

“Once again, Lynelle Mason has penned a work that is commendable in writing style, research, and intrigue. It holds the reader’s interest in a powerful way as she reveals the ups and downs of her early life. After writing about many others, lastly my own biography as told by Lynelle, I read with great interest her account of her own life story up to adulthood. I could see many similarities to mine, although our backgrounds were very different in many ways. She pushed through adversities to reach her goals. She was supported by strong people who loved her and encouraged her, with her mother being a central figure. Although she was only a baby when her father died, the influence of that event shaped much of the family’s life, and therefore, Lynelle’s writing style of bringing in history and current events adds interest and brings richness to her story. I now understand better the woman whom I call friend. I so admire someone Lynelle’s age who continues to be very engaged in life and takes on projects that require a lot of work. She is an inspiration and model for all of us. Instead of resting on her laurels after a life of many achievements, she continues on an active path. With the ups and downs of life, what stands out prominently is her strong Christian faith, which is something for each of us to emulate.”
—Phyllis E. Miller, Obstetrician-Gynecologist, Chattanooga, Tenn.

“*My Inheritance* is a candid and heartwarming memoir of childhood amidst family turmoil and upheaval during the Depression and World War II. Lynelle Mason invites us to walk with her through the untimely death of her father, the struggles her mother endured to keep the family together, and her first steps toward a wider understanding of the world and the importance of her faith. Carefully sifting through a trove of memory, she has clearly identified what was worth keeping and what needed to be left behind. The lessons imposed by hardship and struggle have not been without value, and she has done us a great service by sharing those lessons.”
—Bill Ireland, Pastor/Executive Coach/Church Consultant, Knoxville, Tenn.

“Lynelle Mason gives us a child’s eye view of events from 1931 to 1948. As historically important as the Depression and WWII were in our country’s past, Lynelle’s clear-eyed view of her family’s life is the highlight of *My Inheritance*. The poverty and nomadic life she experienced were undergirded by the deep love of her mother, siblings, and a large extended family. Join Lynelle’s journey through South Georgia, as she overcomes a fractured early education to become a confident young woman.”—Martha Killian, Former Special Education Teacher, Aiken, S.C.

“To know Lynelle Mason now as an amazingly positive and vibrant person, you would never guess what a difficult and often tragic young life she lived. This is a story of courage, grit, perseverance, and love. *My Inheritance* will inspire each of us to be grateful for those in our lives who have loved us along the way and have pointed us to a loving and faithful God.”—Brenda Hooper, Former English and Speech Teacher, Signal Mountain, Tenn.

“I have read all of Lynelle’s books and enjoyed them immensely. She always seems to keep me interested as a slow reader. In *My Inheritance*, I appreciate how she speaks candidly about her family’s struggles and that God was always with her.”—Nibby Priest, Insurance Advisor, Henderson, Ky.

“Lynelle Mason brings her early years to life with her inspirational telling of her story with colorful anecdotes. Her resourceful mother worked hard to keep the family together after her husband’s untimely death. You will enjoy Lynelle’s list of Santa’s gifts such as fiddlesticks and jacks and the big handful of hard candy that a nickel would bring at that time. Lynelle includes her faith journey and how she almost became a Methodist. I commend this entertaining book by a remarkable woman.”—Carol Prevost, Former English and Speech/Drama Teacher, Chattanooga, Tenn.

My Inheritance

Family and Faith
During the Great Depression and World War II

Lynelle Sweat Mason

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Top Cover Image: Three generations of the Jordan Family, c. 1920.

Bottom Cover Image: (Left to right) Kathryn, Herbert, and Lynelle Sweat.

Pump Organ on Page 20: Wystan, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

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PREFACE

If someone told you that you had inherited a million dollars, what would you say? What would you do? My guess is you'd be leaping in the air with wild thoughts running through your mind of living on Easy Street for the rest of your life.

The things I have inherited, both the good and the not-so-good, have little to do with money. Among my inheritances are the genes given to me by my parents and ancestors. The places where I have lived have left their marks on me, some happy and some sad. Likewise, certain people and events, both sought and unsought, throw additional light on who I am. They all are tied together in a bundle I choose to call my inheritance.

I encourage you to look for inheritance traces throughout this narrative, roughly divided into the following time periods, and also to explore your own inheritance.

