

# Growing up “Colored” in Chatham County, North Carolina

by Annie Rose Taylor McCrimmon, February 2022

*“If you live right, Heaven belongs to you,  
If you live right, Heaven belongs to you,  
Treat your neighbor right, Heaven belongs to you,  
Oh, oh— Heaven belongs to you.”*

This was my Mama’s favorite song. Our Mixed Choir sang this at her funeral. For many years she would lead the singing of this testimonial herself during morning devotions at Church.

I remember thinking as I looked down at her body in the coffin that she had lived a long, full life. This woman could not read recipes but was renowned for her great food. She would always work harder than her coworkers and learn most of the processes so she could do any job. I decided later she did this to solidify her place at work— to be too valuable to be easily sent away. She loved her family, raised her children to be able to get through life successfully, she appreciated the value of friendship with people, believed in doing her best, loved her husband until she died and expects to spend eternity with the Lord.

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I was born in May of 1949, in Chatham County, North Carolina. I had a brother four years older than me, a sister two years older than me and a sister two years younger. The youngest was the only one of us four children to be born in a hospital. The rest of us were born at home in Chatham County and Mama was attended by a midwife. Mama and Daddy were a united front in situations regarding raising us children. There were no gray areas existing in our lives when it came to matters of responsibility and accountability. Our parents made the decisions and told us what we were to do. We had no bargaining rights as minors and out of love and respect for our Daddy and Mama, did not question their advice ever (not to their faces). As children we knew what we could and could not do, at home and especially away from home. We were growing up during the age of segregation in the South. Neither Daddy nor Mama received much formal education. Daddy quit school in the third grade to help on his family’s farm and Mama quit in middle school to take odd jobs to contribute to the support of their family of fourteen.



Daddy and Mama:  
Aubrey Bill and Beatrice Mae Goldston Taylor

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Daddy's family, descendants of Jack and Margaret Taylor, were founders of the Community and Church, Taylors Chapel. The founding year for the Church was 1879. My grandchildren represent the seventh generation of my Daddy's family to live in Chatham County, according to the information Dr. Gregory T. Headen and I have been able to locate. I became intrigued with the process of history gathering when he introduced this idea in 1979 while researching the history of our church. Many descendants of this Taylor family are still residents and property owners in Chatham County. Brothers Harvey and Spencer Taylor owned and farmed many acres in Taylors Chapel. Harvey was my grandfather and Jack was my father's great grandfather. This farmland, that Harvey and Spencer worked and pulled a living from, has now been reclaimed by the trees, bramble, and brush. They worked hard to make it productive so their families could live and not only survive, but thrive. Corn was harvested, livestock was raised, and families were fed. Grandpa Harvey loved sauerkraut. I've been told he would plant cabbage by the acre to insure there was a jar on the table at each meal.

Daddy was around five foot ten inches with a muscular build. He had nice facial features, with a stern jawline and receding hairline. He was a logger. He worked for Lee Gunter, and they developed a friendship over the years that lasted until Daddy's death. Daddy logged from the time when horses would bring the felled trees from the woods until they started working with tractors. He loved horses and was certainly able to speak the language they understood to harvest timber. He would die in the woods harvesting timber in June of 1965 at 43 years of age. His friend and fellow worker, Melvin McLeod, told us later that Daddy had gotten down off the tractor, mopped his brow and said the day was the hottest one he could remember. He died on that hot summer day of a massive heart attack!

Mama was tall and sturdily built, high cheekbones and nut-brown complexion. Her hair was naturally curly and soft. In later years, she would be plagued with migraine headaches. She was the most beautiful, fully realized woman I have ever known. Strong and determined, hardworking, courageous and no nonsense, she married her first love, our dad, at fourteen. Mama and Daddy made a formidable couple and wonderful parents. They knew how to raise us so we could live and grow as safely as possible in the Jim Crow South.

