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LOCAL BLACKS SMALL IN NUMBER

SINCE AREA HAD FEW SLAVES

By Nell Quesenbery

"Free, free, at last!"

-- Dr. Martin Luther King

At the close of the Civil War, black people in the United States of America had been in bondage for two hundred and forty-six years.

Eighteen percent of the nation's population owned slaves. The average slave holder owned between one and four slaves.

Farmers of the beautiful ridge land in east Tennessee neither required, nor could afford, many slaves. Consequently, upon emancipation of these slaves, Claiborne County was left with a very small black population.

After the Civil War, many of the older slaves, having nowhere else to go, stayed on with their white families. In many cases, a strong love had developed between these black and white people that had lived together for generations.

It was different with the young black people. The land was in war-torn chaos. Still, they were eager to experience freedom. They toiled mightily to create homes from the small stipend earned from heavy farm labor and domestic work. All that was open to them.

Within fifty years after their freedom, ninety percent of the black people were able to read. But it would take ninety years before, in all parts of their nation, black and white people would use the same public facilities, live in the same neighborhoods and attend the same schools.

Hoop Creek is the oldest black community in Claiborne County. The road to this section follows the creek through a hollow bordered on each side by steep ridges. The beautiful flat land along the creek is called "The Fields." Here, Hoop Creek makes a loop near the Hancock County line, before emptying into the Powell River.

Another early black settlement is Locust Street, often called Back Street, located in Tazewell, three blocks east of the Claiborne County Courthouse. The street runs through land once deeded to H.Y. Hughes, heirs.

Hi Berry is a later-settled black community. It is located along a gap in Wallen Ridge that crosses 25E about two miles south of Highway 33.

Sally Hodges and Will Buis were the first and second persons to settle near the old Cedar factory, now called Brooks Furniture Mfg., Inc.

Each of these black communities had a church. For the most part, these churches were either Baptist or Methodist.

The church was always an important place to the black people as a place to worship. In the days of slavery, blacks were not permitted by law to learn to read, nor meet in groups of more than three or four persons. The church served as an excellent place for the slaves to meet unobserved.

Where black populations were small, as in Claiborne County, these laws were not enforced so rigorously.

Philip Brooks was a man with a gift from God. He had once been a slave, but he was freed after the Civil War. He was a Baptist minister.

Both white and black congregations opened their doors to hear this mighty man preach the Gospel, displaying his marvelous gift.

The book of scriptures, warmly worn through much loving handling, had been given to Philip Brooks. Silent and still, it lay on the pulpit. Philip Brooks, unable to read, but filled with a power, could open the Bible and find the text upon any subject he felt called to preach.

He spoke with great authority, yet never raising his voice nor shouting. His sermons, ripe with meanings, could be heard distinctly throughout any size audience. When preaching, Philip Brooks expressed originality and outstanding charm.

The woman people called the beautiful “white Indian” became his first wife. They became some of the earliest black people to settle along Hoop Creek. A daughter, Matilda, was born during this rapturous love match. Greatly saddened, Philip watched his lovely white Indian wife stricken and die.

Catherine Parkey, a sweetly intelligent girl, became his second wife. They also only had one child, a boy called Winton Brooks.

Erma Brooks Mize, age seventy-five, daughter of Winton and Catherine Brooks, still lives on the land her grandfather, Philip Brooks, bought along Hoop Creek.

Mrs. Erma Mize tells the story of her family: “My father, Winton Brooks, taught at the Hoop Creek School. My mother, Catherine, worked as a domestic. She climbed over steep ridges to work for the Rileys, McNeils, Walkers and other families that lived along the Sycamore Creek.

“Then both my mother and father died of old-timey consumption. Now we would call their disease tuberculosis. We children were left orphans, to live the best way we could. I was one of the older children. I walked across the ridges and worked all day, earning very little from the white families.”

Winton and Catherine Brooks’ children were: Lizzie Brooks Fugate, Erma Brooks Mize, Orville Brooks, Carter Brooks, Nila Brooks Wallace and Booker T. Brooks.

Their daughter, Erma, that writes Hoop Creek News in the Claiborne County Progress, married Roy Mize. The living children from this union are Clyde Mize, James Mize, Lula Mize Isom, Eugene Mize, Raymond Mize, Charles Mize and Shirley Mize Cotner.

All Roy Mize’s working life was spent doing heavy farm labor and sawmill work. Erma did domestic work to help support the children.

Because of segregation locally, higher education was denied to the Mize children. They traveled to Morristown, Tennessee, to attend black schools for their higher schooling. Some of

Roy and Erma's children gained education in the Army. One of these children now holds the position of supervisor in a Knoxville, Tennessee, post office.

