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STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

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**Strong in the Struggle:
My Life as a Militant Trade
Unionist**

by Lee Brown

Edited by Robert L. Allen

First Draft 8/25/99

(NOTE to Jill: Numbered chapters are in Lee Brown's voice; others were compiled/written by Robert. Maybe the titles/text can be set in a different font?)

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Introduction

I ring the bell at Lee Brown's apartment building in a housing project in San Francisco's Western Addition neighborhood. He immediately buzzes me in through the metal gate. For the first few months of our meetings he would always look out his window to check who was there before buzzing me in. Now he says he recognizes me by how I ring the buzzer. He opens the door and waits as I climb the stairs to the third floor. "You in, Bro' Robert?" "I'm on the way up, Bro' Brown."

At 78 years of age, Lee Brown is tall and husky with light brown skin. His voice is deep and rich. When discussing racist and capitalist adversaries he adopts an exaggerated scowl, but more often his eyes have a mischievous twinkle and he is quick to laugh.

In his bedroom, which also serves as the livingroom, a photograph of Elijah Muhammad is displayed prominently over the bed with a Million Man March poster on the adjacent wall. The room is crowded with a bed, an old easy chair, TV, VCR, and four sagging bookcases overflowing with well-thumbed books, newspapers, magazines and miscellaneous papers. An alcove is crammed with a file cabinet, more books, documents, photographs and papers. The hundreds of books and pamphlets in his apartment reflect his love of reading and his wide ranging interests. His collection includes books on labor history, black history, ancient African civilizations, religion (especially Islam), socialism, economics, biography and philosophy.

In the kitchen,

We talk at the formica ~~kitchen~~ table sitting on two folding chairs. The table is usually cluttered with a big bowl of fruit in the center, papers scattered around it, and various canned and bottled goods from the welfare department on the table and on the floor. He offers me a bottle of Ginseng soda. I take a second bottle from the refrigerator for him.

He is a man who delights in good food, though he seldom gets out to restaurants now. A good cook, he enjoys preparing a favorite dish -- savory goat stew -- for the pleasure of friends. Each week he looks forward to two meals at a local community center, hoping that they might satisfy his appetite, as the trade union struggle fed his spirit.

He believes in dressing to make an impression whenever he leaves his apartment. That means wearing a three-piece brown pinstrip suit, with gold watch and chain in the vest pocket, 5 or 6 pens and reading glasses in the coat pocket, four buttons on the lapels (Africa/Black USA Unity pin, NAACP Lifetime membership pin, Local 2 button, HERE button -- Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees union). On his head he sports a black leather fez with a map of Africa outlined on its front in green, yellow, red colors. He uses a walking cane and wears brown boots. He impresses one as a man ~~He is a man~~ who thinks well of himself and is not hesitant to make known his views.

We met through a mutual friend, Patricia Scott, who knew of Lee Brown's efforts to write his autobiography and my interest in African American involvement in social movements. I was immediately fascinated by Lee Brown's story -- which he had already started

writing with the help of his late wife, Grace, and a friend, Tom Dunphy. He asked if I would help him with the project and I agreed.

For more than 60 years Lee Brown has been deeply committed to the struggle for the rights of working people in this country. A largely self-educated man ("doctor of the working class" is how he describes his education), Brown took part in grassroots labor struggles on the waterfront of Galveston, Texas, and in railroad labor camps in Arizona in the late 1930s, fought for jobs for black actors in the Hollywood film industry in the 1940s, and campaigned for workers rights in the great hotels of San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s.

Brown made history as one of the top leaders of a militant, interracial union in the Deep South during the 1940s and 1950s. He was vice president of Local 207, Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union (affiliated with the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemens' Union) in New Orleans. Also a member of the Communist Party, Lee Brown paid a high price for his commitment. In 1957 he was investigated by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Brown refused to cooperate with HUAC. At the hearings he created a sensation when he adamantly refused to answer any questions until the Committee allowed him to make a statement. (He had planned to pose his own set of questions to the committee, including: Was Senator Eastland a member of the Ku Klux Klan?) For his insistence on having the right to make his own statement, Brown was accused of being a defiant, arrogant witness and ejected from the HUAC hearing.

The following year Lee Brown was charged with violating the Taft-Hartley law, which prohibited union leaders from being members of the Communist Party. Although he had previously withdrawn his membership in the Communist party to meet the requirements of the law, he was convicted nonetheless. He became one of the first labor leaders imprisoned during the McCarthyite witchhunts, and he served one of the longest prison terms of any of the Taft-Hartley victims. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment at the federal penitentiary at Texarkana, Texas.

in 1921 & raised in
Born ~~to a~~ *Communist laborer* farming family in rural Louisiana ~~in 1921~~, Lee Brown first joined a union at age 17 when he was working on the dry docks in Galveston, Texas. It was there he had his first taste of labor *Communist laborer* ~~conflict~~ *struggle* when the union called a strike in 1939 for better wages.

Later he worked on the railroads in Arizona. When a foreman unfairly dismissed a worker, Brown told the others: "Let's call a meeting. Together we should stand up for this brother." *were strong* The ~~effort~~ was successful, and Brown was launched on a course of lifelong militant labor activism.

By World War II Lee Brown was in Los Angeles working for RKO Studios and actively involved in the NAACP. He campaigned for better jobs for blacks in the film industry, and along the way he met many famous black actors, including Louise Beavers, Mantan Moreland and, later, Paul Robeson. He even had a couple of bit parts in films.

After the war Lee returned to New Orleans where he got a job on the docks loading river barges. He joined Local 207 and soon became a shop steward. Local 207 was known for its militancy and

consequently disliked by the employers. With black and white members its president, Andrew Steve Nelson, was black -- a situation virtually unheard of in the South, and especially galling to local authorities. Brown's fearlessness and militancy got him chosen as vice-president of Local 207.

Like many other black activists at the time, he also joined the U.S. Communist Party. In an effort to decapitate the militant black leadership of Local 207 and end the ILWU presence in New Orleans, both Brown and Nelson were indicted under the Taft-Hartley law, the National Labor Relations Act. Nelson was convicted, but died before being imprisoned. Brown was convicted and imprisoned at Texarkana.

Serving time in the penitentiary was not easy, but Brown was not dissuaded from his politics. When he was released in 1960 he moved to San Francisco and joined Local 110 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union at the famous Fairmont Hotel, where he became the first shop steward in any hotel in San Francisco. From then until his retirement he was a union organizer and a leader of the struggle against discrimination in employment for black workers in the hotel and restaurant industry in San Francisco. During this period he met and married Grace Oliver, who was also a union activist in the hotel industry.

On coming to San Francisco Brown resumed a tenuous relationship with the Communist Party. However, disillusioned by racism within the Communist Party, Brown later drifted away from the CP and flirted with various Black Nationalist groups, including the Nation of Islam. Nevertheless, his fundamental belief that

grassroots organizing of all people is the key to social change eventually brought him back into the CP. Although he left the Party for good in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing schisms in the CPUSA, he remains committed to the ideals of socialism.

Since retirement, Brown's militancy has not diminished. He has thrown himself into the senior citizen's movement, working with such organizations as the Senior Action Network and Legal Assistance to the Elderly, and marching in demonstrations in Sacramento demanding more state aid for seniors.

Lee Brown's story is unique: A black labor activist in the South, Southwest and the West who worked with several different labor unions, as well as the NAACP, the Communist Party and Black Nationalist groups; a militant who paid the price of imprisonment for his political principles; a Communist who lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union but who remains committed to the struggle for radical change.

For Lee Brown, life and the struggle for change are one and the same. As he put it: "I have dedicated my life in the service of poor people."

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PART 1

On Friday, February 15, 1957 Lee Brown was summoned to appear before a subcommittee of the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee. The HUAC subcommittee was holding hearings in New Orleans to investigate alleged Communist Party activity. Lee Brown was a leader of a militant waterfront workers union, Local 207 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). The questioners were Richard Arens, HUAC staff counsel, Rep. Edwin E. Willis of Louisiana, chairman, and Rep. Bernard W. Kearney, a committee member from New York. After swearing in and determining that Brown was representing himself the interrogation proceeded. An excerpt from the transcript:

Arens: Where and when were you born?

Brown: In 1921, May 28.

Arens: Where?

Brown: New Orleans.

Arens: Give us, if you please, just a brief sketch of your education.

Brown: I would like to say one thing, Mr. Chairman, if I may, to the chairman. Are you the chairman?

Willis: All right.

Brown: I would like to say one thing to this committee or any other committee.

Kearney: Mr. Chairman, I suggest that the witness answer the question and not make a speech.

Willis: That's right.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, at this point --

Willis: You can answer a very simple question -- to give a brief description of your education. That's a very simple question.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I submit I would like to make a statement before I answer any questions.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest the witness be ordered and directed to answer the question.

Willis: I direct you to answer the question; and let me tell you the consequences of that order that I have directed to you: That any attempt on your part to evade questions or to make a speech is out of order. I see you are not represented by counsel. I suppose you know your rights. If any questions are asked of you which you believe honestly might subject you to criminal proceedings, you are entitled to invoke the privilege of the fifth amendment. You can't hedge, pussyfoot, or run around the issues. You are ordered to answer the question.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I still ask for the privilege under the first amendment to make my statement.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, in view of the fact that he has refused to answer the question with respect to his education and he has been ordered and directed to do so, I propose to interrogate him by other questions on other matters.

Willis: Proceed to another subject. You realize the implications of what I have told you.

Arens: Where are you employed?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I request to make my statement.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest the witness be ordered and directed to answer the question as to where he is employed.

Willis: That's a very simple question, the second simple question, and you are ordered to answer that question. A record is being made of it by the reporter. Since you are not represented by counsel, I will repeat to you that the consequences may be contempt proceedings. I don't know the field counsel will go into, but you will not be permitted to hedge. You are ordered to answer the question, and from now on I will not make any more statements.

Arens: Where are you employed?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, based on the first amendment, I would like to make a statement before I answer and question, period.

Kearney: Mr. Chairman, I suggest that again the witness be directed to answer these questions, and so far as making a statement or a speech, as far as this committee is concerned, I object to it.

Arens: How long have you been employed in your present employment?

Brown: I refuse to answer, period, until I get a chance to make a statement, period.

Arens: Are you vice president of the International Longshoremen's Union in New Orleans?

Brown: I refuse to answer the question until I get a chance to make a statement.

Kearney: Are you a member of the Communist Party?

Brown: I would like to make a statement, period.

Kearney: If you are not a member of the Communist Party, would you tell this committee to that effect?

