

BREAKING
IN

WAYNE D. CASEY

With Kate E. Stephenson
As told to Linda Vaughn

Foreword by Bernie Casey

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Written by Wayne D. Casey with Kate Stephenson
as told to Linda Vaughn

ISBN 13: 9781492767664

ISBN 10: 1492767662

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Editing, Typography and Cover Design by
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Text set in Gentium Book Basic.

*To my mother, whose love, prayers and support
helped me through difficult times.*

*To my dad, whose actions gave me the motivation
to be the best that I can be.*

To the seven best sisters anyone could ask for:

*Elizabeth, Lois, Vivian, Barbara Gene,
Wanda, and Venita.*

To my brothers, my heroes, Charles and Frank.

*To my best friend of over sixty years,
Douglas Tench.*

*You are my family, you are my everything,
you are remembered.*

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Foreword

The right of passage. Purposeful in the willingness to understand the behavior of people whose underbelly is that of a serpent. The right of passage from boy to young man, hopeful and naive, but steadfast and strong because he loves God and his Mama! Respectful because he was taught to be. Unrepentant because he had no need to be. Holding on to the willingness to do his best, to be the best, knowing he had the right to the tree of life, and hard work has its own reward. Wayne Casey was wise enough to know to be still when Angels speak, pray unceasingly, and expect miracles, because no weapon formed against him would prosper!

— Bernie Casey

Preface

Do you know what it's like not to exist?

For four years, my name was Nigger. If I am honest, that had been my name for many years before that. It was my name and the name of every other recognizably African American in my community. Our white neighbors felt no need to know our Christian names, because we did not exist. We were not people. I did not exist.

Adversity has never been an abstract for me. In the pre-civil rights era South, I grew up staring adversity in the face. It was clear, it was certain, it was real. For black folk, adversity was a way of life, especially in the Appalachian Mountains of Raleigh County, Stotesbury, West Virginia. There was adversity behind the closed door of my home, in the open roads of my community, and in the halls of my school. There were few places to hide and fewer moments of relief.

My way was not marked for ease. From early on, I was called to greatness. But greatness is not a reward, it is a burden. This was mine to bear.

Here you will find no regret, no bitterness, no axe to grind. I simply offer a story. This is how I broke in and delivered the answer to that holier-than-thou question, "Who are you?"

Chapter 1: The Beginning

The sky darkened more with each mile the bus rolled towards Stoco High. The closer we got, the less people talked. By the time Stoco was in view the bus was completely silent. None of us knew what the evening would bring. I think we all assumed it wouldn't be good. The steady jostle of the bus was all that could be heard. But as the bus pulled into the school parking lot a different noise drew my attention. It took some time to understand the source of the sound penetrating the steel walls and glass windows. It was a chant. A low and steady intonation, repeated over and over and over again.

It grew and became louder as we all raised our heads and saw the crowd of stern white faces waiting near the bus.

“nigger..... Nigger..... Nigger..... NIGger..... NIGGer..... NIGGER!”

There was no mistaking.

I hadn't noticed all of the other players and our coaches filing off the bus one at a time. I had stood without feeling my feet. I was at the door of the bus, walking down the two steps—I froze.

I knew the nigger they called for was me.

But I can't start there. Let's start at the beginning... My beginning.

PART I: THE MAKING OF WAYNE CASEY, 1942 – 1956

“None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody...bent down and helped us pick up our boots.”

—Thurgood Marshall

National News

1942

President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Democrat)

Third year of World War II

African Americans Allowed in Military

The Great Depression Era

Postage stamp, 3¢

Bread, 9¢ a loaf

Milk, 15¢ a gallon

Muhammad Ali, born January 17, 1942

Aretha Franklin, born March 25, 1942

Chapter 2: Looking Through the Window

My name is Wayne DeLeon Casey.

