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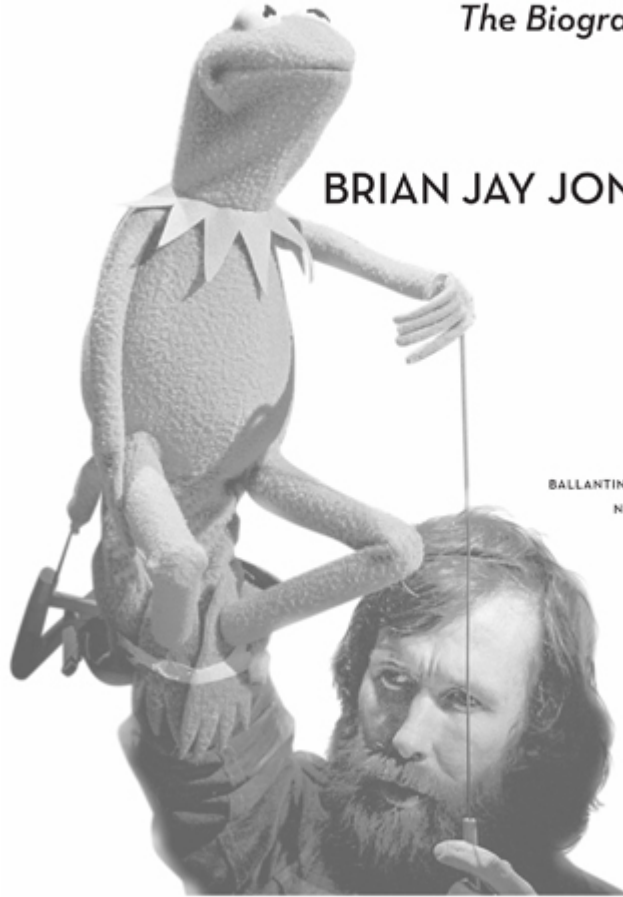


BRIAN
JAY
JONES

JIM HENSON

The Biography

BRIAN JAY JONES



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PROLOGUE

BLUE SKY

1973



(photo credit prl.1)

JIM HENSON SLOWLY FOLDED HIMSELF INTO A COUCH INSIDE REEVES Teletape Studio, sliding down, as he often did, until he was nearly horizontal, his shaggy head against the back cushions and his long legs stretched out in front of him. As always, Jim was the calm in the middle of the chaos, sitting quietly as studio technicians and crew members whirled around him, adjusting

lights and bustling about the background sets for *Sesame Street*'s Muppet segments. Jim simply lounged, hands folded across his stomach, fingers laced together. Draped limply across his lap was the green fleece form of Kermit the Frog, staring lifelessly at the floor, mouth agape.

Jim and Kermit were waiting.

In the five years *Sesame Street* had been on the air, many of its most memorable moments involved children interacting with the Muppets. And while all of the Muppet performers were good with children, most agreed that it was Kermit children believed in and trusted completely—mostly because they completely believed in and trusted Jim Henson. Jim—and therefore Kermit—had a natural sweetness, a reassuring patience, and a willingness to indulge silliness—and the resulting interaction could be pure magic. Even as Jim sat waiting, then, there was, as always, a buzz of anticipation.

Sesame Street director Jon Stone—a warm bear of a man with an easy smile—strolled the set, the end of a chewed pencil sticking out of his salt-and-pepper beard. “Blue sky!” he said loudly—a signal that a child was present on the set, a coded reminder that the normally boisterous Muppet performers and crew should watch their language. There was actually little chance of Jim himself swearing—normally his epithets were nothing stronger than “Oh, for heaven’s sake!”—but with the cue that his young costar, a little girl named Joey, had arrived, Jim slowly unfolded himself and rose to his full six-foot-one height.

Casually, Jim pulled Kermit onto his right arm, slightly parting his thumb from his fingers as he slid his hand into the frog’s mouth, then smoothed the long green sleeve from Kermit’s body down over his elbow. He brought the frog’s face up toward his own, tilting the head slightly—and suddenly, Kermit was magically alive, sizing up Jim with eyes that seemed to widen or narrow as Jim arched or clenched his fingers inside Kermit’s head.

While *Sesame Street*'s Muppet sets were usually elevated on stilts some six feet off the floor—making it possible for puppeteers to perform while standing—no child would ever be placed at such a perilous height. Instead, Joey—in a pink striped shirt, with her long blond hair tied at the top of her head—was moved into position on a stool while Jim knelt on the floor next to her. Slowly he raised Kermit up beside her, eyeing the Muppet’s position

on a video monitor in front of his crouched knees. Joey's eyes locked immediately on Kermit. The frog was no mere puppet; Kermit was *real*.

"*Rolleeoleeoleeyo!*" called out Stone—and as tape began to roll, Joey was already patting and petting Kermit lovingly.

"Hey, can you sing the alphabet, Joey?" asked Kermit.

"Yes," said Joey, nodding earnestly, "yes, I could."

"Let's hear you sing the alphabet."

"*A B C D...*" sang Joey, and Jim bopped Kermit along in time to the familiar "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" melody, bouncing the frog's head back and forth. "*E F,*" continued Joey—then instead of G, she substituted "*Cookie Monster!*" and giggled at her own joke.

All eyes in the studio were on the frog, waiting to see what Jim would do.

