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[I am a Negro]

96A

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: I AM A NEGRO

Date of writing March 15, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Walter Coachman (colored)

Fictitious Name No Name Given

Address Route #1

Place Bennetsville, S.C.

Occupation Pastor, Manning Grove,

Holiness Church.

Name of Writer F.Donald Atwell

Name of Reviser State Office. C.O [?] - S.C.

Project 1655

"A mere whimsy of fate made me black and you white.

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It might easily have been the other way around. You were born

with the blessing of Providence. Hands were extended to help you the day you were born, and you may go as far as your capabilities permit. But me? The cards were stacked against me the day I came into the world. I can go just so far—no further.

“I was born the twelfth son in a family of thirteen children. My father was as black as the ace of spades, and killed himself working for old man Whitelaw on the twelve horse plantation just outside Bennetsville.

“I realized early in life that I was a Negro, and that it was the lot of our people to get the bum end of everything, all things said to the contrary. My father worked hard, made good crops, and was always in the hole at the end of the year.

“My mother was a woman of most forceful character even if she was colored. She fought tooth and toe-nail to see that us children got some education. I went to a one-room negro school about three miles from where we lived. I learned to read, write and figure. I was, and still am, interested in figuring! When I was twelve, I had gone through the fifth grade. I began to figure against old man Whitelaw. My mother was in full accord. Pappy always said it was a sin to take advantage of people. It was against the Bible.

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Pappy was a good, Christian Negro. He was too meek to suit my mother. I remember my first experience in looking out for number one. My father had me hitch up the two horse wagon and haul the corn in. Two loads to Mr, Whitelaw's barn, and one to ours. I made the mistake of occasionally hauling two loads to our barn and one to old man Whitelaw's. Honest? Of course, it was honest! Didn't Whitelaw charge my father twelve dollars an acre for corn land? I wasn't exactly a fool even as a child.

“Later, I checked up on the cotton and found the biggest part in Mr. Whitelaw's cotton house. It was waiting there to be ginned. I slipped in there one night and made a rough

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estimate between the value of that cotton, and the cost of fertilizer and the value of the land, and I came out two bales to the good.

That cotton was ginned at Whaley's gin down below Bennetsville. I hauled it away in the night! Pappy came out pretty good the next year.

“When I was eighteen, I left home and went to Columbia to go to Allen University. I hadn't been there long when my father began to go in the hole again, and I had to shift around to pay my tuition. I got a job with Mrs. Reynolds, a widow lady who loved flowers and had a wondefful garden.

She didn't have much money. In fact I soon found out while working around the flowers and garden that she was really up 3 against it. She had given me the yard work to help me stay in school.

There was an acre lot next to her house that belonged to her, so one day after studying the situation thoroughly I suggested that she turn it into a flower and plant garden, and sell plants, bulbs and flowers. I told her I would put in every minute I wasn't in school to make it go over. She fell in for the plan right off, and I certainly put out on that bare acre.

“I was working hard at my classes, studying theology, and every moment I could spare I slipped away to work in the garden. It soon showed the result of intensive cultivation, and it wasn't long before it became a showplace in Columbia.

People would stop their cars along the street and just sit and look. I painted a sign or two stating that we had plants of all kinds for sale. I planted plenty tomato, pepper, and egg-plant seed, and sold every plant.

“It wasn't long before Mrs. Reynolds was busy all day long driving about filling orders. I did all the dirty work, and she did the talking, advertising, and selling.

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It was a glorious partnership, because Mrs. Reynolds was the finest woman God ever let breath, and she gave me a fair share of the profit.

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“When she died in Columbia hospital, it nearly killed me. I was about twenty-two then, and graduating from school.

I hoped so much that she would come to the graduating exercises, because I was class poet, and I meant to show off for her.

“I shall never forget that cold, blustery day in the cemetery. As they lowered her casket, something in me went down with her. I stayed there until everyone had left, and then I got down on my knees and cried. All I could say was:

'Goodbye, Miss Alice.' My eyes were so filled up I couldn't hardly see.

“If only God would put more white people like her on earth. Why, I used to sometime spend the night in the house with her. Do you think she was afraid? I never slept a wink, because I was watching over Miss Alice. Her niece stayed with her most of the time, but occasionally she would go home on the week-end. She went to school in Columbia, and stayed with Miss Alice because it was cheaper than boarding or staying at the dormitory. It was when she went home that I used to stay with Miss Alice.

“Did I ever get the idea I was as good as Miss Alice?

Certainly not. I am a Negro, and I'm not ashamed of it. I know, and I have to teach and preach that we are entitled to economic equality but never social equality. If God hadn't intended for us to always be two separate races, he'd made us alike.

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“I remember the day the grocery man came to the house.

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He shouted to me in the yard: "Hey, nigger, gimme a hand with these groceries." Miss Alice gave him a look fit to kill him and said: "There are no niggers working here, Mr. Blake. I shall appreciate your not addressing my help as nigger."