Each coal camp had its own doctor; ours was Dr. Ray. He treated colored births and white births the same. Dr. Ray delivered me on March 31, 1942 at one o'clock in the afternoon. At seven pounds, much of my weight was in my head. My eldest sister Liz later told me that I was a difficult delivery for Mama. Life-threatening in fact. Dr. Ray said she should not have any more children, it could kill her—my two younger sisters came after (Mama believed in the Lord more than in the doctors). I suspect that experience at birth kept me close to my Mama. She was then and has always remained my number one sweetheart.

I was born in the small coal mining camp of Stotesbury, WV. It was not exactly a town, but more a coal community, like many residences that grow up next to the local industry, whether the automobile towns of Michigan or the railroad communities that dot across the nation. Few people have ever heard of Stotesbury and even fewer people live there today. But it was an interesting place to grow up.

About 70 miles west of Charleston, Stotesbury, West Virginia was a sleepy town stuck between Beckley and Mullins. This rural community was

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swallowed up by mountains and so intractable and densely forested that it was almost uninhabitable. Miles of mountains and trees, unmolested for hundreds of years; trees so large that two men could not clasp their hands around them. I often wondered if God could clasp his hands around Stotesbury, the place where I knew God had to be watching colored and white people. Surely, things would look different from God's point of view.

The entire community was owned and run by the E. E. White Coal Company. Three shifts of men worked several hundred feet beneath the ground, mining the coal that fueled the country. Dad was part of the Stotesbury day force. Whether it was cold and rainy, hot and dry he seldom missed a day of work, regardless of how he felt. He worked five days a week, walking to the coal mines, in his leather jacket, baseball cap and blue jeans, early every morning and back home early in the evening. When he came home each evening, he expected a warm house and a wholesome meal. He expected his dinner to be on the table and no one could eat unless he was there. After dinner, he sat on the front porch, smoked his Prince Albert and chewed his apple tobacco, watched television and then went to bed early. He had a hard job and dad was a hard man.

Constance Casey was 5'8", 170 pounds. No one ever pronounced his full name, everyone knew

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him as Conston. He had a small head, wide hands, and big arms for a man his size. He drank homebrew and moonshine from a mason jar, and he slept with a rifle over his bed. He and all of his brothers were heavy drinking, pistol packing, hard-working, and hell-raising men in their homes.

My Dad was born on October 3, 1903. As a young boy, his mother ruled the roost, controlling everything, including Conston's father, Conston and all his siblings. He vowed never to let another woman tell him what to do. And I don't think he ever did.

He wasn't much of a talker himself, except when he drank on the weekends. Then, he never stopped talking. His sense of humor was colorful, and his lack of balance was profitable—as little children we would run after him as he wobbled from room to room, scooping up the change that fell out of his pocket and into the creases of the furniture. We would careen into each other in our attempts to snatch a nickel or a dime for our own. Later in the day, dad would always wonder “Now I know I had some change...” I don't think any of us ever told him what happened to it. But he could also be harsh and no one escaped Dad's tongue lashings, including the preacher. He had very little softness in him. And when he drank, he could be mean.

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He spared no punishment for perceived wrongdoings, and when he had decided your punishment there was no persuading him otherwise. There was no Department of Children and Family Services in those days, there was really no such thing as domestic abuse. No one was ever arrested, much less prosecuted, for domestic violence in those days. But dad could be a violent man. He used his fists, a belt, a beanpole, whatever. Many times, I had to make my own switch. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason for his actions, other than his drinking. Dad took very seriously the biblical statement “spare the rod spoil the child” and he had determined none of his children, especially me, would be spoiled. Over the years, I incurred his wrath on more than one occasion. I tried my best to stay out of his way. Sometimes it worked, other times I was not so lucky.

I was taught to “honor thy father and thy mother.” And I do. I did not feel softness or kindness towards my Dad, but I did love and respect him. Conston Casey was *not* many things, but he was a steady provider for his family of eleven. Yes, eleven!