Brown: I would like to make a statement, period.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest the witness now be ordered and directed to answer the questions as to whether or not he is a Communist.

Willis: You are ordered and directed to answer that question.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I hope you understand it clear and perfect that I am not answering a question until I make a statement, period.

Kearney: Mr. Chairman, may I suggest to this witness you are not scaring this committee.

Brown: You don't frighten me, either.

Kearney: I am not trying to frighten you. We are trying to get you to answer a simple question. In view of his arrogance, Mr. Chairman, I suggest if you can't get any answer from him, you ask the marshal to escort him from the room.

Willis: That will be taken into consideration.

Arens: Mr. Witness, as a prerequisite to obtaining your witness fee, it is necessary for you to affix your signature to the pay vouchers. This is the pay voucher that you will get your witness fee for appearing today. Will you kindly, affix your signature?

Brown: I don't sign anything, Mr. Chairman, period.

Arens: Now, Mr. Witness, I lay before you a photostatic copy of a non-Communist affidavit dated July 23, 1951, signed by yourself, here in New Orleans in which you say that you are not a member of the Communist Party or affiliated with the party. Look at that document and tell us, first of all, whether or not that is a true and correct reproduction of your signature.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I hope I made it clear, I am not answering anything until I make my statement.

Arens: You said in this statement of 1951, and you said it under oath, that you were not a Communist; isn't that true?

Brown: I say I am not answering any question until I make my statement, period.

Arens: Now I lay before you still another affidavit signed by yourself, dated July 15, 1952, and a non-Communist affidavit under the Taft-Hartley Act, in which you say under oath that you are not a Communist. Look at that document which we have marked "Exhibit No. 2" and tell this committee while you are under oath whether or not you signed that document.

Brown: I am not answering anything. I hope I made it clear to you, Mr. Chairman and the rest of the committee, I am not answering any question until I make my statement.

Arens: Now I lay before you still another document signed by yourself, executed under oath, a non-Communist affidavit, in which you say:

"I am not a member of the Communist Party or affiliated with such party. I do not believe in, and I am not a member of nor do I support any organization that believes in or teaches the overthrow of the United States Government by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods."

Look at that document now while you are under oath and tell this committee whether or not you executed that document.

Brown: I think I made it clear, Mr. Chairman, and to this committee as a whole, that I am not answering questions until I make my statement.

Arens: Now I lay before you still another document dated June of 1956, signed by yourself, in which you state that you are not a member of the Communist Party. Look at that document which you filed under oath pursuant to the provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act, and tell this committee whether or not that truly and correctly represents your signature.

Brown: I say I am not answering any questions until I make my statement.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, so the record may be perfectly clear, I respectfully suggest to the Chair that this witness now be ordered and directed to answer each and every one of the several questions which I have posed to him with respect to these documents.

Willis: You are now ordered to answer those questions which have to do with your signing these statements relating to your status of being a Communist or non-Communist. You are ordered to answer these questions.

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I think I made the statement clear I am not intending to answer any questions until I make my statement.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that each of these exhibits which we have just used be appropriately marked and incorporated in the body of the record.

Willis: Let them be so marked and incorporated.

In further testimony Brown was asked to identify various materials presumably produced by the Communist Party and containing mentions of his name. As before he refused to answer any questions until he was allowed to make a statement. Then the committee called another witness, Arthur Eugene, and swore him in to testify while Lee Brown was still present.

Arens: Mr. Eugene, will you kindly identify yourself by name, residence, and occupation?

Eugene: Arthur Eugene, Jr. I live here in New Orleans, 2121 St. Anthony Street. My occupation is a warehouseman.

Arens: Mr. Eugene, I expect to interrogate you at length in a few moments, but for the present purpose I should like to ask you, Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Eugene: Yes; I was.

Arens: During what period of time were you a member of the Communist Party?

Eugene: From the period of 1948 until 1956.

Arens: During part of that time, were you working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation furnishing information to your Government?

Eugene: That's right.

Arens: Mr. Eugene, during the course of your membership in the Communist Party, did you know a person as a Communist by the name of Lee Brown?

Eugene: Yes, I did.

Arens: Do you see the person in the courtroom today?
Now?

Eugene: Yes, sir.

Arens: Whom you knew as Lee Brown?

Eugene: Yes; I do.

Arens: Would you look him in the eye and point him out to this committee while you are under oath?

Eugene: That is him right here

INSERT PHOTO HERE OF EUGENE POINTING AT BROWN WHO IS
SITTING RIGHT NEXT TO HIM (Times-Picayune, 2/16/57, p. 1)

Kearney: When you say "that is him right here," you are referring to the witness who is under oath and who has refused to answer all these questions which have been propounded to him by counsel.

Eugene: That is correct.

Arens: Now, Mr. Brown, you have heard the testimony just a moment ago of Arthur Eugene. Is that correct? Did you hear the testimony?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I refuse to answer any questions until I make my statement.

Arens: Now, Mr. Brown, look at the man at your left who has just identified you as a member of the Communist conspiracy, and while you are under oath look him in the eye and tell this committee, did he lie or did he tell the truth?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I refuse to answer the question until I make my statement, regardless. I still refuse to answer until I make my statement.

Arens: Are you now a member of the Communist conspiracy designed to overthrow this Government by force and violence?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, I refuse to answer questions until I make my statement. I am not answering any question, period.

Kearney: Are you an American citizen?

Brown: I refuse to answer questions until I make my statement.

Kearney: Aren't you proud to answer that question?

Brown: Until I make my statement.

Kearney: Let me say to the witness, from your answers here, I notice you fail to take advantage of your rights to seek refuge behind any of the amendments you so desire to the Constitution. Do you decline to answer on the grounds of the fifth amendment that to truly answer might incriminate you?

Brown: I refuse to answer any questions.

Kearney: Then I want to say to the witness that, just as soon as we can get together I shall certainly move for a contempt citation, because you are the most arrogant individual I have seen in many a year.

Brown: That don't worry me a bit. That don't worry me what you do.

Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that will conclude the staff interrogation at this time of Lee Brown.

Willis: Let me suggest to you further, since you are not accompanied by counsel, that you have not invoked the privilege of the fifth or any conceivable protective amendment to the Constitution.

Brown: I answered the first and the fifth amendment. I think I did.

Kearney: That is no answer.

Willis: Will you proceed to requestioning, then, Mr. Arens. He said he answered on the fifth amendment.

Arens: What is your present occupation?

Brown: I refuse to answer until I make my statement.

Arens: Do you honestly apprehend if you told this committee truthfully where you are presently employed you

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page)

could be supplying information which might be used against you in a criminal proceeding?

Brown: I say I refuse to answer the question.

Arens: I respectfully suggest the witness be ordered and directed to answer the question.

Brown: Until I make a statement.

Willis: I don't think you have invoked the privilege of the fifth amendment, but if you want to or if you think you have, this question is intended --

Brown: I have a right. I don't ask anybody to give me nothing.

Willis: We are trying to be very fair with you. This is a test of whether you are honest in the plea, if you think you want to plead it, because you cannot invoke the privilege of the fifth amendment unless you honestly believe that to do so would subject you to criminal proceedings. The simple question is, Do you believe that by answering that question you would be so subjected? You are ordered to answer that.

Brown: I say I refuse to answer questions until I make a statement.

Arens: Will you answer any questions propounded by the committee?

Brown: Until I make a statement.

Kearney: Mr. Chairman, I again --

Brown: On the first amendment. I have a right to talk.

Kearney: I ask that this witness be escorted from the hearing room. He is one of these defiant, arrogant witnesses

here

that once in a while we run across who has the Commie line in every one of his answers. There is no need of wasting the committee's time with him.

Brown: Mr. Chairman --

Willis: They usually invoke the privilege of the fifth amendment, and then say they do so because there are phantom witnesses and that they are not confronted with their accusers. Here is a very much alive person next to you who, under oath, has subjected himself to the pains and penalties of prosecution if he didn't tell the truth, who has charged you with being a Communist. As a red-blooded American citizen, if you are, here is your chance to stand up and deny that fact if it is not true. What is your answer to that?

Brown: Mr. Chairman, as I have already stated, I refuse to answer the question.

Willis: Mr. Marshal, I suggest you escort the witness out of the room and keep him out of this room throughout these hearings.

That evening the New Orleans States published an account of the hearing, which is excerpted below:

Lee Brown, 2017 Jackson, vice president of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's local, refused to answer more than 50 questions put to him by the House Un-American Activities subcommittee and was told to leave the hearing room in federal district court.

Brown, after telling his name and address, refused to answer the other questions put to him by the committee and later said he was invoking the First and Fifth amendments to the Constitution as protection.

Rep. Bernard Kearney of New York, committee member, called Brown "one of the most arrogant witnesses to ever appear before this committee."

As each question was put to him, Brown kept repeating: "Mr. Chairman, I hoped I had made it clear that I will not answer any questions until I am permitted to make a statement."

He refused to say whether he is or was a Communist party member, refused to give his occupation, and would not identify document after document placed before him.

Among these were letters written to editors, signed with Brown's name, a reproduction of the Daily Worker, Communist organ, a document bearing the name of the state committee of the Louisiana Communist party, and affidavits in which Brown's signature was put to statements that he was not a Communist.

The dramatic point of Brown's appearance came when Arthur Eugene, who said he was a Communist from 1948 to 1956 and did undercover work for the FBI part of that time, was called to the stand.

Eugene described himself as a warehouseman and resident of 2121 St. Anthony in New Orleans. He appeared as a star witness in the case against Andrew Steve Nelson, former

president of the ILWU convicted of falsely swearing he was not a Communist.

Eugene said during the time he was a party member he knew Brown as a fellow party member.

Asked to single out Brown and look him in the eye, Eugene pointed at Brown and said: "That's him right there,"

Rep. Edwin W. Willis of St. Martinville, subcommittee chairman, told Brown he did not believe he was honestly using the first and fifth amendments and ordered marshals to evict him from the room.

Brown walked out before marshals had the chance to forcibly eject him, but the federal officials followed him out.

Chapter 1/Childhood

(Ver 2, revised 6/9/98, 6/18/98))

I went to live with my grandfather when I was five years old. Grandfather owned a farm in Morrow, Louisiana. Grandfather was well known and loved and respected by everyone who lived in Morrow. His name was Lee Brown. Everyone called him Uncle Lee Brown. When I was born in the Charity Hospital in New Orleans on May 28, 1921, I was named after him, Lee Brown,

Grandfather was a tall, dark-skinned man with kinda heavy shoulders. He was a large fellow, solid and strong. He was also a kind-hearted, easy going man. I never did see him angry. He never got in no fights. Everybody in that little country town liked him. He was always helping people, people that had trouble. He carried his money in a sack, a white sack. I think my grandmother made it. He would lend people money, poor people who needed help. He was always trying to do things for people.

