Big Mama's Story

In Her Own Words

by

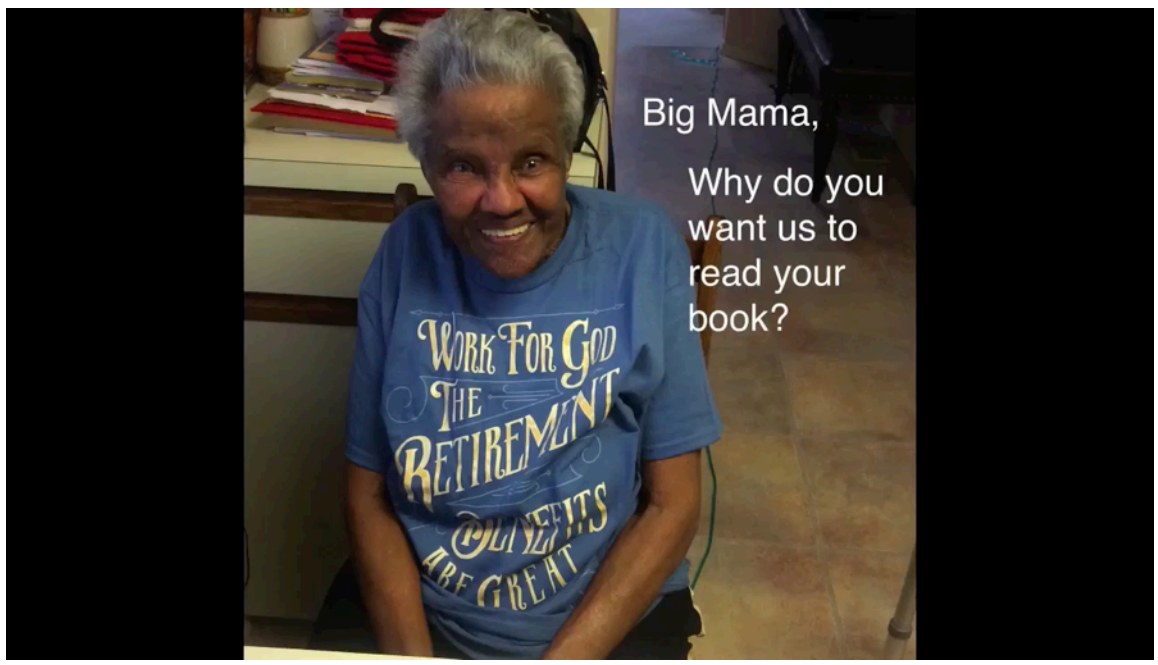
Lenora Kelly

with David LaMotte

Published using iBooks Author and available free of charge on iBooks.

Send all inquiries to davlamotte@me.com.

Video Forward by Big Mama



If you are reading a pdf version of this book, then go to the following url to see and hear Big Mama's Forward: http://bit.ly/LKForward

If you are inspired by Big Mama's story,
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Princeton HomeCare Hospice Program

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How This Book Came About

I started serving as Big Mama's hospice volunteer in late October, 2015. During our weekly visits, she told me stories and shared old photographs. Between our visits, I took my rough, typed notes and turned them into a narrative, which I would then read back to Big Mama at subsequent visits. Chapter by chapter, we assembled the autobiography presented here. The biggest challenge was to try to do justice to Big Mama's voice. In the end, words on the page are a pale reflection of the immediacy of her stories, her truly distinctive way with words, her humor, and her wisdom. So we decided to include the Video Forward as a way to let her invite you into her story in her own voice. (If you are reading this book in a format that does not permit you to view the video forward, you can also see and hear it at the following url: http://bit.ly/LKForward.)

"Life review," helping people recollect their lives and write down some of their stories, plays an important role in hospice. It's a way of sustaining a sense of meaning and purpose for those nearing the end of life, and at a time when they are increasingly dependent on others, it's a way of affirming that they are still the authors of their own experience. Big Mama's story is something more: it is a testament to "love, joy, and life" by an extraordinary woman who grew up on a peanut farm during the Great Depression, witnessed and participated in the Great Migration, and lived a life of service to family, friends, and strangers. What a privilege it has been for me to help her tell her story. And now, in the words of one of her favorite hymns, may the work she has done speak for her.

As Big Mama would say, "So that's the way that goes."

David LaMotte

David LaMotte has served since 2010 as a volunteer with Princeton HomeCare Hospice, where he also coordinates the placement of volunteers in both the regular hospice program and a special program called “No One Dies Alone,” for patients who are actively dying and have no friends or family by their side. David also serves on the Biomedical Ethics Committee at the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro and on the board of Goals of Care, a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve end-of-life care by strengthening communication between doctor and patient. Until his retirement in 2015, David taught English for more than 30 years, most of them at Princeton Day School in Princeton, NJ, where he was Chair of Upper School English from 1999-2013.

CHAPTER 1

Each Day I Wake

All my life I have been guided by God. His pathway is narrow, and you have to walk the chalk line by faith and grace. "The Lord Is My Shepherd." That's my favorite psalm. And my favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace."

Each day I wake, I thank the Lord for watching over me in my sleep and allowing me to wake to a day I've never seen before. He allows me to get up, and I stand and wait until my head guides me to move my foot. Sometimes it takes ten minutes before I can move, but then He allows me to go to my bathroom, He allows me to go to my kitchen and get me a cup of coffee.

I've got a terrible kind of arthritis. Mr. Arthur. He's worse some days than others, but I got to live with him every day of my life. I'm not able to do all the things I'd like to do, but I thank the Lord for each step He allows me to make every day of my life.

A woman asked me, "How old are you, Lenora?" And I said, "Thirty-Nine." "What do you mean"? she asked me. And I said, "Turn that number around."

See what it says here on this shirt? “I’ve seen it all. I’ve heard it all. I’ve done it all. I just can’t remember it all.”

CHAPTER 2

The Little One Is Here, 1922

I was born on October 21, 1922, in the house my father built, on his farm in Surry County, Virginia, the poorest county in the state. I was the tenth of eleven children, all of us born there on the farm. My own daughter was born there, too, and so was one of my nephews. That farm stayed in my family until 2016. My father died in 1947 at the age of 69, and my mother died on May 18, 1960, at the age of 79. All of my siblings are gone now, too. The oldest, William, was the first to die, in 1962. And the youngest, my sister Vernice, just died a couple of years ago, on December 18, 2013.

My father's parents, Samson and Martha Howell, were natives of Barbados. They were part Amerindian; I've seen a picture of Martha with two long braids though she died long before I was born. They worked their way over on a ship, came to Florida first, and then settled in Surry County, where my granddaddy be-

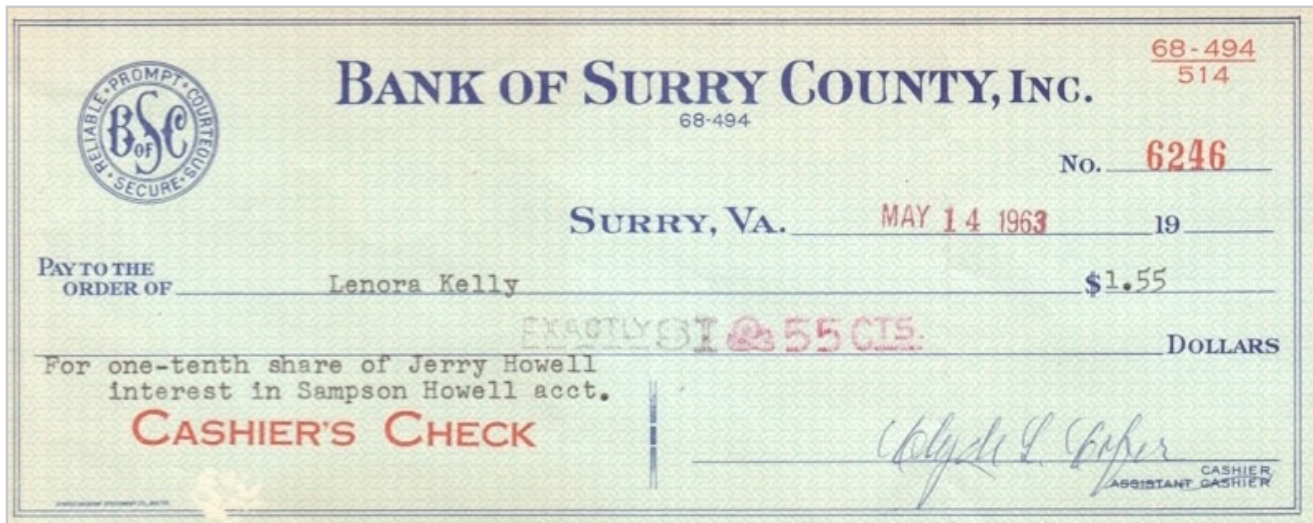
came a successful farmer. He bought the land for our church, Swans Point Baptist Church, and helped build it. There were a lot of carpenters in our family. That's how my daddy built his home so cheap.

My granddaddy's farm was right in back of ours, way back in the woods. It was a beautiful farm with a big cherry tree on it. I used to go up that tree to get some cherries. I'd fill a basket with them, and we used to sell up some of them for five or ten cents a pint. By then, my grandfather's farm was in the hands of my Uncle Bossy. My grandfather died when I was two weeks old.

My parent's siblings all had big families. I have 117 first cousins on my mother's side, and I don't know how many on my father's side. Only one of all those cousins is still living: Ernestine Johns, who is six foot six, 89 years old, and lives in East Orange, New Jersey. Of my sisters' and brothers' children, I have two living nieces: Mavis Brown, who still lives in Surry County, Virginia, and Vern Ukkerd, who lives in Havertown, Pennsylvania.

In the early 1960's, many years after my grandfather died, the Bank of Surry County came to my Uncle Bossy and asked for the names of all my grandfather's

children and grandchildren. My grandfather had some money that had been sitting in that bank for all those years, and now they needed to close the account. That meant dividing up the money among his children. By then some of those children had passed on, including my father, so their shares were to be divided up among their children. Samson had 12 children by two marriages, and my father's one-twelfth share was divided among my nine siblings and me. I still have the check from the Bank of Surry County, for the grand total of $1.55!



My father built his farmhouse when he was 25 years old and lived in it for a year before he married my mother, in 1902. They spent their honeymoon in that house, and all eleven of their children were born there. My mother, Nelly Bell Ellis Howell, was around 21 years old when she had her first child, who died of rickets while still an infant. Then she had ten more children, all born about three years apart. I don't know how she did it. She herself was from a big family, 14 children. One of her brothers, Uncle John, had 22 children by two wives and raised them all. They had nothing to do back them but make children.

I was born about four a.m. on a Monday morning. I had a grannie, Miss Clara Wallace, who delivered me and helped my Mama raise me. I was two months premature, and I weighed two pounds. I was so small they kept me on a pillow for three months, on a cane chair near a heater.

When my mother's girlfriend Nelly Scot came by later that morning, my father said, "The little one is here."

"What little one is here?" Nelly asked, and when she saw me, she said, "You're not going to raise that little bitty thing."

And my mother said, "I'm going to try."

CHAPTER 3

Swan's Point Baptist Church

Swan's Point Baptist Church is 147 years old, the oldest church in Surry County. My grandfather, Samson Howell, helped buy the land and build the church, which was only a short way from his farm, and even closer to my father's.

I took my first steps in Swan's Point Baptist Church. My mother and her sister, my Aunt Mary Baxter, would sit side by side in church. People said they looked like twins. One of them would pick me up, and the other would pick up my baby sister Vernice. But one day, my father was holding me, and when I got tired of being held, he let me down and said, "What you think you going to do?" I took a few steps, holding onto things as I went, and Reverend Wilson paused in his sermon. "I want you all to stand up," he said joyfully, "and see the little one walking here."

In 1935, when I was 13, I found the Lord in the corn field. My sister Vadelia and I were out there having a hallelujah time cutting the corn tops to feed to the

cows and mules on the farm. The corn we'd harvest later to feed to the hogs. Vadelia was singing "Old Ship of Zion": "Get on board. It's the old ship of Zion./ It will never pass this way again./ As I step on board I'll be leaving/ All my troubles and trials behind…." Vadelia could really sing, and suddenly I just got as happy as I could be.

Come on, step on board, and I stepped on board and accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. Normally, you didn't dare stop working for my father. You had to fall down to prove to him that you were sick. He didn't pity you. All he wanted was his work done. But that day, I ran to the house.

"Mama, Mama," I shouted, "I stepped on board! My soul is saved! Can I go to church this evening and tell the people I'm saved?"

There was a revival going on that week. And everyone would gather in the church in the evenings for four or five days in a row. We usually went to church twice a day when a revival was going on, and it was usually in August. But that year, polio was raging, and they didn't want children together so much, so they moved the revival to September and cut it to once a day in the evening. We couldn't play with friends that summer, and we couldn't go to church at all for two months.

At the revival that evening, when they invited anyone who wanted to accept Christ to come straight up to the front, I went up, and they sang and prayed until we jumped up and shouted, "Hallelujah! Thank God for the Savior!" That was on the first Monday in September, and I was baptized a few weeks later, on the first Sunday in October.

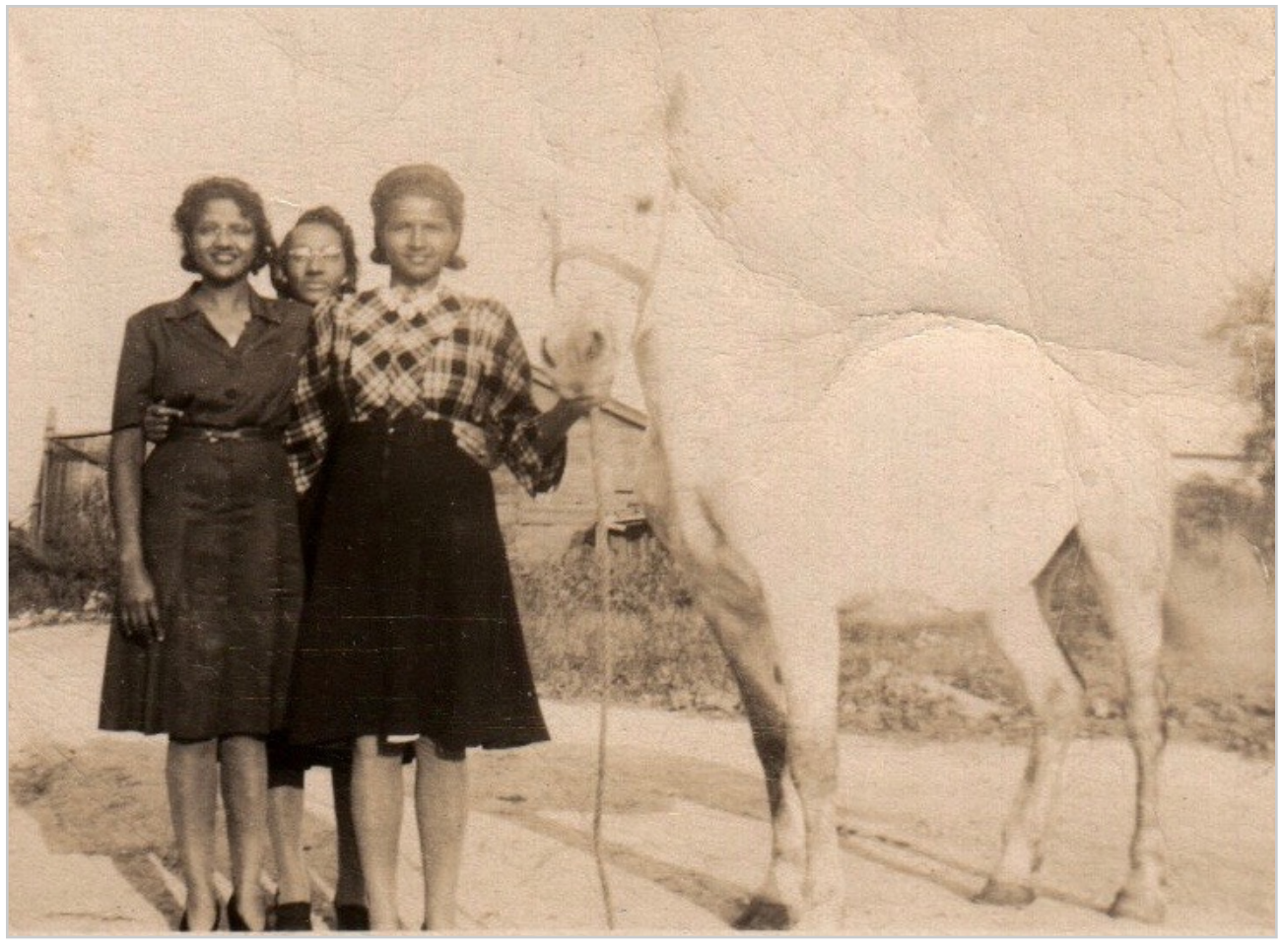
Some churches take you to the river to baptize you. But Swan's Point Church had a baptizing pool right there in the church. They filled the pool on Thursday and kept a stove going to keep it warm. But it was so cold that Sunday that my Aunt Mary Baxter, who lived right behind the church, made them carry two barrels of hot water from her house to pour into the pool. Even so that wa-

ter was cold as I don't know what. I was one of 13 people baptized that day. While we were being baptized, the people in the church sang, "Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water…."

They still got that baptizing pool, and I still participate in that church today. I save my nickels, dimes, and quarters to send to them. It might take me two years to do it, but when I've saved up fifty dollars, I send it to Swan's Point Baptist Church to support the Friendship Hall. I was there last year, and I would go every year if I could.

We used to make sure that the elders got to the church. We would go help them get dressed and drive them to church in my sister Vernice's station wagon. One of the deacon's wives was paralyzed and blind, but she could hear very well. We got her dressed, put her on a cot that fit into the station wagon, and drove her right up near the pulpit.

Swan's Point Baptist Church is where I stepped on board with Jesus Christ, and it is where I will be buried when I die. But I found my Savior in a cornfield. I tell people, you can serve God anywhere. You can go to God any hour of the day or night.



CHAPTER 4

Penny Days

I grew up in penny days! And wagon days! A horse, a buggy, and a surrey. The buggy had one seat and the surrey had two. And they were both pulled by a horse named Lady. My father got his first car when I was 14 years old, a brand new Model T Ford named Betsy. It cost two hundred dollars.

