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INTRODUCTION

The Many Stories of Sylvester Bell

I.

We wound down off the Ozark Plateau, following the twisting road until it reached the delta and leveled off in a straight line across fertile, black-bottom riverland. Water stood in ditches alongside the road and in wide sheets across fields that a few months earlier had bloomed with cotton balls. Away from the gloomy hollows and bristling ridges, the sun glowed with promising warmth. Birds twittered in the trees. The air was laced with a hint of spring. Grassy patches glistened in the distant fields.

At Newport, Arkansas, I stopped the car at a cafe to get something to eat. He sat on the passenger side, bundled in a fur hat and winter coat, a sturdy, compact, stubborn figure with heavy jowls and wide, expressive eyes.

"Aren't you getting out?" I said.

He crossed his arms against his chest and stared glumly through the windshield. "I bleeve I'll wait right here."

"You can go in there," I said. "The law has changed down here. You can go anywhere you want."

"It may have changed for some folks, but not for me."

I looked at him with a mix of affection and exasperation. His jaw was set; his eyes behind the lenses of his owlish, out-of-fashion glasses were as flat and shiny as polished coins. He was digging in his heels, coming to a complete stop, hunkering down in a ditch somewhere in his mind so as not to offer a target to anyone looking to knock him off. I knew the expression. Over the years he had demonstrated it to me many times in the stories he had told me about his life.

It was February 1985, and we were within a few miles of his hometown of Augusta, Arkansas, which he hadn't seen in 66 years. I could only speculate what emotions might be churning through his mind at this moment. Over the years he had told me many tales about his tempestuous life. They all began here, in the flat, dreary, cotton-farming country of east-central Arkansas, where, as a poor black boy, he had come up hard amidst poverty and prejudice, scratching for whatever he could find. It wasn't easy. Life was a chronic struggle to survive; despite the daunting odds, he had prevailed, and not just prevailed but triumphed, through toughness, resilience, a canny mix of caginess and sheer good luck.

I walked around the car and opened his door. "Come," I said. "We haven't driven all this distance for you to sit in the car when I know you're hungry."

II.

Old memories die hard for Sylvester Bell. It's not hard to figure out why. His life reads like a hard-luck chronicle, full of brutal realities and bitter experiences. Born into abject poverty, he was abandoned by his father and raised by a resourceful and religious mother. As the opening pages of his personal narrative make abundantly clear, he learned to survive through a combination of shrewd intelligence and sheer physical grit. His sister died while still an infant. His older brother Edward died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. At the height of that harrowing event, Sylvester fell into a coma for nine days and was given up for dead.

He came up the hard way, kicking and clawing for every scrap of sustenance he could find. He fought with his fellow blacks. He retaliated against white men when they pressed him too close. In a rigidly segregated southern town in the first two decades of the 20th century, he witnessed the appalling effects of Jim Crow prejudice against his race. He saw men swing from ropes. He saw them beaten and killed. He saw them snap like taut rubber bands under the strain.

There were times when he and his family came close to starving. Branded as subhuman by the ruling elite, they lived little better than animals. But these indignities only seemed to stiffen his resolve; as the only surviving child, Sylvester knew he had to do all he could to keep

himself and his family afloat. It wasn't a question of getting along, or ratcheting it up a notch, or taking it to the next level; the struggle he experienced in his early years was primal and uncompromising: Would he survive? Would he be killed?

His life poses perplexing questions for those of us who know nothing about it. What's it like to be born into a world with literally no material resources to fall back on? Where there's no net to catch you before you slip through the floor? What's it like to be chronically reviled for the color of your skin?

Out of a gritty will to survive, the young Sylvester Bell focused his energy and intelligence upon the simple expedient of staying alive. It's hard for us to imagine how difficult this struggle was a hundred years ago--not just the struggle to endure the implacable prejudice of the white bosses, but the struggle to find enough to eat, to remain clothed, to sleep in a place with adequate shelter. The story of his evolution from victim to survivor is a powerful testament to the ability of the human will to prevail against insuperable odds.

III.

There are parts of this story that aren't pretty. There's the racial animosity he suffered, the struggle to keep himself alive, the meanness he

sometimes exhibited toward people who didn't deserve it. More than once he told me that coming up as hard as he did had made him hard, and without ever apologizing or saying he was sorry for anything, he'd lay out the facts again, as if their recitation could somehow ameliorate the dark side of who he was. It was never my place in the long relationship we shared (he died in 1987 at the age of 87, when I was 47) to pass judgement upon his life. Drawing conclusions, making an assessment, offering a final evaluation is not what this story is about, or, more importantly, what our relationship was about. We made a curious duo-- black/white, old/young, poor/rich, vulnerable/insulated. Huck and Jim, I suppose, sailing down the big river on that flimsy raft, Huck listening avidly to Jim's tales and digressions, trying to understand what it was about the tree-shrouded bank on the Missouri (slave state) side that made him so antsy and nervous.

There's only so much we can learn about middle-class American life from our parents and then we have to go elsewhere, into another realm, another reality, to experience the shock or trauma that can shake us loose from our received identity. Despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, family is not without its limitations; the values it embodies don't always represent the high point of personal development. Sometimes to grow, one has to step outside of one's given life to confront something totally

different and inexplicable. Sylvester Bell was that for me; the simple act of listening (sympathetically) to what he had to say enabled me to envision the vital, sensory, physical world he inhabited.

How much can we learn about people from listening to stories about their lives? Maybe a lot, maybe not much. I have no idea whether everything he told me was the actual truth or not. He was a born storyteller, he had a captive audience, possibly he embroidered the details. But I can't fathom why he would have done that. Dissembling was alien to his nature; he never pretended to be anything other than what he actually was. The air of authenticity he radiated was as tangible as a plank board. He was as candid about his faults as he was about his virtues. His life from the very start was governed by the ruthless equation of poverty and prejudice; why would he exaggerate events that from the outset were so patently grim? He came from nothing, and by dint of a kind of steady, persevering courage, he made himself into something. For all his shortcomings, he was a compelling and attractive man. People were drawn to him. He radiated a distinct personal magnetism. It was impossible not to be charmed by his presence, his personality. His gift for being himself, without apology or hesitation, was enormously appealing.

IV.

I had listened to Sylvester's stories since I was a little boy. He came to work for my family first in the early 1940s and then in 1946 after we moved back to St. Joseph, Missouri, from Washington, D.C., where my father served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. I liked to follow him around the house, and whenever he took a break from his chores to eat a sandwich or drink a cup of coffee, I'd ask him to tell me another. At an early age, in my naivete and enthusiasm, I sensed that there was something fabulous about his life; it seemed so full of adventure and excitement. One person's chronicle of human misery is another's fantasy of a life well-lived; the gap between the two can never really be bridged, not even by the most compassionate effort of the imagination. His life had nothing in common with mine. There was nothing remotely similar between them. They occupied opposite poles in the racial/economic spectrum of American life. I was white, middle-class, coddled and comforted by all that money could buy. I knew nothing of any of the hard times he described in detail. There were moments when his life seemed to test the limits of credulity, yet each story was as vivid in the retelling as the first time I heard it.

The phenomenon of story cuts both ways. It insulates at the same time it exposes; it distances at the same time it discloses. While we may

learn more about others, that knowledge doesn't necessarily earn our sympathy and respect. In fact, it can have the opposite effect; it can magnify our differences to the degree that we feel hopelessly estranged. In the end the listener understands the story only in his imagination, and this type of reception, no matter how warmly projected, remains markedly different from the mindset of the person who delivers it.

What it was really like for Sylvester, growing up the way he did, I can never know with any degree of certainty; I can only present in these pages what was presented to me with as much fidelity as I can muster. These stories give shape and substance to his life. They define and classify him at the same time they seem to have sprung full-blown, not just from his lips, but from the mouth of a collective consciousness, whose stories on the same theme swell in unison like a choir.

In the end, when the teller is boxed up in his grave, all we are left with after everything else falls away are the stories by and about him that linger tantalizingly in the air like a shimmery late-evening light. Historical figures receive footnotes in the retelling of their lives, whereas the majority of us rely on hearsay and innuendo to validate who we are and why. We can document our origins and activities up to a point, until the nugget of reality around which our elaborate retellings are snugly wrapped melts slowly into the darkness. The process is

inexorable--fact to story to legend to myth--the reverse of the process of photographic development--a subtle, steady blurring of hard-edged detail to the flicker of a shadow. So much is lost in translation, like they say. But if we had no chimeras and echoes, no lingering light, if these stories about Sylvester Bell had passed untold and unacknowledged, what legacy could we then leave to those still interested in listening?

V.

For years he and I had talked about going to Arkansas to visit the town where he'd grown up and to find the house that he had lived in from 1907 to 1919. Born in 1900, he was now 85 years old, and the enormous vitality that had quickened his life was beginning to fade. In 1984, after a lifetime of smoking, he had part of a lung removed. Despite this setback, his physique was sturdy, his shoulders broad, his arms and legs, conditioned by a lifetime of hard labor, still corded with muscle. His voice was maybe his most remarkable feature--a deep, brassy baritone, full of colorful epithets and strident laughter, that echoed off the walls like the vibrant toots of a tenor saxophone. At my brother's wedding reception in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1974, Herman Bell, Sylvester's oldest son, an outstanding jazz musician in Kansas City, was soloing on tenor sax when he took off on a wild improvisatory riff, causing the dancers to

slacken their pace and look around. Standing in the crowd of appreciative listeners, I realized that, through the medium of that gleaming horn, Herman had caught and amplified the hard, virile, honking edge of his father's distinctive voice.

VI.

It was nearly noon that February day in 1985 when we drove across the White River bridge into the town of Augusta, seat of Woodruff County Arkansas. "If anyone asks you who the old guy you're with is, you just tell them his name is Sook Mason."

I knew that pseudonym. He'd told me about it before. He'd used it during his outlaw years when he didn't want anyone to know his real name. It was a kind of second self he could slip into when he wanted to remain incognito.

"What're you worried about?" I protested. "It's been 65 years since you were last here."

"You just do as I tell you. The people I knew in this raggedy-ass town must've had their own sons and daughters. People don't forget so easily in a small town."

I could tell he was nervous. The doctors had told him not to smoke, but he lit a cigarette anyway and inhaled deeply.

Only a few people walked the streets of downtown Augusta that glittery, late-winter afternoon as we came down off the bridge from the west. Empty storefronts lined the main drag. Sylvester lowered the passenger window and leaned out. His voice trembled as he pointed out the boarded-up hulk of the old movie theatre where he had clobbered a white man with a blackjack one night in retaliation for an indignity the man had inflicted upon him. The alleyway he had fled down was gone, plugged by the shell of an old filling station, which itself looked on the verge of collapse.

We drove through the colored residential section. At the corner of Sixth and Sycamore, Sylvester spotted a familiar landmark. A solid red-brick church with a tarpaper steeple shaped like an elf's cap, glowing in the brittle sunshine. He got out and inspected a stone-incised marker next to the double doors. A warm smile creased his face. "This was my wife's church," he said happily. "Sunday morning I used to wait for her on that corner over there and follow her home."

"Dirty old man," I chided him.

"I was that too,"

We tried to locate his wife's house. Sylvester remembered it was only a few blocks away. We parked the car and strolled along the gravel streets. Instead of houses there were empty lots. Sylvester's eyes

flicked anxiously from one vacant space to the next. "This place used to be crowded with homes," he muttered. "There used to be homes everywhere around here."

A block east of the church, where the house he had grown up in once stood, there was an empty lot. Well, not quite empty; another house stood there, two other houses, set back from the street, which presented a different configuration from what Sylvester remembered.

"This corner used to be square," he whispered in dismay. "Now the road curves through it. My house used to set out on the point here, right under a pecan tree. The house was built up on bricks so air could circulate in summer. My brother and I used to crawl in there and shoot marbles and hide from Momma when she wanted to give us a lickin. It's gone now. So's the pecan tree."

He looked up and down the empty street. He turned completely around, pirouetting on the heel of his shoe. A puzzled expression crimped his smooth brown face. "Where'd my house go?" he wondered. "What happened to it?"

None of the neighbors knew. Sylvester got out of the car and spoke to two or three, introducing himself as Sook Mason, relative of a fellow named Sylvester Bell, who had once, a long time ago, lived in Augusta. In the watery light of the late-winter afternoon, he looked the part of the

outsider, the well-heeled city cousin, and that might have bothered the people he spoke with. He wore a fur cap with retractable ear flaps, a plaid shirt buttoned at the throat, a light-colored coat with a black wool collar that reached to his knees. The real problem was that no one he spoke to was old enough to share his recollection of the way the street had once been. "I've lived so long there's no one left to remember anything with me," he said as he slipped back into the car. He ran his hand musingly over his cheeks and nose.

He found his old school in an area called Boxtown on the north side of Augusta, a couple of miles from the black district. In the early 1900s, white children attended a brick school on the edge of downtown, while black kids had to walk through the white area to a single-story, two-room clapboard structure located at the foot of a rutted, unpaved country lane, which in 1985 remained rutted and unpaved. The schoolhouse was abandoned. We pushed through the creaky, unlocked door and prowled around inside. Sylvester recalled where he had once sat, where the schoolmaster's desk was located, the wood-burning stove.

Back out in the shimmery delta sunlight, a bewildered expression clouded his face. "How things change," he whispered. "How they change."

We drove in silence through the placid streets of the little town, Sylvester gazing intently out the open window for other landmarks. The

tall oaks that once lined the wider avenues had either died or been cut down. As the car glided from block to block, he spoke obsessively about his missing house--the crawl space under the floor, the privy out back, the newspapers matting the walls. "It was just an old, funky shack," he recalled, his voice tight and thin. "It was practically ready to fall down back then. So how can I expect after all this time that it might still be standin?"

He dug into his pocket for another cigarette. "That's what my head keeps tellin me. My heart keeps sayin sumthin else."

A group of black and white children, fresh from school, strolled along a sidewalk, talking and playing. Two boys tossed a ball to one another. Sylvester watched them with keen interest. Then he told me a story.

One day in 1911 a black man went beserk and killed three people, one of whom was white. A vigilante group found the man and dragged him to the river bank and hanged him from the limb of a sycamore tree. The children in the black school in Boxtown were let out early that afternoon and forced to march single-file past the tree so they could view the body.

"It was pitiful, the things I seen when I was young. Just pitiful."

True enough, but he couldn't keep from talking about them, and I couldn't keep from listening. Tonight, in the motel, I'd ask him questions,

and he'd be off again, recalling other events, other incidents. And I would listen and ask for more. And somehow, by hearing the stories about his life, I'd find out more about my own. Sylvester and I were like two fish feeding off the same elusive substance in the depths of a murky pond. I had known him all my life, since I was a little boy, a pampered, privileged white kid, insulated from life's harsh realities. He was more than a surrogate father, he was a friend and confidant, my mentor and exemplar. He believed I was destined for a happy, productive life. He was patient with me. He taught me things. He insisted I learn how to behave like a man, which for him meant facing up to whatever came my way, without flinching or making excuses. I loved him as deeply as I've ever loved any other human being. I can't say I ever really knew him or understood him; his life was too complex for that, his racial identity diametrically opposed to my own. But I know that when I was in his presence I felt better. I felt energized, full of hope, ready to laugh and shout, eager to accept what life might throw my way.

VII.

I don't think he ever trusted anyone. His nature was too wary and suspicious; he'd been shot at, literally and figuratively, too many times in his life. He knew what it was like to be a target, to have people out there

gunning for him . As we drove back across the bridge spanning the White River, a load seemed to lift from his shoulders. "Are you glad you came back?" I asked.

"Yes . . ."

"Was it what you thought it would be?"

"No . . . I expected more."

"More . . . ?"

"I guess I expected it would be more like it was when I was a kid."

"It's changed that much?"

"To the point where I could barely recognize it!"

We drove along in silence for a couple of miles.

"That's not fair," he said. "It's bad enough that it's all gone by, but to have it look different, so you're not even sure where you are, that's hard."

That night, deep in the Ozarks, in the room of a motel near the town of Mountain Home, as he was undressing to get into bed, I noticed a long-bladed knife strapped to his left calf. "Wait a minute," I said. "What's that?"

"Just a little sumthin to comfort me with," he replied.

"It's a knife," I said.

"That's right. Sook Mason dont go anywhere down here without havin

a little sumthin he can come back at you with.”

“Thank God we weren’t stopped by a cop,” I fussed.

Oh, I’d’ve made it okay. I could always talk my way out of a problem.”

“Did you bring a gun as well?”

“I thought about it. Never know when you might need one. Then I knew you wouldn’t like it, so I left it at home.”

VIII.

I have so many memories of this man, so many images that flicker through my mind, lighting up the dullest corners. He was a powerful presence--short, compact, about five feet five inches tall, with a barrel chest, long arms with an extended reach, and strong, calloused fingers. (Fourth of July when I was a kid he’d hold a firecracker in one hand and press down on the length, causing the explosion to shoot outwards away from his fingers. “How’d you do that?” I said breathlessly. “Just don’t you ever try it,” he replied.)

His face was broad, his smile wide and expansive; only a few times did I ever see his eyes color with wrath. A mulish expression now and then darkened his features, turning them to stone. He could be stubborn; when he set his mind on something he went after it with a single-minded

intensity. He taught me how to tap dance, how to clean a dead rabbit, how to carry a loaded shotgun across a bumpy field, how to call a duck down to within shooting distance of a camouflaged blind. I always learned something when I was in his presence. I always perked up with expectation and delight. And when he told me a story, I felt connected to the bigger world of history and meaningful event. He was the living embodiment of an era before my own when life was a lot more difficult for so many people. An older, sensory, tactile world where people worked with their hands and thought more slowly and deliberately and tried to live the best they could within the limits imposed upon them.

IX.

One summer afternoon in the late 1950s he and I drove up to my father's farm north of St. Jo. The farm was located out on the bottomlands of the Missouri River, a few miles south of the Squaw Creek Game Preserve. Sylvester had some work to do, and I had been told by my father to mow a certain field and get it ready for flooding. In a few weeks, geese and ducks would be heading south down the flyway from the Dakotas. They liked to lay over at the preserve and on the nearby properties, provided they had a wet spot to land on and something to eat. I was scheduled to return to college in a week, and I was bored with being

in St. Jo and ready to go back east and pick up on my new life.

I had trouble getting the tractor to start, and Syl had to tinker with it, speaking to it as he always did with anything he was working on with a kind of affectionate baby talk--humming, chortling, scolding--until the engine finally coughed into action and I plopped into the perforated seat and slipped the wheel into gear and guided the clattery, popping vehicle out of the decrepit wooden shed in which it was housed. Mowing was one of my favorite things to do at the farm, and for a couple of hours I traversed the oblong field, cutting swaths of weeds and grasses in ever-shrinking circles, attracting flocks of swallows and chimney swifts, who dove at the bugs stirred up by the whirring blade. The afternoon was warm; the smell of cut grass snuffed deliciously through my nostrils. It was mid-September and the energy wires leading from the cabin out to the county road were crowded with kingbirds and dickcissels, bunching up before heading south.

The Missouri River slipped by maybe a half-mile away, churning south-southeast toward St. Jo and Kansas City. Over the eons it had meandered back and forth between the high bluffs on the Kansas and Missouri sides, depositing a rich alluvial soil that we called gumbo when it got sticky wet. The bottoms were still farmed big time, but there were also city people like my father who owned hundred-acre plots which they

used for hunting in the fall. To the west and a little north I could see the town of White Cloud, gleaming from the tucks and folds of the bluffs on the Kansas side. An Indian town, capital of the Ioway Reservation. The tractor rattled and belched. The swifts and swallows darted and buzzed. Maybe I fell into a trance, but I remember thinking that these bottomlands were like a long, snaky corridor leading up and out onto the Great Plains of the Dakotas and eastern Montana, and as I puttered along on the rickety tractor I could imagine in my mind's eye being connected to all that huge space up there, as surely as if I were tethered to it by an invisible thread.

Finished with mowing, I drove the tractor back to the shed and detached the mower and wheeled it to the back wall; then I put the tractor into reverse and maneuvered it into place. Mowing for me was always satisfying work; the fruits of my labor unfolded in front of me with every fresh pass along the edge of the field. I looked inside the cabin for Sylvester, but he wasn't there. As I walked along the edge of the pond, past a cluster of willows, a trio of turkey vultures glided over the tops of a grove of trees next to the pond. Something dead around here, I concluded; then I heard Syl's low, throaty, cooing voice.

"Where are you?" I called.

"Just about finishin up here . . ."

"What's going on?"

I crossed the mowed portion of the slope between the pond and a stand of tall grass that faded back through the grove of trees. Sylvester was just inside the grass, on his knees, busy gutting and skinning a young buck with a modest antler rack.

"What's this?"

