



“**T**here’s no other taste in the world quite like a fried dill pickle,” Allen Ginsberg once remarked.

This wasn’t a line from one of his Beat Generation poems. The Big Daddy of Howl was merely trying to pass along a little praise to the handful of half-listening regulars at the Loner Drive-In Cafe in Atkins where he had stopped off as he was passing through Arkansas.

Ginsberg might have launched into a hip little dithyramb then and there if the locals had paid him more mind. But the Loner has drawn so many notable people over the years with its fried dill pickles that Ginsberg didn’t make much of an impression. No more than if he’d been Winthrop Rockefeller or Buckminster Fuller or Norman Mailer. If he’d had Johnny Cash or Dolly Parton with him, the story might have been different, but then again maybe not.

Atkins, a typical old wood-frame and native stone Pope County hill town snuggled up beneath Crow Mountain, with the Arkansas River sluicing along just a good turnip’s toss from everybody’s front porch, takes its celebrities in stride. It used to be a baseball hub, for one thing. It sent homegrown Ellis Kinder to the big leagues for a distinguished career, and even that


THE FACES OF NORRIS CHURCH MAILER



MERRITT
HOTEL
AND
BATHS

BUCK
AU

A typical painting shows "Arkansawyers doin' their thang."



There's good fun in her pictures . . .

dizzy-brained Dean boy spent some scalding summers days flanging the pill around Atkins' ball yard. Too, the wonderful old movie actor Arthur Hunnicutt (Davy Crockett and Dan'l Boone) drawled and stalked through his youth down yonder in the riverbottoms. And anyway, Atkins figures that anyone in these United States who loves the crunch of a good gherkin already knows about the Pickle Capital of the Western World.

The town may not have a country club or a ritzy residential subdivision or a labyrinthine shopping mall. Folks around here don't seem to need such fretwork. What Atkins does have, in some abundance, are strong good-looking hobnailed-intelligent people. It's a tribal town and it takes care of its own, reserving the right to claim or disdain its children's folly and fame.

Nowadays Atkins is getting some more attention because it's the hometown of a famous daughter. Her name used to be Barbara Davis back when she was growing up tall as an Ozark sycamore. She was James Davis' girl, the granddaughter of the locally legendary "Jeems" Davis. Her name got changed somehow to "Norris Church" when she went up East eight years ago to model for magazines and appear in picture shows and be on TV. And she married that New York writer feller, Norman Mailer.

Barbara's success has come as no surprise to the homefolks. She could always dazzle the professional picture takers, even when she was just a child (she won the title "Little Miss Little Rock" and got a little taste of early fame). She has one of those heart-shaped faces that can just melt you. She's nearly six feet tall, wispy as a

willow now, and her hair is the color of those gorgeous sunsets you see from atop Mount Nebo.

But Barbara has always had something more than just good looks. She's got a special artistic talent and she hasn't let the big time corrupt it. Living in New York, being the wife of a famous author, pursuing an acting career, taking care of a houseful of kids — all that can eat up a body's time, but Barbara keeps up her painting, keeps it up with daily exuberance, with an inbred determination to become a first-rate artist.

Acting is Barbara's fun and it's something she'd like to do a lot more of. She's been in some movies, a scene here and a few good lines there. She did a cameo in *Ragtime* and she played well with the outstanding actor Tommy Lee Jones in one of the key scenes of *The Executioner's Song*. She's visible in this year's *Exposed*, though most of her good scene got cropped.

Admittedly Barbara got a late start in acting, having had no experience even on the college stage. But she's working hard at it, studying and taking lessons, improving. And it shows. She's auditioned and won parts in some TV soaps, most notably *All My Children*, the lively mess that is one of daytime television's most infectious melodramas. She's also performed for three years with an off-Broadway repertory company, down in the Village, and she's even written a few pieces for New York magazines, though she says she doesn't aspire to be a writer.