1931–1938

1938–1940

1940–1942

1942–1943

1943–1945

1945–1946

1946–1948

INTRODUCTION

Not even America's Great Depression of 1929 that turned the economics of the world topsy-turvy could slow the romantic intentions of Cleo Jordan and Ward Sweat. Cleo lived with her mother and often visited in the home of her married brother, Crawley. Both her mother and Crawley lived in the area that today is known as Dixie Union, situated 15 miles north of Waycross, Ga. Ward lived with his family 22 miles from Waycross in Pierce County, in a rural area sandwiched between the towns of Alma and Blackshear.

In a letter that Ward wrote to Cleo from his home, he exclaimed—with a lot of “ohs!” interjected—how he was yearning to see her and how deeply he was disturbed to hear that she thought he didn't care for her. He bemoaned the single life and attested he would enjoy being married. Throughout his letter he asked Cleo, “Don't you?” Much of his letter involved his trying to figure out when Cleo was going to be home.

(In the 1920s a young man called on a young lady at her home. And, if the two of them were lucky, they could go for a short stroll. Kissing and petting were taboo.)

Cleo was enrolled in a school where she majored in elocution, better known today as speech, and she had just finished a starring role in a school play. Her theatrical career, however, ended when her brother Crawley gave his blessing for Ward and Cleo to marry. Cleo was 17, and Ward was 18. The couple spent their one-night honeymoon at the DeSoto Hotel in Savannah.

Cleo's parents, David Abraham Jordan and Leannie Taylor Jordan, had begun their marriage in a one-room log cabin with a dirt floor, on the land north of Waycross where they would later build a spacious dwelling. By the time Cleo was born, David Abraham had acquired massive land holdings.

Ward's family lived in an obscure part of Pierce County called The Forks of the Hurricane. The unusual name for that area came from a violent storm that tore through a large swath of land in Bacon and Pierce counties and stripped the land of thousands of trees. Although the storm was a tornado, the settlers called it a hurricane and named the resulting barren land Big and Little Hurricane Creeks. The "Forks" part had to do with where the creeks divided into two parts.

The Sweats' house would never adorn the pages of *Southern Living* magazine. Through the years it experienced many growing pains. It probably started with a main bedroom, and later a kitchen and dining room and a huge hallway connecting them were added. The house also boasted an indoor bathroom and a six-party telephone hookup. Electricity provided the family with pumped well water.

Upon the death of her father in 1912, 13-year-old Cleo was given two pieces of property: a farm 15 miles north of Waycross and a house at 602 Miller Street in Waycross, the county seat of Ware County, located 57 miles from the Florida line. First settled in 1820, it was the ninth stop from Savannah on the railroad, and soon became known as "Old Nine." Only much later did the name Waycross stick.

By 1930, Waycross had established itself as a railroad hub for the Southeast and boasted a population of 15,510, nine of whom resided at 602 Miller Street: Cleo Archie Jordan Sweat and John Ward Sweat and their five boys and two girls. On Feb. 24, 1931, Baby girl Sweat (the name that appeared on my original birth certificate) joined the company of this family with deep roots in Southeast Georgia.

John Ward Jr. (J.W. or J. Fudge)

Quentin (Skeet)

Darcile

Harold

Chandos (C.D.)

Kathryn (Tunt)

Herbert

Lynelle (Ninkey)

Join me in experiencing a slice of the small town of Waycross I knew as a youngster.

You have a nickel to spend, and it's burning your hand like hot lead. You can't wait to get to S. H. Kress & Co. "five and dime" store. Alas! as you arrive to cross over Hicks Street to get on Plant Avenue, your eyes and ears are bombarded by a train engine going chugga, chugga, chugga, choo choo! The friendly engineer waves and toots his horn: waank, waank, waank! I wave back and begin staring at the too-many-to-count cargo cars snaking behind the engineer's elevated seat.

Suddenly the air space darkens as billows of black smoke descend upon me. I close my eyes, hoping to escape the tiny bits of flying sparks coming from the boiler. Finally, I spy the little red caboose and begin smacking my lips in anticipation of the huge display of mouth-watering candy I will soon gaze upon once the train passes and the tracks are clear. Digging in with my bare feet and running as fast as I can, I waste no time finding the five-and-dime store.

When I get to the candy counter, I point to the peanut butter kisses and show the clerk my nickel. She begins filling a quart sifter with the brown, individually wrapped goodies. When it is crammed full, almost to the point of over-flowing, the purchase is completed. Clutching my bag of candy, I skedaddle home.

The laid-back, safe, family-friendly community of Waycross in the 1930s–1940s is part of my inheritance. So, too, is the small but comfortable wood-frame house on Miller Street with a modest front porch. It had electric lights and a commode, but no bathtub. And a major part of my enduring inheritance is the family that lived in this simple house, a family cemented together with love.