He looked up. His expression was mischievous. "It was me or him," he said with a chuckle. "He was about ready to attack me, so I had to take the wind from his sails."

"It's not deer season, is it?"

"Far from it. That's why I got to get him dressed and outtasight in case some conservation officer comes pokin around."

I knelt down. The buck lay in the grass with a gaping wound in its side, blood trickling out its nostrils. Syl kept a selection of knives and small hatchets in a leather case in the trunk of his car. The case was unfolded in the grass, and he was busy eviscerating the carcass.

"What did you hit him with?"

"That ten gauge I keep in my car."

"Whoo."

"More than enough to lay him low."

"You just saw him in the grass?"

"He first come out of the grass and went toward the pond like he

wanted to drink. I got the gun out and begun to stalk him along the edge. Little bit later, he stepped out in the open and blooey! I got him good."

He'd already cut out the animal's wind pipe. It festered in the grass along with the greasy bladder of the stomach and a glistening coil of intestines. A cloud of insects sizzled overhead.

"Help me here . . ."

We grabbed as much of the guts as we could and spilled them into a burlap bag. Working deftly with the knife and a small, gleaming hatchet, he chopped off the deer's head and limbs and shoved them into another bag. He cut out the haunches and shoulder sections and wedged them into a plastic chest. "We'll get some ice in Forest City."

Without being told, I carried the two bags through the tall grass and through the grove of trees to the edge of an oxbow, a slice of still, curving, stagnant water we called the lagoon. A beat-up aluminum canoe lay overturned on the shallow bank. I pulled it upright and placed the bags in the bow and shoved off and paddled the 20 yards or so to the other side, well away from the house. I dumped the bags in a depression and covered them with leaves. The varmints would make short work of them. Back on the other side of the lagoon, I watched Syl carve up the last edible sections of the deer. "I can hardly wait to sink my teeth into this," he wheezed. A single strand of sweat beaded his forehead. His fingers were

specked with bright spots of blood. "Ain't nothin like fresh meat."

The afternoon was sliding to a close. The sun sank over the bottomlands like a slick plum. A mild breeze luffed through the yellowing leaves. A half-dozen turkey vultures circled overhead.

I helped Syl carry the ice chest into the cabin. "Let's us enjoy a little piece right now," he said. He'd cooked a bit of everything for me in the past--squirrel, rabbit, duck, goose, quail, racoon. This was the first deer.

He dusted a greasy black skillet with flour, pepper, and salt. Then he cut off two chunks of deer meat and laid them in. They popped and sizzled for a few minutes, then he cooked them on the other side, planting his feet far apart to maintain his balance on the flat kitchen floor of the two-bedroom cabin like he'd learned to do when he worked as a short-order cook on the Burlington Northern Railroad in the 1940s. Clackety-clack, the train wailing through little towns, past sidings dominated by rusty water towers, with hoboes tucked under the rods like Sylvester used to ride, traveling from one work site to another. He speared the dripping slices and plunked them down on chunks of bread and sprinkled them with salt. We opened two cold beers and sat down and dug into the meat. The taste was fresh and clean. The juice ran over my tongue and down my throat.

"Down'n Arkansas we'd eat this way. Knock some animal on its ass, build a fire, and dig in. You had to eat when you could."

He chewed some more and took a swig of beer. His face glowed with pleasure. "Nothin like fresh meat. I saw that deer, and season or no season, I had to have him. When the woods offer up their bounty, you got to take it."

He threw back his head and laughed, a loud, startling laugh that rang through the comfortable two-bedroom house that my father had built in 1954 at one end of the pond for he and his cronies to stay in during duck season. A short time later we were in the car, jolting along the track that ran along the top of a levee leading out to the county road. The sun was about to slip below the edge of the bottoms, where the flatlands billowed up into a stack of bluffs and hills on the Kansas side. The telephone wires edging the county road were crusty with birds, eager to be off to wherever they went for the winter.

"We got to stop in Forest City to get ice."

"I remember."

"This deer is our little secret, unnerstand?"

"Completely."

He looked out at the lurid orb of the sun which was just about to disappear behind a line of bushy trees. "Bleeve I'll take me a shower when

I get home. Then me and Marguerite'll get gussied up and go out on the town."

He lit a cigarette and looked out the window. The top arc of the sun slipped below the horizon. A soft yellow light lingered in the cloudless air. "Yass, yass," he sighed. His chin slumped to his chest. I reached over and took the cigarette from between his fingers and finished smoking it before we reached Forest City.

A Note on the Text

For years we spoke about getting it down before he got too old to remember all the things he needed to remember. I knew some of the stories, so I could prod him. I knew some of them so well, I could even fill in the gaps. But each time he told them, he remembered something new -- a detail, a line of dialogue, a character. Sometimes the stories got confused, with so-and-so, who had not been a factor in an earlier version, suddenly turning up in the narrative. Working with him, I realized that storytelling is an accretive process, bit by bit, like the formation of a coral reef, a dribbling down of different sedimentary grains to create an organic whole. There is no conclusion or finale to such a process. The work of building and shaping goes on and on.

If we could sit in a cork-lined room like Marcel Proust and call up everything we could possibly remember, would we be satisfied with the results, or would we want to dredge up more? I suspect if Sylvester were still alive, he'd pump new life into many of these stories. Once launched, stories assume an identity of their own; they become self-perpetuating organisms that feed off the energy generated by their own retelling. Oral history is a wobbly, tenuous, uncertain medium; and yet it's not accuracy

or historical validation that necessarily matters, but authenticity--the replication of the real voice, spoken by that special person, whose inflections and locutions provide a fitting context for events that (hopefully) interest and involve the reader.

We finally got together in the late 1960s and began to get it down. I had access to a reel-to-reel tape recorder, a cumbersome machine that challenged my limited mechanical talents. Because we knew what stories we wanted to emphasize, and because I had heard most of them before, we were able to focus the narrative and follow a chronological timeline. The result was promising; while grateful for what we got, any written account of what was caught on tape remains incomplete without an audible snippet of Sylvester's singular voice. A strong, heady, masculine voice that could fill a room with its resonance. A rich, baritone voice, rising from the diaphragm of his sturdy chest, that ebbed and swelled with operatic fervor.

The taping, done at odd moments when both of us were available,. continued into the early 1970s. And then I backed off and started looking for a way to get it down on paper. Other projects intervened. Our lives took different turns. We managed to tape a few more pieces, mainly to plug the holes. And then Sylvester's health began to fail. After he died on September 26, 1987, the project spun into limbo.

It revived in the 1990s. Interest from a National Public Radio

producer helped rekindle a new appraisal of the story's potential. I found somebody to convert the reel-to-reel tapes into cassettes, which were then transcribed. A narrative thread glimmered through the bulky Q & A transcript. I considered editing that format and offering it for publication, but it seemed more appropriate to let Sylvester have the entire stage to himself, minus my intrusive presence. And so I combed through the transcript isolating and codifying the most important tales. I was keenly acquainted with the way he spoke; no part of the transcript in which he appeared was without its aural accompaniment, whether from the raw material of the tapes or from my own memory. Everything caught and preserved on paper echoes with the sound of his voice. It's that voice --brash, heady, distinctive--that has buoyed and sustained me throughout the assembling of this memoir.

I have endeavored to tell the story in a sequential manner, beginning with his earliest memory. The account on the tapes jumps around a bit, and I have tried to link it back up in a consecutive narrative. In some instances, I combined relevant material from multiple entries to create a deeper, richer anecdote. My overriding concern was twofold: to preserve the character of the man's remarkable memory, and to capture and sustain the flavor and rhythm of his compelling manner of delivery.

Sylvester excelled in telling stories about his life. Unlike other

storytellers, he did not embellish them with fancy rhetoric. In that sense, he was a raconteur rather than a performer. Other than a short stint on the stage in the 1920s as a member of several entertainment troupes, he was not a “man-of-words” performer in the sense defined by Roger D. Abrahams in his many books on the subject. (See especially *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*, 1983). Sylvester’s manner of delivery is more plainsong than verbal dazzle. The tone is steady, unwavering, and blunt. He describes the events in his life so that they jump from his recollection directly onto the page without being embroidered or bowdlerized. While much of what he says is shot through with visceral humor, he remains ruthlessly honest, not only about others, but about himself. What we have here is a rugged, no-frills account of an authentic American life. He makes no effort to conceal his flaws, or those he perceives in others. He is his own man, without hesitation or self-doubt. What he feels and what he knows he says outright. And what he says resounds with the clap of implacable truth.

I hope some of the material herein has made the often difficult transition from oral recitation to the printed page. Sylvester Bell was an original. He lived through a difficult time when life for African-Americans was precarious and grim. Ultimately, no medium can

adequately convey the richness and diversity of his life or his presence. His story, told from ground level by a participant and survivor, helps us to understand what it must have been like to be a black man from the Arkansas delta in the first half of the twentieth century. It also reclaims this man--my mentor and friend, in all his complex facets--from the gloomy well of historical silence, where the majority of us are fated to dwell.

Conger Beasley, Jr.

St. Joseph, Missouri

February 2004

A CERTAIN MAN
The Life and Times of Sylvester Bell

1.

The first thing I remember--this must have been in 1903--a wind come up and blew me off the porch. It was two years after that before I could walk good. And durin that time my brother Edward outgrew me. He was two or three years older, but he outgrew me, and then my sister was born.

Until 1905 we lived in a windowless shack in the woods seven miles from Wheatley, Arkansas (1). We packed the chinks in the walls with dried mud in winter, and knocked them out in summer to let in air. My brother and I slept on the floor on a pallet of sage grass. Come winter, Momma'd wrap us up in gunny sacks. She'd sit up all night tendin the fire. If that fire had gone out, we might've froze to death.

There was no furniture of any kind in the house, no windows or lights.

One summer Edward and me slept with a king snake. The snake was like a pet dog for us. One day he come up out of a pond where we drew our water and crawled into the house and slipped between our bodies as we was layin on the floor. We weren't scared. We seen him around in the yard

huntin rats and other bad snakes. We called him King. He was like a pet, our very own. He stayed with us three or four months, till summer ran out, then went back into the pond. We never saw him no more after that.

2.

My sister Pinky Lee died when she was two. She died of a thing back then we called "slow fever." (2) That was in 1905. My brother and I sat on her coffin in the wagon as the mules drew her body from the church to the cemetery. There was lots of people at the funeral. She was just a child. My mother, with all her healin magic, couldn't cure her of the fever. I have completely forgot what her face looked like.

3.

Once a week we'd go to town and buy a 24-pound sack of flour. And from it Momma'd make biscuits and cornbread. She cooked all kinds of game in that flour--coon, possum, birds, chickens, rabbits.

Edward and I killed blackbirds for Momma by scatterin seed under a door and waitin for the blackbirds to walk under it. When enough of them did, we yanked the prop out with a string and flattened a mess of them.

We killed rabbits with slingshots and sticks tipped with iron bolts that bind railroad joints. We got pretty good at that. We got so we could

run a rabbit down by hollerin at it and makin it so confused it didn't know which way to go.

4.

You know, when I was comin up through childhood and all the activity we had then . . . what we played with and what we didn't have to play with, and so forth. I didn't want specifically to tell about those things because it was a lot happenin from childhood days, such as you couldn't make a livin the way you wanted to make it. If you didn't want to work, they'd force you to work. Also, in 1907, they issued you money out of scrip. (3) They didn't have no real money back then. They didn't have no regular bills or nothin. They just had scrip. They'd hand you a piece of paper and you'd take it to the grocery store and they'd tear off so much and you'd pay your rent out of that. A whole lot happened like that back then.

5.

My father, James Edward Bell, was a jackleg preacher. By that I mean he didn't always mean the same as what he said. He fancied himself a preacher. He read the Bible and he spoke it, but he didn't always follow the Bible. He'd give a sermon one day and the next he'd go into town and shack up with a woman.

He was crazy about chickens. Outside our house in the woods we had chickens everywhere. There must have been three or four hundred of them, roosting in the trees. Sometimes their feathers fell like snow all over the yard. Every so often he'd pack the wagon with chickens, hitch up the mule, and take the chickens to Wheatley to sell. Trouble was, we wouldn't see him after that for maybe a few weeks. Momma finally got tired of it and ran away from him.

Last time I saw my father he was wanderin up and down the train depot in Wheatley, sellin chickens. He had chickens hangin all over his body, dead ones and live ones. His hair looked like it had been dusted with chicken feathers. He had chicken feathers stickin out his ears. I was across the street and screamed "Daddy! Daddy!" I tried to run over to him, but my mother snatched my arm and pulled me halfway across town before she turned me loose. I cried the whole time. And when we got home she blistered my ass with an ellum [elm] whip and told me I didn't have a daddy anymore.

6.

After Momma run away from my father, we went to live in Augusta, Arkansas, where she had a sister. (4) She worked all day for this farmer, shuckin corn for 50 cents a day. With the first 50 cents she made, she

walked seven miles to town and bought a piece of meat and a piece of salt pork and some cornmeal. Then she come home and made a big fire. We didn't have any stove to cook on in our new shack. She just scraped a hole in the ground and heated up some coals and cooked the meat on top of the coals.

7.

One time I saw my brother stick his dick into the backside of a hen, and after he busted his nuts that ole hen went and sat on her nest and laid an egg. And I told my brother, "I'm not gonna eat that egg! There's no way I'm gonna eat that egg!"

8.

Edward and I wore flour sacks pinned at the neck and sometimes at the waist, and that was all we wore no matter what the weather was like. We didn't have any shoes. It wasn't until I was living in Augusta that I wore a pair of shoes, and that was for Sunday and goin to school. Momma could whip us easy then. All she had to do was lift up the backs of them flour sacks, and there we were exposed, and she could blister us till we cried for mercy. And, oh how we cried to God for mercy, but nobody ever come down to help us out. I've never been too religious in my life as a

result of that. Those ells switches would lick a long ways around our little asses and never break. They never broke once that I could remember.

9.

We didn't have any wall paper in our house. We didn't have anything on the walls. The best we could do was to take newspapers and paper our walls with that. Edward and I used to lie in bed at night and read what happened a year before, or read the comics, or the advertisements. We'd take the papers from the fancy white houses where Momma worked, and paper our walls with that.

10.

Momma was part Indian, Choctaw, I bleve. Her mother was a solid Indian. She couldn't hardly speak any English, and I carry that blood in me today. (5)

I never liked my grandfather. He did all the talkin for both of them. In them days the man handled all the money. The women couldn't handle no money. All they'd make they'd give to him and what he decided to do with it was what was done.

Momma was a healer. She knew how to find the right herbs and leaves, how to boil them to make compresses and potables [liquid herbal

remedies].

One time my cousin took sick of the slow fever, and Momma made a tub with hot water and put peach-tree leaves in it. (6) Then she made a pad out of it and wrapped her up and steamed the sickness right out of her. It come back to her in little pieces out of her Indian heritage, what to do to help sick people. She could help her cousin, but she couldn't cure little Pinky Lee, her daughter, who died at the age of two of the same disease.

We tried everything durin them years to try and get well on our own, cause the doctors were so far and few between. There was only one Negro doctor in Augusta. His name was Dr. Gulvershine and he was from Africa. He cost too much to go to, so when we got sick Momma just brewed something for us from what she found in the woods.

We had a tea we made out of sheep shit, mixed with our own chamber lye [urine], which we took for sore throat. You gargled with it and spit it out, just like you do with a mouthwash or gargle today. And it'd clear your throat up fine. (7) So far as wrappin sores and wounds, well, one time I fell on a piece of glass and Momma healed that with castor oil. She'd soak the cut with castor oil. We didn't have anyone we could go to to put in stitches if we needed them.

We peed in a pan and washed our face with it and let it dry and left it on overnight. That would take all the courage bumps off your face. Pimples, they call em today. Like when your face gets full of bumps, you

see lots of kids with it; them's just courage bumps. Sex is so powerful at that age, they aint got nothin to keep it down.

When we had a fever Momma'd keep us soaked all the time with peach-tree leaf juice. She'd steam us all over with it. We wore a piece of asafetida around our necks to keep the fever down. (8)

And, of course, men had a whole lot of claps [gonorrhea] goin around. They'd go to a doctor if they could and get some tablets for it. It was just bad times back then. You'd see people with the pox, pitty faces like someone pecked them with an ice pick. Now, I understand, they've mostly gotten rid of that disease. And influenza. Oh my, that killed a whole bunch of people back then!

11.

In 1911--let's see--yes, in 1911, when she was 30, Momma married this big-lipped man named John Duckworth. We moved to a shack on Fifth and Sycamore, in Augusta, and he got work at a barrel-stave factory. (9) The schoolhouse we went to had two rooms for a hundred students, and two teachers for all them students. A man named Eskridge taught grades one, two, and three. A man named Love taught four through eight. School lasted three months, off and on, from October till spring, dependin on how much cotton needed to be planted and picked. Everything came to a stop

during cotton season. When it came time to work the cotton, all the Negroes had to go out to the fields.

I went to school up to the eighth grade. I was 17 years old when I graduated from that grade. I don't think I was stupid. I just didn't have time for an education.

12.

It was 1913 when I seen my first automobile. There wasn't no paved streets or nothing. Everything was dirt and sand and mud. When the horses was pullin a wagon, well, when they saw an automobile comin, the people had to git out and hold their horses cause the horses were afraid of the automobile. It was just something unbelievable, the way it was then and the time it is now.

The first airplane I seen, well, I ran two miles just to look at it. It come down like a cyclone into a field, and everybody seen it, and no one had ever seen one before. (10) There was people takin pitchurs of the airplane, and later on they charged five dollars to go up in it, and I got to go up through the generosity of a white man named Tom Stanton. (11) He paid my way. It seemed like, once we was up there, I could see the whole world turnin on a spool. Later I went to work for Tom Stanton and helped feed his cattle and pigs. One time a bull I was herdin got out of hand and

ran me under a trough, and I was there two hours before I could attract any attention for anybody to get me out.

13.

One time Edward and me was playin in a sorghum mill. I was playin like I was the mule, trampin around a circle, causin the gears to mesh. Edward got two fingers caught and they were chewed off. Momma healed the wounds with a mixture of turpentine, axel grease, and soot. Edward had to hold his arms up for a long time. When he put them down, blood ran out of the stumps he had for fingers. I felt terrible about that, but there was nothin I could do.

14.

Doctor Biles had his office downtown, over the Rexall drugstore, but he lived in this swonkie [swank] house in the white district. He had me and Edward chase balls when his friends come to the house to play tennis. They didn't have no catch boards like they have now. They'd hit em, and if they went a block, well, we had to run a block and bring back the balls. We got ten cents for that. (12)

Momma was workin for Doctor Biles, and she would cook the meals and serve them at the big table. There wasn't any screens back then,

no screen wire like we got today, and the flies would come in the doors and windows. I'd set over in the corner while the family ate and pull this rod with a fan cut out of newspapers tacked to a piece of board, and work it back and forth to keep them flies off the table while they ate. It was mostly kerosene lamps back then. They didn't have no electric hooks or nothin like that.

In the mornings we'd go out with the ice wagon deliverin ice, and we'd get a dime for that. Then we'd buy us a watermelon or whatever we needed to eat, some cheese and crackers, whatever we had to have. Most of the time the iceman'd give us some ice. After we'd been on the ice wagon, we'd buy a watermelon and put ice on it to chill so when Momma came home she'd have a cold piece of watermelon to eat. She worked for Doctor Biles at that time, washin, ironin, cookin. There was four of them in that family, and she made \$3.50 a week. We had a two-room house that we lived in, and we was payin three dollars a month for that.

It was just poor times, very poor.

15.

Tom Stanton lived in north Augusta. He had a lot of Negroes workin for him. He was the first man who brought an automobile into town. And he used to run races with a veterinarian, who was the second man in town

to have a car. One time they run races right through town, everyday for a week. Then they'd get out and fight with each other for about an hour. Then they'd jump into their cars and race for another couple of miles and fight again. I guess they didn't like each other one bit. They never fought with nothin but their fists. No knives or nothin. They just beat each other up till they could hardly see. They both were rich, and they had this grudge against one other. Tom Stanton felt this veterinarian had done something to his cows and the rest of his stock that he didn't like. So they had this feud, and it went on for a week. The law didn't step in. It was the most pitiful sight you ever seen. Two white people fightin each other and keepin it up for a week. No one tried to settle it or nothin. They just settled it themselves.

16.

We went to school in an area called Boxtown, at the north end of Augusta, two miles from the black district. (13) We had one pair of shoes apiece, my brother and me. We wore them to school and church. The rest of the time we went barefoot or wrapped our feet in gunnysacks.

Back then, white children attended a brick school on the edge of downtown, while colored kids had to walk through the white section to a two-room clapboard buildin located at the foot of a rutted, unpaved path.

