

CARTON 8:6

STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

MANUSCRIPT DRAFTS, CHAPTER 2

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Chapter 2/Off The Plantation

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I didn't want to look for support from my cousin Esther, so the next day I went looking for work, and was hired as a houseboy for the LaBlanc family.

My duties included cleaning, shopping and running errands for Margaret, their daughter. I used to do things like go to the store and buy shoes for her. She'd tell me the size and I'd go get them. I bought her powder, soap, things like that. She probably was too lazy to go herself, so she sent me.

Margaret was in her twenties, a tall, slim brunette. She was going to school. There was three other daughters, but they was older and married had moved out. Margaret was the only one left in the house. Mrs. LaBlanc was handicapped, she couldn't use her left hand.

The LaBlancs was a family of moderate income in this small town. They also had an upstairs maid. I was given a little shack in the back of their house to live in, which was part of my meager wages. The LaBlancs had two grandchildren by another daughter about the same age as I. Their grandchildren and I got along fine together. Mrs. LaBlanc knew the salary she was giving me was small, so she told me to plant a garden in back of the house. The money I earned from selling whatever vegetables I grew would be mine to use

for things like movies or pocket change. I grew different kinds of vegetables in my garden. I gave Mrs. LaBlanc's family some vegetables and sold the rest up and down the streets. I pulled a little red wagon filled up to the top with vegetables.

There was times when I got very lonesome in my little shack, especially when the day was over and night began. One thing for sure, I did have a German shepherd, Laddie, who followed me everywhere I went, even to the movies. He stayed outside until I came out. I loved this dog. He really was a devoted friend.

One day I was walking along selling my vegetables, when a gang of white boys came up to me and wanted to start a fight. I told them I lived at the LaBlanc's home and worked for them. They was surprised to hear this and walked on down the street. I didn't have that trouble anymore.

My salary was two dollars a week, plus meals. At first I ate my meals in the backyard under a tree close to the house. They gave me a wooden table and a chair back there. But Margaret didn't like that. Margaret had visited New York and seen how black and white people lived there, and she explained to her mother that making me eat in the back yard was wrong. Margaret said she didn't believe in discriminating against any race of people. Her mother probably hadn't travelled and didn't know any better. I liked Margaret. She was friendly toward me and she seemed intelligent. If she believed in discrimination she wouldn't have trusted me going

to the store for her. I realized that not all white people was mean and prejudiced; some, like Margaret, tried to be decent toward black people. From then on I ate at the kitchen table and I was treated better than before around the house.

I got acquainted with the black maid who worked upstairs. She did the cleaning and the washing and ironing. I used to give her some of the vegetables from my garden. She was forty years old. She was a very nice lady. She fixed my breakfast every morning.

I worked for the LaBlancs for nearly two years. But I decided to leave to better my condition. The little money I was making wasn't enough. I needed to buy my own clothes and shoes. One day I jumped up and wanted to get to stepping, so I packed my suitcase and left to look for some work that paid more.

I went back to Esther's house and stayed about a month. Esther was nice to me but her daughter and I couldn't get along. Things began to get unpleasant around the house. It seemed to me that cousin Esther's daughter was mentally disturbed. Often we got into arguments. She slapped me in the face one day. I told cousin Jessie about how she was acting around the house when everyone was out. He didn't like it, and told her never to slap me again. I didn't want to make matters worse, so I left Melville.

I went to a little farm to visit some friends of mine, Annie and Buddy Harris. When I arrived there, they was out in the fields planting potatoes. I stayed and helped them

plant potatoes for about a week. I felt good helping them with the planting cause they was struggling sharecroppers and they appreciated my help.

I left them and stayed for a day or so with cousin Horace Bertrand. When I was leaving I asked him if he could give me some money for travelling, and he gave me a chicken, which I was happy to get. When I was walking down the street, I saw a man coming toward me who was dressed like he was on his way to work. I stopped him and asked if he wanted to buy a chicken. He answered yes. I sold him the chicken for forty cents. With forty cents in my pocket, I went looking for a friend's house to ask him to travel with me and show me the way to Galveston, Texas. I wanted to get to Galveston because I knew Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe was now living there.

Oak Tar was my friend's name. When I found Oak Tar he didn't have any money but he was willing to hobo with me and show me the way. First, we hoboed to Opelusas, Louisiana. Then we jumped on a freight train for Galveston. Once inside the boxcar it was so cold we had to make a fire. As we traveled we didn't have anything to eat all the way. When Oak Tar and I finally arrived, the cold wind seemed like it went straight through our bodies. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe was so happy to see me, they hugged and kissed me and fixed us some dinner. When dinner was over, Oak Tar went back to Louisiana.

I spent a few days looking around Galveston. I noticed one day when I was walking down the street that some people was coming out of a building carrying bags of food. I asked

the people if I could get some of that food. They told me to go on in and ask for some. When I got inside the building and asked for the food, a lady, who was sitting behind a desk, told me to sign some papers. When I signed the papers, I got the food -- some cornmeal, flour, plums and grapefruits. I was so glad to get this food I couldn't wait to get home to show Aunt T-Babe and Uncle Tot what I had. When Uncle Tot saw the food, he got very angry at me. Apparently, the building I went into to get the food from was the Welfare Office. Uncle Tot explained to me I shouldn't go to the Welfare Office to get food because that food was for people who was out of work and didn't have any other means of support. Even though I didn't quite understand what he was talking about, I didn't go there ever again.

One evening passing the dock I noticed some men was giving away bananas. They gave me some, so I took them. I didn't know what reaction Uncle Tot would have. But he didn't say anything to me about that. I just wanted something different to eat for a change.

It was so nice being with my uncle and aunt, but jobs was hard to find. No one was hiring. A government agency had a work project called the Civilian Conservation Corps. This project was designed for young boys who wanted to work. I signed the necessary forms so I could begin working. However, the next morning when I was supposed to report to go on the job, I was walking down the street and pains started in the lower part of my stomach. I fell unconscious in the streets.

Someone called the ambulance. When I woke up I was laying in bed at John Seely Hospital. Hanging in front of my bed was a chart that said "C.C.C boy." I was uncertain about the nature of my illness. Before I realized what was happening to me, a team of doctors was wheeling me down the corridor toward the operating room. I saw all these doctors standing around me. Then this old doctor came up and asked me what was wrong. I said I didn't know, but I didn't want to be operated on. The old doctor told the others to take me back to my room. Then he came in carrying in his hands a catheter, which he inserted and pulled out. It was later that I found out my urine had stopped. One thing for sure, I didn't have any more trouble of that kind.

When I thought about that job which I had signed up for at the C. C. C. camp, I decided not to take it, because the government was only paying twenty dollars a month. Five dollars would be for myself and they would send the rest of the small amount to my aunt.

While I was looking for some other work, I used to go to the courthouse in Galveston and listen to the cases. I had heard people talking about the courthouse and the law and all, and I was interested. I was also interested because I remembered Uncle Tot's trouble in Louisiana with the white man. Tot got away to Galveston, but the Sheriff in Louisiana found out where he was and got the police in Texas to arrest him on his job at the dry docks. They brought him back to Louisiana and put him in jail in Opelusas. I was still

living in Louisiana then. But they had to let him out because the white man they claimed Tot killed, his mother came to the courthouse and told them, "Tot did not kill my son." She knew he didn't do it. Some other white man had done it. They had to let Tot go. When he got back to Galveston, the superintendent at the dry docks, a man named Spider, let him have his job back. Tot was a good worker and Spider said, "I don't care if he killed every white man in Louisiana, I want him back on the job!"

So this was one reason I was interested in what went on at the courthouse. I noticed that they had a lot more black folks in there than whites on trial and going to jail for various crimes. It seemed like something was wrong, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly what. I didn't really understand how racism worked at that time, but I knew something was wrong. It wouldn't be until I got into the union that I would understand better. But I could see that black folks was not getting equal justice. And it made me start to thinking.

Every morning for three weeks I would go and line up on the dock for work. All the foremen would come over on a little boat and pick the people they wanted to hire. Todd Dry Dock was on the other side of the bay. On this particular morning they hired about 30 men, and I was one of them. We was examined and signed up to work as common laborers scaling and painting ships. Each man was given iron toe shoes and a helmet for safety. Payday was on Fridays.

I was doing common labor -- sometimes running the scaling gun, or painting, or down in the double hold cleaning out the bottom, which was dangerous work. Just like they did in Texas City, Texas when that damned ship blowed up. But I was young and I didn't know how dangerous it was.

Soon I found out that you had to join the union. This was the union of common laborers, a black union. Uncle Tot was a member of the union. Mr. Spriggens, the president, told Uncle Tot, "Your boy is young. You'll have to stand for him to get his book." So Mr. Spriggens signed me up and gave me my black union book.

Later on we went on strike for better wages. This was in about 1938. The common laborers was only making 35 cents an hour. They put me on the picket line at night. That was my first time on a picket line. The white guys in the other unions, the boilermakers, the carpenters, they respected our picket lines and wouldn't cross the line. I was proud to be in the union and on strike because my Uncle Tot was a strong union man. I remember during the strike Uncle Tot would wake up in the morning and tell Aunt T-Babe, "Hurry up an fix my breakfast, T-Babe; I got to go on duty." That's what he said about going to the picket line; he was proud of it and called it "going on duty." He was picketing during the day, and I picketed at night. It was the first time either of us was on a picket line and he inspired me.

The strike lasted three months. Before the strike, the common laborers was receiving thirty-five cents an hour. When

the strike finally was settled, the wages was fifty cents an hour. Afterwards, all common laborers joined the union. Now this was my first involvement with any union activity.

Jobs those days was hard for a black man to find, except on farms and plantations, where wages was so low you could barely live off of it.

I thought about all the black people like my cousins who was sharecroppers for white plantation owners. Black families stayed on some of their land and picked and chopped cotton at just above starvation wages. The living arrangements mostly created hardship since large families was forced to live in crowded one- and two-room houses. There was no running water, only outdoor toilets, and many people was forced to sleep on floors. Families didn't have enough money to buy new clothing. The white plantation owners sold them hand-me-down clothing.

Some black families moved off the plantations to get jobs in the cities. Some was lucky; others went back to the farm. Black children worked in the fields with little or no education.

The union made me feel that I could do something for poor people like myself and my cousins. The union gave me a way to go forward, to help change things.

The dry dock job lasted six months, then work began to slow down. Mr. Spriggens told the young men that if they wanted to look for work someplace else he would stamp their union book "paid in full" to make it easier to find work. The

married men with families stayed working at the dry docks. I got my book stamped and left.

