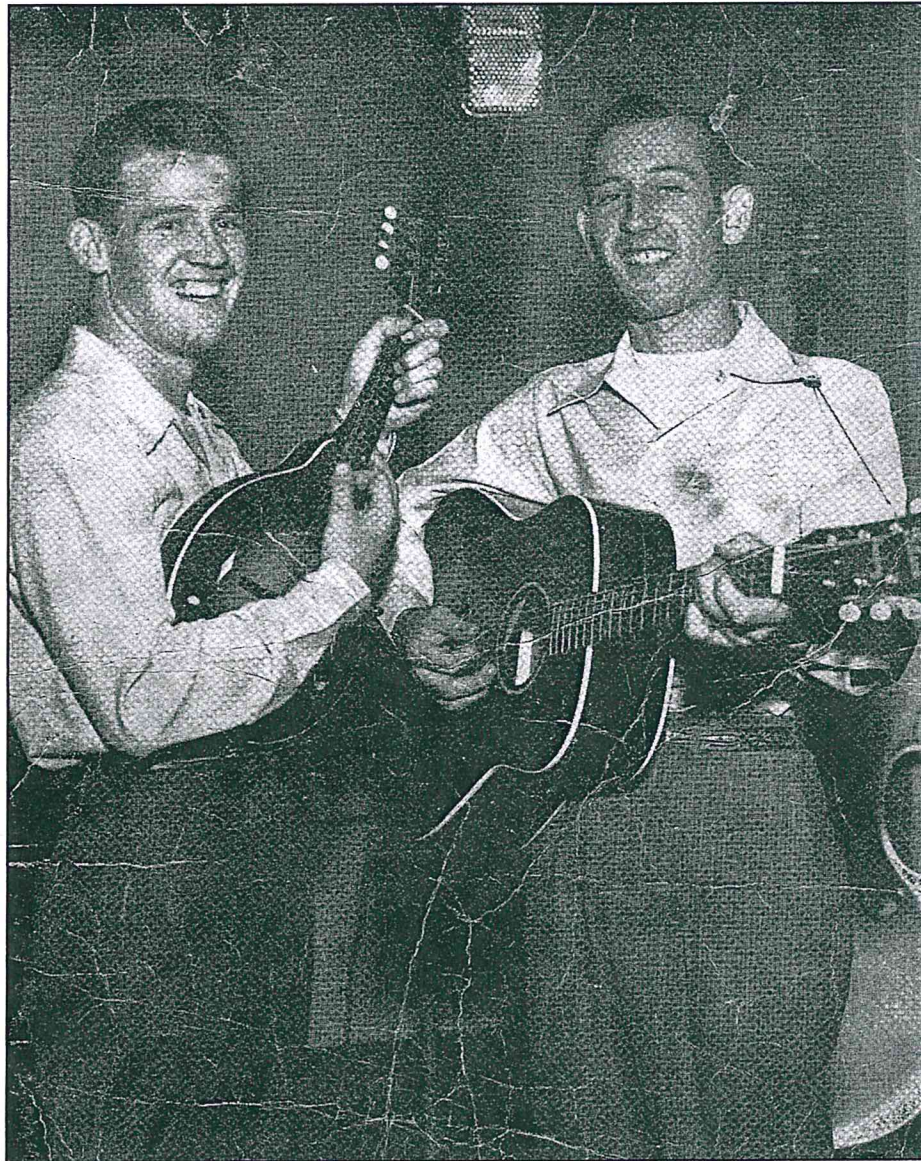


# THE DEATH OF RAY BREWSTER



Willy and Ray Brewster

Ray Brewster's untimely death in October 1948, ended the first period of the Brewster Brothers' career. There's always a story behind the story, and this was an extraordinary one. While working on updating the notes for the "Early Days Of Bluegrass" CD set, I asked Paul Brewster why his uncle Ray had died so young. The answer surprised me: "He got killed. A sheriff of Loudon County, Tennessee, shot the tires out from under him. It was kind of a big stink. It made national news. The sheriff didn't particularly like him. He kind of had it in for him,

so they just kinda waited on him and shot the tires out from under it. The car flipped—flipped him out of the car and on top of him, and he smothered to death. There was a crowd that gathered, but the sheriff wouldn't let them get the car off of him. Nothing happened to the sheriff."

