7. In the Days of My Youth

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I remember a crowd of white men who rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. Then they rode away. I was not yet five years old, but I have never forgotten them.

I know now that they were one of the mobs associated with the infamous Phoenix Riot which began in Greenwood County, South Carolina, on November 8, 1898, and spread terror throughout the countryside for many days thereafter. My oldest sister, Susie, tells me, and newspaper reports of that period reveal, that several Negroes were lynched on the ninth and others on subsequent days.

That mob is my earliest memory.

Susie says I was born on August 1, 1895. The 1900 United States Census gives my birth date as August 1, 1894, and this date I accept. My birthplace is ten miles from the town of Ninety Six, South Carolina,¹ and fourteen miles from Greenwood, the county seat. The first post office I recall was named Rambo; later it was renamed “Epworth.” Epworth is four miles from my birthplace, six miles from Ninety Six, and ten miles from Greenwood. The train ran through Ninety Six, which is seventy-five miles from Columbia. My birthplace is about midway between Greenwood and Saluda, not far from Edgefield.

Both my parents were born in slavery, my father, Hezekiah Mays, in 1856 and my mother, Louvenia Carter Mays, in 1862. My mother was too young to remember anything about slavery, but Father could, for he was nine years old when the Civil War came to an end in 1865.
I know virtually nothing about my ancestors. I have been told that my grandmother, Julia Mays, and her two children were sold as slaves by someone in Virginia to a buyer in South Carolina. Her daughter died early, and her son was shot to death in the field by a white man. After coming to South Carolina, she married my grandfather, James Mays. Six children were born to them, four girls and two boys: Frances, Roenia, Janette, Polly, Hezekiah (my father), and Isaiah.

I never knew my grandfather, James Mays, but I remember my grandmother, Julia, quite distinctly. She lived to be ninety or more years old. As I remember her features, I think she might have had a strain of Indian or white blood. However, I do not recall ever hearing her or my parents make any reference to white ancestry. I never knew my maternal grandparents. My mother had three brothers and two sisters: Abner, Harper, John, Sarah, and Susie.

My mother and father were very dark-skinned, and the color of their children ranged from black to dark brown. Color was never a problem in my family, nor did we ever feel any discrimination based on color among Negroes in my community, whose colors ranged from black to white. To protect the "purity" of the white race, South Carolina had decreed that any person with one-eighth of Negro blood in his veins belonged to the Negro race. So there were a good many mulattoes and white Negroes in my area. We never felt sorry for ourselves because we were dark, and we accepted Africa as the home of our ancestors. Although I can appreciate the current emphasis on blackness, I am mighty glad I didn’t have to wait seventy years for someone in the late 1960's to teach me to appreciate what I am—black! Many times my mother, unlettered and untutored though she was, said to us children, “You are as good as anybody!” This assurance was helpful to me even though the white world did not accept my mother’s philosophy!

My heroes were black. Every once in a while, some Negro came along selling pictures of, or pamphlets about, a few Negro leaders. Pictures of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Laurence Dunbar hung on our walls. In my high school days, Booker T. Washington meant more to me than George Washington; Frederick Douglass was more of a hero than William Lloyd Garrison; Dunbar inspired me more than Longfellow. I heard about Crispus Attucks and was thrilled. The Negro preachers and teachers in my county, I worshiped. I didn’t know any of the white preachers and teachers. (I doubt that I would have worshiped them if I had!) The Negroes in the South Carolina Legislature during the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction years were the men held up to us in high school history classes as being great men, and not the Negro-hating Benjamin Ryan Tillman and his kind, who strove so long and hard to deprive the black man of his vote. I had identity.

My mother could neither read nor write. She enjoyed having me read to her, especially sections of the Bible. Until this day, I regret that I didn’t teach my mother to read, write, and figure. Father could read printing fairly well.
but not script. I often wondered how my father—a slave for the first nine years of his life—had learned to read as well as he did. My sister Susie, ninety years old now, told me much about our parents when I visited her in the summer of 1967 as I was beginning this book. She remembers well two of my father’s stories. He frequently told how the slave children on his master’s plantation were fed. While the slaves were working in the fields, the master’s wife would feed the slave children. She would pour milk into a trough and then call the slave children—my father among them. The children would rush to the trough, scoop up the milk in their hands and slurp it into their mouths. The other story is delightful. The slave master’s son liked my father very much. Though it was unlawful to teach a slave to read, this white boy would take my father down in the woods to a secluded spot and there teach him to read.

I am the youngest of eight—three girls and five boys: Susie, Sarah, Mary, James, Isaiah, John, Hezekiah, and Benjamin—me. I never knew Isaiah, who died early. Hezekiah was the only one of my siblings to finish high school. The others went hardly beyond the fifth grade in our ungraded one-room school. The maximum school term of the Negro school was four months—November through February. The white school usually ran six months. Discrimination and farm work accounted for the shorter term for Negroes. Most of the cotton was picked in September and October; and early in March work on the farm began. It would never have occurred to the white people in charge of the schools that they should allow school to interfere with the work on the farms. I was nineteen years old before I was able to remain in school for the full term.