It's true that being married to Mailer has

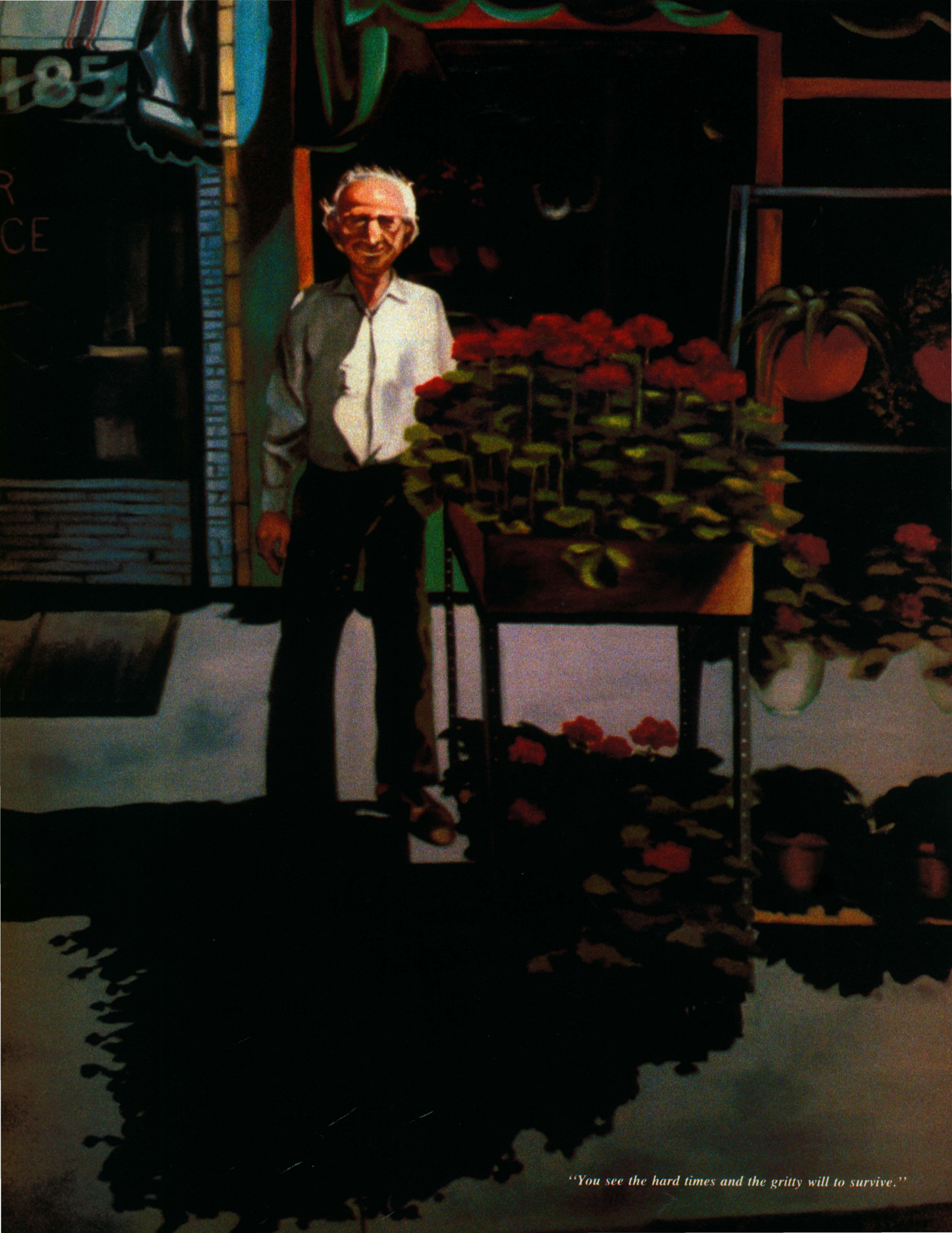
given her media exposure, even opened a door or two. It's also true that "knowing" someone is a slang phrase and can work as much against a performer as for. "Everybody knows somebody," Barbara says of show business, "everybody is related. Sure, doors sometimes get opened. Sometimes. But you have to walk through yourself."

