

## Corrine “Sis” Allison Thompson

Interviewed by her great-nephew Sam Gleaves.  
Wythe County, Virginia, February, 2013.

Note: In this interview, Sis uses the terms “Ma” and “Pa” to refer to her grandparents, the terms “Mother” and “Daddy,” of course refer to her parents.

My name is Corrine Elizabeth Allison Thompson. I turned eighty in December, I was born December the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1932. I used to think, wow, when I heard someone say they were eighty years old when I was a teenager, I’d think, *man! Eighty years old!* It ain’t bad, Sam. It ain’t bad to be eighty.

When I was born, my older brother Duck named me. Mother and Daddy said, “You’ve got a baby sister, what are we gonna name her?” He loved music, so he immediately said, “Corrine.” There’s a song, “Corinna, Corinna,” have you ever heard it? You need to sing it for me sometime. Sister was an old family name that they gave the oldest child, so everyone in our family called me Sis or Sister.



Corrine Elizabeth Allison Thompson, Sis, at her dining room table, 2013.  
Photo – Sam Gleaves.

I was raised out in the Cove area of Wythe County, that’s what it was called but it was more or less known as Possum Holler. We had neighbors of Smiths, Feltys, Umbergers all within walking distance. I must have been four or five when Mother went to work at the shirt factory and I was left with Grandmother Allison. She cooked three meals a day on the old cookstove, we had to heat the water to do our dishes, we had to heat the water to do our clothes. I can remember her taking me by the hand, everyone was called Aunt and Uncle back then. She’d say, “Let’s go see Aunt Lucy Felty, she hasn’t been feeling well, there may be something we can do to help her.” So, through the fields we’d go, she’d climb the fence and I’d find a hole to go through, I wasn’t much of a fence climber. This was the difference in families between then and this point in time. They were caring people, not that people don’t care now, you do, but people are working. Nowadays, people are working and when you come in from work, you don’t have time to go visit your neighbor! You’re just too tired and you’ve got your own family to take care of!

There was so much difference in all the ages of us children, but my brother Duck and I were close. He had a little wooded area down from the house, he called it the jungle. We had a little branch that you had to cross to get to our house, we had a walk over it, of course the cars just drove through it. Duck would get me into trouble so much. We had this little wooded area that he called the jungle. One day he said, "Sis, would you like some scrambled eggs?" I said, "Yes!" He said, "Well, you'll have to go to the henhouse and get 'em." I thought, well Pa Allison's around and Ma Allison's around, but he said, "You need to go out the kitchen door, this way, down through the jungle so they can't see you. You be real careful and bring those eggs down here and we'll cook 'em." Well, this went on for maybe a week and Pa Allison would say to Ma, "That old hen out there ain't a layin'. You just need to kill her and fix chicken and dumplings, 'cause she haint laid all week," that's just how he would say it. Duck was kicking me under the table, looking at me and frowning as if to say, "*Don't you say a word.*" 'Cause I was stealing the poor old chicken's eggs, that's the reason they weren't getting any!



The Repass Family. Center: Laura Repass, Corrine "Sis" Thompson's mother. Right: Frank Pierce Allison, Sis's father. Left: Sis's Aunt Bertie Repass.

We rode a bus, but for the first two years of my schooling I went to Rockdale School. We had young teachers, one of them told me she started teaching when she was eighteen. You could go to college for a year and then teach. Atha Hudson who went to our church was our second grade teacher, she said, "Do you realize that I had grades one through seven and I had boys that were older than I was!" I walked to school, my grandchildren would say, "Nonnie, tell us about walking to school with snow up to your knees barefooted," and I'd say, now you wait a minute. I was very fortunate that I was not barefooted, but I have walked to school when there was a lot of snow because then if you could get to school, there was a teacher there.

I was fortunate to have a little half pony and when they cut hay, 'course now you've got your tractors and all, but they'd put the hay up in a little haystack, a little shock of hay. Daddy would take a chain and wrap around that and hook it to my little horse and I'd ride them up the hill to the big haystacks. They made haystacks so high that I don't know how Daddy got down 'em, he must have slid down. That was a good memory, I'd sit on that horse all day long.

I had a little calf and I loved her so and I told Daddy and he said, "Okay, you can keep her but she's your responsibility. You will have to feed her and when we bring her in in the winter you will have to clean her stall and then when she becomes fresh," that's the word he used, "you will have to milk her." So, I went to the barn with Pa Allison, a lot of times when it was dark and he just had an old lantern, to milk my cow.

Then, neighbors helped with threshing, threshing was getting the grain all out of the wheat. After that, I remember going to a place down on Pepper's Ferry Road that was called Mackensaw and they would pack my lunch. I had a little lard bucket and I'd have a little jelly biscuit or a little butter biscuit or whatever but it was so good 'cause Daddy had the same thing.

