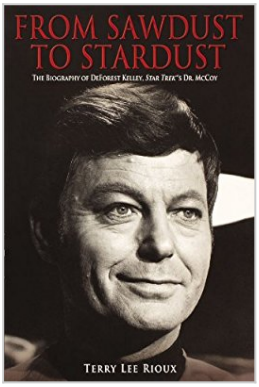

From Sawdust to Stardust: The Biography of DeForest Kelley, Star Trek's Dr. McCoy

By Terry Lee Rioux

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Jackson DeForest Kelley came of age in Depression-era Georgia. He was raised on the sawdust trail, a preacher's kid steeped in his father's literal faith and judgment. But De's natural artistic gifts called him to a different way, and a visit to California at seventeen showed a bright new world.
Theater and radio defined his early career -- but it was a World War II training film he made while serving in the Army Air Corps that led to his first Paramount Studios contract.
After years of struggle, his lean, weathered look became well known in notable westerns and television programs such as *You Are There* and *Bonanza*. But his work on several pilots for writer-producer Gene Roddenberry changed his destiny and the course of cultural history.
This thoroughly researched actor's life is about hard work and luck, loyalty and love. It is a journey that takes us all...from sawdust to stardust.

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- Sales Rank: #713513 in Books
- Published on: 2005-02-01
- Released on: 2005-02-01
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.20" w x 6.00" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 362 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
"For those interested in the life and work of actor DeForest Kelley, they cannot do better than consult *From Sawdust to Stardust,* Terry Lee Rioux's thorough and engaging life story of the beloved actor."
-- Nicholas Meyer, screenwriter and film director

"A baseball coach of some note once opined, 'Nice guys finish last.' Terry Lee Rioux's well-researched and readable *From Sawdust to Stardust* is warm, charming and inspirational -- especially for those who work just out of the limelight, and never curse their luck. For *Star Trek* fans, it's a chance to re-enter the final frontier with a really nice guy."
-- Ronald J. Drez, author of *Voices of Valor* and *Remember D-Day*

About the Author
After earning a baccalaureate degree in anthropology from SUNY Plattsburgh, Terry Lee Rioux joined the United States Coast Guard. Later she earned a Master of Arts degree in history at Lamar University. Terry's professional focus has been the preservation and interpretation of individual life stories in the nineteenth and twentiethth centuries. She lives and works in New Orleans and travels frequently to Los Angeles. She has continued to participate in academic work in Texas through the East Texas Historical Association. Terry is an active volunteer in the collections division of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans. She is the author of *From Sawdust to Stardust*.

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Chapter I: The Preacher's Son

"It was a hard row to hoe, to be perfect."

DeForest Kelley, 1992

Reverend Ernest David Kelley began his ministry to the congregation of Conyers, Georgia, on January 12, 1930. At first meeting, the new shepherd made a mild impression, fine-boned with smooth skin, spectacles, and a bald head. By surface appearances, he was a timid man, but his quick, sharp eyes and the fire of his sermons revealed that he was not. His greatest gifts were the content of his sermons and the strength of his presence in the pulpit. His own soul knew the bitter taste of daily trials, and so he was a genuine witness in his mission to frail humanity. His was a constant litany, crying out about the perfect soul-gathering rescue of Jesus Christ and the joys to be found in him.

Reverend Kelley could speak directly to the souls of these Georgia people. His heritage was close to that of his congregants. The Kelley family origins were proud, Irish, and Southern. From Virginia in the 1750s, the Kelleys found their way into Georgia, to Franklin County and the small hill town of Toccoa. Theirs was the rugged earth of north Georgia hill country, a land of Cherokee people and hardscrabble settlement. A century later, the region became a favorite highway for the mean ruin of Union forces during the Atlanta campaign. Two young witnesses to the Civil War, Mary Emily Payne and Emory Jackson Kelley, later married and raised nine children surrounded by the deprivations of Reconstruction. Ernest David, born in 1883, was called to ministry in 1911. Ordained through the Broad River Baptist Church, Reverend Kelley chose to serve the common man on the sawdust trail. He met and married Clora Casey of Cedartown, eleven years his

junior, and his first son, Casey, was born in 1917. Jackson DeForest came along in 1920. In 1925, Reverend Kelley earned a graduate degree in theology from Mercer University. He served churches with names like Zebulon, Attica, County Line, and Penfield. With Clora at his side, he ministered all over the interior of Georgia.

