

WHO ME?

Rev. Clay Evans will never read a word of this story. Not one word. He would; he just can't. His eyesight isn't what it used to be. It's a hard truth, a difficult reality. But Reverend Evans won't ever read his story on these published pages. No matter. He knows the story pretty well. After all, it's his story. Actually, Reverend Evans's life has been more like an exciting adventure, filled with tragedies and joys, friends and enemies, villains and heroes, victories and defeats. And now this adventure is retold for you, in hopes that it will impart some important lessons. Lessons, Reverend Evans would say, to inspire you to be the best version of yourself. Lessons to challenge you to extend greater measures of openness, generosity, and mercy to those you encounter—yes even, and especially, your enemies! Lessons, he'd say, to inspire you to show greater humility—yes, definitely to those with whom you disagree! Lessons to reconcile you with others and yourself. That's always been Reverend Evans's hope for this project. "If this book doesn't help encourage someone else, if it doesn't inspire them, give them hope, or draw them

closer to God,” he’d often say to me, “then there’s no point writing it.” So here is Rev. Clay Evans’s great adventure in life and ministry, shared now with you for the sake of the better world you can create if you’re open enough, loving enough, courageous enough, and humble enough to learn the lessons within these pages.

During his fifty years as a senior pastor, Rev. Clay Evans comforted thousands of souls. However, the only way to tell Evans’s story properly is to begin with the very first soul his ministry ever touched. It’s earlier than one might think, earlier than even he remembers. The first time Clay Evans eased the agony of a burdened soul went something like this:

DECEMBER 1927—It was December 23, 1927. In Haywood County on a rural farm in Brownsville, Tennessee, a shy two-and-a-half-year-old boy named Clay scurried across the shabby floor of a sharecropping family’s small kitchen. His mother, Estanauly, looked lovingly on. She pondered, “What a strange child!” She knew it. Her husband Henry and the rest of the family knew it. Even all the neighbors knew it. Clay’s third birthday was just six months away, and he hadn’t spoken a single word. Not one. Instead, he communicated nonverbally—through body language, facial expressions, and smiles and frowns. Or he used an assortment of noises, like groaning or grunting. But he never spoke words. He couldn’t. Clay Evans was a sickly child. Everyone knew it. “My mother was very burdened about that,” he recalled. “She prayed and prayed and prayed that

I would talk.” To ease the weight of such a terrible burden, his mother often looked heavenward for strength. Writing about the intensity of Estanauly’s struggle raising a son with health problems, author Dorothy June Rose declared, “Clay had been the supreme test of her faith. A sickly baby, he taxed her energy and often kept her in anxious vigil through long and sleepless nights.”¹ There were moments when Estanauly and Henry Evans faced the painful possibility that their son might never speak.

One autumn day several months earlier, Estanauly had sat on the porch steps of the Evanses’ home in Brownsville with her two friends, Ellie and Pearl. Estanauly, then a thirty-one-year-old mother of four who was sixth months pregnant with her fifth child, watched Ellie and Pearl’s children play a game of hide-and-go-seek while little Clay sat silently. Ellie and Pearl looked at Clay. Then they looked at Estanauly with concerned eyes. Finally, Pearl gathered the courage to break the silence:

“Whatcha goin to do ’bout that baby of yours there, Estanauly?” Pearl asked. “Over two years old now and just sits there quiet as a little field mouse.”