I started working part-time on ships as a scrummer (sp?). My job was to hook a sling to a crane to help load raw sugar or cotton on the ship. After this I found some part-time work on the railroad in Galveston, helping around the tracks in the yard. They had six or seven men working on the tracks. But this job on the railroad ran out, so I went back looking for work. I was willing to try any kind of work.

I went looking for work all the next week, with no luck. I left Galveston and went to Crosby, Texas looking for another cousin. I didn't have any luck finding my cousin. So I went walking down the old highway between Crosby and Houston. I walked for about an hour, when I spotted a brickyard right off the highway, which was in Green Bayou. I went to the brickyard and asked the foreman if he was hiring. The boss, a German named Bill Schweiner, said he could put on two men. "You know anybody else?" he asked. I thought about Joseph Godrey, my cousin in Galveston who was also out of work. I said let me go back and get my cousin out of Galveston. I hopped a freight train back to Galveston. That was my transportation. I hit that freight like I owned it.

When my cousin and I returned to Green Bayou, we was put to work. I worked this open field digging up stumps until twelve o'clock noon. By this time I was tired and most of all very hungry. I didn't have any money to buy any food, so a white fellow-employee asked if I was hungry. I said I was. He

took me to a store for some food and told me he would cover for it until I got paid. I worked in the field the rest of the day.

I didn't have any place to live, but I heard about a boardinghouse that was renting rooms. After work I went to the boardinghouse and inquired about a room. I took the room with board for a dollar fifty per week. My cousin Joseph also stayed there.

George Ware, the man who ran the boardinghouse, had a daughter, Georgia Lee, that lived in Houston. We used to go to Houston, and eventually Joseph married her. She still lives in Houston. Joseph later moved to Alaska and married somebody else and had a son. He died years later in Alaska. They say he choked on a chicken bone. So they said.

The salary at the brickyard was twelve cents an hour. Payday was on Saturday. The next morning when I went to work, the foreman took the fieldworkers to work in the brickyard. Once I started working inside the brickyard, I realized this work wasn't as hard as the field work.

I worked molding bricks. I was a mud brick maker. You put the mud into something like a mixer. One guy would feed it with the dirt, and I be taking it out. It was just like in a baking shop. You make three bricks at a time. Put them in the mold, smooth off the top, put the molds on a pallet board and take them on a buggy to the drying place where they stayed for a couple of weeks. Then they take the bricks to a

kiln in a big old building where they burn the bricks. Old man Henderson was the one in charge of the kiln.

Old man Henderson was the one who got me to join the NAACP. Henderson lived in Houston but he'd come and work at the brickyard during the week. On the weekends he'd go back to his family. He used to tell me about the "Freedom." I wanted to know about this freedom. In the evening after work he'd tell about how the NAACP was fighting to get freedom. He talked to me and Joseph. We was searching for freedom, young men who wanted to be free. I know I wanted to be free, and wanted to join something to get freedom. It was only 50 cents a year to join. This was around 1939. So I got my social security card and my NAACP card that same year.

Most of the single men would go to Houston every Saturday. George Ware would take some of us in his little car. George seemed to have his hand in everything. One Saturday I went to Houston to do some shopping. I went and bought me a pair of trousers and a shirt to put on that Sunday so I'd look sharp. While I was sitting on a bench waiting for George to come back by and pick me up to go back to Green Bayou, I went to sleep. When I woke up my damn package with my trousers and shirt was gone! I jumped up and looked around. I saw a policeman and asked, "Have you seen anybody with a package." He said, "I've seen plenty of people with packages, but I can't stop everybody I see with a package." That shows how stupid you can be when you don't have knowledge. I learned the hard way. So that was my loss.

When the fellows finally came back to pick me up, I was upset and angry and I told them about what had happened. They laughed all the way back to Green Bayou.

Meanwhile, I kept on working steadily in the brickyard. I was about seventeen years old now. Everyone on the job thought I was much older. For entertainment after work, I learned how to box, gamble, and drink corn liquor. We used shoot dice and drink. Old man Bud Springer, an old white guy who worked there, he used to make corn liquor and sell it to us. George Ware tried his hand at making corn liquor, too.

Mr. Bill, the boss, used to be a fighter. Sometimes I'd play around after work trying to imitate Joe Louis. One day Mr. Bill said, "You got a good stance, Brown Bomber." Everybody on the job called me "Brown Bomber" after Joe Louis. Mr. Bill started training me, and I had some pretty good fights. I had a fight with a white guy and I knocked him out. Then I had a fight with Sonny Boy Bradley and knocked him out. I thought I was hell! Then they brought in Shorty Jeffrey from Beaumont, Texas. He gave me a one-two-three and knocked me out. Shit, the ring was spinning all around. I told Mr. Bill, "Uh, Uh, brother. I don't want no more boxing. You can forget about that." He said, "Brown Bomber, you got to get whupped sometimes. That's how you learn." But I was young and I couldn't see it. As long as I was knocking them down that was okay, but when Shorty Jeffrey knocked me out that was it. Maybe I might have made a good fighter but I wasn't ready to go through the hard part.

There was one guy named Red who worked at the other brickyard who had a wife named Lena. Now this guy was very jealous. One Sunday my friend Otsey Pryor came by in his car and picked me up to go to Houston. I had made a good lick that day. I think I had won about fifteen, twenty dollars and I wanted to celebrate. Lena was there so I said "Come on Lena, you want to go?" I bought her a drink to get her to go with me. So we went up to Houston to get something to eat. When I got back to Green Bayou, somebody say, "Man, Red looking for you. He heard you was out with Lena in Houston." When I heard that I didn't know what Red might try to when he got drunk. I went to old man Schweiner's house. I told him I wanted to get his shotgun. "What you want a shotgun for, Brown Bomber?" "Red is looking for me to kill me." "What you do?" "His wife was in a car with Otsey Pryor and I and somebody went and told him." He said, "Red ain't gone bother you. Go on back home." Turned out Red wasn't looking for me. People just told me that lie to get me scared. And it did scare me. I didn't run around with Lena no more.

One morning on my day off from work, I was standing in the brickyard in front of the gas burner warming myself. Suddenly my pants caught on fire. The flames was all around my legs. After a few minutes I was able to put the flames out. But my leg was burned so badly I went and asked the brickyard manager if he could send me to see a doctor. The company managers said they couldn't send me to see a doctor

because I got burned on my day off and not when I was working.

On my own, I managed to get to Houston to see a black doctor I knew about. I didn't have any money but when the doctor saw how badly my leg was burned he treated me. The doctor said I could pay him later and I should come back in two weeks. He thought he could get me some insurance money. As days passed, my leg began to get worse, I didn't have any money to travel back and forth to Houston to see the doctor, so I caught a freight train and went back to Galveston. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe sent me to another doctor. It took my leg three months to heal.

Immediately I started looking for a job in Galveston. Jobs still was scarce the same way it was when I first left. So I put in for my unemployment insurance. I worked on odd jobs in hotels, working on trucks, and cleaning yards. It took months before I heard from the insurance company. When the answer came by mail the letter said: "We the company of the brickyard can't pay you any insurance." After getting this answer, I returned to the brickyard.

I was back on the job for a month. Then one of my fellow workers whose name was String took ill. He had been going back and forth to see his doctor. We didn't know the nature of his illness, but, we did know his doctor told him not to drink alcohol as long as he was taking shots. One day he went to visit his doctor and had a shot. The same day, he drank some alcohol and died instantly in Houston. We brought his

body back to the brickyard. The fellows and I didn't know any of his relatives, because he never spoke of any. We took up a collection; each one gave two dollars. We buried his body in a nearby poppy field. I spoke the last words over String's body. I said he was a happy fellow. He always laughed, and never had any trouble at the brickyard. I talked about the hair grease he made out of lye that he used to slick down his hair and make it look good. He was a lot of fun, smiling and talking. We would miss old String.

I went to Houston to live with Aunt Bernice. She had moved there and gotten married. I went to the unemployment office and registered for work. A week later they gave me a job working in a cafeteria in the shipyard. This shipyard wasn't too far from Houston. I rode the bus to work until I met a fellow who had a car, then I rode with him. Wages was five cents an hour, paid on every Friday. The job wasn't paying much, so I left and went looking once more for a job.

I heard men was needed in Arizona to work on the railroad. I signed up for the job. Before I left, I was examined and given three days to get ready to leave for Arizona. Then I was given a pass to catch a train. I left Houston one night about ten o'clock to go to Tucson, Arizona.

When I arrived in Tucson, I was sent to a commissary in the train station to buy some food and whatever I needed to take into the camp with me. When I entered the camp, I noticed rows of tents was up for the workers to sleep in. One of the foremen pointed out a tent for me to sleep in. Then he

left. Since it was so quiet and all the men had gone to bed, I went into my tent and went to bed.

Before dawn I could hear a loud whistle ringing in camp. I figured it was time to get up and get dressed for work. When I pulled the entrance of my tent back, I saw the men standing outside of their tents getting ready for breakfast, so, I joined them. I introduced myself to some of the men. When breakfast was over, I went to work on the railroad. All the men in camp was black men, except the white timekeeper, the white foreman, and a few Chinese cooks. All the employees was given three meals a day . This was my first time eating Chinese food, but before long Chinese food came to be one of my favorite dishes.

I worked on the extra gang, which is a gang of over a hundred men working on the railroad to maintain the tracks. We had to tamp ties and raise the tracks to keep them level. They needed these extra gangs because during the war years there might be eight or nine or more trains a day that would pass along the tracks. I was a flagman. I worked way up on the tracks to signal the trains to slow down. I had my flag and the torpedoes that I used to signal the engineer. When you see a train coming you put down a red torpedo on the track. When the train hit it and it went off, Bam!, he would know to slow down. Then you put another one down to slow him down more, and a third meant he should stop. I used my hands to signal to one train how far ahead the next train was.

By ten o'clock in the morning the hot sun was beaming down on my back. No houses to be seen, no people passing by, just me out in this hot desert working on the railroad. When the day was over and the men was back in camp for the night, we sat around together and talked about the things we planned to do when we got home. Sometimes we gambled a little; other times we took trips to Mexico.