We lived in the countryside among hardworking farmers who was very poor but also very friendly and concerned about each other. Neighbors would come to my grandfather's home every night and they would discuss issues such as farming, church affairs, money problems and health. Listening to these old people taught me a lot about life and how to make a living for myself, and especially respect for others.

To me there was no wiser or beloved a man than my grandfather. He loved me a lot, too. I remember he used to

take me to Bunkie, another little town, and he would buy me toys, a little wagon, marbles, spinning tops. I would bring them back home and then I would give the kids around there some marbles; I would always share with the other kids. He taught me to do that. Even the kids I used to play with, the next door neighbors, we never did have no fights. He taught me how to get along with people.

Grandfather had a buggy that he used to take me around in. It was a black buggy with red spokes on the wheels and and it was pulled by a black horse. Some of the happiest times that I can remember was when I would sit up front alongside my grandfather in his buggy and ride fast across those old dirt roads. I went everywhere with my grandfather. I went to church every Sunday with him. Some Sundays we would go to the church and take food and stay all day talking with the neighbors and exchanging food.

My grandfather would haul freight for different stores. The freight train would stop and leave freight, then he would deliver the freight to the people at four or five stores. He picked it up in his wagon. Two mules pulled that wagon. That was his business, hauling freight. When he went to those stores he didn't bow down, he didn't go in no damn back door. He didn't fear no man. I never heard him say "Yas, suh" or "Naw, suh" to white men like some people did.

On the farm he raised chickens and ducks. He had a few horses and a few mules. He used to gather hay from some other place to feed his horses. He didn't grow no crops except for

a little truck patch of vegetables to eat -- cabbages, tomatoes, potatoes, things like that, and some corn. The farm wasn't no great large one, but it was large enough for him, for what he was doing. Something that he could handle. Sometimes he hired two, three people round there to help him. He would stand with me by his side looking over his land, and say to me, "One day this land will be yours." I looked up to him for guidance, wisdom and knowledge.

In the house grandfather had this long table. I ain't seen no table like that in a long time. Every morning we had our breakfast at this table. He sat me at one end of the table and he sat at the other. He would say a prayer before eating. Now I don't understand this but in those days they had steak for breakfast. I don't know how they did that; maybe they kept it smoked or something. I know we ate meat and eggs. I remember we ate good. I think I had more than any kid around there, good food, toys. I was the only kid living on the farm. It was just me and my grandfather and Aunt Hannah before she died, and later Aunt Betsy.

My grandmother's name was Hannah. I called her Aunt Hannah. I don't remember her too good. They told me she was a Seminole Indian who came from Florida. She was tall with long black hair that hung to her waist. Aunt Hannah didn't talk very much to anyone but everyone loved her. She was a kind lady.

That year I lived ^{with} ~~on~~ my grandfather's ^{was} ~~farm was the~~ happiest time of my childhood. *He was my first teacher*

← Change

My grandfather had three sons: Bab, Bud and Bruce Brown. Bruce Brown was my father. ~~(Later he went by the name of~~ Joseph.) My father was a light-complexioned man and very tall, at 6 feet, 7 inches. He wore size 14 shoes.

Before I was born my father changed his name to Joseph Brown because the law was after him. Years later I got the story from my sister-in-law, Henrietta who was married to my half-brother, Pete Robinson. She told me that my father and his brothers was robbing them little mixed trains, trains that had one coach car and the rest of them was freight. These mixed trains used to run between the little towns in Louisiana. She once showed me a picture of one of my uncles with a red handkerchief tied around his neck. All three of them was riding together on the train like they was Wild West outlaws. When my father came to New Orleans he decided to change his name to Joseph, and that's what it says on my birth certificate.

My father was killed when I was very young. On his way to work on the coal boat one morning in 1922 he stepped on a live electric wire that had fallen down on the ground during the night after a terrible thunderstorm. He was killed instantly. I didn't really get to know my father. Little do I know about him, except what I was told.

My mother was born in Bolton, Mississippi. Her name was Janie Davis. Like I said, I was born at the old Charity Hospital in New Orleans. When I was small my mother received some money from my father's death. She used the money to open

Take out
parenthesis-
I got
confused


a little store. Then she got hold to another man for a while, but he slicked her out of her money and she lost the store and became mentally disturbed. So my grandfather came and got me and took me to live with him at the farm.

One morning later on my mother came to the farm to take me away from my grandfather. When we arrived at the hotel where she was staying, I cried and made such a fuss all night that she was asked by a lady if I was really her son. This lady thought my mother had stolen me. The very next morning my mother took me back to the farm.

Grandfather took good care of me. He used to tell people that he wanted to give me the best education that money could buy. Grandfather never hit me, he never laid a hand on me. He paid a lot of attention to me. When his buggy would roll I'd be in there. He took me everywhere with him, to the stores, to meet white folks, to church on Sunday. People look up and say, "There come Uncle ~~Lee~~ ^{big} Lee and little Lee." It seemed like people knowed me through him. We was so close, when they see him they see me.

Somebody else I remember was Aunt Pauline who used to live around there with her husband, Uncle Bill. She was a kind of Creole and she didn't speak English. She wore a red handkerchief on her head and had red lips and wore a long dress. My grandfather and I used to pass her on the dirt road and she'd say "Bo' jour", and I didn't know what the hell she was saying. I'd break and run. I didn't know she was just saying good morning to me. Her husband, Bill Riето, fought

Who
is
Uncle
Lee?

Bo-jour 

in the Civil War, and he had a old long gun that I sometimes saw sticking out their window when I passed there. He musta fought in the Union Army. I know he didn't fight for the Confederates, staying around my grandfather, 'cause my grandfather was pretty militant.

One day some neighbor's children and I was playing in my yard when suddenly I heard someone scream. Grandfather came out of the barn bent over, blood running down his leg. I don't know how it happened but he cut his leg while working in the barn. Aunt Hannah came out of the house, and helped him get into bed. Aunt Hannah doctored his leg day and night. A hospital that would treat black people was many miles away. Grandfather didn't realize how seriously he was hurt. Months passed; his leg got worse, and he still wasn't seen by a doctor. Things wasn't the same on the farm anymore. The neighbors would leave the house with worried looks on their faces. I soon realized my grandfather's leg wouldn't heal, and it kept getting worse. In the meantime, Aunt Hannah had taken ill and soon she died.

My grandfather hired a housekeeper to take care of us. The housekeeper's name was Betsy. I called her "Aunt Betsy". Later he married her. Little did I know at that time what heartbreak Aunt Betsy would bring to me. It wasn't long after that one night Aunt Betsy woke me up and told me my grandfather had died. I remember hanging onto his neck and screaming. The people that was in the room had to pull me away from him.

lots of time?
Need a
sense of
humor
E. Was she sick
before grandfather?

"Later
he
married
her?"



My grandfather was a member of the Woodmen of the World. This was the name of a secret order organization, something like the Odd Fellows. He was also a member of the Masons. The men who attended the funeral wore white gloves, and they carried swords which was a symbol of the organization, All the women wore white. I was dressed in white, too. I was so hurt, and feelings of loneliness and emptiness filled my heart, since my grandfather had been the most important person in my life.

The death of my grandfather was the turning point of my life. I remained with Aunt Betsy on the farm. Betsy was a mean woman with little education or knowledge. Betsy brought her sister, Aunt Alice, to live with us on the farm. Her sister was a mean old woman just like her. Neither of them had any consideration for me or any one else. Betsy was never pleased with me or anything I tried to do. She used to fuss at me, and scold me and only half feed me.

One evening some men came to the farm. Aunt Betsy had a long conversation with them. Later I found out Aunt Betsy was giving all my grandfather's tools away.

Weeks later a man named Buster Wells, who used to work on the farm for Grandfather, came to live with us on the farm; he also brought his wife. Aunt Betsy gave Buster fifty head of cattle to sell for her. Weeks passed. She was waiting for him to bring the money back, but Buster never came back to the farm. The only news she heard about him was that he had died. Later Buster's wife left the farm. Since Aunt Betsy had no



← Need more
on importance
of tools
center on
(OK)
done

education, men would count her money and shortchange her all the time. Finally all her money was stolen by these people she had trusted.

The remainder of the inheritance grandfather left her was gradually given to her sisters and brothers. Everything that my grandfather had of value was sold or given away. But my grandfather left his land to me and Aunt Betsy. When Aunt Betsy didn't have anything else to sell or give away, she tried to sell my land. But little did she know my grandfather had fixed it so no one could sell it. Finally, Aunt Betsy went to a court in Opelousas to try to sell my land. But the judge told Aunt Betsy that the land couldn't be sold until I reached the age of twenty-one. By that time I would be old enough to decide legally what I wanted to do with the land.

When Aunt Betsy came from court she was frustrated with me. She went around the farm with frowns all over her face. Then she really started mistreating me. The little food she gave me to eat wasn't served on the long dining room table I was used to eating at. All my toys and clothes disappeared. I never knew whether she gave them away or burned them up. I wasn't surprised anymore over any stupid thing she did. There was times when I would walk around crying and longing for my grandfather. Her sister Alice would often hit me for no reason. My grandfather's friends stopped coming to the farm. They wouldn't have anything to do with such mean women.

Later Aunt Betsy sent me to live with her brother. He was very friendly towards me, more so than his sister. But my

visit was cut short. Aunt Betsy came and took me back to the farm. With little food to eat and the mistreatment of these old ladies, word began to spread throughout Morrow about the way they was treating me.

One night in 1927, we had a bad rainstorm. High water was everywhere. All the homes was flooded out with water. People, black and white, received lots of assistance from the Red Cross. When the water kept getting higher, some soldiers came and took everyone to Camp Beauregard. We stayed there three days. When the water went down, we went back to our homes; we was transported back by the soldiers. On our way back home from Camp Beauregard, we saw dead cattle all along the roads, and in people's yards, and scattered around their farmhouses. It took weeks before all the dead cattle was burned.

Things began to get better for me. News reached my cousins who lived in the countryside between LeMoyen and Morrow. My cousin was named Tot Howard and his wife Rosetta Howard. Tot Howard came to the farm and took me away from Aunt Betsy and her sister and he took me to live with him and his wife. (At this time, I found out Aunt Betsy didn't want me to leave the farm. She intended to have me stay until I reached the age of twenty-one, so she could try to influence me to sign my land over to her.) Tot Howard and his wife was very poor people, but they tried to do all they could for me.