Back then, we could walk down the road even at night. We didn't have flashlights, but we'd carry a little oil lantern to light our way. If someone came along in a horse and buggy, it would be someone who knew us, and they would give us a lift. They might be going right past our gate, or they would take us to church or to a neighbors' house. Every Sunday night, four or five of us would go to the church for BUT, which is what our Bible Study was called. We spent most of the day in church every Sunday. We had Sunday School at nine o'clock in the morning, and then we went to the service. And then we went back in the evening for

Bible Study Group. My father was a deacon, and my mother was a mother of the church.

I was happy to have four dress outfits for summer and four for winter. My mother was a seamstress and drafter. She could take a quarter and buy enough material to make me a dress. One of us would say, "Mother, I like this dress." And she could look at it, take our measurements, and then cut the pattern from a big roll of brown paper. She would write the size on the pattern in case someone else wanted the same thing. She sewed with a treadle sewing machine. My sisters and I would do the cooking and cleaning and washing and ironing, and my mother would sit at the sewing machine pumping away with her feet. When we got electric in the house, we bought her an electric sewing machine. My mother sewed until she went blind, about five years before she died.

My father could take four dollars and buy enough meat to feed his family for a week because we made our own flour and corn meal and canned all our vegetables and fruit. We would churn the milk into butter and sell it for ten cents a pound.

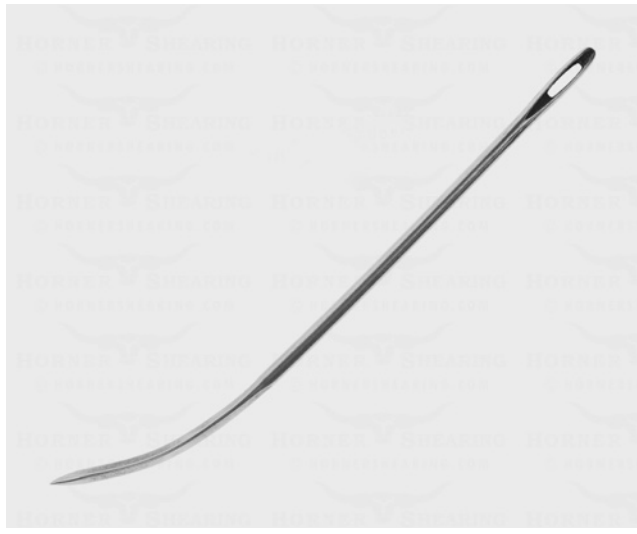
People had big families back then because there was nothing else to do. There were no radios, TVs, or computers. In school, there was one teacher who taught everything. At Christmastime, we would hang stockings by the fireplace, and they'd get filled with nuts, oranges, and other fruit. We were lucky to get one toy at Christmas. We would cut down a cedar tree on our farm and make little bows and things to put on it. We didn't have lights, but we might string a bag of popcorn on the tree. I remember the last game my parents bought us, a push-up game, like pinball. That was one toy for Vernice, Vadelia, and me. We also played checkers, pickup sticks, and dominoes. But no card games. If Daddy caught us with playing cards, he would throw them in the heater.

Yes, I come from the penny days, when you worked eight hours a day for one dollar, and all the people who helped me along the way are in glory now.

CHAPTER 5

Never Marry a Farmer

I promised God that I would never marry a farmer. No more spending eight hours a day harvesting peanuts under the hot sun for a dollar a day. My father would plow with a team of mules along both sides of the row to loosen the peanut vines. We would shake the vines free from the dirt and hang them on sticks to dry. Then, we used a pitch fork to feed the dry vines into a harvester called the peanut binder. It was a belt-driven machine powered by a car battery. It made a lot of noise and filled the air with dust as it separated the peanuts from the vine. Once the peanuts were sorted, we would pour them into wool sacks, three bushels per sack, and sew the sacks shut with a cord as thick as my little finger and a long, curved needle. I still have one of those woolsack needles around here somewhere.



Woolsack Needle

Now they got machines that harvest the peanuts when they are wet and put them in a dryer. That's why peanuts today don't have any taste. None of the food today is like the natural food we used to grow. We would fertilize our fields and our fruit trees with the manure from our farm animals. Nowadays, it's hard to find a good peach.

We used to pick peanuts on Saturdays, roast them, and sell them for five cents a bag. I remember when the raw peanuts in their shells sold for three cents a pound. My father planted over 100 acres of peanuts. Anywhere we could plow, we planted peanuts or corn. My father's farm was 200 acres, but he also worked other people's land that he rented. We grew our own corn, took it to the mill, and ground it into cornmeal. We grew wheat and milled it into flour. We grew sugar corn, took it to the mill, and made it into syrup. We even grew corn for popcorn.

If you are reading a pdf version of this book, you may view this video by going to http://bit.ly/PeanutBinder

We used a pitch fork to feed the dry vines into the peanut binder; it was a belt-driven machine powered by a car battery.

We had to do a whole lot just to survive. We grew carrots, tomatoes, string beans, and lima beans. We had a sweet potato hill. We had all kinds of fruit trees: apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries. We canned our own vegetables and fruit for the winter. We had dairy cows and kept the milk in a cooler that we lowered down into the well until it sat right in the water. We skimmed the cream off the milk and churned it into butter. We even made our own ice cream.

We kept four head of cattle, one that belonged to us and three that belonged to neighbors. We moved them from field to field to graze, and when my father and the neighbors butchered them, we would brine the meat to preserve it. When you cut a piece to eat, you had to soak it in water overnight to get the salt out.

We also raised hogs, and when it came time to butcher them, we'd put them off to themselves and feed them nothing but corn and water for a week to clean their systems out. On hog killing day, neighbors would come to help us kill our hogs, and then we'd all go on to the next farm. I've known my father to kill eight or ten hogs and then leave for another farm. He'd start at sunrise and wouldn't be done until after dark. After killing a hog, he'd scald it in a big iron pot of boiling water over a bond fire, then scrape it, clean it, and let it hang for a day. The next day, the women would cut up the fat and make lard for cooking. We used to kill hogs on a full moon because they claimed that the fat would dissolve easier then.

Our refrigerator was an ice box buried in the ground, and once a week, we would go to the store and buy a block of ice. We did all our laundry by hand, us-

ing a scrub board. When I was about fifteen years old, we got a washing machine that ran on batteries. We lit the house with oil lamps and lanterns, heated it with a wood stove, and cooked on a wood-burning cookstove. We drew water from the well by hand until we finally had a pump installed in the kitchen. We used an outhouse until the Board of Health came through and made everybody put in toilets and cesspools. I was already a grown woman when that happened.

CHAPTER 6

The Sweetest Thing in Life

I went to a one-room school house called Spring Grove School. Soon after I started there, they sent me home one day, saying that I needed glasses and that I couldn't come back to school until I got them. But my daddy didn't want to get me glasses because he was afraid that I would break them and get glass in my eye. My mother said, "Well, she has got to go to school, and they make glasses that don't shatter." They had to sell some of our chickens to get my glasses. The glasses cost six dollars, and that meant they had to pull out a lot of chickens!

When our Spring Grove School burned down, we had to walk a mile and a half to a new school. There was never any fighting or trouble in that school. You got five licks with a yardstick if you got out of hand. I was my mother's

pretty little girl and her helper. I'd say, "Mama, I want to wash the dishes." And she would stand me up on a chair in front of the sink.

I went to school up until the tenth grade. A man named Mr. Jones bought a bus and started charging people a dollar a week to take all the children to school. When he raised the fee to a dollar fifty, my father said he couldn't send two of us to school, so he decided to send my little sister. The principal came to him and said, "I wish you could put this child back in school. The younger one isn't college material, but this one is." But my daddy just said, "I can't send them all to high school." So I went back to school after I was grown and got my G.E.D.

When I was in seventh grade at the Spring Grove School, I went around to 22 schools and taught compound interest. I was the only one who could work it out. Even our teacher, Miss Grace, didn't know how to do those problems, so she took me around to the other schools to show them how. My mother and father were so proud of me. To this day, I'm a math person. In the grocery story, as I put the groceries in my basket, I can calculate in my head what it's going to cost me in the end.

If my parents could have sent me to school, I would have been a doctor. My IQ shows doctoring, and when I was working in the hospital, I diagnosed many cases before the doctor came around. After the doctor said the very same thing, the patient would turn to me and whisper, "You were right."

I was approached by many doctors in my career who would say, "Lenora, why aren't you a doctor? Why don't you go to school and get your license? You've got what it takes." I would say, "I don't know what you all think you see in me." But deep down in my heart I knew I had it.

If any of my grandchildren or greats wanted to go to college, I gave them a piece of money to help them do it. I tell all my great-greats that education is their goal. Without it, you cannot go out there and get a good job. You might

get married. You might have children. Those things might get taken away from you. But your education is a thing that no one can take away from you. The sweetest thing I know in life is an education.

CHAPTER 7

Lenora Has Bid Us Good-by, 1936

One day, when I was fourteen, I had a convulsion. We didn't have telephones, so my father went to our doctor's home on a Sunday night and asked him to come check me out. By the time he got there, the convulsion had passed, and he said to my mother, "There ain't nothing wrong with her."

"My child don't pretend," my mother replied. My father believed the doctor, but my mother said to him, "You believe what you see here."

My daddy brought the doctor a second time, and again he claimed there wasn't anything wrong with me.

"Oh, you get on outta here," my mother told him. "I'm not gonna hear any more of that."

The next morning, I told my mother "good-bye," and she said, "What do you mean, 'good-bye'?"

"Mama," I replied, "Don't you see the bed is sinking?"

At that, she ran out to the field to get my father, and when he saw her coming, he stopped plowing and asked her what was wrong. "Lenora has bid us good-bye," she told him.

"What?"

"Lenora, has bid us good-bye."

My father hollered to my brother to take the team and ran to the house. "We're going to get her somewhere," he said. "I don't know where, but somewhere, somehow." When he came into the house, he said to me, "Would you like to try a new doctor?"

"I don't care where you take me," I told him.

We went to a doctor's office in Claremont, Dr. Robinson. He wasn't there yet when we got to his office, but the county supervisor, who lived right across the street, saw us and said, "Y'all bring that child up here on the porch."

When Dr. Robinson arrived, he took one look at me and said, "Pick her up and bring her over here."

He took us through a side door directly into his examination room, where he examined me and asked me question after question, until I finally said, "Mother, I can't answer all these questions; I'm too sick."

Dr. Robinson turned to my parents and said, "This child has yellow jaundice, and she is anemic. I want you to get her home— carry her, don't let her walk!— and go to the drug store right away and get this medicine." When we got home and got the medicine, they stirred it into a spoonful of black molasses, and I swallowed it down.

The next morning, I felt fine. My father went down to the store to call Dr. Robinson, who told him, “Give that child anything she wants to eat.”

“Fried chicken!” I told them. My sister Vadelia caught a small chicken, gave it to my father, and came running into the house to set the water boiling, so they could scald it, pluck it, and cook it up as quickly as possible. I enjoyed that chicken and felt good all day, but the next morning I was vomiting, and my bowels were running, and everything that came out of me was dark green.

“Jerry,” my mother told my father, “you better go call Dr. Robertson again.” After he examined me, he said, if they had been a day later in diagnosing the jaundice, he wouldn’t have been able to save me.

CHAPTER 8

Delores Vernice

I got pregnant when I was 17. I was still living at home with my parents, and I had the baby right there in the same house where I was born. My daughter, Delores Vernice, was born on March 17, 1940, at 12:20 on a Sunday afternoon. She weighed six pounds, eight ounces, and she was eleven years old before she ever got sick enough to need a doctor.

Delores's father wasn't in a position to marry me, and he was never a part of Delores's life. He was too busy making babies with several women until he finally married the one whose father threatened to blow his brains out. I told the

Lord that I made this one mistake in my life and that it would never happen again.

"You gonna accept this baby," my mother told my father. "They wasn't taught where babies were comin' from."

It's true. We grew up believing you could find babies in stump holes. Or the preacher brought them to the house in a little black suitcase, or they came in the little black bag that the doctor carried, or the birthing granny.

When Delores was two weeks old, my mother came in to wake me up one morning, and I said, "Mama, it's still night."

"It's eight o'clock in the morning," she said.

"But I can't see you," I said. She put her hand right in front of my face, and I still couldn't see.

She ran out to find my daddy, shouting, "Lenora is in there and can't see!"

That was the end of March. I was blind for four months. My father took me to the doctor six days a week for treatment, and every hour I had to put a medical compress over my eyes, from the end of March to the first week of August. On the first Thursday in August, the doctor said that he thought I might be able to see again by the following Monday.

That Saturday we went to church as usual. I never stopped going to church while I was blind. My Aunt Mary Braxton lived right behind the church, so every hour I would leave the service to go to her house to put the compress on my eyes.

As we drove up the lane to our farm, coming back from Swan's Point Baptist Church that day, I began to open and close my eyes. I could just make out a green tree, then a cornfield. When he stopped the car, my daddy always came

around to my side to open the door and help me out. But that day, before he got there, I opened the door myself and shouted, "Praise the Lord!"

That was a joyful day for all of us.

"I want to see Delores," I said first thing. Vernice brought her out to me, and I held her and kissed her. Then they all took her and got to shouting, "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord."

"The doctor said she'd be able to see by Monday," my mother said.

"Do you think we should call him?" my Daddy wondered.

The doctor told them to bring me into his office at 9:00 Monday morning. No more compresses, he said, and he gave me a special salve to heal the skin irritation that the compresses had causes. He said I would heal in five or six days. He also said that I would need special glasses and that the prescription would have to be changed every six months.

Delores was raised by my parents on their farm. They would not let me take her with me when I moved to Newport News and then eventually to Philadelphia. I said, "I'll let you keep her until she is six years old."

But when she was six, my father died. He was buried on her seventh birthday, March 17, 1947. Delores called him "Daddy." And when I think of them together, I think of what we called her "Cute Trick": She would go up to my father when he was talking with one of the other deacons at Swan's Point Baptist Church, and when she saw the man gesturing as he spoke or patting my father on the back, Delores would grab him by the pantleg and say, "You stop hitting my daddy! Don't you hit my daddy!"

My mother really took great emphasis with my daughter. She never left that child alone in the house. With a heater, you never know what trouble a child might get into. We had two cousins who got burnt up in a fire when their parents went to church. The ten-year-old was putting wood in the heater, and an ember came out and got on floor. So even if my mother was just going out to feed the chickens in the winter time, she would put Delores in her boots, scarf, and wool coat and take her along.

When my father died, my mother said to me, "You can't take this child away from me. She's all the family I have here to keep me company." And Delores did not want to leave. She was a smart little girl and a big help to her grandmother. When my mother got older, we did not have to hire help for her; as young as 13, Delores would wash and iron and do all the other chores to take care of her grandmother.

CHAPTER 9

Newport News, 1941

I got my first job while I was still living at home. I worked for a private family from six in the morning until ten at night. It paid six dollars a week, and my daddy took four of them. I was so tired at the end of the first week that I just couldn't take it anymore.

The next Monday morning, when the man came to pick me up at 6:30 a.m., my mother went out to the car and told him, "I don't have no slave here."

"What you mean, Nanny?" he replied.

"My daughter is not going back down there no more. You worked her from six in the morning til ten at night. What do you want from a little teenager?"

That's when I decided to move to Newport News. It was 1941. I was 18 years old. We had cousins down there, and that's where most of us went when we started out on our own. I went home every weekend to be with Delores and my family.

At first, I went to work for another private family. This job paid ten dollars a week for eight hour days. But eventually I got my GED and went to work for the Buxton Family Hospital. Dr. Buxton himself hired me as his "all around girl," and he even asked me to take care of his ailing mother. She couldn't get on with nobody, but she fell in love with me.

"Forget about your nurses," she told her son. "Lenora will be my nurse."

The nurses would come to help me get her bathed, but then I would stay with her. I encouraged her to eat. It was like taking care of a baby. When she was getting ready to cross over, I called Dr. Braxton and said, "You'd better come on over."

Five minutes after he got there, she was gone.

"I don't know how you did it," he said to me.

She gave me a little locket that you put pictures in. After that, I went on back to working at the hospital until I moved to Philadelphia.

Where I was staying at in Newport News, there used to be a bakery shop downstairs, and I asked the landlady if I could use the kitchen so I could sell rolls on the weekend. There was a big oven with three shelves, and I would have eight pans going at one time. There was a long line outside at the window, and as fast as I could put them out, they'd be gone. Twenty-five cents for a dozen rolls. I'd bake 1000 rolls, and they'd all be gone by noon.

CHAPTER 10

Philadelphia, 1942

While I was living in Newport News, I was going to the eye doctor every six months to get my prescription changed. My sister, Marie, who lived in Philadelphia, kept asking me to come up there and see a doctor at the Will Eye Hospital. She finally convinced me, and I arrived at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia in the middle of a snow storm. Marie's husband, George Collins, came to pick me up with a pair of Marie's boots and a winter coat.

After I had seen the doctor, Marie said, "Why don't you stay up here?"

In addition to Marie, my sister Willy lived in Philadelphia with her husband Robert Wilson, and so did my brother Lawrence and his wife Margaret. I liked the idea of being up there with all of them, so I went back down to Newport

News to let the people there know I was leaving and to pack up my things. George drove down to pick me up.

I was twenty years old when I moved to Philadelphia. I got a job the second day I went out to look for one, working at Presbyterian Hospital as a dietary technician. But that job only paid 16 dollars a week. My sister Willy was doing day work, and one of the families she worked for wanted someone permanent to help with their children. Willy told them that I was going to school to learn how to take care of problem children. When I went for the interview, the woman said, "The job is yours." She started me at 25 dollars a week and soon raised me to 35.

I never had any trouble getting a job. People would just look at my face and say, "I'll hire you." But then a woman got killed, and they blamed the murder on a girl named Corrine Styles, who used to work for the murdered woman's family. After that, people always called for references before they would hire you.

That was when two dollars could buy some groceries, and I paid a dollar a week in rent. I stayed with Marie and George until I got on my feet, and then I rented a little apartment with my brother Lawrence and his wife Margaret. It was at 429 Preston Street, and we payed seven dollars a week rent, including utilities. I lived there for about seven years, until 1949, and saved my money up.

The family I was working for had two children. The younger one was a three-year-old boy who had the mind of a six-year-old, and he was a handful. The mother, who had the child when she was 43, didn't have the patience to look after him properly and would never punish him. The child's psychiatrist, who had told them that someone needed to be with the child all day long, wanted to meet me. And after we met, the psychiatrist told the parents, "Lenora is going to be in charge of him altogether, and when she leaves for the night, she's gonna give you orders you have to follow." If I said he couldn't have TV for

so many hours or he had to go to bed at 8:30 every night, they had to do it my way.