Now at the height of his physical and spiritual strength, Reverend Kelley shared the gospel in Conyers. Educated and poor, after nearly fifteen years of preaching, the Reverend knew the hearts and minds of men and the dangers of a worldly life. His call for unswerving Christian faith was mixed with Christian warning: he made it very clear to his congregation and to his children that there were grave consequences for sinful yet ordinary behaviors such as going to dances and movies and drinking and smoking. The saved and those yet to be salvaged were invited to find and renew their spirit in a Baptist way of life with the Kelleys. While the Reverend ministered with his sermons and mastery of the Bible, his wife ministered by loving example and gentle touch.

Reverend Kelley kept his boys, Ernest Casey and Jackson DeForest, close to the church. He made them learn the responsibilities of the elect; the boys knew they were representing something far larger than their own small lives. The mission of the father was the mission of the family. As a preacher's kid, DeForest was bound to the sawdust trail of his father's ministry. Athens, Woodville, and so on, they moved from one Georgia mill town to the next. Reverend Kelley shaped his sons with an eye on the promise of heaven and the literal existence of hell. He ruled with the steady hand of the righteous, while Clora worked to soften that hand with humor and diplomacy. However, the traditional round of Bible study, quotation and recitation, psalms at supper, Wednesday evening prayer meetings, and Sundays filled with classes and multiple services challenged the obedience of even the most respectful child. DeForest's brother, Casey, chafed under the restrictions of the household and seemed quite unable to please anyone completely. He was already a teenager, vexed by many things his little brother couldn't begin to imagine. DeForest, like his mother, sought to keep the peace. DeForest's first role was his portrayal of the Good Son.

Sometimes DeForest spent long hours playing outside, and when it was time, from deep in the shadows of the porch, Clora would call out, "DeForest!...DeForest!" and the boy's name rang out all around the big house and yard. DeForest loved that sound of his mother's calling. Other times, the little boy stayed close to his mother to keep her company as she worked. While she did her chores, his eyes were often drawn to her only finery, an ice-bright diamond ring. Clora wore it always, while washing, ironing, and scrubbing, "and it was all smooth...and the prongs wore down slowly," the boy remembered. She cherished that ring, and so did her son. Her brother, the mysterious Herman Casey, won the ring in a card game in France and gave it to her. Her boy DeForest wanted to give her something, too; he wanted to give her the world. As young as he was, he knew her life was hard, and he wished to make it easier for her somehow, and so he became her sunshine.

DeForest was immersed in the Reverend's mission in Conyers. There his sermons were thundering appeals delivered in lightning. He called all to a worldly mission to "seek and save the lost." To join him, one must be filled with the Holy Spirit, and for that to happen, one must surrender. "Are you willing to crucify self?" the Reverend challenged every member. He promised them that failure would mean "wreck and ruin."

Ten-year-old DeForest began to think that there could be only hellfire and damnation for someone as weak and selfish as he knew himself to be, and his father gave no indication otherwise. DeForest worked ever harder at being the good son. With some resignation, he recalled, "It was a hard row to hoe, to be perfect."

2 Before their first year in Conyers was over, Reverend Kelley introduced the congregation to DeForest's musical talents. In the words of Erskine Davis, DeForest's friend during those years, the boy had a "very good voice for singing. He often sang a solo at the morning church service. Two of his favorites were 'Living

for Jesus' and 'Jesus Is All the World to Me.' While DeForest sang, Reverend Kelley would beam with pride and joy. Sometimes he would stand by DeForest while he sang." The Reverend made good use of DeForest's gifts and seemed determined to forge the boy into an instrument of ministry. For the holidays, the Reverend presented a Christmas exercise. DeForest received "a great hand, the solo work of this 10-year-old boy being especially good," according to the local paper. DeForest's uncle, Dr. Luther H. Kelley, "slipped in and took a back seat just like most doctors do at church and grand opera."

DeForest's performances, his manners, and his charm made him popular in Conyers. He was a sensitive boy who appreciated neatness, process, and order; messes and contrariness disturbed him. Contrariness, indeed! One grandmother drove DeForest to distraction by insisting on calling him Forrest, as in Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Civil War hero. When he tended to her, she would look at whatever he might bring her and say, "Set it down here, Forrest." And he'd put her tray down. Finally, he brought her a gift and told her if she would say his name right, he would give her his gift. Smiling, she agreed. He gave it to her; she admired it and handed it back to him: "Set it down here, Forrest." Everyone knew, and she did, too, that he was named for Lee DeForest, the genius of the new century who made the radio possible, as well as talking movies and all kinds of things. Dr. DeForest traveled the country, promoting his work and inspiring the common man to look forward to the new world just taking shape in the early twentieth century. Reverend Kelley was very impressed with the mind and inventions of Dr. DeForest, and his second son was given a name fit for the future.