Tot wanted me in school. I had never attended school before. I was very excited about the idea of going to school

News of
mistreatment?

Were they from
Scotter's side
Bad or Good?

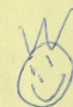
with kids my own age. This was the beginning of a new experience for me.

All the black children in this small community went to the same school in Morrow. Most of the children was from the families of the Howard people around the same plantation. I went to school three months out of a year. We didn't learn too much in that small length of time. Yet, this was quite some experience to look forward to. All of these black families was sharecroppers. Miss Ida Bowers, our teacher, was very respectable and taught one hundred children, which included all primary grades up to the fifth grade. When I became older I was transferred to another school in LeMoyen. This school was about six miles away.

I walked the six miles every day, in cold weather and in rain. I walked on the railroad tracks with the other black children. We was afraid to walk on the highway because a man had got run over. Black children couldn't ride on the school buses. I realized for the first time I was living in an evil Jim Crow, discriminatory, and racist society. School buses was available only for the white children. This made me want to learn what was behind these problems that existed for black people.

I liked to read. We used to read books like *Bob and Nancy*, and the story of the Tar Baby, and "Little Boy Blue Come Blow Your Horn. The sheep's in the meadow, the cows in the corn." Hell, with stuff like that no wonder I didn't learn nothing in that school!

~~What~~
age was he?
Had a sense
of time



But I did learn how to read. Reading books became very interesting and enjoyable. After the three months of school was over, I went back to help my cousins. When we wasn't farming, we chopped wood for some white people's homes. The money from chopping wood helped out in the winter months. One thing I couldn't understand was why my cousin didn't chop wood for us and prepare for winter. Instead we would wait until it got real cold, then we would gather wood every day for the fireplace. But I didn't complain about anything that was done around the place.

The sharecroppers was very poor but I appreciated what my relatives was doing for me. My appetite was so big I wanted different kinds of food to eat. My cousin Aunt T-Babe (we called our cousins "aunt" and "uncle"; and T-Babe was the nickname for Rosetta, Uncle Tot's wife) made lunch for us everyday to take to school. Sometimes we had potatoes and a cinnamon roll, and sometimes we was eating that damned pork. We didn't know no better. But we ate good. Sometimes Aunt T-Babe made Cha Cha, made out of cabbage, cucumber, pepper, mustard, and green tomatoes. They had a good garden. They had potato banks where they would store the potatoes buried in the ground wrapped in hay and corn silk. They killed their hogs and salted the meat and smoked the meat and made sausage. They would catch fish and smoke the fish. And Aunt T-Babe would bake light rolls. She would let the dough set and rise up and then bake it. And then wrap it up in a piece of cloth to keep it fresh. I remember we didn't have no ice, so we put

? Is this
• going
somewhere
later? (the
wood)

"Smoked
pork" why?

fresh



our drinks in sawdust in a tub. At least that's how I remember it. It's funny how at 77 years old you can remember a lot of things. Seventy-seven ain't too old to remember!

I lived with Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe for ^{quite a few} ~~several~~ years, longer than I stayed with anybody else. They raised me like I was their own child.

One night Uncle Tot and his sister Aunt Bernice went to a small bar in the community. While they was sitting at the table a drunk white man named Alec Havord came in from the white bar next door and tried to kiss or dance with Aunt Bernice. She refused him, and then he hauled off and slapped her. As soon as this happened, the light in the bar went out. Then a shot rang out in the bar. The white man was shot. Before he died, he called out that Uncle Tot had shot him. This man didn't know who shot him. Uncle Tot didn't have his gun that night. But, of course, everyone believed Uncle Tot killed this man. White men on horses rode all night in the rural communities looking for Uncle Tot. The neighbors gathered all their children and put them in one house, until morning. This went on for three weeks. Uncle Tot escaped the riders' hands. He had hidden out in a church for two weeks. Later, with the help of friends, he escaped to the train station and made his getaway to Texas. Soon afterward, Aunt T-Babe moved to Evergreen, Louisiana, and took me along. We went to live with her brother. Later, we heard that a white man did the killing in the bar that night.

E How old?

I started school again in Evergreen. I got along fine with the other kids. One time I was playing on some thin ice and fell into a hole. The kids had to pull me out. Another time when my little cousin and I went to a grocery store, I stole a grape and put it in his mouth. When we got home, my cousin told Aunt T-Babe and she gave me a good spanking.

Aunt T-Babe decided it was time for me to get baptized, so I was baptized in the local Baptist church one Sunday morning with three more children. I remember how the preacher gave a long sermon over us, and people be hollering just like it was a funeral. Then the old preacher took me in the water and I thought he was going to preach my funeral. And that water was cold! People just hollering. When the preacher dipped me that last time people was standing all around in the water and they started to singing "done got over." I remember that good. They took us back to a house and dressed and fed us. I felt like I was some kind of chosen person. For a while I went to church every Sunday and also had Communion.

At about the age of 15, I decided it was time for me to go out and find work to help support myself. I was still a young boy, but pretty large for my age. I was lucky to find work as a houseboy, working for a German family, although this job didn't turn out too well. The salary was too low for all the work that was required. So, I left and went to live with Aunt T-Babe's brother, Dad Jones, and his family, where I worked every day in the fields picking and chopping cotton. With the little money I received I bought some clothes. Dad

why
clothes?
(Grandson)

Jones had a large family, but everyone got to eat a cooked meal and drink milk every morning. He treated me like one of the family.

The field hands' day off was on Saturday. One morning a boy in the neighborhood wanted someone to work in his place, selling meat door-to-door on Saturdays. The job was paying one dollar and fifty cents a day. I took this job and saved enough money to hobo to Melville, Louisiana. I went there looking for other relatives and a cousin named Joe Reece. When I caught the freight train to Melville, other hobos was in the boxcar with me. They told me when the time came to jump off. With a suitcase under my arm and a little money in my pocket, I finally made it to Melville.

Melville wasn't no large town but it had streets and a theater. I started walking down the street asking everyone I met whether they knew anyone by the name of Joe Reece. I happened to see a lady walking on the street and I said, "Lady, can you tell me where Joe Reece lives?" She said, "He lives out of town." She told me how to get to where he lived, then she asked me, "What is your name? You kin to Joe?" I said, "Yes, my name is Lee Brown."

Then she started mentioning some of the Brown's names to see if I knew any. I recognized some of the names she mentioned. It turned out this lady was my second cousin. She took me home with her. It so happened she lived only a short distance from Melville. When we arrived at her home, I was introduced to her husband, her daughter and other relatives.

Why?
who were
they?
why did we
want to go?

Maybe
tighten this
part up

of Bob
or Bob?
How are they
related? How
did they get
to Melville?

Her name was Esther; my other cousins was Jessie Brown, and Henry Brown. I got so excited meeting so many relatives. After dinner we talked about other relatives who lived in different towns. I didn't know any of the relatives mentioned, but was glad to hear I had a large family. When time came to go to bed, cousin Esther prepared a bed in the back of the house. She told me to stay as long as I wanted.

That just goes to show how you can be walking on the street and you just stop some particular person, and it turns out you're related to them. That shows how things can happen. I don't know what you call it. I don't know if I was a chosen man or what, but that's what happened to me.

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 LeBlanc 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. LeBlanc was handicapped, she couldn't use her left hand.

The LeBlancs 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 LeBlancs had two grandchildren by another daughter about the same age as I. Their grandchildren and I got along fine together. Mrs. LeBlanc 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. LeBlanc'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~~ ^{For a while time} 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 LeBlanc'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

One thing for
sure? How
did he get
the dog?

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 LeBlancs 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

Pants
where I
learned something
are good -
can tell you
more of
that?

Clothes
again -
what is the
connection?
His grandfather?

who?
where?
why?

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 Bertram. 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

Who?
Where?

E. Good
motivation
E. How did
he know him?

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

What?
What is
the lesson?
Cut

!
When?
Did he
return?
He didn't
return?

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

cut
?
OK

what
age?

and typo

!

Repeat
of 35¢ above

!

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

clothes
again

!
! Explain what that
means - is it a
good thing?

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

In a
union?

2. 2
← why?
How?

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

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more

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.

!
↓ clothes -
(looking) sharp

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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.

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earlier
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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 ^{do} 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

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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

What kind
of ins \$
← How did he pay
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return? Why
did he leave?

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 Gila Bend, Arizona.

When I arrived in Gila Bend, 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

Why?
who was she
again?
← Do you need
this?

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

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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.

Chapter 3/Los Angeles

(ver 2, 6/24/98)

As time passed, Los Angeles kept coming more and more to mind. After working on the railroad job for about three months, I left one morning after being paid. I arrived in Los Angeles at four o'clock that evening. I think this was in 1942. When the train pulled into the station, I was astonished to see how large and beautiful the station looked. I wandered around the station for a while, then I saw a black man standing in the station. I went and asked him if he could tell me where the black people's section of town was. I always liked to be around my people. The man said, "Central Avenue. Catch the Central Avenue streetcar. When you see a crowd of black people that is Central Avenue!"

In all my excitement in this crowded city, I caught another streetcar but I transferred to the Central car. I stayed on the streetcar until I came to lots of black people on the street. I got off the streetcar at Twelfth and Central Avenue.

A lady was sitting at a table; she was registering people to vote. I thought she ought to be able to give me some information so I walked up to her and asked if she knew where I could find a hotel that was renting rooms at a reasonable rate. The lady said, "I have a friend, Mrs. Maude Williams, who is renting rooms." Then the lady said "I'll give you a note to take to Mrs. Williams, 'cause she's a very

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good friend of mine." As it happened the lady at the table was named Mrs. Brown. I run up on a lot of Browns. So I taken the note and went to 1217 South Central Avenue, which was the address. I went to the hotel and gave the note to the lady who was behind the desk. This lady said, "I know Mrs. Brown; she's a friend of mine. Yes, I have a room for rent." I asked her how much it was and she said three dollars a week. I paid for two weeks. When I paid for the room, the lady gave me a key. I went to my room, hung my clothes in the closet, and went back out onto the streets.