I worked for that family for four years, until the children were old enough to go to school. During that time, I met my first husband, Charles Bowman. I met him in 1946, just before my dad died. At first, Charles and I continued to live with Lawrence and Margaret. But in 1947, we bought a plot of land in Lawnside, New Jersey. We bought the land for $100.00 and built a house for $7500. We would go down to Lawnside on the weekends and check on the progress as they cleared the land and built the house. When we moved there, in 1949, the population of Lawnside was only 800; now it's 65,000. All the farms that was around us are all houses now.

By that time, I was doing piecework, making lingerie, at a factory in Philadelphia. Charles was working for Abbots Dairy, making 39 dollars a week. We had an empty lot in back of our house in Lawnside, and I was saving money to build a children's nursery there. But it didn't work out that way. The factory where I was working went to Japan. The New Jersey turnpike was drawing up to come through, and the Turnpike Authority was going to buy us out. And by then I knew Charles was messing around, and I could see the handwriting on the wall.

We split up after the buyout, in 1952, and I moved back to Philadelphia and lived with Willy and Robert at 5703 Delancey Street. I got a job as a cook at Bryn Mawr College, but it only paid fifty dollars a month, so I went to work again taking care of problem children. I did that for about three years, and then in 1955, I went back to hospital work. I worked at Einstein Hospital for the next five years.

CHAPTER 11

Doing for Our Parents

When I was 22, soon after moving to Philadelphia, I went home to the farm and said to my father, “I want you to take me to Waverly to the electric company.”

“Whose money you going to spend?” he replied. That was my father. Always a poor man. I guess he would have to be with ten children to raise.

“You take this child to Waverly,” my mother told him. “Stop being contrary, when our children are just trying to help us.”

The electric company came to measure from the house to the highway, to see how many poles we would need. It cost us $200 to run the electric line to the house, and we got our cousin, who went to school to be an electrician, to

wire the house for fifty dollars. Each of us children bought a fixture, one for each room in the house, and by the time the electricity was ready to turn on, we had a refrigerator and a washing machine sitting there ready to go.

Vadelia and I both said we wanted to be the first one to do the wash. I was coming home to do the wash the day after the lights got turned on, but Vadelia got there the night before. What I wanted to see most of all was how my daddy accepted me and what we had done for him. When I walked in, he was looking through a catalog.

"What you looking for?" I asked him.

"It's so good to switch a button and the lights come on," he said. "I'm trying to figure out a way to heat the house without having to make a fire all the time."

"Oh, you done got a taste of the easy life," I teased him. I could see my daddy was proud of what we had done.

We bought them a new dining room suite —$150 for a table, six chairs, a buffet, a serving table, and a china closet. In 1942, my brother and sister and I painted the house ourselves. My Daddy had always just stained it every two years because he couldn't afford to paint it. In 1944, we had a cousin who was a roofer put a new roof on the house.

Daddy died before we got new heaters in the house. First we got a heater that would burn wood or charcoal. We still have one of those in the garage that William and Vernice built for their buses; they needed a heater in there because the buses were diesel. Eventually, we had a propane tank put in at the farm for heat, hot water, and cooking.

We believed in doing for our parents, and they were very happy. It's a big change in the world. Young people today just don't feel the same need to take

care of their elders. There’s one thing I can say: my parents never wanted for nothing because their children were there for them.

CHAPTER 12

Back to the Farm

During the early years in Philadelphia, I went home to Virginia every other month. It cost me 12 dollars round trip. At around midnight, I'd get on a Greyhound Bus in Philadelphia. There was no Route 95 back then. We traveled Route 1, Route 13, and then Route 40 to Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond. In Richmond, I'd transfer to a Trailways Bus that would pass through Petersburg and stop right at the end of our driveway, on Route 10.

"Lenora is coming in," my mother would say to my sister Vernice.

"Now, how do you know that?" Vernice would ask.

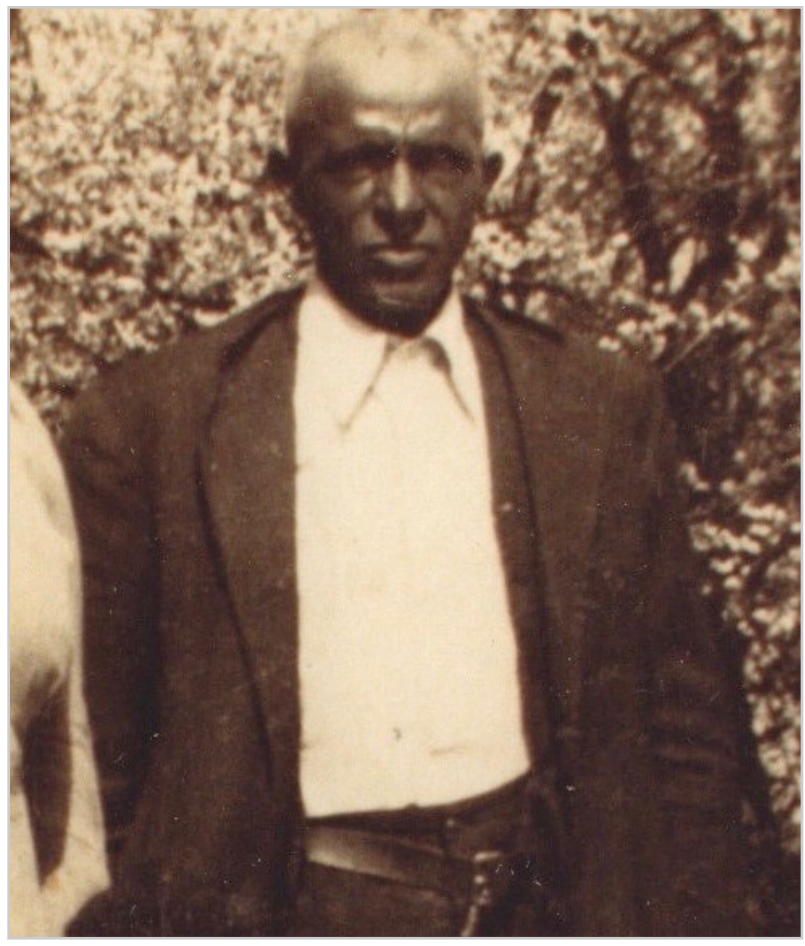
Though she eventually went blind, my mother always had amazing hearing. She could hear the bus slowing down as it came down the hill toward our lane. Vernice would come out to the end of the lane in the truck or the car to pick me up, and I'd be at the farm by 9:00 a.m.

Going back to Philadelphia, I'd catch the Trailways Bus at the end of our driveway at about 11:00 at night. I'd be in Richmond by 12:30 a.m., and I'd run to catch the next bus at the Greyhound Station, about a block away. That bus would be in Philadelphia by eight in the morning, and I'd go straight to work.

I made that trip from Philadelphia to Virginia for many, many years. I'd be so tired on those Mondays, but I was faithful about going home to help take care of my parents, my daughter, my brothers and sisters, and eventually my grandchildren. When Route 95 opened up, the trip home got a lot easier.

In 1935, long before I moved up there, my parents sent my sister Vadelia to Philadelphia to stay with our sister Marie and see a doctor about stomach problems she was having. It was around Christmas time, and the bus she was supposed to take home skidded off a bridge in Hopewell, VA, and went down into the Appomattox River. Hopewell is where the Appomattox flows into the James River, just below Richmond. Sometimes there were big floods along the James River. I remember one year you could see furniture hanging in the trees.

When we heard about the bus accident, Daddy went to Waverly to find Vadelia, and when he couldn't find her, he went into a store and got somebody to call Marie in Philadelphia. "We just heard about the accident," she told him. "Don't worry, Daddy. Vadelia didn't make that bus. She is right here." All fourteen people on that bus died. for our parents, and they were very happy.



CHAPTER 13

That Indian Daddy of Mine

1878-1947

My father hadn't been to a doctor in fifty years when he took sick in 1946. He got so he would almost fall, and finally he did, and Doc had to pick him up and put him to bed. He didn't believe in going to the doctor.

"Your daddy is sick, and he won't admit it," my mother wrote to us in Philadelphia. Five of us — my sisters Willy and Marie, my brothers Lawrence and William, and I— all squeezed into William's car and drove down to Virginia.

"What you all here for?" my daddy asked when he saw us.

"We understand that you are sick, Daddy, and we want you to go to the doctor."

We were down there from a Sunday to the next Saturday, in early September, and we had to work on him most of that week. "You are going to the doctor before we leave," we told him, "and we are going to pay for it." Friday morning he finally gave in, and got in the car and went to see Dr. Stone in Waverly. We gave him 25 dollars to pay for the visit.

Daddy came home with a bag full of medicine. "The doctor said it was nothing but my stomach," he told us. "I got ulcers."

On our way back to Philadelphia, we went back up the highway to the doctor's office to find out if that was true. I was worried that he might have something contagious and my daughter Delores might catch it.

"I took some X-rays, and your daddy is in bad shape," the doctor told me. "But I don't think you should tell him right now. I've given him this medicine, so let's see how he does."

Two weeks later, Daddy got so sick the doctor ordered him to go to the hospital. They drew the fluid out of his lungs and then sent him home. My brothers and sisters and I went back down there, and the doctor was there when we got to the farm. Daddy's hearing was sharp as a wick, so we left Delores in the room with him and walked down to the barn lot with the doctor.

"Your father has lung cancer," the doctor told us. Daddy never knew it. We thought he'd live better and happier not knowing. We told the doctor we didn't want him to know. He had put his crop in and wasn't going to be able to harvest it. His neighbors, children, and other relatives all pitched in to harvest his crop and take his produce to market. I was the one who fed the peanut binder. We saved every bit of his crop.

That was in September 1946, and he only lived seven more months. After coming home from the hospital that first time, he did well for about three

months. Then he had to go back to the hospital to have the fluid drawn from his lungs again.

The third time he went into the hospital was in March 1947. One day, when he had been in the hospital for about four or five days, he said to Vadelia, who was there with him, "You tell your momma to be up here tomorrow morning because I am going home." So the next morning, Robert and Vadelia brought Momma to the hospital.

"There's nothing more I can do for him," the doctor told her. "You can take him home." But the doctor forgot to sign the discharge slip, so it was late afternoon before they got him discharged and headed home.

That was March 13, 1947, the day he came home from the hospital for the last time. As they drove slowly along Route 10, he waved to all his neighbors who were out on their wagons. The lane into the farm was torn up, waiting to be resurfaced, so they couldn't drive him in in the car. They had to get the mule and wagon and carry him down the lane that way.

"Turn me around," he said, when they put him in the wagon. He wanted to see the farm in front of him as he rode down the lane. When they went to get him off the wagon, they could see the sweat begin to pop off of him.

"We'd better get him on inside," Momma said.

They got him settled in his bed and gathered around him— Momma, Doc, Vadelia, Vernice and Robert, and Delores.

"You have been a good wife to me," he said to Momma as she was undressing him.

Then he patted Delores on the head. "Duck," he said with a smile. He called her that because she loved water so much you could bathe her three times a day.

"Wife, I'm going home," he said.

"You are home," Momma told him.

"I'm going to my heavenly home." He clapped his hands, bid the world good-bye with a big laugh, and died with a smile on his face. They hadn't even finished undressing him, but he died beautiful.

"I hope you don't disturb that smile on his face," my mother said to the undertaker, who was our cousin.

"I'll try not to," he replied.

Even during those last months, when he wasn't in pain, my Daddy was a jolly man. He always used to have a joke to tell. The pastor loved to come visit him every week. When there was a visiting pastor sitting in for the regular one, he loved to visit Daddy, too.

That visiting pastor could sing and play piano, and he would ask Daddy, "Is there any hymn you want me to sing for you?" And Daddy would ask him to sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer" or "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross."

With the lane all tore up, the hearse would not have been able to come to the farm to take Daddy home. So the neighbors, cousins, and other relatives all pitched in to help haul gravel and grade the lane. Even the preacher bought himself a pair of overalls and said, "I got to go ahead and join these men," and he did. Reverend Dewberry. He was a young man, 28 or 29, but a good one. If you were washing dishes, he would join in. Whatever you were doing, he wanted to do.

My mother used to tell my daddy that he was too hard on his children. Once, when I was 16, Vernice done told a lie on me, and Mama knew it. Daddy cut a switch off a tree and come strutting toward the house.

"You tell that little one to come out here," he said, meaning me.

"She's out here now," my mother told him. "I am the little one. You not going to hit that child. You gonna whip anyone, you whip Vernice. She as wrong as she can be."

When Daddy got all upset, he would stammer. It was all the Indian coming out of him, she would say. "I know you out of your mind," my mother said and stepped on in the house.

Before I'd have let Daddy hit me with that switch, I'd have run away. My Aunt Mary used to tell me I had a home as long as she had one. But I never did run away. Instead, I killed him with kindness.

After he died my mother said to us, "Children, I want you to understand that this is y'all's home. The things that your daddy wouldn't let you do, you don't have to worry about no more. You don't have to hide your cigarettes from me, your liquor bottles. And there's nothing wrong with playing cards. I just don't want you fussin' at each other." My mother was a humble, kind person, and people say I inherited that from her.

"Daddy want to talk to you," Mama said to me two weeks before he went into the hospital for the last time.

"Daddy, what you want with me?" I asked him.

"Just sit there in that chair," he said. "I know I was hard on you when you was growing up, but I prayed over it and asked the Lord to forgive me. And I want you to forgive me for all the times I was hard on you and you were right."

"Daddy, I forgot about that stuff a long time ago. You are forgiven."

"I been telling him a long time," my mother said, "Lenora were your best child."

That Indian Daddy of mine was something else, but I loved him right on because I knew he didn't know no better. Keep on loving. Keep on caring. I'm for peace and joy all the time. Love, peace, and joy. That's how I like to live.

CHAPTER 14

How I Got the Name Big Mama

My daughter Delores was still living with her grandmother in 1957 when she married a man named Percell Clark. They had four children together— Alvin, Wayne, Aquanetta, and Percell. The oldest, Alvin, still lived on our old farm in Surry County, Virginia, up until 2016. Next came Wayne, who died in June 2015. Then comes Aquanetta. I live with her and her husband, Louis Toval, here in New Jersey. And the youngest of Delores's four children, Percell, who we call Junior, also lives here in New Jersey.

Big Mama surrounded by grands, greats, and great-greats on her 93th birthday.

Alvin has nine children; Aquanetta has one by a previous marriage, Gregory Allen, who is now 36; and Percell has four. So I have 14 great-grandchildren. And some of them have children of their own, so I have 17 great-great grandchildren. Some of those I saw for the first time at my 93rd birthday, in October 2015.

Delores and Percell lived near my mother, and their children called her "Grandma." So the question was what would they call me. That's how I got the name "Big Mama," which is what my grandchildren and their children and their children's children call me now. And so do all their friends, so it appears I'm Big Mama to the whole world.

If Alvin and Wayne were visiting “Grandma” at the old farm when “Big Mama” arrived from Philadelphia, they would ride their bikes out to the end of the lane, towing a wagon, to pick up their Big Mama’s suitcase and haul it in to the farmhouse. Here’s a picture of them when Alvin was about eight and Wayne seven, sitting proudly on their bikes with my suitcase perched in the wagon behind them.

Delores and Percell Clark got divorced in 1970, when their children were still young. Aquanetta was nine. Eventually, Delores remarried, but her second husband turned out to be a surmiser. A surmiser is someone who can’t trust other people, and that makes him a dangerous person. He couldn’t even trust Delores to go to the store, when it turns out he was the one running around with other women, as we learned after he went to jail for murdering her. He only got ten years for the murder and got out sooner. He moved around after that and eventually died somewhere out west.

Delores died on August 26, 1990. At first they told me that there had been a terrible accident.

"I'm not going to have her crying all the way from Philadelphia to Virginia," Vernice said.

"How is it you get to do all the crying," Willy told Vernice. "Y'all gonna tell Lenora what happened. We gonna set her down right here in my house and tell her this thing clear. Delores wasn't in no accident."

Vernice had driven up to Philadelphia with Bill Harris, who drove one of the buses owned by Vernice and her husband Bill Jackson. Bill Harris was a wonderful man who often served as Vernice's chauffeur. They'd brought Doc up with them so that he could visit our brother Lawrence, and they'd come up to Philadelphia to pick up Sharita, Delores's granddaughter, who had been staying with us for the summer. Sharita, who was only about eight or nine, lived with Delores, so losing her grandmother was like losing a mother.

So I went back to Virginia with Vernice, Harris, and Doc. They packed me up quick. I was beating the walls, doing some heavy things. It was shock enough that there'd been an accident, but when Willy told me the truth, I had to get my cry out. They gave Vernice a shot of liquor to help her sleep.

"Now you can let it out," Willy said to me.

"It won't bother me," Harris said. "I understand." His father had just been killed the week before in an auto accident.

When we got to Virginia, we went straight to the hospital, where they had Delores on life support.

"Take that thing off of her," I told them. I wanted them to carry her to a room so that she could die peacefully.

"You can't fool her." Willy said, "She works in a hospital. Ain't no sense trying to beat around the mother bird's bush."

A lot of our friends came down for the funeral, about three vans full. It was something, but I snapped out of it. About a month later I was back to myself. My play daughter Beanie helped me out. She's had tragedy in her life, too, and we've taken care of each other. Every day, after she discharged her daycare children, she'd be over to get me on the go. I also went to group therapy for six weeks, where they let us talk out our grief. Holding it in is no good. Taking care of my girlfriend Mildred, who had cancer, helped me out, too. Every morning and every evening I would go over there and bathe her and lotion her down.

Though Delores grew up living with her grandmother, I gave her everything a child needs except the roof over her head. She was a smart little girl who took good care of her grandmother, and later on, when she had children of her own, she was smart with them, too. If they went outside and got dirty, she would call them in, wash them up, and put clean clothes on them. She kept those children so clean, she used to wear a washing machine out in no time. Every time I'd look around, I was buying a new one, but back then you could get a washing machine for 49 or 59 dollars.

CHAPTER 15

Grandma Holding Me

1883-1960

My mother loved being with her sisters and brothers and their families, who lived on their own farms all around Spring Grove. One of her brothers, Uncle John, raised 22 children by two wives. My mother had 117 nieces and nephews when she died in 1960. All of them are gone now. We used to go from house to house with my mother. We might bake a cake or two or make rice pudding and bring it with us.

