

WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME



Artists' Stories

"West Virginia, oh my home, West Virginia, where I belong. In the dead of the night, in the still and the quiet, I slip away like a bird in flight, back to those hills, the place that I call home."

– "West Virginia, Oh My Home," by Hazel Dickens



Hazel Dickens

"I was a kid who didn't give up."



Hazel Dickens has sung her songs on stages in Japan, Australia, Canada, Ireland, France, Germany, and Spain, and more than 30 states, but "when I was a kid," she said, "I never in the world would have believed I'd go anywhere. I didn't think I'd ever leave the place where we lived."

She grew up in the mountains of Mercer County, West Virginia. "When I was very young, if we needed soap or groceries, we'd walk down off the mountain to town to go to the store, then walk back up the mountain."

She had ten brothers and sisters. "We all had to sleep together, because we didn't have that many beds. I slept in between two sisters. I didn't like that, because one sister pinched me if I got too close."

All the kids had jobs. "The older children would carry in coal and water, babysit, wash the clothes and iron. In the mornings, they had to climb out of the bed to help get breakfast. One of the younger ones had to build the fire in the front room where my parents slept."

"I remember my next-oldest sister washing clothes on a scrub board," Hazel said.

The farmers nearby knew the family had a lot of kids, "So they'd invite us to come pick vegetables and grapes and fruit. And we'd go up in the mountains and pick berries or find a fruit or nut tree, and bring them home.

"I loved to pick the flowers, little blues and purples and reds. I'd hop about in my bare feet. I don't know how I kept from getting bit by a snake."

She has no pictures of herself as a child. "We didn't have money to buy school pictures, and my family didn't own a camera.

"I did have one school picture, but I tore up the only copy I had, because my brothers and sisters kept laughing at it. I was real skinny and shy, with freckles on my nose, and my ear stuck out through my hair."

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Hazel's parents



Teachers were sometimes not kind. On her first day of school, "I was going out to the playground, and a teacher pointed at me and said to another, 'Would you look at that one?' I knew she didn't mean anything nice by it."

Her dad worked hard driving a logging truck, but they had no extra money for toys. "I don't ever remember having toys you buy in the store. In fact, I don't even remember getting a baby doll.

"When I was growing up, you had to buy your own schoolbooks, but my family couldn't even afford pencils. At school, I had to sit with another child to share a book, because I didn't have one. I remember one girl who would put her arm around me as we read together."

Hazel didn't let any of that stop her. She learned to entertain herself. "My little neighbor friends and I made playhouses out of rocks and things. There was a great big rock in the field. That was our stage. We'd get on that rock and put on little shows, sing and tap dance."

"I was a kid who didn't give up," she said. "As little and skinny as I was, I could out-run anybody in my class. When they put on plays, they put me in them. In the third grade, I won the spelling bee. And I sang. Teachers would ask me to sing."

"I didn't let anyone push me around either," she said. "One time, I'd found a broomstick, and I was playing with it, sticking one end in the ground and pushing myself into the air, kind of like a pole vault. Some older kids saw me having fun with it, and they tried to take it away from me, and I swung it around at them. I ran them off. That made me feel really good.

"There's something special inside every child," she said, "but we don't always know what it is. I never knew I could sing well till my family told me I could. I never knew I could write songs till I tried."

"I'd open my mouth and let it roar."

"I can't remember a time when I didn't sing," Hazel said. "Any day at my house, somebody was singing, even if they were just singing to themselves."

"Somebody would start singing, if we were sitting on the porch, then someone else would join in. We'd sing in the living room or after supper or when somebody was cooking or when there was some lull in whatever was going on.

"Sometimes people passing by on the road thought it was the radio, and they'd stop and listen."

"It didn't cost a dime to sing," she said. "My brother Robert and I sang duets. My sister Beulah and I did older songs, *Midnight on the Stormy Deep*, the Carter Family, and *Lovers Return*."

Every morning, Hazel woke up to the radio. When her dad got up early for work, he turned on country music, loud. "So I learned a lot of songs from the radio," she said. On Saturday nights, the family listened to the Grand Old Opry.

Her father was a Primitive Baptist preacher, "fire and brimstone," she said. During the week, he hauled coal and timber in his big truck. "Dad worked very hard," she said. "He'd take one or two of the boys with him, and they'd go up and cut the trees and strip the branches off of them, then haul those logs down to the mines.

"On Sundays, we rode in the back of the truck to church, so he'd pull it down to the river, throw a bunch of sand in, and wash it out. After it was clean, we'd pile in the back, and he'd drive us to church."

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"He preached all over, at little churches, sometimes at people's houses. If there wasn't a church, people would gather at somebody's house, and my father would come preach.

"He was an incredible singer, and I loved to sing with him in church. He'd go into almost a singsong trance."

He played old-time banjo. "He'd hide it if somebody from the church came around. Primitive Baptists weren't supposed to do worldly things. He felt guilty about his banjo.

"Sometimes he would invite other people to the house, and he'd point me out and say, 'You should hear my daughter Hazel sing.' Then he'd have me stand up in front of those people. He always asked for the same song, *Man of Constant Sorrow*.

"I wasn't one to show off, but I'd open my mouth and let it roar. People always liked it. I wondered later that's one reason I enjoy being on stage so much."

