

An Hour
Before Daylight

Memories of a Rural Boyhood

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*To my newest grandson, Hugo, with hopes that this book might someday let him better comprehend
the lives of his ancestors.*

Land, Farm, and Place



Main Street of Plains, Georgia, 1905

IF YOU LEAVE Savannah on the coast and travel on the only U.S. highway that goes almost straight westward across the state of Georgia, you will cross the Ogeechee, Oconee, and Ocmulgee rivers, all of which flow to the south and east and empty into the Atlantic Ocean. After about three hours you will cross the Flint River, the first stream that runs in a different direction, and eventually its often muddy waters empty into the Gulf of Mexico. Unlike the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains, our “divide” is not noticeable, because the land was all part of the relatively flat bottom of the sea in the not-too-distant geological past. It is still rich and productive, thanks to the early ocean sediments and the nutrients it has accumulated from plants and animals since that time.

If you keep on for another thirty miles, still heading toward Columbus, Georgia; Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama; and points beyond, you’ll come to Plains, a small town on land as level as any you will ever see. As people have always said, “When it rains, the water don’t know which way to run.” Its original name was “Plains of Dura,” derived from the place in the Bible where King Nebuchadnezzar set up his great image of gold (Daniel 3:1). Although the land was flat and rich, no one knows why the earliest settlers wanted to commemorate the worship of a false god. It may have been to honor Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refused to bow down to the idol, and they escaped the fiery furnace because of God’s protection.

Just beyond the town there is a place called Archery, where the topography begins to change for the first time since Savannah, from flat plains to rolling hills and poorer soils that extend on to the Chattahoochee River, which divides Georgia from Alabama. Archery is no longer there, except on

the old maps, but it's where I grew up and lived from when I was four years old in 1928 until the very end of the Great Depression, when I left for college and the United States Navy in 1941.

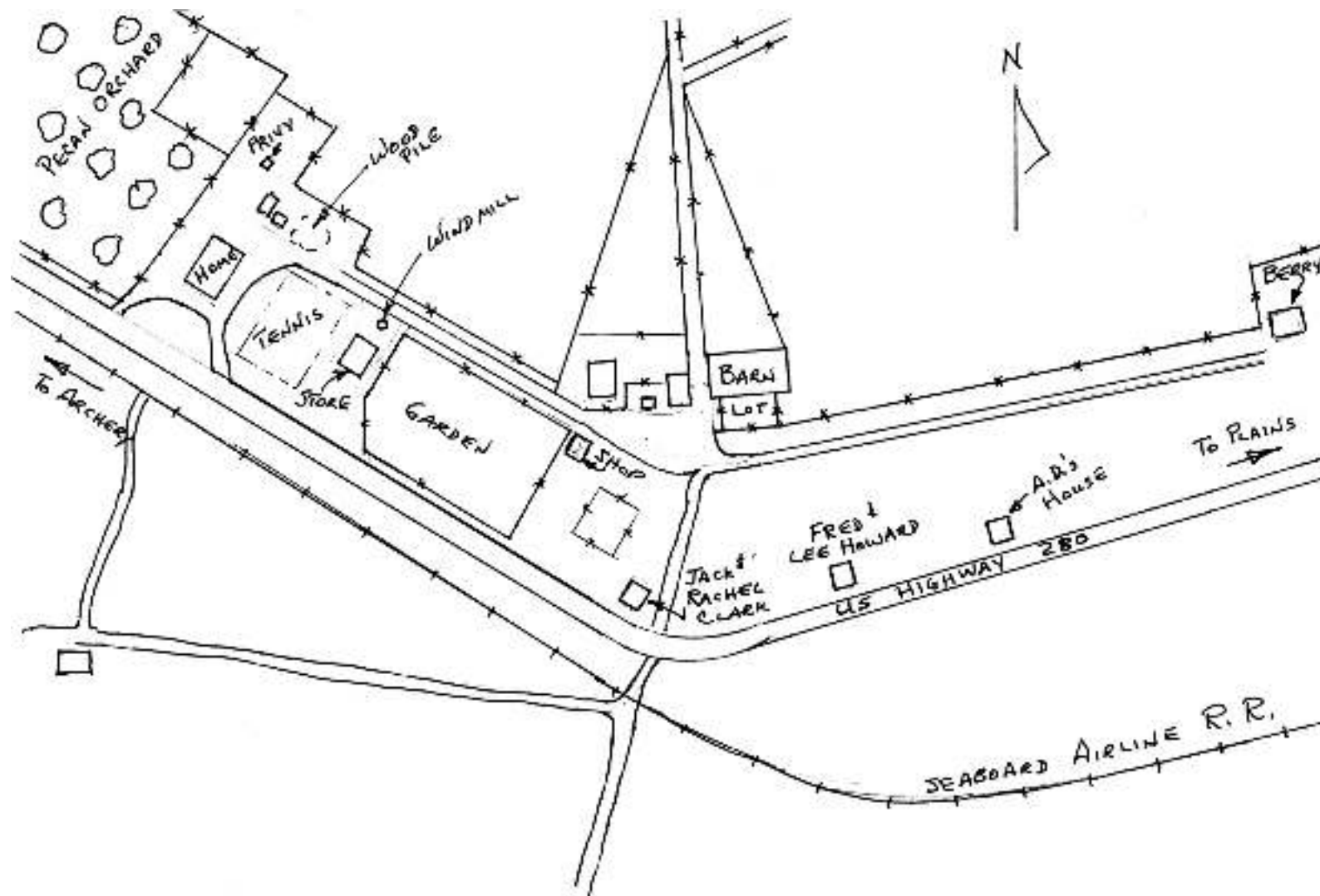
In addition to being 190 miles west of Savannah, Plains is located exactly 120 miles due south of Atlanta, and the seat of the county—Sumter—lies nine miles to the east. It is named Americus, the Latinized first name of Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator and explorer who claimed to be the first European to land on the North American continent and, as a mapmaker, also gave it his name. The coming of automobiles and tractors has caused most of the small towns in Southwest Georgia to wither away, but Plains is an exception. It is surrounded by productive farms, and seems to have citizens who are exceptionally inclined to resist moving away to distant places.