Well, the white kids would taunt us as we walked through their section, and we'd taunt em back. We'd get to shovin each other off those high wooden sidewalks and get into a fight right there. It was an unwritten law in that town, black folks had to get off the sidewalks and walk in the streets when whites came toward them.

We had to walk a mile and a half each mornin to get to school. I tried to get there early and help the teacher start the fire in the stove on cold mornings. Black kids went to school till the age of eighteen. Then they'd leave home, leave town, go somewhere else. Sometimes, like me, they got no further than eighth grade, even though they was seventeen and eighteen years old, all growd up. We was taught in groups. Teacher would ask us a bunch of questions, and we'd stand up in our group, in a line, and answer. When we stood up, we stood in a line. And if you didn't know anything, if he asked you a question and you couldn't answer, well, you had to go to the foot of the class and work yourself back up.

I wasn't bad in school, even if I spent two years in second grade and three years in fourth grade. They told us we couldn't get so much as a porter's or a waiter's job if we didn't have an education. I couldn't do the mills and jills [math] real good, though I could work my dramatics [public speaking] okay. I could always entertain people and make them like me.

17.

One day in 1910--I remember that year!--a black man went beserk and killed a Negro couple. It was well-known that he went and killed them. Then he caught a train and got in the engine and made them drive him thirteen miles. Then he went beserk again and killed the engineer and fireman on the train. (14)

Well, they finally caught him and brought him back to Augusta, and they had a trial. And while they was conductin this trial, a bunch of Negroes gathered out back of the courthouse, all angry and shakin their fists. But the man never did get to stay in jail because they let him out the front door and a bunch of whites throwed a rope around his neck and drug him ten blocks down the middle of the street. And they hung him from a tree at the stave factory over there by the White River. I was ten years old at the time.

They left him hangin up there from ten in the morning till dark, and everybody went by and saw him hangin there. Us kids in the black school in Boxtown were let out early that afternoon and forced to march single-file past the tree so we could see the body. It was the most pitiful sight you ever seen. Man hangin there, tongue stuck out, snot comin out of his nose, just hangin there. They finally cut him down into a wooden box. He would have got killed either way. If he'd gone out the back, the Negroes

would have killed him. So he went out the front and the white folks killed him.

18.

When you got into trouble with the law you could run into different places, but it wasn't too much protection for you. Just the same, maybe, as a rabbit. If you ran into some place where you wasn't really known, well, they'd get after you there and you just had to keep on runnin, that's all.

It was best out in the open instead of runnin into someone's home or something like that, cause you might get killed that way. You was just mostly afraid to do anything that your parents told you not to do, and you just wouldn't do it. You could get out of line by speakin a single word to the wrong person. It was so rough, I don't know how we managed to live that way for as long as we did. You had to say "yes sir" and "yes maam," and "no sir" and "no maam." My momma was very strict on how we had to behave to keep from gettin ourselves in trouble. We'd go to church every Sunday mornin, and we'd stay at church most of the day. All the play toys we had, we made em ourselves. We'd see some kids playin with something, and we'd try to get along with them so we could play with it ourselves.

19.

Black people used to swim at a place in the river upstream from where the whites used to swim. But the whites made us stop swimmin there. They were afraid some kind of contagion might drift downstream and infect them.

20.

We had a garden back then cause there wasnt much canned food to buy, and what there was was costly. We grew cabbage, green peas, corn, green beans, and other stuff. You couldn't buy food like you can now. We only got salt pork for meat. There was one meat market in town that finally opened up. And there used to be a wagon that'd come by that we could buy meat off of. They cut what you wanted, cut it right there on the wagon. Every so often we'd kill a cow, and eat that. And of course we had chicken and things like that. Now and then we'd get hold of a hog and fatten it up. You butchered hogs in winter time, and put them down in a well. We didn't have no ice like they have now, so we had to put it down in the ground. We'd put it in a sack and drop it in. The bottom of the well had water in it, and it would keep cool that way.

We smoked our meat to preserve it and give it flavor. We'd smoke it in a special room, with a low hot hickory fire. Then we'd put a lot of salt

on it. We needed to put salt on it to keep the meat from spoiling after it was smoked. It would keep for about a year. Whenever you got hungry, well, you'd just go out to the smokehouse and cut yourself a piece.

21.

We could hunt anything we wanted to hunt. There were no game laws, no fishing licenses, you didn't have to buy no license or nothin. Just go out in the woods and kill anything you wanted to kill. They had rabbits and squirrels and coons and possums and deer. There were bear as well. Just on the other side of the White River there was a big canebreak called Nine Mile Bend. There was bear, panther, everything out there. (15)

Real bear! They're still there, I bet. You take a rich man, well, he wouldn't turn his stock loose over there cause the panthers would kill too many of them. Some of the cows that got lost over there became pretty wild and were hard to round up. I knowd lots of Negro cowboys back then. They had to go out and search through the canebrake and find the wild horses and cattle and break them and drive them into pens. And these cowboys didn't use no saddles either. They just tied a rope around the horse's mouth and they'd have to hold on to that rope. Aint nobody could ride a horse like that but them Negroes. (16)

22.

We'd get ahold of a boat and go out on the White River and drop an anchor bar and dive down and pick up two or three hundred mussel shells. Pearlin, we called it. Not all the boys liked doing this, but I did. I was a good swimmer and I was never afraid of the water.

We'd take up those mussel shells and build a fire on the bank and cook them off and see if we could find a pearl or slug that was worth some kind of money. If we didn't, well, we'd sell the shells at 75 cents a ton. They made buttons out of them back then before plastic come in and ruined the business. We could catch a thousand pounds a day if we kept busy. (17)

So we was sellin pecans, mussel shells, blackberries, and muscadines, anything we could get in our hands. If we could sell it in town, we'd go out in the country and find it. We could make better money doin that than pickin cotton, but the white owners, they didn't like that. They didn't like the fact that we didn't want to work in the fields, so they burned down all the berry patches and the muscadines and made it hard for us to dive for mussel shells. They also wouldn't sell us no tools. They did this to make us work in the fields. It was almost slavery time, what I come up under.

They didn't have cultivators back then. We had to chop cotton to thin

it out. They had no machine that would clear it out. And now they got machines to pick the cotton. (18) But then, you had to pick it with your hands. It took a lot of people workin together to make cotton grow, then get it picked. Sometimes there'd be two or three hundred of us out in the fields. We'd start at six in the mornin and wouldn't get home till seven that evenin. They'd have wagons and trucks come by and pick you up and carry you out to the fields. October, November, a little bit into December. Sometimes it was cold, and we'd wrap our feet with gunnysacks, cause Momma wouldn't let us wear our shoes out in all that mud and dirt. We went barefooted. She went barefooted, too. Even when she was workin for Dr. Biles, cookin all the family meals, washin and cleanin, she had to pick cotton. That's how important that crop was to the white people who owned everything. At harvest time, Dr. Biles'd let her off to go pick cotton. He had farms and fields, too, and he let her off for that. We'd be let out of school, and we'd all be together pickin cotton in the fields. White men like Dr. Biles could use you anyway they wanted to. (19)

23.

Long about 1914, I bleve it was, they found this white man hangin from a trustle [railroad trestle bridge spanning a stream or river], so they wanted to lay it on us. They was a bunch of us that ran around together,

and we could get pretty ornery at times. And I don't know to this day who really did it. We didn't know this man, and the law didn't know this man, and from that day to this one, they don't know who he was. But they found him hangin on the trustle, and they wanted to lay it on us. We went down and looked at him, and several of the boys said they knew what happened. But I don't know what happened. At the time there was lots of hobos roamin the country. People out of work or down on their luck was always hoboin at that time. They would ride the train. This fellow must've been a floater who come through town and got hisself into trouble. Aint nobody knew nothin about him. They just found him hangin by a rope from the trustle.

24.

There was this man by the name of Pondexter. He worked for a millionaire white man, Nathan Gregory, who owned a whole lot of land. One day this Pondexter killed some Negroes. The law asked his father to have him come in, and it was two years before he turned himself in. They never did try to go get him. It was said one time when they tried to capture him, he killed four Negroes and three white men.

The house was out in the woods, and it was hard to get to. The Negroes down there was part Indian. Pondexter was a crack shot. He had a

Winchester rifle hangin on the wall of every room in the house. They was mean people, that's all. They come up in school, fightin and goin on, and they never was taught how to live proper. (20)

Seldom anybody got through eighth grade down there. When you got through eighth grade, you were so old you couldn't go to college or nothin because you didnt have no money. They'd usually get about a fourth or fifth grade education. That's about as far as they got, because they grew out of school. By the time they reached fourth or fifth grade, they were grown men and women. They were on their own. You were just about a man, growed to be a man. And a dumb man at that. Most of my education come from travelin.

25.

They had a slogan when I was growin up--"when a mule die, buy another one; when a Negro die, hire another one." And that's the way they kept it. If a Negro went into a store wantin to buy a pair of shoes, he couldn't try them on. If you didn't know your size and if you bought that pair of shoes and it was the wrong size, it was still your pair of shoes. You couldn't take em back and exchange em.

The clothes we wore were called "mammy-made clothes." Your mother'd make em, sewin by hand or on a machine. If people give you some

old clothes. she'd take em and cut em up and fix em so you could look nice. You could buy clothes, mostly from a Sears and Roebuck catalogue. You couldn't buy clothes out of a store cause they wouldn't let you go in and try them on. It was just rough times back then. Hard times.

26.

Momma didn't ever read anything but the Bible. And she was a Baptist. When I got married, I married a Methodist girl, and Momma got angry cause I married a girl out of the faith.

Every Sunday we went to church. Sunday school lasted an hour, followed by the regular service, which could last two or three hours, yass. And then we'd go home and eat lunch, and then go back to church and stay at church till two or three o'clock in the afternoon. And then we'd go right back at eight o'clock at night and stay till about 10:30 or 11! Now that's enough church for anyone.

There just wasn't much time for play. Between four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon and when we had to go back to church in the evenin, a bunch of us would get together and go over to the stave factory and hit cans with sticks or walk a mile or so and get ourselves an ice cream cone. They burned wood inside the church to keep us warm in winter. There was some coal, but we couldn't buy it, it was too expensive for us to buy.

When we got bigger, Momma'd run us out to saw wood. It was all ax and handsaws then. She'd make us go to the stave factory and pick up what we could, coomrods [wood chips] they'd give away free. I didn't know what playin was. It was all work.

27.

I never started playin baseball until 1916. My mother wouldn't allow me out of the yard to play no ball. Lots of kids was playin ball, but not me.

Momma told me I didn't have time. I'd have to carry clothes home from Dr. Biles, or pick up chips for the fire, or pump water if she gonna wash at home. We didn't have no hydrant or nothin. We had to pump water with a pump out of the ground. Fill up four or five tubs. Well, it took quite a spell to pump all that water.

28.

Everything that has happened in my life I first dreamed of in 1914. In 1914 I had a vision of what my life would be like. I dreamed of the things I've done and seen since 1914: hoboin, tap-dancin, meat-packin. In 1914 I seen big chunks of meat floatin through the air. In 1914 I hadn't seen any of that, and now I've lived to see it all.

My mother wanted me to be a lawyer, but there wasn't any money for that. I knew I wanted to be something in life. I had that in my mind ever since I was little. I wanted to be something, but I had no idea what that would be. All that I know now I learned by lookin, watchin mostly, lookin and watchin. That's what enabled me to learn five trades--barberin, tailorin, butcherin, dancin, porterin. I could always get a job with those trades.

29.

When I was 17 years old I played catcher and shortstop for a semipro black team called the Memphis Red Sox. I could bunt okay. I could run the base paths like a rabbit. My reflexes were so quick, when I played catcher I could swatch [snatch] the ball off the hitter's bat right as the hitter was makin contact with it. I used to wear all the skin off my fingers and knuckles doing that.

We made maybe ten or fifteen dollars a game. That was a lot of money back then. But you had to play real hard, teams like the Kansas City Monarchs. I was with the Sox maybe a month and a half. I finally left em in Oklahoma City. After my hand healed up, I went back into dancin. I just let the baseball thing go.

One time I got fined a hundred dollars. See, as a catcher, I squat so

close to the batter I just swatched the ball off the bat. I lost the skin off the back of my right hand, and got fined a hundred dollars for doin it. I could do whatever I wanted to do behind that bat. I could govern the ball. I mean, I could handle it.

I never did hit very good. I was a bunter. I'd lay it down. I was a good bunter, but I wasn't much of a long-ball hitter. I didn't take a heavy swing at the ball. I was always in position where I could lay one down if I had to.

One time we played this all-white team. I forget what town it was in. I think it may have been Searcy or Newport [Arkansas]. We were beatin them bad. One of our players hit a grounder down the third-base line that riccoshayed off the foot of a white spectator and ran up to his chin and knocked him cold. Well, that did it. They chased us clear out of town. We ran like crazy through the woods for four miles, to the nearest railroad track, where we hopped a freight back home. (21)

30.

Any time you had a fight with a bunch of white boys . . . well, they would get after you and run you and beat you up. A bunch of em would beat you up, see? To keep from gettin beat up, you had to run. And one incident happened . . . well, two or three . . . I had to swim the river two or three

times. Cause I'd run to the river when there was trouble, and I could swim. And I'd stay away a couple of days, then come back home. Or stay out in the woods, or stay any place I could stay for a couple of days, then come on back. They knowed they couldn't make you leave or keep you away from your own home. But they wouldn't do anything about it after you come back. Unless they jumped on you again, a bunch of them, but you had to stay shy of that bunch. You couldn't go uptown very much and things like that. Whenever you had a fight with one of them, you'd bet you'd have to run.

31.

My brother Edward died in 1918 of the influenza. His fever was so high, his skin peeled off like fish scales. My uncle, my brother, another uncle and aunt, and their daughter all died the same day. Dr. Gulvershine, the only Negro doctor in town, a man who originally came from Africa, died in the epidemic. (22)

I got sick too. I came home from work one day from the linseed oil mill, sick as a dog. Edward was workin at the barrel-stave factory. After about an hour he come home, feelin poorly. I was in a coma for nine days. When I come out of it, Edward was dead. An hour after he died they put him in the ground up on a hill. So many people dyin back then, no preacher

had time to pray over each one. It lasted a year, all those people dyin. Everything was quarantined. If you died this hour, they'd bury you the next hour. It was just pitiful. Later, Momma said to me, "Why did God punish me by takin my two best children and leavin me with a hellcat like you?"

32.

Saturday night they had a piano and a drum. Sometimes they'd have a washboard instead of a drum. If they had no drum they'd take one of them old-time washboards and put thimbles on your fingers and play it that way, see? And they had a banjo. They always did have some kind of guitar. They'd bang on that in time. Most people had rhythm, and that was because they'd sing all the time. They'd sing when they was pickin cotton. If you wanted to dance, you'd just start clappin your hands, and just keep time thataway. It was all they had. They'd get a bunch of them together, but somebody would get into a fight, maybe over a girl or because someone was out-tappin the other. Anybody who could play the piano, why he was great. Anybody who could beat a drum, he was great. If you played the banjo, you was the greatest of all!

W.C. Handy started down here. He started out blowin a horn. We hardly heard him cause he mostly played for white people. (23)

We had to make our own entertainment. That's the reason why I

went around barefooted . . . danced when I was barefooted . . . cause I could keep time, you know? And learn different steps!

We used to take whiskey bottles and fill em up with water. This one with so much water, that with a little less. That's where the xylophone started out.

We always did have whiskey of some sort or another. Moonshine whiskey, most of it. Of course, the whites, they'd order their whiskey from Missoura. Wasn't any whiskey in Arkansas, see? It was a dry state. I seen em make it with stills and things. I learned how to make it myself after I went to St. Jo [St. Joseph, Missouri]. I had a needle there at home, and I could make 60 gallons of whiskey in eight hours.

See, that needle is just a piece of iron rod, which gets hot and gets the water and sugar to boilin. Then it ferments, and when it cools off, it's the same whiskey you can buy in a store today. But it's illegal for you to make it yourself.

33.

I always did love to fight. When I got to be 17 or 18 years old, I prize-fighted in back alleys. A white man would put a pair of boxin gloves on a couple of us and give us four or five dollars and we'd fight for that four or five dollars. And after I found out I could make more money, I

went to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and got into a gymnasium and learned how to fight good. I was trained by a fellow to box from a cross-handed position, with my fists clutched against my chest.

I'd fight all the time on the way home from school. Everytime I got into a really big fight, I'd take out for the river. The only protection I had was to jump in the water. I was shot at a few times, but they couldn't hit me in the water. I'd just duck and swim underneath. I always carried a bamboo cane. And I'd breathe through that cane. I'd finally come up on the other side and go off to another town like Baldknob, about 12 miles west of Augusta. I'd find somebody I knew there and tell em what happened and they'd put me up for three or four days, until the worst was over. I always kept some money in my pocket, and I'd give 'em that and catch a train back to Augusta.

It was rough times, all right. I mean it was hard. Back then, people didn't know no better, see? And they couldn't hear no news like over the radio or TV. You'd maybe read a newspaper once a week, and nobody'd know nothin unless somebody was drivin through and brought the word. Naturally, we didn't have no money to buy no automobiles back then. And very few people had an automobile, so the news traveled very slow. If you had a fight and got in trouble, well, you could get out of it cause the news just didn't travel that fast.

34.

Country negroes and town negroes got into it now and then. The country negro had more money than we did in town. A man workin in town made at the most maybe \$1.25 a day. Sometimes I made ten cents for ten hours work. Three dollars worth of groceries would feed four of us for a solid week. We made our own biscuits and bread. I think I was fourteen years old before I ever ate a piece of light bread. Just biscuits and corn bread before that. It's lucky that people could even survive durin them times, but it was all solid food and it would hold you up longer. And when you got used to it, you could move it. We have to take a pill to work out the food we eat today.

The average negro didn't own his own horses or mules. He used them, but the whole trick was never to let the negro get out of debt. Especially the country negroes. They bought everything from the plantation store. What they couldn't pay for in cash, they were debted for from what they earned pickin cotton in the field. It was slavery, pure and simple. Maybe not the old kind, but still slavery.

35.

Sometimes we had it out with the country negroes, especially when a youngster come to town and our girls would want to ride in his buggy.

We didn't have nuthin for them to ride in. They'd get in those buggies and go off for a ride. When they come back we'd run em out of town. We'd throw bricks and rocks at em. It was all right if they bring their girls into town, but to come to town and take our girls out into the country . . . we didn't like it.

36.

This happened in church one Sunday when I was about 18 years old.

They was havin a big revival, and these country people had come to town. Some of the Pondexters was in church, and we were all standin up and hollerin about something. Well, somebody tole me to sit down . . . I don't know, I guess I was blockin their view. We had a few words back and forth. I decided to leave the church when this fellow hit me in the side of the head and knocked me down. Well, I crawled out of the church and ran home and got my gun, a rusty old .38 revolver, and come runnin back to church. I come through the door of that church, wavin the gun. Folks bolted for the doors and jumped clean out the windows. Well, this boy I was after, he grabbed me and pulled out a knife. The girl Eddie I was fixin to marry said "Look out!" I grabbed his arm with the knife and we tussled there on the floor. I finally broke free and shot him twice. I remember pullin the trigger twice, but the coroner said afterward that the bullets

didn't kill him. A friend of mine called Ossie Emerson was accused of that. He hit this Pondexter boy in the head with a chair. But it wasn't Ossie that killed him, it was Pondexter's own brother. He was lookin to help him out, so he picked up another chair and swung it at me. He missed me and hit his brother instead, broke his neck and killed him. The dead brother then fell over on top of me, knockin me down and pinnin me under him so I couldn't get up. That's where the law found me when they got to the church.

It took three marshals to get me out of there. Meanwhile, Pondexter's friends ran home and got their guns, and there was a big shootout between the marshals and Pondexter's friends with me in one of the cop cars, all ducked down.

They put me in jail for three weeks. I was wrongly accused of havin killed the fellow, when it was his brother who done it. There were plenty of witnesses to back me up. Momma paid up \$350 and I was finally released.

So, I got out of that. I mean, the lawyer charged me \$350, but normally a Negro wouldn't go to the penitentiary for killin another Negro. They'd just fine you and then you'd wait awhile and then it would be over with.

37.

There was nothin for me to do but leave town. I jumped a freight and went first to St. Louis then up to Pittsburgh. I worked in the railyards. Then I went on to New York where I joined the Georgia Minstrel Show and then the RKO Circuit as a tap dancer. (24) I learned tap-dancin from watchin dancers in carnivals and fairs that come to Augusta. I learned first by tap-dancin in my bare feet. One time up in New York I danced in the same show with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. (25) He didn't like it when I received more applause than him.

I used to stutter a lot back then. I couldn't talk plain. I wanted to say my words the way I wanted to. But it was like the words kept gettin locked in my mouth and I couldn't say them the way they needed to be said.