But the present times were hard. To help out, DeForest hunted squirrel, rabbit, and possum -- anything that might fill the family table -- but he had no taste for killing and never hunted unless he had to. Reverend Kelley took on a second church, the Rockdale Baptist Church a few miles west of town, for the small sum that congregation could offer. While the Reverend preached, DeForest hunted and sometimes hosed down the coal laborers at the Conyers rail depot for a coin or two, but these small amounts could not do much to relieve the Kelleys' ministerial poverty. There was no shame in their lack, and it was no sin to do without.

In Conyers, one of DeForest's favorite playmates was the small son of Emma Banks, who did some day work for Clora Kelley. Emma's house was little more than a shack in West Conyers, but her yard was interesting, with an outdoor laundry kettle, chickens, and a woodpile where DeForest and sometimes his brother Casey would go to play and be with Emma. She made a deep impression on DeForest, and he took her into his heart.

DeForest took pleasure in his life in Conyers, trapping rabbits, fishing, wading in the water to catch tadpoles and bugs. He loved Sandy Kelley, the little brown dog that kept close tabs on the young master, waiting for him while DeForest was in school. Toward the end of every school day, DeForest would go near the classroom's open window and sharpen his pencil, signaling Sandy that dismissal time approached. He remembered, "That little dog's tail would raise up, and off he'd go, down the street, through the window without the screen, and all around the house; then he'd come back and lead me home."

School lunches could be dreary, but Erskine Davis's mother baked a yeast loaf for his sandwiches. Erskine's father was a dairy farmer and grew wheat for the family bread, taking it to the local mill to be ground. The smell and taste of the bread were just wonderful. "DeForest would come around at lunch recess and swap two of his sandwiches for one of mine," Davis remembers. A boy who knew quality had to be willing to pay up for it, and DeForest was such a boy.

DeForest's elementary-school teacher, Mary J. Cowan, gave him stellar reports for neatness, promptness, attendance, and conduct. He did very well in agriculture, grammar, geography, and reading. He earned B's in physiology, history, spelling, and writing. Arithmetic never meant very much, though he did fairly well. In

1932, he was advanced into high school.

It was easier to express high spirits among the children, teachers, and staff at school than in the company of Reverend Kelley. And DeForest's angelic sweetness had a good touch of Tom Sawyer salt in it. It seems he was just the boy for the role of Tom, in something he vaguely recalled later as "Tom Sawyer Paints a Fence," apparently his first experience onstage. He enjoyed cutting up for his classmates; Tom Doyle especially appreciated young Kelley's efforts. The principal of Conyers High School was a tall, stern man with a bald head, rather like the Reverend Kelley. Doyle recalls that the principal would, whenever he passed their classroom, go up on tiptoes to peer at them through the window at the top of the door. When he did that, DeForest would croon, "The moon is rising! The moo-ooon is risiiing!" Muffling the laughter would be half the battle, stifling admiration for DeForest's nerve the other half.ar

One of DeForest's favorite classes was Miss Bedenbaugh's French class. She was "a tiny, pretty, dark-haired lady," Doyle recalls. "Each French class, DeForest would tell her, 'My, you look pretty today!'" All sugar and snowball, DeForest flummoxed her with charm. He didn't let up. She was so dazzled, "we didn't learn a lot of French," Doyle admits.

DeForest and Tom were far outnumbered by the girls at school. The boys soon realized their sublime situation. Often, they hid in the cloakroom for a kiss or two or three, with one or two or three of the girls. Estelle was an especially pretty girl, and one day she got a pass to go to the library. DeForest and Tom decided to go, too, and all three headed arm-in-arm to the library in the basement. In the stairwell, Tom and DeForest each gave Estelle a big smooch, and just then they looked up and saw the principal at the top of the stairs. The boys dropped their books and ran for it, Tom crying out, "Excuse me, Professor!" All three skedaddled back to the classroom.