Our one-room school house, Spring Grove School, was right across an open field from our farm. Mother used to ring the bell when she wanted us home. When it rained, my friends Irene, Doris, and Gladys would come stay with us

rather than go home, because they lived back in the woods. We used to make pallets for them on the floor. Mother was like me. She never turned anyone away. The girls always came back to us, and the boys would go somewhere else nearby.

My mother had the patience of Job. As I've said, she took great emphasis with my daughter Delores. She never left that child alone in the house. With a heater you never know what a child might try to do. When my mother went out to feed the chickens in the winter time, she would put Delores in her boots, scarf, and wool coat, hold her by her little hand, and take her along. That's how much patience my mother had with children, and I got it the same way.

She was very loving and humble, but she could be very stern in her talking to you, and her tongue could be like a whip. But I never knew her to say, "No," and that is a beautiful thing to say. She would get up any hour of the night to help someone and never say, "No, I can't come out there." She was a dear-hearted woman.

My mother was a seamstress. She knew how to draw up a pattern. We would see a picture of a dress and say, "We like this one, Mommy." She would take our measurements and cut the pattern out of a piece of brown paper. She could make anything— men's suits, women's suits, shirts for men, and blouses for women. I was 15 years old when I wore my first store-bought coat, and she still had to alter it because I was such a little bitty thing. The clothes Mother made were just as good or better than store things. She never went to school for it, she said. She just taught herself.

She never worked out of the house. She always worked at home and always had more sewing than she could handle. Her sister, my Aunt Mary, used to come help her. Them two sisters were something else with the sewing machine. Mary's clothes were always a little too large, but my mother could make it fit per-fect.

When we was growing up, she always had us with our Easter outfits and clothes for special occasions. She made us all our Baptism dresses, white flannel gowns with elastic in the bottom so they wouldn't fly up when you went in the water. I'll never forget, one year she made suits for all of us. She and my father had dark dark navy blue suits. The oldest son and daughter had navy blue. The next two children had a slightly lighter shade of blue, and so on. When it got to Vernice and me, ours were a pale blue. The suits were all lined, and from the same lining material she made blouses for the girls and neck ties for the boys and my father. She made hats with ribbons and feathers, and the hat bands were from the same lining material.

My older sister Marie used to work for a rich woman who lived up in the Poconos. She loved our hair. My hair used to be long, and I wore it in two or three long plaits. Vernice did the same thing. I wish I could get some of those plaits off your sisters' hair, the woman told Marie. She wanted to make them into a bun and wear them, and in exchange for our hair, she would send material to my mother for her sewing. She sent beautiful material to my mother, and my mother made clothes for her, as well as for us. A couple of times this woman came all the way down to Virginia, and once in a while she would send mother a check, just to be sending her a check. But my mother also gave away many, many coats, dresses, and things to people who needed them.

She would sit at that sewing machine, working that pedal with her foot, while the older girls did the cooking and we younger ones did the cleaning. Sometimes she'd take a nap right there on her sewing machine. Mama, I asked her, don't your leg get tired? Yes, sometimes it does, she told me. That's why you see me take a little nap. When we got the electric turned on, we gave her an electric sewing machine for Christmas, and then did she sew, day and night!

When my mother was living, I always went home for Mother's day. I only missed it once when I was sick and in the hospital. In the summer, I would go

home and take care of her and my brother Doc, so that my sister Vernice could have a little vacation. I remember one summer Mother developed a sore on her foot that wouldn't heal. I told my sister Vadelia and her husband Robert that we needed to take her to the doctor. That's how we found out she was diabetic. She was a diabetic for many years, and eventually she went blind.

We knew nothing about nursing homes; we took care of our parents. When my mother was sick, I took care of her. I forgot about a job. I could always get another job, but I couldn't get another mother. My mother was very humble, and even in the hospital, everyone who came to see her fell in love with her. The last time she was in the hospital, they wanted to amputate her leg, but her heart was too weak, and I like to think they loved her too much to take her to the operating room. When we took her home for the last time, the hospital staff all came down with her to the door. "Miss Nelly," they told her, "you sure have a wonderful family. One of your children was by your side every minute." We took turns, all five of us girls, around the clock for eight weeks. Back then a whole week in the hospital cost less than a single day now.

My mother went into a coma on Mother's Day in 1960. That morning, she knew us all. She had a stack of 50 cards or more, and we read them to her until we could see that she was getting tired. She didn't seem to notice us.

"Where's the children?" she asked.

"What children are you talking about, Mother?"

"I'm talking about my daughter and her grandchildren."

"Mama, don't you want something to eat?" Delores asked her, and when she answered yes, Vernice ran to the kitchen to get some apple sauce and scrambled egg. Delores went home to get her children dressed and bring them back. Her oldest, Alvin, called himself Dr. Clark.

"Grandma, how you feel?" he asked his great grandmother.

“Not good, Dr. Clark,” she told him.

“Where you hurt?” he asked, putting his hands on her and massaging her. “That feel better?”

“Yeah, a little bit,” she said, and those were the last words we heard from her.

By 4:00 Sunday afternoon she didn’t know nobody. I was the only one who could calm her down. I stayed up from Monday morning until Wednesday evening. At that point, I was so wobbly they had to hold onto me to take me up to go to sleep. No sooner was I asleep than my sister Marie tapped me on the face.

“I want you to go down and check Mama,” she said. “She ain’t actin’ right.”

When I came down, the living room was full of family; people filled the dining room and the kitchen and spilled out onto the porch. I had them turn her bed so that her head was to the sunrise and her feet to the sunset. I could not hear her heartbeat, and she barely had a pulse.

“Y’all want to see her one last time?” I called out.

“What you talking about?” said Marie.

“Where’s Doc?” I asked, thinking of my brother Lucas.

“Out in the yard somewhere.”

Everybody came to the door. She took one deep long breath.

“That’s it,” I said and walked out of the room.

“You don’t know what you talking bout,” said Vadelia.

“I’m going to show you what I’m talking about.” I held a mirror up to Mother’s face and flashed a flashlight in her eyes. “She’s gone, don’t y’all understand?”

"Lenora knows what she's talking about," said Vernice," as many people as she done seen pass."

Marie was standing there with a whiskey glass in her hand. I took the glass and set it down and said, "This is no drinking matter."

Vernice went to call the undertaker. I said the body must lie in peace for one hour before the undertaker comes for it. Thurman, the undertaker, was afraid to drive his hearse across the lawn, because he didn't know where the cess pool was, so Vernice and I drove it for him.

The day before my mother died, her leg had fallen off in my hand, because she had gangrene.

"What are we going to do with this?" asked Vernice. We put it on ice, so that the undertaker could take it when he took away the body.

My mother left the old farm to my sister Vernice, who was the one who had stayed there to take care of her and Doc. When Vernice died, she left the old farm to Delores's children, and Alvin lived there until they sold the place, just this past year. Everybody thought the place would come to me, but I never made no fuss over it. My mother always said, "Something we have never had, we will never miss."

When my mother died, Delores's children were asleep. When they came down the next morning and couldn't find her, they locked themselves in her room. Delores had to go through the window. They were sitting under the bed because we had already taken out the mattress. We had to take all three of them to the doctor and give them medication to calm their grief. Vernice got so she couldn't drive past the cemetery because they'd insist on seeing Grandma. Alvin would sit on the vault like he was sitting on her lap and say, "Grandma holding me."

CHAPTER 16

Two Pull Together

Soon after moving back to Philadelphia from New Jersey, in the early fifties, I met and married Lafayette Kelley. I met him at a showplace where they had a bar and all of that you know. My girlfriend Marie and I were sitting there and he came over and started messing with me.

Lafayette was an interior decorator, a painter, and an electrician. That man could paint all day long and not drop one drop of paint. He was artistic and thorough. He made sure his job looked right before he turned it loose. On my days off, I did some catering on the side, and a family I worked for was looking for someone to wallpaper, paint, and fix up an apartment for their son, who was getting married. My husband does that kind of work, I told them, and they gave Lafayette the job. He did such a good job that they recommended him to their friends, and he got six other jobs out of that one.

That man could have been on easy street, but he couldn't stick to it. He did alright for a couple of months, but after that he got crazy. When I got off of

work, I used to help him do wall-papering jobs. I told him you can save up and buy a truck, and you can do good. But he turned out to be a drunk. His mother was so angry at all the money she spent to help him get his training, and then he turned out to be a drunk. He was a clean-cut guy, but he would blow the money as fast as he could make it.

It takes two to pull together, and that's what I thought I had found in Lafayette. But I found out I had a sporting man once he got ahold of some money. The third time he did it, I told him, If you going to drink up the money as fast as you make it, you are not for me. I'm trying to get somewhere in life. A liquor bottle I cannot live out of. Let the doorknob hit ya where the good Lord split ya, I told him, and I didn't look back.

By the time I met Lafayette, I had moved out of Willy's place and rented my own apartment at 801 Preston Street, four blocks from my brother Lawrence. Lafayette and I decorated that apartment beautiful. Bathroom, kitchen, living room… we had the whole place looking good. And after we gave it up, I saw that the apartment firm had raised the rent in their advertising. I went to the realtor and said, "I saw your ad for your newly decorated apartment. Now what I want to know from you is will you pay me for some of the material we bought to decorate that apartment for you?"

"I'll talk to my wife about it," he said.

"You can talk to her right now," I told him. "I'm here for business. You did not decorate that apartment. We did. You are going to gain money from what we did? That's not right that you don't give us back some of the money we spent to make it look good."

"You're right," he said. "I'm not saying you're wrong." And in the end, he agreed to pay me for the material we had bought to fix that place up.

After leaving 801 Preston Street, I lived with Willy and her husband Robert Wilson again for a few months, and then I bought a duplex at 60th and Larchwood. I lived there through most of the 1960‘s, until the Board of Education came along and bought me out in order to build a playground for a nearby school— same thing that happened to me in Lawnside with the Turnpike Authority. I had a 20-year mortgage on that duplex, and I was working two jobs to pay it off as quickly as I could. I’d make a double payment every other month, and by the time the Board of Education bought me out, I only had six years left on that mortgage.

After that, I rented an apartment on 52nd Street. I was there for less than a year before I bought my house on Spring Street, where I lived from March 1970 until 2012, when I moved over here to New Jersey with Louis and Aquanetta.

CHAPTER 17

Give Lenora a Hammer

What my eyes see I can do. That's how I learned to panel a house. My sister and my friends used to say, "You give Lenora a hammer and a nail, and she can build a house." Men get mad with me because I know a lot more about things that they should know. When I was working in the hospital, I'd be looking at the maintenance men trying to put up a piece of sheet rock, and I'd say, You want me to show you how to do it? Yeah! they'd reply, thinking it was a joke. Turn it around and try it like that. Turned out to be just the way I said. And then they'd say, We need you for a trouble shooter!

That's what I am, a trouble shooter. Many things I've seen I could straighten out. It's true we visualize in our sleep. You trying to work out a problem, you go

to sleep over it and then try it again. You get up and go after it, and it works perfect. I used to make jumpers for nieces and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I did my own upholstery.

What I saw someone do, I could do. I was gifted that way. I paneled my own house and did all my own painting, inside and out. I burnt off the old paint with a torch and painted the walls white. That house needed a lot of work when I bought it, but I just got up on my ladder and went about my business.

I bought my house on Spring Street on March 8, 1970, and owned it for 45 years. 5912 Spring Street, between 59th and Redfield. It was a small fixer-upper that I bought from young people who had inherited it. It needed a new roof and new electric and plumbing, and it had terrible old wallpaper. But you don't look at the interior. You look at the foundation, and you hit the walls to see how far apart the beams are. I'll think about, I told the realtor. And then I went back to the real estate office and said, I wouldn't give you more than $3,500 for that house because it will cost me $2,500 to fix it up. When I got home to my apartment, the telephone was ringing, and the realtor said, Can you bring me $100 tomorrow morning? For what? I asked. Turned out the owners had accepted my offer.

I got in there with my paint brush and roller, steamed the old wall paper off the walls, and sanded and painted them myself. I even took down the blinds, washed them, and put new cords on them. Bought it on March 8th and moved in on March 30th. My sisters couldn't believe it.

I got the roofer, electrician, and plumber in there all at the same time. The plumbing cost me $1,500, and the electrician cost $300. I put on a new roof for $200, and it lasted 12 years. I'd like to know where you could get a roof for $200 today! The last roof I put on that house cost $1,500. I moved into that house by the end of March, 1970, and lived there until 2012, when I sold it for $27,000. That's not a lot of money in today's world. By the time I paid my bills, moved here to New Jersey, and bought the few things I needed for this place, I was about down to my burying money.

Now, I get by on less than $1,000 a month, but everything I need, I buy myself, including my food and medicines. By the time I pay rent and insurance, I ain't got much, but I pinch by.

I've never lived nowhere free. I've always been independent. Mother taught me that when I was a child. Stand on our own two feet. When you get grown, remember you're out there on your own.

I can truly say, I never had to go back to my parents to ask them to lend me a dime, and that is something beautiful to say. I did not depend on my parents or my sisters and brothers for anything. I've always provided for myself, made my own way. Nobody can say Lenora owes me this or that. I always found a way to make my ends meet. I know how to do, that's all I know.

CHAPTER 18

Presbyterian, 1961

In the late fifties, I was living in my duplex at 60th and Larchwood, in West Philadelphia, and working at Einstein Hospital in North Philadelphia. The commute was rough, going back and forth on the subway at five o'clock in the morning or late at night. I had a neighbor who was working at Presbyterian Hospital, and he said, "They're hiring at Presbyterian. Why don't you come back and work here again?"

When I went for an interview, I sat there for a whole hour and no one came. I started to leave, but before I got out of hollerin' distance, a woman asked me to come back and asked me when I could start. I told her I needed to give two weeks notice at Einstein. They called me back the next day to assure me they were serious about the job and to take my hand prints and get me fitted for a uniform. So I went back to Presbyterian Hospital in 1961 and worked there until I retired in 1988.

During the 27 years I worked at Presbyterian, I had so many different job descriptions it was hard to keep them straight. During the ‘60s and early ‘70s, there were two separate groups, hospital aides and housekeepers, but in the late ‘70s they combined them into one group called Environmental Services. I worked my way up to being in a training position in Environmental Services.

When I first started there, I was cleaning my bathrooms one by one until I got them right. One doctor told me, “I seen a time when I had to put a cloth over my nose to walk down the hall, but since you been here, things are the way they should be.”

Once, during my early years there, all the ice machines were condemned by the health department. I told the supervisors to give me a man to empty the ice out of all the machines and I would show them where the problem was. Everybody was going into those machines and grabbing ice without even using an ice scoop. When we got the machines empty, you could see they were so full of bacteria it was no wonder people were getting sick. I told them to put up signs on the utility rooms saying no one could enter but employees, and the employees had to follow the rules about using an ice scoop. I saved them a lot of trouble with people getting sick behind that ice, and they gave me a war bond for that.

Eventually, they made me a trainer on the QT. The other employees knew that I was doing the training but not that I was getting paid more. And they loved the way I trained them. If we do our job right, I told them, we don’t have to worry about inspectors.

Sometimes, I had to stand up for myself, and when I had the right shoes on, I wouldn’t hesitate to go to the top.

When Ed Money came in as supervisor, he changed all the equipment, including mops that were too heavy for women. When he wouldn’t listen to my advice about this, I told him, “Mr. Money, you messing with the wrong one. I’m not going to work until this is settled.”

When I went up to the first floor, I ran right into the president, Donald Snoop.

"You just the person I want to see," I told him. "My mother birthed me as a woman, not a man. I am all woman, and I am not going to do men's work or use men's equipment."

"That sounds reasonable to me," the president replied. He went in to call Ed Money, and meanwhile I went back and took my cart out onto the floor, without a mop. Twenty-five minutes later, I had a woman's mop in my cart, two of them. Everybody wanted to know how I did that. "Y'all just stand over there in the corner," I told them. "The only way we can get things done is to go forward."

One year, I had Christmas off and had already bought my ticket to go to Virginia and be with my family. But then that same supervisor, Ed Money, jumped up and changed me to work.

"You can't do that to me," I told him. "You are wrong."

"No, I'm not," he said. "I'm the boss."

I saw Donald Snoop walking out to the parking lot, and I went right up to him and told him that I had four days off, but my supervisor changed me to work without coming and asking me if I had any special plans. When Mr. Snoop got after him and told him he was supposed to consult with me, Ed Money came to me crying, "You made it bad for me."

"No, you made it bad for me," I told him. "You took my holiday." Eventually, he did apologize, and after that he treated me with a world of respect.

When they were designing the Louise Cupp Pavilion, in the early 1980s, they had each of us draw up how we would like the patient rooms to be set up. My design included a place for the patient's flowers and a place for cards so that the walls wouldn't get messed up. I included a desk and chair where someone

could sit and write or read, along with the bed and nightstand. The contractor went through all the designs and chose mine. They gave me a $200 War Bond as an award and invited me to a special dinner with the administration.

Once, when the Cupp Pavilion was still brand new, I had just come back from a vacation, and my supervisor came to me and said, "We want to see you outside for a moment." And then he added, "Don't worry. It's something good."

It turned out that they couldn't open the third floor because the preparations had not been done right.

"What do I have to do with that?" I asked them.

"We are going to put you in charge up there to make sure it gets done right, and anybody who doesn't cooperate with you, we'll show them the door."

"You got to do that job," my boss told me. "And you're gonna get paid good for it." They wanted to double my pay, but I wanted time off instead. I never wanted to get paid overtime, because that would just increase my taxes. I aways asked for days off instead, and I always checked in behind them to make sure it was done correctly.

When I went up to the third floor, I could see right away: There was still sawdust and scraps of wire on the floor, and they didn't have the right sheets. I told the cleaning crew, "I have orders for y'all to do this job right or I turn you back over to the supervisors and they'll do their thing, and it's not going to be good."


