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Jett Williams finds her place

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When Jett Williams was a toddler, her grandmother dressed her in a little cowboy outfit, draped a guitar from her shoulders and stood her on top of the dining room table to belt out "Your Cheatin' Heart."

Williams has no memory of the performance. She read about it in her adoption papers about 30 years later.

The grandmother, Lillian Stone, was the mother of country legend Hank Williams Sr. According to documents Jett Williams unearthed long after his death, the man whose "Your Cheatin' Heart" is now a staple of classic country music intended to raise her largely by himself. Instead, he was buried on Jan. 4, 1953. Jett was born before sunrise on Jan. 6 of the same year.

"I maintain that as his soul was leaving this world my soul was coming into it," Jett Williams said. "I think that during that twilight between death and life, we passed each

other coming and going because of the window being so small."

Stone legally adopted her son's baby, but she died two weeks after the adoption was final, launching Jett Williams into the foster care system. She didn't find out she was Hank Williams Sr.'s youngest child for decades, and then she spent eight years trying to prove her paternity.

Orphans get advocate

Williams details her struggle in her 1990 autobiography, *Ain't Nothin' As Sweet As My Baby*. But recently she decided to do more to raise the awareness of orphans and foster children. In December, she became a spokeswoman for the Orphan Foundation of America, which helps teens who have aged out of the U.S. foster care system to pursue a post-high school education.

"For the grace of God, I got a couple more signatures in the system that put me into an adoptive home. But the system could have stopped before that," said Williams, sitting in a wicker chair and sipping coffee in a game room at her Hartsville, Tenn., office complex.

"And the thing about being an orphan or a foster child is that when you get to that age where the system releases you, you do not have the benefit of a family, which allows you the support to go on. I was blessed with a good education . . . and it's critical to be able to have a profession and find adulthood."

The Orphan Foundation of America provides scholarships, internships and mentors, helping with job placement for the nearly 5,000 people in the program each year.

"Her story has to inspire the children in our program because she's made so much of her life," said Eileen McCaffrey, the foundation's executive director. "She's had these losses and pains and never quite fit in, and she got up every day and had a job that was meaningful to her. She worked hard, and there was this void in her life. She needed a sense of belonging and being valued. By pursuing her birth family, she was able to put a piece back into her life."

Secrets were kept

Williams should never have been an orphan at all, according to the story she pieced together over the years.

To adopt her, Lillian Stone had to do two things: prove to the State of Alabama that she was the child's paternal grandmother, and, because of her health and age, provide proof that if she died, another family member would assume custody.

Stone met the first requirement with a letter from Williams' birth mother, Bobbie Jett — who gave up parental rights — stating that Hank Williams was the baby's father. The second requirement was fulfilled by Stone's daughter, Irene Smith, who promised to care

for the baby.

But according to Jett Williams, Smith not only put the toddler in the foster care system, but also stipulated that any potential adoptive family must know nothing about her lineage or be associated with the Williams family in any way.

Williams, 56 this month, said after that, it was like she just "dropped off the face of the Earth."

"My grandmother did not hide me in a closet," she said. "She used to drive (Hank Williams') baby blue Cadillac, and there are people who have told me I would be standing next to her and we would be driving all over Montgomery, Ala. Everyone knew who I was. Everyone knew that Hank was my father, so when she died there was an outpouring of people who came forward, friends of Dad's saying, 'What's going to happen? We'll take the baby.' "

Williams believes the stipulation was the first step in cutting her out of the Williams' family and inheritance. Soon after giving her up for adoption, Smith sued the child over Stone's estate. Because Stone had adopted Williams, she and Smith were both considered daughters. But at the time in the State of Alabama, an adopted child could not be a legal heir.

Lone link remained

When Williams' adoptive parents, Louise and Wayne Deupree — both now deceased — took her home, they were told they could not yet adopt her because she was involved in a court case. Williams remained with this family into adulthood, though she describes their relationship as emotionally distant.

"I think it hurt that relationship with the Deuprees two-fold," she said. "I was 2 going on 3, and I was considered undesirable because people wanted babies. But here you are given this toddler and told you can't have it. It's like giving someone a puppy and telling them not to love it because we might have to take it away from you."

At the end of that first court case, Alabama's law changed so that an adopted child could be a legal heir, but that was too late for Williams. Instead, because she was in the foster system, the State of Alabama tallied how much money it would take to cover her living expenses over the next several years. About \$2,000 — with Lillian Stone's name attached — was placed in a bank account for Jett Williams to collect when she turned 21

"That was critical," Williams said. "That money was the trigger that caused the adoptive mother to mention Hank Williams might be my father."