After school, there were hours of precious freedom. I. G. Ellis's dad was the manager of the Coca-Cola plant just across the street from the Baptist church. Often after school, three pals -- Tom, DeForest, and Flip Cook, the sheriff's son whom DeForest christened "Flip Flop Floyd the Flea" -- would go with I.G. to visit his dad at the plant, "and he would give us a free ice-cold Coke...a big treat."

Toward dusk, it was time to see Tom to the depot for his ride home on the Dinky. Tom's father ran the quarter-sized locomotive from Milstead to Conyers for the Callaway Mill; his last run was at the end of the day, and Tom had better be on it or walk miles to get home. Often the boys would hear that whistle blow, and DeForest and friends would holler, "The Dinky's waiting for you! The Dinky is singin'!" and they would race to the depot.

Sometimes there would be a sleepover. Tom, DeForest, and Flip looked for adventure on those nights. One Saturday, the musketeers slept over at Flip's. The Cook family lived downstairs in the jail, with prison cells above. The cells were generally used only for drunks on Saturday nights. "After everyone was asleep, we went upstairs. We took an empty Prince Albert Pipe Tobacco can and raked it across the prison cell bars, waking the drunks and tormenting them!" Doyle says. The sheriff finally woke up and put an end to it, and they got an earful from prisoners and sheriff alike.

DeForest treasured his memories of schooldays and friends in Conyers. Other idyllic memories came from travels during summer break. The Kelleys would make their way back to Toccoa to enjoy the family reunions. DeForest met up with his cousins and many aunts and uncles. "Tons of good food and watermelons later taken from the cool water," he recalled. The boy was especially close to his dear Aunt Gladys, a loving, centralizing force in the Kelley clan. And DeForest was very proud of his uncle Dr. Luther Kelley, a highly respected surgeon and veteran, who brought DeForest into the world with his own hands. Luther was the

most successful and respected of the Kelley clan.

To follow in the footsteps of his uncle would have been a great and noble thing, but the Great Depression meant that higher education was already out of the question for Casey and DeForest. DeForest had all the usual youngster's aspirations of the day, such as being an aviator or a cowboy. He wanted to be a cowboy more than anything. He dreamed all kinds of big dreams, but there was no money and no sign that things would ever change in the Kelley household. His father and mother strongly impressed upon their sons that expectations must be held in check. Humility and spiritual rewards were paramount. Their teachings may have been the kindest lessons they could impart, for the 1930s were not conducive to lofty goals such as higher education or the arts.

3 DeForest looked forward to seasonal events, family reunions, and the traveling wonders that came and went. He particularly enjoyed the evangelists T. W. Tippett and Gypsy Smith, but his world was small indeed. Practicality and drudgery might have been the boy's future, except that DeForest's much storied and mysterious uncle, his mother's brother Herman Casey, came to visit and took the town of Conyers by storm.

Reverend Kelley set down an account of the Caseys' visit for the church bulletin: "Mr. & Mrs. W. H. Casey, of Long Beach, California, arrived in Conyers this week, following a six-day tramp across the continent to visit Mr. Casey's sister, Mrs. Ernest D. Kelley." Herman and his wife, Shorty Casey, were part of a team driving with Ernest Stuht, a "Speedmotor and gasoline technician," out to record their driving experiences in their Willys-Knight six-cylinder. Apparently, the only trouble on the entire trip from Long Beach by way of Phoenix, El Paso, Shreveport, and Birmingham was a right rear tire that failed six times. The reverend wrote that Stuht "recommends that tourists leave [the] right rear wheel at home." Apparently, the Caseys and Stuht were involved in oil exploration and speculation in Long Beach. They were high rollers on the road for a good time.

"I thought he was the greatest guy in the whole world. When he smiled at you -- you just laughed all over," DeForest remembered. The Caseys kept everyone in stitches, with jokes and stories, filling the Kelley house with delight. Clora's brother had the wonder of life, the love of adventure, and the wit of an Irish hero. To DeForest, he seemed to be a big man, "a broad-minded...tremendous guy...he looked like a sort of a dashing Noel Coward." And for DeForest, nothing would ever be the same.

Herman Casey was extraordinary, even down to his handwriting. DeForest had him do some samples on sheets of paper, and later he showed Erskine Davis the beautiful script that belonged to that life-loving man from California. And DeForest began telling Davis that he would go to California someday, and he would try to get into pictures.