Jim reacted instantly, arching his long fingers inside Kermit to give him a surprised expression. Then he turned the frog, in a classic slow burn, toward the still-giggling Joey. "You're not singin' the alphabet!" Kermit said cheerily, and began the song again. Joey sang along eagerly, this time gliding past the letter G without incident, and stumbling only slightly through the troublesome quintet of *LMNOP*.

Joey patted Kermit lightly, unable to keep her hands off the slightly fuzzy Muppet. "*Q R Cookie Monster!*" she sang, and broke down in another fit of giggles.

Jim pressed his thumb and fingers tightly together inside Kermit's head, giving the frog a brief look of mock irritation. Then he arched his hand back upward, returning Kermit's expression to one of mild surprise. Joey tilted her head slightly and giggled directly into Kermit's eyes. She believed in him completely.

"Cookie Monster isn't a letter of the alphabet!" said Kermit helpfully. "It goes, *Q R S ...*"

"*T U Cookie Monster!*" Joey exploded into giggles, clenching her hands in front of her.

For a moment, Jim nearly broke character. He snickered slightly. "Yuh—you're just teasing me!" he finally said in Kermit's voice, and the two of them began singing together again. "*W X Y and Z ...*"

Joey briefly placed her hand on Kermit's shoulder as they entered the refrain. "*Now I've sung my ABCs...*" the two of them sang.

“... *next time Cookie Monster!*” Joey erupted, and broke down in giggles again.

“Next time, Cookie Monster can do it with you!” griped Kermit. “I’m leaving!” Jim pulled Kermit’s face into a mild grimace—and with a groan of exasperation skulked the frog away, out of camera shot.

Joey stared after him. “I love you,” she said, matter-of-factly.

Jim bounced Kermit eagerly back toward the little girl. “I love you, too,” he said warmly.

“Thanks,” said Joey.

And she draped an arm around Kermit and kissed him on the head.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DELTA

1936–1949



James Maury Henson in 1937, at about six months old. (photo credit 1.1)

DEER CREEK WINDS CASUALLY, ALMOST LAZILY, THROUGH THE MUGGY lowlands in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Its point of origin—near the little town of Scott, in Bolivar County—lies roughly ninety miles north of its terminal point at the Yazoo River three counties away. But Deer Creek takes its time getting

there, looping and whorling back and forth in a two-hundred-mile-long amble, looking like a child's cursive scrawled across the map.

The town of Leland, Mississippi, straddles Deer Creek just as it twists into one of its first tight hairpin turns, about ten miles east of Greenville. Established before the Civil War, the sleepy settlement, sprawled out across several former plantations, had taken advantage of fertile soil and regular steamboat traffic on Deer Creek to become one of the wealthiest in the Delta region. In the 1880s came the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, along with an influx of grocers and landlords and innkeepers—but even with the growing merchant class and increasing gentrification, it was still land that mattered most in Leland, and in the Mississippi Delta. In 1904, then, the state legislature called for the creation of an agricultural experiment station in the Delta region, preferably “at a point where experiments with the soil of the hills as well as the Delta can be made.” That point turned out to be two hundred acres of land hugging Deer Creek, in the village of Stoneville, putting the state's new Delta Branch Experiment Station just north of—and practically butted up against—Leland. By 1918, the facility in Stoneville was housing researchers and their families from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, carrying out research on crops, soil, and animal production for the federal government; by 1930, its findings on animal feed and insect control were particularly welcome to planters and sharecroppers doing their best to scratch out a living from the swampy Delta soil during the Great Depression.

Paul Ransom Henson—Jim Henson's father—was neither a planter nor a sharecropper. Nor had he come to the Delta region to work a family farm during the Depression or satisfy a random pang of wanderlust. Paul Henson was a practical man, and he had come to Leland in 1931 with his new wife, Betty, for a practical reason: he had accepted a government post at the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville.

Paul Henson came from a line of similarly sturdy and clear-minded men who sought neither to offend nor agitate, a trait that Paul's famous son would inherit as well—and, in fact, Jim Henson would always be very proud of his father's rugged, even-tempered Midwestern lineage. On one side of his father's family were the Dolton and Barnes lines—good-natured, nonconfrontational, and accommodating almost to a fault—while on the other were the Hensons—practical, rugged, and imperturbable.

One of Jim's favorite family stories involved his great-great-grandfather, a strongly pro-Northern farmer named Richmond Dolton who, during the Civil War, had been living in a small Missouri town in which most of the residents were Southern sympathizers. Rather than offend the Confederate sensibilities of his neighbors, the amiable Dolton simply swapped his farm—in a typically equitable and businesslike exchange—for a similar one in a town in Kansas where the residents shared his own Union tendencies. The move would come to be particularly appreciated by Dolton's teenage daughter, Aramentia, though for reasons more prurient than political—for it was here in Kansas that Aramentia Dolton met Ransom Aaron Barnes, a New Jersey native who had settled in the area. In 1869, she and Barnes were married; less than a year later, they would have a daughter, Effie Carrie Barnes—Paul Henson's mother.

On the Henson side, Jim could trace his pedigree back to colonial-era farmers in North Carolina whose descendants had slowly pushed west with the expanding American frontier, setting up farms and raising families in Kentucky and Kansas. One of those descendants was Jim's paternal grandfather, a sturdy Kansas farmer named Albert Gordon Henson, who, in 1889, had married Richmond Dolton's levelheaded granddaughter, Effie Carrie Barnes. After an ambitious though unsuccessful effort to stake a claim during the Cherokee Strip land run—where he had rumbled into the dusty Oklahoma countryside in a mule-drawn buckboard—Albert and Effie would eventually settle in Lincoln County, just east of Oklahoma City. It was here that Paul Ransom Henson—the name Ransom was borrowed from Effie's father, Ransom Aaron Barnes—would be born in 1904, the youngest of Albert and Effie's nine children.