The very first time I went to Mexico I had the time of my life. Although I couldn't speak Spanish, I ran into a little Mexican boy who spoke Spanish for me. This little boy was about six years old. He took me any place I thought I wanted to visit. In and out of different restaurants, theaters, and to see plenty of girls. The boy told me that if I didn't like the girls he took me to see, he would take me to see his two sisters and his mother. I didn't like the idea of going to his house, so I told him I would settle for some of the other girls he took me to see. He did all these things for one dollar.

One night when I went to a room with a girl, this little boy was still waiting until I came out. It amazed me how this boy knew his way around town. He walked down the street with me smoking a big cigar. No one seemed to pay any attention to him. When I was ready to leave Mexico he took me to the immigration office to let the authorities know I was leaving. After my first visit to Mexico, I made several more trips and each time I went this little boy would be waiting for me to show me the town.

My job on the railroad was going alright until one morning 150 black men went out on strike. What happened was that when we knocked off from work every day, we'd put the handcar back on the track to get back to camp. This particular day in loading the water kegs some water had spilled on the seat, and a black worker named San Antonio saw it and decided to stand up rather than sit in the water. When the white foreman saw San Antonio standing he told him to sit down. San Antonio said no because there was water on the seat. The foreman told San Antonio again to sit down and again he refused. When we got back to the camp the foreman told San Antonio he was fired because he disobeyed the foreman's orders. San Antonio told him, "I wasn't gonna sit in that water no matter who's orders it was."

Now I was watching this and I was already a union man. In fact, I still had my union book. So I got to the boys and I said, "Alright, let's get together tonight and have a meeting." At the meeting I said that we shouldn't go back to work until the foreman put San Antonio back to work. All of them agreed. The next morning the foreman got out there and blew his whistle. We stood by the tracks looking at him but we wouldn't move. "Alright boys, let's go" he said. The boys had already at the meeting said, "Brown, are you going to speak?" and I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll speak." And I showed them my union book. So I told the foreman, "We ain't going until you put San Antonio back to work." "I can't do that, he's fired now." I said, "Well, I'm going to call the

roadmaster in Yuma." When I said that, shit, the foreman got nervous and said, "Okay, go back to work everybody. I'm gonna put San Antonio back to work." He didn't want to face that roadmaster, the district boss, who could have fired him for not handling the situation. So we got San Antonio back on the job by taking action. I was the only union man out there, but I led the struggle. It was a victory for us.

After this experience was over, I realized that unity with other employees was what made the foreman act. If all employees united together on jobs there would be less trouble and less firings would come from the employer.

When I came to work on the railroad, I left my sweetheart, Ruth, back in Houston. I had met Ruth through Aunt Bernice. She used to visit Aunt Bernice. Bernice knew Ruth's mama. Bernice invited Ruth there one time when I was visiting and that's how I met her.

As time passed while I was in Arizona I never heard from Ruth or even got a letter. So I began to worry about her and wanted to see her. I made up my mind I would go back to Houston and try to find Ruth. So I told the foreman I wanted a pass to go home. He gave me a pass and I left Tucson and went back to Houston. When I arrived in Houston I went directly to the house she was living in when I left, but the people living in the house told me she didn't live there any more. Weeks passed. I went everywhere I thought she'd be, with no luck. I never found Ruth. Lonesome and heartbroken, I left Houston and went back to Galveston.

I didn't stay in Galveston very long with the work situation being the same as when I left. Men was still being sent to work on the railroad. When I went to the train station, I sat down on a bench and my mind started wandering concerning what I should do next. I only had one nickel in my pocket. After I sat awhile, I got up from the bench and went and asked the ticket agent if they needed a man on the section hand. The ticket agent looked on a list and asked if I wanted the job. I told him, "Yes, I want the job." After the ticket agent signed me up for the job, he gave me a pass on the train and a letter to get some food from the commissary. I bought a loaf of bread, some cans of beans, a can of wieners, mackerel, packs of cookies.

I was on my way to Barstow, California, a small town not too far from Los Angeles. As I sat in this small train station waiting for the train to arrive, I noticed I was sitting next to an old man and his wife. They asked me if I was hungry. I told them I wasn't hungry, I had some food. But they insisted on giving me a slice of watermelon, which I accepted. By this time the train pulled into the station. Sometime late that night I arrived in Barstow. I stayed in the station all night. The next morning I walked from the little town to the section houses. I gave the foreman my work slip and started to work on the section gang that Monday morning.

A section gang is a group of about six men who maintain a certain section of track. Different section gangs took care

of different sections of track. On my section gang we had two brothers and some Spanish guys. The Spanish guys would take me to Mexico every night with long stories about Mexico when we got off work. The two black guys was married and they would tell me all about Los Angeles, and encouraged me to go there. The guys and their wives used to visit Los Angeles frequently on railroad passes. Sometimes they would bring a newspaper back. I was wondering how come they didn't stay in Los Angeles. They was telling me how good it was but here they was on the section gang. Maybe they wanted to get rid of me, I didn't know. Anyway, it got me to thinking about going to Los Angeles.

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I heard men were needed in Arizona to work on the railroad. I signed up for the job. Before I left, I was examined and given three days to get ready to leave for Arizona. Then I was given a pass to catch a train. I left Houston one night about ten o'clock to go to Tucson, Arizona.

When I arrived in Tucson, I was sent to a commissary in the train station to buy some food and whatever I needed to take into the camp with me. When I entered the camp, I noticed rows of tents were up for the workers to sleep in. One of the foremen pointed out a tent for me to sleep in.

Then he left. Since it was so quiet and all the men had gone to bed, I went into my tent and went to bed.

Before dawn I could hear a loud whistle ringing in camp. I figured it was time to get up and get dressed for work. When I pulled the entrance of my tent back, I saw the men standing outside of their tents getting ready for breakfast, so, I joined them. I introduced myself to some of the men. When breakfast was over, I went to work on the railroad. All the men in camp were black men, except the white timekeeper, the white foreman, and a few Chinese cooks. All the employees were given three meals a day . This was my first time eating Chinese food, but before long Chinese food came to be one of my favorite dishes.

I worked on the extra gang, which is a gang of over a hundred men working on the railroad to maintain the tracks. We had to tamp ties and raise the tracks to keep them level. They needed these extra gangs becuse during the war years there might be eight or nine or more trains a day that would pass along the tracks. I was a flagman. I worked way up on the tracks to signal the trains to slow down. I had my flag and the torpedoes that I used to signal the engineer. When you see a train coming you put down a red torpedo on the track. When the train hit it and it went off, Bam!,he would know to slow down. Then you put another one down to slow him down more, and a third meant he should stop. I used my hands to signal to one train how far ahead the next train was.

By ten o'clock in the morning the hot sun was beaming down on my back. No houses to be seen, no people passing by, just me out in this hot desert working on the railroad. When the day was over and the men were back in camp for the night, we sat around together and talked about the things we planned to do when we got home. Sometimes we gambled a little; other times we took trips to Mexico.

The very first time I went to Mexico I had the time of my life. Although I couldn't speak Spanish, I ran into a little Mexican boy who spoke Spanish for me. This little boy was about six years old. He took me any place I thought I wanted to visit. In and out of different restaurants, theaters, and to see plenty of girls. The boy told me that if I didn't like the girls he took me to see, he would take me to see his two sisters and his mother. I didn't like the idea of going to his house, so I told him I would settle for some of the other girls he took me to see. He did all these things for one dollar.

One night when I went to a room with a girl, this little boy was still waiting until I came out. It amazed me how this boy knew his way around town. He walked down the street with me smoking a big cigar. No one seemed to pay any attention to him. When I was ready to leave Mexico he took me to the immigration office to let the authorities know I was leaving. After my first visit to Mexico, I made several more trips and each time I went this little boy would be waiting for me to show me the town.

My job on the railroad was going alright until one morning 150 black men went out on strike. What happened was that when we knocked off from work every day, we'd put the handcar back on the track to get back to camp. This particular day in loading the water kegs some water had spilled on the seat, and a black worker named San Antonio saw it and decided to stand up rather than sit in the water. When the white foreman saw San Antonio standing he told him to sit down. San Antonio said no because there was water on the seat. The foreman told San Antonio again to sit down and again he refused. When we got back to the camp the foreman told San Antonio he was fired because he disobeyed the foreman's orders. San Antonio told him, "I wasn't gonna sit in that water no matter who's orders it was."

Now I was watching this and I was already a union man. In fact, I still had my union book. So I got to the boys and I said, "Alright, let's get together tonight and have a meeting." At the meeting I said that we shouldn't go back to work until the foreman put San Antonio back to work. All of them agreed. The next morning the foreman got out there and blew his whistle. We stood by the tracks looking at him but we wouldn't move. "Alright boys, let's go" he said. The boys had already at the meeting said, "Brown, are you going to speak?" and I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll speak." And I showed them my union book. So I told the foreman, "We ain't going until you put San Antonio back to work." "I can't do that, he's fired now." I said, "Well, I'm going to call the

roadmaster in Yuma." When I said that, shit, the foreman got nervous and said, "Okay, go back to work everybody. I'm gonna put San Antonio back to work." He didn't want to face that roadmaster, the district boss, who could have fired him for not handling the situation. So we got San Antonio back on the job by taking action. I was the only union man out there, but I led the struggle. It was a victory for us.

After this experience was over, I realized that unity with other employees was what made the foreman act. If all employees united together on jobs there would be less trouble and less firings would come from the employer.

When I came to work on the railroad, I left my sweetheart, Ruth, back in Houston. I had met Ruth through Aunt Bernice. She used to visit Aunt Bernice. Bernice knew Ruth's mama. Bernice invited Ruth there one time when I was visiting and that's how I met her.

As time passed while I was in Arizona I never heard from Ruth or even got a letter. So I began to worry about her and wanted to see her. I made up my mind I would go back to Houston and try to find Ruth. So I told the foreman I wanted a pass to go home. He gave me a pass and I left Tucson and went back to Houston. When I arrived in Houston I went directly to the house she was living in when I left, but the people living in the house told me she didn't live there any more. Weeks passed. I went everywhere I thought she'd be, with no luck. I never found Ruth. Lonesome and heartbroken, I left Houston and went back to Galveston.

I didn't stay in Galveston very long with the work situation being the same as when I left. Men were still being sent to work on the railroad. When I went to the train station, I sat down on a bench and my mind started wandering concerning what I should do next. I only had one nickel in my pocket. After I sat awhile, I got up from the bench and went and asked the ticket agent if they needed a man on the section hand. The ticket agent looked on a list and asked if I wanted the job. I told him, "Yes, I want the job." After the ticket agent signed me up for the job, he gave me a pass on the train and a letter to get some food from the commissary. I bought a loaf of bread, some cans of beans, a can of wieners, mackerel, packs of cookies.