They were buying the house we lived in by the time I was in the third grade. Prior to this time, they rented the houses we lived in from various landlords. There was never indoor plumbing in any of these rentals. The house they bought had a room for a bathroom but no fixtures or plumbing. It was a cinder block house with an a-frame roof and no insulation, two bedrooms, a living room, where our brother slept at night, and a kitchen. I learned to cook in this kitchen. I was able to cook most of the dinner for the family before Mama got home from work by the time I was finishing third grade. This house became our family's castle. The feeling of pride Daddy and Mama enjoyed just knowing we were buying instead of renting filtered down to us children. It was not unusual for the houses our family used to rent to be rummaged through by the landlord's teens while our family was out. There was no plumbing or bathroom in our new house. Our water source was a free-flowing spring in the woods behind the house.

When Daddy died, my baby sister and I were still in high school. Tine was the oldest girl and had just graduated from high school. She had received a scholarship to attend St. Augustine's College in the fall. Our brother had been married just one week when Daddy died. The mortgage on our house was not paid off. Mama did not make enough money working at the chicken plant to support the family and pay the mortgage. Mama never fully recovered from the loss of Daddy. It became the responsibility of us girls to help Mama support our family. I found odd jobs working for white families. I had one family take social security out of my small wages and while it felt like too much at the time, I appreciated that

when I started drawing Social Security. My earnings showed my first payments going in when I was 13 years old. My older sister spent less than one semester at St. Augustine. She quit and went North to live with an aunt and her family just long enough to earn enough money to pay the mortgage off. I would be a grown woman before I would fully appreciate the courage it took for her to leave all that was familiar behind and slow her stride to sacrifice all her plans to do this. The house was paid off and we, my sisters and I, took any work available to help earn the money necessary to keep our family afloat.

As a child, I felt segregation was a kind of security for black folk. I felt secure in a neighborhood full of folk who were black like me. My church was full of folk I was either kin to or they were families my folk were friends with. There were no strangers there. My brother, two sisters and I all attended the segregated, all black Horton High School in Pittsboro. Our principal, Mr. I. E. Taylor, was black. He knew Daddy and Mama, and even though his last name was Taylor too, we were not blood kin. I cannot remember having a single teacher who was not black the entire ten- year time span I was a student there. I graduated from Horton High School in June of 1967. Our graduating class of 104 was all black. Cooks in the cafeteria were all black; bus drivers were all black and so was the custodial staff. Bus drivers were high school students back then. School felt like an extension of my community. It was important to my siblings and me to do our best in studies and any tasks we were given by school staff or other personnel. Cocooned in the security of this black community; my siblings and I thrived. We studied, did our homework, volunteered for school activities and were always on our best behavior. We knew what we did spoke to the kind of upbringing our parents had given us. We would do nothing to cause our parents expense or shame. I was not yet aware of the extreme effort required of or the penalties being suffered by many others who looked like me in the broader community/country.

*“When I was a child, I talked like a child,  
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.  
When I became a man, I put the ways  
of childhood behind me.” 1 Corinthians 13:11*

However, I was still in elementary school when I started to fully realize how unsafe and unpleasant it could be for black folk in the larger community. I would later come to realize that segregation was fashioned to ensure that blacks would always feel out of place and unwanted when outside the parameters of our communities. I had my eyes fully open by the time I was a teenager. As a youngster, I do remember us children getting our feet traced onto a sheet of notebook paper so Mama could buy shoes for us. Blacks could not casually go into retail stores and take clothes into stalls to try them on. Most of our clothes were hand-me-downs or hand sewn by Mama. Going into stores to make purchases could easily turn into another episode of having to step aside and let white customers go before you even when you were there first or facing a shopkeeper who acted like he'd rather not have to serve you. Yes, I remember the times when our family would step off the sidewalk to let a white person pass.

Mama and Daddy were really thrifty and good with the meager wages they earned from working jobs that required long hours and lots of hard labor. They taught us the value of integrity—letting your word be your bond. They led by example in teaching the value of being able to remain humble, accept blame when blameless, apologize and walk away. Learning to absorb the meanness and spite we often encountered in dealings with white businesses and employers on jobs or just existing in the same space required a vigilante spirit of survival. We

could not go into the front door of any restaurant in town if it were not owned and operated by blacks. Mama and Daddy would take the family out on Friday night to eat supper. We would go to either June Reaves' or Oliver and Julia Marsh's restaurants. These were sanctuaries where we could sit, eat, and enjoy being out. White owned restaurants in Chatham would allow blacks to go to a back door or side door and order food to go. Black community members were usually familiar with which of these white places had black cooks and would be okay with ordering out from these.