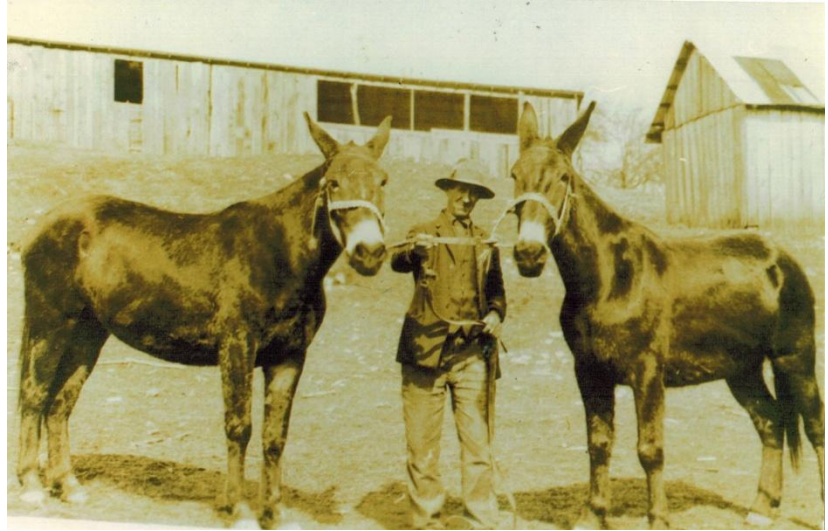
When we ate, chicken was always the main dish, chicken and dumplings, roast chicken, fried chicken, for the simple reason that we had 'em. We raised our chickens. On Thanksgiving Day, I never knew what it was to have a turkey because it was hog killing day, butchering day. Cold as blue blazes, it would be sleeting, snowing and everything, but neighbors got together and did their hog killing. We'd kill twelve or fourteen hogs a day. When we butchered, our first meal on butchering day was tenderloin and it was so good. We might get it one more time, but that tenderloin was canned, the sausage was canned, the backbones and the ribs were all canned. Then they'd salt down what they called the side meat, the meat we cooked with and the hams and the shoulders, that was all salted down. We had a smokehouse, and never had a lock or key on anything. If we'd have had a key for the house, everyone in the world would have had one like it because it was what they called a skeleton key. I never remember them having a lock and we never had anything to come up missing.

We had a springhouse but we didn't use it like a lot of people did. We got running water to the house but not in the house. The water came up from this little branch and there was a spring in it. Back then, there were springs everywhere nearly, you'd just see them popping up out of the ground. That cold water was the best water in the world. We also caught rainwater. We didn't drink it, but we did our wash with it, my mother told me I'd always have the prettiest hair if I used rainwater to wash it with. That's true.

I was always the tomboy, wanted to be out with them, you know, and I never heard Daddy raise his voice much and he'd never fuss, but he'd pick me up and set me aside when I got in the way. When I was young it was my responsibility to see that the kindling was brought in, that was to start the fire with, you know. He even gave me a little hatchet and taught me how to split some kindling and I thought that was the greatest thing in the world, that I could do my own cutting. That's a lot more than most children do in this day and time, but it didn't hurt me. I learned a lot.

Here is a picture of Pa Allison, this is Daddy's dad. His grandmother or great grandmother was a full blooded Cherokee. There's one picture that I wished we had that shows his real high cheekbones. He had black curly hair, just as black as coal. The reason that we know that there must be Indian blood involved somewhere is that we can't trace the genealogy as far back on him as we have the others. It's like it's a lost cause. They didn't recognize those marriages, that happened back then.

Dad and Pa Allison loved squirrel and rabbit, but I never could go that way. I just couldn't do it, but they thought that was greatest eating. When Grandmother went to the store, all they had to have was baking powder, sugar, soda, and coffee because we raised our own meat, we had our own lard shortening, we had our own flour, we had cornmeal. We didn't have to buy much of anything, but this was Depression years, there wasn't much money around.



Sis's grandfather Pa Allison and his prize winning mules.

I can't ever remember being hungry or cold, I didn't have the nicest, but I always had what I thought were nice clothes. We always had food, maybe it wasn't what you liked, but you learned to eat. I loved parsnips, rutabagas, turnips. My Daddy always said that a hog was the only thing that he knew loved parsnips besides Sis! I also learned to eat hog brains in scrambled eggs, you didn't waste much. Like I say, it wasn't bad.

Grandmother Allison and Ma Repass were excellent cooks, made biscuits every day of the world and probably cornbread too. They baked in the cookstove, so that temperature had to be just right. On Saturdays, I can remember Ma Allison cooking all day on Saturday for two reasons, Uncle Fleming, Ma Allison's brother from Fries, would bring his big family over just about every Sunday to eat. The second thing was that you didn't do much on Sundays, so cooking and so forth was done on Saturdays.



