part of my life growing up, and there is no way I can write the damn book without writing about you."

There was a long silence, and he wandered back over and said, "You know, I have always been a pretty good fellow."

"Robbie Joe, you are a damn good man. You have always been a damn good man, but you can never tell when I am going to lie in that book"

That ended the conversation about my book.

Two or three days after I returned home, I received an e-mail from Aunt Hope, Robbie Joe's Wife. The message was this: *Robbie Joe wants to be on the first page of your book.* I guess he was willing to take a chance on whatever I was going to say about him.

Editors and publishers control the first two or three pages of a book, and I was certainly not going to put Robbie Joe on my front cover. I decided to dedicate the book to my grandson, Bradley, who suggested the book in the first place, and to Uncle Robbie Joe.



Robbie Joe and Loyd in 2011

Two weeks before his death, Uncle Robbie Joe received his copy of my book, *Backfields of My Memory*.

I received another e-mail from Aunt Hope, and she said he was very pleased with the book. Later Aunt Hope told my sister that Robbie Joe sat on the front porch reading the book, laughing at some stories and crying at others. Folks, that alone makes the two and half years of blood, sweat, and the thousands of dollars involved in launching my book worth everything.

Thank God for my Uncle Robbie Joe, and I ask God to give him a special seat in Heaven.

In loving memory of Robbie Joe Williams

*Google Mumbely Peg



Loyd Gilley retired May 2009 after working 48 years with GE/RCA. I started writing stories about my youth on the suggestion of my grandson, Bradley Mauger. I lived in an exciting time with no electricity, no running water and no indoor toilet until I was nine years old. I now live in Clermont, Florida with Marilyn, my wife of 48 years. I am the father of three daughters and granddaddy to four wonderful grandchildren.