Piecing together the story from accounts in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, the *Knoxville Journal*, the *Kingsport Times*, the Associated Press, and the

---

By Bill Nowlin

---

*Chicago Tribune*, quite a story emerges. Another brother, Willie G. Brewster, showed up at radio station WNOX before noon on October 23 to appear on the *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round* and learned that Ray had been killed the night before. And, yet, another brother, Bud Brewster explained, "The sheriff actually killed him is what happened. At the time, they called in the National Guard to keep the people from hanging the sheriff. They mobbed the jailhouse and was trying to get to him." Paul adds, "My dad [Willie G.] and Ray had a good duet together. I never did get to hear



them. When he got killed, my dad lost interest in playing.

Ray Brewster was killed at around 11 p.m. on the night of October 22, crushed beneath his own automobile. He was pronounced dead on arrival at a Loudon hospital at 12:45 in the morning. The accident occurred about five miles south of Loudon on Lee Highway between Chattanooga and Knoxville. The following day, Ray's father, Reuben, charged Loudon County Sheriff Henry McDonald and Deputy Sheriff Clifford Hughes with involuntary manslaughter and the two were under bond of \$5,000 a piece. The warrant charged that the officers had chased Brewster down with their cruiser, shot out the tires, and caused the car to overturn. Willie G. said that the sheriff had fired four shots and caused the car to crash, and that the sheriff had left Ray pinned under the wreckage for 45 minutes without medical attention while he took some of the survivors to jail. Ray

Brewster was on his way home; he was the father of four children.

The sheriff's story did not resonate well with many in the county. He said that Hughes, driving the police cruiser, was trying to pass Brewster. The "hillbilly singer" rammed his car into the cruiser twice while they were trying to stop him. McDonald added, "His car was weaving all over the road." The sheriff never mentioned shooting at Brewster's car in his report. An initial hearing the next day was postponed; the magistrate declined to preside because McDonald was a first cousin of his wife. A reported two hundred people turned out for the hearing, upset about Brewster's death. There were suggestions that McDonald had it in for Brewster, and the locals were in an uproar over the incident.

A local committee formed to try and force McDonald's resignation, and the *Journal* reported in a story dated October 27 that an estimated five hundred had

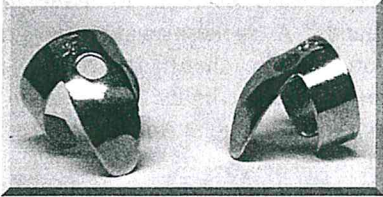
gathered that evening to issue their demands. A spokesman for the group reported, "The sheriff locked the jail, turned out all the lights, and stood on the porch with a shotgun. And when we asked him to resign, he told us, 'There isn't anybody in Loudon County big enough to make me quit.'" The sheriff told the *Journal* that he was carrying the shotgun because, "I had been warned two or three times that they intended to take the jail. There was about forty or fifty men in the bunch. I explained that [Brewster] was driving while drunk and when we tried to stop him, he rammed our cruiser twice. The third time he tried to ram us, his car left the road and overturned."

McDonald said he was carrying a county warrant for Brewster's arrest on felony charges at the time of the incident. The charge was larceny, and the warrant had been issued on September 29 by Knox County Judge Glen C. Johnson. The complainant was "Dan Bailey, radio



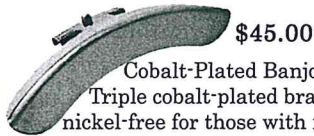
WROL, Knoxville, Tenn., L to R: Dan Bailey, Will Brewster, Ray Brewster, Junior Huskey, and Cas Walker, 1943.





## Power Picks

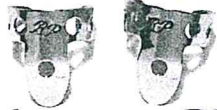
These picks are .025 gauge Bell Brass with double Cobalt Plating.