Margaret Jane Littreal Allison, known to Sis as Grandmother or Ma Allison.

They made cakes and pies, my grandmother made what she called sweet cakes, which were big old cookies, she'd put sugar on them. They were so soft, you could just break it right apart. I'd love to know how to make those sweet cakes.

When it snowed and it was a good snow, the first snow you didn't do much with, but as time went along they made snow cream. Man alive! We didn't get ice cream until the summer, when Daddy would buy the rock salt and the ice for the ice cream freezer and we used our eggs and milk and all. Lots of times we had boiled custard. Grandmother made fudge and she made it in a big old black cast iron skillet on the stove and she'd cook it for so long, stirring it the whole time and she'd get her a little bit of water and drop a little candy down in that water, and if it made a little ball it was done. She'd beat that candy and beat it and beat it and she'd pour it out into a big old pan and that was the best smelling stuff in the world. We didn't get much of it, so it was *so good*.

Grandmother Allison was a quilter and here again, we went to neighbor's houses and you had a great big quilting frame and when I say big, I mean as big as a table that could have set nine or ten people. They did a great big quilt and they did it in no time 'cause there would be five or six women, maybe more. I was about the only child, sometimes I had a cousin there with me, but we'd get up underneath those quilting frames and that's where we played. Grandmother also taught me to knit when I was a young girl and to knit on four needles and to make mittens, and that's an advanced thing now. If you can use four needles, you're really coming along. I knitted all my mittens and I kept Brenda and Boyd in mittens too. Grandmother in her later years did some beautiful embroidery, every little table had a scarf on it and they embroidered flowers and so forth on them.

As I say, I lived out there in the country until I was thirteen. I was very disappointed to leave the country and move into Wytheville because it was such a change in my lifestyle, such a change. But it worked out okay, Mama and Daddy were happy and that's the main thing. We had to move because Dad worked with the Appalachian Power and we had to have a telephone. He drove a truck and when electricity went out, they had to be able to get in touch with Dad to go fix it. We had to move to town for that convenience.

Last time I saw you, I showed you a picture of your grandmother out in the orchard, little, just barely walking good. That was out in the country, that was home to me and always will be because it was the home I remember. It's the house that Melissa and Robert Vaught live in now and they invited us to come one Christmas to see the house and we went and I walked up on the porch and Robert met us and I said, "I'm home." He said, "I certainly hope so!" I said, "Yes, it's home."



Brenda Sue Allison, Sis's sister and grandmother of Sam Gleaves. Taken at the old homeplace in Possum Holler, Wythe County, Virginia.

We always went to Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church, where your grandmother and I still go. It's the only church I ever remember attending. We only had the piano and our voices for the music, after years and years they finally got the organ in. We sang songs like "Precious Memories," "Church in the Wildwood," that's always been a favorite of mine. It reminds me of my home church, where everyone is so caught up in music and in the church. My voice is leaving me now, old age I reckon. So much of the contemporary music has taken over our old songs and that's sad. I go through an old songbook every once in a while and remember that old music. I, myself, I wouldn't have to have a preacher sometimes, I can just hear the music. I tell people, if you will listen to the words, you will get a sermon out of the song you hear. It's true.

We'd have what they called homecomings and what fun it was, because first of all, we got lemonade. Mom would make lemonade and that was delicious because we didn't always have lemonade at our house. Mom would make us little sandwiches in a little gift box, chicken salad or egg salad. There'd always be fried chicken and potato salad and deviled eggs were a must. We ate on the ground because there wasn't room in the church and it was nice out in the summer. We'd take a tablecloth and spread it on the ground. Of course, as long as the Lord's there, you can have church right out in your backyard. That's all you need is the love of God and to know he's right there with you.

The other day I was down at Pulaski Healthcare and there was a hymnal on the shelf, so I picked it up and was singing some of the songs to Denise, my daughter who can't leave the bed, she's been in the hospital for years.

When my children were little, there was a little prayer that we sung together, it went,

*Father we thank thee for the night  
And for the pleasant morning light,  
For rest and food and loving care  
And all that makes the world so fair.  
Help us to do just as we should  
To be to others kind and good.  
In all we do at work and play  
To be more loving every day.*

I forget how they named it, "A Children's Prayer" or something. Grandmother taught it to me years ago. I'm gonna copy it down when I go tomorrow.

Right: Brenda Allison Bradberry, Sis's sister, singing with her grandson Sam Gleaves at Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church in Wytheville, Virginia.