Well, the boys I worked with on the circuit came up with a cure. They used to whistle every time I'd get ready to say something, and it just cut off the stutterin, and the words came out right. I don't know why it worked that way, but it did.

Whenever I hoboed I wore a shirt and tie underneath a pair of coveralls, so I could strip them off fast when I got to town so's I'd look like a respectable nigger. You couldn't get a job doin anything if you looked trashy.

38.

One day I met this boy in St. Louis. He'd never been outta Augusta before. I knew him, and one day he showed up in St. Louis. So we hung out together. He liked to walk a lot, moreso than ride the streetcar. It was the first time he'd ever seen paved streets. So durin the time we was walkin he says, "This mud really gets hard here in St. Louis!" We went back to Arkansas together, and he's never been out of Arkansas since. Me, I just kept on travelin.

39.

Well, after about four months of hoboin, I come back to Augusta. The girl I'd been seein was a preacher's daughter, and when I come back she was pregnant. I knew I was the father. Eddie Ernestine Grim was her name. She was very progressive. She was smart in school. She was three grades ahead of me. I was older than she was, but when it came to book learnin, she was way ahead of me.

When Eddie and I got married after I come back off the road, it cost me \$1.50 for a preacher. It was a Boxtown preacher, and he was in a wheelchair. I was seein two other girls at the time. Oh, I was a wild one, all right. Back then, I got more pussy than the law allowed.

These two girls came to the weddin. Eddie was eight months

pregnant. Her father worked at the barrel-stave factory. He was a sit-in preacher. Ed Grim was his name. One day he let slip to me that he intended to kill the fellow who'd knocked up his daughter if the fellow didn't marry her. I couldn't tell then if he was speakin about me or not. I knew he was as good as his word. I didn't care to die just then, so I borrowed \$1.50 from my mother and got married.

40.

When a woman got pregnant and didn't want to have the child, she'd take a liquid called ergot. It was made out of a kind of fungus. If you took an overdose, it could kill you, but if you took the right amount it would take a period of three or four days for it to act. It was just the same as birthin a child. You would birth it all right, but the ergot had killed it and it had to come out. Took two weeks for the wounds to heal up. (26)

I don't know what this medicine was made of. I just know one time this fellow come through town and told people how to cure themselves out of a medicine book he carried. He was nothin more than a common doctor with his own knowledge. Who knows if what he said was correct or not? You took whatever you could to try and get yourself back in shape. It was just pitiful times.

41.

People slept around a lot back then. The majority of people were in common-law marriages. That meant they wasn't married by a preacher. If you met somebody and liked them, you laid up with em and that's the way it was. If you were married to a woman, lawfully married to her in front of a preacher, and if you stayed together three years without havin children, you could break off the relationship simply by walkin out. The law would back you up, and say you were officially separated. You'd marry whoever you wanted to marry, and if you wanted to leave, well, you could. White people didn't care if we got married or not. They saw us the same as a bunch of hogs or cows. All they wanted us to do was work. And we got very little salary. \$1.25 a day was the highest salary I ever earned.

42.

I was married in May of 1919. The next month, June 19th, my son Herman got borned. That summer I went to work in McCollum's barbershop downtown, next to the Rexall drugstore. One day a white man named Ross Roddy, whose shoes I was shinin, leaned over to me and said, "You killed that boy in that church, didn't you?"

I ground my teeth together, but didn't look up. "No sir, I did not," I said.

"Sure you did. Everybody in town knows you did. You're a bad nigger. A mean nigger. You ought to be run out of town."

Well, I clenched that rag and snapped it down on the tip of his shoe. "I didn't kill him," I said. "His own brother killed him."

Ross Roddy took a pistol outta his pocket and pressed the barrel against my forehead. That stopped all the talkin in that barbershop! "Nigger," he tole me, "you see that newspaper over there?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"I want you to eat a page of it, the entire page, and I want you to swallow it."

Well, I tore that paper into strips and stuffed the strips in my mouth and chewed them till the spit dried on my tongue and my jaw ached. I nearly vomited. It took all the control I could manage to keep from pukin up the shredded strips. But the touch of the pistol against my forehead, plus the way Ross Roddy laughed deep down in his throat, kept me attentive to what I had to do. It took me awhile but I swallowed every scrap of that paper. (27)

43.

Well, I didn't do anything for awhile. Then one night I saw him walk out of a movie theatre alone at night. I kept in the shadows of the

storefronts and followed him. At the openin to an alley leadin to a livery stable, I jumped on him like a cat and hit him with a blackjack shaped out of a bar of hard soap wrapped in a silk stocking. I didn't kill him. I hit him good, once. Then I took out runnin.

Someone saw me. I heard a whistle, then a siren, then all kinds of yellin and screamin. Shortly, I was being chased through the streets. I ran to the river. Back in them days, we always ran to the river when we got into trouble. I splashed in and swam out as far as I could and ducked under the surface. I always carried a six-inch length of bamboo cane in my belt, and I yanked that out and breathed through it. I could hear bullets spatterin around me. I kept my head down and breathed through the cane. When I come up on the other side I heard them howlin all the way across the river. They wanted to lynch my black ass but I wouldn't let em. No sir. There's no way I was goin to let them do that.

44.

So I hit the road again. In St. Louis I worked in the B&O round house, cleanin out cars and loadin boxcars. Cause I was so poor I worked 16 hours a day.

I saved up a good deal of money in that time. See, I didn't believe in payin my way into any place. I'd just catch a freight train and be on my

own, sleepin outside in hobo camps when I had to.

In Pittsburgh I stayed in a roomin house. I liked Pittsburgh. It was wide open too. You could do anything you wanted to do in Pittsburgh. I didn't party hardly at all. I was after money then. All I did was sleep when I wasn't on the job.

I stayed there two and a half months. In Pennsylvania they didn't pay you no attention at all. You were just a Negro man, and they just went from there.

I usually had no trouble with white people. My mother worked for Dr. Biles, and it seemed sometimes as if we was raised like his kids. He had a room over the garage where we slept sometimes. Sometimes I wasn't around nothin but white kids. I just carried myself accordingly, see? I was black down there in Arkansas, but I was sometimes treated white.

45.

After Pittsburgh I went back to Arkansas and stayed a month. Things had calmed down in Augusta. I kept myself pretty much in the shadows while I was there.

Then I come to St. Jo, Missoura. I'd been to the town before and really liked it. It was the most wide-open town of any I had been too. Gamblin, hookers, juke joints. When I first saw it in 1919 there was a

sign on top of the Corby Building, the tallest building in town, 14 stories, that said: "Welcome to St. Joseph, Missouri, The City Worthwhile." So I used it as a headquarters. From there I'd go up to St. Paul, Minnesota, and over to Sioux City, Iowa, then back down to St. Louis and back up to Omaha. I liked St. Jo so much I finally moved my family there from Arkansas in 1921.

46.

Back then the passenger trains were segregated, with Negro cars and white cars. The first car behind the engine was the Negro car. You couldn't go nowhere on that train but in that one car. The whites had a diner on the back end of their car. But if we wanted sumthin to eat we had to wait for the man to come through with sandwiches and sodas, which you could buy from him. But that's all you could buy. There was no dinin car for us. And the depots had colored and white waitin rooms. And you couldn't stay in no place but in that colored waitin room. (28)

They'd overcharge you sometimes, too. I remember a ticket from Augusta to St. Jo, Missoura, cost \$23, but a ticket from St. Jo back to Augusta cost \$19. So in Arkansas at least, they could tack on any sort of extra charge they wanted.

And that's the reason why, you see, most Negroes tried to run away

from that. Those that could took to hoboin at nights or hitchhikin . . . well, there wasn't no hitchhikin back then cause there wasn't that many automobiles on the streets.

47.

I thought it was about equal, blacks and whites hoboin. It was just as many whites hoboin as there was Negroes. Hobos are people who go from place to place lookin for work. The difference between them and tramps is that tramps are just on the road. They like the life alright and don't care if they work or not.

They didn't allow no tramps in the hobo camps. Most hobos was dressed up and they protected their good clothes by wearin a pair of coveralls. They wasn't necessarily broke. They had money in their pockets, but they wasn't goin to pay their way no place, see? They moved around lookin for better jobs.

I never saw any cops try to bust up a hobo camp. They'd come down after you, if they had a warrant. So you had to have your identification on you. If you didn't have no identification, they'd lock you up for a night or two, till they found out who in the hell you were.

Back then, news didn't travel as fast as it does now. If you'd done something bad in St. Louis and you were in a camp outside Tulsa, chances

are the police wouldn't know about it. So long as you had your identification and knew where you were goin and managed to look respectable and clean, they wouldn't bother you.

48.

In St. Jo I rented a room at a house, and we done the same thing we did in Arkansas. We cooked, ate, and slept in that same room.

We cooked over a little old monkey stove. It had a flat top and burned coal and we filled it full of coal to keep the house warm. We cooked on that same stove. Little Herman slept in the bed with us. We paid \$5 for a bed. Mattress and all we bought down there at I-Buys Second Hand Store.

It was at the St. Jo stockyards where I learned the art of butcherin. I learned how to do that at the packin houses there. (29) Anything I could see anybody doin I'd practice till I made perfect, until I got it perfect. I just went from job to job at the packin house. Down there, if you could do more than one thing, they was crazy about you. They wanted you to come work for them. It didn't make no difference in St. Jo if you was black or white, so long as you could do the job.

I got fired three or four times for cuttin in on somebody else's job, and the boss told me to lay off. Well, I figured, how you gonna lay off and

keep on learnin? Life doesn't work that way. Whatever I learned in St. Jo, I'd go someplace else and do it. One time I went to St. Louis and the foreman asks me, "What packing house you work at?" And I says I aint workin at a packin house. And he give me a knife and tole me to go upstairs and let the big boss see what I could do. Well, I went up there and worked all the way through on one cow, and he sent me back down to tell the foreman that I could go to work for him. But I wouldn't go to work for him. I had my pride. I told him who I was and what I could do, and the strength of my word should have been enough to get me hired. So I packed up my clothes and shipped them back home C.O.D. and hoboed back to St. Jo. Soon as I got there, I went to work and in two weeks I had some money in my pocket. I went back to shinin shoes and went up to the Robidoux Hotel and waited tables. I knew how to make a livin for myself.

49.

Any time I'd get laid off at the packin house in St. Jo, I'd light out for Omaha, Sioux City, or St. Paul, followin the market. If I heard they were hirin in some town, I'd ride the rods and show up there. When you was a butcher at Swift and Company in St. Jo, you could go any place and get a job cause we put out better butchers than any other place in the United States.

50.

I wasn't black in South Dakota. Yes, you was still black, but they didn't pay no attention to you. One night in Huron, South Dakota, a boy invited me to come to a party with him. I did a tap dance there, then danced with all the girls in the house. It was excitin cause I wasn't used to being treated that way. I was doin things I hadn't been used to doin. But if you could dance and she could dance, well, hell, you was up to par. Anything you could do, you could do it. That's what made it so great.

51.

But I had to keep makin money to keep going. So, when I run out of funds and there wasn't no job in town, I just took off. I'd put my overalls on over my suit and go down to the depot and hop a freight. I'd try to stay on top of it, or in a box car, or maybe if it was a passenger train sit in the vestibule. When they close the door down, the steps are still there, and I was small enough to sit on them steps for 40-50-60 miles, holdin on to that handle, just stayin on there and ridin.

Sometimes you had to ride the rods. That's the rods that go underneath that holds the cars together. There were four of them, and you could stretch yourself across them and be pretty comfortable. You could only do that in summer cause in winter it was too cold to ride that way.

Wintertime, you looked for an open boxcar to get in.

They had what they called these car knockers. They'd come along in the stations and see how the wheels was and open up all the boxes. As soon as they started doing that, why, you'd wiggled out from under the car and hide behind a tree till the train started out again.

One time I got caught and they put me off the train somewheres between St. Louis and Poplar Bluff, Missoura. The man told me that if I got on the train any more, he was going to shoot me. But it was in the wintertime, and I wasn't going to let that train leave me there.

Another time I got put off . . . I cant remember the name of the town in Illinois . . . and I had to walk nine miles to catch another train. They didn't allow no Negroes in that town, and they made me walk all the way through town to the other side so I could catch another ride away from that place.

"Move on, nigger," they'd say. "Just keep on movin."

52.

In the hobo camps, even if you didn't have any money, you could eat. You had to eat out of cans and buckets and things, and then you had to wash those cans and buckets and hang em back up for the other hobos.

Mostly in a hobo camp, dependin on the weather, you'd sleep on the

ground. There were sheds and huts they built themselves out of boards and limbs and whatever else they could find. And there was usually a top over it. If I come along and seen that it needed something else, and if I could get the materials, why, I'd put it on there. We took things out of boxcars and what we could find along the tracks to build us a camp with. There was always names carved on the walls and boards and trees and things-- who was here and who had gone. Oh, it was something!

Usually you'd pool your resources, includin money, and if that wasn't enough to get you all fed, well, then you'd go up through town beggin. Solicitin. Yeah, you could beg, you could go to the back door and knock on the door and they'd give you this or that. Or maybe they wouldn't give you a damn thing.

There wasn't much discrimination between white and negro in a hobo camp. If someone called you a bad name, well, you either took it or you had to fight.

I stayed in a lot of camps during my days on the road. There was a special feel in those camps that I remember. It was easy to talk and share stuff. We told others what we knew about the towns around, and do you know so-and-so? and what's the best way to catch a freight out of here to someplace else?

Now and then you'd see a man and wife and children and they'd have a

mattress to sleep on. They'd be hooking their way through the Midwest, lookin for work. Sometimes the children looked pale and hongry. But in the camp they'd be taken care of.

I remember, far as Missoura was concerned, there was a hobo camp in St. Louis and one in Poplar Bluff. See, St. Jo was so widely operated at that time that you didn't need to go into no hobo camp to get fed or to sleep. St. Jo was a real good beggin town. If you didn't have nothin, you could go into any night club and there was some guy always winnin money. He'd help feed you and you just kept on goin thataway. There never was any need for a camp in St. Jo.

St. Louis become overcrowded with Negroes. It was like a port of entry from the South. When one fella come up from Mississippi or Arkansas and found a little work there, he'd send for the rest. And they just kept on comin. They were the dumb ones. They didn't know how to ask for a job. They didn't know how to do nothin. They come out of one of those cotton patches down there, and that's all they know. They never been around no machinery or nothin like that. Most Negroes that's got a job, they went at least to the 6th or 7th or 8th grade. They could apply their mind to whatever job they managed to get. But most of them down there were second or third grade readers, and they were just plain dumb.

53.

They didn't treat blacks nicer in St. Jo than in Arkansas. But there were more things to do here. Down in Arkansas, blacks only met with blacks, but in St. Jo you could intermingle some, and nobody'd pay any attention to you. I was a tap dancer, and it wasn't long before I was dancin in every pavillion in St. Jo. For awhile I went to cookin down at the Union Depot. I cooked there for eight months. The railroad went on strike and they shut the kitchen down for awhile. So I took to shinin shoes after that to put some jingle in my pocket. This was at Ray Donaldson's Barber Shop. (30)

54.

St. Jo became my key town. From there I went out all over the west and midwest workin at jobs. By now I could butcher. I could also cook, cut hair, wait tables, do some tailorin, and dance. I'd send money back to my wife and bring her a bunch of it when I came home. She didn't like me goin away so much, but what could I do? I had to make a livin.

55.

In Saint Paul one time when I was workin in the packin house, a guy hired me to tap dance with the RKO Circuit. I can't think of his name. I

also had to do a 15-minute monologue. While they was changin sets for the next act, I'd come out on stage and tell a big long story and make people laugh.

It was a rough life cause at that time you didn't make but \$25 or \$35 a week. I was billed as Little Willy, the Alabama Coca-Cola Kid. My monologue didn't make much sense. It went like this:

"Ladies and gentlemen,
I came to this station,
without hesitation,
to meet this congregation."

Like that. You'd build it up right out of the crowd, about this fellow here, that fellow there, and get a big laugh. "And right now I'm gonna take great pains to introduce me to a Bengal tiger who has 99 stripes around his ass . . ." Double talk. Jive talk. And then I danced.

Sometimes I'd get crossed up by the band, especially if they decided to play by watchin me dance. I had to hear the music to dance, so I'd get crossed up waitin for them to establish the beat.

Well, I started that RKO Circuit in St. Paul. And we kept on to the coast. We went all the way out to Seaside, Oregon. We played a different town every night. Funky, dusty, drab-ass towns. No trees and lotsa wind. There was some white kids out there who couldn't believe the color of my

skin. They'd come up to me and rub my hand to see if it would rub off. (31)

Then we come back east to Chicago where I decided to call it quits. I'd been out a month and a half and I missed my family.

56.

If you was a star on the circuit, then you had everything you wanted. You could get anything you wanted as long as you had the money. Every actor in show business was poor back then. Aint nobody had any money. It's a little better now, I understand, cause it all don't go to the manager like it did back then. But even though we didn't make much, we splurged with what we had. Like you wanted to make a party, and you'd get a group together, and if you had the money to spend, you spent it. Because you knew you were going to get some more money next day anyway, and you could draw on your salary.

You know, when you're in show business you're dumb to all other things except your lines, your show-business lines. And if you could keep that in mind and be a good actor, when you got through with the actin, you wanted to do something else, and that something else was playin. Playboy and playgirl! Everything was fun and good times. That's where I had it different from the majority of them. I knew how to do other things. When they quit actin, they didn't know what to do. I could do something else

outside of dancin and show business. So I didn't give it another thought. I just traveled from town to town. When I got tired I quit.

57.

On the circuit now and then you'd meet up with a freak of nature. People built crossways. We called them morphodites. One time it was a fella that was half man, half woman. He was both all right. Now they call them bull-dikers, 'see? This fella had a twat and he could pull it and pull it and pull it until it fell out as a peter. And then he'd fold it back up in 'here. A man could go to bed with him and think he was a woman. A woman could do the same thing and think he was a man.

58.

I wouldn't allow my first wife to take a job while I was away on the road. I wanted her to devote herself to raisin the kids. So I furnished the money so all she had to do was take care of them kids.

Despite all my runnin around, I thought then and I still think that marriage is a good thing. It's the best experience a man can ever have in his whole life. After you've been married for about five or six years, it blends in and then you can't hardly live without her. See, if you're eparated, it's not long before you get yourself another, because you're not

used to livin by yourself. If she's really good, she can help you guide yourself through, you know? Without her help, you aint worth a damn no how.

59.

In show business you'd hardly ever stay on a job over a month. Three weeks to a month, because they got a billboard, and you could read it and it would tell you what other acts were wanted by what other theatres and troupes. Who needs this and who needs that. Hey, they need a tap dancer in Kansas City! If you wanted to quit, there were plenty of other fish to fry. Just quit and go on to another town

Before I joined the RKO Circuit I was with the A.G. Allen Minstrel Show. We played in the South. We didn't play no Northern towns. (32)

Once with them I went to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. They'd put up a tent at all these raggedy-ass little towns, and we did our show under it. We traveled in boxcars equipped with sleeping bunks. Bunk coaches, we called them. You'd come out of one town and go into another and have all the fun you ever wanted. That's what kept you broke. Because you'd see different towns and you'd want to go out after the show. But you had to rehearse every morning at 10 o'clock and be on the show at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then be on another show at 7 o'clock that

evening.

As a finale we'd march through the town behind our band with a lady on the wagon and a man on the wagon all dressed up with scarlet coats and big wide ties. We'd make em remember us, so next time we popped through, they'd be rarin to see us again.

60.

With the RKO Circuit I earned as much as \$75 a week. Once you got a bigger job, you kept lookin for more pay. I met Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in New York and danced in front of him and behind him, twice. This was long about 1923, I recollect. One night I got more autographs than Bill, I don't know why. He was a great hoofer. Great up until the minute he died. He could really dance. See, I danced with body motions while wavin my arms, while Bill didn't move nothing but from the waist down. He let his feet do the work.

I just knew him as a celebrity. Same as I knew Fats Waller. Fats Waller was one of the greatest piano players we ever had. He'd sing right along with you while you danced. He was mostly a cabaret man, a night-club man. He looked a lot like Count Basie, only he was a little heavier than Basie. Nice fella. Reminded me a lot of Satchel Paige, especially in the dandy way he liked to dress. He bought a new suit every other week.

He had plenty of clothes and he dressed like it! He must've changed clothes three or four times a day. There were always women flockin round. Fats was a great entertainer. (33)

I ran into Peg-Leg Bates in New York. I had danced with him before in St. Louis when we was giggin together. He was a nice fella also. (34)

61.