Each morning, Paul Henson would be awakened at first light to do his chores and walk the half mile to school, a one-room building crammed with fifty children and presided over by two teachers. While Albert Henson never had much formal schooling, he was determined to make education a priority for the children in the Henson household. With that sort of parental encouragement, Paul graduated from high school in 1924 at age nineteen, and immediately headed for Iowa State College—now Iowa State University, a school recognized then, as now, for the quality of its agricultural programs. Over the next four years, Paul was a member of the agriculture-oriented Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity, participated on the Farm

Crops Judging Team (the team would place third nationally in 1927), and even discovered a knack for performance as a member of the Dramatic Club. In July 1928, he received his BS in Farm Crops and Soils, completing a thesis on the hybridization of soybeans.

Following graduation, Paul began work on his master's degree at the University of Maryland, enrolling in courses covering plant physics, biochemistry, genetics, statistics, agronomy, and soil technology. One afternoon, while eating his lunch, he caught sight of an attractive young woman walking toward the campus restaurant—when pressed, he would later admit his eyes had been drawn mainly to her legs—and was determined to win an introduction. The legs, as it turned out, belonged to Elizabeth Brown—Betty, as everyone called her—the twenty-one-year-old secretary to Harry Patterson, dean of the College of Agriculture.

Elizabeth Marcella Brown was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Maryland, but had lived in Memphis and New Orleans long enough to pick up both the lilting accent and genteel demeanor of a Southern belle. The accent and the manners were fitting, for Betty had a refined, distinctly Southern, and generally artistic pedigree. In fact, it was through Betty's side of the family that Jim Henson could trace his artistic ability, in a straight and colorful line running through his mother and grandmother back to his maternal great-grandfather, a talented Civil War-era mapmaker named Oscar.

Oscar Hinrichs—a swaggering Prussian who had immigrated to the United States in 1837 at the age of two—began working as a cartographer for the United States Coast Survey at age twenty-one, reporting directly to Alexander Dallas Bache, head of the survey and a great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin. When the Civil War began in 1860, Oscar enthusiastically enlisted with the Confederacy—even smuggling himself into the South with the help of Confederate sympathizers in Maryland—and loaned his valuable mapmaking skills to the Southern cause even as he survived battles at Antietam, Gettysburg, and the Wilderness. After the war, Oscar married Marylander Mary Stanley—whose father had helped him sneak into the Confederacy—and moved to New York City. Over the next ten years, Mary bore Oscar six children, including one daughter, Sarah—Betty Brown's mother, and Jim Henson's grandmother. It was Sarah who inherited Oscar Hinrichs's innate artistic streak, and she would learn not

only how to paint and draw, but also how to sew, carve, and use hand tools—talents that Jim Henson would wield just as skillfully two generations later as he sketched, carved, and sewed his earliest Muppets.

The Hinrichs family eventually settled in Washington, D.C., where Oscar unhappily bounced between jobs, convinced employers were discriminating against him because of his service to the Confederacy. Compounding his misery, Mary became ill with uterine cancer and died in 1891 at the age of fifty-two. Less than a year later, a grief-stricken Oscar Hinrichs took his own life, leaving an orphaned fourteen-year-old Sarah to tend to two younger brothers. Dutifully, Sarah dropped out of the art school into which she had just been accepted and moved with her brothers into a Washington boardinghouse. For the rest of their lives, neither Sarah nor her siblings openly discussed Oscar Hinrichs's sad demise—a penchant for maintaining a respectful silence about unhappy circumstances that her grandson Jim Henson would also share.

In 1902, twenty-four-year-old Sarah Hinrichs was introduced to Maury Brown, a lanky, thirty-four-year-old clerk and stenographer for Southern Railway. Born in Kentucky on the day after Christmas in 1868, Maury Heady Brown—Jim Henson's grandfather—was a self-made man with a rugged Southern determination. Raised by a single mother who was totally deaf, Brown had run away from home at age ten and learned to use the telegraph, supporting himself by reporting horse-racing scores for a Lexington racetrack. A voracious reader and quick learner, he next taught himself typewriting and shorthand, eventually becoming so proficient at both that he was hired as the full-time private secretary to the president of Southern Railway. When he met Sarah Hinrichs in the winter of 1902, Brown fell in love immediately—and on their second date, as they ice skated on the frozen Potomac River, Maury Brown presented Sarah Hinrichs with an armful of red roses and asked for her hand. While the newspapers in 1903 may have noted the marriage of Maury and Sarah Brown, to each other—and to the rest of the family—they would always be “Pop” and “Dear.”

For the next few years, Pop and Dear bounced around with the Southern Railway, landing briefly in Missouri, Washington, Memphis, and New

Orleans, and all while raising three daughters, Mary Agnes, Elizabeth, and Barbara—better known as Attie, Betty, and Bobby. Perhaps because they moved around so often, the Browns were an exceptionally close and good-natured family. “I just thought we had the happiest home that ever was,” Bobby said later. “And I remember what a shock it was when I would go to other people’s houses to sleep over and found out that all families weren’t as fun and nice to each other as ours!”