Education was not considered essential in those days, not even by or for whites. By law, slaves were kept illiterate. Consequently, when four million Negroes were freed in 1865 most of them were unable to read or write. It is not surprising, therefore, that, according to the Census of 1900, 57 percent of the Negro males of voting age in my county were illiterate. Even the 43 percent who could read and write could not vote. In the state as a whole 52.8 percent of Negroes ten years old and above were illiterate in 1900 as against 64.1 percent in 1890. I suppose that the literacy in my family was slightly above the average of Negroes in my county.

Two of my brothers, James and John, tried farming. James stuck with it until he was killed at the age of forty-eight or fifty by a brother-in-law. Earlier, however, John had left for the city. Another brother, Hezekiah, after an altercation with Father, pulled off his sack and left the cotton field and his home, never to return except on visits to the family. My three sisters all married farmers in the community.

It could hardly have been otherwise than that most of the Negroes in my county at the turn of the century were wage hands, sharecroppers, and renters. Only a very small minority owned farms or cotton gin. Though it could be different. Thirty-five years earlier, Negroes had been freed without being given a dime or a foot of land by the federal government.
Emancipated from Southern slavery in 1865, the Negro was promptly deserted by the North. Had forty acres and a mule been given to each emancipated slave family, as had been proposed, the economic plight of the Negro would have been greatly ameliorated. Today the harvest might well have been of wheat and not tares.

In 1900, Greenwood County, in which I lived, had a population of 28,343, of which 18,906, or 66.7 percent, were Negroes. The fact that Negroes so far outnumbered the whites contributed to the whites' determination to exclude them from politics. The evil result of this determination was the infamous Phoenix Riot. Negroes in my county were heavily dependent upon the white people for land to till; the whites were equally dependent upon the Negroes to get their farms worked. In 1900, close to 20 percent of the Negro farmers in South Carolina owned their homes. However, in Greenwood County in 1910 only 112 Negroes owned their farms free of debt; ninety-five had farms but they were mortgaged; sixty-eight were part owners; 1,230 were cash tenants; 1,296 were share tenants; forty-three share-cash tenants; and eighty-nine were not specifically designated. These figures add up to 2,933 farms run by Negroes. The free-of-debt owners, plus the owners with the mortgages, and the part-owners totaled 275, or 9.4 percent who had some ownership in their farms. Roughly speaking, only one Negro farmer in ten owned his land, and only one in twenty-six owned a farm absolutely free of debt. Ninety percent of the Negro farmers in Greenwood County were renters, sharecroppers, and wage hands. Despite poverty, however, Negro life was very stable. As a rule, men did not desert their families. There were not many illegitimate children in my community. A girl who had an illegitimate child was usually looked down on as having brought disgrace to her family.

My father was a renter. As far back as I can remember, I think we owned our mules. Any man who owned his mules or horses, buggy, wagon, or other farm equipment occupied a little higher status than the one who worked for wages or was a sharecropper. The wage hand was one who worked by the month for ten, twelve, or fifteen dollars a month. The sharecropper, or the one who worked on "halves," had his house, mules, and other farm implements provided for him. The owner of the land received half of all the sharecropper made.

As I recall, Father usually rented forty acres of land for a two-mule farm, or sixty acres if we had three mules. The rent was two bales of cotton, weighing 500 pounds each, for every twenty acres rented. So the owner of the land got his two, four, or six bales out of the first cotton picked and ginned. Many Negroes rented as many as sixty acres of land, paying as rent six bales of cotton weighing 500 pounds each. From the first bales ginned, Father got only the money that came from selling the cottonseeds. I was elated when that money came, for my father always celebrated by buying a big wheel of sharp yellow cheese out of the first cottonseed money. I still enjoy the taste of cheese. I have eaten the finest varieties in many parts of the world, but
nothing has ever tasted as good to me as the cheese my father used to bring home from the sale of cottonseeds.

Although I do not recall that we were ever hungry and unable to get food, we did have very little to go on. To make sixteen bales of cotton on a two-mule farm was considered excellent farming. After four bales were used to pay rent, we would have twelve bales left. The price of cotton fluctuated. If we received ten cents a pound, we would have somewhere between five and six hundred dollars, depending upon whether the bales of cotton weighed an average of 450, 475, or 500 pounds. When all of us children were at home we, with our father and mother, were ten. We lived in a four-room house, with no indoor plumbing—no toilet facilities, no running water. When my oldest brother got his own farm, and after the death of Isaiah, there were eight of us; and things changed as my sisters got married and the oldest brothers, James and John, began to fend for themselves. If we were lucky enough to get twelve or fifteen cents a pound for cotton, things were a little better. But six or seven hundred dollars a year was not much when Father had to pay back, with interest, money borrowed to carry us from March to September, and when shoes, clothing, and food for all of us had to be bought out of this money. Then there were the mules, the buggies, wagons, and farm tools to be bought and paid for.

We were never able to clear enough from the crop to carry us from one September to the next. We could usually go on our own from September through February; but every March a lien had to be placed on the crop so that we could get money to buy food and other necessities from March through August, when we would get some relief by selling cotton. Strange as it may seem, neither we nor our neighbors ever raised enough hogs to have meat the year round, enough corn and wheat to insure having our daily bread, or cows in sufficient numbers to have enough milk. The curse was cotton. It was difficult to make farmers see that more corn, grain, hogs, and cows meant less cash but more profit in the end. Cotton sold instantly, and that was cash money. Negro farmers wanted to feel the cash—at least for that brief moment as it passed through their hands into the white man’s hands!