Acting takes resilience, like painting, and maybe that's the appeal Barbara sees in it. One of these days soon that special part is going to come along and single her out, and when it does, she's going to be ready for it. Meantime she works and studies and paints. She's getting there as an artist. Back in the late Sixties when she first enrolled at Arkansas Tech at Russellville she was already showing some keen artistic insights and skill. She had a real flair for color and shape which caught the eye of her art teacher, Helen Terry Marshall. Helen took Barbara under her wing, abrasively and lovingly, as Helen was wont to do.

"Barbara was special," Helen recalls. "She had all the talent in the world."

And not much background or discipline. If you had been on the scene those days you couldn't have missed that long-stemmed, fire-bodied beauty from Atkins. You would have pegged her for a jockfly or baton twirler or beauty queen, anything but an artist, because she had such a presence, a buoyancy.

"She had hair like spun gold and a face like Audrey Hepburn's," Francis Gwaltney, her English professor, used to say. Francis used to tell her that she'd never become a great artist until she rid herself of her sweet, sensual laziness.



"You see the hard times and the gritty will to survive."

You've seen their faces . . . a pure mystery . . .

But sometimes what passes for lazy in those smoky-eyed Southern girls is actually guileless wonder. "I was self-confident but I didn't know much except Atkins, Arkansas. I did want to draw. I'd been doing it all my life, I guess. In those days I didn't think much past Russellville and Arkansas Tech. My greatest dream was to become an art teacher at Tech."

Maybe in some ways a girl like Barbara and a college like Tech were meant for each other. She needed to learn just about all there was to know, without being swallowed up — and Tech was, despite its name and cow-college image, a fairly lively little liberal arts nook. At Tech, too, Barbara came under the sway of Francis Gwaltney, an old World War II buddy of Norman Mailer's. It was through Francis that Barbara met the man who would change her life.

The Halloween years of the late Sixties and early Seventies presented some private pitfalls. Barbara had married Larry Norris, a hometown Atkins boy, and was trying to finish up her degree while she was pregnant and her husband was away in the service. Before she knew it, she was out of college, divorced, and looking for a way to support herself and a new baby. She took some teaching jobs in the area and eventually became the art teacher at Russellville High School. Students at Russellville said that Barbara was one of the best teachers the school ever had. "She had a way with the kids," says Jeannie Williams of Dover, one of Barbara's brighter students. "She made art and school fun, not a drill. We couldn't wait to

get to her class."

Barbara first met Mailer in the spring of 1975. He had come to Russellville to renew his friendship with Gwaltney — and Barbara got herself invited to a little party being given in Mailer's honor at the home of Van Tyson, professor of journalism at Tech. She had merely wanted to meet the famous writer and see what he was like.

"There was an attraction between them immediately," Tyson recalls, "especially on Norman's part. The first minute she walked in, you could see the sparks."

The attraction turned out to be the genuine article. A courtship followed, a kind of old-fashioned wooing. Mailer came back to Arkansas, got to know the Atkins way of life, went to church with Barbara and her folks, did the things a man will do when he finds the woman he wants to marry and take care of and make a solid life with, Southern style. It all worked out. Barbara had been planning to leave her teaching job. She wanted to go to a good art school and develop her talent. She had applied to art conservatories in Rhode Island and Boston, but instead she found herself bound for New York with Mailer. She started fitting in right away.

It's not surprising that she did fit in so well, Southern women being so amazingly adaptable. She was not only physically striking, she was also good company, and it didn't matter if she were in the presence of international jet-setters or jive-talking street people. She was witty and full of life. Most of all, she was true to herself and her roots.

