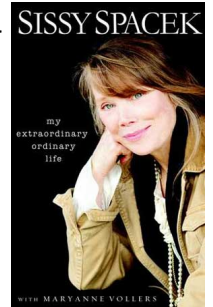


Nothing ordinary about Sissy Spacek: Quitman native opens up about family, career, life

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 10 July 2012 09:39

Academy-award winning actress Sissy Spacek grew up just down the road a piece in Quitman. She's been in over two dozen films, has won four New York Film Critics awards, a



Golden Globe and has been nominated for a Grammy. But neither the glamorous life she's lived nor the accolades she's won could change what she is – a small town girl whose “values were formed in a community where material possessions didn't count for much, relationships were everything, and where waiting for something you wanted could actually be better than having it.”

In her memoir, “My Extraordinary Ordinary Life,” Spacek recalls growing up with loving parents and two brothers, Ed and Robbie, that she adored. She was born on Christmas day in 1949.

“For seventeen years, Quitman was the center of my universe,” she writes. “I always appreciated the accident of my birth into such a wonderful world.”

Her father, Ed, was the Wood County agricultural agent. Her mother, Virginia (Gin), worked at the abstract office.

She grew up with a circle of friends, her family and her community to protect her.

As with most everyone in Wood County, Spacek looked forward to the annual Old Settlers' Reunion.

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"I'd load up on Cokes and hot dogs, frozen custards, cotton candy, and my personal favorites, candy apples, before getting on the rides," she remembers. "Somehow I never got sick, which is kind of amazing for someone who couldn't even sit in the backseat of the car without turning green."

She was a cheerleader in junior high and a twirler in high school. She and Robbie performed together, but Sissy decided to take up the guitar. She also loved listening to the radio.

"I would lie across my bed at night, trying to catch WNOE in New Orleans or KLIF in Dallas," she said. "We were right between the stations, so you could hardly catch either one of them."

While she liked the music of the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, she really didn't like pop music until the British invasion.



"On the Sunday night that the Beatles were playing for the first time on The Ed Sullivan Show, Mother invited the whole [church] group back to our house to watch it," she writes. "She was the coolest mom ever."

Spacek's enchanted life was not to last.

During her sophomore year of high school, Robbie, a junior, was diagnosed with leukemia. He was in and out of M.D. Anderson Hospital for the next year and a half.

"Robbie's illness turned our ordinary, orderly lives upside down," Spacek said. "Mother was no longer working at the courthouse, and Daddy took a leave of absence. ... We rented an apartment in Houston to be near the hospital during Robbie's treatments."

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During the summer between her junior and senior year at high school, Spacek went to New York City, where she stayed with actor Rip Torn, a cousin on her father's side, and his wife, the actress Geraldine Page.

“When I arrived at their doorstep, the poor country cousin, Rip and Gerry were the toast of the New York theater and arts scene,” she recalls. “They took me everywhere with them.”

Her eyes set on being a musician, Spacek went to several auditions, but was called home. Her brother had taken a turn for the worse. He died on Sept. 19, 1967. She lost interest in everything, except music. Even an acceptance letter to the University of Texas couldn't change her desire to return to New York and carve out a career in the music business.

She made a record (“John, You've Gone Too Far This Time) under the stage name of Rainbo, but, in the end, decided to keep her name, because “nothing I accomplished would be worth salt if I lost track of who I was.”

She took acting classes at the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute near Union Station. She worked in a dress shop to make ends meet. She worked as a print model for Breck shampoo and Chanel No. 5 perfume.



In the spring of 1971, she met Michael Ritchie, who cast her as a waif in “Prime Cut,” with Lee Marvin. It was in acting that she found her calling. She soon moved to Los Angeles, where she was cast in Terrence Malik's classic film, “Badlands,” along with Martin Sheen.

“In this rarified world, two life-altering things happened to me,” she writes. “I learned that filmmakers can be artists. And I fell in love with Jack Fisk.”

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The two married on April 12, 1974. They have two daughters, Schuyler and Madison.

Soon, Spacek was cast as the lead in the Brian DePalma movie, "Carrie," which earned her an Academy award nomination, a rarity for an actress in a horror film.

Then, in the summer of 1977, country music star Loretta Lynn started telling people that Spacek was going to star in a film about her life.



"I was slightly dumbfounded because I'd never even met Loretta, and I'd certainly never agreed to be in her film," she remembers.

After meeting her in Shreveport, Spacek changed her mind.

"All of a sudden, the door to the living quarters of the bus flew open and out stormed a tiny woman in a flaming red chiffon dress," she writes. "She was shaking her fist in the air and hollering, 'BAM BAM BAM! BAM BAM BAM! I couldn't hear nothing but them dadgum drums a'beatin' in my ear!' At that moment I thought, 'Oh my God, I have to play this woman!'"

Spacek followed Lynn around "like a puppy," trying to mimic her accent and body language. She tape-recorded her stories and practiced until "I kind of got my own version of her."

The one-time aspiring musician also had to learn how to play and sing like Lynn. After practicing with her and writing songs with her, Lynn paid Spacek the ultimate compliment.

"She invited me to sing with her at the Grand Ole Opry," she writes.

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The two became “as close as sisters,” and for that Spacek is grateful.

“Everybody in Nashville and the country music world loved her so much that they welcomed me and the movie with open arms. She was the reason we were treated so royally. She made it happen.”

For her efforts, Spacek was nominated for, and won, the Academy award in 1980.

After losing her mother to cancer and becoming pregnant, Spacek and Fisk decided to leave the rat race in Los Angeles. They had purchased a farm near Charlottesville, Va., several years before Schuyler was born.

“In the fall of 1982 Jack put the house up for sale and we started packing,” she writes.



She's been part of the Virginia countryside since. Sure, she has to leave the farm to work, to promote movies and her book, but she always returns home.

During filming, a young actress asked her what she wanted to do.

“I thought for a moment and smiled. 'I just want to go home,' I said. I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do or any place I wanted to be more than home.”

Editor's note: Sissy and I shared a guitar teacher, who lived near my parents in Winnsboro. I think I was in the 9th grade and she was a junior. Her lesson was right after mine on Tuesday afternoons. She had already graduated to a 12-string and was popular at all the local talent

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shows. She had long, straight "Mary Travers [of Peter, Paul and Mary] hair" and she wore mini-skirts. After her brother, Robbie, died and she spent the summer in New York, she came home with a bi-level cut, like Diana Ross. It was a really bold move, but Sissy made it work. She and I were twirlers in the marching band for rival football teams, so we spent time together on the field. While no one could have known that she would win an Oscar, there was no doubt she was going to be a success. She had star quality even then.

It's no surprise that she has written a book that overflows with warmth, humor and a strong sense of self-awareness.

Click [here](#) to see Spacek and Lynn singing "You Ain't Woman Enough" at the Grand Ole' Opry.