I was on my way to Barstow, California, a small town not too far from Los Angeles. As I sat in this small train station waiting for the train to arrive, I noticed I was sitting next to an old man and his wife. They asked me if I was hungry. I told them I wasn't hungry, I had some food. But they insisted on giving me a slice of watermelon, which I accepted. By this time the train pulled into the station. Sometime late that night I arrived in Barstow. I stayed in the station all night. The next morning I walked from the little town to the section houses. I gave the foreman my work slip and started to work on the section gang that Monday morning.

A section gang is a group of about six men who maintain a certain section of track. Different section gangs took

care of different sections of track. On my section gang we had two brothers and some Spanish guys. They Spanish guys would take me to Mexico every night with stories about Mexico when we got off work. The two black guys were married and they would tell me all about Los Angeles, and encouraged me to go there. I was wondering how come they didn't stay in Los Angeles. They were telling me how good it was but here they were on the section gang. Maybe they wanted to get rid of me, I didn't know. Anyway, it got me to thinking about going to Los Angeles.

Chapter 2/Off The Plantation

(ver. 2, 6/18/98)

I didn't want to look for support from my cousin Esther, so the next day I went looking for work, and was hired as a houseboy for the LaBlonche (LaBlanc ?) family.

My duties included cleaning, shopping and running errands for Margaret, their daughter. I used to do things like go to the store and buy shoes for her. She'd tell me the size and I'd go get them. I bought her powder, soap, things like that. She probably was too lazy to go herself, so she sent me.

Margaret was in her twenties, a tall, slim brunette. She was going to school. There were three other daughters, but they were older and married had moved out. Margaret was the only one left in the house. Mrs. LaBlonche was handicapped, she couldn't use her left hand.

The LaBlonches were a family of moderate income in this small town. They also had an upstairs maid. I was given a little shack in the back of their house to live in, which was part of my meager wages. The LaBlonches had two grandchildren by another daughter about the same age as I. Their grandchildren and I got along fine together. Mrs. LaBlonche knew the salary she was giving me was small, so she told me to plant a garden in back of the house. The money I earned from selling whatever vegetables I grew would be mine to use

for things like movies or pocketchange. I grew different kinds of vegetables in my garden. I gave Mrs. LaBlonche's family some vegetables and sold the rest up and down the streets. I pulled a little red wagon filled up to the top with vegetables.

There were times when I got very lonesome in my little shack, especially when the day was over and night began. One thing for sure, I did have a German shepherd, Laddie, who followed me everywhere I went, even to the movies. He stayed outside until I came out. I loved this dog. He really was a devoted friend.

One day I was walking along selling my vegetables, when a gang of white boys came up to me and wanted to start a fight. I told them I lived at the LaBlonche's home and worked for them. They were surprised to hear this and walked on down the street. I didn't have that trouble anymore.

My salary was two dollars a week, plus meals. At first I ate my meals in the backyard under a tree close to the house. They gave me a wooden table and a chair back there. But Margaret didn't like that. Margaret had visited New York and seen how black and white people lived there, and she explained to her mother that making me eat in the back yard was wrong. Margaret said she didn't believe in discriminating against any race of people. Her mother probably hadn't travelled and didn't know any better. I liked Margaret. She was friendly toward me and she seemed intelligent. If she believed in discrimination she wouldn't have trusted me going

to the store for her. I realized that not all white people were mean and prejudiced; some, like Margaret, tried to be decent toward black people. From then on I ate at the kitchen table and I was treated better than before around the house.

I got acquainted with the black maid who worked upstairs. She did the cleaning and the washing and ironing. I used to give her some of the vegetables from my garden. She was forty years old. She was a very nice lady. She fixed my breakfast every morning.

I worked for the LaBlonches for nearly two years. But I decided to leave to better my condition. The little money I was making wasn't enough. I needed to buy my own clothes and shoes. One day I jumped up and wanted to get to stepping, so I packed my suitcase and left to look for some work that paid more.

I went back to Esther's house and stayed about a month. Esther was nice to me but her daughter and I couldn't get along. Things began to get unpleasant around the house. It seemed to me that cousin Esther's daughter was mentally disturbed. Often we got into arguments. She slapped me in the face one day. I told cousin Jessie about how she was acting around the house when everyone was out. He didn't like it, and told her never to slap me again. I didn't want to make matters worse, so I left Melville.

I went to a little farm to visit some friends of mine, Annie and Buddy Harris. When I arrived there, they were out in the fields planting potatoes. I stayed and helped them

plant potatoes for about a week. I felt good helping them with the planting cause they were struggling sharecroppers and they appreciated my help.

I left them and stayed for a day or so with cousin Horace Bertrand. When I was leaving I asked him if he could give me some money for travelling, and he gave me a chicken, which I was happy to get. When I was walking down the street, I saw a man coming toward me who was dressed like he was on his way to work. I stopped him and asked if he wanted to buy a chicken. He answered yes. I sold him the chicken for forty cents. With forty cents in my pocket, I went looking for a friend's house to ask him to travel with me and show me the way to Galveston, Texas. I wanted to get to Galveston because I knew Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe were now living there.

Oak Tar was my friend's name. When I found Oak Tar he didn't have any money but he was willing to hobo with me and show me the way. First, we hoboed to Opelusas, Louisiana. Then we jumped on a freight train for Galveston. Once inside the boxcar it was so cold we had to make a fire. As we traveled we didn't have anything to eat all the way. When Oak Tar and I finally arrived, the cold wind seemed like it went straight through our bodies. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe were so happy to see me, they hugged and kissed me and fixed us some dinner. When dinner was over, Oak Tar went back to Louisiana.

I spent a few days looking around Galveston. I noticed one day when I was walking down the street that some people

were coming out of a building carrying bags of food. I asked the people if I could get some of that food. They told me to go on in and ask for some. When I got inside the building and asked for the food, a lady, who was sitting behind a desk, told me to sign some papers. When I signed the papers, I got the food -- some cornmeal, flour, plums and grapefruits. I was so glad to get this food I couldn't wait to get home to show Aunt T-Babe and Uncle Tot what I had. When Uncle Tot saw the food, he got very angry at me. Apparently, the building I went into to get the food from was the Welfare Office. Uncle Tot explained to me I shouldn't go to the Welfare Office to get food because that food was for people who were out of work and didn't have any other means of support. Even though I didn't quite understand what he was talking about, I didn't go there ever again.

One evening passing the dock I noticed some men were giving away bananas. They gave me some, so I took them. I didn't know what reaction Uncle Tot would have. But he didn't say anything to me about that. I just wanted something different to eat for a change.

It was so nice being with my uncle and aunt, but jobs were hard to find. No one was hiring. A government agency had a work project called the Civilian Conservation Corps. This project was designed for young boys who wanted to work. I signed the necessary forms so I could begin working. However, the next morning when I was supposed to report to go on the job, I was walking down the street and pains started

in the lower part of my stomach. I fell unconscious in the streets. Someone called the ambulance. When I woke up I was laying in bed at John Seely Hospital. Hanging in front of my bed was a chart that said "C.C.C boy." I was uncertain about the nature of my illness. Before I realized what was happening to me, a team of doctors was wheeling me down the corridor toward the operating room. I saw all these doctors standing around me. Then this old doctor came up and asked me what was wrong. I said I didn't know, but I didn't want to be operated on. The old doctor told the others to take me back to my room. Then he came in carrying in his hands a catheter, which he inserted and pulled out. It was later that I found out my urine had stopped. One thing for sure, I didn't have any more trouble of that kind.

When I thought about that job which I had signed up for at the C. C. C. camp, I decided not to take it, because the government was only paying twenty dollars a month. Five dollars would be for myself and they would send the rest of the small amount to my aunt.

While I was looking for some other work, I used to go to the courthouse in Galveston and listen to the cases. I had heard people talking about the courthouse and the law and all, and I was interested. I was also interested because I remembered Uncle Tot's trouble in Louisiana with the white man. Tot got away to Galveston, but the Sheriff in Louisiana found out where he was and got the police in Texas to arrest him on his job at the dry docks. They brought him back to

Louisiana and put him in jail in Opelusas. I was still living in Louisiana then. But they had to let him out because the white man they claimed Tot killed, his mother came to the courthouse and told them, "Tot did not kill my son." She knew he didn't do it. Some other white man had done it. They had to let Tot go. When he got back to Galveston, the superintendent at the dry docks, a man named Spider, let him have his job back. Tot was a good worker and Spider said, "I don't care if he killed every white man in Louisiana, I want him back on the job!"

So this was one reason I was interested in what went on at the courthouse. I noticed that they had a lot more black folks in there than whites on trial and going to jail for various crimes. It seemed like something was wrong, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly what. I didn't really understand how racism worked at that time, but I knew something was wrong. It wouldn't be until I got into the union that I would understand better. But I could see that black folks was not getting equal justice. And it made me start to thinking.

Every morning for three weeks I would go and line up on the dock for work. All the foremen would come over on a little boat and pick the people they wanted to hire. The dry docks was on the other side of the bay. On this particular morning they hired about 30 men, and I was one of them. We were examined and signed up to work as common laborers scaling and painting ships. Each man was given iron toe shoes and a helmet for safety. Payday was on Fridays.

I was doing common labor -- sometimes running the scaling gun, or painting, or down in the double hold cleaning out the bottom, which was dangerous work. Just like they did in Texas City, Texas when that damned ship blowed up. But I was young and I didn't know how dangerous it was.

Soon I found out that you had to join the union. This was the union of common laborers, a black union. Uncle Tot was a member of the union. Mr. Spriggens, the president, told Uncle Tot, "Your boy is young. You'll have to stand for him to get his book." So Mr. Spriggens signed me up and gave me my black union book.

Later on we went on strike for better wages. This was in about 1938. The common laborers were only making 35 cents an hour. They put me on the picket line at night. That was my first time on a picket line. The white guys in the other unions, the boilermakers, the carpenters, they respected our picket lines and wouldn't cross the line. I was proud to be in the union and on strike because my Uncle Tot was a strong union man. I remember during the strike Uncle Tot would wake up in the morning and tell Aunt T-Babe, "Hurry up an fix my breakfast, T-Babe; I got to go on duty." That's what he said about going to the picket line; he was proud of it and called it "going on duty." He was picketing during the day, and I picketed at night. It was the first time either of us was on a picket line and he inspired me.