Close to her 21st birthday, Williams' adoptive parents drove to visit her at college. And while her father went for a walk, her mother told her about the money and that there was a slight possibility Hank Williams was her father. That is the first time she recalls hearing that she might be part of Williams' legacy. But her mother also told her "there was no

proof and there wasn't anything I could do."

So, with her adoptive uncle Stanley as her escort, Jett Williams picked up the check at the courthouse and put the notion of her famous father out of her mind. "To have that glimmer and then to have that snuffed out was pretty devastating," she said. Several years later, her father got cancer and saw a program featuring Hank Williams Jr. The father then called Jett Williams and gave her his permission to start searching for her birth parents, which she said was critical.

"You feel a loyalty and an allegiance because you feel like if you go and search, you're letting them down, and you owe them even if they weren't the best," she said. At the time Jett Williams began her search, there was no Internet — her main tools were telephone books, libraries and conversations. The first big clue was a newspaper article her father sent her that mentioned Hank Williams had a possible second child. Jett Williams requested her adoption papers, which eventually required filing a lawsuit. After that initial dead end, she tracked down the woman who served as her caretaker when she lived with her grandmother, and that woman gave Williams her birth mother's name. Williams looked up the name Jett in the Nashville phone book and found her mother's uncle Willard, who eventually told her that her mother had died.

"I had put all my eggs in the basket of Bobbie Jett because who better to tell you who the father was," Williams said. "When I found out she was dead, I felt I had exhausted all possibilities."

Attorney steps in

Soon after, Williams met Keith Adkinson, an investigative attorney from Washington, D.C., who took her case. Together, they retraced all her steps and went back to the state adoption agency. This time, a worker was willing to read Williams her papers, and Adkinson caught it all on a hidden tape recorder.

Adkinson also was able to dig up a copy of a pre-birth custody contract between Bobbie Jett and Hank Williams Sr. that stated the singer was Williams' father and had plans to care for and support her.

"She was squalling," he said. "She made me read it to her seven times. But it never occurred to either one of us that there was anything (financial) involved in it. I figured the estate had been closed for 30 years. She said, 'That answered all my questions. That's all I want to know.' I said, 'It may answer all your questions, but now I've got about 10,000 questions, and I smell fraud by somebody.'"

In 1987, Adkinson, who is now married to Jett Williams, established her paternity in a court of law. By this time, Williams had been sued by her half brother Hank Williams Jr., and Hank Williams Sr.'s publishing company for causing contractual business problems by claiming to be Hank Sr.'s daughter.

But in 1989 she won again when the Supreme Court of Alabama ruled she was entitled to half of Hank Williams' estate. In a 54-page ruling, the court found that Williams had been denied her status as Hank Williams Sr.'s child through fraud and fraud upon the court. She won a second lawsuit shortly after the Alabama ruling in a federal court in New York over Williams' claims to a child's portion of the copyright renewals.

For Jett Williams, everything hinged on the fact that her biological father wanted her and had plans to provide for her.

"When I found out that he wanted me and signed all the legal papers (the pre-birth custody agreement) and something went wrong, I told Keith I wanted to stand up and set the record straight," she said.

While it wasn't easy, she can say the end result was worth the emotional turmoil and legal battles.

"Today Hank Jr. and I co-own the estate, so we do business," she said. "For 15 years now we've agreed and disagreed on every point. We do not do social, but we still make public appearances together. I also think that by having the (Williams family exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame) it kind of sums it up that we're all under the same roof. We get along to get along."

About the Orphan Foundation of America

Every year, more than 25,000 people age out of the foster care system and try to make the transition into adulthood without family or financial support, according to the Orphan Foundation of America. The foundation, for which Jett Williams is now official national spokeswoman, was founded in 1981 and is the only national organization focused solely on helping these young adults pursue educational goals beyond high school. The foundation works with about 5,000 people each year. Information: www.orphan.org.

IF YOU GO

Exhibit set

What: Family Tradition: The Williams Family Legacy explores the legacy of Hank Williams Sr., his children and his grandchildren. The exhibit will remain on display through Dec. 31.

Where: Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 222 Fifth Ave. S.

Contact: www.countrymusichalloffame.com or 416-2001.

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