

Chapter One

The Early Years

By Judge Randall Cole

Houston Cole is recognized today for his distinguished career as an educator, but as a boy he treaded dangerously close to becoming a high school dropout. Except for the encouragement of an older sister who admonished Houston that dropping out of school would be a grievous mistake, he would have given up school in the tenth grade and gone looking for a job. Instead, Houston continued his studies and in May, 1921, graduated from DeKalb County High School.

His graduation not only opened new doors of opportunity but also represented a major achievement in his life because the odds against his attending high school, much less graduating, had been overwhelming.

Walter Houston Cole was born on November 24, 1899, in DeKalb County, Alabama, on Lookout Mountain. The modest house which was his birthplace was located near a large natural formation known as Coon Rock in a community about ten miles south of Fort Payne. He was the tenth child of John and Polly Ann Cash Cole.

When he was four years old, his family left their Lookout Mountain home and moved to Comanche, Texas. They traveled by train, the most desirable means of transportation available, but the trip proved extremely unpleasant. The train moved slowly and the younger children became restless and irritable.

The youngest child, aged two, cried every waking hour of the trip.

Life in Texas did not measure up to the glowing reports of a better life which had lured the family there. Especially troubling was the lack of good water to drink. Remembering the cool, clean mountain water which flowed so freely from a spring at Coon Rock, the family packed their belongings after only nine months on Texas soil and returned to Alabama.

The following year, Houston's mother became ill with pneumonia and died, when he was only five years old.

John Cole remarried, and he and his new wife, Della White Cole, had four children, bringing the number of children in the family to fifteen, one of whom died of a childhood disease.

Upon returning from Texas, Houston's father homesteaded eighty acres in the Loveless community on Lookout Mountain just a few miles from Houston's birthplace at Coon Rock and later bought an adjoining forty acres. The family's livelihood was to come from their stewardship of this land, and this meant that each family member had to carry his share of the work load.

Once Houston was old enough to till the soil, his father taught him to plow with a blind horse named Tom. Later, his father sold Tom, but somehow the horse's name became Houston's nickname and many family members came to know him as Tom. The horse was replaced by a pair of mules known as Jack and Nell, which Houston worked during most of his farm years. Mules were valued possessions on the farm and occupied a special relationship with those who shared their toil. Even today, he recounts with affection the individual characteristics and dispositions of the mules which were the work companions of his youth.

As a youth, Houston's long hours of work in the hot and dusty fields of that Lookout Mountain farm seemed to him to be of little lasting value, but years later he would look back upon those times and realize that growing up as a farm boy established within him a work ethic that became one of his most valued possessions.

Work was no stranger to the Cole family. John Cole's workday began at 4 a.m. and included the usual farm chores plus making cane sorghum for the public at a syrup mill which he maintained on the farm. He also grew watermelons and vegetables which he carried into Fort Payne on a two-horse wagon and sold house to house.

John Cole was an imposing man. He was tall and straight, both in stature and in character. He had little formal education, but he was always well informed about current events. He subscribed to *The Atlanta Constitution*, and from the light of a kerosene lamp read with thoroughness its three weekly issues. In addition, he

regularly read *The Chattanooga Times* and *The Birmingham News*. His exposure to news events was expanded in later years when he acquired a Silvertone radio from Sears Roebuck and was able to listen to the broadcasts of newsmen, Kaltenborn and Thomas.

Houston's father was active in community affairs pertaining to church, school and politics. He was a Methodist and a Republican, although he became a great admirer of President Franklin D. Roosevelt because of his leadership in bringing the nation out of the Great Depression.

The story is told that John Cole was once called for jury duty when a lawsuit against the county sheriff was to be tried. The sheriff was a Democrat and had a lawyer who was a Democrat. Knowing John Cole was a Republican, the lawyer wanted to strike him from the case. The sheriff, however, trusted Cole not to let his politics interfere with his oath as a juror and insisted that he stay on the case. He commented to his lawyer, "If John Cole finds me guilty, I'm guilty." When the jury returned to announce its verdict, Cole was foreman. The lawyer despaired, but the sheriff was relieved. When the verdict was read, the sheriff won.

John Cole subscribed to a puritanical code of conduct and expected his children to do likewise. The only playing cards in the home were Rook cards, and alcoholic drink was strictly forbidden. When Houston was in the sixth grade, he performed in a school play and as the script suggested, he kissed the leading girl during the play's concluding scene. It was a scene that he cherished, but it cost him a spanking when he got home.

