

Bob Wills, Bill Monroe, and Bobo Driver

The 1930's were a nice time for traditional country, or "hillbilly" music. New country and western sounds were being created across America, from singing cowboys like Gene Autry to Texas Swing from Bob Wills. The Depression sent records sales plummeting, but country and western music held its own via dozens of radio "barn dances".

In 1933, the radio is where you would hear the new band Bob Wills and His Playboys (later renamed the Texas Playboys). Wills' style of danceable upbeat fiddle and guitar tunes made him the "King of Western Swing" with songs like "San Antonio Rose" and "Smoke on the Water". In 1935, Arkansas-born Patsy Montana had the first million-selling country female hit, "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart". She sang through the 1930's on the nationally syndicated radio show *WLS Barn Dance*.

Like teenagers today, trying to emulate rock stars, there were young musicians in the 1930's trying to be like Bob Wills and Bill Monroe. One was Smithville's **James G. "Bobo" Driver**. **Bobo**, as everyone knew him, who loved blue grass, country and gospel music. In 1935, the 19-year-old Driver was a member of the Civilian Conversation Corp (CCC) in Virginia where he formed a band made up of boys from Tennessee. The band, Jimmie Driver and His Tennessee Playboys, won first place in a talent contest in Petersburg, Virginia.

Soon, young Driver and his band had their own barn dance program on Petersburg radio station WPHR. They played a variety of music, including jazz, but country and bluegrass were their favorites. The listeners felt that way also. They sent fan letters from all over Virginia and Maryland requesting the boys play country and blue grass songs. The Tennessee Playboys made many public appearances in Virginia, but when their CCC service came to an end, so did the band.



In 1935, James G. “Bobo” Driver’s band, Jimmie Driver and His Tennessee Playboys, had their own “barn dance” radio show on WPHR in Petersburg, Virginia.

Bobo came back to Smithville and put together a new band that played all over the South, including the Grand Ole Opry in the 1940’s. One long-time member of that band was Ira Louvin, who, with his brother Charlie, went on to Opry fame as “The Louvin Brothers”



Bobo Driver (kneeling) and His Tennessee Playboys in 1946 at Colvert's Lake, east of Smithville. Left to right: Mallow Herndon (Bass fiddle), Ira Louvin (mandolin), Willie Master (Lead guitar) Buel Wright (lead fiddle), Garland Phillips (Second fiddle), James G. "Bobo" (rhythm guitar).

In the 1950's, Bobo formed the Driver Family Band made up of wife, Nell and sons, Jim, Donnie, Randy, Mickey, Gary and Terry. They played all over Tennessee and appeared on WSM-TV's Junior Grand Ole Opry.



James G. "Bobo" Driver Family Band –July 4, 1953 DeKalb County Courthouse, Smithville, TN.

Left to right: Mickey (Banjo ukulele), Donnie (Fiddle), Daddy Bo (rhythm guitar), Jim (Accordion), Gary (toy guitar) and Randy (steel guitar). In the audience was Nell Driver (Mom) and the newest Driver, six-month old Terry.

In 1972, Bobo helped Berry Williams and Congressman Joe L. Evins put together the first Smithville Jamboree. To help get the Jamboree started, Bobo sent out hundreds of letters to country music performers and supporters whom he had met during his musical career. He asked them to perform and be recognized for carrying on traditional country music. He particularly wanted young performers to be rewarded for their talent and efforts.

Bobo helped with the Jamboree for almost 20 years as the Registrar. He was particularly interested in recognizing the talent and efforts of young performers of traditional country and bluegrass music. The Jamboree's National Championship Country Musician Beginners Award is named in his honor. In 1993, the Jamboree was dedicated to Mr. Driver. The Board of Directors also named the James G.(Bobo) Driver memorial trophy to be presented to the winner of the National Champion of Country Musician Beginners which continues today.