Ellie also chimed in. “Do you suppose he’s ever goin’ to talk, Estanauly?” she asked.²

Estanauly gazed fondly at Clay. Refusing to hide her uncertainty, she replied simply, “*I don’t know.*” Doubt filled her eyes, but only for a moment. Still gazing at her happy baby boy, Estanauly beamed brightly. It was the hopeful smile of

a woman of faith who believed God could, somehow, do the impossible. Encouraged by this hope, she turned back to her friends, more certain this time, and responded:

“All I know, he’s in the good Lord’s hands. He was a hard time borning and sick more than well his whole first year. Henry ’n I was sure we’d lose him many a night. But the good Lord brought him through, and brought him through for a purpose. If the Lord give us a dumb baby, well He give him to us for a reason. And if the Lord wants Clay to talk, well, He’ll just have to make that happen, too. Ain’t nothin goes on He’s not in charge of. And that’s just good enough for me.”³

In the meantime, family members adjusted. They learned to decipher Clay’s many nonverbal cues. Estanauly continued to pray for her mute son’s deliverance. So many nights she prayed. And so many mornings little Clay woke up still quiet as a field mouse. But then, two days before Christmas in 1927, her prayers were answered. Estanauly was sitting with friends at the Evanses’ kitchen table, watching Clay scurry silently about. Though the Evans family had very little money, Estanauly was determined to give her children at least one homemade gift for Christmas. She had ripped the seams out of her blue skirt, the prettiest garment she owned, and made a dress for her daughter, Gladys. Estanauly’s friends scolded her for ruining her skirt. But Estanauly beamed with pride. “And besides,” she said, justifying her sacrifice to her friends, “there was enough left over

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to make this little stuffed dog for Clay.” Right then, little Clay looked up at his mother, wide-eyed with anticipation, and interjected, “Who? Me?” The words came so clearly, so unexpectedly. Estanauly’s heart raced. God had answered her prayers!

When Evans retold the story of the time he had overcome his struggle to speak, he evoked the biblical character Moses. Moses, Evans testified, also had struggled with speech. The third and fourth chapters of the Old Testament book of Exodus narrate God calling Moses to free the Israelites from the oppressive rule of a pharaoh who was holding them as slaves in Egypt. Because of anxieties about his own limitations as a leader, Moses responded to God by saying, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11, NRSV). Evans has always interpreted Moses’s struggle in Exodus through the lens of his own struggle with speech. There, in Moses’s story, Evans found an encouraging similarity. “Moses also said, ‘Who? Me?’” Evans concluded proudly.

Evans credited his mother’s regular prayer life with his emancipation from muteness: “She really prayed that her son would be able to talk . . . my mother was a real saint.” When she heard her son finally speak words, Estanauly dropped to her knees. She wrapped Clay in her arms. Tears streamed down both cheeks. “Thank you, Lord,” she whispered. “Thank you for letting this child of mine talk. Now please, I pray, give me the wisdom to guide him so his voice is ever raised in your service.”⁴

Born on June 23, 1925, just over fifty miles northeast of Memphis in Brownsville, Tennessee, Clay Evans was the fourth of nine children. His parents, Henry and Estanauly Evans, were natives of Brownsville, located in Haywood County, in the Delta Region of western Tennessee. In that county, where the Hatchie River runs straight through Brownsville, farming ruled supreme. In 1923, the fertile soil in Haywood County yielded a high level of crop diversification, with cotton, corn, fruit, grass, and livestock being the county's most important agricultural products.⁵

During the early 1920s, sharecroppers provided a plentiful supply of cheap labor in the region. Henry and Estanauly had both come from sharecropping families. Like countless African American southerners, Henry and Estanauly spent their childhoods enslaved in what scholar Jennifer Searcy refers to as the “endless cycle of financial rigging orchestrated by white landowners” achieved through the sharecropping system.⁶ Within this system, financial stability became virtually impossible for African American southerners.⁷ And certainly the threat of racial violence always hung in the atmosphere to discourage people from daring to challenge white-imposed social, economic, and legal restrictions. The logic was simple, as one former plantation owner explained: “Teach the Negro that if he goes to work, keeps his place, and behaves himself, he will be protected by our white laws.”⁸ Plantation owners passed down this culturally transmitted disease from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Like his grandparents and parents before him,

Clay Evans spent his childhood in this terrifying and unjust crucible of racial violence and oppression.