\$45.00

Cobalt-Plated Banjo Armrest  
Triple cobalt-plated brass armrest, nickel-free for those with nickel allergies. Pre-war style armrest with highest quality triple cobalt-plating over brass. Fits banjo with 11" rims and 24 bracket spacing.

## COBALT *BP*



### Signature Picks

Cobalt Plated Brass or Cobalt Plated Nickel Silver

Bob Perry

3540 West 117th St.

Cleveland, OH 44111

Phone 216.941.8927 e-mail cobaltbp@aol.com

www.cobaltbp.com

entertainer of 214 Twelfth Street, who charged Brewster pawned his watch valued at \$200." Since Brewster lived just six miles from the county seat, one might wonder why it had taken the sheriff nearly a month to attempt to enforce the warrant. The group of men confronting the sheriff gave him a Saturday deadline to resign and warned that they would act if he did not—if he wanted it the "hard way."

The sheriff said, "I've got a moral obligation to the people of Loudon County not to turn this situation here over to a bunch of roughnecks. It's an obligation I'll defend with my life. They won't be doing anything tonight. They're cowards. They don't want to trade lead." He postured with a bit more confidence perhaps, because the day before, the Governor of the State of Tennessee had called out the National Guard to try and keep the peace. There had been no incidents, but the sheriff and Loudon Mayor, F.F. Watkins, had wired Governor Jim McCord and told him that "mobs there were threatening to dynamite the jail." Five hundred people had attended a meeting at a nearby rock quarry on the 27th and then a thousand came to a

meeting at the local ballpark following the arraignment of McDonald and Hughes. Among those in attendance at the ballpark meeting was Knoxville City Councilman (and sponsor of the *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round*) Cas Walker. The spokesman for the group, Jake Littleton, said they were mobilizing a drive to remove McDonald from office by *legal* means, but, he did say, "If he's not ousted in eight days, boys, it's up to us."

The sheriff said, "I've been informed they had dynamite yesterday, in fact, they have said they were going to use it. They're a bunch of boys I've had to corral. It wasn't what happened that started all this. They just thought they had an excuse to drive me out and get rid of me. They've openly said they were going to blow up the jail." He asserted that a "lawless element" from five different counties was involved. He made it sound as though offenders from surrounding counties were in cahoots to do him in. "A lot of law violators don't want to be hindered. They stick together pretty well." He repeated his bravado: "They don't like to face lead." He told of a time a year earlier when one of his enemies "got behind a tree in the courthouse yard and opened up on me with an automatic rifle. I traded shots with him. Every time he stuck his head out from behind the tree, I let him have it until I nicked his hair. Then he hollered."

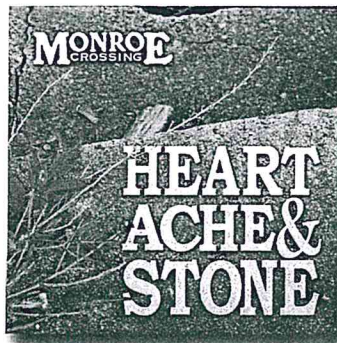
Other accusations were leveled at the sheriff, but, in the meantime, the National Guard poured into Loudon on Saturday, October 30. Five trucks with 150 soldiers from the First Battalion-278th Infantry (including both rifle and machine gun detachments) pulled into the courthouse yard and began to patrol the streets. Overhead flew five P-47 fighters from the 105th Fighter Squadron, commanded by Col. Enoch B. Stevenson in a C-47 aircraft. The airplanes circled overhead and buzzed the residential sections of town and the local ballpark where a high school football game had attracted a large audience.