The strike lasted three months. Before the strike, the common laborers were receiving thirty-five cents an hour.

When the strike finally was settled, the wages were fifty cents an hour. Afterwards, all common laborers joined the union. Now this was my first involvement with any union activity.

Jobs those days were hard for a black man to find, except on farms and plantations, where wages were so low you could barely live off of it.

I thought about all the black people like my cousins who were sharecroppers for white plantation owners. Black families stayed on some of their land and picked and chopped cotton at just above starvation wages. The living arrangements mostly created hardship since large families were forced to live in crowded one- and two-room houses. There was no running water, only outdoor toilets, and many were forced to sleep on floors. Families didn't have enough money to buy new clothing. The white plantation owners sold them hand-me-down clothing.

Some black families moved off the plantations to get jobs in the cities. Some were lucky; others went back to the farm. Black children worked in the fields with little or no education.

The union made me feel that I could do something for poor people like myself and my cousins. The union gave me a way to go forward, to help change things.

The dry dock job lasted six months, then work began to slow down. Mr. Spriggins told the young men that if they wanted to look for work someplace else he would stamp their

union book "paid in full" to make it easier to find work. The married men with families stayed working at the dry docks. I got my book stamped and left.

I started working part-time on ships as a scrummer (sp?). My job was to hook a sling to a crane to help load raw sugar or cotton on the ship. After this I found some part-time work on the railroad in Galveston, helping around the tracks in the yard. They had six or seven men working on the tracks. But this job on the railroad ran out, so I went back looking for work. I was willing to try any kind of work.

I went looking for work all the next week, with no luck. I left Galveston and went to Crosby, Texas looking for another cousin. I didn't have any luck finding my cousin. So I went walking down the old highway between Crosby and Houston. I walked for about an hour, when I spotted a brickyard right off the highway, which was in Green Bayou. I went to the brickyard and asked the foreman if he was hiring. The boss, a German named Bill Schweiner, said he could put on two men. "You know anybody else?" he asked. I thought about Joseph Godrey, my cousin in Galveston who was also out of work. I said let me go back and get my cousin out of Galveston. I hopped a freight train back to Galveston. That was my transportation. I hit that freight like I owned it.

When my cousin and I returned to Green Bayou, we were put to work. I worked this open field digging up stumps until twelve o'clock noon. By this time I was tired and most of all very hungry. I didn't have any money to buy any food, so a

white fellow-employee asked if I was hungry. I said I was. He took me to a store for some food and told me he would cover for it until I got paid. I worked in the field the rest of the day.

I didn't have any place to live, but I heard about a boardinghouse that was renting rooms. After work I went to the boardinghouse and inquired about a room. I took the room with board for a dollar fifty per week. My cousin Joseph also stayed there.

George Ware, the man who ran the boardinghouse, had a daughter, Georgia Lee, that lived in Houston. We used to go to Houston, and eventually Joseph married her. She still lives in Houston. Joseph later moved to Alaska and married somebody else and had a son. He died years later in Alaska. They say he choked on a chicken bone.

The salary at the brickyard was twelve cents an hour. Payday was on Saturday. The next morning when I went to work, the foreman took the fieldworkers to work in the brickyard. Once I started working inside the brickyard, I realized this work wasn't as hard as the field work.

I worked molding bricks. I was a mud brick maker. You put the mud into something like a mixer. One guy would feed it with the dirt, and I be taking it out. It was just like in a baking shop. You make three bricks at a time. Put them in the mold, smooth off the top, put the molds on a pallet board and take them on a buggy to the drying place where they stayed for a couple of weeks. Then they take the bricks to a

kiln in a big old building where they burn the bricks. Old man Frick was the one in charge of the kiln.

Old man Frick was the one who got me to join the NAACP. Frick lived in Houston but he'd come and work at the brickyard during the week. On the weekends he'd go back to his family. He used to tell me about the "Freedom." I wanted to know about this freedom. In the evening after work he'd tell about how the NAACP was fighting to get freedom. He talked to me and Joseph. We were searching for freedom, young men who wanted to be free. I know I wanted to be free, and wanted to join something to get freedom. It was only 50 cents a year to join. This was around 1939. So I got my social security card and my NAACP card that same year.

Most of the single men would go to Houston every Saturday. George Ware would take some of us in his little car. George seemed to have his hand in everything. One Saturday I went to Houston to do some shopping. I went and bought me a pair of trousers and a shirt to put on that Sunday so I'd look sharp. While I was sitting on a bench waiting for George to come back by and pick me up to go back to Green Bayou, I went to sleep. When I woke up my damn package with my trousers and shirt was gone! I jumped up and looked around. I saw a policeman and asked, "Have you seen anybody with a package." He said, "I've seen plenty of people with packages, but I can't stop everybody I see with a package." That shows how stupid you can be when you don't have knowledge. I learned the hard way. So that was my loss.

When the fellows finally came back to pick me up, I was upset and angry and I told them about what had happened. They laughed all the way back to Green Bayou.

Meanwhile, I kept on working steadily in the brickyard. I was about seventeen years old now. Everyone on the job thought I was much older. For entertainment after work, I learned how to box, gamble, and drink corn liquor. We used shoot dice and drink. Old man Bud Springer, an old white guy who worked there, he used to make corn liquor and sell it to us. George Ware tried his hand at making corn liquor, too.

Mr. Bill, the boss, used to be a fighter. Sometimes I'd play around after work trying to imitate Joe Louis. One day Mr. Bill said, "You got a good stance, Brown Bomber." Everybody on the job called me "Brown Bomber" after Joe Louis. Mr. Bill started training me, and I had some pretty good fights. I had a fight with a white guy and I knocked him out. Then I had a fight with Sonny Boy Bradley and knocked him out. I thought I was hell! Then they brought in Shorty Jeffrey from Beaumont, Texas. He gave me a one-two-three and knocked me out. Shit, the ring was spinning all around. I told Mr. Bill, "Uh, Uh, brother. I don't want no more boxing. You can forget about that." He said, "Brown Bomber, you got to get whupped sometimes. That's how you learn." But I was young and I couldn't see it. As long as I was knocking them down that was okay, but when Shorty Jeffrey knocked me out that was it. Maybe I might have made a good fighter but I wasn't ready to go through the hard part.

There was one guy named Red who worked at the other brickyard who had a wife named Lena. Now this guy was very jealous. One Sunday my friend Otsey Prior came by in his car and picked me up to go to Houston. I had made a good lick that day. I think I had won about fifteen, twenty dollars and I wanted to celebrate. Lena was there so I said "Come on Lena, you want to go?" I bought her a drink to get her to go with me. So we went up to Houston to get something to eat. When I got back to Green Bayou, somebody say, "Man, Red looking for you. He heard you were out with Lena in Houston." When I heard that I didn't know what Red might try to when he got drunk. I went to old man Schweiner's house. I told him I wanted to get his shotgun. "What you want a shotgun for, Brown Bomber?" "Red is looking for me to kill me." "What you do?" "His wife was in a car with Otsey Prior and I and somebody went and told him." He said, "Red ain't gone bother you. Go on back home." Turned out Red wasn't looking for me. People just told me that lie to get me scared. And it did scare me. I didn't run around with Lena no more.

One morning on my day off from work, I was standing in the brickyard in front of the gas burner warming myself. Suddenly my pants caught on fire. The flames were all around my legs. After a few minutes I was able to put the flames out. But my leg was burned so badly I went and asked the brickyard manager if he could send me to see a doctor. The company managers said they couldn't send me to see a doctor

because I got burned on my day off and not when I was working.

On my own, I managed to get to Houston to see a black doctor I knew about. I didn't have any money but when the doctor saw how badly my leg was burned he treated me. The doctor said I could pay him later and I should come back in two weeks. He thought he could get me some insurance money. As days passed, my leg began to get worse, I didn't have any money to travel back and forth to Houston to see the doctor, so I caught a freight train and went back to Galveston. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe sent me to another doctor. It took my leg three months to heal.

Immediately I started looking for a job in Galveston. Jobs still were scarce the same way it was when I first left. So I put in for my unemployment insurance. I worked on odd jobs in hotels, working on trucks, and cleaning yards. It took months before I heard from the insurance company. When the answer came by mail the letter said: "We the company of the brickyard can't pay you any insurance." After getting this answer, I returned to the brickyard.

I was back on the job for a month. Then one of my fellow workers whose name was String took ill. He had been going back and forth to see his doctor. We didn't know the nature of his illness, but, we did know his doctor told him not to drink alcohol as long as he was taking shots. One day he went to visit his doctor and had a shot. The same day, he drank some alcohol and died instantly in Houston. We brought his

CHAPTER TWO

Chapter 2/Off The Plantation

I didn't want to look for support from my cousin, so the next day I went looking for work, and was hired as a houseboy for the LaBlonche family.

My duties were to shop and run errands for the ~~oldest~~ ^{youngest} daughter of the LaBlonche family. The LaBlonches were a family of moderate income in this small town. They also had an upstairs maid. I was given a little shack in the back of their house to live in, which was part of my meager wages. ~~The LaBlonches had children the same age as I. Their children and I got along fine together.~~ Mrs. LaBlonche knew the salary she was giving me was small, so she told me to plant a garden in back of the house. The money I earned from selling whatever vegetables I grew would be mine to use for things like movies or pocketchange. I grew different kinds of vegetables in my garden. I gave Mrs. LaBlonche's family some vegetables and sold the rest up and down the streets. I pulled a little red wagon filled up to the top with vegetables.

Daughter's
Name?
what
errands?

There were times when I got very lonesome in this little shack, especially when the day was over and night began. One thing for sure, I did have a German shepherd, Laddie, who followed me everywhere I went, even to the movies. He stayed outside until I came out. I loved this dog. He really was a devoted friend.

One day I was walking along selling my vegetables, when a gang of white boys came up to me and wanted to start a fight. I told them I lived at the LaBlonche's home and worked for them. They

were quite surprised to hear this and walked on down the street. I didn't have that trouble anymore.

My salary was two dollars a week, plus meals. When time came for me to eat, they brought my food out to the yard. This went on until Mrs. LaBlonche's daughter, who had lived in New York, explained to her mother that she didn't like the idea of serving me food in the backyard. Having spent time in the North and overcome most of her prejudices, she wanted it stopped and wanted me to eat at the table with the other children. Mrs. LaBlonche's daughter further explained that she didn't believe in discriminating against any race of people. Afterward, I was treated better than before around the house. I continued selling my vegetables.

