

[Mary Windsor]

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Mrs. Sonie Williams ([rool nine?])

Verns, Florida

Life of sharecropper

Barbara Berry Dersey, writer

Veronica [E?]. Ruass, revisor

MARY WINDSOR

Mary's small, unpainted shack stood in an isolated clearing almost a quarter of a mile from the grades. I found it by following a dim woods trail which led from the grade through the heart of a hammock. The few scattered pines surrounding her homes made a pleasant contrast against the door green of the bayhead in the background.

To reach the house I had to leave the trail and pick my way through vines and thick grasses and around large clumps of palmettos where thoughts of lurking rattlesnakes sent me scurrying toward my destination. There was no other dwelling within miles and a peculiar stillness brooded over the place, broken only by the sougning of the wind in the [pines?].

[?] week feminine voice called from the house as I approached. Come right in [man?]. There aint no gate but you kin raise under the wire and get through the fence that way. Willie has been a-fixin to make us a gate ever since we come here but he don't seem

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to find no time for it. Sure enough there was no gate in the rusty two-strand barbed wire fence which zigzagged around the house but the strands were hang loosely upon the crooked posts, and it was an easy matter to crawl under the lowest strand.

Please [?], just chase them little biddios cutten the room, for that old hen, she won't be quiet till she gets them all out with her. They will come in this way when I's sick in bed and can't chase them out. They's always a-lookin for scraps and crumbs. I declare, I believe one or two is in the kitchen yet, they shore do pester me this way. Would you mind a-shooin 2 them out please. I feels sorry[,] to pester you like this, mam, but there ain't no body also to call.

The tiny chicks were urged out the front door to be taken under the protecting wing of the [irate?] hen. The other chickens were then chased from the kitchen table. They made their protesting way into the back yard where they lingered about the steps.

With order restored for the time being, the comely young woman with dark curly red hair, spoke again. She lay in the soiled bed covered with several dingy blankets and a ragged quilt: "This here house don't look very clean mam. But I been sick now with chills and fever for most a week, and I aint been able to clean and scrub and wash like I belong to. Teeny, there, she dont' feel so good neither, she's had the fever medicine, he ain't got back yet."

Teeny, proved to be a tiny two-handed girl of two or three years of age. She was cuddled down in the blankets next to her mother.

"[?] mam, we don't never have a doctor, living so far out this way and without no money much neither. I feel better soon as I take a few doses of that fever medicine. I try to always keep it in the house for there aint no tellin' just when them chills will strike me like. But the medicine, it give out the last time I was so sick and I kept a waitin' thinkin' maybe I wouldn't have no more chills. Soon's Willie gets back and I start the medicine again, I'll feel better. No mam, I don't know just what kind he'll get this time. He says it's better to change the

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medicine a lot and he sure known too, for Willie, he knows a heap about most every thing like.”

She looked dreamily out across the clearing as if the wish for Willie's return would make him materialize at once. When Willie is home and these 3 chills starts, he always wraps me up warm and puts a stove lid to my feet. Then he fixes the medicine for me, too. He always knowed just what to do bout overthing like, he's get such a fine education. Teeny here, she has the chills too and she takes the medicine, but sometimes it makes her sick to her [stomach?]. Come times I wisht we could have a doctor but I expect Willie knows bout as much.

“Teeny is most four years old now. Willie and me has been married bout five year, I think it is. But I don't pay no mind to dates like, and time do pass so quick. I been havin' these here chills and fever off and on all the time like. I spect I [mighta?] had other babies by now If I hadn't been so [skinny?]. I heard that sometimes it keeps more babies from a-comin. I wouldn't mind two or three more if they didn't come along too quick. [Seems?] like it would be real nice for Teeny to have a little brother to play with. Willie don't never say much but he likes babies, too. I guess he would be glad, specially if it was a boy. He says it's always better to have boys[;] they is easier to raise and can help better with the farmin'.

I sure do wish we had a big farm. Wille, he's always a plannin' to buy one like. Willie, he were raised on a farm too and he sure knows a lot bout farmin. He worked on a lot of places, too, croppin for other folk. And if them folks had-a all just done like he told them to, they woulda made better crops,” she said sincerely.

“Yes mam, we was both borned in Florida. [He] lived here all the time; we ain't never been away out the States. I am most 23 years old now and Willie, I reckon he's about 35. I won't rightly know where he was borned, but it were in Florida. I was borned over in Hardee County, [sway?] out in the country almost like this here. My daddy, he were a farmer, but

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he never had no very big farm. I don't know where my family come from to start with, 4 I never thought of nothin but just a-livin here like.