His parents encouraged DeForest's performing talents. His singing aroused such interest that Reverend Kelley decided to take his son over to the big Atlanta radio station, WSB. The local paper welcomed the preacher's son to the airwaves and proudly reminded its readers that Mrs. Kelley was from Polk County. The press agreed with the Reverend that DeForest was a popular singer and an appealing talent. DeForest was featured in a WSB broadcast from the Sunset Club at the Biltmore Hotel. The boy's solos were good enough to keep him coming back. He performed duets with a young lady named Miss Margaret Perrin.

In January 1934, shortly before his younger son's fourteenth birthday on January 20, DeForest's father departed the Conyers congregation and moved the family to the Atlanta community of Decatur. Good-bye to country life and the friends of Conyers, where DeForest came to the age of responsibility, self-awareness, and dreams. He could take nothing of Conyers with him except what it had taught him and the memories. The curtain drew closed on his sweet youth of Tom Sawyer adventure and simplicity.

4 At Decatur Boys High School, DeForest discovered a natural talent for sports. He was one of the proud Decatur Bantams, champions of the 120-pound Sandlot League, who were, as the press reported, "Undefeated in their march to the title." Ever careful with his appearance, DeForest was the only boy on the team to pose for the news photographer in a sweater and tie.

Reverend Kelley was without a church. He and DeForest were compelled to work for the Roosevelt agencies designed to lift the country out of economic crisis. Reverend Kelley went to work for the WPA, the Works Progress Administration, and DeForest went to work for the NYA, the National Youth Agency. The federal government taught him to be a janitor, cleaning bathrooms and lockers and scrubbing floors at a local school after his own day of classes.

In addition to baseball, DeForest played football and some other sports, and he dabbled in all the activities of a large boys' high school, including dating: "I remember when my brother was old enough to date, there was constant disapproval from my parents." He kept the peace living by his father's law. He dated young ladies under the Reverend's strict eye, and therefore not very late, not very often, and not very successfully. He did manage to enjoy female company, however, acting in the Decatur Girls High School production of *He Couldn't Take It*, a comedy in three acts by Austin Goetz.

In June 1936, DeForest was sixteen and preparing to graduate in the midst of the Great Depression. At the time, it seemed he would spend his adult life as a janitor or laborer.

Just before graduation, Uncle Herman Casey visited them again. The Casey magic hadn't faded; in DeForest's eyes, he was the complete opposite of the Reverend, with his clothes and dash and "million-dollar personality." Uncle Herman told DeForest to come visit him in California. The nephew seized on the idea, making it the central purpose in his life. Graduation came and went in a fog of daydreams. The typical high school senior events, such as signing yearbooks, didn't hold much significance. He hoped that he was just passing through Decatur and Atlanta. He was on his way to California and unnamed possibilities.

Sometime before graduation, DeForest got a job as a drugstore's car hop, and he made sure he kept it. He spent weekends working at the local theaters. He did not falter in his determination to get the bus fare that would take him to Long Beach and the Pacific Ocean. His mother brokered the deal; if he could get the money, he could go to California for a few weeks, where Herman and Shorty Casey lived in sunshine and excitement.

As an usher at the Paramount in Atlanta, DeForest soaked in the movies. He continued singing at church and on the radio. He was chosen to sing with the Lew Forbes Orchestra at the Paramount. DeForest remembered the event as "my first real contact with an audience, and though I was dreadfully nervous, I found the experience exhilarating." He sang with the orchestra, and the experience lifted him up and out of himself.

In 1937, his father returned to the ministry at Atlanta's Woodland Hills Baptist Church. Reverend Kelley and other leaders made a leap of faith and established a new church building on the corners of Woodland and Confederate Avenues. The Reverend was restored to the pulpit, and he resumed teaching through passionate sermons. He forcefully recounted the labors and trials of the men and women of the Bible. Everyone knew that the Prodigal Son was the most cherished in his father's sight, and perhaps this father did not yet know which son was which. He appealed, "Christian mothers bar the way to hell!" Yet Clora knew it was time to let her Good Son go.

DeForest finally had the bus fare saved. Clora saved the small notice in the local paper that announced the event: "Dr. Forest Kelley left Thursday for California to visit his uncle Herman Casey in Long Beach." Oh,

that name again! Well, another doctor in the family couldn't hurt.