I got acquainted with the Black maid who worked upstairs. She was forty years old. She was a very nice lady. She fixed my breakfast every morning.

I worked for the LaBlonches for two years. One Sunday morning when everyone was attending church, I packed my suitcase and left to look for some work which paid more. I went back to cousin Esther's house to live. Things began to get unpleasant around the house. It seemed to me that cousin Esther's daughter was disturbed. Often we got into arguments. She slapped me in the face one day. I told cousin Jessie about how she was acting around the house when everyone was out. He didn't like it, and told her never to slap me again. I didn't want to make matters worse, so I left Melvin, Louisiana and went back to Dad Howard's plantation and stayed one week.

what was
Laurie's
like?
parents?
other
in family?

Very
straightforward
telling, but
needs context
to break up
narrative

Name?
relationship?

Why?
Did it pay
goodly?

Jessie is
father?

~~stepped out in night~~

Nannie & her ^{husb} Nuddy ^{sons}

I went to a little farm to visit some friends of mine. When I arrived there, they were out in the fields planting potatoes. I stayed and helped them plant potatoes for about a week. When I finished I told them I would be back one day to help eat them, but the last news I heard about my friends was that they had died.

Woods?

more?

Before dawn I woke my ^{friend} cousin up and told him I was leaving; so, he gave me a chicken. When I walked down the street, I saw a man coming toward me who was dressed as ^{like} though he was on his way to work. I stopped him and asked if he ^{wanted} would like to buy a chicken. He answered yes. I sold him the chicken for forty cents. With forty cents in my pocket, I went looking for a friend's house to ask him to travel with me and show me the way to Galveston, Texas.

why Galveston?

Oak Tar was his name. When I found Oak Tar he didn't have any money but he was willing to hobo with me and show me the way. First, we hoboed to ^{opelousas} Apalousie, Louisiana. There we caught a freight train for Galveston. Once inside the boxcar it was so cold we had to make a fire. As we traveled we didn't have anything to eat all the way. When Oak Tar and I finally arrived, the cold wind seemed ^{like} as though it went straight through our bodies. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Bay were so happy to see me, they hugged and kissed me and prepared our dinner. When dinner was over, Oak Tar went back to Marrot, Louisiana.

why Galveston?

It was so nice being with my uncle and aunt, but jobs were hard to find. No one was hiring. A government agency had a work project called the Civilian Conservation Corps. This project was designed for young boys who wanted to work. I signed the necessary forms so I could begin working. However, the next morning when I was

what for...
office
young man
etc
we

supposed to report to go on the job, I was walking down the street and pains started in the lower part of my stomach. I feel ^{full} unconscious in the streets. Some ^{one} called the ambulance. When I ^{wake up} became conscious I was laying in bed at John Seely Hospital. Hanging in front of my bed was a chart which read "C.C.C boy." I was uncertain about the nature of my illness. Before I realized what was happening to me, a team of doctors were ^{was} wheeling me down the corridor toward the operating room. Luckily, I passed an old doctor who ^{who} recognized me. He asked me what was wrong. I told the doctor I didn't know. ^{I told him I didn't want any} Then he asked me if I wanted an operation. I told him no. The doctor told the team of doctors to take me back to my room. ^{later} Then he came in carrying in his hands a catheter, which he inserted and pulled out. It was later that I found out my urine had stopped. One thing for sure, I didn't have any more trouble of that kind. When I thought about that job which I had signed up for at the C. C. C. camp, I decided not to take it, because the government was only paying twenty dollars a month. Five dollars would be for myself and they would send the rest of the small amount to my aunt.

There were times when I went to the Hall of Justice, and listened to cases that were scheduled for that day. I was interested in finding out about the administration of law, and how it was carried out. Before long this became one of my special past-times.

Every morning for three weeks I went to the dry docks to look for work. On the dry docks there were crowds of men looking for work and waiting in line to be called. Finally, I was called from among the crowd. Thirty men were hired that day. We were examined and signed up to work as a labor ^{or} scaling and painting ships. Each man

who?
How?
From where?

in my section
Kidney
trouble?

why?
remember
only?
impact on
life?

because
tot
worked at
dry docks

was given iron toe shoes and a helmet for safety. Payday was on Fridays.

When I was working for a few weeks, it came time for the common laborers and workers to organize into a union. Union workers walked off the job. We the common laborers respected the picket lines and didn't cross their lines. This was in ^{check} 1938. I walked the lines every night. The strike lasted three months. Before the strike, the common laborers were receiving thirty cents an hour. When the strike finally was settled, the wages were fifty cents an hour. Afterwards, all common laborers had to join the union. Now this was my first involvement with any union activity. All the workers had to join the union which we paid four dollars to join. Then the workers went back to work.

This job lasted six months, then work began to slow down. The president of the union told the young men who were working that they had to go find work some other place. My union book was stamped "paid in full". Then I left.

I started working part-time on ships with the crewmen and part-time on the railroad in Galveston. This job on the railroad ran out, so I went back looking for work. I was willing to try any kind of work. Jobs those days were hard for a Black man to find, except on farms and plantations, where wages were so low you could barely live off of it.

Black people were ^{not Black mostly} sharecroppers for white plantation owners and homeowners. Black families stayed on some of their land and picked and chopped cotton at just above starvation wages. The living

more info?
How did
this happen?

Why/how
did he get
involved?

damn what?

have
to
make
of p. 17

arrangements mostly created hardship since large families were forced to live in one- and two-room houses. There was no running water, only outdoor toilets, and many were forced to sleep on floors. Families didn't have enough money to buy new clothing. The white plantation owners sold them hand-me-down clothing.

Some Black families moved off the plantations to get jobs in the cities. Some were lucky; others went back to the farm. Black children worked in the fields with little or no education. Naturally, I was determined to stay off the farms and plantations. Therefore, I went looking for work all that week, with no luck. I left Galveston and went to Crosby, Texas seeking another cousin. I didn't have any luck finding my cousin. So I went walking down the old highway between Crosby and Houston. I walked for about an hour, when I spotted a brickyard right off the highway which was Green Bayou. I went to the brickyard and asked the foreman if he was hiring. Sure enough, he was hiring and needed two more men. I thought about my cousin in Galveston who was also out of work. I told the foreman I had to go back to Galveston to get my cousin, but I would come back with my cousin and take the job.

When my cousin and I returned to Green Bayou, we were put to work. I worked this open field until twelve o'clock noon. About this time I was tired and most of all very hungry. I didn't have any money to buy any food, so a white fellow-employee asked if I was hungry. I said I was; then, he took me to a store for some food and told me he would cover for it until I got paid. I worked in the open field the rest of the day. I didn't have any place to live, but I heard about a boardinghouse that was renting rooms. After work I went to

Gilbert Howard

name?
Joseph Godfrey

Deserve work?

the boardinghouse and inquired about a room. I took the room with board for one-fifty per week.

where did
cashier stay?

The salary at the brickyard was twelve cents an hour. Payday was on Saturday. The next morning when I went to work, the foreman took out the fieldworkers to work in the brickyard. Once I started working inside the brickyard, I realized this work wasn't as hard as the field work.

which
which
+ Frick

Most of the single men would go to Houston every Saturday to shop. One Saturday I went to Houston to do the same. I bought a pair of pants and some shirts. As I was waiting for the men to take me back, I fell asleep on a bench. When I woke up, my bag with my pants and shirts was gone. Someone had stolen it. I looked everywhere and couldn't find the bag. Then I saw a policeman standing on the corner. I asked him if he had seen someone pass by with a large bag in his hand. The policeman said, "I've seen lots of people with big bags." When the fellows finally came back to pick me up, I was so heartbroken and angry that I told them about what had happened. This was so amusing to them they laughed all the way back.

on pair trousers a white George Pick me up

Coming from work one evening I met a girl named Alice. I asked her if I could go home with her. She said it would be all right. When I got to her house she didn't have any food in her house, so I went out and bought some food and took it back to her house. She seemed to me to be a very nice person. After that day we began to be good friends. This relationship lasted a long time, until one night I took her over to some friends' house and told her to stay until I came back. I went gambling and was lucky that night. I won fifty dollars. I

new
late

Describe her
conversation?
age?

she lives
alone?

was so excited about my winnings, I rushed back to tell Alice and pick her up. When I got back to her house I knocked on the door. No one came to the door. I repeated the knocking until finally my cousin came out of the house. I didn't say anything to him, but I asked Alice what took so long for her to come to the door. She didn't say anything to me, but she had an expression on her face that told me right off that she had been unfaithful in my absence. I left Alice at the door. I felt so hurt about Alice, I went home and went to bed. The next morning I went to work. Later on in the day I saw Alice carrying a suitcase, but I didn't know she was leaving town. About two weeks later I was sitting in a bar drinking with some friends and a girl came through the door. My friends told me she was Alice's sister. When I started talking to her, she said she was Alice's sister and Alice was doing fine. Alice's sister and I started dancing. When she got ready to leave, she kissed me. I never heard from her until three months later. I was told Alice and her sister were living in a small town someplace in Texas.

One morning on my day off from work, I was standing near the brickyard in front of the gas burner. Suddenly my pants caught on fire. The flames were all around my legs. After a few minutes I was able to put the flames out. But my leg was burned so badly I went and asked the brickyard manager if he could send me to see a doctor. The company managers said they couldn't send me to see a doctor because I got burned on my day off and not when I was working. On my own, I managed to get to Houston. I didn't have any money but when the doctor saw how badly my leg was burned he treated me. The doctor said I could pay him later and I should come back in

who?

more to later

Burnt
stomach
put
Lena
stomach
how

why Houston?

and?

what doctor

8

two weeks. As days passed, my leg began to get worse, I didn't have any money to travel back and forth to Houston to see the doctor, so I caught a freight train and went back to Galveston. Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Bay sent me to another doctor. It took my leg three months to heal.

7?
older
anecdotes?
belong?
Meanwhile, I kept on working steadily in the brickyard. I was about ~~sixteen~~ ^{seventeen or eighteen} years old now. Everyone on the job thought I was much older. For entertainment after work, I learned how to box, gamble, and drink corn liquor. I learned how to box after being knocked out a few times. Then, I got so good at boxing that whenever I boxed I could knock out the other fellows.

more about feeling
Evenso I was lonesome for a girlfriend. The only woman near the brickyard was a much older woman and a good cook. She cooked at the brickyard. I asked her if I could come to visit her. She said, "Come any time you want to." I went to visit her every day after work. Soon, I became very fond of her. When the fellows that I worked with found out I was seeing this older woman, they teased me about her. But, that didn't have any effect on me. I continued seeing her until she went back to Beaumont, Texas.