Presbyterian-Univ. of Pa. Medical Center
presents to
LENORA KELLY
this certificate of
Environmental Services
"EMPLOYEE of the MONTH"
presented this 13 day of MAY, 1982
Louise Brooks
Louise Brooks, Env. Svcs.
Marta Bobak
Marta Bobak, Employee Relations
Douglas E. Avey
Advisor

Everywhere I worked at Presbyterian, I was successful, and they told me they wished they had a whole staff like me. They wanted to make me a supervisor, but I told them, "No. If you made me a supervisor, the first thing I'd do is fire half the bunch you got working here, and y'all wouldn't like that. You let 'em ride, but I wouldn't do that." Everybody thought I should be a tour guide, but I told them I didn't want that. Let somebody else do it. When they wanted to move me up to the third floor of Louise Cupp, the people in the heart unit where I worked said, "You can't move her out of here!"

Lenora being honored by the hospital in 1984

In 1987, a few days before I was supposed to retire, a nurse shook me and damaged a nerve in my neck. I had reminded her that she was supposed to put the room number up on the board so that we would know not to clean it until the patient came back. But I also told her not to worry. It just meant that this patient got a sanitized room.

But she was on drugs and suddenly got angry and shook me until my head was dizzy.

“Sandy, what’s wrong with you?” I asked her. “Are you losing your mind?”

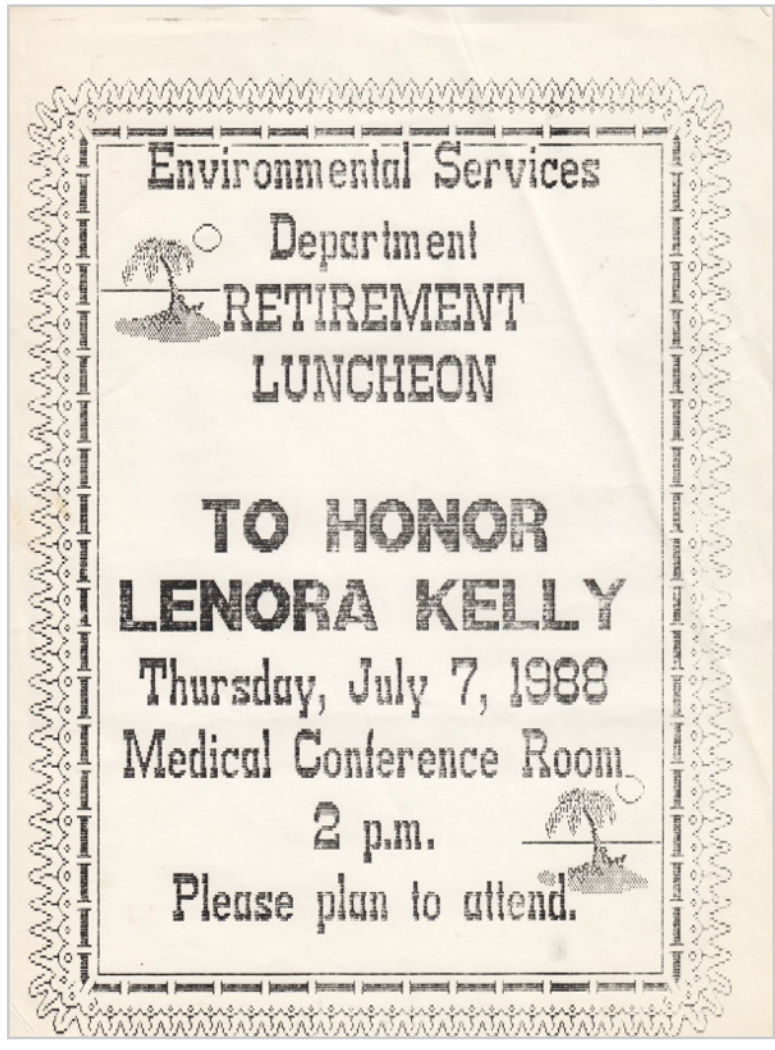
Somebody opened the door, and she turned me loose. They put me in a wheel chair because I was kind of staggering. Sandy was supposed to be dismissed for what she’d done, but they didn’t fire her.

A few days later, they tried to make me go back to work, but I knew I wasn’t ready, so I went to see the president of the hospital, Mr. Donald Snoop, and said,

"I came in to have a talk with you to find out which way you want me to come in here? Do you want to negotiate with me to pay me for my injury? Or do you want someone to come across the table this way on my behalf?"

He ordered a specialist to look after me instead of the hospital's employee doctor. When they sent me for an MRI, it showed that a nerve was broken and another one was twisted. The hospital lawyer, Lorraine McGill, had claimed that there was nothing wrong with me, but the specialist said, "I'm going to show you that this woman is not faking it. The MRI don't lie!"

This happened just a few days before I was supposed to retire, but they had to pay me for a whole year through workman's compensation. I couldn't draw my pension until I was off comp, but I got what was due to me, and they sent me to therapy for a whole year. Ed Money said, "Ms. Kelly don't need no lawyer; she can balance her own case!" And Donald Snoop and Lorraine McGill would turn away and look down whenever they saw me coming.


Environmental Services
Department
RETIREMENT
LUNCHEON

TO HONOR
LENORA KELLY
Thursday, July 7, 1988
Medical Conference Room
2 p.m.
Please plan to attend.

Since I didn't officially retire until I went off comp, they gave me a special retirement party in July, 1988, and everyone knew I deserved it. My family had to get out of the way there were so many people coming up to congratulate me and handing me many gifts and many envelopes with a piece of money in them, not just from my group, but from nurses, secretaries, and others. Everybody was in my corner, especially the people from the heart unit.

CHAPTER 19

Here Comes Mother Hubbard

Being together is an important thing in my book. We grew up knowing our cousins, aunts, and uncles— those who were living when we came along. I believe in keeping families together. I used to go home in August for family day at church, and I usually had one of those days to take the Sunday school children for a cook out down on Virginia Beach on the James River.

We put hay on the truck, and the children rode on the hay down to the beach. We had someone to go in the water with them, and we had a line to show them how far out they could go. They could go in up to their waistlines and that's it. When they came out of the water and changed their clothes, we had a cookout. It would be a hallelujah day with all kinds of snacks for the children. It was fun. Used to be about 25 or 30 Sunday School children, and that was my

glory. I always organized it. And one of the cousins always made sure they could get one of their big trucks and fill it with hay.

There was always one cooler with liquor in it for the grown-ups, and my father was so funny. He'd say, "What's so special about that cooler that y'all keep going to it but you don't want me to get near it?"

I used to have picnics for kids in Philadelphia, too, on July 4th. Parents used to supply me with food— hamburger, hotdogs, and chicken— and I'd take 20 or 25 of children on the trolley out to Woodside Park to watch the fireworks. Two children for 15 cents. The conductor would count them up. I put them all in yellow shirts with little cards pinned to their backs with my name and their name on it.

I used to take my niece Vern, her sisters, and two station wagons full of kids to Longwood Gardens to have a cookout and see the fountains. When the fountains and music started, you could hear a pin fall. I'd tell the children, don't you get away from me.

Sometimes I would take my neighbors' and friends' children to the Steel Pier in Atlantic City. The bus driver would say, "Here comes Mother Hubbard." Marie's husband, George Collins, was fond of children, and he used to help me out a lot. He always gave me extra spending money for them. After the Steel Pier, we went to a restaurant where we could have a late dinner for a flat rate, and then we'd get back on the bus to Philly. Sometimes we'd stay down there until eight or nine o'clock, and the children would still say, "Can't we walk on the boardwalk a little more?"

In 1964, I took twelve children to the New York World's Fair, by myself. Every Saturday for a month, before we went to the fair, I had the parents bring those children to 5703 Delancey Street, where I was living at the time with my sister Willy and her husband, and I'd tell those children, "We're going to do our little drill before we go to the fair." They'd march down the street two by two,

and I would be in back, making sure they all stayed in front of me. One, two, halt. One, two, go.

We did that for four weeks, and then one day we took a 9:00 a.m. train from 30th Street Station straight to the World's Fair. The parents supported the trip and gave their children spending money. I left the men back there betting on how many I would lose. Once again, I had them all in the same color shirt with my name and address on a card pinned to their backs. We stayed all day at the fair. The train home left there at 10:00 pm, and when we got home to 30th Street Station at 11:50 p.m., one of the children said, "Miss Lenora didn't lose none of us!"

Back Row: Marion, Doc, Lawrence, Maurice

Front Row: Willy, Lenora, Vadelia, Marie, Vernice

Missing: William

CHAPTER 20

Put the Little Pot in the Big Pot

One day when I was fourteen, while I was recovering from the jaundice, I said to my mother, "Mom, there's something I would love to see."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I'd like to see all my sisters and brothers together."

So she wrote to them— we didn't have phones back then— and they all came home. We had gone to church on a Friday night to hear a group of blind

singers. The church was full that night. That was back in the day when you could go to church to hear things like that. All you had to do was put whatever you could afford in the collection plate. Our church did not allow no ticket selling. You didn't have to pay a certain amount to enter God's house. And those blind singers could sing, believe me.

My brothers and sisters arrived that evening and went to the farm. Back in those days you could just leave the door open, and when they found that the house was empty, their first thought was that there was probably something going on at the church. On the way to the church, they saw that our cousins' house was dark, too. Everyone was at the church to hear those blind singers.

We were on our way into the church when someone came up to me and said, "There's somebody calling for you over there in that car." I thought, who would be calling for me, but I went over to the car, and there they all were— all my brothers and sisters except for Marion.

Before we left the church that night, Daddy put the lights up and made an announcement. "All my children except one are here. Anyone who wants to see my family is welcome to come to Nanny and Jerry Howell's residence." And people poured into that house that evening. That was something to see, when a big family gets together.

Put the little pot in the big pot. That's the first time I remember hearing that saying. Put the little pot in the big pot. That's how you celebrate family. That's how you know you are part of something bigger than yourself.

When we got home after the singing, that house was so noisy, I couldn't stand it, since I was still recovering from the jaundice.

"Do you want me to take you home to my place?" Vadelia asked me.

"No," I said, "I'll go upstairs and lie down."

Mother and Daddy got the crowd to settle down a bit, and later on that evening, I pleaded with them to get Marion to come, too.

"All right," they said, "we'll send Maurice over to Waverly to send Marion a telegram."

When I woke up the next morning, there he was come all the way from Jacksonville, North Carolina, with his wife. Of course, they never sent any telegram; they knew all along he was planning to arrive Saturday morning. That was the first time I saw all my brothers and sisters together at once, when I was 14 and had yellow jaundice.

Standing: Marion, Wilhelmina, Lucas, Marie, Lawrence.

Seated: Vern, Vadelia, Lenora, Vernice, Delores.

Put the little pot in the big pot. Over the years since then, we have had some wonderful family reunions. Especially in the late '60s and early '70s, after

both our parents were gone, my brothers and sisters and I made a point of getting together to celebrate family.

In 1969, we had a reunion at my sister Marie's house in Philadelphia. She had a large basement that we turned into a dining room where she could feed sixty people at a time. There were close to one hundred people at that reunion, and that was a pretty small one.

The next year, we had a reunion at the Sharp Shooters Hunting Club in Smithfield, Virginia, about 15 miles from the family farm. Sharpshooters had a big refrigerator and several stoves, and you could serve 200 people at a time. We had over 300 people there, and after dinner, there was music and dancing. And after the saints cleared out, we party-timed until four o'clock in the morning. We called them The Sanctimonious, and they took the children home and kept them for us. And then we danced and carried on and had a glorious time.

Sharp Shooters had bunk beds that could sleep 35 or 40 people. We put up a big sheet to divide the women and the men.

The next morning, we had Mama and Papa's breakfast, in honor of the Ellises and the Howells: salted herring, sausage, bacon, ham, hominy grits, cereals, home-made biscuits and rolls. I made the rolls, and Vadelia made the biscuits. Delores made the cornbread. There was applesauce, home-fried potatoes, oatmeal, and cream of wheat for the children. Everyone participated. One cousin even made doughnuts. We had it all. I can't even name it all. That Mama and Papa's breakfast went on from nine in the morning until noon, and we served over a hundred people. Put the little pot in the big pot.

In 1972, we went to Sharp Shooters for a second time. I led a caravan of four Cadillacs from Philadelphia down to the farm. Three of the drivers— Rudolph, Hilbert, and Ollie— were road men, who knew what they were doing. The fourth one, Fred, we called the dummy, because he wasn't used to traveling.

I took him with me. My brothers-in-law in Virginia, Bob Wilson and Bill Jackson, were betting 25 dollars on whether we would lose a car along the way.

For three weekends before the trip, we got the chauffeurs together and made plans. Once we hit Route 95, I told them, our first stop is going to be the Maryland House, and then we gonna journey on. If anyone needs to use a restroom, you've got to signal three times, and we'll all stop together. When we get ready to get off Route 95 in Hopewell, Virginia, Fred and I will take the lead so that the rest of you can follow us.

"How many got lost?" Bob asked, as he and Bill watched us coming up the lane at the old farm.

"Lost?" Bill replied. "Count 'em. One, two, three, four. Nobody got lost. They had a Howell leading the way. Give me my 25 dollars!"

My sisters were already down at Sharp Shooters, and when we rolled in there, my sister Willy asked, "How many times you get lost on the way down?"

"Not once," one of the drivers told her. "We had a real pilot steering us."

"Leave it to Lenora," Willy said.

In 1973, we had a family reunion in honor of the Ellises and the Howells that started on a Friday in Williamstown, New Jersey, where we had two men operating a barbecue pit. We had chicken, ribs, steak, pork, and vegetables of all kinds. For dessert we had watermelon and home-made ice cream. On Saturday, the party moved to Lawrence's house in Philadelphia and on Sunday to his daughter Vern's house in Mt. Airy. That was the year my sister Vernice came up from Virginia with a bus and five cars full of people. We had family from all over— New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, and Virginia. We even had a cousin from Detroit, Michigan. Willy had a full house, Vern had a full house, and I had a full house. I slept three couples upstairs and 15 children downstairs,

where I rolled out a big mat with sheets over top of it. I slept in the middle with the boys on one side and the girls on the other.

The last of these big family reunions was a few years later, at my house on Spring Street in Philadelphia. I decorated my basement as a banquet room that could serve forty people at a time. I used pingpong tables covered with drop cloths. I covered the washtub and decorated it so nobody would know it was there, and we put the serving dishes on top of the heater to keep them warm. When my brother Marion came in, he went down to the basement. He was always one to lend a hand. And when he came back up, he said, "Don't tell me Grandma ain't got it together!" I had a green carpet on the floor and green table cloths, and the tables and the ceiling were decorated in fall colors because it was around Thanksgiving.

We served 98 people at that reunion. The bar was in the living room. The desserts were in the dining room. And the main course was in the basement. It was fun going up and down the stairs. We used china plates and glasses and Willy's silver and my silver, no paper or plastic. When one group was done at the table, they'd come up from the basement with their plates, and we'd get them washed and ready for the next group.

We had turkey, rib roast, and ham, and all kinds of vegetables. Family from Virginia brought up collard greens and string beans. Vadelia and Vernice baked pies— apple pie, peach pie, lemon pie, sweet potato pie, and peach cobbler. My daughter baked rum cake, pound cake, and chocolate cake.

Put the little pot in the big pot. When I said I would have this reunion at my house, my brother Lawrence said I couldn't do it. "Y'all don't know what Grandma can do," Willy told him. When it was over, after all the cooking and cleaning and putting things back in order, I was so tired I could not move. I had to rest for two days.

CHAPTER 21

I Believe in Helping People

I have to cry because the Lord has blessed me to live this long. Once in a while, I ask Him, "Lord, what did I do to deserve to be here this long?" It's a good thing we can talk to him any hour of the night or day. That's what keeps me going and gives me the wisdom, the strength, and the knowledge to go on through all the ups and downs. The Lord told me, "It's the way you have helped people into your home and taken care of them, Lenora. That's why you are here at the age of 94."

I've taken many people into my home. I never turned nobody down. To this day, if I had ten cents, I would divide it to help someone in need. I had a friend whose son Tony was being put out of his apartment when there were six inches of snow on the ground. He and his wife Elsie didn't have jobs, and they had a baby less than a year old, Ariana. I fed them and gave them a roof over their heads for over a year, to give them time to find jobs and save up some money. That was 26 year ago.

I took in many a child so the mother could go to work at night, just so long as they were children who could sleep through the night. I'd get up at five in the morning, dress them, take them to their baby sitters, and then go on to my job.

That was just me from a child. My mother would ask me, "Why do you want to go down to Miss Florence's? There's nothing but old people down there."

"Mama, they might need me to help them scrub their floors or wash their dishes or clothes."

"Bless your little heart," she'd say. "Go on down the road, but be back here by five o'clock."

The old folks would want to give me a dime or 15 cents, but I told them, "I didn't come for money. I'm doing it for my heart." I was 10 or 11 years old, and they had to put a stool down for me to stand up to the sink and wash the dishes. At the age of five I'd get down on my knees and help my mama scrub the floor. She'd scrub on one side, and I'd scrub on the other. That always made me feel like a big girl, when I was helping out.

My father used me for a boy. When they were short of help out there with the peanut binders, I would help them sew up the peanut bags. Those three-bushel sacks were bigger than I was, but once someone shook them down for

me, I could sew them up as fast as anybody. They would give me two bags of peanuts for my pay, but my father would take them and sell them.

In the early 80's, I had a friend named Mary Bright, who worked at Presbyterian Hospital with me. When she had a baby, she wanted to give it away, but I said, "Mary, you don't give your baby away!"

"But how am I supposed to work with a baby?"

"Mary," I told her, "the Lord always makes a way for us. I'll help you out all I can."

When that baby was six weeks old, I found a baby sitter who lived right around the corner to take her during the weekdays, and I took care of her at night, Monday through Friday. On the weekends when I wasn't working, I would take the baby, and Mary would take her on her weekends off. I did all that until that child was 19 months old, and as soon as I got her potty trained and sleeping through the night, then Mary's mother wanted to take care of her. Before that, she didn't want to have anything to do with the baby. You cannot enter God's kingdom that way, by turning down something that you got to do. I would like to know where that child is right now. Her name was Angel.

Anybody who needed help I was always willing to lend a hand. I helped my great-granddaughter Sharita go to college, my grandson Alvin's daughter. Sharita was an A student from kindergarten up. She had a hard row, living with her grandmother until her grandmother died, and then with her great-grandmother until her great-grandmother got sick, which was during Sharita's last year of high school. I took care of her from pillar to post, and now she has her masters degree and her doctorate. So does her husband Travis. They live in Salisbury, Maryland, with their son Jaiden. They are doing terrifically well, and I am so proud of her. Sharita hosted my 93rd birthday party down there in Salisbury. She had to go to the University of Pennsylvania that week and didn't get

home until two days before the party, but she still made sure that everything was all set up.