5 Finally, Long Beach, California! In 1937, DeForest stepped off the bus into a world of sunshine and palms and beaches so white as to blind a boy. This new world was astounding, enlivening, beyond daydreams, and without limits. "I was an innocent young thing -- just a white-cheeked kid -- living a sheltered life as a minister's son," DeForest recalled. He presented himself to Herman Casey, occasional oilman, welder's foreman, entrepreneur, and, mostly, professional gambler. Uncle Herman was a card player in private clubs; he played dice, and he played on his great charm within the community. He was a fellow who relied on his way with people, his knowledge of the odds, and his mastery of the game at hand. He and his wife, Shorty, were never well off. They accepted the cards they were dealt and played them with relish and good cheer. They loved having DeForest as their guest. In just a few weeks, Herman Casey determined that the young man should stay and try to become a part of his world. DeForest needed little prompting to slip into the part of the high roller.

When a cousin from New Jersey came through some six weeks later, DeForest's descent into the nightlife accelerated. The kid was a gambler and "a tough guy, who talked out of the side of his mouth," DeForest recalled. They soon became partners, setting up their own gambling den. "A poker game would start Friday and continue on through Saturday and Sunday....My job was to serve booze, help drag the game, and wipe [the players'] foreheads with a wet rag when they got sleepy," DeForest recalled. Herman Casey made sure his sister's son did not play cards, since card playing was a sure ticket to hell for a Southern Baptist. And DeForest himself developed a dislike for gambling; however, the smooth, cool lifestyle was appealing enough. Soon, though, the boys found out that their little business had come to the attention of the police; the cops were on to DeForest and his cousin. They left the apartment in a hurry, scared witless. They found a hideout in a building with some very rough characters, seamen and longshoremen and women who matched them. One night during a domestic quarrel, his cousin went to the defense of a friend and wound up beaten terribly and in the hospital. Aunt Shorty was enraged with the whole adventure, and DeForest was mortified. "I can't believe I was really involved in such things," he later confessed. Lessons learned, DeForest moved back into Casey's house and began looking for wage work.

A healthy young fellow could find work among the steel mills, shipbuilders, canneries, and cleaning crews. The hardest work and the best wages were found in the oilfields, doing the grinding work of roughnecking on the rigs. DeForest worked the platforms, the drills, and the dangerous derrick assemblies that were covered in mud, crude, and sweat. The boy's natural physicality was honed and tempered in labor and heat. He lived among rough working people, exposed to vice and sickness.

If DeForest were to stay in Long Beach, he would have to become streetwise, and his Uncle Herman tried to teach him. DeForest had to find the fine line between raising hell and risking real damnation.

Away from the oilfields and the seedy interior of Long Beach, DeForest discovered the tonic of beach-bumming in 1937. It was a pure way of life -- body surfing, hanging out, and all the while surrounded by girls. His labors and swimming defined his long muscles and darkened his skin; his hair bleached blond. The Pacific rolled in to embrace him. He became enamored of the ocean and the people who were drawn to it as much as he was.

Occasionally, DeForest treated himself to a meal out, and one day, he recalled, "I was sitting in a restaurant when this guy named Ronald Hawk came up and asked if I'd ever worked in theater. I told him I hadn't....He asked if I'd come to the [Long Beach Little Theater] and try out for a play he was going to direct. And then he heard my thick Southern accent...but decided I should read for the part anyway, as he felt I was just right for it." He didn't take it very seriously. "I'm sure I joined originally to meet people -- because I'd absolutely

no designs on Hollywood at all." He had forgotten his comment to Erskine Davis about making pictures, and now the desire to perform was borne to consciousness through the social banter of Ronnie Hawk.

Ronnie's girlfriend, Valerie, was popular in the clique of performing artists in Long Beach; she saw DeForest and brought him into that circle. Sure enough, he got the part in a small one-act production of *Holiday* for the Little Theater. He was kidded and coached by his new friends about his mush-mouth drawl. He tolerated their jokes and accepted their instruction over several weeks. With Holiday, DeForest became aware of the motion-picture talent scouts who prowled the small theaters and amateur productions for their studio contract players. DeForest recalled, "This guy came from backstage. 'I'm from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a talent scout....I just want to tell you you're too young for us to do anything with you right now, but stay down here and keep working.' Well, I was floored."