Though never hungry, we were indeed poor. We supplemented our earnings by working at times as day hands, hoeing, chopping, and picking cotton for white farmers in the neighborhood. The price paid for this work usually was forty cents a day, sometimes only thirty-five, though when a man was desperate for help on his farm he would pay fifty cents a day. One made more money picking cotton, especially if he were a good cotton picker. The pay was forty or fifty cents per hundred pounds. All of us worked on the farm, including my sisters. Except in cases of dire necessity, Negro fathers preferred to have their daughters work on the farm rather than cook in the white man’s kitchen. My sisters did not plow or cut wood, but they hoed and chopped and picked cotton. We usually got to the field about sunup and worked until sundown.

It was and still is a belief among Negroes that most white people who had
Negro tenants cheated them. This belief had no lack of confirming evidence! Many Negroes did not know how to keep their own accounts, and even when they could, all too many of them were afraid to question a white man’s figures. His word was not to be disputed, and if he said a Negro owed him so much, questions were not in order and no explanations were forthcoming. If he told John, “We broke even this year; neither of us owes the other,” even if John knew he had cleared a hundred dollars, he would ask no questions, register no protest.

To support my own recollections about a great deal of my past, I have either personally interviewed or had someone else interview 118 Negroes who were born about the same time I was. The majority believed that Negroes who worked for white people in the South were grossly cheated by their white “bosses.” Of the 118 interviewed for this study, 101 (85.6 percent) expressed the belief, from their own experiences and observations, that Negroes were cheated by white people. One was emphatic: “Whites didn’t cheat Negroes—they robbed them!” Seven disagreed. Ninety-one (77.1 percent) were convinced that Negroes were also cheated in the courts. I share these majority opinions. In my county, whenever a white man was involved, the Negro was automatically guilty. As these interviews showed, it is difficult even now to get Negroes to believe otherwise. They know that Negroes were cheated in slavery, were worked and treated like animals. They know that Negroes are still cheated by whites on such things as rentals or contract buying, so they are certain that Negroes were taken advantage of on the plantations of the South after emancipation.

Despite the fact that I share this widespread belief, I feel that William Mays (no relative of mine), on whose land we lived, was fair in his transactions with my father. I did not know Dr. Childs, on whose place we lived until we moved to the “Bill” Mays place; but according to what I heard my parents say about him, he was a kindly white man. I never knew Bill Mays well. In my entire youth, for that matter, I did not know any white person well. I never had a white playmate. I saw Bill Mays when he made fairly frequent visits to the farm to see how Father was getting along, and occasionally we saw him in Greenwood. I suppose I never talked with him ten minutes at one time during our whole tenure on his place. I got the impression that he took some interest in Father’s welfare. I do not believe William Mays ever cheated my father; but I was really hurt one day when I heard him tell Father, when I was trying to get away to school, that he should keep me home to work on the farm. From that moment on, I put him down as being against me. In fact, I considered anyone my enemy who was not in sympathy with my aspiration to get an education. I never forgot what Mr. Mays said to my father. A few years later when I was home from school and he visited the farm, my mother asked me to go out and speak to him and I refused. I felt that he was still against my going away to school. If Bill Mays did not cheat my father, I am sure that there must have been other white men in the South—however few—who did not cheat Negroes who worked for them.
I believe my mother had a kind of affection for the wives of Dr. Childs and Bill Mays, and for their children, who sometimes paid brief visits to our house. I recall that on more than one occasion the sons of Betty Childs came to see Mother after their family had moved to Greenville, and Mother always appeared glad to see them. As I recall, one of them gave Mother a half dollar. The way Mother spoke of Betty Childs and Nona Mays indicated affection for them—an affection which my father, I am sure, did not share. My own contact with them and their children was so slight that I never had a chance to develop any real friendship or affection. In Greenwood County, for the most part, black was black and white was white, and never the twain did meet except in an inferior-superior relationship; this relationship I never sought, cherished, or endured.

I did not know the meaning of it at the time, but I recall going to Greenwood with my mother when she went to see "Miss Nona," as she was called by the Negroes. Mother and I went to the back door. I do not know whether "Miss Nona" required this, or whether Mother was following the custom for Negroes to go to the back door when they went to a white man's house. I remember seeing Negroes go to the back door of a white man's house even when the white people were sitting on the front porch. Most of the 118 persons interviewed for my study reported that Negroes went to white people's back doors in their communities. When asked "Why?" forty of them, or 33 percent, said it was custom or tradition. Eighteen said white people demanded it. One person said, "It would have been accepting Negroes as equals if whites had allowed them to enter the front door." Another said that Negroes were sent to the back door because they were not considered persons. As for me, I learned the hard way, later on when I was in Orangeburg, South Carolina, that a Negro was not to go see a white man by way of the front door. But as a child, even when we had "worked out" by the day, the back-door custom had not struck me as odd, for we had no need to go to the front door, the noon meal being served on the back porch, as a rule, and not in the dining room.

