



About Wilson Rawls

"I am an ardent fly fisherman and a hunter. I wouldn't trade a good bedroll by a blue mountain stream for the best bed in the Waldorf-Astoria."

—Wilson Rawls

The Waldorf-Astoria is a big, fancy hotel in New York City. Most people would like to sleep in a fancy hotel, in a soft bed under a fluffy blanket. Wilson Rawls, however, liked sleeping under the stars in his sleeping bag much better. He loved the outdoors because he felt so at home there. Since his early childhood, Rawls was close to nature.

Woodrow Wilson Rawls was born on September 24, 1913, in Scrapper, Oklahoma. Scrapper is a very small town in the middle of the Ozarks region. The Ozarks cover a big area in the south-central part of the United States. How big? About 50,000 square miles! The Ozarks include parts of four states: Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The Ozarks are surrounded by rivers. If you look on a map, the north (top) of the Ozarks is bordered by the Missouri River. The south (bottom) is the Arkansas River. The east (right) is bounded by the Mississippi River. The west (left) is stopped by the Grand and Neosho rivers. The Ozarks are a

beautiful area that is filled with trails, streams, and grand mountains.

Since Rawls's mother, Winnie Hatfield Rawls, was part Cherokee Indian, she had been given some land in Oklahoma by the federal government. (The United States gave land to some Native Americans who had been displaced from their original land.) Winnie and her husband, Minzy, farmed the land and raised their children on it.

In the spring, the family woke up to the rich smell of the earth after a gentle rain. The birds chirped and the leaves swayed in the breeze. In the winter, the family shivered in the chilly wind and crackly frost. No matter what season, the day started and ended with chores: milking the cows, feeding the pigs, hoeing the crops. The family's vegetables came from their fields. Their meat came from the woods, not the supermarket: The Rawls family trapped and ate squirrels, raccoons, bears, and rabbits.

Rawls's hunting dog was not only his best friend but also a way to help his parents earn enough money to survive. Rawls and his father sold the fur skins from the animals they trapped. These skins, called pelts, were made into warm coats, hats, and mittens. The family used the money they earned from the pelts to buy things they needed that they couldn't grow or hunt. It was a hard life, but one filled with love of nature, family, and God.

Nearly everyone in the Ozarks was poor. Like the Rawls family, they lived off the land and just got by. In 1929 the New York stock market crashed. How could something that happened in

New York City—way across the United States—affect people in the Ozarks? The stock market crash affected people all around the world.

Almost overnight, the world plunged into the Great Depression. Companies did not have the money to pay their workers, so many people lost their jobs. Companies could not hire new workers, either. As a result, it became almost impossible to find a job. By 1933 one quarter of all workers were unemployed: About 13 million people did not have jobs. Because there were so few jobs, people took whatever work they could find. Like most other people at this time, the Rawls family did not have enough money to buy food and clothing. In 1929, when he was sixteen years old, Wilson Rawls left home and traveled all over the country looking for any work he could do. He wanted to support himself and be able to send some money home for his family, too.

At first, he worked as a carpenter and a handyman. Then he worked on construction jobs all over the world, including Mexico and South America. He helped build the Alcan Highway in Alaska and five major dams in the United States. He labored in West Coast shipyards, for the Navy in Oregon, and for a lumber company in Canada.

No matter where he was, Rawls kept on writing. His arms may have hurt from hammering all day, but he stayed up late writing. Unfortunately, he did not know much about grammar and spelling, so his stories had lots of writing mistakes. As a result, no one would buy them. The rejections made him sad, but it was

his lack of learning that depressed him. Nevertheless, Rawls saved his stories in an old trunk.

In 1957 Rawls went north to Idaho. There, when he was working for the Atomic Energy Commission, he met Sophie Styczinski. They fell in love! A year later, they got married and were very happy together. Sophie helped Rawls with his writing by fixing his spelling, capitalization, and punctuation mistakes.

In 1961 Rawls published *Where the Red Fern Grows*. All his hard work and determination had paid off. In 1976 he wrote one more book, *The Summer of the Monkeys*. Just like *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The Summer of the Monkeys* has become a classic.

Wilson Rawls died in 1984, but his novels live on in the hearts of children and adults around the world.

How *Where the Red Fern Grows* Came About



“The sweetest music I have ever heard is the snake-like buzz of a busy reel, and there is no feeling like the feel of a trusted rod bent in a rainbow arch by a fighting trout on the end of a line.”

—Wilson Rawls

“**W**rite what you know best!” is the advice often given to beginning writers. Wilson Rawls did just that. He wrote about his childhood, when he hunted for raccoons with his loyal dogs. He described the hot, dusty summers and the fierce winter blizzards in Oklahoma. He told of his love for his parents and sisters, too. He explained how much loyalty and God meant to him. He wrote all about his life as a young boy: the joy and the sorrow, the good times and the bad times. The result is *Where the Red Fern Grows*. The novel is the real-life story of Rawls’s childhood.

Since there weren’t any schools in the area, Rawls’s mother taught her children at home. She read aloud from books she had ordered through the mail. You’ve probably read many of the

stories that Rawls heard from his mother: *The Little Red Hen*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

At first young “Woody” didn’t like the books. “I thought all books were . . . GIRL stories!” he said. “Then one day Mama brought home a book that changed my life. It was a story about a man and a dog—Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*.” The book influenced Rawls to become a writer. He explained it this way: “After we finished reading the book, Mama gave it to me. It was my first real treasure and I carried it with me wherever I went and read it every chance I got.” He even read the book aloud to his dog!

Wilson Rawls had found his goal: When he grew up, he wanted to be a writer. He wanted to write a story about a boy and a dog that would affect others as much as *The Call of the Wild* had affected him. He wanted to touch his readers’ hearts as well as their minds.

As you read earlier, Rawls kept writing and writing but had no luck selling the story of his childhood. Just a few weeks before his wedding, he decided to give up his dream of being a writer. He felt that as a married man, it was time to be responsible. On a hot August day, Rawls took all his stories out of the old trunk and burned them. He burned five stories—including *Where the Red Fern Grows*!

Deep inside, though, Rawls still wanted to be a writer, so he told Sophie how he had burned his manuscripts. He told her how Jack London’s novel *The Call of the Wild* had sparked his desire

to write adventure stories. He described the long nights he had spent writing stories by a campfire at the side of the road.

Sophie felt sad because she believed that Wilson should have a chance to make his dream come true. She persuaded him to rewrite the story of the boy and his two hunting dogs. It had taken Rawls twenty years to write *Where the Red Fern Grows* the first time. Luckily, it took him only three weeks to rewrite it! Sophie helped Wilson fix many of his spelling and grammar mistakes. In 1961 Wilson and Sophie sold the book to a very popular magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*.

For three months, *The Saturday Evening Post* published chapters from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. The *Post* called the story “The Hounds of Youth.” People loved it! Later that year, *Where the Red Fern Grows* was published as a book. Rawls’s dream of being a writer had come true.