Archery, on the other hand, was never quite a real town. At the heart of it, a little more than a half-mile west of our farmhouse, were the homes of the Seaboard Airline Railroad section foreman and the six black employees who kept the rail bed in good repair. A half-mile farther west was a strong African Methodist Episcopal church congregation, across the road from the most notable landmark, a small store by the railroad tracks that was sheathed completely in flattened Prince Albert tobacco cans. Except for the church, which is still vibrant and active, all the rest is gone.

Our own farm, just to the east, occupied the last of the good land; otherwise, around Archery the soil was marginally fertile and somewhat hilly, and the surrounding sandy fields were some of the first to be planted in pine-tree seedlings, which now compose an almost monocultural forest, approaching maturity. Back in the 1930s, however, Archery was substantial enough to be the center of my world.

My most persistent impression as a farm boy was of the earth. There was a closeness, almost an immersion, in the sand, loam, and red clay that seemed natural, and constant. The soil caressed my bare feet, and the dust was always boiling up from the dirt road that passed fifty feet from our front door, so that inside our clapboard house the red clay particles, ranging in size from face powder to grits, were ever present, particularly in the summertime, when the wooden doors were kept open and the screens just stopped the trash and some of the less adventurous flies. Until 1938, when a paved highway was cut through the woods a mile north of our house, we were proud that our small crooked dirt road was the official United States Route 280! For those days, it was heavily traveled by automobiles, trucks, and buses, but with few exceptions the local people passing in front of our house walked or rode on mule-drawn wagons. The railroad ran just a few feet on the other side of the dirt road, and we never failed to wave at the conductors, engineers, and passengers, who seemed so remote as travelers from another planet.

It didn't seem that we watched outside all the time, but someone in the house was always aware of a nonstranger was passing by, and we knew a lot about the people and their vehicles. We recognized the make of cars and pickup trucks as far as we could see them and could identify most of the local vehicles by the sound of their engines and rattles. One difference between then and now, I guess, was that there was usually someone out in the yard, the store, the garden, or a nearby field who was watching the passing scene. Really old people, those who were not feeling well, and able-bodied folks on rainy days or on Sundays were most often sitting on their front porches. When we passed someone's house, we felt somewhat uncomfortable if we didn't see anyone there with whom we could exchange a wave or a hello.



Carter Home Place

Very few farm homes had a telephone, but there was one in our house. It was number 23, and was answered two rings. ~~On the same party line, the Bacons had one ring and the Watsons picked up on three.~~ (In fact, there were usually two other listeners to all our calls.) We seemed to have an omniscient operator in Plains. If we placed a call to Mr. Roy Brannen, Miss Gladys would say, “He left for Americus this morning at about nine-thirty, but he plans to be back before dinner. He probably stop by the stable, and I’ll try to catch him there.” She also had the latest news on any sickness in the community, plus a lot more information that indicated there were maybe three listeners on most calls.

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I’ve often wondered why we were so infatuated with the land, and I think there is a strong tie to the Civil War, or, as we called it, the War Between the States. Although I was born more than half a century after the war was over, it was a living reality in my life. I grew up in one of the families whose people could not forget that we had been conquered, while most of our neighbors were black people whose grandparents had been liberated in the same conflict. Our two races, although inseparable in our daily lives, were kept apart by social custom, misinterpretation of Holy Scriptures, and the unchallenged law of the land as mandated by the United States Supreme Court.

It seemed natural for white folks to cherish our Southern heritage and cling to our way of life, partially because the close ties among many of our local families went back another hundred years before the war, when our Scotch-Irish ancestors had come to Georgia from the British Isles or moved south and west, mostly from Virginia and the Carolinas. We were bound together by blood kinship as well as by lingering resentment against those who had defeated us. A frequent subject of discussion around my grandparents’ homes was the damage the “damn Yankees” had done to the South during Reconstruction years.

Many older Georgians still remembered vividly the anger and embarrassment of their parents who had to live under the domination of carpetbaggers and their Southern allies, who were known as scalawags. My grandfather Gordy was thirteen years old when what he saw as the Northern oppressors finally relinquished political and economic control of the state in 1876, eleven years after the conflict ended. My mother was the only one in her family who ever spoke up to defend Abraham Lincoln. I don’t remember ever hearing slavery mentioned, only the unwarranted violation of state rights and the intrusion of the federal government in the private lives of citizens. Folks never considered that the real tragedy of Reconstruction was its failure to establish social justice for the former slaves. The intense bitterness was mostly confined to our older relatives, who could not understand the desire of some of us younger ones to look more into the future—or at least the present—instead of just the past.

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Georgia had begun its early colonial existence in 1733 by rejecting fervently the concept of slavery, but this ideal yielded twenty years later to the influence of large landowners along the Atlantic coast who saw their neighbors in the Carolinas getting rich from rice, silk, indigo, and cotton produced by the slave labor they imported from Africa. Within a few decades after being legalized, slaves made up two-thirds of a plantation family’s total wealth, with about one-half the remainder coming from the land they worked.

My great-great-grandfather Wiley Carter is an example. He died during the war, in 1864, and

his will he left to his twelve children forty-three slaves, 2,212 acres of land, and other property and cash, or \$22,000 for each. Neither he nor his heirs realized at the time that the slaves would soon be free, and that the Confederate money would be worthless. His children ended up with small farms, and they and their descendants retained a deep-seated belief that only the land had any real and lasting value.

Another legacy of the war was the refusal of white people to accept the children of liberated slaves as legal or social equals. Having been effectively disenfranchised themselves if they had been loyal to the Southern side, white leaders considered themselves justified in using every means to control the political system when Northern domination finally ended. Elections quickly came to be decided solely by the Democratic Party primary, from which black citizens were carefully excluded, and rural dominance was guaranteed by basing election results on counties (regardless of their size) instead of on the votes of individual citizens. For more than a century after the war, and even when I first ran for public office in 1962, each vote in some of the smaller counties of Georgia was worth a hundred votes in Atlanta.