In travelin the way I did you always had \$50 or \$75 or \$100 in your pocket all the time. You never spent no money unless you had a good excuse to spend it. Because everybody spent money on you. You were the entertainer, the center of attention. In New York I walked in any place I wanted and bought myself one drink and started askin questions, and when people found out what I did, that I was a tap dancer, that I was on the RKO Circuit, they bought the drinks. Unless I wanted to be a full-fledged sport, I didn't have to worry about spendin my money.

I wasn't in New York but about seven or eight days. It was too fast for me. I didn't have the money to keep myself up like the other guys. Sure, people bought you drinks and a meal or two, but what about the taxi cabs and fancy hotels? Besides, I wasn't looking for a permanent job in show business. I had a family back in St. Jo, and I had to take care of them. Mainly I was just travelin, that's all. I didn't care. If I made \$15 or

\$20 or \$30 or \$50, well, I'd just stick it down my sock or into my money belt, and keep on goin. I wasn't lookin for no woman to marry, cause I was already married. I would just night with this one and night with that one. And if you could dance, the gals would flock to you just like a bunch of birds. And they'd feed you. Whatever they ate, you'd eat too.

62.

Then I come back to St. Jo. My wife had lost a child while I was away. She lost him travelin from Arkansas up to St. Jo. She tried to carry a whole bunch of luggage, and she lost that baby changin trains, carryin all that stuff. When she got to St. Jo she had a miscarriage.

My son Sylvester Junior was born in St. Jo in 1923. We lost a fourth child out at Corby Pond a year later when my wife got her feet wet while she was ice skatin and caught cold. The baby was born dead, and there wasn't anything any of us could do. The doctor said, "I won't say anything to anybody, if you won't. Bury the child your own way, and you'll save yourself some money."

It was snowin that night, and I had to chop at the earth with an ax to make a deep enough hole. I wrapped the baby in a scarf and placed it in the box and wedged the box down in the hole. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. I said a few words that I remembered from the Bible

and went back to the house. It snowed all night and by mornin the place where I had put her was completely covered up!

63.

When I got back from New York my wife wanted me to get a job in St. Jo so I could be around more. So I started thinkin seriously about settlin down and gettin steady work. I waited tables at the Robidoux Hotel and out at the Country Club. (35) But I guess I was too antsy, and I went down to Arkansas again and up to St. Paul and Sioux City. And then when she said she wasn't going to take it anymore, she'd rather move back to Arkansas where she could be close to her mother rather than for me to keep on travelin, I decided to stop and make a man out of myself in St. Jo.

This was in 1924. I went first to Swift and Company packin house cause I had worked there a little in 1921. But I learned so fast that in 1924 I was almost a master butcher. (36) I also waited tables and cut hair. There was 120 of us workin on one gang at the packin house, and if a guy needed a haircut, I'd cut 10 or 15 heads in a single day. My money just got bigger and bigger. After it got big enough I went and bought the family a little house to live in. It wasn't but a kind of shack. It didn't have no runnin water. At the same time it didn't cost but \$800. So I decided to stay in St. Jo cause it was the best kind of town,

friendly and wide-open. You could do anything you wanted to do in St. Jo that you couldn't do in other towns, even as a Negro. The people that I met here were different than all the people that I'd met in all the rest of my travelin. They'd sit down and talk with you. In New York if you wanted to light a cigarette and you aint got a match, you ask a man and he don't pay you no mind, he just pass you right on up, see? People in St. Jo was more like country people. Of course, other places you go, people don't pay you no mind. You aint nuthin to them, unless you're somethin big. But when you're small people, well, they all blend right together in St. Jo. There's North St. Jo, south St. Jo, and East End. Most of the Negroes back then lived in the South End and downtown and North End. People in South St. Jo know each other down there, but they don't care about knowing the people in North St. Jo or the East End. I'd ride the streetcar home from work in the South End where the packin house was and I couldn't get off at 6th and Hickory cause that was a poor white neighborhood. Crackers. They'd rock you and ride you right on out of there. (37)

The Negroes had restaurants, they had roomin houses. That's when Gus Williams got started in the gamblin business. I could've bought a third interest in that for \$200 when he started out, see? I had the money then. Gus was involved in gamblin and I coulda had a piece of that too.

(38)

64.

There was maybe three or four movie theatres back then. Colored had to sit upstairs in the balcony, or way up in the third balcony, which we called "the pigeon roost." At the train depot it was all together, no colored and white waiting areas. Everybody bought their ticket from the same person. I won't say the town was any more lenient or tolerant regarding race, but the people would talk to you, they had a friendliness about them.

St. Jo was an underworld town back then. Women and gamblin was wide open. There was whiskey everywhere you turned. Nobody minded so long as it was confined to a certain area. The town elite owned downtown. You couldn't do nuthin there, but a few blocks away, it was alive and thrivin. That sign on top of the Corby Buildin, the tallest buildin in town, 14 stories, told it all: "St. Jo, the City Worthwhile." I mean you could see that sign ten miles outside the city limits. Anywhere you went you could see that sign. But after they cut the gamblin and sportin out in World War II because of the airbase out there, they took it down.

65.

The gamblin houses were located from Sixth and Edmund, south to Messanie and west to Second Street. After that they scattered out. There

was three in South St. Jo, two Negro and one white place. The gamblers would go from place to place. Gus Williams was in the middle of it. He was a big-time crook.

There was a little roulette, but only at the fancy nightclubs on the Belt, at the edge of town. A gamblin house was usually located in a buildin downtown. They'd put a crap table there, and a poker table, and some rummy tables, and any other game you wanted to play, and there was always somebody in there who'd play with you.

If he went into one of these places with a white fella, a Negro could go to a white place. No problem. I could go in just about anyplace I wanted cause I was an entertainer. That's the reason I kept up that part of my life, so I could go wherever I wanted. I could go to a white place, dance a little, then shoot all the craps I wanted. Guys would let me shoot their hands, see? They'd fade me, and I'd roll the dice, and it was their money to win or lose. I was a pretty good crap shooter.

We played a game called Coon Can, a game like rummy, for two people to play. (39) Another game called Cotch, with only three cards. That was the fastest game. It's still the fastest card game I ever played. You don't find no Cotch players now because it's too fast. And there was gin rummy and race-horse rummy, straight stud and draw. But the hottest game was craps. They was always shooting craps in these joints.

66.

I made lots of bootleg whiskey in my time! We'd buy these barrels from a place on Main Street that didn't do nothin but sell barrels and kegs and stuff like that. And it was charred, burned on the inside. Then you took and put 30 gallons of straight alcohol in there. And then you put in 30 gallons of water and five pounds of sugar. And then you got a needle that you put down there. I've got one out to my house right now. Well, you plug that needle in and stick it in the water and it'll get that ole barrel to boilin. And when it gets to boilin you take it out. And if you do it right, well, you can make about 60 gallons of whiskey in about eight hours. Then you got to let it cool off for maybe a week. See, you make it in eight hours, but it takes longer to cool off. And when it cooled off, it was the prettiest whiskey you ever seen.

Then there was corn whiskey. They'd cook it in a vat. Then, after it goes through another pipe and drips out into a separate container . . . well, if by this time it don't blow up on you . . . see, it could blow up in them vats. Lots of times they'd make it too fast and fail to get enough of the bad stuff out of the corn. The rot-gut stuff that could burn you up inside. If they made it too fast, and you drank it too early, it'd make you sicker than a dog. It's a much longer process than makin needle whiskey.

Corn whiskey was more potent stuff. It was white-corn whiskey.

Needle whiskey is colored. It turns the same color as the charred barrel you make it out of. That stuff sold as fast as we could make it.

There was always Goetz beer here in St. Jo. (40) It was 3.2 beer, or near-beer as it was sometimes called. Even in the middle of Prohibition, there were bars downtown. Not many, but a few. The number of bars sellin near beer or 3.2 was established by the size of the town. The bigger the town, the more of them kind of bars. But nobody would go to them.

For a time up on Second Street they sold a beer called Peacock, and if you could drink three bottles of it and still stand up, you was considered the best. It looked like orange soda pop, and the police tried for years and years to find out what it was made of. We used to take it to dances with us and try and get the gals drunk. It was a lot of fun. We never did find out what was in it. A guy named Ching made it. He run a nightclub out on Second Street. White people came from all over Missoura to buy that damn beer.

Ching was a Chinese fella. I never thought he was very smart, but he must've been smart enough to make that stuff and sell it. He even built himself a house. In them days a \$5,000 house was a heck of a house, and one day he built himself one. His wife was a schoolteacher. Ching made a lot more money shootin craps and gamblin than she made in the classroom. We used to sit up all night at his place, drinkin Peacock beer and rollin the

dice.

67.

I was hoppin bells at the Robidoux Hotel. I used to go down and pay \$2 for a pint of whiskey and sell it for \$5 or \$10. It was bootleg whiskey, which meant we was sellin whiskey without a license. When I started makin my own whiskey, I'd buy some labels, just like the labels you see on bottles now. That was my biggest expense, buyin those labels.

I'd sell the whiskey for \$3 a gallon. If I bottled it up, I sold it for \$17.50 a case. And I was sellin beer. I could buy a keg for \$6 and sell it for \$9. We always got lots of Kansans comin over the river to buy beer.

Real booze like a fancy scotch was 15 bucks a bottle. They sold it in quarts and pints, and you paid an expensive price for it. So we started chargin the same price for bootleg whiskey in the Robidoux as we did what regular liquor places did. Only difference was, ours was bootleg.

The cops mostly just looked the other way unless they were sent down to a certain place by the Chief. "I want you to go down there and see what's in that house! Break it up, if you have to!" Then they'd have to go in and break it up.

It didn't matter if you were Negro or white, you had to pay the law to stay away from your house. Every month or every week, whatever way

you wanted to work it out, you had to pay them on the dot, \$20-\$50, to leave you alone.

Now and then there was a killin, but usually that involved somebody gettin overheated about some gal and takin his frustrations out on somebody else. There was very little robbery. Very seldom you hear tell of a robbery, cause this was Jesse James's home and people didn't go for it. Nobody had the guts he did. You got to have a lot of guts to rob a person. You could see Jesse James's house settin on a hill from the Union Depot. I used to see it every day when I worked there. Old man Hill was the head Red Cap down there, and he was alive when Jesse was killed in 1882, and he remembered all about it. Only thing was, when you left here and went someplace else and said you was from St. Jo, everybody wanted to ask you about Jesse James! (41)

68.

The more money I made the more restless I got. The cattle market went up and down, and when it was down they'd lay you off. That's when I hit the road for some other town. Out of work or not, I always dressed sharp. I always had the clothes. I wanted to let people know that I was a successful businessman, just like them. I always tried to keep my appearance up. The Bible tells you that the Lord always wants you to look

your best. So I decided to keep me a suit of clothes on at all times.

69.

As a kid in Arkansas I learned how to barber. When my mother and stepfather bought a restaurant in Augusta, it was a barber shop in there, on one side. I used to take my buddies in there and practice on them with a comb and a pair of scissors. When I come to St. Jo I couldn't get a job barberin. Nobody'd come to me until they heard that I actually knew what I was doin. And once they knew that, then I had more heads to cut then I could possibly do. In 1924, it cost 25 cents for a haircut and 15 cents for a shave. I cut black and white hair. While I was in St. Paul, I had more white customers than I did black.

70.

All kinds of burlesque and vaudeville shows come through St. Jo. Lots of famous and popular people. They wanted to pick me up, to have me join them, but I didn't want to cause I knew what a rough life it was. You drink too much. You don't eat properly, and what they feed you, free, with your salary, you couldn't live off that. You'd be a skeleton after awhile. Maybe they'd give you a bowl of oatmeal, but if you wanted eggs and sausage, you'd have to buy it out of your own pocket.

I'd work all day Saturday usually, barberin or at the packin house. Then I'd stay up all that night. The night was mine to go out and shoot craps and run the gals and do anything I felt like doin. My first wife, she usually stayed at home tendin to Herman and Sylvester Junior. I'd spend the night out jellyin [partying], but I'd always get back home in time the next morning to take the boys to church. Even if I'd gotten plastered the night before, at 6 o'clock the next mornin I was on my feet and movin. I was never affected real bad by hangovers. I never got the shakes from drinkin too much. It was a mental thing for me. If you aint got the strength inside your head, then you got to give up. I aint the type to ever give up.

Lots of white people came to the Negro joints to gamble and have fun. But no gambler in town, colored or white, could touch Gus Williams. There'll never be another person who'll get as much hooked into St. Jo as Gus Williams did. That man run night and day, clean on up till he died in 1951. I don't know whether he got killed or not. He went pheasant huntin one day with some cronies and never come back

He was a well-dressed guy, and he always kept plenty of money. He'd go down to Kansas City and get some gamblers to come up with some good-lookin girls. He'd run the girls for awhile out of one of his places, until they'd seen enough of St. Jo and was ready to go back to Kansas City.

Gus was from South St. Jo, a little younger than me, maybe two or three years. He started operatin a joint back in the 1920s between Felix and Francis. He started operatin down there, then he kept addin on and addin on. And then he bought the Harlem Hotel down by the river, in partnership with a white fella from Maryville, who was the same fella that helped lynch that Negro up there in Maryville, Missoura, who was accused of assaultin a white woman. His name was Raymond Gunn. He'd been accused of killin a white woman teacher. A mob got ahold of him one night in 1931 in Maryville when he was being taken to the courthouse to be tried. They chained him to the roof of that schoolhouse and burnt the entire schoolhouse down. They say you could hear his screams all over the county. (42)

Used to be a lot of Negroes lived up in Maryville, but they all moved away after that.

71.

The only business I ever owned outright during them years was a barber shop. It was a combination bootleg joint and barber shop. A customer would come in to have his hair cut, and while he was waitin I'd have a gallon of whiskey sittin in the middle of the table for him to pour himself a drink from if he wanted. I'd cut his hair for 50 cents and sell

him a bottle of whiskey for \$8-\$10.

72.

St. Jo was like some kind of loud, roarin animal back then. Almost a Las Vegas, cause you could do anything you wanted. The streets were filled with sportin women. They had houses full of em and you could walk in there anytime you wanted. They'd have em all lined up, buck naked, all different colors, and you'd just pick the one you wanted. The cost for a piece of booty ran from 50 cents to a \$1.50. We had a Jewish girl there, and it's very seldom you see one of them workin in a house. She come here, I remember, from Cleveland, Ohio. There was maybe 40 houses in St. Jo back then, and there was usually about ten girls to a house. You could pick out any of the ten you wanted. They lay around naked and when you walked in they'd start purrin like cats. (43)

You could drink as much as you wanted in these houses. They had the bootleg liquor. If you stayed around long enough, the woman who ran the house'd fix a big meal for everybody in the place. "Come and get it, y'all!" she'd call. I remember that.

For a \$1.50 you could get a stamp-brand bourbon, but the best sold for \$2.50 or \$3. And then there was a low-grade version that sold for 50 cents. Even if you didn't have no money, everybody drank the same anyhow

whether you had it or not. But they was always lookin for the jackpot, and so you had to be careful, cause once the Depression got bad, there was a lot of thievin going on. You couldn't go in there drunk cause most of them would just take you for a ride. Best thing to do was to take your money out and lay it on the table right out in the open, so everybody knew where it was at.

73.

The cat houses were pretty much located all over downtown. Well, on the fringes of downtown, cause the city fathers didn't want that stuff interferin with their business. The girls'd peck on the window and call at you as you'd walk by. And they'd want to know what you got and what you want and everything, and it was like that. Lots of times a guy wouldn't have nothin in his pockets, and he'd just go in anyhow and josh around for awhile. But I always kept me some money. If I wanted a woman, I'd pay for her. There was nothin like it that I had ever seen before in any town in America. (44)

74.

The best house in town belonged to a white woman name of Lizzie King. It was famous all over the U.S.A. She had a place on the corner of

Fourth and Messanie, and you could go in there three different ways. A solid brick building, two story, with iron bars on the front windows. She never had to worry about no law raidin her or nothin, cause she always paid off on time. She even managed to put her daughter through college and set her up in business. She built a nice home out in the country, and once a day she'd go out there and check to see that everything was all right. She was a high-toned woman, respectable. She traveled a whole lot too. She was a rich woman and she knew how to take care of her money. Drummers comin' to St. Jo, after they got through with their business, they'd take off down there. Lizzie's was a strict, up-to-date house. Very little mixing. Two black girls worked as maids, but Lizzie worked them in too, if they were needed. It was about the only place in town a black man couldn't go. I went there, but that's cause I worked there. I was the porter in the saloon. (45)

Lots of times if it was a dead day and they was just sittin around, the girls and guys'd go over to a Negro place. It was just thataway. Sportsmen liked to mix with sportsmen. There was gamblin all up and down Edmond Street, big long noisy loud bars. That was after 1932, when things loosened up a little. In the Twenties the police kept a lid on those places and even shut a few down, just to flex their authority. But after 1932, I remember people shooting craps anywhere they could shoot em, in

the street or anywhere else, so long as they weren't too obvious. Pie Mabin's dad run a house out on Douglas Street. It was a five-room house and there was always people there. Day and night, that place was stacked with them. He owned two more next door, where he kept his kids privately.

But Lizzie King's was still the best. They had a saloon bar downstairs, and rooms upstairs where you could go. We made needle whiskey in the saloon and poured it down in a barrel under the floor with a pump so we could pump it back up behind the bar. It was all out of sight, so when the law come to look around they couldn't find anything because we had it all covered up with furniture and rugs.

Lizzie was in her 70s when I first met her in the 1920s. She was a real sharp dresser. I remember she'd change dresses three or four times a day. She always wore glasses. When anyone new come through the door, she'd drop those glasses down and look at you like you never been looked at before. I never knew her to take up with nobody. She was strictly business.

Lizzie owned the saloon, but she'd always rent it out to somebody who wanted to run a business. One time she rented it to Jimmy Miller. He had lots of money and she didn't have time to run both the saloon and the girls. Jimmy had a wife and three kids, and he put them up way out in the

country. He got him a sportin gal, and he just partied all the time. This was around 1932. I guess he thought he was going to make him a lot of money. But then legalized whiskey come back in, and it not only broke his heart, it damn near put him out of business.

75.

Scariest thing I ever did back then was haul liquor from Kansas City to St. Jo. Jimmy Miller sent me. I'd take a touring car with the top down and drive it down there on a dirt road, two or three hours on old Highway 71. Then in Kansas City I'd meet up with these Italian fellas in some spooky dark place. I went in there with my knees knockin, up to a desk. It looked like nothing, but it was the place where they did their business with all the bar owners. These Italians was real sports, dressed in suits with snap-brim hats. Smooth-talkin tough guys. I'd turn the car over to them for three hours, and they'd fill it up with bootleg booze and three or four hundred gallons of raw alcohol. I don't know where they got it from and I didn't ask. Then I'd get in the car and drive north. They'd have two guys on the running boards with machine guns and another car followin, filled with more guys with guns. They took care of their customers. They didn't want any rival gang hijackin my supply of alcohol. Comin out of Des Moines, loway, doin the same thing, I never had to worry about rival gangs

tryin to muscle in. But Kansas City was different. Kansas City was loaded with rival gangs. And these fellas with the guns would stay with me till we reached the city limit, then they'd jump off and be picked up by the car behind. They'd wave. I'd wave. And I'd be on my own.

Well, I'd get back to St. Jo, and the city policemen, the motorcycle cops, they knowed about what time I was due back in, and they'd be watchin for me and guide me on in safe to Lizzie King's. Talk about protection! (46)

76.

During this time I waited tables and cut hair and worked at the packin house. I shined shoes . . . anything I could do. I never worked more than six months steady at any job. I'd get me a pocket full of money, and I was gone somewhere else.

There was a rich white guy I knew back then. I dont know where he was from, Savannah or Forest City maybe. One day he tole me he wanted to drink some whiskey at Joe Dressler's place. So he takes me in there. I don't want to go cause I know Joe Dressler don't especially like Negroes. So he orders his whiskey in a shotglass with a water chaser and orders the same for me. Every glass I drank from the bartender broke over a pipe behind the bar and looks at me like he wants to melt me with his eyes.

Well, that same night, we left Joe Dressler's place and went up to the jailhouse. My friend knew the sheriff up there. We taken two bottles of whiskey with us, and we sat down in the sheriff's office and drank that whiskey. And the sheriff drank with us till he passed out

77.