At some point in his youth, Maury Brown embraced Christian Science, a relatively new faith that had been formally established in 1879. Consequently, the daughters were all brought up as Christian Scientists, though moderate in their practice, likely through the influence of Dear. While the daughters might forgo most medical care in favor of prayer or homeopathic treatments—as a girl, Betty was dunked in alternating hot and cold water baths to combat a case of whooping cough—more serious injuries were almost always attended to by physicians. When Attie was badly hurt in a car accident one winter, the family immediately called for a doctor—and far from being concerned about compromising her faith, Attie remembered being more embarrassed that the doctor had to cut away her long underwear to set her broken leg.

Eventually, the Browns returned to the D.C. area for good, living first in a “perfectly awful” place near the railroad tracks in Hyattsville, Maryland—the house would shake violently as trains roared past—before settling into the much quieter Marion Street in 1923. Attie and Betty were expected to help pay the mortgage each month, and shortly after high school both found work as secretaries—Attie at an express company, and Betty at the nearby University of Maryland, where she, and her legs, soon caught the eye of Paul Henson.

Paul would woo Betty for the better part of two years, studying genetics and plant biology at the university during the week and attending regular tennis parties hosted by the Browns on weekends—and Paul quickly came to adore not just Betty, but the entire Brown family. It was easy to see why; Dear and Pop were devoted to each other, while the girls, both then and later, had distinct, almost Dickensian, personalities. Attie was the serious and straitlaced one and became a devoted Episcopalian. Betty was considered practical and no-nonsense, though she could show flashes of a slightly silly sense of humor, while Bobby was the happy-go-lucky one who

worked to ensure that everything was “upbeat all the time.” All three, too, were excellent tennis players, having been taught to play at a young age by their dashing uncle Fritz Hinrichs, who also taught the girls to dance. Attie later admitted she “could’ve cared less” about tennis, but the parties kept the Browns in the center of a wide social circle, and their names on the society pages of *The Washington Post*.

In the spring of 1930, Paul completed work on his master’s thesis—on the “effect of starchy endosperm on the distribution of carbohydrates in the corn plant”—and received a master of science degree in June. He and Betty married on December 27, 1930—the same day Attie, still recovering from her car accident, married Stanleigh “Jinx” Jenkins, a good-natured high school teacher and Episcopalian minister. Although Paul was graduating during the first difficult years of the Great Depression, with his advanced degree and his background in soybean research, he found employment almost immediately as an agronomist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In early 1931, the USDA decided to post him not to the research facility at nearby Beltsville, Maryland, as perhaps Betty had hoped, but rather at the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Mississippi. The newlywed Hensons were off to Leland.

Despite the distance from home, even Betty Henson had to admit that Leland was an attractive place to start a family. The surrounding landscape was lush and green, brimming with wildflowers almost year-round. Cypress trees lined Deer Creek, keeping the shores shady and relatively cool even in the humid summer. The population was just large enough—hovering around three thousand—to support movie theaters, drugstores, and several churches and restaurants, while still being small enough to provide a small-town feel. Further, with the steady flow into Stoneville of college-educated scientists—most of them, like Paul Henson, with advanced degrees—the school in Leland was one of the best in Mississippi. The town, in fact, seemed immune to the Depression infecting the rest of the country. Near record harvests of cotton were ginned at Stoneville and packed into the railroad cars that regularly chugged through the Delta region. Construction was booming, and businesses were doing so well that local police fretted about the best way to manage the traffic that was snarling Broad and Main Streets on Saturday evenings.

Further, the government had gone out of its way to make the relatively remote Stoneville facility as attractive as possible to its scientists and staff. Most employees lived on the grounds of the facility itself—and, in fact, a home had been built specifically for the Hensons in early 1931, a four-room house just southeast of the new main administration building, erected at a cost of \$3,093. Milk was delivered daily, free of charge, courtesy of the on-site dairy, and each year the facility would sponsor a Delta Days celebration where families would come from miles around to eat from enormous pits of barbecued chicken and pork and take part in pickup baseball games and other contests.

The Hensons would be in Leland only a little more than a year before they added their first child. In the autumn of 1932, with Dear and Bobby close at hand, Betty bore a son they named Paul Ransom Henson, Jr.—a small, sad-eyed boy on whom Betty doted. For the next four years, Betty would make regular and extended trips back to her parents' place in Maryland—where the rest of the family could coo and fuss over their firstborn—while Paul Sr. settled into his position at Stoneville, escaping the stifling heat of the administration building each day by tromping the nearby fields of soybeans stretching steadily upward toward the Mississippi sun.

Four years later, the week of September 20, 1936, was an unseasonably hot one for the Delta region. Cotton plants wilted under a scorching sun, while a few scattered rain showers lamely soaked into the dry, brittle ground. On Wednesday evening—the 23rd—with thunderstorms still rumbling across the Delta, Paul Henson drove his pregnant wife the nine dusty miles from Stoneville to Greenville and checked her into King's Daughters Hospital, a stern-looking building the locals called simply "The Hospital," since it was the only one in the region. The following morning—at 11:40 A.M. on Thursday, September 24, 1936, with a Dr. Lucas attending—Betty Henson gave birth to her second child, an eight-pound, eleven-ounce, round-faced son with a shock of sandy hair. While their first son had been named for her husband, for their second child Betty looked to her side of the family—and perhaps intentionally employed the same trick Paul Henson's own mother had used when naming him—using her father's first name as her new son's

middle one. Betty and Paul Henson's younger son, then, would be James Maury Henson—though his family would almost always call him Jimmy.