Someone had to be blamed when the ravages of the Depression years struck, and many of the smoldering resentments against Yankees and the federal government were given new life in my childhood. Yet, with the racially segregated social system practically unchallenged, it seemed that blacks and whites accepted each other as partners in their shared poverty. So there were negative and positive aspects of our white Southern heritage. Our white families were generally close-knit and relaxed in dealing with black neighbors, deeply wedded to the land, and penurious with our cash holdings, especially as we saw them dwindling away during the hard years of the 1930s.

Despite the legal and social mandate of racial segregation, the personal relationships among black and white families were quite different from those of today, at least in many aspects of life on our farm, because our daily existence was almost totally intertwined. At the same time, throughout the years of my boyhood and youth the political and social dominance of whites was an accepted fact, never challenged or even debated, so far as I knew, by white liberals or black protesters. I recall a few instances when disreputable whites had to appeal to the larger community to confirm their racial superiority by siding with them in a dispute, but their very need to do so confirmed their own low social status. For those who were lazy or dishonest, or had repulsive personal habits, "white trash" was a greater insult than any epithet based on race.

In fact, the final judgment of people I knew was based on their own character and achievement and not on their race. There is no doubt that black families had to overcome severe and unfair obstacles, but those who were considered to be honest, hardworking, and thrifty had at least a chance to succeed financially and to enjoy general respect, despite the unalterable social distinction. This was true even though they still came to the back door of a white family's home, rode in a separate part of the passenger train, sat upstairs in the Americus movie theater and in the county courthouse, and attended their separate schools and churches. They were not allowed to vote, serve on juries, or participate in any political affairs. Their spokespersons could make appeals to the local school board, the city council, or in various ways to the system of justice, but they could not participate in the final decisions made, and their appeals were often ignored if they were contending with prominent whites.

All white children around the Plains community, including Archery, attended Plains High School from the first grade through the eleventh. Black children in our part of the county had classes in more than a dozen churches or private homes, often with all grades crowded into a single room. They were usually furnished with chairs of various sizes, a blackboard, and textbooks considered to

dilapidated for use by white students. The County School Board was strict on mandatory attendance for white children, but quite flexible for blacks, assuming that their education above an elementary level was not important. This division of the two races was supposed to meet the U.S. Supreme Court's mandate of "separate but equal."

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In Archery, a black man enjoyed the highest social and, our community believed, financial status. He was African Methodist Episcopal Bishop William Decker Johnson, whose primary religious responsibilities encompassed five Midwestern states. His home base was a combination private school, insurance company, and publishing company located across the railroad from St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church. The entire Plains community knew when Bishop Johnson was at home, and about once a year he invited our family and perhaps the Watsons to come to the worship service at St. Mark AME Church. In honor of his presence, a choir from Spelman College or one of the other black institutions in Atlanta, would come down to sing, and the bishop would preach.

In addition to St. Mark AME Church and one still-occupied tenant house, the most important landmark in Archery now is one of the few historical markers erected in Georgia to commemorate important events or the lives of outstanding citizens. This one, in a couple of hundred words, recounts the notable contributions of a famous son, William Decker Johnson. (In one phrase, it also mentions that the thirty-ninth president of the United States was his neighbor.)

As a little boy, I was accustomed to the relatively sedate and time-constrained services of our own congregation at Plains Baptist Church, so our family's visits to St. Mark were strange experiences. The small white clapboard building was always overflowing with worshipers and would rock with music and with religious spirit far exceeding anything we ever experienced. We knew the words to many of the hymns, but we had to struggle to keep proper time with the strange, slow rhythms, with syllables often stretched into words, and words into entire verses. Soon, however, we would be rocking back and forth in harmony with the swaying bodies of the beautifully dressed choir behind the altar.



Bishop William



Decker Johnson

Bishop Johnson would preach, and his character seemed to change during his sermon. He was well educated and a master of the English language, but would shift to the vernacular of a semiliterate sharecropper when he wanted to emphasize a key point. His voice would sometimes become so soft that the congregation would lean forward to hear, and then he would erupt with a startling volume of sound. He used a singsong rhythm on occasion, even when quoting scripture, and those long-familiar words assumed a different meaning. There was no doubt that he dominated the consciousness of everyone in the church, and, at least during the sermon, the sense of being brothers and sisters in Christ wiped away any thoughts of racial differences. To me, he seemed the epitome of success and power.

At some time during the seemingly interminable service, when emotion was at a high point, everyone would line up and pass by the offering plates placed on a table immediately in front of the pulpit, and the church stewards would call out the amount of each offering. Daddy would always make a generous gift, acknowledged with clapping and “amen”s from the congregation.

Bishop Johnson was certainly aware of the racial customs of the day, but he did not consider it appropriate to comply with all of them. It was understood, for instance, that he would not come over our front door when he wished to talk to my father—but neither would he deign to come to the back. After ascertaining through a messenger that we were at home, he would arrive in his chauffeured black Packard or Cadillac, park in our front yard, and sound the horn. My father would

go outside to the automobile for a conversation, while Bishop Johnson either stayed in the car or came out so the two men could stand together under the shade of a large magnolia tree. I don't remember that he ever came closer to our house. We could see them talking and laughing together and afterward Daddy always said that they just exchanged ideas about the bishop's work and the farming situation around home.

Like their father, the bishop's children were quite successful. His daughter, Fannie Hill, lived in Oklahoma, and her husband was the first black legislator in the state. (They supported me strongly when I ran for president.) One of his sons, Alvan, was a special friend of my mother, and attended one of the Ivy League universities—Harvard, I think. In any case, on his visits home he always came to call on Mama. Representing a younger and more liberated generation, Alvan came to our front door, where Mother would welcome him and invite him onto the front porch or into the living room. Since it was not possible for my father to acknowledge this breach of Southern etiquette, he would just ignore the event altogether. So far as I know, he never confronted Mama about it.

