GREENWOOD - In about 1935, Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson mounted a stool at Memphis's Hooks Brothers Photography studio, picked up his Gibson L-1 guitar, tipped his fedora and gazed into a camera lens.

Nearly four decades later, Mr. Johnson's half-sister dug the resulting photo out of a cedar chest to show to a dogged blues historian who had tracked her down. The trunk she opened that afternoon in 1973 has since turned into a Pandora's box.

That now-famous photograph and another one that was buried in the chest have become the subjects of a convoluted legal tug of war between the blues sleuth and relatives of the legendary musician, who died penniless and without a will in 1938. At stake: Who is the rightful owner of the iconic images, the only known photographs of the legendary musician, and who holds their lucrative copyrights?

The dispute is the final chapter in an epic legal struggle, now entering its 15th year, over Mr. Johnson's legacy. Earlier, a dramatic trial elevated a sole heir from a handful of contenders, entitling a once-poor truck driver to share in the lucrative rights to Mr. Johnson's music. Now the dispute over the photos is proving just as tangled, thrusting the blues historian and his business dealings into the spotlight.

"This has been an odyssey every bit as turbulent as the life of Robert Johnson himself," says Connecticut lawyer Stephen Nevas, who represents two family members.

To understand the spell that Robert Johnson casts over devotees of American music, just travel here to the Mississippi Delta, a fertile expanse of northwestern Mississippi that spawned a strain of blues that became a foundation for rock 'n' roll.

Dedicated fans have placed gravestones for Mr. Johnson in three separate rural cemeteries outside Greenwood, after puzzling over the sketchy tale of his burial in an unmarked grave. He had been poisoned, the story goes, at the age of 27 by a jealous juke-joint owner whose wife caught the singer's eye. On a recent winter afternoon, guitar picks, cigarettes and coins lay scattered around all three gravesites.

For decades after Mr. Johnson's death, little was publicly known about him beyond the 29 haunting country-blues songs he recorded in Texas in 1936 and 1937, including "Love in Vain" and "Hell Hound on My Trail." When CBS Records' Columbia label released a batch of them on a 1961 LP, the company apparently assumed he had left behind no likenesses of himself, and no heirs. The album was illustrated with a drawing.

Blues historian Stephen LaVere, now 61 years old, first learned about Mr. Johnson's half-sister, Carrie Thompson, as he searched for leads in Mississippi in 1973. When he reached Ms. Thompson by phone at her home in Churchton, Md., he asked whether she had any photos.

"It's funny you should ask," he recalls her saying. "I had lost it for a long time, but I found it in a Bible." An excited Mr. LaVere raced to Maryland.

When she handed him the Hooks Brothers photo, he thought "album cover." With Ms. Thompson's permission, he took the photo to a professional photographer, who produced a negative for him.

As Mr. LaVere and Ms. Thompson rummaged through the trunk during a later visit, Mr. LaVere came upon a scrap of paper, face down. Turning it over, he saw a small photo of a man staring intently, a cigarette dangling from his lips, guitar in hand. "Oh, that's little Robert," Ms. Thompson told him. Mr. LaVere copied that one, too.

What Mr. LaVere did next has made him a controversial figure in the blues world. He persuaded the elderly woman to assign him
the rights to the photos and other memorabilia. Assuming her to be Mr. Johnson's only living heir, he also persuaded her to transfer her rights to Mr. Johnson's songs and recordings, which until then had been treated as in the public domain. In exchange, he promised her 50 percent of any royalties the material produced. He told her he would commercially promote Mr. Johnson's music.

But Mr. LaVere, it turned out, wasn't the first outsider to lay eyes on a Johnson photo. After Mr. LaVere struck a deal with CBS Records to release a new Robert Johnson collection, another sleuth, cultural historian Mack McCormick, insisted to CBS that he had secured rights to biographical information about Mr. Johnson during an earlier visit with Ms. Thompson. Mr. McCormick came away from his visit with a photo of Mr. Johnson and his nephew, a sailor. Mr. McCormick declines today to comment on where that picture is. (Although he does not have a copy, Mr. LaVere claims rights to that photo as well.)

Wary of legal problems, CBS put the record on ice, where it stayed for 15 years. Finally, in 1990, without the cooperation of Mr. McCormick, CBS Records released a boxed set of Mr. Johnson's recordings, with the Hooks Brothers portrait on the cover. It sold more than a million copies.

As the royalties rolled in, the trouble began. By then, Ms. Thompson had died, leaving her estate to her half-sister, Annye Anderson, a retired schoolteacher who is now 78, and Ms. Thompson's grandson, Robert Harris, a Chicago landscaper, now in his forties. Ms. Anderson opened court proceedings to establish her claim on Mr. Johnson's estate.

That is when gravel-truck driver Claud Johnson, now 73, materialized with a birth certificate listing as his father "R.L. Johnson, laborer." His claim on the estate was supported by a sworn statement from an elderly woman who claimed to have witnessed sexual relations between Claud's mother and the itinerant musician in the woods along a country road nine months before Claud's birth. A 1998 ruling named Claud Johnson sole heir, entitling him to $1.3 million in royalties that had accumulated in the estate, plus future royalties. Ms. Anderson got nothing, and her appeal was unsuccessful.

The ruling, which entitled Claud Johnson to split proceeds from his father's music with Mr. LaVere, threw ownership of the photos and their copyrights into limbo. Did the photos belong to Claud or to Ms. Anderson and Mr. Harris? And what about the copyrights, which Mr. LaVere said he had secured following his 1974 agreement with Ms. Thompson? Under his deal with CBS, those copyrights were yielding royalties of their own, although it remains unclear what portion of several million dollars of royalties is attributable to the photos.

"We can only guess what has been earned," said Mr. Nevas, the lawyer for Ms. Anderson. "It is certainly in the six figures and probably in the seven," a range Mr. LaVere says he wouldn't dispute. Ms. Anderson and Mr. Harris, their lawyer claims, haven't seen a penny.

Ms. Anderson and Mr. Harris filed suit in 2000 against Mr. LaVere, Claud Johnson and Sony Corp.'s music division, which had purchased CBS Records. The photographs were family mementos, they argued, not the property of the estate. Moreover, they claimed, in 1980 Ms. Anderson's half-sister Carrie had rescinded the agreement under which Mr. LaVere had obtained the rights. Mr. LaVere refused to relinquish the rights, the lawsuit said. After several years of legal maneuvering between the parties, the Mississippi Supreme Court last December ordered the dispute to trial.

The case promises to bring questions about the images to a boil. Mr. LaVere says the miniature photo he found in the trunk is a photo-booth portrait. Ms. Anderson says her sister took it herself with a Kodak, which, if true, could make it easier for her to argue that it doesn't belong to the Johnson estate.

Nonsense, responds Mr. LaVere, who is unwilling to surrender his copyrights. Photo booths render pictures as mirror images, he says, so that the original pictured the right-handed Mr. Johnson as a left-handed guitarist.

For the moment, that is impossible to verify. Mr. Nevas, Ms. Anderson's lawyer, said he is "not at liberty to say" where the photographs are. When pressed, he says only: "They're in the possession of my clients."

Claud Johnson, for his part, has yet to stake out a position on the matter, but his lawyer, James Kitchens, promises to do so soon. "I'm not ready to tell you," he says.

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