I first became involved with this project in 1990, when I planned to tape oral interviews with Eddie Stimpson, Jr., (known to me as “Sarge”) for a sociological study. One of the chapters which I had researched and written for a book sponsored by the Friends of the Plano Public Library—Plano Texas: The Early Years (Wolfe City, Texas: Hennington Publishing Company, 1985)—was on farming. It was my favorite, but I was painfully aware that it was told entirely from the point of view of the white landowner. I had searched for, but never found, an account written by a black farmer, and I despaired of ever getting another point of view. Getting to know Sarge through work on another project was a fulfillment of my dream, and our work together became a central personal project for me, with many of my family members getting caught up in the excitement of the work.

During a pre-interview session designed to let him know the types of questions I would be asking, Sarge asked if I would like him to write up the material instead. I was surprised, but said that would be fine. Back he came next week with a yellow legal pad covered with writing—no punctuation, no paragraphing, and spelling largely phonetic—but lively and informative, full of the drama and rhythm of his life. We read through it together, Sarge deciphering the words I could not read, and later I typed it up.¹

For three years after that, the tape recorder was forgotten, and Sarge came by my house on Mondays at 9:00 a.m. unless I was busy or he was going fishing. When we thought we were finished with the story of Sarge’s life, we began going through the whole thing line by line, clarifying, correcting, subtracting a phrase, or adding even as much as a page or chapter, but always careful to maintain the unique style of Sarge’s own way
of getting things said. After months and months of that process, my granddaughter Erin Cone came home from college and put the manuscript on the computer. We continued to record revisions and additions, determined that the wording remain entirely Sarge’s own. Only once did I add a word, and my daughter Nancy Warder caught it immediately. “Mama, you added that word,” she said. “Sarge didn’t say that.” And out came the word “gabardine” to describe Miss Ami’s elegant pants. I never tried to insert a word again.

For Sarge, the reason for writing his story was to pass it along to his grandchildren. But as the work took shape, I began to realize that the narrative had wider significance. I approached the Collin County Historical Commission during one of our meetings and the members were immediately supportive of the project. Our chairperson, Lolissa Moores, contacted the University of North Texas Press, whose editor invited her to send the manuscript. This book is the result of that long process.

Eddie Stimpson, Jr., has fulfilled a long-standing dream by writing up the memories of his early years for his descendants. In doing so he has given all of us a glimpse of rural black family life during the Depression, which is largely lacking in our history books. He gives an account of his youth which is factual, detailed, and vivid.

He was born in 1929; his youth covered the Great Depression and World War II, a time of trauma and great change for everyone in the country. He grew up in an area ten miles west of Plano, Texas (but in the Plano school district), which was known for its fertile soil and its stable farm life, carried on generation after generation by descendants of the first white settlers.

The black families had also developed a pattern of continuity. Eddie’s father was a sharecropper who followed in
the footsteps of two members of the extended family, one a Drake and one a Stimpson, who, instead of being content to be mere day laborers, sharecropped extensively on either side of Preston Road, using their own teams and equipment.

The Depression was rough for everyone in the Plano area. Until 1929, the banks were glad to lend money so the farmers could make a crop. After the crash, the banks were reluctant to make such loans and farmers had difficulty saving harvest money for that purpose. After cotton went down to four cents a pound in 1932, it brought an average of only ten dollars an acre. Still and all, farm life was generally better than life in town. The farmers, white and black, at least had food from their gardens to eat, to can, and to share with their town relatives when they went to visit.

Eddie Stimpson's story of his life during the Depression and the war years that followed it, begins with an overview called "My Growing Up Days." He then adds more detail on a subject by subject basis. He writes with imagery, rhythm, and an ability to convey emotion which sometimes approaches the poetic. I puzzled over the source of this gift until I realized that his natural talent had been shaped and enriched by his lifelong reading of the scriptures, particularly the Psalms. It has been a rare privilege to have had the opportunity to help with this account.

Frances Wells, longtime Plano resident

1Editor's note: In preparing this book for publication, I have relied on Frances Wells's original typed manuscript, along with a disk copy she later sent me which was made by yet another person. As the punctuation is largely Wells's rather than Stimpson's, I have corrected that without hesitation. The spelling was a different matter. As an editor, I am ordinarily strive for accuracy or, when an author is adamant about an idiosyncratic spelling, grammar, or punctuation pattern, I at least ask for consistency. In this case, that did not work. The author used such a variety of spellings for some words that it would have been confusing to the reader to be confronted with all of them.
“Family,” for instance, was spelled “faimly,” “faimley,” “famley,” and “famly,” in addition to the proper spelling. To always change it to the proper spelling seemed to me to be tampering with the spontaneity and character of the work. To leave them all as they were in the manuscript also did not seem right, as some of the misspellings could actually have been errors by the typist, as could the “proper” spellings. One solution to the problem has been to make the spellings conform to the author’s most frequent spelling pattern. In the case of “family,” then, in this book it is “famley.” In other cases, I have let stand two or three varieties of the same word.

I want to make it clear that my “tampering” should not be taken as a judgment of Stimpson’s writing ability. On the contrary, I was captivated by his writing style, and wanted to make sure that my editing did not interfere with either the story or the storyteller’s way of telling it. Stimpson’s writing reflects a unique blend of spoken and written language skills, and whatever changes I have made were designed to help the reader capture the full flavor of Stimpson’s narratives.

Editor’s note: Frances Wells has stated that Stimpson’s writing style became more “polished” during the time they were working on the manuscript. He began working with a dictionary before he got to her house, so that there were fewer spelling errors in the later chapters. His syntax and use of verb tenses became more regular, also. As the final organization of the book does not conform to the order in which Stimpson wrote the chapters, the careful reader will notice some inconsistencies in the overall “voice” of My Remembers.