I walked the streets for hours, looking at different parts of Los Angeles. I was looking at different faces to see if I recognized anyone I knew. I didn't recognize anyone, so I just started talking to some fellows on the streets. I saw this one fellow wearing a pair of long-toed shoes, and I thought, "He looks like he might have some knowledge." I asked him what the job situation was. The fellow said, "If you can't find a job, the newspapers carry jobs or ask at the employment agency." He told me about the Sentinel newspaper, the black newspaper. The fellow and I began looking through the "want ads". Finally, I picked out an employment agency located on Jefferson Avenue. He explained to me what streetcar to take to get there. I went back to my room, put the newspaper on the bed and wrote my room number on a slip of paper. I knew I could remember where the hotel was because of the Coca Cola plant and the funeral home on Central, but I wasn't sure I'd remember what room. The room

long
toed
shoes
knowledge

number was twelve. Then I went back to the streets to look around Los Angeles some more.

The street on Central Avenue was crowded with black people. Some was shopping; bars crowded inside and out. Children was running up and down the streets. Central Avenue reminded me of some streets in the South. When I finished looking these places over, I decided to go to a movie. I hadn't eaten all day, so I stopped in a restaurant and bought two hamburgers and a Coke. I took my food and ate it in the theater. I stayed until it closed.

As I laid in bed that night, I began to wonder if the people in California would be friendly to work with and what kind of job I might find. After thinking about this for a while, I finally felt so exhausted I fell asleep.

Early the next morning, I woke up feeling rested. When I looked out the window, the weather was foggy. I realized Los Angeles would be a very foggy place to live.

One hour later, I was out on the streets. I went looking for the employment agency. The employment agency office was open on Sunday. When I entered the office, I was astonished to see a black man behind the desk. Naturally, since I had been working on the farms and railroads, it was a good feeling to see a black man working behind a desk.

We talked some and I asked if he had any jobs. It turned out the he was from New Orleans, too. Then he said he had a job in Corona. The fee was ten dollars. I paid the fee, then the agent called Corona to find out what type of work they

had available. When the agent finished talking on the phone, he told me, "They need a man to work in the dining room of a restaurant and wash dishes." I wanted the job 'cause in a restaurant I could get my food and have money to pay my room rent until I got myself established. He asked if I could leave that evening to live on the premises. I told the agent I could live on the premises and I would take the job.

I went back to the hotel and told the Mrs. Williams about the job I had gotten in Corona. She was surprised to hear I had found a job so quickly. She said, "Some people have been living in Los Angeles for years and haven't found a job yet; but, you just arrived in California two days ago and you were able to get a job!" I didn't tell her that the agent was my homeboy.

I packed my suitcase to head for Corona, about thirty miles from Los Angeles. I caught a train that evening. When I arrived at the station, I didn't know who was going to pick me up. Then a black couple drove up in a stationwagon. The man asked me, "Are you Lee Brown?" I answered him, "Yes, and are you the one who came to take me to the job?" The man said, " Yes, I was sent by the boss to take you to Corona. He introduced himself and told me the lady in the car was his wife, and they worked on the Fuller Ranch as cooks.

When I arrived, I didn't have any idea this place was so huge. They called it a ranch but it was really a restaurant - a large house and dining room, with beautiful green grass, which looked like somebody had just finished cutting it.

Tall trees was all around. A garden, with different kinds of vegetables, was growing behind the house. When I went into the house, I was introduced to other black employees: the maid, the waiter. After I ^{met} ~~was shown~~ they showed me the room where would stay. I stayed one hour, then the man and his wife took me back to the station. This happened on a Monday, which I was told was to be my day off. So I went back to Los Angeles, stayed that night, and reported to work Tuesday morning. They paid me twenty-five dollars a week, plus room and board. Besides working in the dining room, and washing dishes, I had to help the cook by bringing in vegetables from the garden. Since I took my time coming back the cook, Henry, started kidding me and calling me "Lightening", and we would laugh about that.

It was two days before I met the owner, Mr. Fuller. I never did see too much of him, but he seemed a nice fellow. The Fuller family entertained frequently. Sometimes, when a party was given, it would last for days. Well-dressed people with furs and diamonds on would come and go all day long. This job was a considerable change from my other jobs.

I worked a month before I got a chance to meet any other people, besides the ones I worked with on the ranch. Mr. Fuller hired a black lady for part-time work. She was friendly from the first time I met her. When she was working on the ranch for awhile, she invited me to come to her house on my day off for dinner. I accepted the invitation and went to her house, and met her four daughters. I was glad to have

met her family, because on my days off I wouldn't have to stay on the ranch. Sometimes this lady's daughters would take me shopping. Soon I began looking forward to my days off.

Everything was going along fine on the job, or at least I thought so, until one day the waiter, Mickey, went to town with Mr. Fuller. I didn't think anything about this at the time, because Mickey would go with him all the time. But this particular day they was gone all day. I don't know what Mickey said to him but when they got back to the ranch Mr. Fuller said to me, "I'm going to have to let you go. The work is slow." Which I knowed was a lie, 'cause the work was the same as when I first started. Then I thought maybe it was that Mickey was jealous, because the new lady Mr. Fuller had hired was friendly to me.

I didn't ask any questions. I just packed my suitcase and left. I went back to Los Angeles. I didn't waste any time but went to the employment agency. I was sent to another job at a drive-in, working as a porter and washing dishes. This job was paying twenty-five dollars per week. But I needed more money to live on, so I quit the job five months later.

I started feeling discouraged about now, 'cause I was finding out a person living in California needed more money to survive than in the South. Rent, clothing, food, and so on was higher than the money the job was paying. Some jobs paid better, but those was the ones that required special skills. I was a common laborer and had to take whatever job I could.



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Naturally, I was anxious to find better employment. I was able to find another job from employment office, working on the Union Pacific dining cars. I used to make runs on these trains from Los Angeles to Omaha, Nebraska. I made a few runs from Los Angeles to San Diego. At first I worked as a "Forty", sometimes called a fourth cook, which actually meant I was a dishwasher. But the chef, who was a brother, and I would get to talking and be drinking and have a couple of nips, and he saw that I knowed about food so he said he wanted me to be a "Thirty". A "Thirty" was a vegetable preparer and foodserver for the waiters, when they was serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner on trains. During the War the help on these trains ate better food than the paying customers.

But I decided I didn't like being a "Thirty", I wanted to go back to being a "Forty". The reason I wanted to be a "Forty" was that the six waiters put all their tips in a cup, and when we got to Omaha they shared the tips with me. I wouldn't have to go to borrow from the commissary or nothing because I had some money to buy things. A "Thirty" didn't get any tips. I tried everything, but the chef wouldn't let me go back.

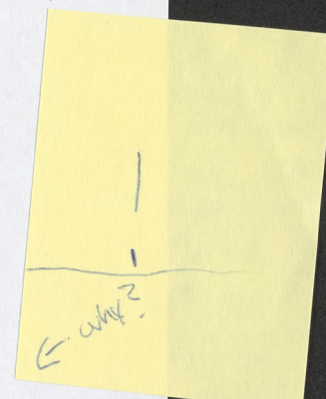
Then the "big boy" used to come around, they called him the travelling chef. He was a brother. He put on white gloves and hit the pots and dishes to see if they was clean. I was kinda glad I was a "Thirty" 'cause I didn't have to be bothered with him no more. When I was a "Forty" the chef

used to warn me, "The 'big boy' is on here now," which meant, "Be cautious!"

Sometimes the brothers when they left the train they used to leave with bacon, eggs, butter, chicken, but something told me -- maybe it was divine knowledge -- something told me not to take nothing. We had a guy they called Stringbean, another brother. He taken my place washing dishes. He talked more shit than a radio! I said to myself, "Oh, brother!" Let me tell you what happened. Stringbean was a railroad detective. Union Pacific was losing all that food and they put Stringbean in there. But something told me to watch out for him. I was lucky. All the other brothers lost they jobs. Stringbean turned them in. I figured something was funny about him; you can tell by the way people act.

On my first run through New Orleans I thought about my mother. I thought about maybe going to New Orleans and trying to find her, but I didn't try to find her at that point.

The railroad job was alright, although the pay was only forty-five cents an hour. My problem was that I couldn't catch no air in the dining car. You couldn't raise the windows to catch some air. I needed air, I was born under the air sign, Gemini. After awhile since the windows was never pulled up at night, when I slept on the train it was hard for me to breathe. So I was forced to quit this job. However, I worked six months before I left.



I soon found out Los Angeles was a weak union town, it wasn't organized. The hotels wasn't organized, the restaurants wasn't organized. Where they had unions, like the RKO Studios dining room, the union leadership was weak. Wages was paid according to what employers wanted to pay: low pay, bad working conditions, no pension plans, no sick leaves, no health plan for the employees. Who was hurt the most? Black people! And plenty of black people was out of work. Now I know why families left Los Angeles, to try to find work in other cities.

One day I was standing on the streets talking to some fellows. I overheard them talking about work in Hollywood. I went to inquire about the job. It was my luck that this job was still open, working in a restaurant for forty dollars a week plus meals. Mostly black help worked in the kitchen. One black busgirl worked in the dining room. The waiters was white. My job was working in the storage room and cleaning stoves. I handled all the keys to the storage room, and helped the head waitress close the restaurant at night.

Working in this restaurant, the Carolina Pine on Melrose Avenue, I found out how prejudiced some white people in California was toward black people. One evening, I'll never forget it, a party of five white people and one black sister came into the restaurant together and sat down at a table. All of them ordered dinner. The white waitress served soup to everybody, except the sister, whose soup wasn't served until after the white people had finished the main course.

The busgirl came into the kitchen, told us what had happened, and all the black employees got angry. I got to talking, we got to talking, talked to the chef and the sous chef. They was all black people from the South, too. I was surprised to see white people still prejudiced in California. I thought I had left all that hate behind in the South. I suggested to the black employees that they come to work one hour early to have a little meeting to discuss what we was going to do. I had a little authority 'cause I was carrying the keys to the storage room.

The regular time to be at work was eleven o'clock a.m. The next morning all the black employees came to work at ten o'clock. We decided that the two cooks and myself should go talk to the owner, Mr. Davis. We told the owner what had happened. He called in the waitress and she went to crying and all that bullshit, talking about she was sorry. Hell, she was prejudiced, that what she was! She should have served all the soup together. She didn't want to serve the black sister. We wanted her fired. We said if she wasn't fired, the other help wouldn't come to work the next morning. She begged and said she was sorry. Mr. Davis told her it was wrong. He told her that she had to serve black people at all times in his place of business. She said she was sorry and that it would never happen again.

All the black employees was standing outside the restaurant waiting until the owner and the rest of us came out to explain what had happened and what the owner intended

to do. Mr. Davis said: "This refusal to serve black people will never happen anymore, and I would like all of the employees to come in and go back to work." The black employees talked this over and decided to return to work. The waitress acted much better.