Only a little more than a year later, in early 1938, the Hensons moved back to Maryland, taking a house at 4012 Tennyson Road in Hyattsville. Founded just before the Civil War and straddling railroad tracks and the Baltimore and Washington Turnpike, Hyattsville was at an ideal location to funnel traffic and commerce between Baltimore and the nation's capital. By the late 1930s, it was a bustling streetcar suburb with a thriving downtown—including a brand-new Woolworth's—and like Leland, was already struggling with traffic and parking problems.

For the next five years, between the constant bustle of bridge and tennis parties at the Browns' a few blocks away, Paul Henson would make the short daily commute up Baltimore Avenue to the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and its newly established Bureau of Plant Industry. In 1940, he completed a course in cytology at the University of Maryland, and began researching alternatives for beef cattle feed, eventually publishing his findings in the respected *Journal of Animal Science*.

For his younger son, however, those first years in Maryland were a blur—no surprise, really, considering that Jim's colleagues would later laugh that his ability to recall the past was almost nonexistent. "Jim hardly ever gets the past straight," Muppet writer Jerry Juhl said. "That's because he's completely future oriented." Jim did recall seeing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Wizard of Oz* at this time—and while he would later cite *The Wizard of Oz* as his favorite film, given that he would have been barely three at the time of its 1939 release, it's little wonder that what he remembered most was being terrified of the roaring MGM lion before the film's opening scene.

Perhaps one of the most important and lasting impacts of these early Maryland years, however, was on Jim's way of speaking. While Southern-born, Jim learned to talk in the D.C. region, where he was more likely to hear the slightly fronted vowels of the mid-Atlantic accent than the Southern drawl of the Delta. Although Jim may have continued to hear Betty's gentle Southern lilt at home, it was Paul's flat, slightly nasal, Midwestern twang, as well as his almost whisper-quiet way of speaking, that Jim ultimately adopted. As he grew older, too, Jim developed a particular quirk in his speaking that, to many, would be as identifiable with

him as his bib of a beard: when deep in thought, Jim would *hmmm* quietly as he considered a question or comment—and colleagues would learn to gauge Jim’s mood from the length or tenor of a particular *hmmm*.

At the end of Jim’s first-grade year, the Hensons returned to Leland, moving back into government housing on the Stoneville campus. The Henson home edged up against an orchard of pecan trees, planted for research and hybridization studies, but raided regularly by Jim and Paul Jr., who would bring in sackfuls of nuts for Betty to bake into pecan pies. Chickens ran in a small fenced-in area in the side yard, while the back of the house faced a fountain and circular drive leading up to the three-story, red-brick administration building. Just beyond the road that ran in front of the Henson house, the lawn sloped sharply down to Deer Creek.

Deer Creek, for all its beauty, wasn’t a creek for swimming. Already shallow and swampy, cypress trees crashed regularly down into the murky water, creating makeshift dams that backed up with a mess of mud and debris. “None of us were allowed to swim in that creek,” recalled Gordon Jones, Jim’s best friend at the time. It was still their primary spot for playing, though instead of swimming or fishing, Jim and his friends generally preferred romping along the sloping banks. But “there were snakes all along the creek bank,” recalled Tommy Baggette, another Leland friend, “and everybody had to be careful where they walked.” To Jim, the snakes were all part of what he later recalled fondly as “an idyllic time.” “I was a Mississippi Tom Sawyer,” he said later. “I had a BB gun, and I’d shoot at the water moccasins in the swamp just to wake them up.”

When he wasn’t romping on the banks of Deer Creek or startling snakes with his gun, Jim was an avid bird-watcher, squinting into the high grass near the fields on the Stoneville compound, or peering up into the tops of the cypress trees with a pair of binoculars, then thumbing through his thick book of birds to try to identify what he’d seen flutter past. Baggette remembered being impressed by a reference book Jim had made himself by pasting in pictures of birds cut from books and magazines, and filling the margins with his own drawings. When pressed, Jim would name the blackbird as his favorite, not only for its spunky personality, but also because he delighted in the sound of the bird’s less formal name: the

grackle. It was the sort of deliciously sharp-sounding nonsensical word that Jim loved—a meaningless word that just *sounded* like it meant something.

Jim and Paul Jr. were enrolled at the Leland Consolidated School, an elegant high-ceilinged, single-story brick building that backed onto the creek. Here Jim joined the Cub Scouts, and picked up with a regular group of friends, including the bookish Jones, the rascally Baggette, the colorfully named Royall Frazier, and a strapping young man named Theodore Kermit Scott. While the Hensons still referred to their youngest son as Jimmy, to Jones, Frazier, and most of Leland, he was hailed by the groan-inducing *James*, thanks to a fourth-grade teacher who needed a way to distinguish between three boys in her class with similar names. “Jimmy Childress was going to be Jimmy,” said Frazier later, laughing. “Jim Carr was going to be Jim and that meant Jim Henson was going to be James!”