"When I first met Norman I'd never read any of his books," Barbara says with a little laugh. "That's one of the things he

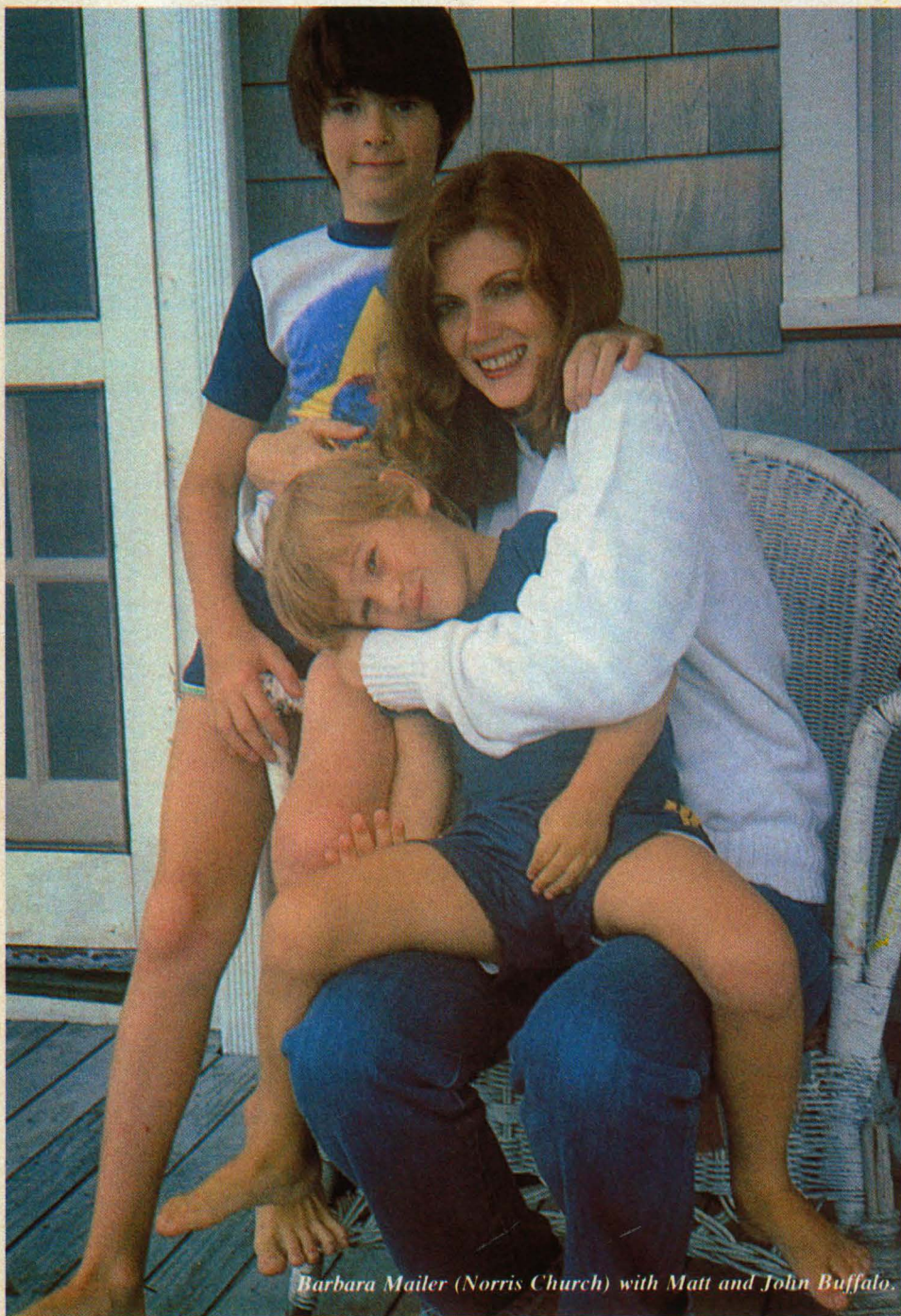
really liked about me. I don't think I've changed much, except for the better. I have read all Norman's books, though. Oh, the honeymoon's still going on. Norman and I are a lot alike. We even have the same birthday."

She admits that New York City awed her at first and there was a period of wide-eyed wonder, but she wanted to try to make her own way, on her own terms, and Norman was wise enough to let her. Now she's very much at home there, every bit as much as other Arkansawyers such as Mary Steenburgen and Helen Gurley Brown, or Albert Mills, the fashion designer, and Calvin Skaggs, the stage and television producer, to name a few.