Conston married my mother, Mary Elois Coleman on September 17, 1929. She was 16 and he was 25. Their union produced ten children. Charles, Conston, Elizabeth, Frank, Dolores, Vivian, Barbara-Imogene, myself, Wanda and

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Louise-Venita. Between the eldest and the youngest was a span of 22 years. I was the baby boy and I always believed the apple of my Mama's eye.

Mama was born in 1912. She was tall and strong. She stood a couple of inches over my dad, much like his mom over his dad. Mama was a house wife for most of my youth, until my Dad lost his job. For one year my mother worked as a domestic; that was a difficult time in the Casey home. She was a devoted woman to her God and to her family. Mama was a religious woman who went to church regularly, no matter what. Daddy was a hell raiser and he'd often stand in the doorway to block her from attending. But she went anyway.

Mama had a pretty smile. She always sang when she cooked. She made biscuits daily and fresh rolls on Sunday, had choir practice on Tuesday, washed clothes on Wednesday, shopped for groceries on Saturday and sang in the choir on Sunday. Having eleven kids was a full time job. Much of my early years revolved around home and church. At home my siblings and I had big fun playing kick the can, hide 'n go seek, hopscotch and all kinds of ball. On Saturdays I hung out at the general store, aptly named because you could generally buy everything you wanted there. On Sundays, we were always in church with Mama. (I think Mama had hopes of

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me being a preacher one day.) I don't know of anyone who stood by her children as Mama did. Although she made all of her children feel special, I thought she loved me best. My siblings thought so too. I was often called a Mama's boy. I didn't mind because it was true.

All of the Casey children were good looking, tall and slim. My mother gave birth to seven girls and four boys; all of her children except one survived. Conston died just a few hours after birth. Poor old Dr. Ray cut Conston's umbilical cord too short; few people really understood how that effected the baby back then (not many people realize it now). Certainly there were no repercussions, no hospital or insurance to sue. But what would it have mattered. I still never got to meet my big brother Conston. I sometimes wonder at the sorrow that must have caused Mama, but she never let it show. I suppose the ten of us God left on earth kept her more than busy enough.

The Casey boys were all handsome and I grew up with a severe case of hero worship of my brothers Charles and Frank. Because they were so much older than me, we weren't really raised in the same household at the same time. Charles was married and had long moved away by the time I reached high school and Frank was in the military. But somehow even though we were separated by age and geographic distance, we

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were still close. I looked up to them, and they gave me excellent models of manhood. I will tell anyone that my brothers were the coolest cats on earth. Charles didn't walk, he strolled and stepped. There was a rhythm to his stride that called to women around the world. I studied his feet for years, trying to perfect that walk. Frank was smooth as silk. His laidback, relaxed nature meant he never got into scuffles or stepped on anyone's toes. He was never interested in conflict. With Frank everything was copacetic. And the ladies flocked to him as well.

As handsome and cool as my brothers were, my seven sisters were just as pretty and full of personality. Each was a great cook, just like Mama.

Elizabeth was the eldest and I always saw her that way. In many ways she was a second mama. My clearest memories of her as a child are at bath time and breakfast. She used to put me in the bath and scrub me down, then dress me carefully for school. On Sunday mornings, Mama would always yell to her, "Liz, did you put down those rolls." That was her job, to make sure the rolls were ready for distribution at the table. We weren't close in the way of confidants, but I loved my sister Liz with a warmth reserved for the eldest and the wisest.

Dolores or Lois as we all called her was sweet and softhearted, like God had sprinkled a little

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extra sugar on her before she was born. I loved all of my siblings, but there was always something about Lois that made me smile. Maybe it was the fact she used to hand me dollar bills every time her husband's monthly military pay came in—there was always something in her that made sharing second nature.