This poor white waitress refusing to serve black people! If she had any true knowledge of herself, she would have acted more intelligently. A worker is a worker. It doesn't matter what color your skin might be. The bosses will stick together. Why won't the poor workers stick together on jobs? On this job the workers was organizing to stay off the job, although some of them couldn't afford to stay home, but they was willing to fight for what they believed in. If black and white poor workers would take more time to fight the bosses for better working conditions and better pay, all poor workers would live better under this system.

About this time I got called up for the draft. I went before the board and I got classified as 4-F 'cause I couldn't hear. But that was a fake. When I got to the end of the line the doctor dropped a silver dollar behind me. I heard it but I didn't flinch. I didn't want to go in. Shit, no! I ain't had nothing to fight for. Give me something to fight for. Freedom! I had a little sense. You can overestimate me but don't underestimate me! We wasn't getting freedom, we wasn't getting decent jobs. There was more discrimination there in Los Angeles than there was in New Orleans. I saw some black soldiers and a lot of sailors

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being shipped down to Long Beach. They came to the Dunbar and the Club Alabam and the Last Word, bars in the black community.

During World War II, about 1943, there was a lot of racial tension against both blacks and Mexicans in Los Angeles. One time a riot started in Los Angeles between white sailors and Mexicans. During that time there was a men's fashion called Zoot suits, with sharp trousers with a long chain, a long coat and hat with a long feather. A lot of Mexicans and some blacks wore Zoot suits. A white sailor claimed that a Mexican man wearing a Zoot suit had raped his wife. Then the white sailors started attacking every Mexican they came across. The Mexicans started organizing and started fighting back. Then the police started helping the white sailors fight the Mexicans. The white sailors said they was going to come down to Central Avenue and kill all the niggers, and cut all the Zoot suits off them.

Then the black Zoot suits started helping the Mexicans fight. I heard that the black leaders called on the Mexican Government to try to stop the riot. Then the white sailors attacked a girl who was in the ticket box office at the theater on Central Avenue. The black leaders warned the white sailors that if they came past the Lincoln Theater, then black people was going to defend themselves. If the riot didn't stop, they would open fire. No one got killed during the riot.

I think this riot was started to stir up hate and so the police could attack the Mexicans and the blacks. I got caught in the riot while I was trying to come home. The streetcars had stopped running and I was walking down the street. I ended up running down the streets with the black and Mexican Zoot suits. The riot lasted four or five days.

Later on, I worked for Frederick Cold Storage loading and unloading boxcars. On this job, I worked with other men loading up boxcars with different kinds of food, to be sent overseas for the soldiers. We would send food, powdered eggs, barrels of whiskey, whatever. But soldiers I talked with said, "We haven't ever seen any whiskey. The whiskey would be for the top brass."

I used to take a hammer and bust them barrels so we get ~~the shit~~, that good whiskey. The superintendent would look the other way and say, "I don't see nothing." One day the superintendent got so drunk that he started walking on his knees.

This job went along fine for three months, until one day a black foreman picked up a stick to hit me. I think he must've told me something to do and he didn't figure I was moving fast enough, or something. He was hard, he wanted to be tough. A bad attitude. I overpowered the foreman and took the stick away from him. This black foreman was so proud of his authority over other black workers that his job went to his head. Now he wouldn't ask his fellow workers on the job, in an intelligent way, to do things, but he demanded things.

I hadn't ever had to fight anyone on the job before but knew how to defend myself.

One thing I haven't ever approved of was fighting on the job where I worked. It doesn't make any sense to me. Some blacks with authority, I have seen, treat other blacks on the job worse than any other race. When blacks work on jobs with a little authority over other blacks, they don't have to prove to the bosses that they are not prejudiced. Just treat everyone the same, regardless of race, color, creed! I have seen blacks on jobs lying, harassing, trying to discredit other blacks to get them fired. Don't they know they can also be fired? Lots of black workers let blacks with authority on jobs get away with a lot of mistreatment, because they are black.

After the fight I knew suddenly that this black foreman couldn't be trusted when my back was turned. I called the police to teach him a lesson. The police wanted to take the foreman to jail, but I didn't want them to take him to jail. I told the police there was already too many black people in jails. I only called the police to have them tell the foreman to leave me alone on the job. No job is worth fighting over. When I said this to the police, they didn't make any arrest. The police talked with the foreman and left.

Working in and out of the cold-storage kept me with a constant cold, so I soon quit. Next I worked for Triangle Candy Factory as a combination janitor and watchman, which wasn't a bad job. One thing, for sure, no violence ever

happened! I even carried a gun, which they gave me as part of the watchman job.

When I had worked for around three months, one evening on my way home from work, I met two teenage girls walking down the street selling tickets. One of the girls came up and asked me if I would buy a ticket for the church. Quite naturally I wasn't going to turn her down. I told the girl I would buy a ticket, if she let me sit beside her in church. She told me her name was Thelma Brown and, yes, she would let me sit beside her in church. I bought two tickets. Thelma said she was seventeen years old. To me she looked much younger and smaller for her age. We sat next to each other in church that night. In church I met Thelma's grandmother, and Thelma invited me to her home. Thelma lived with her mother and grandmother.

After that night, we started seeing each other regularly. We went to movies and out to dinner on my days off. Soon she started coming to my room at night and would stay until three or four o'clock in the morning. We said we was going to the show, so Thelma's mother thought she was in the movies, because the movies stayed open all night.

One evening we was walking down Central Avenue. A policeman called me aside and asked me to buy some tickets for the police benefit. Thelma looked so young for her age, I thought at first the police was going to question me about her age. Since it was just about the tickets I bought two tickets.

Thelma's mother and grandmother treated me as one of the family. Sometimes I stayed all night at their house. I slept in the same bed with Thelma and her grandmother. I slept on the outside. Wasn't nothing funny happening there. They liked me, the grandmother and the mother both, they wanted me to marry Thelma. They thought I was a good man. I treated them with respect. But I wasn't in no marrying mood then.

Every evening I would bring candy home for Thelma. Our romance was doing fine, until her grandmother started asking questions about our sex together. I was twenty-two at the time. Thelma and I did have sex together; but we kept it to ourselves, because she wasn't of age.

Soon we stopped seeing each other. I don't remember what happened, just a parting of the ways. Maybe it was cause they was worried about marriage. The grandmother and the mother wanted us to get married, maybe that was the reason. I saw Thelma on the streets several times after we parted. We spoke to each other in a friendly way.

I had a lot of girlfriends at this time. I liked them, I respected them, but I wasn't wanting to get married. Some of them had husbands in the army or on ships. I never did see the husbands. The women told me that when the husband came back we couldn't be together no more. That's the way it was then.

I met a man named Sydney and his wife, Edna. They lived at the hotel at 1217 South Central. We became good friends.

His wife worked in Los Angeles in a restaurant. Sydney worked in Hollywood. We all drank together on our days off.

Unbeknownst to his wife, Sydney also had a girlfriend named Bertha. One night Sydney was driving around town in his car. His wife was sitting in the front seat with him and his girlfriend, Bertha, was sitting in the back seat with me. Sydney had Bertha sit with me, so his wife would think she was my girlfriend. We stopped off at some friends' house for a few drinks. Now Bertha was a nice looking woman. I didn't want to just let that get by. And Sydney was already married. On our way back to the hotel, I asked Bertha if she would come up to my room. When she agreed, Sydney didn't want to let us out of the car. He got mad, but he couldn't say nothing because his wife was in the car. I had him then brother, I had him between the devil and the deep blue sea. When we got out of the car, Bertha came to my room and stayed.

The next morning Sydney had got over his anger. He didn't know what we did, I just told him Bertha and I went to my room and had a couple of drinks. We had a great laugh about the whole thing and remained good friends. That's the way it was then. I was young and I liked good-looking women.

For a time I went to work in the cafeteria at the RKO Studio in Hollywood. This was where all the actors ate. I had a combination job -- washing dishes and busboy. After I was working on this job for a while I was told it was a union job. A white union man came and told me. "This is a union



job," and he brought a white union man to replace me. Now I was in a union but not that union. If I had been told before this happened, I would have joined the union. Well, it became clear to me that it wasn't just a union job---it was another one of those prejudiced jobs! They had it hooked up, they didn't want a black man in that job. I was the only black in the cafeteria. I guess they figured that if they let one in others might come. It made me realize that some union reps could be prejudiced. They don't want black folks to have a chance. They block you, and that gives the boss and the owner more power to keep the workers divided. It weakens the unions and the bosses can make inroads. You get bad contracts when they keep the black and white or any other workers fighting each other.

In less than a week I was working for Hills Brothers Chemical Company on a machine for packing and tying bags. This was when I joined the Youth Movement of the NAACP -- and after a while I even got the President and Superintendent of the company to join the NAACP.

I was already in the NAACP from my time in Texas. I found out that they was having meetings at the YMCA on 28th and Central so I decided to go to join in the struggle. I met a lady named Mrs. Charlotte Bass who was the editor of the California Eagle newspaper and the director of the Youth Movement of the NAACP. The Youth NAACP had two hundred members, including some actors and actresses. I learned a lot about movies. Sometimes we went to the Lincoln Theater to

see stage shows and movies. On Wednesdays they would let the Youth NAACP members in free.

One night we met at the YMCA with actors and actresses to discuss getting better acting parts for black people in movies. Some black actors and actresses came that night and told the NAACP that they wouldn't play any more Uncle Tom parts in the movies. Lena Horne and Hattie McDaniel couldn't come that night but sent a telegram. Uncle Tom parts for black actors and actresses was encouraged by film producers in Hollywood. This was one reason black actors and actresses wasn't able to show how truly great or excellent they was in their performances. The great talent they had to offer to the public was denied; Uncle Tom parts was the only kind they could get. This is why the Youth NAACP had to step in to fight for better parts in movies and on stage for blacks. Mantan Moreland, and Willie Best was well known for playing these Uncle Tom parts in movies.

I got a chance to meet quite a few movie stars -- Louise Beavers, Ruby Dandridge, Dorothy's mother, Darby Jones, Benny Carter and Peterson. Mantan Moreland and Willie Best often came to the YMCA and talked about parts that was given to them in pictures. Once they got in an argument, in a friendly way, about whose eyes was the biggest, which one could roll their eyes the best, and who ran the fastest in films. Everyone in the YMCA would start laughing at the way they would act. Darby Jones was progressive. He'd stand up for better parts.