Sundays in Leland were for church—and even with its relatively small population, Leland had a number of churches, with Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, and several separate black churches all represented by their own imposing brick or stone structures. Paul Henson was, for the most part, a nonpracticing Methodist, while Betty and her sons were among the few Christian Scientists in the entire Delta region—before the arrival of the Hensons, a religious survey of the town had located exactly two Christian Scientists—but Jim’s unusual faith was never cause for much conversation between him and his friends. Discussing his religious views years later, Jim was deferential to faith in general, a courtesy friends and colleagues deeply respected. “Over the years, I’ve evolved my own set of beliefs and attitudes—as we all have—I feel work for me,” Jim wrote later. “I don’t feel particularly comfortable telling others how to think or live. There are people who know more about these things than I do.” “He was not an evangelical at all,” agreed Gordon Jones, “and I wondered if it wasn’t more of an intellectual thing, something that his parents had put on him, because it wasn’t something that he seemed to really enjoy talking about or feel like he had to talk about.”

Still, Jones, a Baptist, was curious enough to ask Jim about his religion at least once. “I remember he had pretty good answers,” Jones said. “I wanted to know ‘What happens when you get sick?’ and ‘Don’t you go to the doctor?’ And he let me know that a Christian Scientist’s faith would handle that kind of thing.” When it came to more serious illnesses, Jones said, Jim

informed him that these were due to “a temporary lapse of faith.” At that point, “they would go to the doctor,” Jones said. “But generally, they depended on their faith to heal them.”

With no real organized church of Christian Science in the area, Jim participated to some degree in the social opportunities provided by Leland’s many other churches. Some weekends, Kermit Scott and his family would pick Jim up in Stoneville and attend services at the white Spanish Mission–style Methodist church in Leland. Other times, the Fraziers would bring him to the brick Presbyterian church on the corner of Willeroy and Broad Streets, where Jim would attend Sunday school classes. Here the basement classroom was presided over by a local osteopath named Dr. Cronin, whose lessons were remembered more for their entertainment value than for instruction in the gospels. Cronin delighted in engaging students with trivia questions and awarding prizes for the quickest correct answer, and for one particular contest announced that the student with the first correct answer would receive a softball bat while the runner-up would get a softball. “Jim found it just before I did and so Jim had first prize and I had second,” Frazier recalled. “But Jim already had a bat [so] he went ahead and said, ‘No, I’ll take the ball,’ and he let me have the bat, just because I wanted it so badly.” That was characteristic of Jim, said Frazier warmly. “He was a good friend.”

If Sundays were for church, however, Saturdays were for Temple.

On the corner of Broad and Fourth in downtown Leland stood the town’s sturdy brick movie theater, the Temple, built by the local Masons who used its spacious upstairs rooms for meetings. The name was appropriate, for here an eight-year-old Jim Henson would spend countless Saturdays sitting with his eyes cast reverently upward in the darkened theater, engrossed in the flickering images on the screen. “We’d always go on Saturday to watch the double feature cowboy movies,” Baggette said. For fifteen cents, Jim and his friends could each get a bag of popcorn and spend an entire day soaking up serials, newsreels, cartoons, and the latest comedies or action films. Jim particularly liked films with exotic locations and costumes, whether it involved the American West or the Far East, and he and his friends would spend the rest of the week reenacting what they’d seen on screen, stalking each other through the pecan trees near Jim’s house,

building elaborate props, and putting together costumes from old clothing and materials salvaged from linen closets.

Sometimes neighbors would see Jim sitting swami-style on the front lawn of the Henson house, bunched up in a sheet with his head wrapped in a makeshift turban, pretending to snake-charm a garden hose. That was typical; whether it was figuring out how to make clothespin guns that fired rubber bands or building miniature slingshots, Jim could almost always come up with a clever or creative way to make their games more fun. “A child’s use of imagination and fantasy blends into his use of creativity,” Jim explained later. The trick, he said, was to “try out whole new directions. There are many ways of doing something. Look for what no one has tried before.” As he would demonstrate many times throughout his life, sometimes the cleverest solutions to a problem were also the simplest—and usually lying in plain sight, provided you could see a thing differently.

Jones, for example, remembered being fascinated with the 1944 Columbia serial *The Desert Hawk*, a swashbuckling Arabian adventure in which Gilbert Roland played twin brothers, one good, one evil. “The good guy had a birthmark. It was a black star on one of his wrists,” Jones recalled. “So Jim brought me a little cork he had made—he had cut it out and made a star and charred it so that I could make a little black star on my wrist if I wanted to, which I thought was just absolutely great. It hadn’t occurred to me to make that thing or even figure out how to do it ... but he was always coming up with simple little things that others didn’t.” Even at eight years old, Jones said, Jim “had something the rest of us didn’t have—an unusual degree of originality.”

But Jim had something else, too. He had Dear.

Even with her daughter Betty living more than a thousand miles away, Dear continued to make regular trips from Maryland to Mississippi, usually traveling by train, with daughter Bobby for company. Perhaps because Betty tended to indulge the more fragile, less independent Paul Jr., and often left Jim to entertain himself, Jim was exceptionally close to Dear—they even shared the same birthday—and on her arrival, Jim and Dear would immerse themselves in paint and pencils and crayons and glue. Like her mapmaking father, Dear was quick and sure with a pencil, and she encouraged Jim in his own drawings—which were often of loopy-eyed birds or wide-mouthed monsters—as Jim discovered how the placement of

two dots for eyes could convey emotion, or how a slash could make an angry mouth. It was the same simplicity that he would later bring to his sense of design for the Muppets.

Dear was equally certain with a paintbrush—she had oil-painted a picture of the roses Pop had given her when he proposed, for example, which remained a family heirloom until it fell apart in the 1970s—and had a knack for crafts and delicate woodwork, including carving and sculpting, all skills she had also learned from Oscar Hinrichs. “[He’s] the one who taught our mother to do the handwork things she did,” said Attie of her grandfather—and Dear nurtured the same talents and enthusiasm in her grandson.