I did not leave the farm because it was repulsive to me. I enjoyed work on the farm and am proud to proclaim that I was a good farmhand—much better than the average. At the age of twelve, I was able to take the lead row in hoeing and chopping cotton. I was an excellent "fodder puller" at the same age. I "knocked cotton stalks" in preparation for the next crop. Whenever we had three mules, I could, with sack and horn, keep ahead of three plow hands, pouring the guano in the furrows. I was not much at cutting cordwood. We were all good at plowing. When it came to picking cotton, my brother Hezekiah and I were the best in the family, and among the best cotton pickers in the county. We often competed with each other to see which could pick the most cotton. One day we carried "grab" rows all day. Each had his own row of cotton to pick and the middle row between us was the "grab" row. The fun came for the one who could pick fast enough to be getting more of the cotton on the grab row than the other. Hezekiah, "H. H."
as we called him, and I competed all day, from sunup to sundown. We picked cotton steadily and fussed just as steadily, each claiming that the other was getting all of the cotton off of the grab row. We both exaggerated, for when father weighed the cotton that evening, H. H. had picked 424 pounds and I had picked 425.

I did not mind being hired out to pick cotton at forty or fifty cents a hundred. Picking only 300 pounds earned me $1.20 or $1.50 a day, whereas I could make only forty or fifty cents a day plowing or hoeing cotton. Unfortunately, I did not always get to keep the money I made after being hired out. If Father needed it, he got it.

I loved the farm. To this day I enjoy seeing a beautiful crop of green corn blowing in the wind, or a patch of growing cotton, especially when nature has cooperated with the right amount of sunshine and rain and the cotton has been well tilled.

The few Negroes in my county who owned their land—and they were rare—were looked up to by other Negroes but had to be exceedingly careful not to be accused by white people of being “ uppity,” or of trying to “act like a white man.” Both were serious charges. The more a Negro owned, the more humble he had to act in order to keep in the good graces of the white people. When a landowning Negro, living in a nice-looking, painted house decided to buy an automobile, he had to get permission from the leading white people in Ninety Six before he dared purchase it.

We wanted Father to buy land, but we did not succeed in persuading him to do so. I wanted him to be like Tom Waller, perhaps the wealthiest Negro in the county, despite the fact that he was illiterate. He had Negro sharecroppers and wage hands just like the landowning white farmers. His land was owned, not mortgaged; and he was a solid citizen. As I look back, I feel sure that it was just as well that Father never owned any land, because there would soon have been no one to work it. My oldest brother, James, was killed by a brother-in-law who was envious because his sister, whom James had married, had fallen heir to their father’s home place. When the sister, my brother’s wife, died and he married again, the brother-in-law couldn’t endure having two “foreign” people in his parents’ home, so he followed James into the field one day and shot him down. And since nothing in the racial situation in my county was conducive to encouraging sensitive Negroes to remain, my brother John soon left, ending up in Cleveland, and H. H. made his home in New York. I was “called” or driven to do something other than farming.

I cannot say that my home life was pleasant. Quarrelling, wrangling, and sometimes fighting went on in our house. I got the impression early that Father was mean to our mother. He fussed at her; and when he drank too much he wanted to fight and sometimes did. All too many times we children had to hold him to keep him from hurting Mother. He would take out his knife and threaten to cut her. Often at night, we were kept awake by Father’s
loud and abusive raging. I think if Mother had said nothing, there would have been fewer arguments. But Mother had to talk back. Our sympathy was with her.

Father did his trading and buying in Greenwood, and it was there that he bought his liquor. We knew when he was “high,” as he would come roaring home in the wagon, beating the mules (normally he was very careful about keeping the mules in good condition) for no other reason than that he had been drinking too much. When we heard him coming at such times we knew that there would be fussing and feuding that night.

Father’s drinking embarrassed me, especially so when he did it at church. Largely under the influence of my mother, I made a vow at twelve years of age that I would never drink liquor. I have kept that pledge, not because I felt this made me better than those who drink but because I never discovered any good reason for breaking it. My decision was not based on religious or moral grounds but on what I saw drinking do to my father and our family. I claim no virtue for keeping this pledge. For the same reason, I never developed the habit of smoking. Father smoked and chewed tobacco, and was not always careful where he spat. Here again I claim no special virtue; I was repelled and disgusted by my father’s indulgence in these habits and I never found any reason to follow his example. At Christmastime, we used to share a little toddy, a mixture of whiskey, sugar, and water. After I was twelve, I didn’t take any more of the toddy.

As I look back over the years, I am convinced that my father was not a heavy drinker. He simply could not hold his liquor. I believe that a little whiskey “did him up.” When he was under the influence of drink, his eyes sparkled and became bloodshot. At most times he was a very kindly man, but when he was otherwise one would shiver in his presence and feel like running for safety. I was afraid of my father until I was past eighteen. I was then ready to defy him when he scolded me or said harsh things to me. But he was not really an alcoholic. He lived to be eighty-two years old, and in his older years he stopped drinking altogether. When he lived with me in Washington, D.C., during the time when I was dean of the School of Religion at Howard University, he never took a drink.

My mother was very religious. Every night she called the children together for evening prayer before going to bed. She always led in prayer. Occasionally all the children said short prayers, too. Father usually prayed with us. Any one of us who got sleepy and went to bed early would say prayers alone. Often I read the Bible before evening prayer, and when Father was in good humor he would read. Frequently I would read the Bible to my mother, especially certain consoling passages in the Psalms and sections of the Sermon on the Mount. How often I read to her the Thirty-seventh Psalm after one of Father’s tirades!