Even before I was an adult and able to understand the difficulty of overcoming racial barriers, I looked on Bishop Johnson as an extraordinary example of success in life. He had come from a tiny rural place, set his sights high, obtained a good education, and then risen to the top of his chosen profession. Of no less importance to me, he retained his close ties with Archery and the people who lived there. I still go by his relatively modest grave on occasion, and wonder how much my own ambitions were kindled by these early impressions.

There were gross abuses of the “separate but equal” principles laid down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 that prevailed at the time, but most people chose to ignore them. In the mid-1950s, almost two decades after I left home, the Atlanta newspapers and civil-rights leaders began to challenge these discriminatory practices, but most of the distinguished lawyers and respected religious leaders in the South defended them as justified under the U.S. Constitution and the mandates of God Almighty.

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Despite some early New Deal efforts to provide “farm relief,” the Depression years were marked by a sense of frustration and even despair in our region. Cotton sales were slow, even at the government-supported price of eight cents a pound. Uncertainties about the impending war in Europe had reduced this most important export market for our basic cash crop, and there was at least a full year's carryover stored in Southern warehouses. Furthermore, cotton production was moving to the Western states, where boll weevils were less prevalent, yields were greater, and mechanization and irrigation were much more advanced.

There was a rapid shift toward dependence on peanuts while I was growing up, and this was the crop that made the greatest impact on my life, both when I was a child and much later, when I returned home with a wife and family. At first, we had to depend for cash income on the small Spanish varieties, used as salted nuts and in candy bars, while growing the more prolific Runner type for hog feed on the farm. But the demand for both kinds increased when a third of all peanuts began to go into peanut butter as a popular food for urban consumers. This took place because of the innovative work of George Washington Carver, a black agricultural scientist who taught at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and began a career with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1935.

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Some basic and unalterable circumstances perpetuated our farm problems. From the time of the Civil War until after I became an adult, too many people struggled to make a living on the limited amount of productive farmland in our region. Despite the extreme rural poverty that prevailed at the time, Southern farm population increased by 1.3 million between 1930 and 1935, as desperate people lost their jobs in failing factories, left their urban homes, and eventually wound up in places like our community. The farm families I knew had to divide the available cropland into ever-smaller plots on which a husband, a wife, and their children could barely subsist, then averaging about thirty-five acres. (With more advanced machinery, grain farms in Kansas were then four times as large.)

Throughout the South, and particularly in Southwest Georgia, there had long been a growing dependence by landowners on destitute families who owned little other than their clothes and some cooking utensils and who were eager to occupy any vacant shack and to work as day laborers or “crop shares” under almost any arrangement. By 1935, families who owned no land worked more than half of Southern farms. As I grew older, I came to understand the personal consequences of this self-destructive scramble for a few small fields on which a family could work as sharecroppers.

Some foreign journalists who toured the South during those years reported that nowhere in Czarist Russia or in Europe under serfdom had families lived in such abject poverty or with so few basic rights as did the tenant families, black and white, of the South. Despite their abominable living conditions, neither my neighbors nor the economic or political powers in America were able to devise a better alternative.

There was a lot of ballyhoo in the Northern press about industrial progress, but not much change had taken place in farming techniques since colonial times. As late as 1942, *Fortune* magazine honored an outstanding Georgia farmer whose agricultural practices were described as “revolutionary.” He did not have a tractor, and relied on five black sharecroppers, two other black tenants who worked by the day, and fifteen mules to work his six hundred acres, and the net annual income of his entire family was \$1,500. The most admirable accomplishments mentioned were the diversification of crops and the annual production of \$500 worth of food for his family. On the farm I knew as my home, the achievements of my father were much more remarkable, but even when I left home in 1941 to go to college, the absence of mechanized power, the almost total dependence on manual labor, and the basic agricultural techniques employed were relatively unchanged since colonial times. One commentator said that Jesus and even Moses would have felt at home on a farm in the Deep South during the first third of the twentieth century.

Even as a boy, I could see a profound difference between my father’s practices and those of other farmers, especially the sharecroppers among whom I lived and worked. A logical option for other farmers was to diversify their agricultural practices, but this choice was available in inverse proportion to the income of the families. It took extra money to expand a rudimentary farming operation. Dad could afford to take a chance on new ideas; he could buy superior milk cows, brood sows, and beef cattle, and we were able to produce the feed for them. He could also pay the costs of labor, seed, and equipment needed to produce noncash food crops that would be used for our family’s own consumption. This was certainly better than having to pay retail prices for meal, flour, syrup, pork, and other basic commodities. However, such choices were almost impossible for the more destitute and dependent sharecroppers, and particularly when their landowners also had a store or commissary and wanted maximum sales of these items, often at grossly inflated prices and exorbitant credit charges.

Perhaps family incomes are the best indication of living standards in those days. Under average conditions, with cotton selling for about ten cents and peanuts three cents a pound, what income could our farm families expect? Although growers always anticipated much more at planting time, usually took about three acres of land to produce a bale of cotton (\$50) or a ton of peanuts (\$60). My father was pleased in a good year when he produced this much on two acres. For most tenant farmers, permanent poverty was inevitable. Even with high yields, a one-horse family with fifteen acres of cotton would have a *gross* income of \$300 to \$400 for the year, and after paying the landlord his share for land use and often the rent of mules and equipment, the tenant would be lucky to keep half of this for a year's labor for himself, his wife, and their children. The cash "draw" from the landlord for the eight or nine months from preparing land to harvest would be from \$100 to \$200, not counting interest. So net indebtedness was almost inevitable for marginal farmers on the poor land, and the chance for a profitable year was remote. Day laborers didn't have even this rare chance for a good year, but with their weekly wage they could at least pay cash for groceries and clothing and avoid some of the credit and interest charges.

