

- Ricky Stilley/Times-Georgian  
Myra Lewis Williams signs a copy of her book, "The Spark That Survived," for Bill Erickson during Friday's Kiwanis Club meeting in Carrollton.

## A teen wife's story that would shake and rattle rock and roll

- Arthia Nixon/Times-Georgian
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"Let me tell y'all how I got married to Jerry Lee Lewis when I was 13 and created one of the biggest scandals in rock and roll," said Myra Lewis Williams, instantly captivating her audience of Carrollton Kiwanians Friday at the Sunset Hills Country Club.

It was difficult to believe that the Duluth Realtor who rolled into Carrollton in an SUV that seemingly swallowed her petite 5-foot frame was a woman with a juicy past — a past that included a family that accepted teen marriages among relatives, an unspoken rivalry with Elvis and Priscilla Presley, and a story that rocked rock and roll and the entire world.

Myra Lewis Williams, who could easily appear to be the sweetest of grandmothers, sipped on her sweet tea as she told the infamous story that shook nerves, rattled brains and made today's social media and reality stars seem dull by comparison. She was in Carrollton on Friday to debut her new book "The Spark That Survived," which was released in February. She said the book is a lot more of her story and less of Jerry Lee's.

Myra's book gives details into her confusing family tree. Her father, her ex-husband Jerry Lee Lewis, and televangelist Jimmy Swaggart are first cousins. Her younger brother's ex-wife is Jerry Lee's current wife, who has Myra's daughter Phoebe, who is facing the fact that her aunt is now her stepmother. She even goes into depth about the loss of their oldest child Stevie who drowned on Easter Sunday when he was a toddler.

On Friday, she spoke of the first time she met Jerry Lee, how she looked up from her homework when her father J.W. Brown — his first cousin and bass player — brought him home to live with them.

Sometime later, she was the one in the family to hear his first song play on air and described the look of shock Jerry Lee had on his face listening to his voice on the radio.

Myra went into details of her "surprise wedding." She recalled coming off the school bus as a 13-year-old eighth grade student and eating dinner with her family. When 22-year-old Jerry Lee asked her to go to a movie, her father consented and they drove to a chapel where they presented a marriage license she says was obtained with deception.

"Jerry Lee had gone home to Louisiana and had gotten one of his friends to pose as me and they got the license," she said. "He came back and called me over to his black and white Ford and showed me, and I said 'I thought we had to stand there and say something,' because I thought the document meant we were already married. I said, 'Jerry Lee, you are nuts, I'm just 13 years old!' and I got out that car. Then he said 'Oh no, you're a woman. I can look at you and tell you're a woman.' And I can't remember much of my wedding ceremony. It was just a blur."

Myra does recall two elderly women throwing rice and wanting to decorate their car. She begged them not to, but when they returned from the ceremony, which Myra attended in the same dress she wore to school that day, they found a car decked out with cans and other wedding items.

"The thing is, it wasn't our car," laughed Myra. "It was the pastor's car!"

In her book, Myra talks about her fascination with the "glamorous" Priscilla Presley, who went to the same hair salon as Myra. She said that she was not allowed to get as glammed up as Priscilla, and often wondered if within the walls of Graceland Priscilla encountered the same marital issues, such as having to do all the chores and banking the way Jerry made her. She said they had no hope of being friends because her husband would not have allowed it.

"It was always Jerry or Elvis, Jerry or Elvis," she told the Kiwanians. "They were always saying which one of them would be the real king. Even though folks here called Elvis the King, he and Jerry were right there with each other. Jerry going to England ... that would have definitely established him more ahead of Elvis and that was his big opportunity to sort of take over."

The 1958 England trip, she said, did not have to turn out the way it did and "ruin all our lives." When Jerry Lee learned he was going there, he said that he would not travel unless Myra went, despite the protests from his management team.

Upon landing at the airport in London, Myra was approached by a single reporter who "strayed from the pack" and asked who she was. She responded by saying she was Jerry Lee's wife, adding that she was 15, not 13. Within a day, Jerry Lee and Myra made international headlines with Jerry Lee being called a "cradle robber," toting around his "child bride."

In the wake of the controversy, Jerry Lee's music was immediately blacklisted and he went from making \$10,000 a performance to getting by on \$200-a-night gigs. The Dick Clark show and others cancelled his appearances and he was "thrown out of England" with lawmakers calling for his removal for being a moral stain on society.

"Since I was a kid and I was 13, nobody talked to me and told me things," said Myra. "And when we arrived in London all they would have had to tell me was to say, 'That's my mother, that's my daddy, this is my little brother Rusty.' If they did that and told me what to say when we got over there, there never would have been a scandal and it never would have happened, but they looked at me as a kid."

After autographing a few books, Myra spoke with the Times-Georgian, revealing details not shared in her book or during her presentation. At one point, she wiped away tears when asked how a 13-year-old child bride could have the courage to divorce her husband at age 26, during an era when divorces were unheard of.

"I didn't have a choice," she said, taking a deep breath. "I had not thought of suicide but I was about ready for it. I had talked to someone who was like a preacher and he sent me to this lady who was supposed to tell me a message from God and I called her and I told her my name and she started crying. She said that she had prayed for me and she said that I had been told by God to leave but I won't go. And she said, 'You can go. God has got this,' and that's what gave me the strength that sent me on the right path. It took me at least seven years to be OK again. It was a long time but I landed

on my feet and nobody knew I wasn't OK because I could look OK. But I cried myself to sleep for the first five years after I left."

Myra gave birth to both of her children before she turned 16. She provided a warning to today's teen girls who are eager to win the attention of their favorite celebrity and think it's a life of luxury, fame and fortune.

"They don't have a clue what they're getting into," she said, shaking her head. "The roadies and groupies, they don't have a clue. And they are looking at the stars so far out there. They have no idea how bad it can get. They have no idea. They are just hanging on to it and they are just a groupie and it's sad because it can be bad. It can be really bad. Thank goodness I had my parents."

The 1989 film "Great Balls of Fire," the title of one of Jerry Lee's most popular songs, was based on the book she wrote. She said the publishers told her people wanted to hear about Jerry Lee Lewis more than they wanted to hear about her. She said there were things the film got wrong, and that she was hurt that it made her hardworking father seem to have less than he accomplished.

"They bought the rights from me to make the movie and when they buy those rights, they do what they want to do," she said. "They paid me \$100,000 and they had the right to use any information in that book or use none of it. It turned out to be a funny, little happy musical but it is so farfetched. They had that Dennis Quaid playing Jerry like the village idiot and the reason he did that is because Jerry Lee was right there, being very intimidating toward him and telling him 'You better play me right!' Winona (Rider, who played the role of Myra) did a good job and she was in earnest doing what she did playing me. Several times she said, 'Myra, how could you go from being extremely happy to being extremely sad just like that?' and I told her I had to and then some of it was actually spaced over a period of time."

Today, Jerry Lee is a an 80-year-old who continues to perform now and again. Myra said she has been amicable with him over the years for their sake of their daughter, who was about 5 at the time they divorced.

Myra said that she is now very happy. She's married to metro Atlanta Realtor Richard Williams and they have two successful firms. She still maintains a very close relationship with her daughter, her brother and her parents, who are now 87 years old.

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