Although there were no laws at the time requiring school attendance, John Cole sent each of his children to school. Houston entered the first grade at Teague's Mill School located about two miles from his home. It was a one-room, one-teacher school which had a term of four months per year. To reach the school, he had to walk a footlog across a creek which was subject to flooding. School attendance was sometimes treacherous.

By the time Houston entered his second year of school, a new school building which his father helped build was completed within a mile of his home. It was here at Loveless School that Houston, under the guidance of a master teacher, Miss Lora Anderson, acquired an appetite for learning that has lasted him a lifetime.

The school day began at 8 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. The course of study was heavy in reading, arithmetic, and spelling with reading recitals twice each day. Miss Anderson, later to become Mrs. C. D. Killian, had a profound influence on Houston's early learning experience, and he remembers her even today with great respect and gratitude.



Eleven year old Houston Cole (kneeling, third row, third from right) in front of Loveless School on Lookout Mountain. His teacher, Mr. Bethune (standing with bow tie) had just paddled him for knocking out the window with a baseball.

Houston's life as a boy was dominated by farmwork and school, but other activities included hunting, fishing, visiting neighbors, playing townball on Saturday afternoons, attending box suppers on Saturday nights, going to the decoration of cemeteries each spring, and attending church on Sunday and revival meetings in late summer after the crops were laid by.

When Houston was about fourteen years old, he was invited to join a debating club at Mount Vernon School in a nearby community. He first declined the invitation because he was frightened by the thought of speaking before an audience, but his father insisted that he join and promised him a mule to ride to and from the events.

Houston quickly developed skills in debating and he and his debating opponents drew crowds on Saturday nights to hear their verbal sparring. The debates sometimes took the form of mock trials, and on one occasion Houston was prosecuting an accused for stealing chickens. The defense counsel, a classmate Oscar McInerney, defended with the argument that his client, who was old and stooped, could not possibly climb the tree to get the chickens from their roosting place. In rebuttal to this defense, Houston produced from behind the door a long cane with a wire on the end and demonstrated to the jury how the accused could have used such a cane to fetch the chickens. The jury agreed with this theory of the crime and found the old man guilty as charged.

After completing eight years of elementary school, Houston graduated from Loveless School in 1916. An elementary school education was more than most youngsters of that day achieved, and few students, especially those living in rural areas, even considered going to high school. High schools were located in towns and cities, public transportation was poor, and attendance at high school required money for room and board.

Houston perceived the prospect of attending high school as nothing more than a daydream which he occasionally conjured while plowing terrace rows. It, therefore, surprised and excited him when a few days before his graduation from Loveless School, the principal, Mrs. John Reese, suggested to Houston's father that he should consider sending him to high school. To Houston's disappointment, his father quickly rejected the suggestion explaining that the boy would be needed to help gather crops in the fall. The answer seemed final.

The matter, however, was not concluded. Two months later, the principal of DeKalb County High School, N. J. Callan, accompanied the county farm agent to the Cole farm. While they ate watermelons under the shade of a tree in the backyard, Mr. Callan called John Cole aside and urged him to let Houston enroll at the high school. Mr. Cole expressed to Mr. Callan, as he had to the Loveless principal, the need for his son's help with the fall harvest. Mr. Callan, eager to have Houston enroll, suggested that he could skip the fall semester and enroll in January. Cole consented. The daydream would become a reality, and Mr. Callan's visit to eat watermelon would become a turning point in Houston's life.

Two obstacles remained to Houston's becoming a high school student. He needed a place in Fort Payne where he could live during the week for an affordable price and a means of transportation to and from home on the weekends.

The first of these obstacles was resolved with the cooperation of an older brother who lived in Fort Payne.

The brother's work carried him out of town during the week, making it necessary for him to leave his wife and small child alone, and it would be useful to have Houston in the home while he was gone. The brother provided the necessary room and board, and Houston, in turn, assisted with household chores such as keeping the coal bucket filled with coal for heating the house, making the daily walk to the post office, and babysitting while his sister-in-law went shopping.

The problem of transportation was not solved so satisfactorily. The only solution was to ride the train, which would have been fine except for the fact that Houston's home on Lookout Moun-

tain was four miles from Portersville, site of the closest train station. Each Monday morning, he would rise at 4 a. m., walk the four miles to Portersville, board an Alabama Great Southern train and arrive in Fort Payne at 7:45 a. m. On Friday afternoon, he would ride the train back to Portersville and then, rain or shine, walk the four miles home. The round trip train fare was fifty cents which was all the money his father gave him each week. Houston learned, however, that on Friday afternoons he could walk from Fort Payne five miles south to Colbran and ride the train on to Portersville for only fifteen cents, thereby saving a dime which was exactly the price of admission to a Tom Mix western movie.