I knew a number of small farmers who owned their own land. Most of them were white, of course, and it was their children who came to our church and were my classmates in school. Many of them were as poor as black day laborers, but they were expected to maintain better houses, wear mostly store-bought clothes, and keep their children in school more days each year. The income of small landowners, who cultivated about forty acres, was approximately the same as that of tenants with a operation of the same size. Paying taxes and the full cost of livestock, seed, fertilizer, and other supplies ate up the advantage of not paying rent. Even those who owned enough land to work their own crops and to support a few sharecropper families quite often made very little profit. They bore the full risk of low harvest prices, and nonpayment of the tenants' debts was their loss. In fact, with very few exceptions, everyone in our rural community was in the same economic boat. All of us had a chance to prosper when the weather was good, particularly when the cotton price was high. Obviously, local merchants welcomed good years, which brought a chance to collect old debts and to sell new shoes, overalls, and perhaps even a sewing machine to their usually destitute customers. Such years were rare.

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Although I was born in Plains and actually lived next door to my future wife, Rosalynn, when she was a baby, the first thing I remember clearly was when I was four years old and my father took us out to show us our new home on the farm. There were four of us, including my sister, Gloria, who was two years younger than I. The front door was locked when we got there, and Daddy realized that he had forgotten the key. He tried to raise one of the windows that opened onto the front porch, but a wooden bar on the inside let it come up only about six inches. So he slid me through the crack and came around to unlock the door from the inside. The approval of my father for my first useful act has always been one of my most vivid memories.

Our house was typical of those occupied by middle-income landowners of the time. Set back about fifty feet from the dirt road, it was square, painted tan to match the dust, and had a broad front porch and split-shingle roof. The rooms were laid out in "shotgun" style, with a hall that went down the middle of the house dividing the living room, dining room, and kitchen on the left side from three bedrooms on the right. We also had a screened porch that extended across the back of the house, where we worked and stored things such as well water, corn for the chickens, and extra wood

to keep it dry. The front porch was where our family congregated in warm weather, which was about nine months of the year. We had a swing suspended from the ceiling and some rocking chairs on there, and Daddy often used the slightly sloping floor for a quick nap after dinner and before going back to work in the afternoon. I relished lying beside him as a little boy, long before I could do useful work in the fields.

There is little doubt that I now recall those days with more fondness than they deserve. We drew water from a well in the yard, and every day of the year we had the chore of keeping extra buckets in the kitchen and on the back porch, combined with the constant wood-sawing and chopping to supply the cooking stove and fire-places. In every bedroom was a slop jar (chamber pot) that was emptied each morning into the outdoor privy, about twenty yards from our back door. This small shack had a large hole for adults and a lower and smaller one for children; we wiped with old newspapers or pages torn from Sears, Roebuck catalogues. These were much better facilities than those I knew when I was with the other families on the place, who squatted behind bushes and wiped with corncobs or leaves.



Gloria and me



My boyhood home

It was a great day for our family in 1935 when Daddy purchased from a mail-order catalogue and erected a windmill with a high wooden tank and pipes that provided running water for the kitchen and a bathroom with toilet. We even had a rudimentary shower made from a large tin can with its bottom perforated by nail holes. One extra benefit was that the top platform of the windmill, up near the fan blades, gave a good view of the nearby fields.

Our house was surrounded by a white-sanded yard, which we had to sweep frequently to remove fowl and animal droppings and leaves from our pecan, magnolia, mulberry, and chinaberry trees. Most of our brush brooms were made of small saplings or limbs of dogwood, which were resilient and long lasting. Several times a year we took a two-mule wagon about three miles to a pit and loaded it with fresh sand, which was scattered on the yard to give it a new white surface. Behind our house and surrounded by fenced fields were a small garage (never used for a car), a smokehouse, a chicken house, and a large woodpile.

Our artificial light came from kerosene lamps, and it was considered almost sinful to leave one burning in an unoccupied room. The only exception was in the front living room, where we had an Aladdin lamp about five feet high whose asbestos wick miraculously provided illumination bright enough for reading in a wide area. We turned this flame way down when we went to eat a meal, both to conserve fuel and to avoid the lamp's tendency to flame up and blacken the fragile wick with thick soot. When this happened—a mishap for which someone always had to be identified as the culprit—we had to endure an extended period of careful flame control while we waited in near darkness for the soot to burn off enough for us to read again.

One significant difference between my parents was their reading habits. Daddy mostly limited his reading to the daily and weekly newspapers and farm journals, but he also owned a small library, which I still have, that included Halliburton's *Royal Road to Romance*, a collection of A. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, and a complete set of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan books, each carefully signed and numbered by my father to indicate their proper sequence. By contrast, my mother read constantly and encouraged us children to do the same. Since we stayed busy most of the time, Mama and I always had a magazine or book to read while eating our meals, and this became a lifetime habit for my own family and me. The only exception was Sunday dinner, which, for some reason, had too formal an atmosphere for literature at the table. At night, at suppertime, there was no

such restraint.



I didn't know of any rural families that had electric lights until the rural-electrification program came along in the late 1930s. We had a large battery-powered radio in the front room that we used sparingly, and only at night, as we all sat around looking at it during "Amos and Andy," "Fibber McGee and Molly," "Jack Benny," or "Little Orphan Annie." When its power failed, we would sometimes bring in the battery from the pickup truck to keep it playing for a special event. I recall some rare baseball games re-created by the announcer from telegraph reports, a few boxing matches, and the late night in 1936 when Alfred Landon was chosen as the Republican nominee for president. The voting went on so long that the battery in our house gave out, and we took the radio outside and set it on the hood of the pickup until the convention made its choice, hours after midnight.