After drinking a glass of water which I secured for her from a bucket on a bench outside the kitchen door, she continued:

“After we was married Willie, he worked on farms and in the strawberries in Hardee County, a lot. He lost a fortune in them strawberry fields and through no fault of his's. You see he had most a hundred dollars he made at a sawmill just fore we get married, so he went in with a nother man to raise berries. But the man, he wouldn't do like Willie said and they both lost all their money. It shore made us feel awful bad and we aint never had that much money any more like.”

In reply to a question about the mill work. Mary stated with prides Willie, he is a [sawyer]?, and he kin run one of them circle saws better's most anybody else. I guess ther just ain't much that he can't do, he got so mush schoolin and known so much.”

“I reckon Willie could get lota work most anywhere, but he can't do much in the mill or at farmin for it hurts his back like. Sometime though he works in the mill and then we have more money, but it ain't ever enough and it don't last long for things is so high. Willie, he has worked round on [lota?] farms, but seems like he knows so much better how to do the work and it most always makes the folks mad at him. I guess they's jest jealous. Seems like Willie, he just don't hold no job for long, even when it don't hurt his back. He always knows a better way to do most any kind of work, and sometimes he gets mad and says the work just ain't worth afoolin with.

“I'll be mighty glad when we can buy us a great big farm, man, like Willie is a plannin to do. I want a big car, too, and a fie big house, but I don't see no chance of it now. I hope we won't be a livin' so far out in the woods them. Willie likes it out here and I do too, only I get 5 real lonesome-like sometimes. And it's worsor when I's so sick, cause then I wish I

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had some neighbors to come in. I sure am glad you come today, so you could talk to me awhile.

“This here place is all right for us now cause we don't pay no rent. and we aint pestered by nobody. But I'd like to be near a town and see folks and things, and go to picture shows. We might get there sometimes if we lived in town. I useter like to go dancin fore Willie and me was married. I aint been to a dance for so long now I spect I forgot how. We don't have no way to get no place livin way out here, it's a mighty long walk to town. It aint often there is anybody [comes?] along the grade with a car either, and it's a long walk so the grad from here.

“How I wouldn't want folks always a-runnin in and tellin me how to do things and manage like, but I would like to visit some. It's so far to [walk?] any place the way it is now, by the time I [geta?] where I's a-goin I's too tired to visit. Sometimes somebody comes along with a car and carries us where we want to go, but that ain't often.

Sometimes I think I would like to try livin in a citys but I spect I would get mighty tired of the dust, and noise, and smoke, and all them pesterin things I hear about. Out here it is quiet and the air is pure and sweet, and don't them pines look pritty a wavin in the sunshine? I been to some of the big towns around her, and they look mighty nice at night with all them lights. But I don't see how people sleep, and when they is sick it must be just awful. But people what lives there gets to see a heap of things we don't never git the chance to and here is lots of places to go to. If we lived in town we might be able to go to the movin pictures sometimes and there to a lot of free things to go to, like band playing and parades.

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“It might be better for Teeny, if she was to be raised in town, but I don't know. Some folks say city childrens is smarter than others, but there is Willie, he was raised in the country and there just aint nobody no smarter than what he is. When Teeny gets ready to go to

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school I spect we'll have to move if we is still a livin out here, for she never could walk to the grade and to the school bus through all these here woods all by [herself?].”

Mary spoke again of works: “Sometimes when I feel well and we need money or food real bad I takes Teeny and walks over to one of the farms around here and he'p with the work. I do anything they want me to, but mostly it's workin in the field. Sometimes they pay me money, mostly a dollar a day. If I gets there real early they always feed me and Teeny and gives me some food to bring home. But, sometimes they want me to take all vegetables for pay and that don't suit so well, but I don't say nothin.

“We don't none of us like vegetables much you know, but we eat them some when we have to. I heard they is awful healthy to eat but I don't see why, they seems mostly like cow feed to me. Willie is always a planin to raise a big garden, but he don't never seem to get to it. He [does?] raise a few cabbages and some turnip greens. We like them some if they's cooked with plenty of side meat. Willie says what's the use of plantin so much, we wouldn't eat it and he couldn't sell it. Though there is folks that sells their vegetables and makes a lots of money too[!?]”

“I would like to get fresh milk for Teeny, but we can't away out here, and she not bein' use to it mightn't like it anyway. When we has the money to spare I gets her [cerned?] milk. She drinks it sometimes then agin she won't have it. She sure does like moat though, and the [fatter?] the better. When she was a real little youngun I uster tie a piece of side meat skin to 7 her hand so she could suck it and it would keep her from cryin lots of times.

Willie claims cryin is good for younguns, but it worries me. I always gits the idea there is something awful the matter with them. Teeny, she always had cried a lot, and she still do it too. Mary paused to gaze lovingly on tho tousled little head and grimy face that peeped timidly from the tumble of bed clothes.