When Houston arrived at the high school on his first day of classes, he did so with great anxiety. He inquired of the janitor where he might find the principal's office and was told that the principal had no office but could be found in his classroom. In the classroom, Mr. Callan was stoking the coal-burning stove that heated the room. He extended a cordial greeting and proceeded to the blackboard where he outlined the course of study: algebra under Mr. O. B. Hodges, English under Miss Alpharine Strickland, later to become Mrs. B. E. Driskell, and world history and Latin under Mr. Callan.

Algebra was the course which caused Houston the greatest apprehension and which demanded the greatest portion of his study. A few days after his arrival in class, Mr. Hodges called him to the blackboard to work an algebra problem which had proved difficult for the other students, all of whom had been in the class much longer than Houston. The request struck terror in him, but with help which he credits as coming from above, he successfully worked the problem, and sat down to the acclaim of his teacher and fellow students.

The expectancy which characterized Houston's introduction to high school soon turned to despair. On April 1, 1917, after only three months of study, he fell victim to a typhoid fever epidemic and was confined to his home for four months. The epidemic, which engulfed Fort Payne, was fatal to several of Houston's classmates.

Under the care of Dr. C. D. Killian, who made regular visits to treat him, he slowly regained his strength and enjoyed a complete recovery. Dr. Killian prescribed chicken soup as the primary diet, and years later Houston recalled that he ate so much chicken soup during the period of his recuperation that he has never eaten it since.

Although Houston was unable to return to classes during that semester, Principal Callan once more demonstrated his faith in his potential. During Houston's convalescence, Mr. Callan weekly sent

him questions from all his courses to be answered from the study of his textbooks. This exercise permitted him to take his semester examinations and his score on the exams qualified him for advancement to the sophomore class. For Mr. Callan's kindness to him, Houston has observed, "Mr. Callan is high on my list of people to see if I get to heaven."

Although Houston was qualified to resume his studies as a sophomore in the fall of 1918, circumstances on the farm did not permit him to do so. The large barn which housed the farm's livestock had burned and his father needed his assistance in rebuilding it. Houston was delayed in returning to school until December 1919, and even then was compelled to resume his farm responsibilities before the end of the term. Similar circumstances cut his junior year short, and it was not until his senior year that he attended a full nine months of school.

In spite of the fact that Houston attended only twenty-three months of the thirty-six months required, graduation day 1921 saw him not only awarded a high school diploma but also honored as valedictorian of his class.

Houston graduated from high school with the ambition to become a lawyer or, perhaps, a congressman, but his first job after graduation took him back to the farm. He hired on to do farm work for a brother-in-law for a period of six weeks and earned \$40. But his days as a farm boy would soon be put behind him.

In mid-July, 1921, John Cole, traveling in a horse-drawn buggy, went to a bank in Collinsville, and borrowed \$80 to enter Houston in Jacksonville State Normal School. When Houston arrived there, he had absolutely no notion that he would return there in later years as the school's president.

After only five weeks at the Normal School, Houston had earned a state teaching certificate. He was offered a job, which he eagerly accepted, as principal-teacher at Hawkins School located between Collinsville and Leesburg on Lookout Mountain. The school had only two rooms and two teachers, although seven grades were taught. Houston taught three of the grades and the other teacher, Velma McClendon, from Duck Springs, taught the other four.

The job paid \$76 a month for a term of four and one-half months, hardly a salary to lure one from an ambition of law and politics, but Houston became interested in teaching and later allowed its satisfactions to change the direction of his career.

After four and one-half months at Hawkins School, Houston returned to Jacksonville State Normal School where he remained as a student for nearly two years. During this period he met and married Leone Pruett whose home was in Boaz but who was serv-

ing as principal of a school in the Williams Community in Calhoun County. The young couple remained apart during the week, but Houston walked eight miles each way to be with Leone on the weekends. His finances during his student days at Jacksonville were strained, and Leone's teaching income allowed him to complete his studies there.

Upon obtaining a two-year certificate at Jacksonville in 1923, Houston was named superintendent of schools in Guntersville. The job paid \$1350 for the nine-month school year, and Leone taught at the high school in Guntersville for a salary of \$800. Houston supplemented his salary by moonlighting as a correspondent for *The Birmingham News*. He enjoyed the newspaper work and if his career had not taken the direction that it did, he might have pursued journalism. "His copy didn't even need editing," said J. Fisher Rothermel, his editor at the *News*.