Major Zeb Sherrill commanded the troops on the ground. McDonald told the major, "I have information that the mob now realizes they can't get me in the jail and they'll try to draw me out to a roadhouse brawl tonight to shoot me in the back." The major agreed to accompany McDonald on any such call. "We'll secure this place, whatever it takes," said Sherrill. One person in the crowd outside the jail

### \*\*The Midwest's Premier Bluegrass & Gospel Quintet\*\*

## A BRAND NEW ALBUM FROM MONROE CROSSING

*Heartache & Stone* is the brand new CD from Minnesota Music Hall of Famer's, Monroe Crossing. Inspired by Minnesota's deep bluegrass roots, this album features an array of songs, including newly penned originals by Lisa Fuglie and Art Blackburn, and music by Becky Buller, Kathe Liners, and Kevin Barnes. Plus, you'll love how the band brings funk to bluegrass with their fan-favorite rendition of Prince's "Purple Rain!"



"...Must listening for any serious bluegrass music aficionado."  
Bluegrass Unlimited



Mail orders:  
Send \$15 p/CD plus \$2 S/H to Monroe Crossing,  
17625 Argon Street NW, Ramsey, MN 55303

www.monroecrossing.com



was said to have remarked, "19 submachine guns had been brought from Nashville yesterday."

The Guard had been called out the previous August when three persons were killed in Polk County following primary elections. And in McMinn County the year before, the Guard was brought in to "quell violence when ex-GI's took over the local government after a ballot-box victory was punctuated by bullets." There seems to have been some political passion at play in East Tennessee. Indeed, Littleton had been a candidate for constable, and just a few days later were the November elections. The Republican candidate for Governor of Tennessee was *Grand Ole Opry* headliner Roy Acuff. Acuff was beaten roughly 2-1 as Truman swept Tennessee in the Presidential election and swept a number of Republicans out of the running. In his final campaign speech, Acuff "lashed back at those who had made fun of him by calling him a hillbilly fiddler, a side-show performer, and other terms of ridicule." (*Knoxville Journal*) He said he "not only pleaded guilty to being a hillbilly fiddler, but was proud of it." He denied, however, that he was a side-show entertainer; apparently, that accusation seemed to hit below the belt.

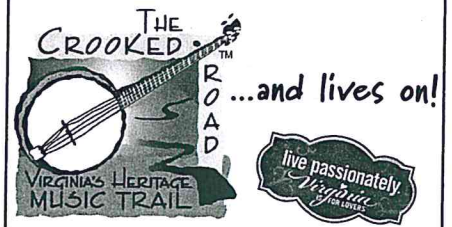
The *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper in Chicago, even took note of the tension and said, "The county sheriff and the mayor of Loudon, both white, this week got a taste of what life for a Negro in the South is like, when they were forced to send a frantic appeal to Governor Jim McCord to send the state National Guard and guard airplanes to put down a threatening lynch mob." They talked about the sentiment rising to "fever heat" and said that a mob armed with shotguns and axes had descended on the county building, but were held off by gunfire from the local police. That's not what Major Sherrill reported. He said that when he arrived, "There is no evidence of violence." Hughes had resigned his position a few days earlier, and was later said to have testified against McDonald. The troops withdrew the day after they arrived.

As indicated, there were others who came forward to accuse the sheriff of misdeeds. A suit was filed on November 30, charging Sheriff McDonald with discrepancies regarding the amount of liquor he had seized and that which was

destroyed, with a failure to keep account of fees that he had collected and not reported (alleged to be in excess of \$5,000 per year), and "the most flagrant acts of official oppression" in arresting people on "frivolous and unfounded charges" in order to obtain the fees. It was further charged that he had "unmercifully abused, mistreated, beat up, and assaulted prisoners." He was said to have exceeded his authority by prowling the highways at night "assaulting and abusing innocent persons, including tourists and strangers, and in some instances shooting into cars without cause or justification."

In the specific case of Ray Brewster, it was said that the "sheriff met Brewster in a beer joint, allowed him and a companion to get into Brewster's car, and then gave chase." It appeared he had had the opportunity to have served any warrant before Brewster climbed into his car. At a hearing on December 15, six hundred people showed up in the courtroom to hear opening arguments. It was additionally alleged that the sheriff had permitted his favorite whiskey and gambling places to operate, and he had beaten prisoners with rubber hoses. A local chiropractor,

Visit the place where  
America's Music was born...