Travis, Jaiden, and Sharita

I have shared with all the children in my life and taught them how to get an education that I couldn't get, and I'm still preaching that today.

I loved looking after the elders, too. There was a senior citizen place at 59th and Haverford, near my house on Spring Street. This was some of the first senior citizen housing in the city, and I used to walk over there and clean their little apartments, cook for them, and wash their clothes. My sister Willy's husband, Robert, got his aunt in there when they were first built. Aunt Rose lived to be a hundred and three. When Aquanetta and her brothers would come and stay with me in the summer, I would send them over with food for Aunt Rose. She would go for her wallet, and Aquanetta would say, "Put it back. We get a kick out of bringing you your meals." Aquanetta and her brothers loved Aunt Rose.

On Saturdays, we would go over there and set up a feast for Aunt Rose and the other residents. I would take my home entertainment and records. We had an outdoor grill for barbecue chicken and spare ribs. I'd go around the whole fa-

cility and invite the residents, and I'd buy table cloths and paper plates. On my days off from work, I was with the senior citizens, or I was with the children.

I made my life very useful down through the years. The doctors at Presbyterian would ask me, Lenora, how can you do so much. It's in my nature, I told them. I believe in helping people.

CHAPTER 22

Beanie & Lavetta

I adopted Bernice Gilbert when she was 13 years old, in 1953. Her nickname is Beanie, and I call her my play daughter. She calls me Nana. Her mother, Alberta Corbin, made slip covers and had a little shop right down the street from my apartment at 801 Preston Street. That's how I met them. They lived nearby on Lancaster, and I used to stop by their home every day after work and give Alberta her insulin. Alberta's husband worked at night, and Beanie was too young to do it.

Beanie married John Gilbert on February 19, 1957, when they were both 17. I baked their wedding cake, and Beanie's mother Alberta made her wedding dress. Alberta died that very summer. I saw Alberta the day before she died, and

I think she wanted to tell me she was dying. But Beanie's sister Arthurette, who we called Bunny, kept popping her head in the door, and Alberta never got to say what was on her mind. Around three the next morning, Bunny came running to our apartment to tell us her mother was gone. I know Alberta was hoping to be there when Beanie had her first child, but it wasn't to be.

I've been there for Beanie ever since. I was by her side when her first child was born that fall, and when all of her children were born, and we are still good friends today.

Beanie's niece, Lavetta Terry, is my god-child. Lavetta is Bunny's daughter. Bunny and her husband, Leo Morris, lived right below me at 801 Preston Street. I took care of Lavetta from the day she was born. When her mother went into labor, the doctor showed me how to dilate her and told me to call him when her pains got to be one hour apart. I went on to work, and Bunny's husband Leo stayed with her until I got back. Then he went to work. He had his own seafood place. When Bunny still wasn't ready to have the baby, I said to the doctor, Dr. Clark, don't you think she's been in labor too long? Yes, he said, but I can't get her to go to the hospital. She's determined to have this baby at home. And she did.

Lenora & Lavetta

Lavetta stayed upstairs with me for the first three months of her life. Bunny worked at night in the fish store, and I kept the child so she could work. Every evening, I'd come home from work, take my baby upstairs, and bring her down in the morning. I spoiled that child. I gave her everything except her shoes.

She lives in Chicago now, but she still calls me two or three times a month. She told me once that she didn't have a picture of herself as a baby. I've got your picture, I told her, and I sent one for her, her husband, and her son. They were so thrilled to get those pictures.

Beanie, Bunny, and their sister Doll all called me Nana because I was like a grandmother to them. I always loved shopping for them and helping them out. Bunny's children— Lavetta and her four sisters— called me Aunt Lenora. I used to take all five of them to Atlantic City for the day to see the diving horse on the Steel Pier, or I'd take them to Longwood Gardens. On Easter Sunday, we'd get up early and go down to see some of the Easter Parade on Market Street and then get on the bus to Atlantic City to see the Easter Parade down there. I gave

Lavetta's son Donald a pair of slippers when he was about four years old. Now, he's about forty years old, and he told me he still has those slippers sitting in his office at home.

Standing: Garfield Dudley, Sam Reading, Tall Jonesy, Dank, Gilbert, David, Short Jonesy

CHAPTER 23

Garfield & The 366 Club

I met Garfield Dudley in 1961. We met at the 366 Veterans Club on 52nd and Market. The 366th Infantry Regiment was one of the only regiments that was all African-American, including the officers. Senator Edward Brooke was a member of this regiment and was right there with them when they held special events in Washington, Baltimore, New York, Cape Cod. Around Philadelphia, there were 31 members of the regiment who put up the money to get this club going at 52nd and Market. They all had big, beautiful jobs.

My girlfriend Marie and I used to go out to the 366 Veterans Club for the live shows. She would drink a beer, but I would take one little jigger of Ginger Brandy and mix it with coca cola or ginger ale. I'd sit there all night long with that one little glass. Sometimes we would dance, and Garfield was a great dancer. He could even tap dance. When my daughter Delores came to visit, Lord have mercy, she loved to go to that club and dance. "Come on, Garfield," she'd say, "let's go!" Willy, Marie, and all of them loved going to that club.

Every year or two, Garfield would lose his memory, and he would have to go into the Veterans Hospital for maybe two or three months. They'd give him some kind of treatment to help him get his memory back, and then they'd give him a weekend out for a test to see if he could do for himself. I would go visit him every week, and I'd tell him, "So many people doubt Him, but truly we can't live without Him. We can do so many things when you get your memory back." The staff at the VA Hospital said, "We wish we had more people like you."

Garfield's family was no help. They put him in the Philadelphia State Hospital at Bayberry and left him there. All they wanted was his money, but money is not everything. Love and care, that's what matters. I look at it the way God would have us do. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. I might need help some day. I was the one who contacted the Veterans Administration about getting him into a VA Hospital. When the VA asked for someone to be responsible for him, no one in his family wanted to do that, so I asked if a friend could stand up for him. And I did. I took care of him for twenty-three years, until he died in 1984.

The VA put Garfield in a hospital in Coatesville, PA, that had a special psychiatric ward. The hospital said we will prepare a ride for you to come visit him, but I said that the members of the 366 Club would bring me out. At first, the members of the 366 Club couldn't stand me, but I wasn't worried about it because I was on the right road with Garfield. After a while, the other members

gave me credit for helping him, and they would help me with anything I wanted to do for him.

We used to go out to Coatesville as a group and have a cookout for Garfield at a quiet spot on the hospital grounds. When it was time to go, we had to ease out of there one by one, or Garfield would get upset. But as he got better, he was able to wave and say, See you next week. As he improved, they'd let him come home for a week, and the next week we'd go to the hospital to see him. Everyone was devoted to Garfield, even his barber, who would travel all the way out to Coatesville to cut his hair.

During one of his stays in Coatesville, Garfield saw an orderly choke a patient, and after that he didn't want to go back there. I took him down to the VA Hospital at 39th and Woodland. They wanted to send him back to Coatesville, but I said no. Then they wanted to put him in a VA Hospital in New Jersey, but the commute would have been too long. They took mercy on me and kept him in Philadelphia.

After I bought my house at 5912 Spring Street, I gave Garfield his own room in my house. He had his room, and I had mine. It was never anything more than that. But I spoke up for Garfield as a wife would speak up for her husband, and they all respected me for that. When he was in the hospital, I brought him special clothes with his name sewn into them, and I made sure they dressed him properly. The Veterans Administration wrote me a beautiful note for taking care of their comrade.

Garfield had been married once, and divorced. He worked at the State Liquor Store. He was even a manager at one time, but after his first breakdown, they moved him out of management. He was a clean-cut man. Some state store clerks would try to steal the liquor, but not Garfield. He worked there until he couldn't work anymore because his memory would go down too often. He would get so he couldn't remember your name.

The 366 Veterans Club was like a family. Once a year they'd have a big gathering, in Philly, New York, Baltimore, Pittsburg. They were grand affairs, sometimes a sit-down dinner for 600 people. They would be so glad to see one another, we women would get out of the way. One year, they rented a place on Cape Cod with a swimming pool and a golf course. We had four days there with big cookouts, and it was hallelujah time. On Easter or Labor Day, Garfield and the others would dress up and go down to Atlantic City. They raised money and bought tuxedos for everyone of them, and each one would try to outdo the other one. Garfield, Sam, Tall Jonesy, Dank, Gilbert, David, Short Jonesy... They are all dead now. Sam Reading was the last one to go.

CHAPTER 24

Willy

1915-1988

The picture at the head of this chapter is of my sister Wilhelminia, or Willy, when she was about 18. She was tall and thin, and we called her Willy Bean-pole. Eventually she became a diabetic and gained a lot of weight. My mother was diabetic and so were five of my nine siblings: Marion, Lawrence, Lucas, and Vadelia, in addition to Willy.

My oldest sister, Marie, who was born in 1909, was the first of my siblings to move to Philadelphia. The rest of us followed her up there. She and her first husband owned their own store, but after their divorce she met George Collins. George had his own business, hauling stuff and doing different things. He had a lot of hustle, and he was a big-time gambler. He didn't want Marie to work. He

was a good man and a good father to Willy and me. We could go to him and say, "George, I need three dollars for this or that."

Willy was my next oldest sister, born in 1915. She moved away from the farm when she was 18, and eventually she and her first husband moved to Philadelphia. After they got divorced, she met and married Robert Wilson. He was from somewhere in South Carolina.

Willy worked at the Hotel Mac Reynolds in Asbury Park, New Jersey. She got the job through the newspaper and eventually became the manager of the cleanup department. The hotel's owners, Mac Reynolds and his wife, depended on Willy. They would even have her interview job applicants to make sure that she was satisfied with them. The hotel was for whites but the help were all colored.

Hotel Mac Reynolds, Asbury Park

Willy worked there for 25 years. The hotel opened in May, a week before Memorial Day, and Willy would go down to Asbury Park a month early to get it all set up. She would stay there until after Labor Day, when the hotel closed for the season. Her husband Robert was a bar tender in Philadelphia, so he stayed there to work and went down to Asbury Park on his days off during the week.

Willy's birthday was on May 24, and one year we all celebrated her birthday down there. Mac Reynolds and his wife joined the party and got a kick out of it themselves. It was before the opening, so they allowed the family to stay in the rooms. When our brother-in-law George saw the dress Willy was planning to wear, he said, "That ain't party lookin'. You take that back and get somethin' else." He gave her money for a new dress, and she got one with a wide skirt. I baked a Miracle Round Cake.

Getting the hotel ready to open was hard work, and sometimes Vernice would come up from Virginia and we'd both go to Asbury Park to help Willy. One year, I showed her how to paint the furniture with white wash rather than scrubbing and scrubbing. We got that hotel together in a week's time.

One year when my daughter Delores was 15 or 16, she came up to Asbury Park from Virginia, and Mac Reynolds and his wife asked her to baby-sit for their two children. So for the next couple of years, Delores would stay there for a couple of weeks every summer, taking care of the children in the day time and bathing them and putting them to bed at night.

Lawrence, Delores, the restaurant's chef, Willy, and Vadelia at the Hotel Mac Reynolds in Asbury Park

In the winter, Willy came home to Philadelphia and did day work or sometimes worked at another hotel.

Willy used to go to casinos all over the country— Atlantic City, Connecticut, Mississippi, Las Vegas. Willy didn't care about money, so she was lucky. "Scared money don't win," she'd say. "If I lose today, I'll be back tomorrow."

The Tuesday before she died, she went to Atlantic City instead of going to the hospital. She was so sick she had to rest after every two steps she took. When she got there, she pulled the wheel and won a thousand dollars. "Let's get out of here," she said. "I done won my money." In an hour's time she was sick as can be.

I was over at her house as soon as she got back from the casino, and I was over there every day that week. On Wednesday, I stayed with her until two o'clock in the morning.

"You go home, " she told me, and her godson took me home. But the next morning I was right back over there.

"You don't look like you feel so hot," I told her. "We should get to the doctor. You need to go to the hospital right now."

"You go on home and do what you gotta do," she said, and asked me to pick up a few things for her. "You get on outta here, Lenora. I'm going up to lay down."

I had a woman staying with me then so that I could help take care of her little girl. I went to pick the girl up from school, and when we got home, I called Willy again. "You don't sound so hot," I told her. "I'm coming over as soon as this child's mother gets home from work."

"It's getting dark out there," Willy said.

"God will see me through," I told her.

When the girl's mother got home, I said, "I may not come back tonight. I may have to stay over there with my sister."

Meanwhile, Willy's friend Lucy called to say that she had stopped by on her way home to see how Willy was doing. "Willy is breathing hard," she told me.

"You tell her I'll be right over there," I told Lucy. When I got out on the street, the bus was waiting for me at the corner, and when we got to Spruce Street, the next bus was coming up the street. I was at Willy's in less than 20 minutes.

"How did you get here so quick?" she asked me. "You must have taken a cab."

"No," I said, "I had a light with God, and the buses were right on time."

We sat downstairs and laughed and talked, but then a pain hit her.

"That's your heart, Willy. Come on, let's go. You need to go to the hospital. I've got fifty dollars in my pocket to pay for it." But "hospital" was a dirty word to her.

"No, I'm going upstairs," she said. "I'll see Dr. Williams in the morning." It took her twenty minutes to get up the steps, breathing hard after every step, with me right behind her.

"If I could get my bowels to move, I would feel better," she said.

"I will make you some lemon water tea," I said. When I brought it up to her, she drank it down, and at 12:30 she told me to go on to bed, in the back room where I always slept.

At three that morning, I heard Willy come to the bathroom. "Willy," I said, "I wish you would let me take you to the hospital."

"You go on back to bed," she said. "We can go see Dr. Williams in the morning."

At seven o'clock I woke up, washed up, and went to put a load in the washing machine. When the phone started ringing, I called out to Willy to wake up and answer it. When it kept ringing, I went in to check on her.

"Willy, what's the matter with you? Why don't you answer your phone?" Her eyes and mouth were closed, and her arm, which was stretched out, was ice cold. I called 911. "I have a sister who is not responding, and I believe she is dead." Then I ran across the street to get the neighbor, Agnes.

I kept calling 911 and telling them to hurry. "My sister is not speaking and hardly breathing if she's breathing at all." Her godson was standing in his doorway across the street talking to someone, and when he saw the ambulance come up the street, he came running over to Willy's house without even closing his door. When they heard the ambulance, other neighbors came to help, as well.

The medics only had to come one block, but it seemed like it took them forever. When they finally arrived, I told them, "Just leave that equipment down here." And then I started up the stairs behind them.

"You go on and put your clothes on," Agnes said, because I was still in my nightgown. "You don't have to go back in that room."

Another neighbor, who we used to call Buffalo, was there, too, because she was going to drive Willy and me to the doctor that morning. They ain't seen nobody get dressed so fast in all their days. And when I was dressed, they helped me down the stairs, one in front and one in back, holding onto me, scared I was going to fall.

"I know what y'all are gonna tell me," I said when they sat me down in a chair. "I know she's gone."

"You're right," Agnes said. "She's gone."

The medics said we had to call the coroner before we could call the undertaker. The coroner came and peeped in the door and wasn't sure what to do. Willy weighed 400 pounds when she died. In 18 months, she had gone from size 22 to size 28. It seemed like you could see the weight coming on her. The coroner went to her doctor's office, Dr. Williams, who met him at the door and told him, "You don't have to do anything. I will take care of it. They can go ahead and call the undertaker. There will be no medical study. Mrs. Wilson has been under my care for the last four years. She refused to go to the hospital and died of a massive heart attack."

The undertaker sent two little skinny guys to pick her up, and when they saw her, one of them said, "We might have to call the firemen."

"Have you got a straight jacket with you?" I asked them. "Well, bring it up here, and we'll take care of it."

Willy's godson and I got up on the bed and rolled her over so that they could put the straight jacket on her.

"Now here's what we're gonna do," I told them. "We're gonna pick her up, put her on the railing, slide her down to the bottom of the steps, and let her down on the floor. Then, we'll pull her across the floor and out across the porch. Someone run down and move the TV out of the way. I got to do what I got to do to get my sister on out of here."

And so that's what we did. They brought a stretcher to the bottom of the porch steps, and when they finally got Willy on the van, you could see that van go down.

When the undertaker came to me to make the funeral arrangements, he said, "Don't you even think about a steel casket. We can make it half steel and half bronze. That's as much steel as we can handle, and it's still gonna cost you a pretty penny to ship her to Virginia." Willy's funeral was at her church on 56th and Vine in Philadelphia, and then we flew her to Virginia. We had a little service at Swan's Point Baptist Church and buried her in the cemetery there. That was in March 1988.

CHAPTER 25

Doc

1917-2001

My brother Lucas, whom we called Doc, was born gifted, gifted and handicapped. He lived on the old farm his whole life. He couldn't speak well, couldn't learn, and didn't go to school, but he became a good mechanic. The mechanic who came to work on the farm equipment loved to have Doc with him. And Doc got so if you laid the parts of a motor out in front of him, he could put it back together again.

On rainy days when we were little, Doc would put me and my little sister Vernice in a wheel barrow to keep us out of the mud. Sometimes, he would roll me over to school in that wheelbarrow. He helped my daddy with the farm, and he could grow a garden like I don't know what. "Look at my beans," he'd shout,

and we'd say "Yeah, Doc!" "See my tomatoes?" "Yeah, Doc." It was funny. He was hard to understand when he was speaking directly to you, but it was easier to understand him when you were speaking to him on the phone.

After my daddy died, Doc got a job at a sawmill, and the man said he was a good worker. He held that job until my mother died. They laid him off as soon as she passed away. When she died, he really grieved hard. He was very devoted to her and just could not accept her death. He would go down to the barnyard and sit under the tree sharpening his knives.

"I took care of Momma," he said to me.

"Yeah, I know you did, Doc," I told him.

Vernice & Doc

Doc belonged to a hunting club, and Vernice made sure he had his license and the right kind of clothes for hunting. And when he went to church, he always looked sharp! Florsheim shoes and custom-made suits. My baby sister took beautiful care of him, and he took care of her, too. That's one of the reasons she

inherited the farm and 50 acres of land, for taking care of Doc. He lived to be old, in his eighties when he died in 2001, and he never wanted for nothing. You become more attached to the handicapped. I always believed the handicapped was to be with the others, not separated.