Immediately I started looking for a job in Galveston. Jobs still were scarce the same way it was when I first left. So I put in for my unemployment insurance. I worked on odd jobs in hotels, working on trucks, and cleaning yards. It took months before I heard from the unemployment insurance company. When the answer came by mail the letter read: "We the company of the brickyard can't pay your unemployment insurance, because you weren't fired off the job." After getting this answer, I returned to the brickyard.

This, like other incidents in book, makes me want to know more how did this happen?

More anecdotes and what Lee brought from there into his later life - what "life lessons" learned

very deceptive - just deceiving but no feeling really - might be there

clarity

I was back on the job for a month. Then one of my fellow workers whose name was ^{was} String took ill. He had been going back and forth to see his doctor. We didn't know the nature of his illness; but, we did know his doctor told him not to drink alcohol as long as he was taking shots. One day he went to visit his doctor and had a shot. The same day, he drank some alcohol and died instantly in Houston. We brought his body back to the brickyard. The fellows and I didn't know any of his relatives, because he never spoke of any. We took up a collection; each one gave two dollars. We then buried his body in a nearby poppy field. I spoke the last words over String's body.

Before long Aunt T- ^{Babe} Bay sent me a letter from Galveston in which she told me to come back to Galveston, to pick up my unemployment checks. I went back to do so and also returned to work at the brickyard. I worked for a few months and left.

I went to Houston to live with Aunt Bernice. In the meantime I went to the unemployment office and registered for work. A week later they gave me a job working in a cafeteria in the shipyard. This shipyard wasn't too far from Houston. I rode the bus to work until I met a fellow who had a car, then I rode with him. Wages were five cents an hour, paid on every Friday. The job wasn't paying much, so I left and went looking once more for a job.

I heard men were needed in Arizona to work on the railroad. I signed up for the job. Before I left, I was examined and given three days to get ready to leave for Arizona. Then I was given a pass to catch a train. I left Houston one night about ten o'clock to go to Tucson, Arizona.

When I arrived in Tucson, I was sent to a commissary in the train station to buy some food and whatever I needed to take into the camp with me. ^{Later, when} As I entered the camp, I noticed rows of tents were up for the workers to sleep in. One of the foremen pointed out a tent for me to sleep in. Then he left. Since it was so quiet and all the men had gone to bed, I went into my tent and went to bed.

Before dawn I ^{heard} could hear a loud whistle, ringing in camp. I presumed it was time to get up and get dressed for work. When I pulled the entrance of my tent back, I saw the men standing outside of their tents getting ready for breakfast, so, I joined them. I introduced myself to some of the men. When breakfast was over, I went to work on the railroad. All the men in camp were Black men, except the timekeeper, the foreman, and a few Chinese cooks. All the employees were given three meals a day. This was my first time eating Chinese food, but before long Chinese food came to be one of my favorite dishes. Describe work

Before ten o'clock in the morning the hot sun was beaming down my back. No house to be seen, no people passing by, just me out in this hot desert working on the railroad. When the day was over and the men were back in camp for the night, we sat around together and talked about the things we planned to do when we got home. Sometimes we gambled a little; other times we took trips to Mexico. anecdote?

The very first time I went to Mexico I had the time of my life. Although I couldn't speak Spanish, I ran into a little Mexican boy who spoke Spanish for me. This little boy was about six years old. He took me any place I thought I wanted to visit. In and out of different name?
Jvon

JUN

restaurants, theaters, and to see plenty of girls. The ~~boy~~ told me that if I didn't like the girls he took me to see, he would take me to see his two sisters and his mother. I didn't like the idea of going to his house, so I told him I would settle for some of the other girls he took me to see. He did all these things for one dollar.

One night when I went to a room with a girl, this little boy was still waiting until I came out. It amazed me how this boy knew his way around town. He walked down the street with me smoking a big cigar. No one seemed to pay any attention to him. When I was ready to leave Mexico this little boy took me to the immigration office to let the authorities know I was leaving. After my first visit to Mexico, I made several more trips and each time I went this little boy would be waiting for me to show me the town.

My job on the railroad was going alright until one morning 150 Black men, ~~one white foreman and one white timekeeper~~ went out on strike. A Black fellow-employee named San Antonio was standing on the handcar before the car started down the tracks. The white foreman told San Antonio to sit down in the car. San Antonio refused to sit down in the car because, as he told the foreman, there was water in the car. But the foreman told him to sit in the water. 'When San Antonio still refused, the foreman fired him.

clarity

My fellow-employees called a meeting to put San Antonio back to work. The men wouldn't go back to work either. The very next morning all the men ate their breakfast and got ready for work; but, when the foreman blew the whistle, the men stood up by the tracks and wouldn't move. Finally, the men chose me and two more men to speak for the rest of the men. I told the foreman if he didn't put San

why?

Antonio back to work no one was going back to work. When we still couldn't get any satisfaction from the foreman, I told the foreman that I would call in the roadmaster, if San Antonio wasn't put back to work. In the meantime, the men standing near the tracks were waiting until we brought news back to them about San Antonio. Finally, the foreman agreed to put San Antonio back to work. Then, all the men went back to work.

After this experience was over, I realized that unity with other employees was what made the foreman act. If all employees united together on jobs there would be less trouble and less firings would come from the employer.

When I came to work on the railroad, I left my sweetheart, Ruth, back in Houston. As time passed I never heard from her or even got a letter. So I began to worry about her and wanted to see her. I made up my mind I would go back to Houston, Texas and try to find Ruth. So I told the foreman I wanted a pass to go home. He gave me a pass and I left Tucson and went back to Houston. When I first arrived in Houston I went directly to the house she was living in when I first left; but, the people who were living in the house told me she didn't live there any more. Weeks passed. I went everywhere I thought she'd be, with no luck. I never found Ruth. Lonesome and heartbroken, I left Houston and went back to Galveston.

I didn't stay in Galveston very long with the work situation being the same as when I left. Men were still being sent to work on the railroad. I signed up once more for the job. I worked on the extra gang for a while. ~~Then I went to work on the section hand.~~ I left the

need
more
info on
her

Describe
work

JAN

extra gang and went to Phoenix. I hadn't received any money from working on the extra gang.

When I went to the train station, I sat down on a bench and my mind started wandering concerning what I should do next. I only had one nickel in my pocket. After I sat awhile, I got up from the bench and went and asked the ticket agent if they still needed a man on the section ^{gang} ~~hand~~. The ticket agent looked on a list and asked if I wanted the job. I told him, "Yes, I want the job." After the ticket agent signed me up for the job, he gave me a pass on the train and a letter to get some food from the commissary. I bought a loaf of bread, some cans of beans, a can of wieners, mackerel, packs of cookies.

I was on my way to a ^{Boston} ~~small town~~ not too far from Los Angeles, California. As I sat in this small train station waiting for the train to arrive, I noticed I was sitting next to an old man and his wife. They asked me if I was hungry. I told them I wasn't hungry, I had some food. But they insisted on giving me a slice of watermelon, which I accepted. By this time the train pulled into the station. Sometime late that night I arrived in this ^{Boston} ~~small town~~. I stayed in the station all night. The next morning I walked from the ^{Boston} ~~little town~~ to the section houses. I gave the foreman my work slip and started to work that Monday morning.

That evening, I got acquainted with two Black families. Their homes were in Los Angeles. They lived in section homes that were given to all employees who worked on the railroad. Often these families traveled back and forth to Los Angeles.

Lee Brown interview concerning chapter 2: 6/14/98

RE: Chapter 1 page 12 white man in bar

This drunk white man named Aleck Havord came over to the black side and tried to kiss or dance with Aunt Bernice. She refused him and he hauled off and slapped her.

Incident in welfare office happened in Galveston and should go in ch. 2.

ch 2
Page 12:1

Lablonche's daughter's name was Margaret, and she was not the oldest.

I used to do things like go to the store and buy shoes for her. She'd tell me the size and I'd go get them. I bought her powder, soap, things like that. She probably was too lazy to go herself, so she sent me. She had confidence in me.

035

I used to help clean up the place, and work in the garden. I had my own little garden.

040

Margaret was in her twenties. She was going to school. There were three other daughters, but they were older and married had moved out. Margaret was the only one left in the house. Father was Mr. E.J. LaBlonche, (doesn't remember mother's first name.) Mrs. LaBlonche was handicapped, she couldn't use her left hand.

Page 13:2

060

At first I ate my meals in the backyard under a tree close to the house. They gave me a wooden table and a chair back there. But Margaret didn't like that. Margaret had visited New York and seen how black and white people lived there and she explained to her mother that making me eat in the backyard was wrong. Her mother probably hadn't travelled and didn't know any better. I liked Margaret. She was friendly toward me and she seemed intelligent. If she believed in discrimination, she wouldn't have trusted me going to the store for her. I realized that not all white people were mean and prejudiced; some, like Margaret, tried to be decent toward black people.

Margaret was a tall, slim brunette.

Black Maid: She did the cleaning and the washing and ironing. I used to give her some of the vegetables from my garden.

Decided to leave to better my condition. The little money I was making wasn't enough. I needed to buy my own clothes and shoes. One day I jumped up and wanted to get to stepping so I packed my suitcase and left to look for some work that paid more.

I went back to Esther's house and stayed about a month. Esther was nice to me but her daughter and I couldn't get along. She slapped me once.

p 14: 3

Went to friends , Annie and Buddy Harris. I felt good helping them with the planting cause they were struggling sharecroppers and they appreciated my help.

Left them a stayed for a day or so with cousin Horace Bertrand. When I was leaving I asked him if he could give me some money for travelling and he gave me a chicken, which I was happy to get.

Decided to go to galeston because he knew Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe were there.

Welfare office story from ch 1 goes before last para on p. 14

p. 15:4

Old doctor did not recognize LB. "They were putting me in the operating room. I saw all these doctors standing around. This old doctor asked me what was wrong, and I told him I didn't want to be operated on."

Courthouse interest (237): While I was looking for work, I used to go to the courthouse in Galveston and listen to the cases. I had heard people talking about the courthouse and the law and all, and I was interested. I was also interested because I remembered Uncle Tot's trouble in Louisiana with the white man. Tot got away to Galveston, but the Sheriff in Louisiana found out where he was and got the police in Texas to arrest him on his job at the dry docks. They brought him back to Louisiana and put him in jail in Opelusas. I was still living in Louisiana then. But they had to let him out because the white man they claimed Tot killed, his mother came to the courthouse and told them, "Tot did not kill my son." She knew he didn't do it. Some other white man had done it. They had to let Tot go. When he got back to Galveston, the superintendent at the dry docks, a man named Spider, let him have his job back. Tot was a good worker and Spider said, "I don't care if he killed every white man in

Louisiana, I want him back on the job!" (Eventually I went to work at the dry docks, too.)

