

A HARD FOUGHT JOURNEY: JOHNNY CASH BOYHOOD HOME

The Childhood Home Of Johnny Cash That Was Part Of A New Deal Government-Sponsored Colony Of Farmers In Arkansas

[Johnny Cash Boyhood Home \[Courtesy/Arkansas State University\]](#)

Back in the late 1940s, kids attending the local high school in Dyess, [Arkansas](#) didn't like to see one name on the roster for talent night, the boy known to everyone as J.R. "They never wanted him to compete, because he would always win," Larry Sims, former mayor of the town of Dyess, said. "Even back then, he could always sing."

The kid known as J.R. was the young Johnny Cash, who grew up in a New Deal government-sponsored colony of farmers, deep in the Arkansas Delta. According to Ruth Hawkins, Executive Director of the [Arkansas State University Heritage Sites](#), the initials appear on his birth certificate; no one in Dyess ever called him Johnny. That changed when he joined the Air Force in 1950, right after high school graduation. "The enlistment officer said he couldn't put down initials on his papers, so he signed himself John," Hawkins told The Buzz. "When he got out of the service in 1954, he moved to Memphis, started hanging out at Sun Records, and the rest, as they say, is history."

Cash went on to become one of the most storied singer/songwriters of his era, but he never forgot the hard-scrabble place where he grew up. The 500 farm families displaced by flood and drought that the federal government moved into its new village in 1934 received a house and 20 acres each, not enough to feed a family, especially one as large as the Cash clan with seven kids. Farming cotton in the sticky gumbo soil was no easy task, and the farm families experienced poverty and hunger, themes that would later inspire many songs written by "Man in Black."

Even after Johnny started his recording career and moved his family to Memphis, he would still come back to visit. "He helped a lot of people out," Larry Sims, the Dyess native who now serves as Facilities Manager and main tour guide at the [Cash Boyhood Home](#), recalled. "His songs talk about picking cotton, and the floods, and the train that ran nearby, and the Indians that lived along the Mississippi near here. Those were hard times, bare times. People come here and say, now see where Johnny's music came from."

The Cash family home, one of only a dozen or so that survive from the original Dyess

Colony, was placed on the endangered historic properties list in 2006 after passing through the hands of several owners. Arkansas State University (ASU) acquired the property in 2011 as part of its Heritage Sites program, which serves as training ground for grad students. “It was sinking into the mud and sagging in the middle,” Hawkins, who heads the program, recalled. “We had to hurry up with the restoration.”

ASU received exceptional assistance on the project from members of the Cash family. Rosanne and John Carter, the singer’s children, helped raise money for the restoration through an annual Johnny Cash Music Festival, a concert held in on the ASU Jonesboro campus since 2011. Major talents come to perform, many of them artists whose lives and careers were touched by Cash, including Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Vince Gill and George Jones, raising some \$450,000 for the project. The money, added to some grants, allowed ASU to acquire the home site as well as several other properties associated with the historic Dyess Colony.

Johnny’s two surviving siblings, Joanne and Tommy, who were both born in the house, served as consultants to the renovation. “They would walk through and tell us what they remembered,” Hawkins said. “Then we created digital images for their approval.” Once they knew what furnishings were in the original home, the ASU team created an online registry, “sort of like you would do for a wedding,” according to Hawkins, to solicit donations. One outstanding gift: John’s mother’s own piano.

Everything else is authentic to the period, Hawkins said, and arranged as close to the original as memory can make it. “Before we opened in 2014, we had a walk-through for family and donors,” she said. “We asked what we should change and John’s family said, nothing, this is just the way we remember it.



“It’s wonderful when older people walk through the house, because they recognize so many of the things from the 1930s and ‘40s. It really gets conversations started with younger family members.”

The renovation of the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home has brought new energy to Dyess, a sleepy village, population less than 500, located just 7 miles off I-55 which parallels the west side of the Mississippi River through northern Arkansas. Tours begin downtown at the Colony’s Greek Revival Administration Building, dedicated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1936. Today it houses exhibits on the history of the Dyess Colony and the Great Depression era, as well as many items donated by Cash’s daughters, such as the table J.R. made in high school shop class, his prom program, and the pillow he saved that belonged to his brother, killed in a tragic saw accident.

Next door is the Dyess Colony Visitor Center located in the old town theater and pop shop, which J.R. and his friends frequented in the 1940s. The visitor center just

opened in May, 2016, after being rebuilt from the ground up. “Only the facade was still standing,” Hawkins said. “And we had that propped up with 2X4’s.” A shuttle carries visitors on to Cash’s boyhood home, a mile and a half away.

The project’s master plan calls for rebuilding the outbuildings around the Cash homestead, including the barn, chicken coop and outhouse. Funds will continue to come from an annual event, now expanded to the three-day [Johnny Cash Heritage Festival](#), relocated to Dyess with a concert on the homestead grounds, set to debut Oct. 19-21, 2017. The transformation of the Cash home from ruin to tourist destination is a breath of new life for Dyess, said Larry Sims. “It had to be done. Our town was nearly gone.”

Renee Wright

A graduate of Franconia College in Social Psychology, Renee has worked as Travel Editor for Charlotte Magazine and has written three travel guidebooks for Countryman Press among other writing assignments. She enjoys food and camping.

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