He was a diabetic, and he was very contrary when his sugar got high. I helped take care of him right to the end. I've always been the backbone of the family. I used to go down and stay with him so Vernice could go away for a few days and have a little time to herself. She missed him, but she wouldn't admit it. When he wanted to be good, he was as good as can be, and when he was contrary, we just didn't pay him no mind. Doc was a lot of fun and a lot of headache.

He was born to see things. He was born with a veil over his face, which our Mamma kept to give to him when he turned 13. We'd hear him call out, "I told you I'm going to kill you," and he'd swing an axe at nothing but the ground. "Doc," I'd call out to him, and whatever he saw would disappear and he'd calm down. He tied his cover to his bed so that nothing could come after him in the night, and sometimes we'd hear him hitting out at something. We'd have to wake him up then. "Alright, Doc. They are gone."

Doc was good with children. He loved babies. He had a wallet full of pictures of children, and he would take them out every day and look at them. "You know who that is?" he'd ask. If a child was crying, Doc would say, "Hand him to me." He would take that child on his knee, pat him, and quiet him down.

The night before Doc passed away, he stopped talking to us, so Vernice told Alvin to go get his twins, who were barely walking and talking then. Doc played with their toes and responded to them, even though he acted like he didn't know the rest of us. I had to take the train back to Philadelphia at 5:30 the next morning, and Doc died before I even got there, around 11:00. So I turned right around and went back to Virginia.

He had a big funeral. The church was jam-packed. That's how much he was loved. He had a heart of gold. When it snowed, he would head off down the lane, and Mother would say, "Yeah, he going to see about the old folks and make sure they have wood."

CHAPTER 26

Vadelia

1919-2008

The two sisters I was closest to were Willy and Vadelia. Willy and I became thick later on, in Philadelphia, especially after I retired. But Vadelia and I were buddy buddies since childhood. We got along beautiful.

My younger sister Vernice was a different story, even though we were closest in age. She had a mean streak in her, and she stayed that way until she died. She wasn't a sister like a sister should be, but I would go down there and take care of her anyway.

"I don't know why I'm so mean," Vernice would say.

"You have not changed," I told her. "You have to ask God to take that away from you and give you love, joy, and life."

Vadelia dealt with many hardships in her life, and she was a champ. That's all I can say. She had throat cancer. She fell and broker her shoulder and had to have a pin put in it. She had open-heart surgery. She had her leg amputated due to her diabetes. She went through it all like a champ and lived to be 89 years old. Vadelia and I often spoke about will power, about learning to accept what the Lord has in store, and moving on from day to day. That's what keeps me going now, even when the nurses and doctors can't pinpoint what's ailing me.

Vadelia married a farmer named Robert Gilchrist, and he was a real farmer. He grew soybeans, wheat, corn, and peanuts, and he raised hogs. There was nothing strange for them to have a hundred hogs. They lived about six miles from our family farm, and whenever I came home, Vadelia would come up to our farm and take me anywhere I wanted to go. We used to do a lot of visiting in those days. Nobody does that anymore.

Vadelia got married on December 23, 1937, at Reverend Henderson's house. When we got to his house, the Reverend and his wife were in the midst of making a cake. We waited while they finished the cake. Then he put his little cape on, and we all stood around the living room. After the ceremony, he said, "Y'all stay here while I serve you some cake and wine." It was so cute of him.

"Thank you, Reverend," my mother told him, "but I've already made the cake and wine for tonight, and Robert's parents are gonna come up and eat with us."

When Vadelia told me that she was going to get married, it broke my heart. "You stole my sister," I told Robert, but he was good-hearted man, soft and kind-hearted no matter what you asked him to do.

We gave Vadelia and Robert a surprise party for their 50th wedding anniversary. She didn't know we were coming home from Philadelphia.

"What's going on here?" Robert asked when he pulled up to the farm and saw the yard full of cars.

"We're just going to take you and Vadelia out to dinner," we told him, "but you can't go dressed like that. We'll send the children back to your house to get a suit." He was dressed in beige and brown to match the colors of the new car he was driving, and Vadelia was wearing beige and brown, too.

"I got a dress up there you can wear," Vernice told her.

"Why can't I go like I am?" Robert insisted, and we let it go because we didn't want to let the pig out of the bag.

When we got to the restaurant in Petersburg, we put Vadelia and Robert in front, and when they walked in, the whole crowd stood up and said, "Congratulations!" There were balloons with "50" on them floating all around. Delores and Aquanetta had been in charge of getting a whole busload of people there ahead of time.

"What in the world is going on?" Robert said.

There were 75 people there. Even the manager of the restaurant came out and said, "I just have to congratulate the couple." Their children all got up and spoke about them. It was a glorious evening, and we party timed until two in the morning.

"I didn't know y'all thought so much about us," Robert said.

I often went down to Virginia to help take care of Vadelia. When she had some teeth pulled and her mouth wouldn't stop bleeding, that's when they discovered that she had throat cancer. She had to undergo 39 treatments, every day but Saturday and Sunday, and then an operation.

The morning before Vadelia was operated on for throat cancer, she was just as jolly as anybody could be. When they told her she needed to get undressed before the surgery, she said, "Why do I have to take off my socks? You not gonna do nothing to my feet. And I got to take my bloomers off? How come?" We all cracked up at Vadelia, and even her doctor said she lifted his spirits. They passed out pads and pencils because they said she wouldn't be able to speak after the surgery, but when she saw us in the elevator after the operation, she said, "There my sisters, there my sisters!" We had them clear all the pads and pencils out of her room.

Not long after this surgery, one morning while she was baby-sitting for her granddaughter, she fell and broke her shoulder. They had to put a pin in her shoulder to hold the bone in place, and I stayed with her a couple of months that time. And some years later, I stayed with her and took care of her again after she had open heart surgery.

Then, she had to have her leg amputated because of her diabetes. The last time I saw her was on a Monday, two weeks before she died. She was sitting up in bed in the nursing home, just as jolly as could be. I fed her liquid food that I

cooked, blended, and strained for her and that she enjoyed— green peas, mixed vegetables, a little Sweet 'N Low, and just a pinch of salt. I knew she wasn't going to live long because she gave me a big hug and thanked me for everything I did. I offered to stay down there, but she told me to get back to Philadelphia. The next day I cooked some more food for her and told Vernice to take it to Vadelia that evening. Vadelia called me and thanked me for it.

Then they ordered Vadelia to go to a special cancer place for more throat surgery. But when she found out what they wanted to do to her, she said, "Lord, you're not going to take my tongue out." So they sent her back to the nursing home, and that's when she collapsed. Her grandson Glen said he noticed a change in her. She felt so heavy as they tried to get her back into bed at the nursing home. She only lived another four days after that. Lord, she was a tough baby, and she showed such will power.

CHAPTER 27

Vernice

1925-2013

My baby sister Vernice, the youngest of all of us, is the one who stayed at the farm. She was born there, got married there, lived there with her husband William Jackson, and died in the same room as our mother and father.

In the 1940's, after my father died, but while my mother was still alive, Vernice would spend the summer in Asbury Park, New Jersey, working with our sister Willy, who was head of house-keeping at the Hotel Mac Reynolds. She would be there before Memorial Day, to help get the rooms ready, and she'd be there to help close the hotel up after Labor Day. I used to take three months off in the summer to take care of my mother and my brother Lucas while Vernice was in

New Jersey. Sometimes, my daughter Delores would also go to Asbury Park for a couple of weeks and baby-sit for the Mac Reynolds family.

It was during those summers, in the first week of August, that we would treat the whole Sunday School to a picnic. We'd fill our cousin's big open truck with hay and give the children a hayride with two adults sitting up there with them. We'd take about 25 children to the beach and give them a picnic. A cousin named Booker T would go out in the water with the children because he knew how to swim. We made home-made ice cream and gave the children a hallelujah time. Every summer the Sunday School children of Swan's Point Baptist Church could look forward to a picnic, and they called me The Sponsor because I was the one who sponsored it.

After Vernice got married, I still would take some time off in the summer and go down to the farm so that she could have some vacation. When I started working for hospitals, I could only take two weeks off.

Vernice married William Jackson at the farm in 1952. He started out as a bus driver, driving workers to the Newport News Shipyard. A lot of people back then worked their farms and also worked at the Shipyard. Eventually he started his own bus company. He started with two buses, one on Route 140 and one on

Route 10. People used to walk from their farms to the highway to get on the bus.

Vernice and William talked about building a big home of their own, but after Mother passed, we didn't hear any more about that. Vernice fell in love with the farm, and my mother willed her life rights to it as long as she stayed there and took care of Lucas.

Vernice never had children of her own. She couldn't carry them. But she had her hands full taking care of our mother and our brother Lucas, helping our mother raise my daughter Delores, and later on helping Delores raise her children. And then there were all our cousins' children. Vernice and Bill often had a house full of children, but there favorite was Delores's oldest child, my grandson Alvin. They would have kidnapped that child if they could, but my daughter broke that up. One year, they got Alvin a bicycle but didn't get anything for Delores's other children. Delores stepped in and said, "We don't do that." She took Alvin home and made him leave the bike at the farm. I got together with Liz, Alvin's other grandmother, and got bikes for all three of them— Alvin, Wayne, and Aquanetta. Delores's youngest, Percell, whom we call Junior, wasn't born yet.

On February 24, 1987, Vernice was in the office preparing papers for a charter. The office was attached to the house, and Bill called out to her from the dining room, "I forgot to put money in the collection box up at the store." Our community was always taking up a collection if someone who didn't have insurance died or got burned out. They were good about helping one another that way.

"Bill, you promised the doctor you were going to rest," Vernice called back. "I will take the money up to the church as soon as I finish these papers."

But then she heard a lumbering sound, jumped up, and ran into the dining room to find him on the floor. She called out to Doc to come help get him up, but when she felt him, he wasn't breathing.

"Bill," she cried out, "you done stole away from me."

She called the rescue squad, and when they got there, they confirmed that he was already gone. When she called the undertaker, she learned that he had gone to Richmond to pick up a body and would not return for at least two hours. The rescue squad offered to take Bill's body to the funeral home.

We had to drive down from Philly in a snow storm. It took us twelve hours to get there. Vernice had to postpone the funeral two days on account of the snow. Fortunately, snow melts quickly down there.

By the time William died, he and Vernice had five buses and had built a new garage for four of them and added the office onto the house. The last two buses were brand new ones that William and one of his drivers flew to Detroit, Michigan, to pick up and drive back to Virginia. Vernice carried on the bus company until she turned 65, and then sold the business to William Harris, one of the drivers who had worked for Bill and Vernice for many years. They called him their son. Harris was terrific, and he often served as Vernice's chauffeur.

The last time I was at Swan's Point Baptist Church was for Vernice's funeral. She died on December 18, 2013. In one of the last pictures I have of her, she's wearing an African dress. They had asked all the older people to wear African outfits for something going on at the church. Vernice won a prize for the sharpest outfit, but when it was over, she just said, "Take that crap off of me."

CHAPTER 28

Travel

Marie's husband George died in 1959, and our mother died in 1960. And a couple of years later, Marie and I went on a cruise to the Bahamas and Barbados. I wasn't even supposed to go. I just went up to New York with Marie and her friends to see them off. But on the way up there, Marie said, If I can get a ticket for you, why don't you come with us? Sure enough, she found a vacancy, and so I went on a cruise with nothing but what I had on my back.

I called up Willy back in Philadelphia and said, "Don't worry about me. I'll be gone for five days."

"Where you going?" she asked me.

"Marie is taking me with her on the cruise."

Marie and her friends all said, "We've got enough clothes for you to wear." And I had an hour in New York to go buy a couple of things, a few little pieces. That's all I needed. When we got to the islands, I bought some material to wrap around me like a sarong, and I wore a band on my head. So I went on a five-day cruise dressed like an Indian.

In the early 1980s I traveled to Brazil for a week in Rio de Janeiro. I went with Willy, Vadelia, Lawrence, Lawrence's daughter Vern, and her husband, Donald Ukkerd. Donald's sister came, too, along with her husband and their two children. There were 44 people altogether in our group—some from Florida, Washington, D.C., and Georgia, as well as those of us from Philadelphia. Donald used to set up computers for the airlines, and he arranged this charter package for us. We paid $900 for the plane and all activities. I took a thousand dollars with me, and I came back with one hundred dollars in my pocket. And I had some of everything I wanted.

We had an interpreter with us, and the service at our hotel was immaculate. They'd pull out your chair for you to sit down. But you had to watch them though. They wouldn't let us have our money up in our rooms. We had to keep it in a safe deposit box, and they would only allow you to carry so much when you went out. We'd go down every morning and get the money out. A twenty dollar bill would give you a whole stack of Brazilian money, and venders would go crazy if you gave them a piece of American money. We didn't wear jewelry when we went out— no necklace, no gold bracelets, and we'd turn our rings. You had to be right on your p's and q's. I carried a cloth change purse that I pinned to the inside of my blouse. When I wanted to buy something, I'd ask for the rest room. If you carried a pocket book, the pickpockets would slit the bottom of it with a razor and be gone before you knew it. One day, I went down-

town in a cab— you could get a cab for one American dollar. While I was purchasing a pair of shoes, this fellow came up behind me, and the salesman grabbed him and threw him out the door.

A lot of stuff we bought at the tables right in front of the hotel.

"What did you pay for that?" Willy asked me when she saw a table cloth I bought out there.

"Seven dollars," I told her.

"Go back and get me one," she said. I bought a Christmas table cloth for three dollars that would have cost me over fifty dollars at John Wanamaker's.

Seven dollars would take you to the biggest show in Rio, and we went somewhere every night. One morning, Vern and I got up early to go out to a place called the Grand Lodge, 50 miles outside of Rio. We were in the cab at seven a.m., and the cab fare to take us out and bring us back was only forty-five dollars. We went shopping out there and enjoyed the beautiful scenery on the trip out and back. When we got back, Lawrence fussed at us for going off by ourselves like that, but we told him we were grown-ups and he could shut the heck up.

We had eight wonderful days in Rio, and it was only when we got on the plane to come home that we realized it was Thanksgiving.

I don't know how many miles I traveled back and forth between Philadelphia and Virginia over the years, by bus, by train, by car, but one time I drove all the way to Pensacola, Florida, with my girlfriend Viola and her husband, John Tolbert. He had a big cadillac, and we drove straight through, for 27 hours, stopping here and there to rest for an hour, though we were too tired to go to sleep. We stopped in Atlanta to see Martin Luther King's grave.

We spent three or four days with friends in Pensacola, and then we cut out from there to Gainesville, Lakeland County, and Tampa, down the west coast of

Florida and over to Miami, then back up the east coast. On the way back north we stopped overnight at South of the Border in South Carolina. The next morning, we headed home to Virginia. We ended up staying there for three or four days so that we could attend a big affair at the Sharp Shooters Hunting Club. Then we journeyed back to Philadelphia, and I went back to work.

Soon after I retired in 1987, I went to Alaska for four weeks with my girlfriend Louise, whose niece, Tamara, lived out there. Tamara and her husband Rick were both in the military. They had just moved into a new home and needed our help. I made draperies for Tamara while I was there, and we helped her unpack and decorate her house.

Their house was in a little one-horse town outside of Anchorage. You had to walk up a steep hill to catch the bus to Anchorage. Tamara was already having trouble with her health, and that hill gave her a hard time. Eventually, she developed ms and had to come out of the military early. She tried to make it to 21 years, but had to come out after 19.

The last bus to their town left Anchorage at 9:00 p.m.. If you were later than that, you had to take a cab. Their house was just two blocks away from the mountainside, which was fenced off. You couldn't be out there after certain hours because of the bears. There was a duck pond that we would walk to every morning. We met some people who lived just around the corner who turned out to be from Germantown, PA. They spent their summers in Alaska and winters in Philly.

We went on a couple of cruises while we were there. One was an all-day cruise that stopped at an island, where you had to be back on the ship by nine o'clock because of the bears. The other cruise was a four or five hour cruise on an ice breaker out to see the glaciers. Every Saturday, we would go down to the local Farmer's Market, where I bought souvenirs for everybody in the family, including two beautiful Eskimo dolls, one of which I still have.

I tell you Alaska is a beautiful state, and the best time to go there is June, July, and August. Other times, it's always night— 22 hours of night in November and December. But when we were there, there were 22 hours of daylight! Only two hours of night, and they'd go by so quick! We couldn't get used to sleeping in all that daylight, so we had to put a quilt over the window.

It was a heck of a trip getting out there. First, they held us up in Philadelphia because it was storming in Chicago. Then, the plane from Chicago to Anchorage was six hours late, and we went through some terrible storms. Louise cracked me up because she was not an airplane traveler.

"Give me my Bible," she screamed.

"Louise, don't do that," I told her. "We'll be alright."

"I have to peewee," she cried.

"Then you just wee on yourself," I told her. "That's the way you got to do when you up here like this."

When we finally landed in Alaska, as we were leaving the plane, Louise said to the pilot and crew, “I love all of you.” Then she bent down and touched the ground and said, “Thank You, Jesus!”

CHAPTER 29

This Is What Makes History

This is what makes history. We learn from way back here all the way up, and that's what we call history. My life is like a history to the children, and they look at you like something from the past. But we made it. I never went hungry. I never went without clothes. And when we went to school, our parents provided the books for us, and that was a blessing way back there when times were tight.

I remember Depression times when people would come by and ask for food. Mr. Howell, can you let me have a little sack of cornmeal or flour. My parents were good about feeding people. They'd give them a little bit of this and that— a sack of potatoes, a bag of corn meal, lard, a piece of meat. We would share our clothes, save them and pass them on. We didn't mind wearing somebody else's

clothes. But by my mother being a seamstress, we didn't have to do that. But we gave away many, many clothes.

People used to hitchhike their way from Florida to New York. Our farm was on the main north-south highway, Route 10, and people used to stop and ask can we sleep over in your barn. Daddy wouldn't let them stay. He'd give them food and carry them on up the road. Sometimes, they'd walk out to the road, and you'd see a car or truck come along and pick them up. We used to say, Go where the bright lights are!

Once, a woman came to our door with her little boy. The soles of his shoes were nothing but paper and cardboard. My mother and father bought him a pair of sneakers and gave his mother clothes. She asked if they could spend a night in the barn, and my father said, No, you don't sleep in my barn, but I will make pallets for you right here on the front porch. Mother and Daddy slept downstairs to keep an eye on them. The next morning, we fed them and cooked up some chicken and sliced ham for them to take with them. Daddy said, I'm going to Petersburg. I'll take you there and drop you off.