Most African American sharecropping families in Brownsville, Tennessee, during the early 1920s lived in housing on their employers' properties. The Evans family lived in a small, aging shack-like structure. Uninsulated wooden walls rested underneath a tin roof riddled with holes. Legions of gaps between the roof and the walls accented the ceiling. At night Evans often gazed out at the sky through these openings. "I looked up at night, and I could see the stars." During stormy weather, each gap, hole, and crack allowed tiny rivers of water to pour into the house. "Many times, we had to move the bed at night when it was raining," Evans recalled, chuckling. The battered linoleum floor resembled the roof. Small spaces in the floor revealed the family's chicken coop underneath the house.

Despite the structural imperfections of their house, the Evans family took much pride in presenting it in as dignified a manner as possible. The neatness of the always-swept porch, the shine of uncurtained windows, and artful placement of marigolds and day lilies along the home's unpaved walk, author Dorothy June Rose states, gave the Evans home "an air of dignity that even the blatant signs of abject poverty could not squelch." This quiet dignity reflected not only the physical appearance of the house but also the inner strength of the family residing within the home. Neighbors felt something special about the Evans family. Many in Brownsville's black sharecropping community often shared their personal joys and pains with Henry and Estanauly.

Since many who labored in the fields passed by the Evanses' home each day, it became a natural meeting place. Here men would meet their wives and children and enjoy a leisurely walk home to a meal already waiting. Rose stated, "And yet, even if it had not been so convenient, the cheerful greeting, the quiet encouragement always to be found in the Evans' home, would have made it a focal point in any setting."⁹

The Evanses' home had a small fireplace. However, its size did not diminish its importance. "In the wintertime, you'd make the fire at night, but you brought in a lot of wood in the evening to put on the fire until you go to bed. And you'd make it so that it wouldn't go all the way out. And in the morning, you'd stir up the ashes, and that kind of warmed the house." The family couldn't afford proper insulation or wallpaper. Instead, family members pasted newspapers on the walls to block cold winds from entering uninvited. "That's how poor we were," Evans explained. Family meals were cooked on a wood stove. "Those were really hard times." For baths, water was heated on the stove and then poured into a single bathtub. "Sometimes two or three people bathed in the same tub, not just in the same tub but in the same water," Evans recalled. "But when they got down to the second or third baths, there wasn't nothing but mud. We've come a long way."

Sleeping arrangements became particularly challenging as Evans and his nine brothers and sisters grew older. At bedtime, he and his siblings all crammed as many as they could into the same bed. "We slept three and four in the bed, two at the head and two at the feet." Those who didn't

make it into the bed on a given night slept on the floor. Looking back on those experiences, Evans's brother Pharis said those cramped conditions strengthened the bonds between siblings:

We had to be close to each other. We had no choice. I slept in the same bed that my brother Clay slept in and my brother Joe slept in the same bed. Sometimes there were more than two that slept in that bed. There are things that we had to do to be close to each other. And because of that when we left Brownsville we carried it with us. It was my brother Joe that took my sister Lou Della in when we got to Chicago. It was our brother Clay that opened the door and took me in.¹⁰

The Evans home had neither electricity nor running water. On the way home from school, the Evans children often stopped to pump water from a nearby well. "And sometimes that was infested with frogs," Evans remembered. His sister Lou Della also recalled those difficult days. "You know how to appreciate things now," she said. "Stuff you didn't have, now you have. It was hard. . . . We didn't have anything. We used each other's clothes. If they had some food left, you'd get their food, what they had left." It was a difficult life. Recalling those childhood days was painful for Evans and his siblings. "It has been a struggle the whole way," Lou Della recalled.