She and her brothers and sisters made instruments out of things they had around the house. "We'd beat on anything, pots and pans, while we sang. We'd put tissue paper over a comb and play it like a kazoo. If you made a noise through it, it came out musical.

"Lots of times, I'd pick it up my brother's guitar and bang on it. I didn't know how to play it and didn't know any chords, but I'd go out in the kitchen and bang on it and sing and sing. Everybody else would be out front playing cards or checkers or yakking, and I'd be in there banging away."

Her mama's hand

Hazel Dickens almost died when she was a baby. "I wasn't supposed to live," she said. "Soon after I was born, I stopped taking my mother's milk. I wouldn't swallow anything, so I was starving to death.

"The family doctor told my mother there was nothing more he could do. He gave up on me and told my mother to take me home, back up on the mountain.

"My mother did not give up on me. Once she got me home, she tried everything she could, to get me to eat. She said I had kind of a blue look about me.

"She did not want to just sit there and watch me die. Somebody told her there was a baby doctor over in the town of Rock, maybe 10 miles away. My dad had the family truck off at work, but she said, 'I'm not going to let this baby die here. I'm going to find that doctor.'"

She didn't know how to find that doctor, but she knew she would. "She bundled me up and she walked down off the mountain with me. She carried me all the way down to the train station, and she had just enough money for a ticket."

When she got off at the little town of Rock, "she stopped people on the street and said, 'My baby's sick, and I heard there's a baby doctor here. Can you tell me how to find him?' Somebody showed her where he was."

"Try feeding the baby bits of crackers soaked in something," the doctor told her mother.

"So she took me back home and somehow, she got some crackers down me," Hazel said. "Maybe she soaked them in milk. It worked."

The crackers saved her. "I lived, because my mother didn't give up, because she kept trying. After that, my mother and I had something really special between us. I think she was proud she had saved me. When she had extra milk, she made a point of giving it to me. She made me feel special."

After she was grown, Hazel wrote a song about her mother, called *Mama's Hand*.

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"I had a ringside seat on all she went through, and I wanted to honor her," she said. "I worked on that song for years." Here are some lines from that song:

*She pulled us through the hardest times
And made us hold our heads up high,
A gift we carry with us all our lives
For we were, oh, so special in Mama's eyes ...
I thought of all the years she slaved,
Thought of all the love she gave.
She tried to make this run-down shack a home ...
It was hard to let go of Mama's hand.*

"These rugged mountains ... have shaped my life."

"I had to quit school at a very early age, when I was about 13," Hazel said. "My parents told me they didn't have the money to keep clothes on me and pay for the things I'd need at school. It like to killed me to see my friends going to school, and I didn't get to go.

"I loved school, and I excelled there. Anything that was put before me, I could do it. There were so many things I didn't get to do at home. My mother would have loved to do those things with me, but she didn't have time. With 11 children, you never got that kind of attention. It couldn't happen. She was worn out.

"All the way through the rest of my teen years, it always bothered me that I hadn't been able to finish. I'd see high school class rings on other people, and I'd think, 'I'll never have that.'"

She went to Virginia to help her aunt and did babysitting "till I was old enough to apply for a factory job." When she was 19, she left home to go find a job in Baltimore, where two of her brothers and a sister were already working.

I said goodbye to that poor little mining town with a few old clothes that had made the rounds, she wrote. I knew I was leaving a lot of things that were good, but I thought I'd make a break while I still could.

And as I looked back to wave once more to Mama crying in the door for me and what the world might have in store, for she knew I'd never be her little girl no more.

– *Mama's Hand*

When Hazel first came to Baltimore, "I was still really skinny, but I knew how to work." In Baltimore, she met other people who liked to play music, and they started playing as a bluegrass band.

"Music really saved my life," she said. "Music let me meet people I never would have met. Otherwise, I just felt lost in that big city. Music gave me a way to go somewhere."

She started writing songs about life in coal mining towns. Her uncles had been coal miners, and some of her brothers were working in the mines. "It was just part of our life in West Virginia," she said. "Coal trains passed by our house every day. I've never been a miner, but I can put myself in their place."

A few years after Hazel moved to Baltimore, her mother and father moved there too, to be near their kids. Hazel was living in Washington, D.C. by then, working in a store.

"I'd take the Greyhound over there after work on weekends, after I'd been standing on my feet all day long. I'd fight my way through the crowd at the bus station, take the Greyhound to Baltimore and find my way to where they lived in the housing project.

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"They'd always have me something to eat ready for me on the back of the stove. And every time I'd go over to their place, my father and I would sing together. My mother would sit quietly over in the corner, and he would bring out the Primitive Baptist songbook. I would ask about a song, then he and I would sing it together."

They always talked about West Virginia.

Home, home, home. Oh, I can see it so clear in my mind. Home, home, home. I can almost smell the honeysuckle vine. In the dead of the night, in the still and the quiet, I slip away like a bird in flight, back to those hills, the place that I call home.

– West Virginia, My Home

Many years later, when Hazel Dickens was honored by the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame, she said, "Poverty could not diminish what I was so richly blessed with, the soul-stirring sounds of mountain music. They became the fabric of my long, musical life.

"These rugged mountains and these coal-dusty mining towns and lonesome hollers have shaped my life," she said. "And they shaped my music for all time."

Story by Kate Long, from interviews with Hazel Dickens.