



Leon's Story

LEON WALTER TILLAGE

Collage art by
SUSAN L. ROTH



Farrar Straus Giroux
New York

—Leon Walter Tillage

To Ethal Mae Tillage and Eva T. Laufer

—Susan L. Roth



An Imprint of Macmillan

LEON'S STORY. Text copyright © 1997 by Leon Walter Tillage.
Pictures copyright © 1997 by Susan L. Roth. All rights reserved. Printed in the
United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.
For information, address Square Fish, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Square Fish and the Square Fish logo are trademarks of Macmillan and
are used by Farrar Straus Giroux under license from Macmillan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tillage, Leon, 1936–

Leon's story / Leon Tillage, with pictures by Susan L. Roth.
p. cm.

Summary: The son of a North Carolina sharecropper recalls the hard times faced
by his family and other African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century
and the changes that the civil rights movement helped bring about.

ISBN 978-0-374-44330-6

1. Tillage, Leon, 1936– —Childhood and youth—Juvenile literature. 2. Afro-Americans—North
Carolina—Fuquay-Varina—Biography—Juvenile literature. 3. North Carolina—Race relations—
Juvenile literature. 4. Civil rights movements—North Carolina—History—20th century—Juvenile
literature. 5. Fuquay-Varina (N.C.)—Biography—Juvenile literature.

6. Tillage, Leon, 1936– [1. Afro-Americans—Biography. 2. North Carolina—Race relations.
3. Civil rights movements—History.] I. Roth, Susan L., ill. II. Title.

F264.F86T55 1997 575.6'55—dc20 [B] 96-43544

Originally published in the United States by Farrar Straus Giroux

First Square Fish Edition: September 2012

Square Fish logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

mackids.com

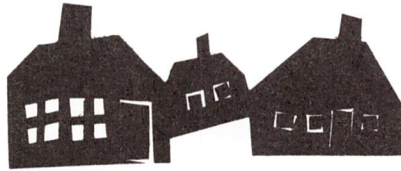
21 23 25 24 22 20

AR: 4.9 / F&P: T / LEXILE: 970L

Leon's Story





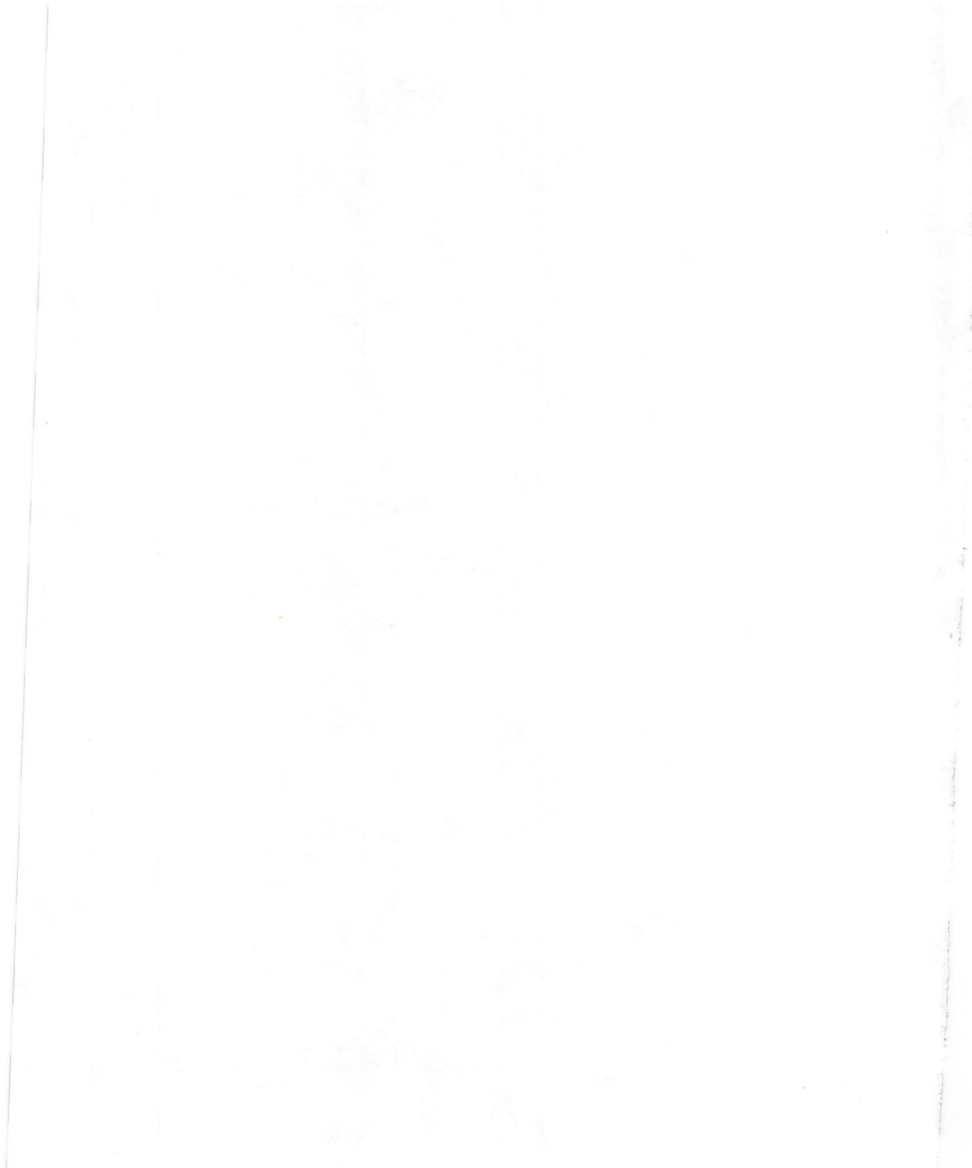
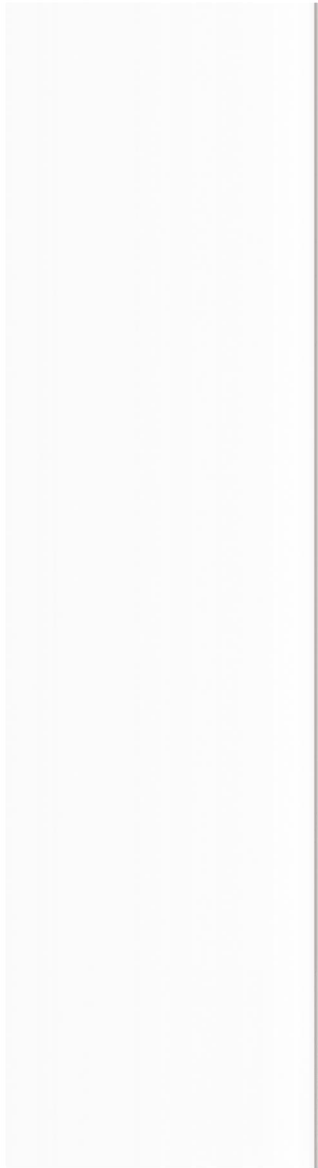