But most importantly, Barbara is making good headway with her painting. She's had one-woman shows in Manhattan's Soho District and up at the Cape and in Raleigh, North Carolina. Being the wife of America's best-known author probably works as an obstacle to her endeavors as an artist and gives the critics fresh fuel. But *Time* magazine has called her "an artist in her own right." And coming from *Time*, that amounts to a rave. A *Time* art critic allows that her oils "are better than many a skeptic would expect," and goes on to describe her appealing method of depicting downhome folks sitting on front stoops or ambling along Main Street.

Barbara does admit that she uses family and friends, even herself, as models. Look at her canvases and you may catch a glimpse of someone you know. Barbara says she doesn't like to be kind to people in her paintings, but neither is she cruel, for something different is going on in the transition from life to art.

Lots of love in the Mailer household. . .



Barbara Mailer (Norris Church) with Matt and John Buffalo.

It's right nice of the New York critics to find favor with her pictures, but it's funny to think of those big-city art experts passing judgment on Arkansawyers doing their thang. Somehow the point gets lost — like the way the scholars have chewed old Bill Faulkner to death. But shoot, you have to like the attention her art is getting, even if they're getting her wrong.

There's just some sheer delight and good fun in her pictures. Plus precise detail-work — with faces and necks, hands and knees. All given a kind of cycloramic effect, with backgrounds of real-life objects surrounding and almost enclosing her people. She uses big, big canvases to show little people up close. A buffet-spread of Middle America. She paints people as spectators, and we *are* a nation of spectators. The very best thing about her pictures is that she makes you want to know just what it is those folks are seeing.

Some of her early studies are on display as drawings in Gwaltney's novel, *Idols and Axle Grease*, maybe Francis' best work, certainly his sweetest. The book was published in 1974 and Barbara did the drawings. She helped to capture the spirit and character of Charleston, Francis' "Our Town, America." In her pictures you see the hard times and the gritty will to survive. Though her art has taken on fuller dimension since then, the style and technique remain there in the faces of Windy Spears and Clodd McCall and Tangle Eyes.

An official homecoming is being planned for Barbara. An exhibition of her work is set for October 15 in Little Rock at the James Anderson Gallery. Barbara will be there in person for the event and she says she's looking forward to it with as much enthusiasm as she would have for a show at the Guggenheim. Well, maybe not quite that much, but the show ought to be a good and lively affair. Norman will be there too, as a spectator, but it's going to be all Barbara's.

This year has been a busy one for the Mailers. Norman's got a big new novel out and Barbara's been interviewed on television and featured in several magazines. You would suppose they lead a pretty glittering, rushlight life, and you'd be supposing correctly. They do some mixing and socializing, Barbara says, but not as much as people might think. Being the American protean writer, as *Time* calls him, Mailer

sets an arduous pace for himself, writing and speaking and meeting his deadlines. Barbara herself holds to a rigid schedule in her own studio.

The Mailers live in Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, in the same neighborhood where Norman grew up. His two teenaged sons, Michael, nineteen, and Stephen, seventeen, live with them (though Michael is now away in school), together with Norman's daughter, Betsy, twenty-three, a New York school teacher, and Barbara's older son, Matthew, eleven, and their son, John Buffalo, now five. Norman's mother has an apartment just two blocks away, so it's one big happy family. They have a direct view of the harbor and the Statue of Liberty, and anytime they want they can look out on the spans and parapets of the magnificent Brooklyn Bridge.

"We're both on the go a lot," Barbara says. "But my idea of a wonderful evening is to sit back with a good book and listen to some country music."

When all the Mailers are together Barbara sometimes cooks up an Atkins-type meal — cornbread and pinto beans and pork chops. "They all just eat it up, and Norman likes it too," she says. "I'm not that good a cook — shoot, I'm a terrible cook. But I grew up fixing that kind of food, it's a way of life. Old habits." Southern women with fat, contented husbands are always telling you they're terrible cooks.

