

Helping Out

Everybody had a job to do on the farm—the boys had a job to do, the girls had a job to do—and after school we had chores to do. During the summer I would leave with my father early in the morning and work on the farm. What happened in a deal like that was we didn't get paid—we was helping out my father, 'cause we had tobacco and stuff like that. If we did do something for Mr. Johnson on the farm, he would give us seventy-five cents or something like that and we would be

very happy. He would say, "I want the boys to go out and pull some weeds," or, "I want the boys to do this for me," and we would love to do that because that was the only change we could get, and that way we could go to the movies or go downtown and buy some sodas or stuff like that. But as far as my father giving us something extra for helping him out, the poor guy didn't have anything to give us. You know, he fed us and stuff like that.

In those days, school was out at roughly two. We would come straight home because we had stuff to do. Now, you must realize in those days you also had to chop wood and get in water for the night. They didn't tell you you had to do these things, you just did them. Even if we had to go out and help shuck some corn or whatever, we would always get back home in time to chop up some wood because in those days we burned wood in the fireplace and burned wood in the stove. I think

one of the reasons we didn't get into trouble is we didn't have time. We had chores, we had things to do at all times, and we didn't have too much free time on our hands.

In the summer my father would be harvesting tobacco. He'd hook the mule to the plow, and one of the jobs we did for him was to walk behind with a stick, and what would happen is, if my father happened to accidentally throw some dirt over the tobacco, we would take the stick and flip the tobacco up—the dirt would smother it, you see. So we walked behind the plow to uncover it.

While we kids worked in the hot summertime, we wondered why Mr. Johnson's kids never worked. He had children that were approximately our age and a little older, and they would stay up under the pecan tree and drink lemonade while everybody else's kids were out there working. And we kids couldn't understand why we worked all the time and

then at the end of the year we didn't have anything. My father wasn't even able to buy us decent clothes or anything like that. Mr. Johnson would advance him a hundred dollars to go buy us clothes, but of course that meant that he was a hundred dollars more in debt for the next year. And there was nothing my father could do about it.

We kids wanted to know why we had to live in an old broken-down house. Why we had to walk around with no new shoes. Why we couldn't have a pretty car like Mr. Johnson and them. Once I went to Mr. Johnson's house and saw his son Harold's room. Harold was about my age. I looked at all the beautiful furniture and saw how beautiful it was in the house and everything, and I couldn't figure out why we didn't have some of these nice things. We knew somewhere something was wrong, but we just couldn't figure out what to do about it. Why in America we had

to be second best. Our parents would only say, "Well, that's the way it's intended, that's the way it's supposed to be. You'll never equal up to the whites."

Our parents' attitudes were different in those days. If my son asked me something now, I would try to explain things to him to my best ability, but in those days you did not question your parents. They was very strict and they would give you a quick answer and that was it. You didn't feel bad about it, you just didn't ask them anymore, and that was the way it was.