The most memorable radio broadcast was in 1938, the night of the return match between heavyweight boxers Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. The German champion had defeated the black American two years earlier, and the world's attention was focused on the return bout. For our community, this fight had heavy racial overtones, with almost unanimous support at our all-white school for the European over the American. A delegation of our black neighbors came to ask Daddy if they could listen to the broadcast, and we put the radio in the window so the assembled crowd in the yard could hear it. The fight ended abruptly, in the first round, with Louis almost killing Schmeling. There was no sound from outside—or inside—the house. We heard a quiet "Thank you, Mr. Earl," and then our visitors walked silently out of the yard, crossed the road and the railroad tracks, entered the tenant house, and closed the door. Then all hell broke loose, and the celebration lasted all night. Daddy was tight-lipped, but all the mores of our segregated society had been honored.



I don't remember much about the summer heat, but I have vivid memories of how cold it was in winter. The worst job was getting up in the morning to start a fire going somewhere in the frigid house. We kept a good supply of pine kindling, which we called "lighterd," to start the blaze that would eventually ignite the long-burning hickory and oak, but I always hoped that some live coals were still smoldering under the ashes so the fire would start quickly. There was an open fireplace in the living room that we lit only late in the afternoon, when the family would gather there, but the fire (later a wood-burning heater) in the bedroom where Mama and Daddy slept was made at dawn, and we shivering children would rush there in the mornings to put on our clothes. I had the northeast corner room, which had no source of heat. We never thought about pajamas, which would have been warmer than the BVDs that Daddy and I wore on cold days under our shirts and trousers, and the way we slept in at night.



Almost all our food was produced in our pasture, fields, garden, and yard. My mother did not enjoy cooking, but was good at preparing a few basic dishes, and Daddy liked to cook special meals such as batter cakes, all-too-rare waffles, and fried fish. At hog-killing time, he fixed souse meat, a conglomeration of meat from heads, feet, and other animal parts that were boiled to a thick, so

mush, heavily spiced, and then congealed into a loaf that could be sliced for later consumption. I also assumed the responsibility of preparing homemade mayonnaise throughout the year and egg nog at Christmas. Whichever farm woman who came in to cook for us when Mama was working as a nurse just embellished the basic meals of her own family with a few of our fancier foods, like ricotta cheese, peanut butter, macaroni, and canned goods. Nothing went to waste around our house, and we were expected to eat whatever was prepared and to clean our plates before leaving the table.

Corn was our staple grain, and rarely would we have a meal without grits, lye hominy, roasting ears, or one of the half-dozen recipes for corn bread. We always had chickens available, either hens or fryers, and it was usually my job to catch and kill them so they could be dressed and then baked, fried, or made into a pie for dinner or supper. (We never heard the word “lunch” applied to sitting down at a table.) Chicken was standard for Sunday dinner after church, when we also had fresh vegetables: peas, potatoes, string beans, butter beans, okra, rutabagas, and all kinds of greens, with collards our favorite, but never any spinach. We also had mashed Irish potatoes or rice and gravy, biscuits, and a pie made from seasonal fruit or sweet potatoes. Cured pork products were available most of the year, and it was surprising how often we ate seafood that Daddy bought from two local men who made regular truck trips from Plains to the Gulf and brought back mullet, mackerel, shrimp, and oysters. Canned salmon, which sold for either a nickel or a dime depending on the quality or size of the can, was usually transformed into fried croquettes and eaten with gobs of catsup. Another staple was kit fish, which was dried mackerel packed with salt in small wooden kegs. We soaked the pieces in clear water overnight to reduce the saltiness, and fried them for breakfast to go with our grits and biscuits.

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I still have vivid memories of the home place where I spent my boyhood. There was a dirt tennis court next to our house, unknown on any other farm in our area, which Daddy laid out as soon as we moved there and kept clean and relatively smooth with a piece of angle iron nailed to a pine log that a mule could drag over it every week or so. Next was my father’s commissary store, with the windmill in back, and then a large fenced-in garden. A two-rut wagon road ran from our back yard to the barn, which would become the center of my life as I matured and eagerly assumed increasing responsibilities for the work of a man.

Beyond the garden and alongside this small road was a combination blacksmith and carpenter shop surrounded by piles of all kinds of scrap metal, where everyone on the farm knew that rattlesnakes loved to breed. This is where we shod mules and horses, sharpened plow points, repaired machinery, made simple iron implements, and did woodwork, with Daddy providing the overall supervision. He was skilled with the forge and anvil, and did fairly advanced blacksmith work. This is one of the first places I was able to work alongside him. I could turn the hand crank on the forge blower fast enough to keep the charcoal fire ablaze, and to hold some of the red-hot pieces on the anvil with tongs while Daddy shaped them with a hammer and then plunged them, hissing, in water or oil for tempering. It required some skill to keep a plow point completely flat on the steel surface; otherwise a hammer blow would bring a violent and painful twisting, with the tongs and red-hot metal sometimes flying out of my hands. There was almost always something broken around the farm, and only rarely would anything be taken to town for welding. I learned a lot from Daddy, and also from Jack Clark, a middle-aged black man who was something of a supervisor on our farm and did most of the mule- and horse-shoeing.

In front of the shop was a large Sears, Roebuck grinding stone, and we would sit on a wooden seat and pedal to keep the thick disc spinning, with the bottom of the stone running in half an automobile tire filled with water. This was a busy place where we sharpened hoes, axes, scythes, knives, and scissors. Daddy didn't believe in paying for something we could do ourselves, so he also had an iron shoemaker's last in the shop that he used for replacing worn-out heels and soles for the family shoes. As I got older, I helped with all the jobs in the shop, but was always most interested in working with wood, especially in shaping pieces with froe, plane, drawknife, and spokeshave.

The centerpiece of our farm life, and a place of constant exploration for me, was our large perfectly symmetrical barn. It had been built by an itinerant Scottish carpenter named Mr. Valentine, whose basic design was well known in our farming region. Daddy was very proud of its appearance and its practical arrangement, which minimized labor in handling the large quantities of feed needed for our livestock. There were special cribs, bins, and tanks for storing oats, ear corn, velvet beans, hay, fodder, and store-bought supplements, including molasses, a bran called "shorts" and cottonseed meal. The sheep, goats, and cattle were usually kept in stalls separate from each other and from the mules and horses, and animals requiring veterinary care could also be isolated while being treated. Hogs had their own pens, and were not permitted inside the barn.