"That was Miss Alice all over. She wouldn't stand running over. Why, I'da died for Miss Alice. I used to wonder late in the night when I stayed in the house to look after her, what I would do if some danger really threatened. I was like most young fellows I guess — a little scary. But I believe I would have faced death easily to protect that good woman. I owe my education to her, and a lot more besides. She taught me how to conduct myself around decent white people, and I've never forgotten her teachings.

"Only the other day I was over in Columbia addressing the colored Bible Class of the Methodist Church South when I came down Hampton Street to find a little colored boy and a white boy fighting. A group of whites had gathered and was shouting encouragement to the white child. On the other side had grouped a bunch of Negroes, and they were pulling for the colored boy. The white boy was much larger, and the little colored boy crying pitifully and taking an awful beating.

"The Negroes saw the unfairness of it all, and the [tenseness?] between the two warring groups could be felt.

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Now, I had learned from Miss Alice that diplomacy would always get you further than simply being pig-headed because you were right, so I quietly eased in and when the children separated, I grasped the colored child by the hand and walked on down the street with him, talking softly to soothe him. I didn't look back, and I didn't speak to anyone except the child.

"Suppose I had been outspoken? It would have been striking a match to dynamite. I try to impress on my people the necessity for diplomacy in their dealings with their white

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brothers. I know that we will never work out our problems in any other way. Kindness and thoughtfulness will do much towards improving the feelings between us.

"I know we are downtrodden. But you know, Miss Alice showed me that we can work things out peacefully if we only will.

The real trouble after all is lack of consideration. I can understand the feelings of the Jews. They have to fight tooth and toe-nail for everything. It is the same way with the Negro.

You know, and I know there are plenty white people in the south who think that a negro should live on nothing and go ragged.

They think that is enough for him. It hurts me deeply to see my people going about in the cold winter time with no shoes.

I hate to see them living in nasty hovels. They are human, and they are entitled to humans treatment.

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"In the last few years, I think the Negro has forgiven a lot because he sees so many poor white people living on his level. He sees the poor, scrawny little mill woman with her weazened baby trudging to the relief office to get something to eat. Only the other day, an old colored mammy who has raised ten children of her own, told me she has been taking care of a poor girl's baby. The mother wasn't married, and she died just after the baby was born. Her people would have nothing to do with her, and she was actually lying in one of those mill-village shanties alone with her child. The old mammy told me that when she heard about it, it made her sick all over. She said she told the people around the neighborhood that if they wouldn't do something for that poor girl, she would. That girl was actually lying in a dirty bed and there wasn't a thing to eat in the house. Mammy took the child and nursed that girl until she died. The county buried her, and the Dept. Welfare took the child.

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"I tell you, I dont know what we're coming to. I try to find solace in the Bible, and also an explanation for the terrible times we are having. But one thing is certain, we've got to get back to God and his teachings.

"There is so much greed and hatred in the lives and hearts of men. The rich people in America look like they dont care anything about anyone but themselves.

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"Even the colored race sticks together better than the white people. I cant understand it all. I have noticed that when a Greek or Italian comes to this country he gets help right off. The same with a Jew. People say you never see a Jew working. They work, but they work their heads, and they stand by one another.

"It is very seldom that the county has to bury a Negro. We have our burial societies. We tide our members over when they get in the tight. When Negroes go to the relief, it is because there are so many to help that the fairly well-to-do Negroes have their hands full and can't help but so many.

"But it is certainly different with the white people.. I saw a poor white boy go in a store the other day and ask for work. The manager wasn't even kind to him, but told him to go to the WPA and get work. If that had been a Greek boy, the manager would have given him something to do to help him until he could get on his feet.

"Now I've got four children. I'm forty-one and my wife is thirty. We determined to help our children, and stick by them to the last ditch. My oldest is a boy 17.

He goes to School in Bennetsville, and is interested in electricity. I'm going to help him in every way I can.

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I have told him what its all about, and me and his mammy are sacrificing to keep him in school. Our other three children are going to grammar school. I dont make very much now that times are so hard with my people. I have four churches scattered throughout Marlboro County, and I preach at each one once a month. In this way, I make more than just one church.

“I am buying a little farm, if I everbget it paid for. We are living there, and my wife works the garden, and looks after the chickens. The children do the heavy outdoor work such as cutting wood, milking, etc.

“I have very little time at home, because I have to go from church to church, and in the meantime, I'm busy on my sermons. Then too, I put on revival meetings here and there. I save a lot of people, but I dont make much. I wont average over eight or nine dollars a Sunday. You see that has to be stretched over the week.

“I thank God I'm doing as well as I am. I have a car or at least a piece of one, and my congregation pays my oil and gas bill. If they didn't I couldnt get around.

I am doing everything I can to set an example for my children.

I shall continue to teach them that courtesy, kindness and consideration for the feelings of others will carry them far, and I shall impress on them the necessity for upholding the ideals of their race.

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“I want them to become men and women worthy of the best treatment any Negro can hope to receive, and I want them to win the respect of white people, and do all in their power to promote better understanding between the two races.

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If they do not fulfil my hopes, it wont be my fault, because I shall do everything to make them fine men and women.