One morning, pain radiated throughout Roy Mize's chest. Later, he hitchhiked to see Dr. Smith, walking the long distance most of the way. On December 8, 1960, Roy Mize died chopping wood.

Duck Robinson, age eighty-three, is also a granddaughter of Philip Brooks and his first wife, the beloved white Indian woman. Matilda, Duck's mother, was their only child.

Matilda became the second wife of Lewis Brooks. Mr. Brooks had three living children from his first marriage, Addie (Mrs. Pete Noe); Mandy (Mrs. Wilson); Maggie (Mrs. Newt Fugate) were these children.

The children of Lewis and Matilda Brooks were Martha, who married Bryant Mize; Minnie, who married Oradant Brooks; Crockett, who married Roxie Brooks; Duck married Ed Robinson, and Jessie, who died at birth.

Ed Robinson, Duck's handsome husband, died many years ago. Duck now lives in the old black district of Tazewell on Locust Street. She is alone, except for her foster daughter, Mary Christmas. Mary came to live with Duck in 1970. Her parents, Reno and Viola Christmas, are both dead.

Henry (Scrubb) Robinson, Duck's son, lived with her until his recent death on January 6, 1982, in the Claiborne County Nursing Home. Devoted to her son, Mrs. Robinson wishes to thank everyone that gave kindness to Scrubb in sickness and in death.

The children of Ed and Duck Robinson are: Sally, who married Buster Cloud; Joe, who married Mary Porter Cloud; Minnie L., who married John Kyle; Arthur, who married Minnie Ford; and Henry (Scrubb), who married Ona Lee Cloud.

John Greer was the first sheriff that Duck cooked in the jail for. The next sheriffs were Anderson N. Munsey and Frank Riley. She also worked for Mrs. Lottie Logan that ran a hotel and dining room. Perhaps, working and being around the courthouse helped create Duck Robinson's strong interest in local politics.

The Robinson daughters did domestic work; Ed Robinson and his sons did farm labor. Mrs. Duck Robinson said her sons always claimed that the hard-working Nathan Smith family that lived in Powell Valley were the kindest and best white people they ever worked for. The late Nathan Smith, also known as a fine fiddler, was the father of our sheriff, Billy Wayne Smith.

Hi Berry section: Along the gap in Wallen's Ridge runs a road cutting across 25E and ascending high up into the ridge. Here, one can see a breathtaking view of the Clinch Mountains. Nestled along the side of this ridge is Wallen Ridge Church.

Before crossing 25E, this same road forks abruptly north, then curves westwardly along a tiny hollow several hundred yards to the Goins Cemetery.

Ralph Goins, a black man, owned great sections of this Hi Berry ridgeland. Being childless at his death, his holdings went to his brothers, Jim, Bob and Henry Goins.

Descended from these early Goins settlers, Hi Berry has a great population of Goins men and women. Generally, these are exceptionally fine-looking people, with proud, sensitive features and shiny, lustrous eyes.

Elvie Goins Barnett, age seventy, was the daughter of Bob Goins and his wife, the former Bessie Hill. Their other children were Bill, Clarence, Melvin, Coy, Hugh Goins and Shirley Ann Goins Snodgrass.

Estel Barnett, gardener, for the wealthy Lawrence Russell family, married the lovely Elvie Goins. Elvie did not have to work. She stayed home and raised the children.

These children were James Barnett, Etta Barnett and Evelyn Barnett (Mrs. John Kyle).

James Barnett lives with his mother. His father, Estel Barnett, died a few years ago.

In the days of slavery, most slaves took on the names of the white family with whom they lived. Most of my mother's ancestors had owned slaves. Their last names would be Yoakum, Jennings, Berry, Moore, Sherman, Davis, Van Bebber and Wilson. What happened to the younger black people who unlike the older ones did not wish to live the rest of their days on the white family's farm?

I asked Mamie Duck (Mrs. Duck Robinson) if she could remember them or knew where they went. "I only remember the Jennings people," she answered. "They lived in Middlesboro or someplace in Kentucky. They used to come back here and visit."

"Mamie Duck, tell me the names of the black people that have lived here. Well, Nell, Honey, I'll try." Old figures began appearing in her mind, and she began calling off their first and last names all the while, calling them aunt and uncle.

"They were Brooks, Sweets, Cloud, Kelly, Goins, Hodges, Buis, Collins, Mize, Thompson, Kyle, Snodgrass, Litton, Barnett, Tate, Robinson, Noe, Fugate, Ford, Wilson, Parkey, and there are others."