There was no doubt in Mother’s mind that God answered prayers. She believed this to her dying day. When I made a trip around the world in the
latter part of 1936 and the early months of 1937, Mother “knew” that it was her prayers that brought me safe home. Shouting in church was common in my youth, and Mother did her share. The preaching was usually other-worldly, and the minister often stirred up and exploited the emotions of the people. This fact, along with her somewhat turbulent home life, accounted for Mother’s emotional outbursts in church. The depth and sincerity of her religious faith had great influence on me.

In later years, my wife was shocked when she first saw the Brickhouse School, for she had expected to see a real brick building. It was named the Brickhouse School after a large brick house nearby owned by a white man. It was a frame, one-room building with a wood stove in the center of the room, with boys seated on one side and girls on the other. The school ran for four months, from the first of November through February. When we moved from the Childs’ place to the Mays’ place, the round trip to school was increased from about six to approximately seven miles.

It was a happy day for me when I entered the Brickhouse School at the age of six. I discovered on that eventful day that I knew more than any of the other children who were entering school for the first time. Susie, my oldest sister, had taught me to say the alphabet, to count to a hundred, and to read a little. Since I was the only one in the beginners’ class who could do these things, I was praised and highly complimented by the surprised teacher. As we put it, she “bragged on me.” The next church Sunday, the second Sunday in November, my teacher sought my parents and told them, with other people standing around, “Bennie is smart.” From that moment on, I was the star of that one-room school. The experience made a tremendous impression on me, so much so that I felt I had to live up to my teacher’s expectations. I became Exhibit A when visitors came around and I was called upon to recite, which I was always eager and ready to do. I dearly loved the spelling class, where the best speller stood at the head of the class. If the boy or girl at the head of the class missed a word, the one who spelled the word correctly moved to the head of the class. I had been so impressed with myself that first day that I always strove thereafter to occupy the first place in class. I loved school so well that when the weather was bad and Mother kept me home I would weep. The student who was out of school a day had to go to the foot of the class, even though he had been standing at the head. When it did happen that I had to go to the foot for being absent, I took great delight in working my way up from the foot to the head.

I fell in love with my teacher, and I am sure I studied hard to please her as well as to learn. My first teacher was Ellen Waller, daughter of Tom Waller, the wealthy Negro farmer. Miss Waller was a high school graduate from Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. Very few Negroes went to college from my county. I can think of only four, before my time, who went to college and received degrees. A fair number went to high school and were graduated.
At the close of the school year, we had what was called an “Exhibition.” Students sang, took part in dialogues, and made speeches. I was always one of the students to say a little speech of some kind, and whether or not I deserved it, the people applauded generously. I was a “great” baseball player at school in those days, and I recall two events in connection with the Exhibition which were somewhat unpleasant. Once, beautifully dressed in a white suit to give my Exhibition speech, I got pretty dirty sliding bases and had to speak in soiled clothes, much to my mother’s disgust. Another time, when I was tagging a runner, he fell and his shoe hit me in the mouth, breaking off a piece of one of my front teeth, which naturally didn’t improve my appearance when it came time for me to speak.

Like any normal, healthy boy I had my fights with a few of the tough guys in the community. I recall one fight when I was cut by one of the two boys with whom I was fighting. I was cut on the hand, the arm, and the head. When I got home, I was bloody. Before I could explain to my father what had happened, he kicked me off the porch and proceeded to beat me thoroughly. He never let me explain what had happened, that the two boys had “laid” for me when I passed their house returning from the store. They had jumped me. I had only two choices: run or fight. I chose to fight. I still think that I did not deserve the whipping my father gave me. I had other fights in school, but none as serious.

Father gave me another whipping which I did deserve. Although I never owned a pistol, my brothers did, and most of the boys in the county carried pistols. The young men who called on my sisters usually had their pistols. Since the firearms were a little heavy, they would put them on the table while visiting my sisters. One night one of the visitors left a loaded pistol on the table in one of our rooms. I found the pistol, assumed it was empty, and pulled the trigger. It went off with an awful noise, the bullet hitting the fireplace. I was so frightened that when Father asked me what the noise was about I told him I didn’t know. H. H. showed Father the pistol. The whipping I got was indeed impressive. It has been vivid in my memory ever since.

Old Mount Zion was an important institution in my community. Negroes had nowhere to go but to church. They went there to worship, to hear the choir sing, to listen to the preacher, and to hear and see the people shout. The young people went to Mount Zion to socialize, or simply to stand around and talk. It was a place of worship and a social center as well. There was no other place to go.

This was my church, six miles from the town of Ninety Six and four miles from our house. Preaching was held every second Sunday, the pastor having other churches. If all of us were to go to church, we had to ride in a two-mule wagon, seated either on chairs or on wheat straw in the bottom of the wagon. As a rule, however, someone stayed home, and then two buggies were ample for the rest of us.

On the farm, we worked hard six days a week. Father wanted the mules to
rest on the Sabbath; but he never tried to keep them rested on the first and second Sundays when there were services at Mount Olive and at Mount Zion, our own church. Mount Olive, though not our church, was closer, and we usually worshiped there on the first Sunday in each month. Fairly often on the third and fourth Sundays, however, Father would insist that the mules needed rest, so if we wished to go to Sunday school at Mount Zion on those Sundays we had to walk—round trip, eight miles.