One night I ran into Ruby Dandridge at the Club Alabam'. I heard her laughing. I said, "Hell, that's Ruby." She was the loudest thing in there. I went over and talked to her. Wyonna Harris used to sing at the Club Alabam'. "The King of the Blues" he called himself.

Hollywood was exciting, fascinating, more so to me because I got acquainted with some of the stars, and I actually took parts in a couple of mob scenes in pictures. Some films called for extras to play in different scenes. When this was available, I usually applied for the parts. Every day I looked on a board to find out if extras was needed.

Old man Gray was a member of the Screen Actors' Guild. He was a tall fellow with gray hair. This was one reason he got to act in a lot of films. He was the one that would hire you, send you out to get jobs as extras in mob scenes, which is what they called scenes where they had a lot of extras. They wouldn't use your name in the credits. You might be standing up, sitting down, whatever. They paid \$9.50 and a meal a day, which was pretty good. You might get one day, two days.

I actually got extra parts in two pictures -- "I Walked with a Zombie," with Darby Jones, and "My Heart is in Dixie," with Clarence Muse. I was in a jungle scene in one and picking cotton in the other.

Old Man Gray told me where to buy clothes on credit. With new clothing and a few dollars in my pocket, I started

acting the part of a movie star. I wore only pointed-toe shoes, triple A's. I would often be seen at the Dunbar Hotel, drinking only Tom Collins. My hair stayed conked back; I only let women barbers fix my hair. I was as sharp as Dick was when his daddy died!

At Ella's Cafe on Central the people gave me a name, Kokomo, because of a jungle scene I got an extra part in. They'd say, "Here comes Kokomo." But this later got to be a problem. I had a girlfriend then named Mildred that I had met on the streetcar. She was married but her husband was in the service. One night I took Mildred to the theater to see "My Heart is in Dixie." When she saw me picking cotton, Mildred got real angry with me because she was embarrassed by the movie. She told me, "You should be ashamed to play in scenes that are so degrading to black people, because you fight in the NAACP for better playing parts for blacks." When Mildred said this, I really felt ashamed and discouraged with myself. I thought I was a helluva actor, but I wasn't nothing but a fool.

I stopped right then and didn't try to get no more parts. A director said I could act in a good religious scene, but I didn't try to get the part.

One Saturday night I went to a theater and got a chance to see the heavyweight champion of the world, Joe Louis. He came into the theater with some friends of his. Joe Louis was dressed in his army uniform. I didn't get a chance to meet him, but I was glad to see him. I was sitting five

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seats from him in the same row. The movie that was playing was "One Dark Night". Mantan Moreland and Pig Meat Markham and a few more actors was also there.

Another night I went to a rally at the Shriners Temple in Los Angeles. Darby Jones gave me the tickets. I saw Lena Horne, Edward G. Robinson, Pig Meat Markham, Monty Holly and many more. Paul Robeson was the guest speaker. This was my first time hearing this proud, brilliant man--foremost in the struggle for peoples' rights. He spoke on freedom for our black people here in America. He said, "Black actors and actresses should quit playing Uncle Tom parts in movies. All black people should fight for better schools, better education, and for better jobs." His voice was deep and I felt uplifted. I liked the way he talked. I said to myself, "That's the man!" But I never would've thought that years later I'd get a chance to talk to him and be his bodyguard. Paul Robeson's speech kept my heart and soul together, and made me want to dedicate my life to the struggle for my people.

They was taking up donations that night and I gave the woman my last five dollars in the basket. I told the woman, just take a dollar out the five. Shit, she went to stepping on and I was hollering, "Hey, sister. Hold it! Hold it!" I put on a bigger act than they had up on the stage. People around me went to laughing. Hell, I wanted to keep the four to get me some beer later on!

On 12th and Central Avenue I had met old man Johnson. He worked with the choir in Hollywood. He used to work with Bing Crosby singing in the choir. They had a little newstand at the corner and we used to meet there and talk. He talked about the conditions black people was facing. It hit me that it seemed like a lot of the black people I met was talking about the hard struggle black people was fighting against here in America,

So, I started buying books of all kinds. I went to different kinds of bookstores. I bought "The Master Keys of King Solomon" and other books, second-hand books. "The Master Keys" taught how to take care of yourself, how to have faith and courage, and face reality. How to meet people, and to be cautious at all times. It told about the three Grand Masters and the 3,600 Master Masons. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for but I had it in mind that I could look at it and see what I wanted. I studied these books and started educating myself on different subjects, important persons, places and things. I read books on labor, some political books, some black history, religious books. I was just starting. I wouldn't get deep into books until I went back South.

One day at the hotel I met a school teacher who saw how interested I was in learning. Her name was Catherine. She started coming to my room to help me to improve my reading. My grandfather was my first teacher, and I remembered an old white professor I met in Texas had told me, "If you learn how

to read you can educate yourself." That's what she was helping me to do. She'd give me a book to read, tell me to study it, and when she came back she'd want me read it to her. Her husband worked in the post office. One thing about this man--he didn't mind his wife coming to teach me classes. Sometimes he used to stop by, too, on his way to work. Mrs. Williams, who ran the hotel, was his aunt.

One morning I went to the bus stop to catch the bus for work. A crowd of people was standing on the streets flagging rides trying to get to work. It was a bus strike. I had no idea how to get to work. I had only learned one way to work. I called the boss on the phone, and I told him there was a bus strike, and could he get me a ride to work. He gave me the directions to the Red car, which was running a short distance from the hotel where I lived. I walked seven blocks and caught the Red car and arrived at work two hours late. The other workers came to work in cars; some walked. The Hollywood Boulevard Car was on strike for one week.

They won the strike. I saw again that if people would stick together they could win. I wasn't so concerned about my inconvenience, I was glad to see them on strike. When they won they made me feel a whole lot better and gave me strength. I knowed that was a part of me out their struggling too.

I was standing on the sidewalk in front of a bar one evening when a man came out intoxicated. He wanted to fight whoever came close to him. After pulling his shirt off, this

drew the attention of a crowd of people who was passing by. Suddenly a police patrol car pulled up and stopped. The policemen jumped out of the car and grabbed both arms of the man. After putting handcuffs on the man, the police roughed him up. His shirt was off---the police wouldn't let him put his shirt back on. I went and asked the police to let the man put on his shirt. To me what the police was doing was wrong. I say that was harassing and police brutality, roughing up the man. At least let him put on his shirt.

He told me to mind my business and I said it was my business. To my surprise I was arrested, put in the patrol car and taken off to Newton Station and charged with "interfering with police officers." I was put in this huge jail. The officer led me to a cell and closed the door. I sat on a cot uncertain what would happen in court the next day. I thought to myself: this is my first time being in jail or in any trouble with the law and I shouldn't have been put in jail. I didn't make a phone call that day, because ^I didn't know anyone to call.

The next morning a jail officer brought me into the court room. I sat restless, waiting for my name to be called to appear before the judge. Finally one hour later, I stood before the judge with no attorney to defend my case, except myself. The two officers who did the arresting didn't appear in court. However, the judge carried on with the case. I explained to the judge that this was my first time in trouble with the law and the way those policemen was treating that

man, it was plain police brutality, happening on the streets. I asked the judge for a suspended sentence. Since the judge didn't have much of a case, with no officers appearing in court to testify against me, the judge then gave me six months' suspended sentence with a lecture about how this interfering could have incited a riot ~~the same way it did in~~ Detroit city. The judge said, "If you ever see something like you saw happen on the street again, you wait until you get to court and report it to the judge." When the judge got through talking, I started back toward the cell, but the judge called out, "The case is closed, you can leave."

When I was leaving the courthouse, two black detectives driving down Central Avenue offered me a ride, which I accepted. We got to talking and it turned out they was in the NAACP, too. They said it wasn't right for the police to mistreat the brother but I should've waited until we got to court to say something. They said sometime you should keep your mouth shut and wait for the proper time. But I was talking about speaking up, about struggle, and they wasn't saying "amen" to that.

When the detectives reached the hotel where I lived and stopped the car I got out of his car and thanked them for the lift. Our conversation was very interesting. This is when I really started thinking about the poor conditions under which black people are forced to live in this country, especially prejudice and police brutality. The conversation also

brought to mind about my grandfather who died because hospitals and medical help for black people wasn't close.

I went to work at the Armour Packing Company, loading and unloading meat on trucks. Meal tickets was given to all employees to eat in the cafeteria. I got to talking with a Spanish fellow who was working there and he told me about the union. I told him I'm a union man, I want to join it. He told me that union members would also get a raise that was coming up. This was Local 12 of the packinghouse workers union.

The Armour Packing Company paid a dollar five cents an hour. This was the highest wages I received from any of my jobs and it made me realize the importance of being a member of the union. I felt more independent with sufficient income with which to live.

Soon I moved off Central Avenue and got a room, with the use of the kitchen, at Rev. Victor's home. Rev. Victor was a quiet person. In fact, the neighborhood was quiet. Living in this pleasant environment, I got a chance to study without being disturbed.

One evening, a letter came from Aunt Betsy. The letter came from Louisiana. Before I opened the letter, I thought how did Aunt Betsy get my address. . . and what purpose could she have to contact me after all these years? Aunt Betsy was ill and wanted me to come to Louisiana to see her. I thought she probably wanted to talk to me about my grandfather's

land. But I still felt the same about her, and I didn't go back. I never heard from her again..

With the different kinds of books I had collected, my room started to look like a library. The more I studied, the more knowledge and information I received from these books about what was really happening in this country and around the world. I was especially interested in the long struggles, suffering, bloodshed, beatings and jailings of black people here and around the world, and what black people are still enduring at this present time. I made a promise to myself to continue helping my people, to the best of my ability.

It wasn't long before I began thinking about New Orleans, the city where I was born. Maybe it was the letter from Aunt Betsy that got me thinking. I decided to try to find my mother and my half-sister and half-brother who was supposed to have been living in New Orleans. I left Los Angeles early one morning. I still had my railroad card, which I flashed to get on the train.

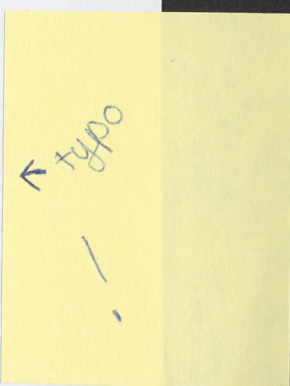
When I arrived, after three days riding, I knocked on the door. My father's cousin, Doretha, answered the door. I told Doretha my name. She embraced and kissed me with happiness and said she thought I was dead, because she never heard a word about me since I was a child. Doretha and I had a long conversation about how I had been living through the years. She asked why I came to New Orleans. I told Doretha I came looking for my mother and other relatives on my mother's side of the family. Doretha explained that at one time she

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knew where my mother lived, but since that was a long time ago, she might have moved. Doretha said she would help me look for my mother.