302

So I was interested in what went on at the courthouse. I noticed that they had a lot more black folks in there than whites on trial and going to jail for various crimes. It seemed like something was wrong, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly what. I didn't really understand how racism worked at that time, but I knew something was wrong. It wouldn't be until I got into the unions that I would understand better. But I could see that black folks was not getting equal justice. And it made me start to thinking.

340

Getting work at the dry docks: Every morning I would go an line up on the dock for work. All the foremen would come over on a little boat and pick the people they wanted to hire. The dry docks was on the other side of the bay. On this particular morning they hired about 30 men, and I was one of them.

page 16:5

378

Later on I found out that you had to join the union, and Mr. Spriggens was the president. This was the union of common laborers, a black union. Uncle Tot was a member of the union. Mr. Spriggens told Uncle Tot, "Your boy is young. You'll have to stand for him to get his book." So Mr. Spriggens signed me up and gave me my black union book.

396

I was doing common labor -- sometimes running the scaling gun, or painting, or down in the double hold cleaning out the bottom, which was dangerous work. Just like they did in Texas City, Texas when that damned ship blew up. But I was young and I didn't know how dangerous it was.

Later on in 1938 we went on strike for better wages. The common laborers were only making 35 cents an hour. They put me on the picket line at night. That was my first time on a picket line. The white guys in the other unions, the boilermakers, the carpenters, they respected our picket lines and wouldn't cross the line. 500 I was proud to be in the union and on strike because my Uncle Tot was a strong union man. I remember during the strike Uncle Tot would wake up in the morning and tell Aunt T-Babe, "Hurry up an fix my breakfast; I got to go on duty." That's what he said about going to the picket line; he was proud of it and called it "going on duty." He was picketing during the day, and I picketed at night. It was the first time either of us was on a picket line and he inspired me.

570

The union made me feel that I could do something for poor people like myself. The union gave me a way to go forward, to help change things.

Worked slowed down: Spriggins told the young men that if they wanted to look for work someplace else he would stamp their union book "paid in full" to make it easier to find work. The married men with families stayed working at the dry docks.

Got parttime job on ships as a scrummer (?). My job was to hook a sling to a crane to help load raw sugar or cotton on the ship. 567 On the railroad I was working helping around the tracks in the yard. They had about six or seven men working on the tracks.

page 17:6

The boss, a German named Bill Schweiner, in Galveston said he could put on two men. "You know anybody else?" Mr. Bill asked. I said let me go back and get my cousin out of Galveston. I hopped a freight train back to Galveston. That was my transportation. I hit that freight like I owned it.

Brickyard work: The first two or three days he put me to working digging stumps up in this open field. That's one way of breaking you in, see how you work.

p 18:7

Cousin also stayed at boarding house. Georeg Ware, the man who ran the boarding house had a daughter, Georgia Lee, that lived in Houston. We used to go to Houston and eventually Joseph married her. She still lives in Houston. Joseph later moved to Alaska and married somebody else and had a son. He died years later in Alaska. They say he choked on a chicken bone.

692

Brickyard work inside: I worked molding bricks. I was a mud brick maker. You put the mud into something like a mixer. One guy would feed it with the dirt, and I be taking it out. It was just like in a baking shop. You make three bricks at a time. Put them in the mold, smooth off the top, put the molds on a pallet board and take them on a buggy to the drying place where they stay for a couple of weeks. Then they take the bricks to a kiln in a big old building where they burn the bricks. Old man Frick was the one in charge of the kiln.

Old man Frick was the one who got me to join the NAACP.

SIDE TWO

Page 18:7

Frick lived in Houston but he'd come and work at the brickyard during the week. On the weekends he'd go back to his family. He used to tell me about the "Freedom." I wanted

to know about this freedom. In the evening after work he'd tell about how the NAACP was fighting to get freedom. He talked to me and Joseph. We were searching for freedom, young men who wanted to be free. I know I wanted to be free, and wanted to join something to get freedom. It was only 50 cents a year to join. This was around 1939. So I got my social security card and my NAACP card that same year.

745

George Ware, who ran the boarding house, used to take us to Houston on a Saturday evening in his little car. So I went and bought me a pair of trousers and a shirt to put on that Sunday so I'd look sharp. While I was sitting on a bench waiting for George to come back by and pick me up to go back to Galveston, I went to sleep. Goddammit, when I woke up my damn package with my trousers and shirt was gone. I jumped up and I saw a policeman and asked, "Have you seen anybody with a package." He said, "I've seen plenty of people with packages, but I can't stop everybody I see with a package." That shows how stupid you can be when you don't have knowledge. I learned through struggling. So that was my loss.

ALICE story happned in New Orleans later.

Page 19:8 (768)

Went to a black doctor, Dr. Shadows, in Houston

page 20: 8

Mr. Bill, the boss, used to be a fighter. Sometimes I'd play around after work trying to imitate Joe Louis. One day Mr. Bill said, "You got a good stance, Brown Bomber." Everybody on the job called me "Brown Bomber" after Joe Louis. Mr. Bill started training me, and I had some pretty good fights. I had a fight with a white guy and I knocked him out. Then I had a fight with Sonny Boy Bradley and knocked him out. I thought I was hell! Then they brought in Shorty Jeffrey from Beaumont, Texas. He gave me a one-two-three and knocked me out. Shit, the ring was spinning around. I told Mr. Bill, "Uh, Uh, brother. I don't want no more boxing. You can forget about that." He said, "Brown Bomber, you got to get whupped sometimes. That's how you learn." But I was young and I couldn't see it. As long as I was knocking them down that was okay, but when Shorty Jeffrey knocked me out that was it. Maybe I might have made a good fighter but I wasn't ready to go through the hard part.

We used shoot dice and drink. Old man Bud Springer, an old white guy he worked there, he used to make corn liquor and sell it to us. George Ware tried his hand at making corn liquor, too.

LENA Story (845)

There was one guy named Red who worked at the other brick yard who had a wife named Lena. Now this guy was very jealous. One Sunday Otsey Prior came buy in his car and picked me up to go to Houston. I had made a good lick that day. I think I had one about fifteen, twenty dollars and I wanted to celebrate. Lena was there so I said "Come on Lena, you want to go?" So we went up to Houston to get something to eat. When I got back to Green Bayou, somebody say, "Man, Red looking for you. He heard you were out with Lena in Houston." When I heard that I didn't know what Red might try to when he got drunk. I went to old man Schweiner's house. I told him I wanted to get his shotgun. "What you want a shotgun for, Brown Bomber?" "Red is looking for me to kill me." "What you did?" "His wife was in a car with Otsey Prior and I and somebody went a told him." He said, "Red ain't gone bother you. Go on back home." Turned out Red wasn't looking for me. People just told me that lie to get me scared. And it did scare me. I didn't run around with Lena no more.

page 21; 9
(895)

Last words for String: I said he was a happy fellow. He always laughed, and never had any trouble at the brickyard. I talked about the hair grease he made out of lye that he used to slick down his hair and make it look good. He was a lot of fun, smiling and talking. We would miss old String.

905 Did get unemployment check but not insurance money.

Aunt Bernice had moved to Houston and got married.

Railroad work: heard about work in Arizona. I went to the railroad station to find out was they hiring people. They gave me an application and they said they'd accept me. So I decided to go there. I thought I could do better. went to Tucson

Page 22:10

I worked on the extra gang, which is a gang of over a hundred men working on the railroad to maintain the tracks. We had to tamp ties and raise the tracks to keep them level. They needed these extra gangs becuse during the war years there might be eight or nine or more trains a day that would pass along the tracks. I was a flagman. I worked way up on the tracks to signal the trains to slow down. I had my flag and the torpedoes that I used to signal the engineer. When you see a train coming you put down a red torpedo on the track. When the train hit it he would know to slow down. Then you put another one down to slow him down more, and a

third meant he should stop. I used my hands to signal to one train how far ahead the next train was.

Page 23: 11

San Antonio Story (975): What happened was that when we knocked off from work every day, we'd put the handcar back on the track to get back to camp. This day in loading the water kegs some water had spilled on the seat, and San Antonio saw it and decided to stand up rather than sit in the water. When the white foreman saw San Antonio standing he told him to sit down. San Antonio said no because there was water on the seat. The foreman told San Antonio again to sit down and again he refused. When we got back to the camp the foreman told San Antonio he was fired because he disobeyed the foreman's orders. San Antonio told him, "I wasn't gonna sit in that water no matter who's orders it was." Now I was watching this and I was already a union man. In fact, I still had my union book. So I got to the boys and I said, "Alright, let's get together tonight and have a meeting." At the meeting I said that we shouldn't go back to work until the foreman put San Antonio back to work. All of them agreed. The next morning the old foreman got out there and blew his whistle. We stood by the tracks looking at him but we wouldn't move. "Alright boys, let's go" he said. The boys had already at the meeting said, "Brown, are you going to speak?" and I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll speak." And I showed them my union book. So I told the foreman, "We ain't going until you put San Antonio back to work." "I can't do that, he fired now." I said, "Well, I'm going to call the roadmaster in Yuma." When I said that, shit, the foreman got nervous and said, "Okay, go back to work everybody. I'm gonna put San Antonio back to work." He didn't want to face that roadmaster. So we got San Antonio back on the job by taking action. I was the only union man out there, but I led the struggle. It was a victory for us.

page 24: 12

Met Ruth through Aunt Bernice. She used to visit Aunt Bernice. Bernice knew Ruth's mama. Bernice invited her there one time when I was visiting and that's how I met her.

Page 25

A section gang is a group of ^{about} ~~no more than~~ six men who maintain a certain section of track. Different section gangs took care of different sections of track. On my section gang we had two brothers and some Spanish guys. They Spanish guys would take me to Mexico every night with stories about Mexico when we got off work. The two black guys were married and they would tell me all about Los Angeles, and encouraged me to go there. I was wondering how come they didn't stay in Los Angeles. They were telling me how good it was but here they were on the section gang. Maybe they wanted to get rid

of me, I didn't know. Anyway, it got me to thinking about going to Los Angeles.