After a year in Guntersville, Houston and Leone had saved enough money for him to enroll at the University of Alabama. He was accepted at the University as a junior and majored in history. He graduated in 1925 receiving a B. A. degree. He was named Phi Beta Kappa and won membership in two honorary educational fraternities, Kappa Delta Pi and Phi Delta Kappa.

After graduating from the University of Alabama in the spring, Houston remained in Tuscaloosa and entered graduate school hoping to find employment by the end of the summer. In fact, by summer's end, he had two job offers.

The first was to become principal of Tuscumbia High School, an offer which he found attractive and had planned to accept. However, on the last day of summer classes, he was informed by Dr. Leo King, one of his professors, about an opening in the principal's position at Northport High School in Tuscaloosa County. Acting on Dr. King's directions, Houston went to the county superintendent, T. W. Smith, and applied for the job. The board hired him the next day.

Houston was delighted. Like the time when Principal Callan persuaded his father to send him to high school, Houston labeled this event a turning point in his life because it permitted him to remain in the University community.

Houston's exhilaration about the new job cooled a bit, however, when he learned that his predecessor had quit because of serious discipline problems in the school. On the first morning of classes, Houston arrived early and found a dozen boys gathered in front of the school. All eyes were on him, and as he approached, he heard one boy announce to the others, "I could whip that fellow by myself." Unnerved, but unwilling to let the challenge pass, the new

principal confronted the boy eyeball to eyeball and declared with resolve, "Young man, I'm ready when you are." He had made his point, and he had few discipline problems during his tenure at Northport.

Houston used his summers to advance his graduate studies, spending one summer at the University of Chicago. He obtained his Master's degree in history in 1927 from the University of Alabama. The same year, he and Leone became the proud parents of a daughter, Beth.

Houston continued as principal of Northport High School for three years when he took a two-year leave of absence and went to Columbia University in pursuit of a Ph.D.

While in New York City, he attended the famous Riverside Church and taught a Sunday school class there. On his first Sunday in attendance at the church, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., served as an usher. Houston recalls that when Rockefeller passed him the offering plate, he put in only a nickel.

As a history student at Columbia, Houston sought an interview with Colonel E. M. House, who had been a close friend and advisor to President Woodrow Wilson. He wrote to Colonel House and requested a 30-minute interview. Much to his surprise, the famous man granted the request and invited him to his East Side apartment.

During a visit that lasted beyond 30 minutes and into several hours, House recounted the attempts that he and Wilson had made to mediate peace in Europe before the outbreak of World War I, told of his pressing responsibilities as Wilson's closest advisor, and with a candor which House had never publicly divulged, talked of an estrangement which developed between him and Wilson and how Mrs. Wilson denied him access to her husband during the President's last illness.

When Houston returned from Columbia University to Tuscaloosa, he was offered the position of Superintendent of the Tuscaloosa County School System. He was pleased to be offered such a responsible job, but his real desire was to return to Columbia, finish his doctorate studies, and teach history at the University of Alabama. Undecided about what to do, he paid a visit to Dr. George Denny, president of the University of Alabama, and sought his advice. Dr. Denny, with no hesitation, told him he would be "crazy" not to take the superintendent's job. Houston followed his advice and took the job.

It was a decision he would never regret. While he had aspired at one time or another to become a lawyer, a congressman, a journalist, or a history professor, being a school administrator suited

him just fine, and although he did not know it, he was well on his way to reaching the job from which he would make his greatest contribution, that of college president. Perhaps he was drawing upon his own experience when he told a high school graduating class years later, "Prepare yourself well, and your day in the sun will come."

Houston prepared himself well through his studies at four institutions of higher learning, but today as he gazes out the window of his president emeritus office on the campus of Jacksonville State University and assesses the milestones of his life, he is quick to acknowledge that his greatest preparation for living came on the Lookout Mountain farm where he spent his early life.

Houston's memory of those early days is sweet, and he has spent much time in recent years reminiscing with family and friends about his youth on the farm, his train trips to high school in Fort Payne, and his heritage at Coon Rock.

Houston once wrote, "The morning of life is made for preparation, the afternoon for achievement, and the evening for reward." Thanks to a father who taught him the importance of work, kind people who saw within him a potential for achievement, and a sister who encouraged him to stay in school, Houston overcame formidable obstacles and used the morning of his life for preparation. That preparation took him to heights of achievement exceeding even his own expectations, and allows him in the evening of his life to enjoy the rewards of a life steeped in distinguished service to his fellow man.