Sam, you've come from a family of musicians and singers. I'm so proud of you. My fondest memories of them is when we'd go up Stockyard Hill on Saturdays when we'd get together and they'd play and sing. I had to be ten, eleven years old, but it just meant so much to me to hear this, I thought it was fantastic. This picture right here is a picture of my grandfather Charles Repass, your great-great grandfather and he was the banjo player. Mother played the piano by ear, Uncle Wooly played the mandolin, Mother's sister Aunt Bertie played the guitar and her husband, Earl Blankenship, played the guitar but he could play most anything, they all could switch around.

The most amazing thing was, they had no music. They didn't know one note from the other, so they were self-taught. Grandfather, we called them Ma and Pa, this goes way back in the country when they said Ma and Pa for grandparents. This is Pa Repass, and when he'd get real happy with playing he'd lay that banjo down and he'd get a hold of those bibbed overalls and pull them up and he'd flatfoot all over that room! A sister of Mother's, another of his daughters, Aunt Rachel, she was a good sized lady and she would get up and dance too and this little room would shake, dishes a rattlin' in the kitchen and everything. No wonder the dishes rattled when they got up, it was a small house, you know. It was surprising the floor was still there when they got done. That was my fondest memory of them all. If you've got music in your bones, you just love music and that's all there is to it. I still love music.



From left: Fred Repass, Sis's uncle, Orville Repass and Charles Gleaves Repass, Sis's Pa Repass, the banjo player.

That's the Repass side. On the Allison side, my grandmother, your great-great grandmother Margaret, she was known as Mag. She was a Littreal from down in Fries before she married. She could sing, all of them could sing and play piano, I'm sure. She had a brother, Fleming, and he had six or seven children and they sang. Uncle Fleming was the lead singer, Uncle Charles sang bass, a daughter Mary, a daughter Vernell, a daughter Willa Mae and a son Elmer. I can remember the six of them singing together, beautiful harmonizing voices, outstanding voices.

When the Repasses played, it was a lot of hoedowns and of course they all listened to the Grand Ole Opry and you can imagine what kind of music that would have been back then. On Saturday nights if they came to our house or we went to theirs, we would listen to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio.

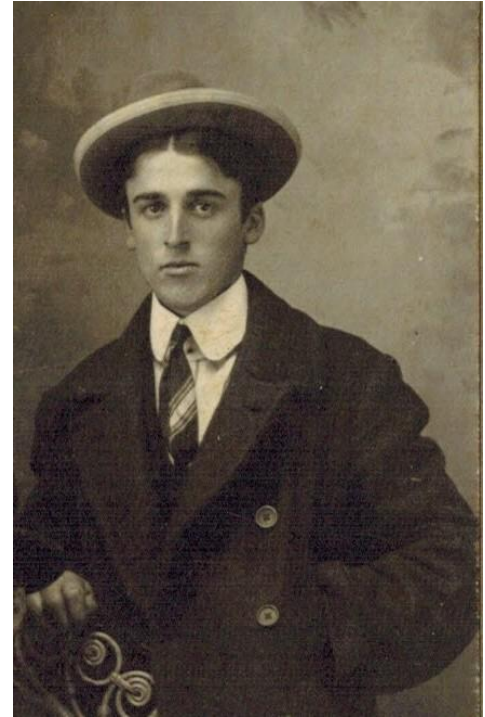
Our radio out in the country was a great big radio, run off of a car battery. Dad would take the battery out of the car, put it in the radio and we would listen maybe an hour. That was tops, it took a lot of juice, you know. But the Grand Ole Opry was a great thing for music, you know.

When your grandmother told me that you were interested in going to Berea for music, I thought, gee whiz, this child has come down from generations, look how far back it started, because Pa Repass would have been your great-great grandfather. I know this is where all your music came from. I know in my heart that it all came down the line like that.

Bill Monroe, he was a fantastic somebody, he used to come in at the truck stop where I worked. It would get around that his bus was there and they'd say, "Mr. Bill Monroe is here" and I'd say, "Well, tell him to come on in and we'll holler at him." The first time he saw me he said, "Are you married," and I said, "Yes sir," and he said, "How long you been married?" and I told him at that time a few years, and from then on out every time he came in he made it a point to stop and talk to me. One time he said, "When are you gonna leave that truck driver and come and go with me?" and I said, "Mr. Bill Monroe, I can't leave my husband and go with you!" He said, "But we could make some beautiful music together," and I said, "*No-we-could-not!*"

I still to this day miss where I grew up. I think of home and I think of the closeness of our family. I am so proud of my background, not only the music, but the love that we had. Times out in the country, there's just memories there that you're not going to lose. They're there.

Right: From the left, "Sis" Corrine Elizabeth Allison Thompson with her son Denny and her younger brother Boyd.



Charles Gleaves Repass, Sis's Pa Repass, the banjo player as a young man.