Apart from her considerable painting and drawing skills, Dear excelled with needle and thread. Her sewing ability, in fact, was the stuff of family legend. Enormous quilts and needlework decorated her home, and Dear had made not only all of her own clothes, but all of her daughters’ clothes as well. Attie recalled with awe Dear’s ability to sew with nearly any material, including a coat she had sewn from a heavy, scratchy army blanket. “How she sewed that material,” Attie said, “nobody knows.” This skill, too, Dear would cultivate in Jim, who would later build, sculpt, and sew his puppets out of nearly any materials he could find lying around.

Perhaps most important, Dear was Jim’s best audience. She encouraged Jim in his play and in his dressing up and prop making, coaxed stories from him and indulged his fondness for puns and practical jokes. A voracious reader, Dear also inspired a love of reading in Jim, whether it was L. Frank Baum’s *Wizard of Oz* books or the comics pages of the newspaper. And with her proud Southern heritage—“the Brown girls were never allowed to forget they were Southerners!” said Bobby—Dear instilled in Jim a similar sense of genteel self-importance. It wasn’t arrogance, but simply a conviction that he could do and be anything he wanted—a confidence and self-awareness that, for the rest of his life, family and colleagues admired and found reassuring. “He was convinced he was going to be successful,” his wife, Jane, said later. “I think he knew he was extraordinary. But it was in a quiet way where he just quietly knew that he knew things.”

With such encouragement at home, it was no surprise Jim found school relatively easy. While he wasn’t the best student in class—that distinction fell to Jones, who later became a physicist—Jim was ranked in the top three. Jim’s classmates remember him as being very clever, but never

seeking the spotlight. No one could recall Jim taking an interest in school productions, apart from obligatory supporting roles in chorus or Christmas plays. It was perhaps just as well, for Jim was so soft-spoken that audience members would likely have had to strain to hear him.

While Jim was taller than most boys his age, he was neither gawky nor an athlete, though Kermit Scott admitted that Jim was “a little bit more of a nerd” than the rest of the gang. Still, Jim could surprise his classmates by exhibiting the same brand of toughness that had sent his paternal grandfather rumbling wildly into the Cherokee Strip. One evening out at Jones’s farm, Jim and his friends took part in a boxing match—a sport at which the well-built, and slightly older, Tommy Baggette excelled. The boys took turns putting on the gloves and fighting one-on-one, but when it came time to find an opponent to take on the good-natured but solid Baggette, all eyes went downward. Finally, Jim stepped forward. “[He] would do things like that,” Jones remembered. “He had guts ... if somebody else wouldn’t do it, he would—and ... he’d just go ahead and make the best of it.” The result? “Tommy hit him with an uppercut and knocked him down,” Jones said. “But I just remember thinking how much nerve it took for [Jim] to put himself in that spot.”

Still, there were no hard feelings between Jim and Baggette, whose mother, Jessie Mae, served as one of the den mothers for their Cub Scout troop. It was in Cub Scouts, in fact, that Jim got his first taste of performing, putting on a kind of pantomime with Gordon Jones as part of a troop skit night. As Jones stood with his hands clenched behind his back, giving a short speech in a deadpan manner, Jim stood pressed up behind him, poking his arms through the crook of Jones’s arms to perform the speaker’s hands. “He’d reach out his handkerchief and pat [Jones’s] forehead, doing all these kinds of things which we all thought was hilarious,” Frazier remembered. It was no accident, Jones said later, that Jim performed the expressive hands, which was the part of the skit “calling for originality and showmanship.... Jim was the showman.”

Betty Henson also served as a den mother for Jim’s Cub Scout troop. As it turned out, the Henson home was a favorite gathering place, not only because Betty was known to serve warm pecan pies at Scout meetings, but also because the Henson household was a genuinely warm one. Everyone liked each other and a good sense of humor mattered. The Hensons, said

Jones, “were very quiet people.... But they all had a sense of humor and they would say things that were funny. But there was no loud-voice laughing. Everybody was very merry, and they did a lot of wordplay and things of that nature.”

While Paul Sr.—“Dr. Henson,” as the boys respectfully called him—was perhaps the quietest member of the family, he was known around the Stoneville compound for his way with a story. During the almost weekly summer fish fries at the Experiment Station, a crowd would gather around Paul as he launched into one funny story after another. As for Betty Henson, she was “absolutely delightful,” said Jones, with “a bright, witty sense of humor.” She took great delight in gently teasing the boys, pouring a glass of milk to overflowing, for example, if the boys didn’t literally say “when.” “I’d say ‘Okay, that’s enough,’ and she’d keep pouring!” laughed Jones. “His mother was great for jokes,” agreed Frazier, who recalled Betty trying to convince him that a blurry baby picture actually showed Jim with six toes. “She said, ‘You never noticed he had six toes?’ ... And I kept saying, ‘Take off your shoe, Jim!’”

Jim, it seemed, could see the humor in almost any situation. For a while, the Hensons owned a horse named Peggy, a volatile creature that Jim and Kermit Scott would attempt to ride among the pecan trees near the Henson house. Instead, Peggy would bolt for the low-hanging branches to knock Jim, or anyone else, off her back. While Jim howled with laughter at the nerve of the horse, Scott was less amused. “Both of us nearly got killed,” he grumbled.