Usually only one black sharecropping family worked per white farm in Brownsville. White farmers required the

children to begin working the fields as soon as they turned ten. Mothers were often forced to take their newborn infants with them into the fields each day. Estanauly held her younger children while she worked. When necessary, her older children relieved her and watched their younger siblings. "That's how women back then could have a dozen children. . . . They'd make the oldest take care of the little ones," Evans said. Henry and Estanauly taught their children to take care of each other. "So my older sister, she was like my mamma, 'cause she had to take care of me," Evans explained. His memories of those times are of grueling and relentless labor. Evans's chores were endless. He helped harvest corn, cotton, and peas. He fed hogs, milked cows, pulled cotton, dug trenches. "You get up with the sun, and you work until the sun goes down." Being a sickly child, Clay found the toil of sharecropping especially difficult. In fact, some of his younger siblings were better able to handle the rigors of farm labor. "I was looked down upon," Evans recalled.

The sharecropper's life was painfully monotonous. The Evans family arose each day before sunrise, usually shortly after 4:00 a.m. They ate breakfast. Then they walked to the fields to work. The backbreaking labor was unceasing. The sun was unrelenting. The Evans family labored non-stop except for brief rests during dinner and supper. The women got even less rest than the men. The Evans women left the fields early to prepare the family meals. "They'd go in the fields and work. And half an hour before dinnertime, they'd somehow come home to fix dinner and then go back

to the fields,” Evans recalled. “How women could double up like that, I don’t know, but they did it.” After dinner, around 1:00 p.m., the whole family, men and women, marched back to the fields, where they toiled under the hot sun until supper, usually around 6:00 p.m. but often later. At sunset, the family returned home, exhausted from their labors, only to get a few hours of sleep before waking up to perform the same ritual all over again. “You didn’t count by hours,” Evans explained about a typical day working as a sharecropper. “Sun up to sun down. You got up with the sun. And many times, you couldn’t quit when the sun went down.” Family members pushed their bodies often past their limits. They were always anxious about the potential consequences awaiting them should they fail to meet their employer’s quotas and profits. Evans’s sister Lou Della remembered the stress of that environment. “I didn’t like the hard work there, not at all,” she recalled. “But I did it. I didn’t have a choice. So you do what you got to do. I never could wait until the time I could leave, to get away, to experience some of the other parts of life.”

Against their will, Estanauly and Henry Evans exposed their children to the brutal life of sharecropping. “They had no alternative,” Evans explained. White farmers contracted with black families to work their lands. However, sharecropping was designed to make it impossible for African Americans to achieve social mobility. No matter how many crops black families harvested, the sharecropping system depended on the perpetuation of black poverty. The most common practice among white farmers was to compensate

black families below the market value for their labor. Additionally, white farmers often demanded exorbitant fees for black families to acquire basic resources like food and medicine, or basic work materials like mules and farm equipment. White farmers often required their black employees to live in housing located on their farms. Farmers then charged high rental rates for these shabby dwellings. Making black families economically dependent on white farmers lessened the possibility African Americans could build enough wealth to become financially self-sufficient. “You’re never paid out of debt,” Evans explained about sharecropping. “I don’t care how much you raise. You’re never paid out. You always owe them something. It was rough. . . . It was slavery time.”

Nick Salvatore paints a vivid portrait of the exploitative sharecropping economy in his account of the childhood of famed preacher Rev. C. L. Franklin in the Mississippi Delta. It is strikingly familiar to Evans’s childhood in rural Tennessee. Franklin, born in 1915, would become the father of singer Aretha Franklin and one of Evans’s close friends. Sharecroppers in Mississippi’s Sunflower County relied on plantation stores to meet their needs between April, when the cotton was planted, and December, when all accounts were settled. However, prices were 10 to 25 percent higher in these stores. The annual rent for housing usually consumed half the value of crops harvested. And when sharecroppers brought their crops to the mill for processing, grading, and sale, the expenses they had incurred living on the farm during the year were deducted. Salvatore elaborates further:

“Given the 25 percent illiteracy rate among blacks and the near-total powerlessness before a determined white owner, few tenants finished any year with a profit. If they did, they were usually paid in credit redeemable only at plantation stores.”¹¹ Like Franklin’s family, Evans and his kin in Brownsville found themselves victims of the sharecropping system’s scheme to trap successive generations of black southerners in virtually inescapable webs of economic oppression.