Before I was big enough for real fieldwork, Daddy encouraged me to spend time with Jack Clark, knowing that it was the best way for me to be educated about farm life, as Jack kept up a constant stream of comments about the world as he knew or envisioned it.

Jack was very black, of medium height, and strongly built. He had surprisingly long arms, and invariably wore clean overalls, knee-high rubber boots, and a straw hat. Knowing (or at least claiming) that he spoke for my father, he issued orders or directions to the other hands in a somewhat gruff voice, always acting as the final arbiter over which field each hand would plow and which mule he would harness. He ignored the grumbled complaints. When all the other workers were off to their assigned duties, Jack was the sole occupant of the barn and the adjacent lots—except when I was following behind him like a puppy dog and bombarding him with questions. We became close friends, but there was always some restraint as to intimacy between us. For instance, although my daddy would pick me up on occasion to give me a hug or let me ride on his shoulders, this would have been inconceivable with Jack, except when he might lift me over a barbed-wire fence or onto the back of a mule or horse.

Radiating from the barn was a maze of fences and gates that let us move livestock from one place to another with minimal risk of their escape. This was one of my earliest tasks, requiring only a modicum of skill and the ability to open and close the swinging gates. Within the first array of enclosures was a milking shed that would hold four cows at a time, adequate to accommodate our usual herd of eight to a dozen Jerseys and Guernseys that we milked in two shifts, twice a day. Later we had a dozen A-frame hog-farrowing structures, which I helped my daddy build after bringing the innovative design home from my Future Farmer class in school. One shelter was assigned to each sow when birthing time approached, and the design kept the animals dry, provided a convenient place for feed and water, and minimized the inadvertent crushing of the baby pigs by their heavy mamas. Except during extended dry seasons, the constantly used lots for hogs and milk cows were always ankle deep in mud and manure, which made bare feet much superior to brogans.

A little open shed near the barn enclosed a pump that lifted about two cups of water from our shallow well with each stroke. It was driven by a small two-cycle gasoline engine that we cranked up and let run once or twice a day, just long enough to fill several watering troughs around the barn and sheds. This was the only motor-driven device on the farm, and was always viewed with a mixture of

suspicion and trepidation. We were justifiably doubtful that it would crank when we needed it most, dreading the hour or two of hand pumping as the only alternative source of water for all the animals. Between the pump house and barn was a harness shed, an open-ended building where we stored a buggy, two wagons, and all the saddles, bridles, and other harness needed for an operating farm. Also near the barn was a concrete dipping-vat about four feet deep, filled with a pungent mixture containing creosote, through which we would drive our cattle, goats, and newly sheared sheep to protect them, at least temporarily, from flies and screwworms.

The farm operation always seemed to me a fascinating system, like a huge clock, with each of its many parts depending on all the rest. Daddy was the one who designed, owned, and operated this complicated mechanism, and Jack Clark wound it daily and kept it on time. I had dreams that one day I would be master of this machine, with its wonderful intricacies.

The workers on our place, all black, lived in five small clapboard houses, three right on the highway, one set farther back from the road, and another across the railroad tracks directly in front of our house. This was the community in which I grew up, all within a stone's throw of the barn.

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Except for Jack Clark, who received monthly wages and worked seven days a week, rain or shine, all the other hands worked and were paid by the day, as the weather permitted and as they were needed. To be more accurate, Daddy and Jack kept accounts in increments of one-fourth of a day, with a full day being from before daybreak until after sundown. For this amount of work, grown men were paid a dollar, a mule dependable enough to plow a mule received a dollar, women got seventy-five cents, competent teenagers a half-dollar, and younger children a quarter. The exception to this was during harvest time, when each person was paid for the pounds of cotton picked or the quantity of peanuts pulled out of the ground and stacked up to dry. Day workers were paid on Saturday, when they were expected to repay any loans and settle up for purchases made during the week at my father's commissary. For too long, I thought, I was given a child's wage, and I was always eager to be promoted.

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Although I respected and admired Bishop Johnson as the most successful and widely traveled man I knew, my own life was affected most profoundly by Jack and Rachel Clark. Without young children of their own to care for, they seemed to enjoy having me with them. Jack Clark knew more than anyone about work around the home site. He was in charge of the barn, the mules and horses, the equipment and harness, and all the other livestock. He rarely worked in the field but usually plowed our family garden and the community sweet-potato patch. It was Jack who rang the big farm bell each morning of a working day, at four o'clock "sun time," and again at "noon." This was not at any precise time as measured by our clocks, but was always about an hour before daylight and then when the sun reached its highest point in the sky. Jack worked directly under Daddy, and seemed to give the boys to have ultimate authority over the farm's life, an illusion he was careful not to dispel.

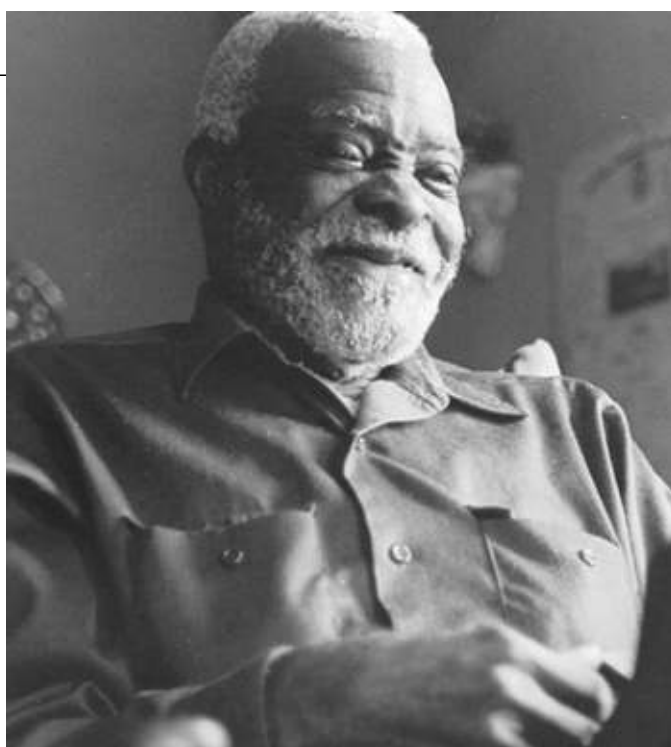
The Clarks' house was the one I knew most intimately, because I spent a lot of time with them. Only about a third the size of ours, it followed the standard design of the other tenant houses on the place. There was a small private bedroom where Jack and Rachel slept, one end almost completely filled by a bed frame on which was a tick that could be stuffed with either corn shucks or wheat straw. A large pine chifferobe in the corner held some clothes and the Clarks' other personal