Public bathrooms had designations for coloreds and whites. My sister reminded me a few days ago that there were seldom paper towels in the black bathrooms in the courthouse. The water fountains were designated for coloreds and whites. I believe these distinctions and penalties for not observing them is what added to the aura of safety in the black community for the young me. We could move about freely.

The men in our community shared hog-killing chores with the white men in the adjoining Asbury community. Our men would scald and pick the slaughtered hogs in the vats that belonged to Asbury's men. This process usually happened at Thanksgiving—in the years before this holiday became all about turkey. Men would deliver the freshly butchered hog liver and tenderloin to women to be sliced, fried, and smothered in gravy for lunch by the time men were finished with the clean-up. Whole acres of corn ready for harvest were pulled by blacks and whites together. We worked in tobacco together with white kids. However, if our school buses passed closely enough for recognition, we just looked and made no sign of recognition. Invisible lines of demarcation, not to be crossed between blacks and whites existed.

When Grandpa Harvey's corn was harvested and ready for shucking, he would have a corn shucking. These events were typically not for blacks and whites to enjoy together. To explain what a corn shucking is: When the harvested ears of corn were brought in on trailers from the fields, these trailers were dumped at the edge of the side or front yard. These trailer loads would continue to be brought in and dumped on the pile until the corn was all piled up. A few jars of white whiskey were placed in the middle of the pile of corn. The women in the community would cook the food while the corn was being shucked. I don't recall ever seeing a box of cake mix or a frozen casserole at these events. Every meat, vegetable, pie, cake, biscuit, and cornbread was prepared from scratch. Women did their best cooking. Men shucked, women cooked, and the youngest children ran and played well into the night. By the time the pile of corn had been shucked down to the jars of whiskey, the women had the feast ready. Men went to the tables to be served the piping hot food. They ate, then the whiskey drinking would commence! The women were responsible for feeding the children. They ate last; after the men and children had been fed. These were great times. I believe these corn shuckings were events not shared with whites because it could be dangerous to imbibe in mixed-race company. That would have been inviting loose lips or callous talk.

The first time I attended an integrated class was when my sister and I enrolled in the secretarial science curriculum at Sanford Business College in Sanford. Integration had been mandated in schools and colleges and the year was 1968. There were less than a dozen of us young black women who were enrolled during this term and we realized quickly that our presence was not welcome. We were our own support system. Our money paid the tuition and fees but could not purchase any signs of inclusion at this institution. We learned to segregate ourselves in this place and be our own cheerleaders. Everything we needed to take away from this experience to be successful in our chosen field of work, we did. Hired by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1969, my sister and I both retired from there. She worked on this campus from 1969-2008. I worked there from 1969-1980; left during the

first half of 1980 and took a job working for a manufacturing facility that was new to Sanford and my husband had just taken work there. I worked for this company until 1995; returned to UNC-CH to enroll as a junior transfer student and took a position in 2000 in the School of Education until my retirement in 2008. Both of us, during our early years of employment with UNC, experienced the solitude of being the only black staff or one of only two. While the commute to Chapel Hill was long and tedious at times, we had no chance of being hired to do this kind of work in Chatham. I still look around in county offices to see how many minority staffers I can spot. I do this as much out of habit as hope—hope for a real diversity of minds, bodies, and souls.

Those of us who journeyed this path earlier perhaps worked a more difficult shift, had fewer breaks and rewards. However, I venture to say that each of us, regardless of our time, will suffer hardship. I have lived long enough to know it is better for us as human beings that we do not contribute to another's burdens.

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*I've had some good days,  
I've had some hills to climb  
I've had some weary days,  
And some sleepless nights  
But when I, when I look around  
And I think things over  
All of my good days  
Outweigh my bad days  
I, I won't complain*

Song, "I Won't Complain"  
By Rev. Paul Jones

Remembrances respectfully written and submitted by  
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