Although the members of Mount Zion were poor and most of them were renters, they were a proud lot, and many of them owned good-looking buggies and at least a couple of fine-looking horses or mules, although it is highly probable that most of them were in debt. As a youngster, I watched them driving up in beautiful rubber-tired buggies drawn by fine horses or mules. I think some of them came late to church just so they could be seen. This was the one place where the Negroes in my community could be free and relax from the toil and oppression of the week. Among themselves they were free to show off and feel important. My brother John was the sporty one in our family. He worked and saved until he could buy a white rubber-tired buggy and a beautiful white mule which he named Kate. John and Kate created quite a sensation in the community and at Mount Zion. When the boys came to church alone, they were expected to take their girl friends home—a duty which they did not find at all burdensome.

Fighting and heavy drinking on church property were common practices in many churches, but not much of this went on at Mount Zion, thanks largely to the man who pastored Mount Zion for fifty years or more.

The Reverend James F. Marshall was hardly more than a fifth-grade scholar, but he knew the Scriptures, at least so far as knowing where certain passages were to be found. He could quote almost any passage of Scripture from memory. He accepted the Bible as it was printed and held it was "wicked" to doubt any part of it. We thought he was the best preacher in the world (our world was Greenwood County). He was eloquent. He could moan, and did. Almost invariably he made some of the people shout. If he did not moan a bit and make the people shout, his congregation felt he had not preached well. The intellectual content of his sermons was not nearly as important as the emotional appeal.

The Reverend Marshall set a good example for the people. I believe no one ever accused him of any dishonesty or immorality. Wives and daughters were safe in his presence. He did not touch liquor. The same could not be said of all the ministers who pastored in Greenwood County. The Reverend Marshall, who lived twenty-four miles away from the church, usually held Conference on the second Saturday afternoon and stayed overnight with a family of the church. It was a rare privilege to have the pastor spend the night in one’s home. The house was spic and span when the preacher came, and the best food was served. He was the only hero we had around Zion to worship. So impeccable (or discreet) was the Reverend Marshall’s conduct that
the only story circulated about him was that once he got up in the middle of the night and left a certain woman's house because she had approached him in an immoral way. The young people heard all the gossip the old people talked, and if there had been any scandal about Marshall, the young people would have heard and no doubt circulated it. He was accused of loving money too well, but he was never accused of stealing it. Why shouldn't he have loved it? Why, indeed, should he not have lusted for it? He had ten children or more; and from his four churches he received a total of only $800 a year.

The Reverend Marshall's preaching was highly other-worldly, emphasizing the joys of heaven and the damnation of hell. He preached funerals according to the life the deceased had lived. He didn't hesitate to preach the dead "smack into heaven" or into hell, according to the life he or she had lived. The church was usually full at funerals, especially if the deceased had been well known; and when a man of bad reputation died the church was jammed. The people wanted to hear what kind of funeral sermon Marshall would preach. I am sure that a burning hell and a golden-streeted heaven were as real as their farms to a majority of the people in Mount Zion and in the community at large. They believed the trials and tribulations of the world would all be over when one got to heaven. Beaten down at every turn by the white man, as they were, Negroes could perhaps not have survived without this kind of religion.

There was no doubt in the minds of some that Marshall had special power with God. Even when he prayed for rain and it didn't come, they still believed he had influence with God. If he prayed for rain on the second Sunday in the month and it came the next day, it was obviously in answer to Marshall's prayer.

Members who had done great wrongs were brought before the Church Conference on the second Saturday in the month. Frequently they were turned out of the church if the Conference proclaimed them guilty. But a person could repent, or make a pretense of repentance, and be taken right back into the fold. I was present at a Church Conference when a young couple appeared who had been sexually intimate; the young woman was pregnant. They admitted what they had done. Marshall advised the young man to marry the girl. With his right hand lifted toward heaven, Marshall told the young man that if he didn't marry the young woman and live with her, fulfilling the duties of a husband, something unspeakably bad would happen to him. The young man married the girl on the spot, but then went on his way, never assuming any responsibility for his wife or child. Not long afterward, he was killed one midnight, so viciously beaten to death with a club that his brains were spattered all over the ground. In the summer of 1968, my sister told me Negroes believed that this young man had been killed by a certain white man because he was hanging around a Negro woman with whom the white man was having relations. Neither whites nor Negroes did anything to apprehend the murderer. The apparent fulfillment
of Marshall's prophecy in this case skyrocketed his prestige in the community. Thereafter nobody wanted Preacher Marshall to "put bad mouth" on them.

Although Marshall taught the people to be honest and upright, the Gospel he preached was primarily an opiate to enable them to endure and survive the oppressive conditions under which they lived at the hands of the white people in the community. I never heard him utter one word against lynching. If he had, he would probably have been run out of the community—or lynched. When a visiting minister attempted to condemn white people, Pastor Marshall stopped him. I was there. I saw it and I heard it. I am not necessarily condemning the use of religion as an opiate. Sometimes an opiate is good in medicine. Sometimes it may be good in religion. Certainly religious faith has helped me in my struggles.