Herman Casey was "in violent disagreement" with his nephew's new pastime. As DeForest later recalled, his uncle was so determined to steer DeForest away from the addictions of greasepaint that he invested in a string of gas stations. Casey knew how to cajole his nephew: DeForest just had to come in with him and do real work, and he would find a real occupation with a real future. DeForest did not want to do it, but he was a malleable youth, and his uncle was a persuasive and charismatic man whom he loved and admired. DeForest hated to say no. He couldn't explain why he was so drawn to acting, because he himself did not know. Without a position to defend, DeForest succumbed to his uncle's wishes.

In a matter of six months, Casey's chain of gas stations went under with hardly more than a gasp, and that was a great relief to DeForest.

Once again, he was a free man, but with freedom came struggle and despair. DeForest would take the red car on the Pacific Electric rail line, north and east to the hills and to Hollywood, some thirty miles from Long Beach. On these small escapes from the realities of Long Beach, he would look for odd jobs and wander around the wonder of Hollywood.

On one occasion, he discovered Grauman's Chinese Theater, a veritable shrine to the movie industry. DeForest marveled at the odd Asian design. He studied the concrete slabs filled with signatures and imprints of hands and feet. All around were the impressions of the odd feature, prop, or symbol associated with the glamorous celebrity.

With a soft lead pencil, he scratched into the waxed surface of a Chinese Theater postcard:

Bud

I am just before going in the dump. I have been up here all morning looking for work. "3 comrades" is playing. Sure is some place. I have been looking at all these footprints of the stars. Write me,

De

He addressed it to Mr. Casey Kelley of the Monroe Company in the Standard Building in Atlanta and posted it on June 1, 1938. Surely, brother Casey could sympathize, even though he was making his way pretty well in the world. Young DeForest was unsettled, restless, and aching for something. What else was there to say?

Older brother Casey was at work selling calculating and adding machines, bookkeeping, and check-writing machines to the businessmen of Atlanta. He made a good beginning in a solid and growing business sector. It seemed the rebel Casey would do very well.

What DeForest, the shining and talented boy, found so alluring in Hollywood was everything his father stood against, and damnation would be the price of such worldly seduction. Not even his uncle could understand what was growing in his head and heart. Could he dare say out loud what he had once told Erskine Davis? The talent scout's approval, the shadow and light of make-believe, and the actor's life enthralled him. And just as overwhelming was the guilt that came with knowing that he was the Prodigal Son and that such a life would shame his parents and torment his conscience. Though his untried dreams tasted like sawdust, he was only a kid struggling to get along in 1938, and he felt himself on the edge of despair. He held on as long as he could -- but finally, he gave up and went home to Atlanta, to save his parents the worry and perhaps to save his soul.

DeForest returned to his father's house. The claustrophobia was horrible, especially after the freedom he had known. Sadly, he realized that he could never settle down into the life he would be expected to live as a preacher's son in the land of his ancestors. He wept for the peace a simple life might have offered. He wept, and within weeks he was on the verge of collapse.

Perhaps DeForest's chance to have a "normal" life was doomed from the beginning. His time in California had revealed a fundamental truth about his spirit: he was an artist. His upbringing and his conscience told him it was wrong not to be proud and satisfied as a working man, but the young artist within was desperate. "I cried each time I made the attempt to tell them I couldn't stand it, that I had to go back....It was a whole new world for me. I had to return, or I'd be miserable the rest of my life." His mother was sympathetic and realized her son needed to be free from the shadow of his father to make his final decision. She insisted that he go with her to Cincinnati to visit her friends. If there in Ohio, where he could think clearly, he still felt so strongly about leaving, then she would have to let him go. Painfully, DeForest remembered: "I didn't change my mind. She and a friend showed me off. Getting on that bus was the hardest thing I ever had to do. We were very close." She loved him enough to let him go. His dear mother would have to return to her simple gray days without him.

DeForest again rode toward the Pacific, this time heartbroken. Never an assertive young man, he was oppressed by the memory of announcing his emancipation from his father's harness: "When I told him I had decided to become an actor, he was sure my soul was lost forever. I was going straight to hell!" Guilt burrowed down deep in DeForest. He was filled with too much desire to be stopped, but he harbored an underlying fear that had been planted long ago deep in the pit of his stomach: damnation. Guilt and fear would not let him rest as he decided his own fate. He would have to be faithful to his understanding of right and wrong as he lived and worked among sin and excess. He would survive the contradictions by finding balance in his life. And if in truth he was doomed, well, then, in the meantime he would be an actor.

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