belongings; with no closets in the house, most of their clothing and other possessions were hung on nails or placed on shelves along the walls. The main room, much larger, contained a rough-hewn four-foot-long table with a bench on each side, and two straight chairs that could be moved near the fireplace or out on the front porch. Next to one wall was a pallet on the floor, which consisted of a narrower mattress similar to that in the bedroom. This is where I always slept when my parents were away, dragging it near the fire on cold nights. Jack and Rachel had a kerosene lantern that hung from the ceiling over the table, and a lamp that could be moved around the house.

Sometimes Rachel's mother, Tamar, or her grown daughter, Bertha Mae, came to stay with them for a few days, and there were often other farm workers visiting in the Clarks' house. As in the field or woods when no white adults were around, the place would be filled with a natural exuberance of loud talk and arguments, and subtle jokes that I enjoyed even though I didn't always understand them. Except in my own room in our house, this is where I felt most at home. At the table, three or four of us played a card game called Seven-Up; it was similar to rummy, but every card could be played with emotion. There was also a checkerboard, used for playing "pool," a fast-moving form of checkers where even the uncrowned pieces could be moved forward to the limit of the unoccupied diagonals instead of just one space at a time. Crowned pieces could move both forward and backward, of course.



Rachel Clark, 1976



Jack Clark, 1976



Rachel Clark, c. 1935

An enclosed shed on the back of the house served as the kitchen and held a woodstove, a wood box, a wide shelf against the wall, and a churn. A back door opened onto a tiny back porch, where the major item was a washbasin on a shelf, with a towel hanging on a nail. Just below was Rachel's bait bed, where the red wiggler worms were fed discarded water, coffee grounds, and any food scraps available from the kitchen. The house also had a narrow porch extending across the entire front, very close to the road, where we sat on the steps or on the chairs and benches that were moved back and forth from inside.

A different kind of special family lived in the smallest cabin on the farm, also facing the main road.

and next door to the Clarks. Fred Howard was relatively young, quiet, and one of the most dependable workers on the farm. He minded his own business, settled his accounts on time, barely made a living, and every now and then mentioned how much he wanted children. His wife, Lee, was some kin to Rachel Clark, and extraordinarily beautiful. She was light-colored, small, and slender and wore her long, silky-looking hair under a flower-printed bonnet and pulled back from her ears either in a bun or a long ponytail. It never mattered that her dresses were made of printed flour-guano-sacks. Lee always seemed timid to me, glancing downward whenever she talked to another person. It was difficult for other eyes not to follow her as she walked or worked in her graceful manner. For some reason, I was rather uncomfortable in her presence, and resented the comments heard from both black and white men insinuating that they would be glad to help if she decided to earn a little extra money with her beauty. Lee's Aunt Rosa was widely known as an expert in tanning, and my mother helped her sell her beautiful lace to supplement the family's budget.

One of the most interesting men on the place was called Tump (he said he didn't have another name). He lived by himself, claimed to eat rats, and was even less educated than the other workers. It was especially difficult to understand what Tump was saying, because he used the intonations of the Gullah dialect of the Georgia coast. He eliminated all "unnecessary" words, such as prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs, and spoke in a strange rhythm with varying tones and pitches to express his meaning. Respected as by far the strongest man on the place, he was called on to do special jobs that were beyond the capability of others. For some reason, Daddy had a big iron weight under the windmill, with an eyebolt on top and "500 pounds" stamped on it. Tump was the only one who could pick it up and walk with it. He seemed to be a special friend of my Uncle Lem, Mama's brother, who helped Daddy one or two seasons at the peanut picker and the sugarcane mill.

One night, as we shut down the mill and headed home, Uncle Lem said, "Tump, I've noticed that you don't usually get to work as early as I do."

Tump responded, "'T ain't so, Mr. Lem, I'm there time everybody is."

Uncle Lem, following up, said, "I'll bet you a quarter I'm at work before you in the morning."

With wages a dollar a day, this was a good-sized bet, but Tump didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir, I bet."

When I asked Uncle Lem what was going on, he laughed and said, "Well, Tump don't know it, but I'm going coon hunting tonight, and will just come back by the cane mill long before daylight and pick up my quarter."

It didn't seem fair to me, but I didn't say anything.

The next morning, even before the farm bell rang at the barn, Uncle Lem arrived at the cane mill. Tump sat up from some cane pumplings where he had spent the night and asked, "Dat you, Mr. Lem?"

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Both in our house and in those of tenants, the long workdays and the high price of store-bought kerosene prevented much staying up after dark, except perhaps on weekends. All the workers' cabins were constructed with rough boards produced by one of the traveling sawmills that came to our farm every now and then to harvest our pine trees. The clapboard siding was the only barrier to the outside heat, cold, wind, and rain, so occupants covered the inside of the boards with old newspaper pasted on with a mixture of flour and water. The wooden windows were kept closed during cold weather, making it necessary to depend on the lamp and fireplace to illuminate the cabin. There were no screens on the doors or windows, so flies and other insects had unimpeded access. It was

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