Speaking of finances Mary said: “Money don't seem to go nowhere these days and we never have much to spend neither. A little side moat, shortnin and flour, is about all [we?]”

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own get. [We?] don't always have that neither. I guess maybe we both could get more work on some of the farms round here, but it hurts Willie's back so to do that work. Then I's so sick so much of the time. And loten times we has to take pay in vegetables, and we don't like that. We might get a little meat and syrup too sometimes, but not very often. Willie says they just don't farm right round here anyway, and he don't like to try it their way, and they won't let him work his own way.

"I don't rightly know how much it would take for us to have the feed we wants and some clothes and everthing. I ain't no hand fer figgers. I sure wish Willie was here to talk to you about that, man. Pat, I do wish we had all the food we want, and some good clothes to wear, and a house, and a car, too.

"I aint had as much schoolin as Willie, I guess he went most through high school. He knows so much, and he can read and write real well, and figger as good as anybody. I guess there just ain't no rithmetic he can't work and [? can't?] hardly ask him a question but what he can answer it. I never went to school real regular, but I was in the sixth grade when I quit. This was jest a little time before Willie and me got married. I 8 learnt to read and write real well and a little about our country, and geogrofy, but I never could figger none.

What does a woman need with so much schoolin anyway? Figgerin wouldn't do me no good, I ain't never had no use fer it. I guess schoolin is all right for them what wants a lot of it, but it takes a heap of time and money to keep at it like some folks do. My ma, she never had much schoolin and she got on all right. She never would make us girls go regular neither, what I mean is, if [we] begged to stay home, she let us.

"Now there's Willie with all his schoolin and the fine hand he can write and the figgers he can do and all he knows about so many thing. But he aint never got on much, and I believe he'd been jest as well without so much learnin. Willie claims they spend too much money on the schools nowadays with all them new things they teach. They even toach the boys

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how to fix cars and run engines and the like. But Willie, he could do all that without no learnin bout it in school.”

I do like to read some, I like love stories and them movie magazines with all the pictures of the actresses in them. We don't never get no magazines less somebody gives us some, fer it seems like all the money we get goes fer food and a few clothes. Even when Willie works steady for a little while we don't seem to have nothin.

Mary stated that she had no interest in politics and knew very little about such matters: “I have voted some,” she said with pride, “and jest like Willie told me to do. He knows all about it and just what to do. I never could see why women want to vote, my ma never did. But Willie says it's the law and we all gotta do it. I don't know what it's all about. I never pay it much mind. Besides it don't make no difference to me bout all them strange 9 folks I ain't never know or seen, a-runnin this here country. Willie, he says things is better than what they was, and the Govmint, it has give work to lots of people and kept them form a-starvin, like it ain't never done before. He says lots of people say we all got to pay it back some time a-comin, but that there don't make no sense to me, for we alls spends the money soon as we gots it. Anyways how we a-goin to pay it back?”

Mary then spoke of the church and religions: “No, mam, we don't never go to church much. Though I spose we ought too Willie, he don't like to go stall, and won't hardly ever go even if folks comes to carry us. He claims it makes him fidgety a-sitting there listenin to the preacher talk so much. Livin way out here thisaway like we do anyway, there don't nobody hardly ever come to carry us to town. So we'd just hafter walk and that's too fer. I don't think we is very sinful not goin to church much, and I believe we live all right. It folks [can?] they oughter go, and give money to the church, too, when they can. My daddy always did.

“Sometimes the church helps folks when they is out of work and needy, but us a-livin way out here, they never seem to get to us like. Willie, he wouldn't want them to give us nothin now way, I guess. Willie likes to talk to folks so much you might think he would like to

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go to church, but he don't. He says the preacher don't always say things to suit him, and sometimes he don't hardly seem to know how to preach. Willie, he ain't tried a preachin job yet, but I reckon as how he could do it as well as any of them can.

"I heard that there is places where they have ball games and shows on Sunday. You know that jest aint right, no mam! I uster like the ball game when I went to school but I aint never seen one played on a Sunday. I aint never been to no movie picture on Sunday neither. Seems like there in plenty 10 of time in the week days fer them things. Folks oughter take care to be more quiet like on a Sunday. We always did at home. My daddy, he wouldn't low no foolishness at all on that day.

"No mam, there shore aint nothin for me to do, I sure am glad you come by and talked to me a spell. I feels better now. Why if we had a doctor come way out here, I spect he'd charge a awful lot of money, bout two or three dollars maybe. I hand these here fever spells so often now I sorter got [nat?] to them like. Jest as soon as Willie gets back with the fever medicine I'll start a takin it, and Willie he always knows just what to do for me like."