Leon

My name is Leon Walter Tillage. I was born on January 19, 1936. I have eight brothers and sisters, and I am second to the oldest. When we were growing up, we lived near Fuquay, a small Jim Crow town right outside Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

I remember that as a young boy I used to look in the mirror and I would curse my color, my blackness. But in those days they didn't call you "black." They didn't say "minority." They called us "colored" or "nigger."





Sharecropping

We lived on a farm owned by Mr. Johnson. He had lots of acres and grew lots of different crops—corn, tobacco, cotton, alfalfa, wheat, and sometimes sugarcane. It was mostly cotton and tobacco, though, because in those days those were the number one crops.

My father was a sharecropper, which means he had to share half of everything he had with Mr. Johnson. So, let's say Mr. Johnson gave my father ten acres of tobacco, ten

acres of alfalfa, ten acres of corn—whatever—to work. Then, at the end of the year, when it came time to sell the crops and settle up, Mr. Johnson would get five acres of each crop and my father would get the other five.

Maybe it sounds good, but the problem was my father had to pay Mr. Johnson for supplies and such, and he had purchased the food we'd needed to live on for the past year on credit from the corner store. So out of his half he needed to pay off those debts.

You see, Mr. Johnson had arranged it with the man at the corner store that we could buy there. He'd gone to the store and said this man or boy works for me, and I want him to be able to get whatever he wants to eat. You couldn't get beer or something like that, just food. Anyway, this made Mr. Johnson responsible, so when it was time for him to give you your money, he would first take you past the store and you'd pay that bill. And if the debt at the store was bigger than the money

we got from our share of the crops, Mr. Johnson would pay off the rest of the debt and you'd owe him even more.

At the end of the year, when settle-up time came, Mr. Johnson would take our crops to market. We'd settle our debts. Then Mr. Johnson would say to my father, "Well, Ivory, you almost got out of debt that time. I think next year you'll make it." And because my father had no education and couldn't read, he'd take Mr. Johnson's word for it. And because he didn't have anything but the two things he was, religious and honest, he didn't question it or try to cheat.

And that's why my grandfather also lived with us on Mr. Johnson's farm. Because once you got on a farm you could work a lifetime and never get out of debt. It wasn't usually a lot of money you owed, because when you're sharecropping like that, they just take the money off the top. It could maybe be a hundred dollars or so, but that hundred dollars

seemed like a thousand—it was enough to keep you on the farm.

So that's why in those days they stayed on the farm. And when something happened to you, your children would stay on the farm because they needed to pay off their parents' debt. It was a traditional thing.

My father and grandfather and relatives, uncles and aunts, most of them, worked on those farms because they didn't have any education. They didn't see the need to have an education because even if they had an education, what kind of job could they get? They couldn't work in a bank, they couldn't work in a store. All because of their color. So they didn't see the need for education. And that was one of the ways that white men kept black men down: by not educating them. If they kept you uneducated, you weren't qualified to do anything but work on the farm. That was the only thing that my father and them were qualified to do.