

Home

I remember that when we worked for Mr. Johnson, we lived in an old cruddy house in the woods behind what we called the big house. There were three or four other families on that farm, and each family pulled a share. It was like a plantation. You didn't live beside the road, you lived behind the big house—most of our houses were back down in the woods. We didn't have running water, or electric lights, and we had to see at night by lantern light. We didn't have a bathroom,

just an outdoor toilet. There were five rooms: a kitchen, a pantry where you kept your pots and pans, a room for my father and mother, a room for the girls, and a room for the boys. We had a wood stove, and on the side of it they had a place you could put water, so when the stove would get hot, the water would get hot, too. Sometimes we cooked a few things in the fireplace.

My mother did a lot of cooking for the Johnsons. She would fix dinner for them. Now, the thing that's quite comical: the liquid stuff that came from the collard greens and the greens she was cooking—we called it pot likker—they'd give it to her to bring home. What would happen, she would get home, make corn bread, and dumplings, and she would turn the pot likker into a soup like. And the amazing thing was the white people couldn't understand why we was so much healthier and bigger than their kids. But we

found out later on in life, when you boil the greens and cook the greens, the vitamins went down into the juice, so we got the best part.

My parents were very strict. There was a lot of boys in our family, and you know how boys do every once in a while, they get in arguments. But my parents didn't allow no fighting among the children. Another thing they was very strict on: you had to be respectful. It didn't matter who it was or what color they were—it was always “Yes, ma'am” and “Yes, sir.”

My family was very close. My parents was real religious, and I remember before we'd go to bed at night, we'd all get together and get on our knees, and you'd have to say your prayers. And before you ate you had to say a blessing. There was no way you'd sit down and eat without blessing the food.

We were in church every Sunday, and most of the time my parents took dinner and

stuff, so we were practically in church all day. My parents would spread the dinner out on the lawn and everybody would chip in and just sit down and eat and have a good time, and the kids would run and play. And then after we ate, the reverend would call us back into church, and then he was praying again and we had to stay there.

When I was young, my grandmother—my mother's mother—was like some eighty years of age. I can slightly remember her sitting on a chair and telling us about her mother. She could remember when she was a little girl; she could remember slavery. And *her* mother was a slave. She used to tell us about cooking, washing, how they made what they call lye soap, and typical work round the farm. She had little chores she had to do—get eggs from the henhouse and stuff like that. We didn't have a television or radio and that was one of our recreation times, sitting around the fire-

place after dinner and listening to the elder people, my grandfather and grandmother.

In those days, Christmas also brought people together. Not only that—white and black would meet up. You could go to a white person's house and they would give you things. It was a time of giving and rejoicing. We kids just could not wait for it.

Christmas Day was a spiritual day—that was the day you'd go to church. The day after Christmas and Christmas Eve, that was the fun time. But Christmas we were mostly in church all day. And then Santa Claus would come Christmas night. We would get some little toy. I would always get a harmonica, some cheap little harmonica; my sisters and brothers would get little dolls, rag dolls, cheap stuff, but to us it was a precious gift because we had no toys.

We used to go to bed early Christmas night and get up before day, and under the

Christmas tree we'd have presents and we'd have fruit and stuff like that in shoe boxes, and we were the happiest kids in the world. I remember some kids didn't get anything, and the thing about it, they would start coming around to visit you because they wanted to play with your toys, so what would happen is your parents would make you put up your toys while they were there because sometimes kids can be destructive and jealous because they don't have anything, and we would be upset because our parents wouldn't let us play with our toys, and we would always try to figure out a way to get our company to go away.

The two things that would bring everybody together, white and colored, was Christmas or a death in the family. If someone would die in the family, people would come to that family's home and sit up all night long, oh, for about two or three days or something

like that. You'd be surprised, a lot of the white people would come and bring food and even bring clothes in for the family. And it would work the other way around: if some white person would die, we would go and do the same thing, and that was just the way it was. It shows how you can come together.