Tragically, the dehumanizing sharecropping culture often caused strain between parents and their children. Under intense pressure to meet their white employers’ production quotas, and desperate to get out from underneath their oppressor’s boot, some parents were often cold toward their children. Evans recalled how sharecropping affected his relationship with his father, Henry. When asked to describe the nature of his relationship with his father, Evans paused momentarily, completely motionless. Then, after a long silence, he finally shared:

My father always expected us to do a day’s work, which was amazing to me what he called a day’s work, with plows that weren’t good plows, horses and mules that were not good horses or mules. But not having proper equipment. And that was one lesson that I really learned. That if I had somebody doing something they ought to be given the proper tools to work with. How could we with the handle of the plow broke, plough hand dull . . . and expect a good day’s work? So I always

used that as an example if I had secretaries I wanted them to have what it'd take to work with. If I had good musicians, given them good equipment, instruments to work with. Give the people what is necessary to really do a good job just if you expect a good job. "Why didn't you plow this?" I couldn't tell whether he understood the old ploughs that he gave me were dull and wouldn't stay in the ground. The mules were so slow.¹²

Probing his memory further, Evans recalled the oft-tense dynamics that arose between his father and his brothers and himself. "He was pretty tough on us for doing a day's work. If an accident had happened, like we broke a plow point or something, we would get a whipping for it. Sometimes you would hit a rock or hit a root or something, and the plow would somewhat break. But you couldn't see what was in the ground. It was an accident. But you got a whipping for that." Despite his father's tough nature in the fields, Evans understood the heavy weight his father carried as the head of a family of sharecroppers. "He expected us to really produce because the white man was expecting him to produce."

Amid the unharmonious family dynamics sharecropping often created, Evans's mother made sure the melodies of prayer, hope, faith, and God rang more loudly. Estanauly was a woman of faith. She believed in her husband and children. But most importantly, she believed in a God who could do the impossible. Estanauly believed in a God who intervened in human affairs to set wrong things right, to lib-

erate the oppressed. One of the ways Estanauly and Henry Evans believed God could liberate their family was through education. If their children could receive a quality education, they believed, then, with God's help, they could escape those seemingly impervious chains of inferiority that had been forged for black children from the moment of their birth in rural towns like Brownsville in the 1920s.

In Brownsville, black children did not attend school nine months out of the year. "We couldn't go to school. Crops had to be worked," Evans explained. However, black families created alternate avenues to educate their children. Schooling for children between first and eighth grades in Brownsville occurred between December and February, because there were no crops to plant or harvest during the winter months. "They always arranged schools at a time that you wasn't really needed on the farm." Children received education in a one-room schoolhouse, where first through eighth grades met together with two or three black teachers, usually committed parents dreaming of better lives for their children. Evans's mother never attended high school, but she served as a teacher for a time. When winter ended, children and their families went right back to working their white employers' farms. "The farm came first, as far as the boss man was concerned," Evans remembered. "He didn't care whether black folks got an education or not." In fact, one of the white farmers for whom the Evans family worked attempted to stop the family's efforts to advance the education of Evans's big sister, Gladys. "The boss man tried to get my parents not to send my older sister, Gladys, to school

or to send her to college. But mamma was determined that Gladys would go on to get an education. So she went to Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. She got a degree where she could teach,” Evans said proudly.

Once children in Brownsville began attending high school, if they attended at all, they usually attended nine months out of the year. A family’s decision to send children to high school meant that there would be one less pair of arms and legs to work the fields. And there was always the inevitable conflict that arose with white farmers who objected to losing a member of their workforce. In the early 1900s, many white southerners, particularly those in rural areas, believed schooling made African Americans unfit for work in a southern economy that depended on an unskilled black labor force. As scholar James R. Grossman argues, “Black southerners who wished to keep their children in school for nine months out of every year faced a task that was at best difficult and usually impossible.”¹³ Evans’s parents were determined to secure a better future for their children. “My parents wanted us to have an education!” Evans said emphatically. Both his parents encouraged him to attend Brownsville’s all-black Carver High School.