For a long time though Dolores, Vivian, and Barbara Gene were all like one person to me because they did everything together. They were not triplets, but somehow they wound up in the same grade together. By virtue of their close age (only one year separated one from the next) and my mother's edict, they went everywhere together. If one was going to a party, they all went to the party. I suppose she figured three could get into less trouble than one alone. But when I really think about it, they were as different as three sisters could be. What I remember most is how much they used to fuss—who was wearing what and when, who could or could not do something. My sisters screamed at me, called me names and I cried a lot. They were terrors and Vivian always told on me (in fact, she told on everybody), but even though they were three grades ahead of me, they didn't mind me tagging along with them. I love them to this day.

Wanda and Venita, my baby sisters, were three and six years younger than me respectively. When you consider the pecking order of a large

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family, being the 8th in a line of 10, wasn't an enviable position. But for Wanda and Venita, I was the older brother in the house, their protector and their chaperone. They were my charges.

I wasn't always good at the job, but I didn't know that then. When you are a teenager your view of the world is limited—those hormones get to pumping through your veins and *your ability to reason slips away*... you know how that song goes, sometimes I was playing the fool and didn't even realize it. Wanda and Venita never said anything to me when we were growing up, but years later they admitted that on the nights when I would slip out to see my girlfriends, they used to hold their breath until I returned. It never dawned on me that they were as afraid of Dad as I was and that I had left them in harm's way. I'm grateful that my youthful indiscretions never did them any serious harm.

In general, they were such sweet girls, and in my own way, I tried very hard to keep them that way. I know they got joy out of being Wayne Casey's sisters.

We were all of us athletic and strong. All of the community children played together, and everyone knew the Casey children because there were simply so many of us. We had lots of fun pitching horse shoes, jumping rope, playing softball, hopscotch, jacks and kick-the-can. It was

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a fun time. Even the adults would join in the activities. It was a small place, and we were all each other's entertainment.

The coal companies owned most of the residences. Houses, arranged in clusters of ten, defined each neighborhood. Housing sections were segregated, one side for white families, and the other for colored families. That fact alone made whites feel superior. In truth, we were all poor. The movie theatre, post office, and doctor's office were located in the white section of town. However, the all-white high school, Mark Twain, was located on the edge of the colored section, only yards from the house where we lived.

Although most of the town's people were of Hungarian descent, we never thought about their nationality, they were just white people or honkies. In those days we were colored and mostly called niggers, but West Virginia wasn't Georgia or Mississippi. Segregation was alive and real, but it was different. Racism was less harsh; colored people didn't seem to get lynched any more than white people. It was more that everyone knew their place, and for the most part, stayed in it.

There were about eighteen colored families that made up the side of Stotesbury we lived in, on one side there were ten houses and across the tracks there were eight. Our family and the Hughes had the most kids. The Hughes lived

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above the road that came through the middle of town. They were the only colored family living in the middle of white families, and they were never challenged to move. We had the most girls and the Hughes had the most boys. Of course we had a friendly rivalry.

Our house was the fourth house of ten in the row. All ten of the Casey kids grew up in that house. It was a two-story with no indoor plumbing. The house was painted a warm yellow, the outhouse in back was unpainted pine. On the long front porch a swing hung on one side and chairs sat on the other. My parents' bedroom, the living room and kitchen were on the first floor. My siblings and I slept in the two and a half rooms upstairs. It goes without saying that our heating source was coal; the back porch was used primarily to store coal buckets. We lived in the same house all of my 18 years in Stotesbury.

On the very end of our road, lived the coolest coal miner in the camp. Calvin Moore, he was dark-skinned, 190 pounds, six feet tall. I did odd jobs for him. Mr. Moore always had a car, and I washed it; I chopped wood, and sold it to him (I would go back the next night steal it and sell it back to him again); I ran errands to the store; anything to earn a little spending change that Mr. Moore was always happy to throw my way. Dressed in his slacks, button down shirt and hat, Mr. Moore glided down the tracks on Sunday

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mornings. He sold moonshine and homebrew. And Dad was his main customer. Mr. Moore's house was Dad's favorite stop after work on Fridays. He and other miners would stop there and get a mason jar full of their vice of choice.