As my pastor accepted the system and made no effort to change it, so it was in other churches—Negro and white—in my day. Of the 118 persons interviewed who could remember what kind of sermons were being preached around the turn of the century, fifty-nine (50 percent) said that their ministers taught them nothing about white people. Twenty (17 percent) reported that their ministers instructed them to obey white people, be submissive and humble, and get along with whites. Twenty-one said their ministers taught them to be respectful to whites. Nineteen did not answer the question on the church and race. Only four said that their ministers taught them to demand their rights. One woman said that her pastor was bitter about the racial situation. The vast majority of them said the church was helpful to them.

Pastor Marshall "stayed in" with the local white Methodist preacher, although Marshall believed that all who were not Baptists were hellward bound. When certain elements in the church wanted to get rid of Marshall, he invited the Reverend Pierce Kinard, a white Methodist, to come to Zion and advise the Negroes to keep Marshall, which of course effectively ended the incipient move to have Preacher Marshall removed.

The Reverend Marshall baptized every member in my family, including Mother and Father. Father did not join the church until after the earthquake in 1886. My parents told me that, after the quake, the Reverend Marshall baptized a hundred men at one session. "God moves in mysterious ways!"

Mother believed, as Marshall did, that only Baptists could get to heaven—that is, she did until my brother, H. H., joined the Presbyterian Church! When I teased her about this, Mother replied, "All things are possible with God." As a small boy, I really felt sorry for the Methodists who passed our house going to the Methodist church. Not for long, however, could I believe that they were all bound for hell, for some of my best friends were non-Baptists; some of the girls I began to like were not Baptists; and indeed I ended up marrying a member of the CME Church.

Though the people of Mount Zion, for the most part, were poor and unlettered, nevertheless they did much for me. As I sat as a boy in Sunday school, discussing the Sunday school lessons with the adults, asking ques-
tions and making comments, they encouraged me and gave me their blessings. Each Sunday in June, we had what was called “Children’s Day.” I do not remember exactly how old I was—possibly nine—when I participated, having committed to memory a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. After my recitation, the house went wild: old women waved their handkerchief, old men stamped their feet, and the people generally applauded long and loud. It was a terrific ovation, let alone a tremendous experience, for a nine-year-old boy. There were predictions that I would “go places” in life. The minister said I would preach; and from that moment on the Reverend Marshall manifested a special interest in me. All of this was part of the motivation that had started with my oldest sister’s teaching me how to count and read and write, thereby winning for me the encouragement and praise given me by my first teacher, Ellen Waller. The people in the church did not contribute one dime to help me with my education. But they gave me something far more valuable. They gave me encouragement, the thing I most needed. They expressed such confidence in me that I always felt that I could never betray their trust, never let them down.

After the Phoenix Riot, never a year passed in my county that there were not several brutal incidents involving Negroes and whites. In the months following the Phoenix Riot, I had seen bloodhounds on our land with a mob looking for a Negro. I saw a Negro hiding in the swamps for fear of being caught and lynched. Negroes always got the worst of it. Guilt and innocence were meaningless words: the Negro was always blamed, always punished. Among themselves, Negroes talked much about these tragedies. They were impatient to do anything about them. They dared not even mention them to whites.

I was twelve years old when I read about the Atlanta Riot in the Greenwood Index and the Atlanta Journal, the two papers to which we subscribed. As I recall, the papers played up the fact that the Atlanta Riot was the result of a series of attacks that Negro men were supposed to have made on white women. It was not until I was older that I realized that Hoke Smith, who campaigned for governor of Georgia on a white supremacy platform, and the four Atlanta newspapers which played up the accusations against the Negroes, not only struck the match but supplied the combustible material to ignite the flames that produced the Atlanta Riot.

It was in this connection that I received a stern lecture from the man who was later to marry my sister Susie. He was an unlettered but highly intelligent man. Like Susie, he would have done well in anybody’s college had he been given half a chance to go. He often walked miles to see my sister, and frequently if he left before dark he would invite me to walk a distance with him. During one of our walks, the Atlanta Riot was mentioned. I was old enough at the time to hear what my parents talked about in the home. I heard the gossip about things that happened in the community. My older brothers and sisters learned all the rumors of the county and talked freely
about them at home and in the cotton fields. We knew that a beautiful, light-brown-skinned Negro woman was living in the house with a white man, and that Negro men knew enough to leave her alone. It was common knowledge that "Hamp," the mulatto Negro who lived in a house a white man built for him in his backyard and whom the white man kept there to work in his house and to drive his daughters around, was really the white man's son, born to a Negro woman, and therefore half brother to the white daughters. It was an accepted fact that "Polly," a beautiful Negro woman, was the paramour of "Lowden," a white man. Once Polly was caught in a buggy with a Negro man, and rumor had it that Lowden made her get out of the buggy and threatened to shoot the Negro man. This story was so deeply believed that fifty years later Negroes living in that community were still talking about Polly and Lowden, who both lingered ill and suffered for years before they died. Negroes say even now that God punished them for their sins. It no doubt was a comfort to believe that God would mete out the punishment that Negroes were powerless to inflict. Occasionally, too, a white baby turned up in a black home.

In the Atlanta Riot, which began on Saturday night, September 22, 1906, and extended through Tuesday, September 25, many Negroes were killed and many more wounded. One or two whites were killed and several wounded. The riot was allegedly caused by black men attacking white women. It was in this context that I asked my brother-in-law-to-be why it was that white men could do anything they wanted to Negro women but Negro men were lynched and killed if they did the same to white women or even if they were merely accused and innocent. My prospective brother-in-law stopped by the side of the road and gave me a stern lecture. He told me in positive language never to discuss that matter again. It was dangerous talk, and if I said such a thing in the presence of a white person it would not be good for me.