Wind through a rich  
musical landscape...

At major festivals and impromptu jam sessions, in concert halls and country stores, sample the music and culture of a region that has had an indelible impact on America and the world.

Plan your journey today  
by calling (276) 492-2085 or visit

[www.thecrookedroad.org](http://www.thecrookedroad.org)  
for a Free Visitor Guide.

Since 1968, your source for  
Waverly and Five-Star products  
for fine guitars and banjos.

**Stewart-MacDonald** [stewmac.com](http://stewmac.com)  
For free catalog call 800-848-2273  
21 N. Shafer St. • Box 900 • Athens, OH 45701 • USA



(540) 213-7411

# Fretwell Bass LLC

## And Acoustic Instruments

FretwellBass.com

Jerry and Mary Jane Fretwell are pleased to announce the addition of Ted Lawhorn. Come visit Ted for your instrument needs.

Offering a full range of repairs on all types of instruments  
And a wide range of instruments for sale, including:

Basses ~ Banjos ~ Mandolins ~ Guitars  
Violins/Fiddles ~ Dobros ~ Dulcimers  
Strings ~ Bass Amps ~ Accessories

Zack Deming & Jerry Fretwell - Luthiers on site

### Lines include:

Huss & Dalton guitars & banjos ~ Engelhardt basses  
Stelling banjos ~ Eastman guitars and mandolins  
Gold Tone banjos ~ Record King banjos  
T.K. O'brian mountain dulcimers ~ Acoustic Image amps  
Black Diamond strings ~ Innovation strings  
Vintage Kay Basses ~ Blue Ridge Guitars

Visit our web site, FretwellBass.com ~ Yes, we ship!

**Buy ~ Sell ~ Trade ~ Repair**

17 West Beverley St., Staunton, VA 24401 (540) 213-7411

age 76, said that he had been blackjacked and roughly handled, that some \$500 of the cash he had turned in while being arrested was not returned to him. Another older man said he had been beaten and thrown in jail and denied medical attention for his badly injured leg for several hours. A third man said that, two days before Brewster was killed, he himself had been required to sleep on the concrete floor of the jail cell without any covering, though the temperature was near the freezing point.

In January 1949, the *Kingsport Times* reported that a grand jury considering charges against Sheriff McDonald and Deputy Hughes, exonerated them and instead indicted Jake Littleton and an associate for "entering into a conspiracy to take human lives and destroy property." The sheriff was off the hook; it appears that he exercised a bit of retribution. But, if Paul's understanding is correct, McDonald may have carried some guilt with him even toward the end of his life. According to Paul, "They said one of the last things he ended up saying was, 'I killed a man.'"

(Thanks to Peggy Gripshover for her help in locating the Tennessee newspapers cited in this account.)



Bill Nowlin is one of the founders of Rounder Records. This article, written for Bluegrass Unlimited, draws on material soon to be offered in Rounder's "Early Days Of Bluegrass" release, a six-CD set with a book included.

### Appeal For Assistance On Early Bluegrass

Rounder Records plans to release all ten albums of its "Early Days Of Bluegrass" series as a boxed set in May 2010. In order to make the set as complete as possible, they have continued to dig deeper into the early days of bluegrass. This article is one of the products of that research.

Readers who have any information at all regarding the Hamm Brothers, who recorded for the Bullet Records label in Nashville are urged to contact Bill Nowlin at Rounder. Likewise, anyone who might have contact with Drusilla Adams Smith, who was integrally involved with Blue Ridge Records, is also urged to contact Bill at: Rounder Records, 1 Rounder Way, Burlington, MA 01803, 617-218-4411, e-mail: <bnowlin@rounder.com>.

## Elliott Capos

Crafters of the

### Elliott Pushbutton and "The McKinney" by Elliott



More than just a capo...



Elliott Capos (Phill Elliott) • 979-421-9393



1601 E.Tom Green St. Brenham TX 77833 www.ElliottCapos.com

For  
For  
to b  
stri