Wild horses aside, Jim and Paul Jr. were always tinkering with something. While Paul was more mathematically inclined, working on detailed projects with small parts, Jim was the more ambitious of the two brothers, often taking on big, messy projects that required a great deal of space. While Jim and Paul were four years apart, they remained close—given his slight build, Paul was more comfortable playing with Jim and his friends than boys his own age (Paul Henson would, in fact, remain of slight build for the rest of his life)—and he and Jim would spend hours together in their side yard, hunched over model airplanes and crystal radio sets. Jim would always be a gadget freak, a passion he had likely inherited from his great-uncle Ernie, Dear’s younger brother, who had built his own crystal radio in the 1920s so he and Dear could listen to *Two Black Crows* together

on the radio's earpiece. To Frazier's delight, Jim's radios worked, too. "You could get one radio station very faintly," said an impressed Frazier. "But it worked!"

As much as Jim liked building radios and knowing how they worked, he loved listening to them even more. "Early radio drama was an important part of my childhood," Jim said fondly. "I'd go home at four-thirty or five in the afternoon to hear shows like *The Green Hornet*, *The Shadow* and *Red Ryder* ... and of course I loved the comedians." Fibber McGee and Molly was one of Jim's favorites, as was Jack Benny. But most of all, Jim lived for Sunday evenings, when NBC radio aired *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, featuring ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his dummy Charlie McCarthy.

Bergen was that oddest of phenomena—a ventriloquist who had rocketed to success on the radio, where no one could see the performance. Those watching Bergen live in the studio might have argued that was for the best, as Bergen's ventriloquism skills could often get sloppy, his lips visibly moving when he spoke through his dummies. It was a charge Bergen shrugged off; to Bergen, the technique was secondary to the characters—and Bergen excelled both at creating memorable characters and bringing them to life almost purely through the sound of his voice. Bergen engaged his characters in rapid-fire banter so nimbly—rotating flawlessly between his own voice and the voices of his impish sidekick Charlie McCarthy or dimbulb Mortimer Snerd—that radio listeners were convinced they were real people. Jim Henson, for one, was certain of it. "I wasn't thinking of any of those people as puppets," he said. "They were human to me."

But it went even further than that, as Jim would explain years later; using a dummy allowed Bergen to do something indefinable. "Edgar Bergen's work with Charlie and Mortimer was magic," Jim enthused. "Magic in the real sense. Something happened when Edgar spoke through Charlie—things were said that couldn't be said by ordinary people." As Jim would discover, there *was* a kind of magic, a wonderful kind of freedom, involved in letting a character at the end of your arm give voice to sentiments one might not feel comfortable expressing while wearing the guise of, as Jim called them, "ordinary people."

In 1948, the U.S. Department of Agriculture sent the Henson family back to Maryland, where Paul returned to work at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. The family purchased a cozy new 1,500-square-foot house at 4002 Beechwood Road in the recently incorporated town of University Park, only a little more than a mile from the University of Maryland. It had been hard leaving Leland, not only for twelve-year-old Jim, but for his circle of friends as well. “I was really sad and upset that he was getting ready to move,” said Gordon Jones, who would also move from Leland a short time later. But being back in Maryland did bring with it one major blessing: it meant being close to Dear, who still lived with Pop in the house at 4306 Marion Street in Hyattsville, less than ten minutes away. Now, instead of gathering as a family perhaps once every three months, the Hensons and the Browns could get together every week to eat large family dinners around Dear’s meticulously set table, then retire to the porch to talk and tell stories as they rocked in rhythm on squeaking metal gliders. Those gatherings would always be some of Jim’s fondest memories. “There was so much laughter,” he said, “because everyone was always telling jokes and saying funny things.”

It was easy to see where Betty Henson had gotten her sense of humor, for both Pop and Dear were funny, though in different ways. Where Dear tended toward the silly, Pop had a more “keen, subtle sense of humor.” But “he never laughed in ridicule,” Attie explained. “He didn’t think ridicule was funny at all.” In fact, Pop would never allow conversations to veer toward anything remotely unpleasant or disagreeable—a trait that would define Jim as well. “If the dinner conversation seemed to be getting out of hand,” recalled Paul Henson, “he’d get a *Reader’s Digest* and read to us!” Many times, Pop would come to the table with a joke or funny story already in mind, fully prepared if necessary to seize control of a wandering conversation or glum mood.

Things could get even livelier at the holidays when Attie and Bobby and their families were added to the mix. “Fifteen or twenty people would be there, sitting around the dinner table,” Jim remembered, “and my grandparents would have stories to tell—usually stories from their childhood. They would tell a tale, and somebody would try to top it. I’ve always felt that these childhood experiences of my family sitting around the

dinner table, making each other laugh, were my introduction to humor.” In fact, Jim’s own sense of humor was a heady mix of every kind of humor seated around the table—a touch of Dear’s laugh-out-loud sensibility, a bit of Paul’s quiet joy in storytelling, a dash of Betty’s twinkling delight in wordplay, then seasoned with Pop’s more subtle edge that always laughed *with* an audience, never *at* them.

But by 1949, there was something else that had perhaps an even more pronounced effect on Jim. Always the gadget freak, there was a new device that had him absolutely fascinated. It was an obsession that would direct his focus, shape the artist he would become, and change the very course of his life.

It was a television. And Jim was going to make certain he “drove ’em all crazy” until he had one.