Years later, when I thought it necessary to do some research on both the Phoenix and the Atlanta riots for this autobiography, I discovered that the four Atlanta papers — the Atlanta Constitution, the Atlanta Journal, the Georgian, and the Evening News — played up the reported attacks on white women out of all proportion to the facts; and that John Temple Graves, editor of the Georgian, really whooped it up. I learned as recently as the summer of 1968 that an analysis of the twelve alleged attacks on white women, committed six months before the riot, showed that two were cases of rape, three were cases of attempted rape, three were cases producing no definite proof of attempted rape, three were purely cases of fright on the part of white women, and a final one said at first that a Negro had assaulted her but finally confessed that she had attempted suicide. Attacks were made on Negroes indiscriminately in the Atlanta Riot with as many as five thousand white men participating. Charles Crowe, associate professor of history at the University of Georgia, writing of the Atlanta Riot in the April, 1969, issue of the Journal of Negro History, says:
As a result of the riot, one white person died and several dozen were hurt. Twenty-five black men perished, about one hundred and fifty suffered serious wounds, hundreds had less critical injuries, and more than a thousand black men, women and children fled the city. For several months to come white leaders busied themselves with public apologetics as black people concentrated on the restoration of "normal" patterns of work and life. The Atlanta race riot was not soon forgotten by black people who remembered with particular vividness the evening of September 22 as the terror-ridden night of the white assassins.  

Another incident happened in my county two years after the Atlanta Riot of 1906, which I remember vividly—I was fourteen at the time. Jack Johnson, a Negro, defeated Jim Jeffries, a white man, in Reno, Nevada, and became the first black heavyweight champion of the world. White men in my county could not take it. A few Negroes were beaten up because a Negro had beaten a white man in far-away Nevada. Negroes dared not discuss the outcome of this boxing match in the presence of whites. In fact, Johnson's victory was hard on the white man's world. Race riots broke out in a number of places and many Negroes were killed. Jack Johnson committed two grave blunders as far as whites were concerned: He beat up a white man and he was socializing with a white woman—both deadly sins in 1908.

This was the pattern during slavery and long after the post-Reconstruction years. In this relationship, white men and Negro women were free. Perhaps the best portrayal of the relationship between white men and Negro women, and, in the colonial days, between the Negro male and the white female servant, is to be found in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States.* Writing of the relationship that existed between white men and Negro women, Frazier says: "cohabitation of the men of the master race with the women of the slave race occurred on every level, and became so extensive that it nullified to some extent the monogamous mores."

I cannot close this chapter without words of commendation for my parents. My father was bitterly opposed to my efforts to get an education; and yet I owe much to my parents. I shall mention only two things:

My parents were industrious. There wasn't a lazy bone in their bodies. They didn't sit back and make the children do it. They did their part on the farm. In addition to cooking, seeing that our clothes were washed and ironed, and keeping the house clean, Mother hoed and picked cotton, and Father worked equally hard. I must have caught their spirit of work. To this day, I am impatient with lazy people. Father believed that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, and that, to him, meant working on the farm in the blazing hot sun. And my parents were honest. I never heard them scheming how they might get something for nothing. I never suspected them of stealing anything from anybody. They taught their children honesty. I believe that not a single child in our family expected to get anything except through honest channels and by his own efforts. I am reminded of
what John Hope, president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, once said. He admitted that Morehouse was poor, but added, “We live in respectable poverty!” The Mays family was poor and lived on the ragged edge of poverty, but we lived in “respectable poverty.”

The rugged honesty of my parents has stuck with me through all these years. I am intolerant of dishonesty, particularly intellectual dishonesty, wherein men ignore or distort the truth and plot to take advantage of others for their own indulgence. My parents did little or no ethical philosophizing, but they lived their ideals of industry and honesty. I am indebted to them for their living example, and I am grateful.

There were only a few books in the Mays’ house and no magazines. We had the Bible, a dictionary, picture books about Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Sunday school books. We read the Atlanta Journal and the Greenwood Index. And we had the school textbooks from which we learned to read, spell, and figure to a certain level. This was about it. Nobody in the family had gone beyond the fourth or fifth grade. I didn’t seem to have much to go on. But I had learned industry and honesty from my parents. I had been inspired by my county teachers, encouraged by the Reverend Marshall, and motivated by the people in the church who made me believe that I could become something worthwhile in the world. These are the things that drove me on and, when they are summed up, I guess they amount to quite a lot.

NOTES

1. According to local legend, the town of Ninety Six, South Carolina, got its name from an event during the Revolutionary War when a Cherokee Indian maiden rode from the Cherokee reservation to Old Star Fort, then occupied by the British, to warn the British that the Americans were approaching. The distance was ninety-six miles; the warning was not successful; the Americans overcame the British; but the name Ninety Six was born.


5. A team of interviewers composed of teachers, senior and graduate college students, using a carefully prepared schedule of questions, conducted in-depth personal interviews of 118 selected persons living in the Atlanta area and born in the South just before and after the turn of the century.

