

STRUGGLING THROUGH THE HARD YEARS

(How Rural Black Families Survived the Depression)

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I sometimes get to thinking back how things were when I was a small boy growing up through those hard depression years on a small farm in Oklahoma. I can remember very well when the black people came out in our part of the country to live. Times were hard - poverty and hunger forced them out of the towns and cities to find food. There were hundreds of acres of unoccupied land to the north and west of where we lived that was owned by oil men. The oil men were only concerned with the mineral rights. First, just one family of black people came and settled on the land, then other black families soon followed. Within one year's time, there were ten or twelve black families settled on the land - all of them were squatters. Most of the land was pretty rough country: hills, rocks, a lot of underbrush. But there was some good timber on the land and some of the land was pretty good for farming. All of the colored folks built log shacks to live in - anything for shelter. They had no money and were just trying to survive through that great depression. They would clear off some land, cut down all of the trees and brush, then plant corn, beans, Irish potatoes, cabbage, turnips, and watermelons. They canned all of the produce they could. Most of them dug a cellar to store their produce in for the long winter. After the first year, they did pretty well if they had raised a good crop. The winters were very cold back then. For meat, they would eat opossum, rabbit, squirrel, tortoise, crows, frogs and skunks. I did some trapping in those days and caught quite a few skunks. I would skin the skunks for their pelts, then give this old man their carcasses - sometimes three or four at a time. He would remove the musk bag from the skunk and bury the carcass in the ground for

three days. This would take away all the odor. The old fellow would then dig the skunks up, wash them off good, then bake them to a golden brown. The black folks had to live off the fat of the land to survive, so they ate about everything they could find. Some of them found a place where there might be some water, then all pitched in and dug an open well about twenty feet deep. They found plenty of good, cool drinking water. But some families would have to carry their drinking water a mile or more. They would go down to the creek to wash their clothes while their kids would play on the sandbars, swim in the water and have fun. My brother and I would swim and play with those black kids. We ate some good meals with their families. Some of those black women were very good cooks. Later on, most all the black families raised chickens and hogs. All of the colored folks had these things in common; they all liked pork-fried chicken, sweet potato ice cream and watermelon. Their clothes were ragged and worn out. Most of the men, women and children had no shoes to wear. They would cut up burlap sacks and wrap them around their feet in the winter to keep their feet from freezing. But they did keep warm in their log shacks because they had plenty of firewood around them. Without us being aware of it, one black man would get our team of work horses out of the big pasture every Sunday throughout the summer and plow his field with them. (None of the colored people had a mule or a horse to plow their fields with at that time.) He raised a much better crop because he had cultivated with our team. After we found out that the man had used our team of horses throughout the summer, I asked Dad what he was going to do about it. Dad said, "He has a

big family and they are very poor. But I will talk with them about that a little later on." I know that Dad never did talk to him about it. My Granddad Haney farmed on a pretty big scale in those days. Some of the colored folks worked for him. Granddad raised lots of sweet corn for roasting ears and always had a big patch of watermelons and a lot of sorghum cane.

Granddad owned a sorghum mill and made sorghum molasses for many years. In late summer, the neighbors would start bringing their cane to the old sorghum mill. They brought their cane in by the wagon loads. They was rick after rick of cane stacked high all around the old mill. Granddad would make their sorghum molasses for a share of it. Granddad Haney told his colored neighbors and employees up front that he would not tolerate any stealing. "I will kill a nigger if I catch him stealing from me.", Granddad said. "But if you run out of anything to eat during the winter, don't go hungry. You come see me and I will help you." He said, "I have a crib full of corn, several barrels of sorghum molasses, lots of potatoes and a smokehouse with plenty of meat." The colored folks had a lot respect for Granddad Haney. And Granddad proved himself time and again by helping them through those long, cold winter months. Granddad never did have any trouble with thieving. I think everyone knew better than to cross him.

Now this is how it was when poverty came to live with us and all around us for a while out here in these old hills of Oklahoma. Where dreams come true, when adversity becomes our teacher and not our foe.