Evans had always struggled academically. “He really wasn’t smart at all. . . . He had to do what he had to do to live and get along,” his sister Lou Della recalled. “But extra stuff, smartness? No way!” Evans remembered those difficult years in school with a sense of humor, saying, “I never made more than a C; A is when I was absent; B is when I was bad.” The humiliating oppression of sharecropping cul-

ture created in young Clay Evans intense feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and anger. The painful daily experiences of a black sharecropper's life traumatized him well into his teen years. By the time Evans was a teenager, his self-confidence had been damaged severely. The psychological effects of sharecropping had taken their toll. Evans turned inward. He became increasingly self-conscious, introverted, and withdrawn. Unfortunately, Evans's transition to the all-black Carver High School only intensified these feelings.

The Evans home was about ten miles from Carver High School. Given the family's limited resources, the only way Evans could attend school was if he stayed in town. Thankfully, the Evans family knew a woman named Mrs. Mark, who lived near the high school. Mrs. Mark agreed to rent Evans a room in her house. He would pay for his room and board by completing long lists of tasks, such as chopping wood. Though anxious about Clay living away from home for the first time, Evans's parents were excited about the arrangement. It would mean the beginning of a better life for their son. Evans's mother, the rock of the family, offered poignant words to her son on the eve of his departure for his great adventure to live with Mrs. Mark and begin his high school career:

And to think when you was a little boy we thought you was dumb. Not talkin' till you was almost three. And now you're goin' on to high school. It just goes to show the Lord has everythin' in His plan. It was the Lord who finally helped you find your voice. It was the Lord

who somehow let us keep you in the grade school even when times was so bad we could have used another wages from the fields. But I always knew you wasn't meant to be no field hand. Somehow I just knew the Lord wanted you for another reason. Now I know I was right.¹⁴

Evans's mother reminded him of the important role his faith would play in the journey that lay ahead. The Evans family was a church family, a faithful family, and a praying family. And as a praying woman, Evans's mother would make sure her son did not forget where he came from. She encouraged her son further, saying, "We raised you right, boy. Now you just keep to prayin' and hard work. We'll all be prayin' for you here, too. Whatever it takes, it'll be worth it in the end. You're the Lord's man, Clay. He is goin' to see you through."¹⁵

It was 1941, and sixteen-year-old Clay Evans was full of confidence, pride, and excitement that night before he began high school. But the journey would prove more difficult than he imagined. There were legions of unforeseen challenges. Hosts of disappointments were lying in wait.

High school proved difficult for young Clay Evans. He wasn't a strong student. How could he be? He was so busy during the day, doing endless chores for Mrs. Mark. As soon as school ended each day, Mrs. Mark consumed Evans's time with work like chopping wood, running personal errands, cleaning the house, and cutting the grass. But she remained an unsatisfied taskmaster. She didn't let a day pass

without reminding Clay how fortunate he was to be allowed to live in her home. Given Mrs. Mark's grueling expectations, Evans could only study late at night. Evans strained himself for his C grades.