See, I'd walk into a place and sell them a case or two of needle whiskey that I'd made, and while I was there, I'd buy everybody in the place a drink. I was just a wheel! I didn't mind spendin it cause it come easy to me. Sometimes I'd make me as much as \$100 a day

I shut down my barber shop and went to work for Jimmy Miller for a dollar a day, plus tips. Well, that first week I made \$42. The second week I made \$100. I volunteered to take a dozen barrels of beer over to sell into Kansas, because back then Kansas was drier than a doorknob. So I just got to be a salesman for him, see? And also for a lot of the Negro joints, who couldn't buy it from nobody else, except maybe this Jewish boy named Izzy Rabikoff. Izzy used to be a paper boy, but when he died, he had a lot of money. He had a little old saloon over on Third Street, and he was a bootlegger there, the same as I was. He'd make needle whiskey the same as me. Izzy just went right on up until he became big time. (47) All those guys . . . I was in with them, see? Every room in the house where my

mother lived was stacked with alcohol from floor to ceiling. Being a church-going woman, she didn't like it worth a darn, but she couldn't do nothin about it cause it was my house and I owned it.

She fought against me and my life all the way to the end.

[Sylvester's mother, Willie Lee Bronson, died in St. Joseph in 1960.] She told me I don't know how many times how the Good Lord come and took her two best chidren and left her with the devil hisself to try and tame.

78.

When I first come to this town the better class of Negroes didn't pay no attention to me. I was just another underworld boy to them, even though I joined the church anyhow, cause of my wife and two children. And when I was workin at the packin house I never did come home very much cause I was always out with the big shots, see? I'd get off at the packin house and ease into a joint called Slippery Gulch and stay there all night long. The girl I was clownin around with, she was the piano player there. And I'd just stay up and she'd say, "You go on upstairs and go to bed and I'll be up after awhile." I'd send my check home to my wife. It was her and the children I was really workin for. I couldn't help it, I was just a wild son of a buck. I didn't care. I was still a tap dancer, and that's what made me popular. I danced in every pavilion in St. Joseph, Jewish

temples and everything else, dancin programs, downtown theatres, nightclubs, what-have-you.

I had a taste of both worlds--the respectable world and the underworld. Oh, yes. I kept straddlin the wheel. I'd clean myself up and dress my kids up and take the family out, and always had money to give to church or to this charity or that. I kept on both sides. I knew practically everybody, from the Country Club to the Moila, from the poor on up to the top. And with my own kind, I was just as common as an old shoe. No airs. No fancy stuff. I knew how to get along with all kinds of people.

79.

We had all kinds of freaks and weirdos come in. One time this girl had a buncha snakes which she kept in the bathtub of a room at the Robidoux Hotel till management found out and threw her into the street. Another girl got fired off her show and she come to the Robidoux and checked in. Didn't have a penny, and she was hongry so she asked us, "I ain't got no money, and if you get me something to eat, I'll let you have some booty." We brought her all the food she could possibly eat! Then there were the sportin gals. We'd call them up and say, "Come in the side entrance and go up to room so-and-so." They got \$5 for the date, and we pocketed \$2 and they kept \$3.

I'd take some well-dressed drummer up to his room and raise the window and turn the fan on and then I'd say, "Now you want some ass?" And he'd say, "Huh?" And I'd say, "You want some ice?" And he'd say, "I thought you said some ass." And I'd say, "I can get you some of that, too."

Whiskey the same way. We sold bootleg whiskey the same way.

With travelin men, lots of times they want to sport em up some, you know? Buy em a bottle of whiskey, take a girl up to their room. They made lots of money on their run, see? They're on their way home, and before they get there they want to sport around a little. Well, it was always a way for us to make good money, and the gals made good money too.

Ten dollars then was the same as \$100 now. You could buy all the food you wanted. You could go to most any restaurant in town and eat a full plate for 35 cents. Or go to eat for 65 cents at the Robidoux.

I knew one guy, he rented a room in the Robidoux. He'd go out and get young girls or have us bring them in, and he'd rub himself silly against the wall. Another one wanted to give me \$5 to whop him in the ass with a wet towel. Women'd come in down and out with no place to stay and they'd agree to do anything just so they weren't on the street. It was just that way durin the Depression.

They had bread lines down here on Second Street. And soup lines.

They'd flop down by the river. There just wasn't no work till the CCC come in and put some of them to work fixin the streets and highways.

I was always able to find work because from 1914 to 1917 I learned everything I could about how to work at various jobs and make a livin. Maybe I didn't get much knowledge in school, but I learned everything I could learn, at whatever I seen and done. And if I seen something and I liked it, well, I'd quit this job and get me a job doin that. Until I got tired of that, and then I'd quit that and go do something else.

80.

The Depression were bad years for most people, but not for me. See, I been in this same bracket all my life where I've had to struggle to make a livin. I always made good money, and then I'd spend it. I never did think about savin no money till I was 60 years old.

Sometimes I made \$100 a day and spent \$120. I was just like every other damn fool, you know? It come easy and went easy. There wasn't any need of me savin a whole lot of money back then cause I could make more money next day. Any job I went on, I made money.

81.

I tried to stay away from white women, but sometimes I couldn't.

When you're a dancer, they all want to see you move. All you got to do is be out where the music's at, and drink. And you're in, regardless.

White men don't pay no attention to a Negro woman. They just think she should take whatever it is they want to give her, because that's what they want, see?

One time there was this white woman from Oregon, Missoura. She come down to Lizzie King's when I was makin whiskey there. Well, she fell for the bartender, a good-lookin boy named Bricks. She just had a pair of hot pants! She really wanted to do it!

She had her sister with her. But I never saw her sister. She sat out in the car for two hours. The girl inside said to me, "Well, how about you takin me out?" Bricks woodn't have nothin to do with her. So, like a dummy, I said, "I'll take you out!" We went to another sportin house I knew closeby where I could rent a room. Cost me \$1. And I taken her there, and she bought some whiskey, and we drank a little, then we went to bed. We got up, drank some more whiskey, and went back to bed. We played like that all night! Next mornin she got up and went downtown and bought her some new clothes. Her sister had seen us and she went back to Oregon and told her husband, "Your wife's been out with a black nigger, and I think you ought to know about it."

Well, he ran a truck line in Northwest Missoura. The wife had

charged all her clothes that she bought downtown that mornin to him. I never did see her no more after that. A little later I heard they separated. I didn't even know her name. I didn't want to know it. I only saw her that one time.

He come down to Lizzie King's lookin for me . . . lookin for somebody! But I wasn't there! Bricks tole him I'd moved to Memphis, Tennessee. See, Bricks and I was just like that. He stole whiskey and he sold whiskey, you know what I mean? We'd take gals to a back room where I had a bed and take rings off their fingers after they got drunk. We'd take the rings and pawn em or sell em to somebody else. We'd take their money and they'd wake up busted. We'd take that money and go to a joint and spend every penny of it.

This boy Bricks was out of Des Moines. Together, we just about fucked everything that come through the front door of Miss Lizzie King's. We'd make em drunk. He had a drink he liked to make up called Chocolate Moo-doo. Wasn't nothing but needle whiskey and some chocolate syrup. Put a name on it, and it went over big. Shit, we had everybody buyin that stuff. Two or three drinks would make em drunk, and if we wanted to knock 'em out, we could knock em out. We were just a pair of young guys and we didn't care nothin about nothin! I was just a rounder, what you call a rounder. I went every place and done everything that I'd seen the next

83.

One day after we'd been together for awhile . . . this was around 1940 or 1941 . . . I said to Marguerite, let's go to Kansas City. She didn't want to, so I went on. When I come back this boy I knew had bought some whiskey and was down to my house. Cuttin the fat over there. Well, I happened to look through the window screen of the bedroom and seen her and him layin there, so I went and knocked on the door. I knocked on the front door a second time and then went around to the back. I thought, maybe the back door ought to be open, see? Well, I got in and I went to the bedroom door and stuck my head in and said to him, "Before you leave, let her put the rest of her clothes in her trunk and you take her on with you. Just take her on out of here."

The boy was all drunked up, see? He didn't get off the bed and neither did she, so I opened the closet door where I kept a pistol hangin upside the wall. I got it and went to the kitchen where I kept some bullets and loaded it up. I came back to the bedroom door and told him to get out of my house. He started after me . . . he started after me so I squeezed the trigger. Boom! the gun went off, and I musta hit him in the stomach cause he doubled over. "Get outta here while you still got a chance or otherwise I'll put another bullet right in your eye!" I said to him. He stumbled past me, through the living room, out the front door, wearin just a shirt and his

shorts. He walked a block and fell in the middle of the sidewalk.

Somebody called an ambulance and took him to the hospital.

Marguerite started raisin hell with me, cryin and cursin. So I just turned around and shot her, too. Boom! The bullet hit her in the leg and split up through her side into her arm. "Get outta here!" I yelled at her. "I done told you to get out and you won't get out, so now you'll have to leave with a lead bullet in your ass!"

She fell back in the bed. I went to the telephone and called the police and told them what had happened. I knew most of them at the station anyway, and they told me to sit where I was and not move. I unloaded the pistol and lined up the bullets on the kitchen table next to the gun. A few minutes later the police showed up at the door. I only lived a block or two from the station. I went with them to the hospital where I watched them slip some kind of rod clear on up through the hole in Marguerite's leg and arm where the bullet had went. Then they painted everything with iodine. And got her all fixed up.

The police took me down to the station. The only thing they charged me for was firing off a gun inside the city limits. Fifty dollars. Plus what it cost to get my wife fixed back up.

The boy I shot in the stomach didn't die. He's crippled but he's still alive. I know him today. We're friends. I saw him at a party not too long

ago. We've been drunk together. I got nothin against him personal. It's just that you don't take no shit, is all. You don't give none, and you don't take it.

84.

One time I cut a boy with a razor for messin around with my first wife. I hit him with the razor and tripped him all at the same time. Put 21 stitches in him. Then I wrapped him in an overcoat so he wouldn't catch cold and carried him to the hospital. I never did like to carry a pistol, but I could handle a razor. I carried it in a string around my neck. I could hit it with my front finger and it would jump right out in my hand.

85.

See, when I first come to St. Jo I used to have a fight every Saturday night. I just had to hit somebody every Saturday night. I'd get about half drunk and some son of a bitch would call me a damn liar, and I'd hit him in the mouth. I was a mean bastard. I'm not bad person in the bone, but I can be a mean son of a bitch when I need to be. I never did think I'd live to be this old. School teacher in Arkansas, when I was going to school down there, he tole me I wouldn't live to be 21 years old. I had my good side, but I was devilish. I just didn't give a damn.

The other boys was scared to cut me when I was awake. Most times I hit a guy I was laughin. It never bothered me to have to do that. I never gave it a second thought. One time I passed out at a party and a guy said, "I ought to go over there and kill that slimy dog while he's asleep." When I heard that I cut back on my fightin. Always somebody waitin to get even with you. But I was still mean. Hard-hearted Hannah. I put knots all over my second wife, smacked her down real good. I can slap a woman blind. I done blacked both her eyes before and told her to get out of the house. Well, she's still with me. I don't know why, but she's still with me.

86.

They hung this boy Lloyd Warner one night in November here in St. Jo. That was in 1933, I bleeve. He was just a kid. Seems he confessed to assaultin a white woman. Then he said he didn't. Sheriff then was Otto Theisen. Theisen took this boy and stuck him in the jailhouse to protect him. There was a mob outside in the streets somebody estimated was 5,000 people. Theisen held em back for several hours. But he knew he couldn't keep em back for long so he had the governor call out the National Guard. The Guard showed up, but they couldn't do anything about the mob. They had armored cars, but people stuck potatoes in the exhaust pipes and the cars chugged to a stop. They threw tear-gas bombs, but people picked

them up and threw them through the jailhouse windows. Theisen came out on the steps and told the mob he didn't know where the boy was, but the mob didn't believe him. They tore down half the jailhouse lookin for that boy. They shot up windows and doors. They set fire to whatever they could. They even broke into Sheriff Thiesen's apartment and rampaged through the rooms.

Sheriff Theisen finally had to give the boy up. That mob would've killed everybody in the jail, includin several more Negroes who were bein held there. He brought him out and turned him over. That boy was beaten, slashed, and stabbed as the crowd dragged him to the corner of Fifth and Jules. They hung him from a tree in front of the courthouse and doused him with gasoline and set his body on fire. It was like Arkansas all over again. (49)

All us colored went home early that evenin. I heard tell they were goin to lynch him. Anyone havin any thoughts about their own life had to stay off the streets that night.

Funny thing is, damn near everyone involved in that hangin ended up dead within two years. The Sheriff died, this guy Slim who helped with the actual hangin, everyone else who was in on the deal, they all died of natural causes, as if a curse was on em. I don't know. There's sumthin that hangs in the air a long while after a lynchin that's awful bad. (50)

I think, twisted my finger hard and broke it. "You tricky son of a bitch!" I said. "I'm gonna catch you when you come out of the gate this evenin, and I'm gonna cut your ass off."

I told my foreman that I got my finger caught in a ring up there on the sheep floor. They sent me to the hospital, and I had it plastered down on a board. That evenin I looked for the guy, but he'd already left town. See, it's a tunnel that runs underground from one packin house to the next. So he went under the tunnel, he didn't come out the front gate.

Well, Gus wanted me take some of that \$700 and be a partner with im. He and Cotton wanted me to run the crap game, which I could be busted for anytime. It was a crooked game. Both Gus and Cotton were crooks, and I know I would've ended up in jail.

Fella named Slim first owned this place, called The Harlem. So when he died, his wife didn't want to stay there no more, see? The place stayed empty for awhile until Gus and Cotton bought it. Gus already owned some other property around the corner. Cotton knowed a lawyer named Judge Voorhees. Between them they fixed it so they could pay off \$100-\$200 a week to run the place without interference. (52)

So they got a license to sell whiskey and they was bootleggin upstairs on Sundays, you know what I mean? Police'd raid it, but they always paid off. Chief of Police Vern Starmer, I heard him say one time

before he died that they'd never be another Negro to have that much hold on St. Jo as Gus Williams did. (53) See, they couldn't bother Gus. They'd raid him and everything like that, but they couldn't nail him to the wall.

Then it come that some white women started to go down there. Well, the law got upset with that. They told Gus and Cotton not to allow no white women in there unless they had an escort with them. That didn't mean nothin. Gus just hired some smooth guys to hang around and sit down at a table with the women. Make like they were their real escorts.

There was plenty of women already at The Harlem sellin their booty, and there wasn't nothin the law could do about that. Gus fed em and bought em clothes and stuff like that. But he was greedy. Gus was awful greedy. He wanted everybody's money.

Gus was a big man, six foot something. Must've weighed 200 pounds when I first met him. Maybe 250 pounds when he died. Handsome lookin. Big yellow man.

Big talkin, too. Everything was dirt to him except what he wanted to do. And he got by with it. That's how powerful he was.

I just got tired of the rackets and didn't want any part of it. So Marguerite and I used to go to The Harlem and tap dance. She was a good tap dancer. White people'd sit there all night watchin us dance.

Cotton Jones was old back then, an old underminin-lookin man,

maybe 65 years old. He was a crook like Gus. All the time, even when he was just gabbin with you, he was cheatin you. He always carried four or five pair of dice along with a big wad, and he could switch dice in a flash and crook people out of their money.

89.

One time, in 1944 I bleeve it was, Gus and I got into it. This boy Mack Davis and I was working at the Green Hills Golf Course. Well, Mack had a key to all the slot machines, and every time he'd empty the machines, Gus would take the quarters from him. "Mack," I told him one day, "don't go back out there and get no more money." But he did anyway, and then went down to The Harlem and gambled it away. So I told him don't do it no more, and Gus heard me. "You son of a bitch, you!" he yelled. "Whatta you mean by interferin in my business and Mack's?"

"You already taken all his quarters," I said. "He can't make it good. You know that. He aint got no money, Gus."

"You lousy son of a bitch!" he says. Then he draws a gun on me. We're at The Harlem and he's got some of his Kansas City cronies there, guys in shiny white suits packin rods under their coats. Gus says to them, "Search that son of a bitch!"

Back then I carried a razor in the crutch [crotch] of my pants. Well,

they searched me and found my gun but not my razor. Gus still had the gun on me. "I'm gonna shoot your black ass," he says. "You aint gonna do a damn thing to me," I says. I could still talk to him. And then I snapped that razor out of my pants and waved it in front of him. He didn't know whether to shit or go blind. "I get close enough to you, Gus," I said, "I'm gonna cut that gun right out of your hand. I'm gonna mark some mighty red stripes on your ass. You shoot me and I'll still get one cut. And that's all I'll need."

He started backin up the steps then, leadin to the second floor where the girls had their cribs, the two of us jawin back and forth, him with the gun, me with the razor, flashin it at him like a mirror. "I know you're gonna kill me anyhow, so I'm gonna get close enough to you, and I'm gonna get one cut, and one cut's all I'll need," I said.

Up those steps he backed, him in the lead, me followin, the two of us like dogs on a leash, strainin to break free. When he got near the top, he said, "I told you not to come no further." He then backed up to the very top step, and that's when I decided not to push him further cause if we got any higher on those steps I'd lose my advantage. I'd already embarrassed him bad, and to cover that up, he'd just have to shoot me.

"All right," I says. "I aint gonna hurt you. But if I ever catch you outside this hotel, I'm gonna kill you."

90.

So I went home and got my shotgun. I had a sawed-off ten gauge, and I went and got that. I had a rumble-seat automobile, with the top laid back. Every time I drove past The Harlem, people could see that gun layin there. Just layin there in the back. I'd park across the street in front of a barber shop, where everybody could see that gun. And I'd say, "I'm gonna get that son of a bitch one of these days."

Well, he got so scared he went to California and stayed out there for six months. Then one day I told Cotton, I said, "tell him to come back in, I won't bother him." So he come back and things settled down.

See, Gus was a big-time crook. He took from everybody, includin the people who worked for him, especially the girls. He was really a big coward, afraid of gettin hurt. He sold the girls the whiskey that they used to entice their customers. Every penny that was spent in The Harlem he got a piece of. They said he did drugs, and it wouldn't surprise me none. By the time it was over, he had made a pot full of money. I know he had over a million dollars. He ran around in hundred dollar suits. He liked to change clothes two or three times a day. Shoes, ties, hats, cuff links, stickpins. You name it, he wore it.

He bought a big house. And he had a big rack of guns. He was a gun fanatic. He had all types of huntin guns. Rifles and everything. And then

one day somebody broke in and stole the whole bunch from him.

He got sloppy after he got older. He'd leave thousands of dollars lyin around his house where people was drinkin and playin cards. Now and then he'd gather it up and take it down to a big old vault he had at The Harlem. At one time he had as much as \$9,000 in that vault. No, as much as \$15,000!

He had no children. His wife was dead. So he decided to leave it all to his nephew, a big, flobby, flabby-assed kid who washed dishes at a hotel in Omaha. Ended up the lawyer got most of it. The nephew pissed through his share in about six months.

Oh, that Gus was sumthin all right. He wore diamond rings and studs and gold cuff links. Looked like I don't know what. You could see him comin in the dead of night, he'd be shinin so hot. He'd take his women downtown and buy em whatever they wanted. He always carried a big roll of money on him at all times. Never did have less than \$500 in his pocket. He packed a rod, but only in The Harlem when he had to break up trouble, never out on the street. When things got hot in there, he'd pull a gun and threaten to blow everybody away.

One time this white guy who ran the Jesse James Hotel he told Gus

he wanted to shoot a nigger, and Gus set it up for him. Went into a room where this boy was sleepin. Cold Willy, they called him. He just come out of the Army and was still wearin his Army uniform. The white guy shot Cold Willy good and dead. I think he got 50 years, but he only served 15 of them, and he finally got out somehow. It's said that Gus Williams got him out.

The white guy used to be a gambler there at The Edgewood on the Belt. (54) See, all the white gamblers, when they'd win a bunch of money, they'd come down to The Harlem to see Gus. The Harlem caught all the big gamblers back then. Policy makers, too, like Ron Tudor, they'd sit around and spend 50, 75, 100 dollars on expensive whiskey. St. Jo was a great policy wheel town. (55) Any kind of gambling you wanted was here in this town. Well, this fella that killed Cold Willy, he was a gambler. Gamblers know other gamblers, so it wasn't hard for him to get off that rap.

92.

Gus got most of his women from Kansas City. There was a guy who run a place down there like The Harlem who tried to get me to run the place at nights. It was the same operation as The Harlem, but I wouldn't take it.

Kansas City was the big city, see? It always caught all the movie

stars, piano players, all the big news. They had bands and all kinds of things comin through there all the time. They had big shows and everything. Them gamblers down there would take all the money the soldiers had. We were bad up here, but they knew how to cheat em real good down there. Crooks always deal with crooks, see? But a man like me, just to be the manager of a place like that, well, I'd take the chance of shootin somebody or gettin shot myself. Break up fights and stuff. Well, Gus told him I was good enough to take care of the job, but, hell, I wouldn't take it.

I never did like Kansas City. Too wild a town. It was pretty wide open, and you had to deal with nothin but dummies with a second grade education up from Arkansas or Louisiana who could barely sign an X for their name. Mean sons of bitches. I didn't want to deal with em. So I turned down the job.