As you talk more with Barbara you come to know that a lot of love is going on in the Mailer household. The older Mailer boys are keen-witted and inquisitive. If you saw them on the television special with Norman a while back, you probably detected all this. The interviewer began directing questions their way and they got animated, all carried away, so much so that Norman found himself in the unlikely role of referee. It was a nice scene.

The younger boys, Matt and John B., complement each other and give the impression that they're going to be close as the years go on. They're not exactly Opies of Mayberry but they are as bright-faced and American as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Boys who could grow up to be forest rangers or United States senators from Brooklyn, New York, or Atkins, Arkansas.

"Matthew is the artist of the family," says Barbara. "He's already doing nice things. John Buffalo's something else. He wants to be president of the United

States."

John Buffalo Mailer, president of America in the year 2022. Wouldn't be a bit surprising. Don't bet against it. His daddy has already written some dandy campaign speeches.

Back in March, Barbara and Norman came home to Arkansas, Barbara to visit her folks and old friends, Norman to speak at a creative writing conference at Arkansas Tech. From all appearances they had a great time. But you'd expect them to, since they're no strangers to the home ground. Norman's been coming to Arkansas off and on since 1948. Barbara gets home once or twice a year and Norman comes with her when his schedule allows.

"It's home to me too," Norman says. "After all, some of my closest relatives live here."

At Tech, Mailer spoke before a large gathering of high school students and teachers. He told the youngsters what they needed to hear about writing — and he did it in a straightforward, sincere way with no frills or antics. A bunch of TV and newspaper people packed into the conference, too, maybe expecting a Mailer show. If they came for that they're still waiting.

During an evening session he read from his new novel, *Ancient Evenings*, talked about poetry (he read some examples of what he called bad and pretty good poems which turned out to be his — they were funny and funky), answered some questions from the audience (he recalled meeting Dale Bumpers in Charleston several years before Dale ran for office — he had been greatly impressed with Dale then and spoke of him now as possibly the best man the Democrats could put up for the presidency). And at the end he spoke of Francis Gwaltney and shared several private anecdotes about the late Arkansas writer.

Anyone who ever knew Francis has at least half a dozen crazy stories to tell about him, but Mailer's are probably the best. The two had met during World War II in the Pacific, both were raw recruits and just about as opposite as orchids and bitterweeds.

"The first time Francis laid eyes on me he accused me of trying to steal his duffel bag," Norman said. Soon afterward they became close friends, sharing foxholes and fear. Norman told the story of the time Francis took it upon himself, in his typical-

ly gruff and hairy way, to defend Mailer's forebears. Some guys in their platoon were mouthing off about "Jews" and Francis, who had probably never seen a Jew before except in the Charleston picture show where he ran the projector, spoke right up. "Hey, you can't say that stuff around here," Francis growled. "I'm a Jew too."

"Aw, Gwaltney, you ain't no goddamn Jew," replied the bigot.

"Yes I am too a goddamn Jew!"

Francis got the notion to become a writer, Mailer said, when he found out that *The Naked and the Dead* was going to be published. "Hay'ul, Norman," Francis

said, "if you can publish a novel, I know I can."

People keep Mailer busy wherever he goes. No American writer since Hemingway has received as much public attention. At Tech there were interviews, luncheons, picture sessions, more interviews, even an Arkansas cocktail party. Norman handled it all with ease, like a downhome good ol' boy. Or a crafty boxer tilting his head back, a twinkle to the eye.

At Tech, Mailer made an extremely nice gesture. He donated his sizable speaking fee to Tech for the creation of a Francis Gwaltney memorial and scholarship fund.

Such funds sometimes get lost in academic red tape, but this one's going to be administered by Francis' widow, Ecey, an English faculty member at Tech and a most capable lady. The hope is that those who knew Francis, friends and former students, will follow Norman's lead to help build the fund into something beneficial for a few Arkansas kids in the future. Francis wouldn't have minded that at all.

While she was home Barbara talked about home and her kids. "I'd like them to get out of the city more," she said, "to spend more time back home so they'll not grow up thinking the whole world's just one big city."