Doretha and I went to the Louisiana Insurance Company to inquire. The insurance company representative said that they would try to locate mother and, if found, I would be notified, if I left my address. My visit in New Orleans was brief. Then I returned to Los Angeles.

In three weeks time the insurance representative notified me. They had located my mother and gave me her phone number and address in New Orleans. I hesitated for several days before calling. After all, we hadn't seen one another since I was five years old. When I finally phoned, mother's voice sounded soft and warm. I told mother ^I was her son, Lee Brown. She sounded so happy and rejoiced to hear my voice. We talked about my past and my future. Mother explained that she was ill and wanted to see me. I told mother I would come to visit her and meet some of my relatives on her side of the family, because I only knew relatives on my father's side. When our conversation was over, I felt a feeling of love and respect. In the meantime, uncertain about when I could leave for New Orleans, I continued working and attending the NAACP meetings. As weeks passed my mind stayed on my mother. Not really sure how ill she was, I decided to start preparing to leave for New Orleans. Before I left my job, I told the superintendent I was going to visit my mother, because she was ill and I hadn't seen my mother since I was five years



old. I didn't know how long I would be gone. The superintendent said that if I ever came back to Los Angeles and wanted to work, a job would be waiting. I had my union membership set up to be transferred from Local 12 to any union in New Orleans, when the time came for me to look for work. I had one sad task left to do: to be separated from my books! These books was valuable to me and important, but I sold my books to used book stores and left Los Angeles.

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PART 2

Even before the Civil War black workers had a significant presence on the docks of New Orleans. (Blassingame, Black New Orleans, p. 2) Slaves were often hired out by their masters as stevedores and free blacks also worked on the waterfront. Many white immigrants, especially Irish peasants fleeing the potato famine, worked on the docks as well. (Video Doc, "The Irish in America") Race relations on the waterfront were sometimes tense as men competed for jobs and employers sought to use black workers to break strikes by whites, but workingclass solidarity also emerged, albeit fitfully, as unions struggled to gain a foothold in the Reconstruction period. In 1865 black and white levee workers struck together for higher wages, although blacks were excluded from membership in many New Orleans trade unions at the time. The New Orleans Tribune, the first daily black newspaper in the U.S., supported the levee workers' joint action. During a subsequent strike by white bricklayers during which black bricklayers, who were excluded from the union, continued to work, the Tribune criticized the racial exclusivity of the white union, urging that it admit black workers to membership to promote labor solidarity. "As peers, they may all come to an understanding and act in common," the Tribune wrote. The white union refused to open its ranks, and lost the strike. (Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, pp 17-18)

Excluded from white unions, black workers acted independently and they formed their own labor organizations. In May 1867, 500 black longshoremen went on strike when contractors refused to pay

them the agreed upon wages. Another strike by black dock workers occurred in 1872. By 1880 black stevedores in New Orleans had organized four longshoremen's unions, the largest of which had 450 members. In addition to their watchfulness over wages and working conditions, the black unions established funds to help the sick and bury the dead, sometimes set up small businesses, and provided community social activities. (Blassingame, 64-65)

The heyday of the Knights of Labor in the South in the 1880s brought a period of interracial labor solidarity in New Orleans. The Knights recognized the dangers posed by racial disunity and they officially welcomed all workers into the fold. Cooperation between black and white trade unionists expanded. The newly formed American Federation of Labor, although espousing segregated locals, at least advocated that black workers should be organized.

As early as 1875 black and white dock workers in New Orleans agreed to share the work and to demand equal wages. Initially white workers saw this as a way to prevent the use of blacks by employers as strikebreakers. In 1886 this agreement was expanded to also require equal sharing of waterfront work. It became known as the "half-and-half" agreement, and would become the governing principle, not without setbacks, of work and labor relations on the docks. Ultimately, the agreement was expanded to require joint negotiating teams (half black, half white), joint demands, racial alternation of speakers at meetings, and in general interracial agreement on any issue affecting dock workers. Half-and-half was anathema to employers and city officials who saw it as undermining employer

control over work and New Orleans' competitiveness with other ports.
(Rosenberg, New Orleans Dockworkers, 69-72)

In October 1892 New Orleans workers launched a massive general strike. Three unions, including an all-black teamsters' union, formed a Triple Alliance to demand a ten-hour work day, higher wages and overtime pay, and the closed union shop. Employers said they would negotiate but only with the white unions. Despite press attempts to foment racial dissension, the Triple Alliance unions refused to be divided and instead walked out. By early November the strike had gained the support of other unions. Led by a Committee of Five that included black longshoreman James E. Porter, some 30,000 workers were on strike. The city was in crisis. As employers prepared to bring in thousands of strikebreakers from other areas, the governor banned street gatherings and declared that he would send in the militia. After three days the strike was called off and a settlement was reached granting the ten-hour day, higher wages and overtime pay, but not the closed shop. Although some observers accused the strike leaders of retreating in the face of employer and government threats, others viewed the general strike as a high point of black-white labor solidarity in New Orleans. (Rosenberg, 33-36; Foner, 66- 68)

On the waterfront the depression of 1893 undermined interracial solidarity as wages plummeted and dock workers fought -- several black workers were killed -- over distribution of available jobs. (Rosenberg, 36-37)

By 1902 the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), which was organized in 1894, had gained a major place among

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waterfront unions in New Orleans. The ILA was one of the few AFL affiliates that admitted black workers, although to separate locals, and elected blacks to leadership positions. Joint meetings were held and James Porter served as a national vice president. The ILA maintained the half-and-half policy in New Orleans and other Southern ports, but the ILA's practice of racial segregation fueled resentment among many black dock workers (Rosenberg, 39-40, Foner, 84, 95) Years later in 1937, the ILA would be challenged by a radical new union, Local 207 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, under the leadership of Andrew Steve Nelson and Lee Brown.

With the South increasingly in the grip of the system of Jim Crow segregation as the new century unfolded, employers in New Orleans were determined to undermine the interracial solidarity that was the basis of the power of the waterfront unions. The economy of New Orleans was heavily dependent upon shipping of cotton through the port. Some 36 waterfront unions representing 11,000 dock workers had organized a Dock and Cotton Council to coordinate actions of the unions. The Council was composed of 72 representatives -- 36 black and 36 white, drawn from the constituent unions on the principle of half-and-half. The officers of the Council were divided equally between white and black, and each year the offices were rotated to insure alternation of each office between black and white incumbents. (Rosenberg, 1; Foner, 90)

Seizing their opportunity, employers refused to renew a key union contract and locked out workers in the fall of 1907. The employers had hoped to split the unions, but the lock-out

precipitated a general strike on the waterfront. The strike severely crippled the operation of the port for nearly three weeks. Finally the employers capitulated and agreed to negotiate, but the business leaders declared that they would never negotiate with black representatives. However, in accordance with the principle of half-and-half the strikers selected two white and two black delegates to represent them. The employers and the white press were outraged. Invoking white supremacist ideology they accused black unionists of using the strike to promote social equality. The Mayor of New Orleans hastened to a meeting of the Dock and Cotton Council to urge reconsideration, but the workers held firm. A black unionist noted that white employers had negotiated with black representatives in the past; what was the problem now? In the end the employers were compelled to choose representatives who, willingly or not, would meet with an interracial union negotiating team. The general levee strike of 1907 was a great victory for black and white waterfront workers, and a highwater mark of the tide of dock unionism in New Orleans. (Rosenberg 121-141, Foner, 90-92)

The years that followed were marked by occasional small victories, but a more general trend was the slow erosion of the strength of the waterfront unions until the Great Depression and the CIO era. This process was related to other changes that were occurring in New Orleans and the larger society. The continued entrenchment of segregation worsened conditions for black people in New Orleans and led to increasing marginalization. (Rosenberg, 170) At the same time more blacks were seeking work on the docks during a period when whites were moving to other jobs. At the turn of the

century black and white workers had about equal numbers on the waterfront, but by the early 1920s blacks far outnumbered white dockworkers. In this context, the half-and-half division of jobs worked to the disadvantage of a growing black labor force and weakened interracial cooperation. Moreover, even with a black majority workforce black unions had never achieved parity with regard to foremen's jobs. (Rosenberg, 169) In addition, the emergence of new technologies in shipbuilding and cotton compressing eliminated skilled job categories and entire unions, such as the screwmen (skilled cotton stowers), who had been at the forefront of important union struggles, including the 1907 general levee strike. (Rosenberg, 165, 171) By the end of World War I most of the remaining dock locals, black and white, were affiliated with the ILA. (Rosenberg, 166) Finally, intervention by government agencies, especially during and after World War I, sought to promote cooperation between labor and management on the waterfront and reduce labor strife in the interest of national security. In practice this weakened unions and fostered conservative labor politics. (Rosenberg, 166)

These factors combined in September 1923 to mortally wound unionism on the New Orleans waterfront. When contracts for the longshoremen and screwmen expired their locals demanded increased pay and hiring of additional workers. Although black dock locals and some whites opposed it, a strike was called. The employers brought in strikebreakers and moved to crush the screwmen's union. When violence broke out between strikers and scabs on the docks the employers secured an unprecedented federal court injunction barring

strikers from the docks. The employers moved to make the strikebreakers permanent workers and to impose an open shop on the docks. In October the U.S. Shipping Board, a wartime government agency that operated some port facilities, accepted the strikers demands at its piers, but the private employers continued to refuse a settlement, leaving the strikers with no option but to contract with the Shipping Board which controlled only 30% of port commerce. Thus 5,000 union workers found themselves excluded from most waterfront jobs. The subsequent decision of the Shipping Board to lease its operations to private employers further sealed the fate of militant unionism. The employers announced that they did not oppose the right to organize. "What we objected to was the arbitrary, intolerable aggressions of the leaders of the unions that walked out," the employers gloatingly proclaimed. "We do not mind dealing with any sort of association reasonably managed." (Rosenberg, 171-74)

This left company unions and a "reasonably managed" International Longshoremen's Association as the main vessels for union activism on the waterfront until 1937*. (*A small IWW-organized union, the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union, continued to carry the banner of racial solidarity and led a strike by several hundred black and white New Orleans dock workers in 1930. [Foner, 196])