The woman took mother's address down and said, When I get a job and go to work, I'm going to remember you. Two months later, mother gets a letter with a little piece of money in it. I don't know how much it was. They were in New York the day after Daddy dropped them off. Someone picked them up somewhere after passing Richmond and carried them to New York.

When I was growing up, a lot of white parents in Surry County would not let there children mix with black children. They had private schools. The white children rode buses to school, but we had to go by foot. Some children had to walk five miles each way to school, and some had foot problems. We raised money for a lawyer who went to Washington about whites riding and blacks walking, and that's how we got buses. When my sister Vernice went to high school, there was just one black bus driver, who charged a dollar a week. My fa-

ther couldn't afford to send both of us, so Vernice went to school and I went to work. By the time my daughter Delores went to first grade, they had buses for everyone, but we had to put up a big fight.

My granddaughter Aquanetta was the first black child who went to a white school in Prince George County. Delores was so nervous the first day that she took her to school and picked her up. During that first term, Aquanetta's white teacher came to Delores and asked can she take Aquanetta to North Carolina to a contest. She said a little boy was going, too, along with a male teacher to look after him.

"Who is my child going to stay with?" Delores asked her.

"Mrs. Clark," the teacher told her, "your daughter will be sleeping with me, and I will take good care of her. Don't worry."

They left on a Saturday, and came home on Sunday, and Aquanetta won first prize for reciting a poem. Today, there are no more white and black schools; they're mixed now.

When I first moved to Philadelphia, we had to go to the back of the bus. We had to stand up and let whites sit if there wasn't room. I had a cousin who served a year in jail just for brushing against a white woman on a crowded bus. A white and black couple would have to pretend they were not together; they could not come out bold like they would today.

Blacks could not drive the buses; they could only clean them and clean the garages. Then the federal government stepped in. President Roosevelt was the one who opened up the way for the blacks. He really worked with us. He took our feet out of the marly clay and made it easier for us. When they started to train blacks to be drivers, the white drivers went on strike, and they had to bring in soldiers to take over.

When I was growing up, I was happy to have four dress outfits for summer and four for winter. I was brought up with one toy and a stocking full of fruits, nuts, and candy. We didn't have Santa Clause. There were no radios, no TVs, no computers. Everyone had big families because there was nothing else to do.

When I was working at Presbyterian, I had five white uniforms that I would take to work every Monday morning, and I only wore them on the job. I never went out in the street in my uniform, and I never wore one home. I was very particular about my clothing, and I'm still that way today.

Back in my day, you couldn't go to church without a hat on your head. Years ago, when somebody died, a wreath went up on their door. But people had to stop putting wreaths on doors, because their houses would get robbed while everyone was at the funeral.

When we were first allowed to sign up for social security, in 1939, my mother used to send me down to the store, and the white store clerk would refer to my mother as Nanny. "That's Mrs. Nanny Howell," I would say, and they'd look like they wanted to throw me out of the store. But I would stand toe to toe about them putting a handle to my parents' names.

Who would have thought that I would live to see a black president! I never saw a time that Mr. Obama was called to do a duty that he failed to do it. He was always right there, like when he sang "Amazing Grace" at the funeral in Charleston. Mr. Obama is something beautiful to see.

CHAPTER 30

Children, I'm Going Home

I have been called home twice. The first time was when I was 19 years old and my appendix burst. The poison went all through my system, and the doctor thought I wouldn't make it. They called all my family near, and my mother sat by my bedside for three days. I was so weak I had to learn how to walk all over again.

Another time I looked over into the Promised Land, and it made no difference whether I went or stayed. It was April 1972, and they left a clamp in me during a hysterectomy. The doctor never admitted that he made a mistake, but he was smart enough not to bill me because he knew he would have been sued. I had to have three operations in eight days, which left me stricken with double pneumonia. That's when it made no difference whether I went or stayed. My family hired a nurse to turn me every 15 minutes for three days. I was so bad

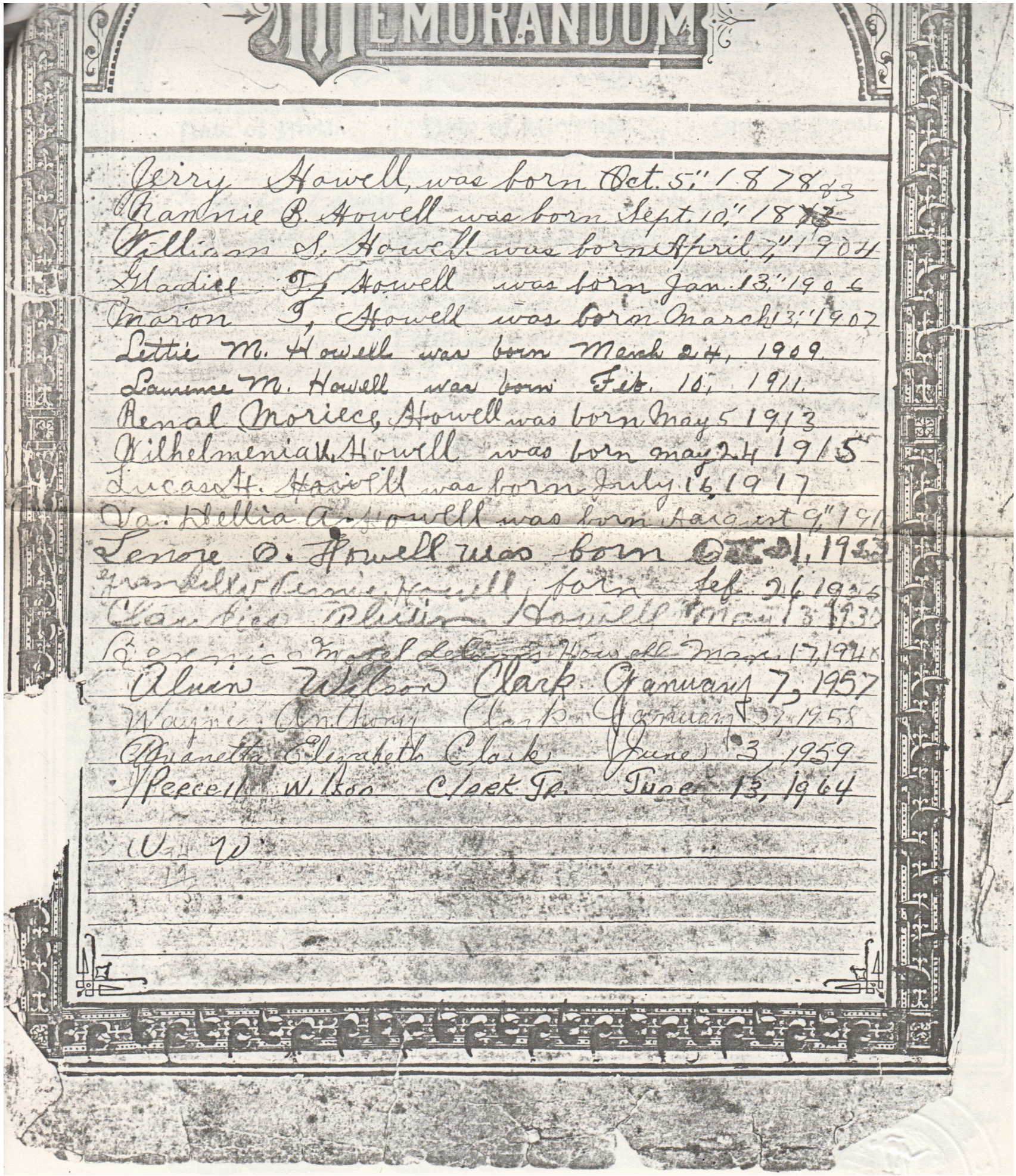
that I asked to see my grandchildren for the last time. Alvin was 8, Wayne was 7, Aquanetta was 6, and Junior was a baby. I was in a private room, so they allowed the children to come see me. When it came time for me to leave the hospital, the family was late to pick me up. They made an excuse about having to do this and that. When we got home, there was a beautiful bouquet of roses waiting for me by the door. Those children had taken all the pennies out of their banks and told their mother, we need to go buy some roses for Big Mama. That's why they were late picking me up from the hospital.

I know one day I'm going to cross over. I think about that, and I'm prepared for it. This last year has been my falling down year. I'm just not as strong as I used to be. I've made arrangements to go back to my native home in Virginia and to be buried there at the Swan's Point Baptist Church, next to my daughter Delores, with my parents and my brothers and sisters. The funeral director down there has promised me that, if she is still the director when I pass, she will come up here and get me herself. If they don't put me in that Swan's Point Cemetery, I'm going to come back and haunt 'em.

"May the work I've done speak for me." That song can be my door. And at the very last, when they are rolling the body out of the church, we sing, "By and By." We'll understand it better by and by. Our soul flies away and leaves just a shell of the body there. One sure thing: we all go through that gate. You might as well face the music. My motto is this: There isn't but one God. Heaven don't care what color we are, what race or religion. We're all serving the same God.

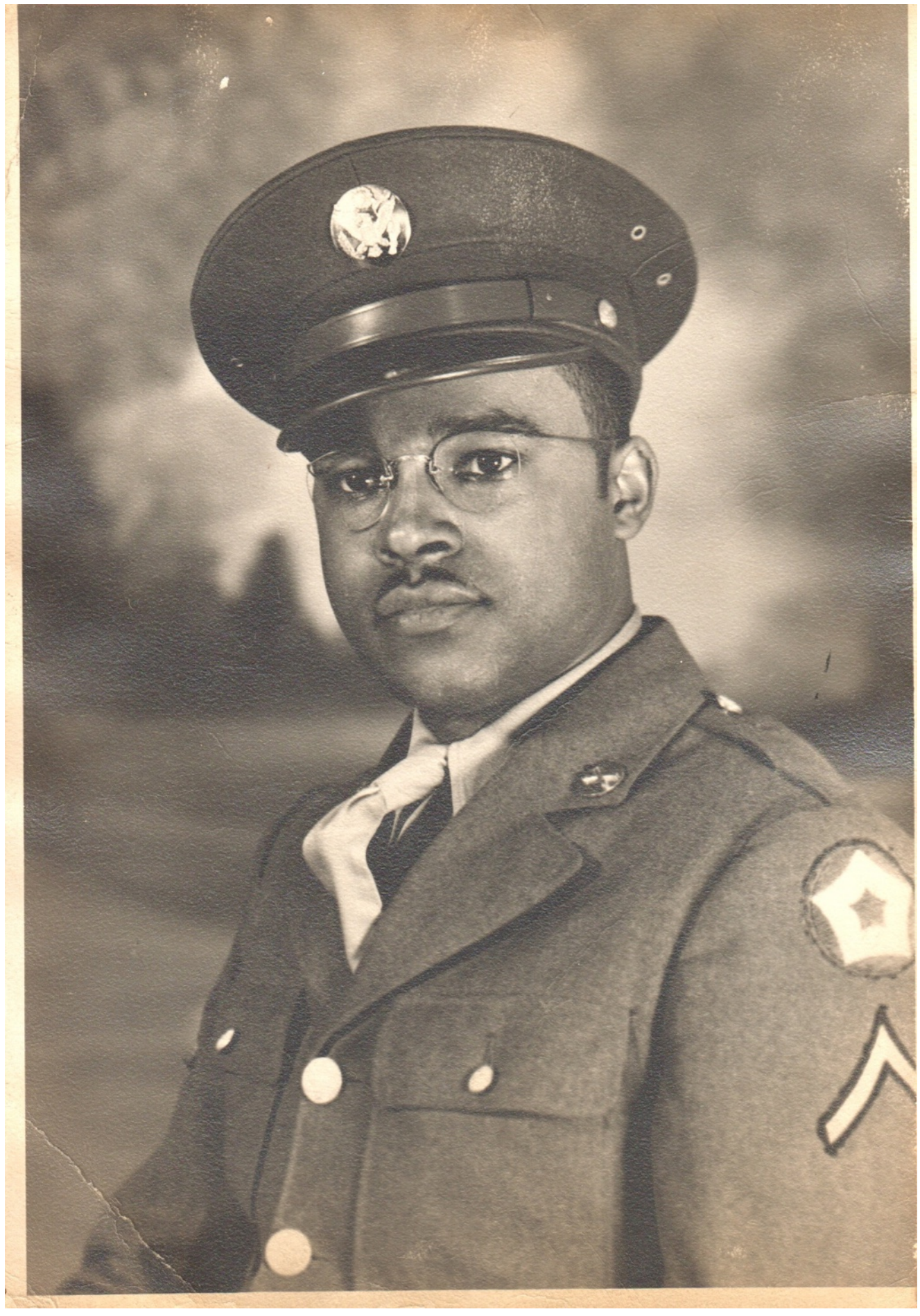
If it can be tomorrow, if I hear a knock, knock on the door, I just ask the Lord to let me be ready, to be willing to go, just like my Daddy was when he crossed over. He was a strong fighter, but he knew when his end was coming. I pray I don't linger. I don't want be a handicap to nobody. I just want to say, "Children, I'm going home now."

Photo Gallery



A page from the Howell Family Bible

Lenora's father, Jerry Howell

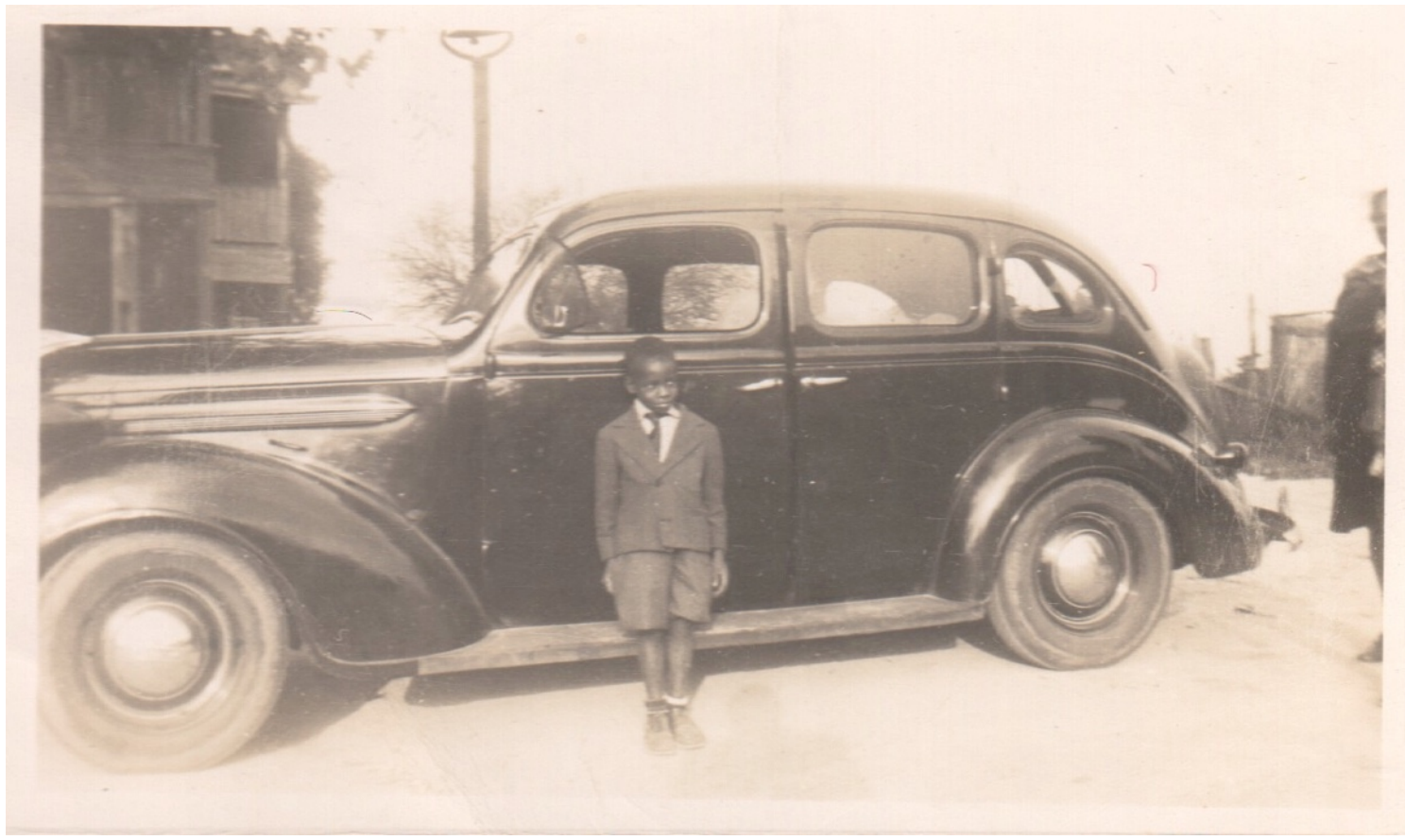


Lenora's brother Lawrence

Lenora's sister, Marie

Lenora's childhood friend Doris Hilton

Willy, Marie, Vernice, and Lenora (sitting) at a niece's wedding



Willy's son, Jaycee, in front of his grandfather's car

Bill Jackson shot a wild turkey!

Mary Stevens, Lenora's sister Marie, and Mary Gibson in the garden at the farm

Lenora's brother Marion cutting corn tops

Uncle Jack Howell with a peanut stack

Vernice on the tractor at the farm

Lenora's mother, her sister Vernice, and Vernice's husband Bill Jackson

Lawrence Jenkins, Lenora's grandson Alvin, and her sister Vernice in Lenora's breakfast room at 5912 Spring Street

Big Mama's great grandchildren and their friends dressed for Easter

Alvin's twins

Alvin's Army

Lenora (2nd from right) with her friend Louise Brooks (2nd from left) and Louise's daughters and grandchildren

Family & friends at Lenora's 45th birthday party

Delores at the family reunion at Marie's house in 1969

Lawrence and Essie's wedding in Williamstown, NJ

Aquanetta with Donald and Vern Ukkerd on their 50th anniversary

Sharita's wedding

Big Mama's 85th Birthday

Vadelia, Lenora, and Vernice on Lenora's 88th birthday

Big Niki, Big Mama, Aquanetta, Alvin, and Sharita on Big Mama's 88th birthday

Vernice & Lenora on Aquanetta's 50th birthday

Grands, greats, and great-greats celebrating Big Mama's 90th Birthday

Grands, greats, and great-greats celebrating Big Mama's 93rd Birthday

Grands, greats, and great-greats celebrating Big Mama's 94th birthday