For the men who drank, weekends were fooling around time. Most everyone at some point or another found their way to a favorite watering hole after the closing bell on Friday, and eventually to our local juke joint for some merriment. Several men found it profitable to supplement their family's income by selling moonshine. Mr. Tench, the father of my high school best friend Doug, was one of them. The law didn't mind so much that people drank it, they just didn't want you to avoid paying the government taxes. A lot of trouble was caused by the greedy government. Lives were ruined because moonshining landed them in jail. Oddly enough, Mr. Moore never got caught. Doug's father wasn't as lucky.

Dad wasn't interested in the moonshine racket other than to drink it. He was tight enough with his pennies that he didn't have to. His penny pinching allowed him to purchase an electric stove and a brand-new television in 1954; all purchased from the company store. Not many people in our community in those days could afford such luxuries. We were one of the few families who had a television, so other families

would come over to watch the most exciting games, especially the World Series. Dad loved watching the news, boxing, and especially baseball on his new TV. I became a huge baseball fan.

Baseball was a natural part of our community. I remember old Ed Spears, who lived in McAlpin; almost every weekend during the summer, Ed would stand in the middle of the railroad tracks and act as if he was a baseball pitcher. He would bend over and wait for the sign from the catcher behind home plate. He would wind up, throw the ball and yell, "Strike *one!*" We were concerned that a train might hit him one day. It never happened. We watched out for him.

My idol was Jackie Robinson and I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. Few baseball teams had colored players. Larry Doby and Hank Thompson both broke in the same year as Robinson, 1947; but watching TV in the early 1950s, you could still count the number of colored players on your hands. At an early age I was very much aware of color. Baseball was a big sport in coal mining towns in the 1950s. We played a lot of pickup games wherever there was space to play. The girls, boys and several adults played together. We used broomsticks, tennis or rubber balls, softballs—anything we could find. We'd even tape up a newspaper to make a ball. As a young boy, I played with the white boys in the

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general store fields or on top of Stotesbury Mountain. Mama couldn't understand why I was always out there playing with the white kids. My reply was always the same—they had all the good toys.

Mealtime in our household was interesting. There were so many of us, I don't know how we all sat at the table at the same time. But we did. And Mama never allowed us to eat a meal unless dad was at the table. On Saturday mornings while dad tanked the booze at Mr. Moore's house, we sat anxiously waiting for him. On the weekends, we always knew where he was. Mama would send me for him. Mr. Moore's woman would say, "Conston, go home! Those kids gotta eat." I never wanted to eat with him because he demanded that we eat everything on our plates, whether it was good or not. On one occasion, when Mama was away, Dad fried chicken for dinner. As he was not the cook of the house, we weren't too excited. When we cut into the chicken, it was still bloody inside. My sister Wanda and Venita cried and refused to eat it. Dad refused to allow us to leave the table until it was gone. When he left the room, little brother Wayne came to the rescue. I ate it for them, blood and all!

Our summers were hot, lazy and hazy—dusty from the well-traveled dirt roads and the soot from the mines. Many of my days were spent on the front porch, looking up at the clouds, trying

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to see God. Other days were spent playing in the high school yard. Mark Twain was a county high school for white students only. It was a large red brick building that stood in between the colored and white community. The school was fenced, but the gate was never locked. Flowers and honeysuckles grew on the fence and I picked them for Mama. I often wondered what it would be like inside the walls of Mark Twain, what it would be like to attend the white school just 100 yards away from my house. On Saturday mornings, when my sisters and I would play in the school yard, I'd walk up to the door and peer inside. Although I had dreamed of following in my older brothers and sisters footsteps to attend Byrd Prillerman High, the colored school, I wondered what it would be like to go to school there.