93.

I used to wear pretty good clothes. See, when I'd make some money, I'd go to the pawn shop to buy my clothes. Because everybody bought a good suit when he won a pawn ticket, he'd take his old one to the pawn shop. Back then, pawn shops were always turning over with new clothes. I always did have five, six, seven suits anyhow. Kept them clean and

pressed and lookin sharp. Fifteen dollar shirts and everything. Man, I was a dressin son of a bitch. Yeah, I ran around with gamblers and hustlers and stuff like that, but I didn't gamble much with them. I'd buy em drinks and hang around and every once in a while I'd shoot off \$40 or \$50 just to keep my hand in. But I never lost my head with it. Money was too important to me. (56)

94.

Gus never bowed or scraped when white people come into his place. "Hello there!" he'd say. "Sit down over there! I'll have somebody at your table in a jiffy! Everyone in the place is my friend!" He was good that way, a real business hound.

Last two years of his life, he was under the doctor's care. Then one day he went huntin with a bunch of fellas from Kansas City, and he just dropped dead. 1951, I bleeve it was. He went pheasant hunting up in Dakota or loway someplace. He dropped dead from a heart condition or something. They said he had \$400 in his pocket, but I know he had more than that. Too much walkin . . . exertion, see? Huntin pheasant, you know, he overtaxed hisself. He was supposed to be settin down and restin, and he just panicked out and died!

Some people felt he might have been murdered. He had a lot of

enemies. But I don't think so. He wasn't shot or nuthin. He just died. We never did see the body or know how it happened, because when you're dead, you're dead. I spose they could have shot him. I mean, them big gamblers, they can pay anybody to do anything, you know?

He had a big funeral in St. Jo. There was people from everywhere-- Oklahoma, Texas, Dakota, Ioway. Mostly gamblers.

95.

In 1945 I decided to leave the packin house. I wanted some money, and the boss wouldn't write me a check. All he had to do was fill out his time sheet, and I could go downstairs and draw out what I had comin anyway. He wouldn't do that for me, so I lost my temper. I slapped him down, pulled his glasses off and knocked him on his butt. After that, they made my money out. \$240 it was.

Well, they blackballed me from the packin house. But pretty soon, they called me back anyhow. I was a master butcher, see? Last time I was down there, I said, "I don't want no more of this packin house. I've gotten too mean, and it's gonna hurt me, so let me get out now."

96.

So I got out here on the streets and started doin yard work and

waitin tables at night. And I made money--not like before-- but I made a livin anyhow.

For awhile there I worked all around town. You couldnt keep me from workin. I cut grass, did housework, raked leaves, shoveled snow.

All the time I minded my own business. I kept to myself. People threw stuff my way, but I didnt pay no mind. You get distracted, you lose focus, and you're liable to get killd.

Seems there was this wife of a prominent white man in town who one day did sumthin that was just plain stupid. She was from down south somewheres, Alabama or Georgia, I dont know. I was workin out at the house. The husband was at his office, downtown. I was doin sumthin inside the house, I forget what, when she calls my name, "Syl-ves-tur! Syl-ves-tur!" in this real sugary voice.

I went to the foot of the stairs and there she stood at the top nakkid as the day she was born. She was a good looker all right, blonde-haired with plenty of curves.

Well, I took one look and shook my head and turned on my heel and walked out of the place. I never went back. The husband, he was an all-right guy, and if he ever knew what she did, he'd've . . . well, I dont know what he would've done. Killd me and her both together. But I know to save my black ass I had to light out of there as fast as I could. Damn woman,

showin herself off that way. But what it was really about, I think, was this--I wasnt anything to her. She could parade nekkid in front of me all she wanted and it'ud be no different than paradin around in front of a cow or the family dog. For all she cared, I was just plain invisible.

97.

For a while there before I quit at the packin house, I was a volunteer organizer. They sent me to Kansas City to make speeches to workers about what was happenin in the St. Jo packin houses. After they found out I was a volunteer organizer, they called me a trouble maker at the packin plant.

We wanted to pass a vote among the workers to get a CIO union in there instead of a company union. CIO union, a national union, would give us better conditions. Swift and Company was pretty good to their people, but they didn't raise their salaries like in other places. National CIO union was known to get their raises, cause they just kept fightin for it. A bunch of us wanted to be a member of that CIO Union. (57)

Now Missoura Senator Francis Smith, from St. Jo, among others, was called in to mediate. See, him and his cronies, they wanted to keep the company union. And so to beat us, they had to pull a fast one. They had Swift and Company hire 300 women and they scattered them around the

plant doin nothin. They were all over the packing house, just before the election. And management gave them more money than they had ever seen. At 15 minutes before 3:30, when it was time to quit in the afternoon to go to vote, they let these 300 women out, and they lined up and beat us at the polls. To a woman, those 300 women voted for the Company Union.

Senator Francis Smith knowed what he was doin, see? (58) They put that machine in there, and they beat us. We only had 150 supporters, and so we were outnumbered. Otherwise, if it hadn't been for those extra women, we'da won. They knew exactly what the hell they was doin. Now don't tell me what no political machine will do when it comes time for them to win.

This was in 1945, at the end of the war. I worked hard to try and get the CIO to come here. I campaigned all over the packin house. We got our first union in 1937. A local union. First time they ever had a local union at a packin house in St. Jo. They got a little leverage at first out of it. Swift didn't strike, but Armour's did. We tried to get one goin at Swift, but nothin happened. Otherwise, they had only two guys at Swift on the company union. On their time they'd go down and try to settle things, but they'd settle it mostly in Swift's favor cause it was Swift's company union. They didn't give a damn about us, see? They'd cut men out when it suited them and loaded em up with work when it suited them.

Well, the union started raisin wages anyhow, the national CIO union. It had bargainin rights, see? But, company rights . . . you aint got nothin . . . you just whatever the damn company says you are. But if you got the national union behind you, you really got something.

Take workin conditions, for example. They could work you ten hours, eleven hours, work you as long as they wanted to work you. You might get a little raise, but then they'd lay the work on you even worse than before. Stretch-out, we called it, and bleeve me that's what it felt like at times. Maybe they'd sugar the deal by giving you an evening meal if you worked 12 hours. They'd work you Saturdays and Sundays and every day. Man, they could really work you! But it was wartime and they was shippin a hell of a lot of meat all over the country.

They had this pencil bandit [efficiency expert] come in there, called the Beedo man. And he'd figure down with a pencil and paper how much work you should do. And he'd make a book out of it, and it was that book that showed each man how much work he's supposed to do. The Beedo system was just to make you work harder and faster. It was almost piecework, the way they put it in there. They told you how many hides you had to cut. And if you did, they'd give you a bonus. Now some guys made \$4, \$5, \$6 a day extra with this Beedo System. But I already knew all about this system, cause I'd worked that way in Huron, South Dakota, and

worked it in St. Paul, back in the 1930s. I was leggin sheep back then. That means skinning the hind legs off. I could work faster than anyone else, but I didn't get much extra for my effort. I was supposed to leg 122 sheep an hour, but I was leggin 200 sheep an hour. And when I did that they'd pay me five more dollars an hour or somethin like that. But when you sped up like I did, it also made you more susceptible to accidents. The system simply didn't reward quality workers for what they were really worth. It got so that people were nearly killing themselves.

Now at Armour, they worked by schedule. You had to do so much everyday, and that was it. They never went over schedule. But at Swift and Company, they'd work you over the schedule. Say you started out to work an average 8-hour day and they got an order for more meat, well, they wouldn't leave it for tomorrow, they'd work you that same day up to 10 or 12 hours. It was just brutal at times!

98.

I guess I just run out of steam. The sportin life didn't shine for me any more. I'd become a target at Swift and Company. I could still run with the big dogs, but not so much as time went on. I was ready for another life. So I stopped bell-hoppin down at the hotel. I kept waitin tables there and at the Country Club. And I started doin yardwork for Mr.

George Schroeder and Mr. Conger Beasley. Also for Mr. Ed Wright. They all treated me fine. More and more I did work for Mr. Beasley, and ended up workin for him full time. Been with him ever since. I done a lot of things in this life. I been to 29 states. I danced with Bill Robinson. I fought with the best of em and held my own. But it was time for a change, and I was ready for it. (59)

end

End Notes

1.

Not much has changed in Wheatley, Arkansas, since Sylvester and his family lived there in the early 1900s, when it was little more than a tiny settlement surrounded by immense old-growth forests. The population remains the same as it was in Sylvester's day, between two and three hundred people, clinging to the poverty line, surrounded by second and third-growth trees, company trees, planted by the logging companies that decimated the forests of eastern Arkansas in the nineteen-teens and twenties.

2.

Slow fever is a descriptive term for a febrile typhoid infection that invades the body through the digestive tract, usually from drinking contaminated water or unpasteurized milk. The disease can be debilitating and even fatal. Symptoms include intestinal lesions and an undulating fever that comes and goes over a period of weeks and months, accompanied by muscle cramps and excessive sweating. In a setting as crude and unhygienic as the cabin occupied by Sylvester and his family on the outskirts of Wheatley, Arkansas in the early 1900s, such an affliction was not uncommon. Today, the disease is also known as brucellosis.

3.

Paper currency issued for temporary use in an emergency.

4.

A white man named Hamilton (first name unknown) landed in a canoe at Chickasaw Crossing on the White River in 1820. He liked the view from the high perch of ground located on the east bank of the winding green river and decided to stay.

Augusta was officially christened in 1848 by Thomas Hough, who chose the name Augusta to honor his favorite niece, Miss Augusta Cald, of Virginia. Hough laid the foundation for all future development, platting streets and blocks and donating sites for churches and the county courthouse.

In its early years Augusta was an energetic mix of pioneer vigor and refined gentility. Many of the first families migrated from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas, bringing their pianos, family portraits, leather-bound books, and hundreds of slaves to help clear the forests.

By the 1850s Augusta had developed into a major riverport. Steamboats from Memphis and New Orleans lined up at the dock to unload coffee, sugar, flour, and manufactured goods. The same boats took away lumber, cotton bales, and sacks of shelled corn.

During the Civil War, troops from both sides bivouacked on the beautiful oak-shaded lawn surrounding the county courthouse. Union gunboats tied up at the foot of the bluff. In 1863 a battle was fought

north of town at a place called Fitzhugh Wood, with heavy casualties on both sides. Another battle, at nearby Blockade Hill, ended in a draw.

It took a long time to recover from the war. In the 1880s, city fathers turned down an offer by the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railway to bring their line right through Augusta. They claimed they could see no advantage in having their town bisected by steel rails; they feared it would shatter the tranquility and usher undesirable people into their midst. The river, they felt, provided adequate transportation.

The city fathers acknowledged their mistake in 1887 by building the Augusta Tramway and Transfer Co., a mile-long track that connected downtown Augusta with the St. Louis and Iron Mountain tracks north of town. "The Little Dummy," as the train was called, gained fame as the shortest independent railway in the U.S.

In the early 1900s when Sylvester moved there with his family from Wheatley, Arkansas, the population of Augusta was around 3,700 people, evenly divided between blacks and whites.

5.

William Loren Katz in his book *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (1986) estimates that nearly one-third of the African Americans in the U.S. have some Indian heritage. Historian Carter G. Woodson has called the mingling of the two races "one of the longest unwritten chapters in the history of the United States." White leaders feared that slaves would flee the plantations and slip into the woods and link up with hostile Indians and form an alliance to resist white supremacy.

Pre-contact Choctaw Indians occupied lands in the present states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana; they were later removed in the 1830s to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). In the mid-1700s, British colonists in the South introduced the practice of African slavery among members of the Five Civilized Nations--Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles--in hopes of protecting their own slave property by inducing Indians to become partners in the system.

6.

A feverish condition was treated by gathering stacks of peach tree leaves and boiling them in water to make a tea to drink or a solution to soak in.

7.

Diluted sheep manure mixed with urine was regarded as an effective way to cure a sore throat. W.C. Handy in his autobiography, *Father of the Blues* (1941), describes several home remedies used by his family when he was growing up in Florence, Alabama in the 1880s: “[My grandmother] was the family physician, who could cure a fever with the juice of peach leaves which she gathered and mashed Some of her doses were hard ones. I remember that when I had a bad sore throat bordering on croup [laryngitis] she made me gargle with my own urine, and when we had the measles she gave us tea made from sheep manure. But we never questioned her remedies, and we all lived.”

8.

Asafoetida, the gum resin of various plants of the carrot family (genus *Ferula*), tucked in a bag and worn around the neck--a rancid concoction that smelled like a dead skunk--was considered an effective prophylactic against certain kinds of diseases.

9.

Before the invention of plastic and cardboard containers, wooden barrels and kegs were commonplace in Woodruff County. In the early 1900s there were basically two types of storage containers--tight or waterproof barrels built from hardwood, and slack barrels that held dry foodstuffs. In the early 1900s, the huge forests in eastern Arkansas had not yet been seriously logged, and there was plenty of wood available.

The remains of a kiln on the bank of the White River in Augusta is all that's left of a barrel-stave mill that once flourished there. The mill opened around 1912, when it was listed in Polk's Arkansas Business Directory, and closed down in the late 1940s. In 1914 the plant burned to the ground and was rebuilt.

According to local historian T.J. Fakes, the first airplane in Woodruff County appeared on April 12, 1918, in conjunction with a Liberty Loan Exhibit Train which made a stop at the town of McCrory, nine miles east of Augusta.

"An enthusiastic crowd of more than 5,000 people crowded through the exhibit train," Fakes writes in the Woodruff County Historical Society (Spring 1974). "One of the highlights of the day was the visit of an aereoplane [sic] from the United States Naval Base at Millington, Tennessee, which flew overhead for more than ten minutes, the first aereoplane ever to fly the skies of Woodruff County.

"The second aereoplane [sic] ever in Woodruff County, and the first to land, came down in a field at the Jeffries Crossing farm of the Fakes brothers west of McCrory, on July 12, 1918. The plane came from Ebert's Field at Lonoke, Arkansas, and was piloted and navigated by Lts. Keene and Pendleton, who had come to McCrory to visit Miss Jewel Daniel. The plane landed about 9:00 a.m. In honor of the event, all church services in McCrory were cancelled. People came from all the surrounding towns and countryside to view the aircraft."

11.

Sylvester is most likely referring to Thomas E. Stanley, Jr., scion of a wealthy and influential Augusta family, who was born in the 1870s. T.E. Jr.'s father came to Arkansas from Alabama, after serving with distinction in the Confederate army, where he was wounded three times at the battles of Corinth, Murfreesboro, and Chickamauga. Like his father, T.E. Jr. was a successful attorney.

12.

Lee Edwin Biles was born in Rose Bud, Arkansas, on December 11, 1872. He studied medicine at the Memphis Hospital Medical School in Memphis, Tennessee, and at the Kentucky School of Medicine at Louisville, finishing up his education at Tulane University at New Orleans in 1907.

In 1909 he moved to Augusta and opened a medical practice and a drugstore in a two-story brick building with offices upstairs. He served for several years as city health officer of Augusta and as secretary of the Woodruff County Medical Society. He owned the first x-ray machine in Woodruff County. He died in 1940.

Typical of a small-town doctor, Biles was often paid in produce by his patients. His daughter remembers that he once received a quarter of a beef steer for removing an enflamed appendix. The standard fee for delivering a baby was \$25, or half a pig. It was not unusual for him to receive "a pair of dressed chickens or a basket of vegetables, or sweet corn or apples. In the summer the front porch [of his house] would be loaded with watermelons and canteloupes."

13.

Life-long Augusta resident John Rolfe Eldridge suggests that the name of the African-American district comes from the wooden freight containers left around the old riverport area. Once emptied of the merchandise that had been transported up the White River from major Mississippi River shipping points, the big boxes were converted by black residents into shanty houses.

14.

Sylvester may have this date wrong. On September 9, 1911, a black man named Arthur Dean, recently released from the state penitentiary, shot and killed a negro farmer named Dennis Clark as Clark sat near the window of his farm house singing to himself.

Shortly after killing Clark, Dean entered the home of a white farmer named J.T. Bostleman. He assaulted Bostleman's daughter, Mrs. Albert Vaughn, then drew a razor and slashed her throat. Mrs. Vaughn lived a few hours, but managed to give an account of the crime to authorities, plus a description of Dean, who was later captured in the town of Bald Knob, eight miles west of Augusta. Dean was taken to Augusta, where he confessed. Emotions ran so high that a crowd of blacks and whites overpowered the officers who were guarding him. They slung a rope around his neck and dragged him to the barrel stave factory near the White River and hanged him from a tree.

15.

A canebrake is a thicket located in a low, flat, marshy region, composed of tall, hollow, cane-like reeds (*Arundinaria gigantea*) that frequently grow to heights of 30 feet or more. Canebrake once typified what wilderness meant in the Mississippi River valley--virtually impenetrable stands of woody, bamboo-like grasses that were regarded by early pioneers as serious obstacles to progress and civilization. David Crockett in his 1834 autobiography describes crawling through a thicket "the best way I could; and if the reader don't know it was bad enough, I am sure I do. For the vines and briers had grown all through it, and so thick, that a good fat coon couldn't much more than get along."

Before the great mid-section of the continent could be properly settled, the "brakes" had to be cleared--the land drained, the thickets consumed by fire. The soil supporting a canebrake was rich in nutrients, and eventually yielded plentiful harvests of cotton and corn. According to long-time resident John Rolfe Eldridge, the land bordering the White River today in the Augusta region is more cultivated and open than it was in the early 1900s when Sylvester lived there.

16.

Negro cowboys worked on ranches and farms throughout the states west of the Mississippi River, from the end of the Civil War until well into the 20th century. Cattlemen returning from the war found their livestock scattered across the countryside, concealed in thick brush and down in draws. During the four years of war, hundreds of thousands of calves grew to become wild cows and longhorn bulls--unbranded, unclaimed, and untamed. One of the specialties of the Negro cowboy was to flush these cattle out of the dense growths where they had taken refuge--mesquite thickets in central and southern Texas, canebrake in Arkansas and Louisiana. The hunt for wild cattle was difficult and dangerous; each cowboy had a few horses, a bag of corn bread and dried beef, and several lengths of good rope for snaring the animals and dragging them out into the open.

Typical of such men was Henry Beckwith, who, according to Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, authors of *The Negro Cowboys* (1965), "hunted cattle in thickets so dense that neither horse, man nor cattle could see for more than a few yards . . . Beckwith carried no bedding, slept where he could, drank black coffee mixed with chili juice and rode much of the time at night . . . Like a coyote, he needed little sleep."

In 1897 "pearling" became a rewarding business on the White River after Dr. J.H. Myers of Black Rock, Arkansas, found a 14-grain ball pearl with a fine pink luster tucked inside a mussel shell. Streams such as the White, Black, and St. Francis, flowing from the Ozark Mountains, were especially good for nurturing mussels because of the high limestone content of the water. In 1900, Dr. Myers shipped his first batch of mussel shells to J.F. Boepple, a German immigrant in Muscatine, Iowa, who converted the shells into buttons.

Enormous amounts of mussel shells were required to keep the nation's button factories in business. At the height of the business, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Arkansas produced nearly a fourth of the button shells for the entire industry. The industry became so popular that speculators scoured the beds of the White, St. Francis, and Black River bottoms looking for mussel shells; finally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had to step in to protect the dwindling stocks.

The increasing use of metal zippers during World War II undermined the Arkansas mussel industry. The glut of cheap plastic buttons manufactured in the late 1940s and early 1950s spelled the end to the business.

18.

Before 1970, the majority of cotton grown in the U.S. was picked by hand. The job was physically grueling; pickers were paid according to the amount of cotton they stuffed into their bags.

The bag was then dragged to a trailer at the edge of the field, where it was weighed and recorded. Before being properly ginned (the process of separating cotton fibers from their seeds), the fibers were spread out in the sun to dry. Later, they were compacted by a press and packed together to form a bale, which made it easy to transport.

19.

The sharecropping system was adopted at the end of slavery, prompting a shift from group labor to family labor. It was the low cost of labor under both slavery and sharecropping that enabled planters to squeeze as much money out of the cotton industry as they did. But the system also drove the South into economic penury. Little industrial investment was encouraged, and social relations between the races were polarized to maintain the hierarchical structure of the plantocracy.

While the Civil War brought important political changes to the lives of African Americans, real economic changes didn't occur until World War II. The crucial event was the development of the mechanical cotton picker.

In the old days, a competent field hand could pick 20 pounds of cotton in an hour, compared to the thousand pounds a mechanical picker could harvest in the same period. Picking a bale of cotton by machine cost \$5.25, whereas picking it by hand cost \$39.41. It was estimated that each machine could do the work of fifty people.