She and Norman have given serious thought to getting a place here in Arkansas, somewhere around Russellville, maybe on Lake Dardanelle. They've even looked at a few houses. "We'd like to get back home more, maybe summers. Live by the lake, take long walks, have picnics on Nebo, let the boys get summer jobs and work in the sun." She has a soft dreamy look on her face as she speaks. An Emmylou Harris song is playing in the background and Barbara pauses a moment to listen before going on to talk more about her kids like a proud mama. Way in the back of your mind you can almost hear Francis talking and laughing and hooting around. You give in to the sensation a minute and think about this pretty girl whose life was so strongly touched by "Fig" Gwaltney. She wouldn't be where she is in the world without *him*, you think. Mailer wouldn't be feeling these strong native ties without him. You yourself might never have done anything with your writing without him.

You have to stop thinking that way because it is always wrongheaded. She is a strong woman and very talented and would have made her way, no matter what. We all do what we have to do. So you let it go and it fades like the sadful Emmylou song. But after all the rouse and flurry of the Mailers' visit is over you still can't quite get the odd little ringing out of your head, and you drive down to Atkins to see what's stirring. Hardly anything is ever stirring in Atkins. You turn off the Interstate and drive past the Loner, the ball park, the sleepy old oak-hooded streets. Right down there on St. Mary is where Barbara's folks live. Her dad had a mean tussle with illness a couple years ago but he's mended

up now and back on his job.

You swing up onto Main Street and park in front of the barbershop. A lot of the storefronts are vacant, in bad repair, and some buildings have been torn out, making Main look like a snaggle-tooth old grandmaw. The barbershop's open, though, and a fellow's getting his ears lowered. You walk down to the filling station and get a Dr. Pepper. There's a driftiness all along the street that makes you fear the town may dry up and blow away. The ringing comes up in your head again and you hear that voice, grating like Old Gant's in *Look Homeward, Angel*, vehemently but illogically cussing you out one more time.

If you don't quit smoking those damn cigarettes you're going to die.

"Ah, Fig, I know it," you say out loud, kind of stupidly.

And if you don't start working harder you're never going to get anything done.

"I know it, I'm trying."

Not hard enough! Writing is serious bidness!

"Hey, Fig, did you know your old buddy was here?"

You think I don't know that?

"Yes, I guess you did. Well, what do you think of the girl? She's doing fine, don't you think?" The ringing softens up.

Humph. She'd do better if she'd stay home and work instead of running all over the world the way she and Norman are doing. It's a waste of time.

"Aw, Fig, ease up a little. What are you doing here, anyway?"

Checking up. It's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it.

The ringing starts to vapor off as a four-wheel-drive peels through town and up over the railroad tracks. It's time to go on home but you keep holding back. Something is tugging at you, working like a screw turning the wrong way in the piece of writing you're trying to do. All along you have thought that your subject was this fine hometown girl who's gone out into the world and made something of herself because she has the ability and the right. Now you're thinking that it's really about small towns and the South and famous writers coming home. You give a big heave of breath. It's all those things and it's none of them.

A couple of Atkins women are coming along the walk. You smile and nod as they pass and they nod back, a little curious because they know you are a stranger. But

with those nice little nods they have welcomed you to their corner of the world. You've seen their faces before but you can't figure where — until you remember those pictures, her pictures, those spectator faces seeing something strange and wonderful.

And now you know that the thing you've been after all the while is right there in those faces. It's something that can be found in Brooklyn faces or Chicago faces or Atkins faces. Just what are they seeing? It's a pure mystery, something worthy of devoting the next few hundreds or thousands of pictures to.

The ringing tries to start up in your head again but now you won't let it. And you know it's pretty silly to have been thinking about mysteries or worrying about Atkins. The town's not going to dry up and die, for Atkins is what it's always wanted to be — just Atkins. The day is too easy, too calm and solid for such foolishness. There's always good bream fishing out at Lake Atkins, there'll be more Fourth of July picnics and ball games and dinners on the ground, lots of fried chicken and porken-beans, and maybe even ol' Fig will come down from Charleston, lugging one of his precious cases of puppy-peckers. 