Mrs. Mark wasn't the only challenging personality Clay faced during high school. His classmates also were formidable. Black students living in town often looked down on country kids like Evans. He was the son of a poor sharecropping family who was a less-than-average student with no athletic interest or prowess. Evans became a regular target for bullies' embarrassing jokes. Worse yet, unlike many of his classmates, Evans had no spending money. Evans recalled those difficult moments in high school: "Maybe mamma's wrong. Maybe the Lord don't have nothin' special in store for me. Maybe I should have just stayed on the farm and done my share like the rest."¹⁶

There were days when Evans packed his things and began making his way back to his parents' home. But his family's faith in him prevented him from leaving each time. Their optimism in his future always called him back to face his bad grades and failed high school popularity. Perhaps it was the image of seeing the excitement in his mother's eyes as she made her way to town each Sunday in the family's rickety wagon to bring sweet treats, homemade jam, fresh bread, or vegetables from the family garden to augment Mrs. Mark's sparse meals.¹⁷

Evans vowed to not let his insecurities or limitations slow his progress. He had much to overcome, but the biggest barrier standing in Evans's path was not sharecropping, racist

farmers, high school bullies, or poverty; it was accepting and loving himself. “Because I always felt inferior. And my looks, my mental capacity. . . . I could never make good grades. And when I was a youngster, I looked terrible. There wasn’t a spot on my face where I didn’t have pimples. Not a spot on my face. You may never think so today, but when it came to competing with others, . . . I had to work on that, even after I got grown and accepted the ministry.”

Evans’s low self-esteem as a teenager had negative effects on his social life, especially with girls. The girls his age didn’t find him attractive. “During my teenage years I couldn’t get a girl. And that can kind of hurt you. All the other boys could get girls. But I couldn’t. They rejected me.” His high school years weren’t filled with scores of memories attending school dances with girls or hanging out socially after school. In fact, by the age of twenty, Clay Evans had never been on a date!⁸ Much later, looking back on those days, Evans laughed as he recalled the times when, after he achieved success later in life, he returned to Brownsville, full of confidence, to strut in the presence of the girls who had rejected him for sport. “When I got grown and got to Chicago and was able to do pretty good I got a car and I went back down there (to Brownsville). . . . See what you rejected!”

When Evans began his journey at Carver High School in 1941, World War II had just erupted. Slowly, the number of boys in grades higher than Evans began to dwindle, as those of draft age were summoned overseas. Evans’s parents had always taught him to detest war, violence, and killing. But

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he found great pride in the idea of serving the country and returning home a hero. Maybe if he were a war hero, his peers would look at him differently. Maybe enlisting might help him to overcome his insecurities. When young Clay Evans told his parents about his plans to enlist, a stern reaction followed. It was one of the few times he remembered his mother shouting at him: “We didn’t work for your education all these years only to have you blown up and buried on the other side of the ocean. You’re the Lord’s man, Clay. I’ve know’d it from the day you were born. He has a mission for you and I’ll see you fulfill it if it’s the last thin’ I do.”¹⁹

Evans remained adamant about enlisting. But each year, the call to serve never came. In 1945, as a senior in high school and almost twenty-one years old, Clay Evans was one of just three males remaining in his class. It didn’t make any sense. He was strong. He was fit. He was classified as 1-A. For the first time, Evans began to consider more seriously the possible providence in his mother’s visions for his life. “Maybe mama’s right. Maybe there is somethin’ special the Lord wants me to do.”²⁰

NOTES

1. Dorothy June Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit: The Life Story of Rev. Clay Evans, a Man with a Mission* (Warminster, PA: Neibauer, 1981), 9.
2. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 8.

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3. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 8–9.
4. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 10.
5. Emma Nunn, “Haywood County,” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, updated 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ybb6hpcl>.
6. Jennifer Searcy, “The Voice of the Negro: African American Radio, WVON, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Chicago” (PhD diss., Loyola University, 2003), p. 27, paper 688, <http://tinyurl.com/y7gpcxya>.
7. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42.
8. Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 366.
9. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 7–8.
10. Rev. Pharis Evans, interview by the author, 2012, Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago.
11. Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 11.
12. Rev. Clay Evans, interview by the author, 2012, Chicago, Rev. Clay Evans’s home.
13. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 249.
14. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 12.
15. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 13.
16. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 13–14.
17. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 14.

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18. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 13-14.
19. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 15.
20. Rose, *From Plough Handle to Pulpit*, 15.