The result of this technological development was to drive black sharecroppers off the land and out of the rural south. Between 1910 and 1970, more than six and a half million African Americans migrated to the North.

20.

Nathan Gregory was a big landowner in the Augusta region. His descendents still live in the area and farm their land, which is located eight to ten miles south of Augusta.

21.

There seems to be some confusion here. Research indicates that while there was an all-black baseball team called the Memphis Red Sox, it did not come into existence as a viable organization until 1924. Sylvester says he played for them sometime in the late nineteen-teens, before circumstances forced him to leave Arkansas in 1919. Was there a minor-league team called the Memphis Red Sox?

In all the talks we had about this aspect of his life, he never deviated from calling the team he played for the Memphis Red Sox. Did he play for them in the 1920s after he shifted his home base from Augusta to St. Joseph, Missouri, and was traveling around the country looking for work? According to Janet Bruce, author of *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball*, the first successful, organized Negro League was established on February 13, 1920 in Kansas City, Missouri. Andrew "Rube" Foster was the driving force behind the organization of the league and served as its president.

Between September 1918 and June 1919, a period of ten months, 675,000 Americans died of influenza and pneumonia. When compared to the number of Americans killed in combat in World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined--423,000--it's evident how deadly the outbreak was.

The epidemic came in two waves. The first wave in the spring of 1918 was milder than the second wave, which began in September of 1918 and lasted until June of the following year; this wave proved to be far more intense and contagious. The virus eventually spread around the world, killing as many as 100 million people, making it one of the most virulent epidemics in all of recorded history.

23.

In 1903 blues composer W.C. Handy (1873-1958) accepted an offer to direct a colored Knights of Pythias band out of Clarksdale, Mississippi. For several years he led the band in a string of successful engagements up and down the Mississippi Delta on both sides of the river. "I came to know by heart every foot of the Delta," he says in his autobiography *Father of the Blues* (1941). "I could call every flag stop, water tower and pig path . . . with my eyes closed."

One night in the station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, as he nodded half-asleep waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, he heard something which was to profoundly alter the course of American popular music. "A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept," Handy writes. "His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable . . . [It was] the weirdest music I had ever heard."

24.

Minstrel shows consisted of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, music, performed by white people in blackface, and, later, after the Civil War, African Americans in blackface. Minstrel shows portrayed blacks in stereotypical and disparaging ways as ignorant, lazy, buffonish, superstitious, infectiously happy, and tuneful. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Charles Callender's Georgia Minstrels became the most popular black troupe in America. Many famous African American actors and singers got their start in black minstrelsy, including W.C. Handy, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters.

25.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1878-1949). Born Luther Robinson in Richmond, Va., he ran away to Washington, D.C. earning nickels and dimes by dancing and singing in the streets. Eventually, he became the most famous of all African-American tap dancers, with an exacting yet light footwork that was said to have brought tap up on its toes from the flat-footed shuffle of an earlier era.

26.

Ergot, a fungus that grows on rye, was once widely used as an abortifacient. Using ergot to induce abortion was risky, as it could cause severe poisoning and even death. Abortions in back-country Arkansas in the early years of the 20th century were ordinarily administered by midwives, or by the pregnant woman herself; male physicians were seldom involved in the procedure.

27.

Ross Roddy was a descendant of a well-known pioneer family that arrived in the Augusta area in the early 1830s from Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

In 1896, the Supreme Court, in a case known as Plessy v. Ferguson, upheld the constitutionality of the social segregation of "the white and colored races" under the "separate but equal" doctrine. The case came from Louisiana, which in 1890 adopted a law providing for "equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races" on its railroads.

In 1892, passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in a Jim Crow car. He was brought before Judge John H. Ferguson of the Criminal Court for New Orleans, who upheld the state law. The law was then challenged in the U.S. Supreme Court on grounds that it conflicted with the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, which enforced the "absolute equality" of the two races before the law. The Court argued that laws requiring the separation of the races "do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race. If this be so, it is . . . solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it."

Following the Plessy decision, restrictive legislation based on race expanded steadily; the "separate but equal" reasoning behind it was not overturned until Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954.

29.

In its early days as a fur-trading post on the Missouri River, St. Joseph (or Blacksnake Hills, as it was known) established itself as an important marketing center for the entire region. As early as 1846 it was a livestock emporium, specializing in pork packing with hogs driven on foot to the St. Jo market from as far north as the Iowa border.

Products were cured and shipped by boat to population centers back east; in the 1850s, St. Jo became the supply headquarters for emigrants overlanding to California to look for gold. The fledgling industry received a major boost in 1857 when a rail line was built connecting Hannibal, in eastern Missouri, on the Mississippi, with St. Jo, in the west, on the Missouri River. The St. Joseph Stockyards, located in the city's south end, opened in 1884.

Though Missouri never joined the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861-1865), many of its settlers were from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, with strong secessionist leanings. The population in 1861 was 1.2 million, which included a hundred thousand slaves. Legislative action by the powerful Radical Unionist Party on Jan. 11, 1865 summarily freed all the slaves. Eleven months later, the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended the institution of slavery nationally.

Slavery died hard in Missouri; anti-black sentiment persisted for decades. In 1868 the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed African Americans equal protection to the same laws and civil liberties as whites. Two years later the 15th amendment granted black men the right to vote.

In the 1880s Radical Republicans lost their power in Missouri. Rural Democrats with strong feelings for the Old South took control of the state legislature. In 1889 they passed a law ordering separate schools "for the children of African descent." Whatever gains that black people had achieved in the aftermath of the war were largely negated by the restrictive effects of the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court ruling.

Unlike the states of the old Confederacy, Missouri never passed

segregation laws covering public accomodation; it was largely habit and custom and the persistence of the slave code mentality that prohibited blacks from joining whites in facilities such as hotels, restaurants, theatres, and hospitals. Living in Missouri may have offered Sylvester Bell a little more freedom and mobility than he had experienced in Arkansas, but only a little.

31.

In the early 1920s vaudeville replaced minstrelsy in popularity as a venue for live performance. In 1925 there were approximately 1,500 theatres in the vaudeville circuits; by 1930 only 300 remained. Of the 700 RKO Circuit theatres, only five offered exclusively vaudeville bills; the rest featured silent films, and later, after 1927, the "talkies."

32.

African-American A.G. Allen was one of the few successful black promoters of minstrel theater in the U.S. So careful was he not to offend his audience that his letterhead and posters advertising his troupe contained portraits of two men above a ribbon banner, both easily identified as white.

33.

Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller (1904-1943) was a jazz pianist, organist, and composer. The most ebullient and popular of the Harlem stride pianists, Waller was also an accomplished performer on the pipe organ, a prolific composer of songs and musical comedy scores, and a gifted comic.

34.

Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates (1907-1998), one of the finest of all rhythm tap dancers, was born in Fountain Inn, S.C. He began dancing when he was five. At age 12 he lost his leg in a cotton-seed mill accident. Determined to become a professional dancer, he left home at age fifteen and worked his way upward from minstrel shows to the vaudeville circuits. After performing in Europe in the early 1930s, Bates returned to the U.S. where he became a featured tapper at such top Harlem nightclubs as the Cotton Club and the Club Zanzibar. He was one of the few black tap dancers to cross the color barrier and perform in prestigious white vaudeville circuits.

35.

In 1908 nine prominent St. Joseph business leaders banded together to build a new nine-story luxury hotel in downtown St. Jo at the corner of Fourth and Francis Streets. The men formed the Buchanan County Hotel Company and sold stock to local businessmen and residents. The hotel opened on September 15, 1908. It capitalized on the city's history, offering the Pony Express Bar, a portrait of the city's founder, Joseph Robidoux, and the use of the Robidoux family crest on the china.

The hotel became a prominent fixture in the community. Residents went there for celebrations, family occasions, holidays, and major social events. Sixty-eight years later, on June 13, 1976, the hotel was imploded. The majestic structure was deemed unfeasible for renovation and became a victim of urban renewal. A film of the implosion was used in a popular beer commercial.

36.

The St. Joseph Stockyards received a major boost in 1897 when Swift & Co., one of the nation's leading meatpackers, broke ground for what was called "one of the largest, most complete, and modern packing houses in the world." Encouraged by Swift's vote of confidence, other major packers moved to St. Jo. Nelson Morris & Co. of Chicago built a four-story packing plant with a daily kill capacity of 5,000 hogs and 2,000 cattle. In 1899 Hammond Packing Co. built a plant that covered three acres and employed 1,000 workers.

The stockyards grew rapidly. In 1912 Armour & Co. bought the Hammond plant and Howe Brothers of Boston opened a tannery to cure hides and produce shoe leather. By the 1920s, when Sylvester moved with his family to St. Jo, the stockyards, packing houses, and related industries employed 4,500 people.

37.

The 1920s saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan as a potent political force. In 1924, a national convention of the Klan was held in St. Joseph. William S. Campbell, of the city, was elected the Exalted Cyclops. In his acceptance speech, he claimed the Klan could control some 400,000 votes in Missouri for the 1924 election. That year marked the Klan's acme of influence.

39.

An early, two-handed type of rummy played in the U.S. All the tens, nines, and eights were removed from a standard pack of 52 cards, leaving a total of 40 cards in the deck. The name is thought to derive from the Spanish "con quien" (with whom), or from the Chinese game Kon Khin. Black players in the American South pronounced it "Coon Can."

Michael Karl Goetz, a native of Alsace, came to St. Joseph in 1858. A year later he founded a brewery with the slogan, "Traditionally Fine-- Since 1859." When Goetz died in 1901, the business was carried on by his four sons.

During Prohibition (1919-1933), the company prospered through the sale of "near beer," a drink with less than one-half of one percent alcohol content. ("Most after-shave lotions gave you a bigger kick than that," Sylvester complained.) Bolstered by sales of ginger ale, lemon and grape sodas, the Goetz brewery plant at 6th and Albemarle in the north end of St. Jo expanded in 1934.

41.

Jesse James, perhaps the most notorious outlaw in the U.S., was assassinated by Bob Ford on the morning of April 3, 1882, in the living room of a rented house overlooking downtown St. Joseph, where he was living incognito under the alias of Thomas Howard with his wife and two small children.

Raymond Gunn, a twenty-seven year old black ex-convict, confessed to the murder of Velma Colter, a twenty-year old white schoolteacher. At 9:30 a.m. on January 12, 1931, a mob overpowered the Nodaway County sheriff and his deputies who were escorting Gunn to the courthouse in Maryville, forty miles north of St. Joseph, for a preliminary trial.

Ample preparations had already been made for Gunn's immolation. All the furniture had been removed from the schoolhouse, located three miles south of Maryville, where the attack had occurred. Gunn was forced to climb a ladder to the roof, where a hole had been cut; through this hole he was bound to the ridgepole with a ten-foot chain, his head hanging down one side of the roof, his feet down the other. Then both Gunn and the schoolhouse were doused with gasoline and set ablaze. A crowd estimated at three thousand watched as Gunn was burned alive.

43.

Long-time St. Joseph News Press reporter Harold Slater, in his memoir *Behind the Headlines* (1989), says, "In the late Twenties and early Thirties there were as many as eighty bordellos actively operating in St. Joseph. [Out of a total population of 78,000.] On one block on South Fifth Street, bordering Messanie, there were fourteen houses. There were houses on the west side, downtown, the south side and in the area of Seventh and Mary Streets and Seventh and Patee Streets. Although they were fairly well scattered throughout the community, police had them all pinpointed and subject to the informal albeit unofficial 'licensing' system."

44.

A prominent St. Joseph businessman in an interview shortly before his death said that "St. Jo back then [1930s] was a real town. You could get anything you wanted any time you wanted it. And you didn't have to get into your car and drive to where it was being offered! You could leave your office at noon and walk to the club for lunch, leave an hour later and walk to one of the gambling halls, then, on the way back, stop in for a refreshment at one of the sporting houses, and be back dictating letters in your office a little after two. There was no town like it in the world."

45.

Lizzie King (nee Elizabeth Ritz) was the legendary madame of a bordello located at 415 Messanie Street on the edge of downtown St. Joseph. She died in November 1939 at the age of 82. She was born in Kentucky in the 1850s and lived in St. Jo for 45 years. Her first "rooming house" was located at 124 and a half South Second Street, about 100 feet from the entrance to the old city hall.

In 1910 she moved her operation to a stolid, two-story, yellow-brick building at 415 Messanie, with glassblock windows protected by iron bars. The exterior of the house was solid and well-kept, the front door located squarely in the center of the building. On each side of the entrance was a parlor, one with a 25-cent player piano and the other with a dime piano for Lizzie's less affluent patrons. In each parlor the women would parade before the potential customer. In the 1930s, when Sylvester worked there, seven to ten women were on call 'round the clock offering their services at a base price of three dollars.

The parlor furnishings were simple--a divan, potted plants, several overstuffed chairs, coffee tables, and self-standing ashtrays. The divans and chairs were decorated with garish pillows, sequined with bright slogans ("Home Sweet Home").

In a retrospective piece printed in the St. Joseph News Press in

1976, reporter Harold Slater said, "Assisting Lizzie as a sort of executive director was a lady known simply as Claudia. Her title among the inmates and patrons was 'floorlady.' She was the straw boss who took care of such essentials as price and protocol when Lizzie was otherwise engaged. Claudia knew the business as well as any executive vice-president of a downtown bank did his. Only the hours were different."

46.

The obituary announcing her death that appeared in the St. Joseph News Press on November 7, 1939, stated that "Lizzie King, who for more than forty years operated a notorious bagnio here . . . was a forceful character of the old school of vice which combined predatory aims and business-like conduct with a view to obtaining the utmost profit and the utmost toleration of the community."

Lizzie was also revered by the locals for her boundless generosity, which included donating clothes for the poor and awarding horseshoe diamond stickpins to her most loyal customers. "For many years the magic sesame at a riverfront clothing store was 'Miss Lizzie sent me,'" the obit continues. "The management had orders to give derelicts a pair of overalls, a blue shirt and a cap and charge it to Lizzie's account. Policemen, well acquainted with Lizzie's charitable proclivities, regularly sent bums to that store to get items of clothing to be put on her tab."

Izzy Rabikoff was a local character and small-time gambler who bootlegged whiskey and operated a downtown club. According to Ben Rich, he was a little guy, a careful dresser, with a snorty laugh and a friendly, ingratiating manner. One time, Rich says, "he got arrested and thrown in the county clink. I was working as a delivery boy at Benny Magoon's delicatessen, and one day I delivered a couple of salami sandwiches to the jail. The guard met me at the door and instead of directing me to Izzy's cell, told me to go straight down the hall to the sheriff's office. Izzy was sitting at the sheriff's desk with his feet propped up, taking orders over the phone for moonshine whiskey. The sheriff sat in another chair, apparently unconcerned as to what was taking place before his eyes."

Izzy liked to bet the horses, which he did at a lively place in downtown St. Jo called The Paddock, owned by a gambler named Benny Sembler, where you could wager on races all over the country. During the war, Izzy ran a nightclub called the Fontanelle. After the war ended in 1945, he moved to Kansas City.

48.

Marguerite Bell was born in St. Joseph in 1912 and lived her whole life there. She died in 1972.

Lloyd Warner was nineteen years old when he was apprehended by a mob and brutally put to death for accosting a white woman near 22nd and Jules streets in St. Joseph, Missouri.

On the night of Tuesday, November 28, 1933, Buchanan County Sheriff Otto Thiesen held off a crowd for four and a half hours, denying that he had custody of the accused man and calling out units of the National Guard to prevent the mob from burning down the county jail. At risk also to the mob's vengeance were the lives of Sheriff Thiesen's deputies, police officers, and additional prisoners, including eleven black men whom Thiesen feared might be harmed by the frenzied mob.

The streets outside the jail were thronged with angry men wielding clubs and rocks and guns. Windows were shattered and blown out; tear gas shells used by Thiesen's deputies to disperse the crowd were hurled back into the jail.

At one point several people gained access to the jail and rampaged through Sheriff Thiesen's office and living quarters. After a four and a half hour standoff, Thiesen pulled Warner from his cell and turned him over to the mob. Still clad in street clothes, including a purple tie and

gray spats, Warner was beaten, slashed, and stabbed as he was dragged to the corner of Fifth and Jules Streets. There he was hanged from a tree and his body doused with kerosene and set on fire.

A grand jury was convened, but no one was convicted of taking part in the lynching.

50.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a violent period in American history. The industrialization of the country attracted a tremendous influx of immigrants from all over the world. Displaced people, down on their luck, looked for scapegoats to blame; lynching blacks became the chief form of violence. Nationally, of 3,224 people lynched between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 were African-Americans. In the same time period in Missouri, eighty one people were lynched, fifty one of whom were black.

(Lynchings in Missouri took place in Springfield in 1906, Columbia 1923, Charleston 1924, Maryville 1931, St. Joseph 1933, and Sikeston 1942.

51. Cotton Jones (to be completed).

Lawrence Archer Vorhees was a circuit judge of Buchanan County from 1917 to 1939. Previously he served as the prosecuting attorney of the county in 1890. From 1897 to 1898 he was mayor of St. Joseph.

According to record, Vorhees was steady, calm, and unfailingly courteous and polite. An official of great formal bearing, he rarely appeared in the courtroom without wearing a cutaway jacket and a starched wing collar.

Vorhees went about his duties in a quiet and efficient manner, often going out of his way to protect people of lesser means from those who sought to take advantage of them. Reporter Harold Slater, who covered the Buchanan County courthouse for many years, says that he "was most human as well as most humane."

53.

Born in 1903, St. Joseph native Verne Starmer served more than forty years as a local law enforcement agent. He began as a deputy sheriff in 1925, and was appointed to the police department in 1929. After serving in the U.S. Navy from 1942 to 1945, he returned to St. Jo where, in 1948, he was promoted to chief of detectives. He died in 1965.

54.

The Edgewood was a major gambling joint located on the Belt Highway, outside the city limits, on the east side of St. Joseph. It was one of the best-equipped betting parlors in town, featuring blackjack, slots, craps, and roulette wheels.

The proprietor was a man named Pete Howard. According to Ben Rich, Howard had a beautiful wife. Some of the high-rollers who frequented the place were always making passes at her. One guy in particular was just certain he could score. A friend encouraged him, saying that he knew for a fact that the lady was known to dally on the side.

With Pete Howard's connivance, the guy was encouraged to pay a visit to his house on Lovers Lane, when Pete was out of town. He was told by the friend to bring flowers and a box of chocolates. He was greeted at the door by Pete Howard's wife in a negligee--she knew all about the scam.

The guy had just settled on the couch when Pete Howard burst into the room waving a pistol. The guy bolted out the front door, with Pete in hot pursuit, firing the pistol, which was loaded with blanks.

A crony in a car picked Pete up in front of the house, and they followed the guy as he ran down the street looking for a place to hide.

Pete leaned out the window and continued to fire off blank cartridges, forcing the guy to run even faster. According to Ben Rich, he ran from Lovers Lane all the way downtown to Fifth and Edmond, a distance of four miles.

At the Greyhound bus station, clutching his chest, wheezing like a dog, he climbed on board a Kansas City-bound bus. "If I remember right," says Ben Rich, "he never showed his face again in St. Jo."

55.

A daily lottery in which participants bet that certain numbers will be drawn from a lottery wheel. Also known as "numbers."

56.

"Being sporty refers generally to loving to keep company and to talk. A sporty fellow often defines himself through flash (*ital*); he wears clothes and acts with style, and he considers that in everything he does he is being watched and comports himself accordingly. A sporty fellow is generally admired by the community, but he must know when it is appropriate to be sporty."

(The Man of Words in the West Indies: Performance and the
Emergence of Creole Culture by Roger D. Abrahams.)

57.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was a splinter group of unions that broke away from the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935. A more militant and leftward-leaning group, the CIO strongly supported Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Battles for control over industrial sectors such as meatpacking and electric machinery resulted in bitter and often violent conflicts with the AFL.

The CIO was beneficial to all workers, but especially to African Americans. In the days prior to the establishment of the CIO, blacks accounted for about one hundred thousand members of the trade unions in the U.S. Once the CIO was established, that number escalated to a half million by the early 1940s.

The two groups eventually put aside enough of their differences to merge as the AFL-CIO in 1955.

58.

Francis Smith (1905-1984) was a distinguished lawyer from St. Joseph, a partner in the firm of Culver, Phillip, Kaufmann and Smith. He also ran for elective office, serving in the Missouri state house of representatives from 1934 to 1938, followed by two terms in the state senate, 1938 to 1946. He was a leader in mental health care reform in Missouri, and a major advocate for modernizing state government.

59.

Sylvester may have been a marked man by 1945 because of his work on behalf of the CIO national union. He may have also known that with the end of the war and the return of white servicemen looking for jobs, he would likely be bumped from the Swift & Co. work force.

