

TRADITIONS

by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald



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Well, I don't know what I'm going to write about this time. There are so many things that could stand being written about. I could easily write about former Under Secretary of the United Nations, Dr. Ralph Bunch who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1950 for settling the Middle Eastern Crisis but the major newspapers will cover that. I could write about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who received that same Prize on the same date, December 10, fourteen years later in 1964 but we know about that already.

There are many other such things that I could write about but I don't think I will. I think, this time, I'll write about slaughtering time in Tunica County, Mississippi back in the 1940s and the 1950s.

Each fall of the year, when the first chill hits the air, I am reminded of my childhood and early youth during that time of year and one of the great events which I looked forward to — traveling to Tunica County to my uncle's for slaughtering time.

Don't ask me why that time was so important to me. I really don't know. It was a lot of work even if one only watched when one was very young. You may wonder why it was a lot of work then. The answer is easy. Back in those days and in Mississippi, slaughtering was part of what men did. Childhood was simply a period of apprenticeship and it required rapt attention to every aspect of everything that men did.

There was not too much reason to expect that life would be any different for the upcoming generations. Black men did hard, physical labor from the time they were big enough to until they were too old to and many died long before they became too old.

As a child, I remember seeing men cutting and loading pulp wood all day. "Coffee break" had not made its way to black Mississippi in the good ol' days. The work started at daybreak and continued until it was too dark to see. Many of the men who did such work were called "cant" and they were called that because when they left for work in the morning it was so dark that they could not be seen and when they returned it was so dark they couldn't be seen.

Other men were diggers. They dug holes and ditches and trenches for every occasion and they used picks and shovels and post-hole diggers to do it. I don't know if

back-hoes had been invented at that time but if they had they had not found their way to Mississippi—at least not to that part of Mississippi where I lived. Whenever anyone needed a hole or a ditch or a trench dug, they simply called on the appropriate number of black men.

As a child, there was nothing more exciting than seeing black men, shirts off, bodies glistening with sweat and muscles rippling as they swung picks and shovels and dug ditches as deep and as long as needed and then, after doing so all day, walking five miles or more home with their implements on their shoulders and never looking for nor expecting a break. That's what I wanted to do when I was a child.

Slaughtering was different. It was a time for fresh meat. I remember the men in my family were all large, barrel-chested and tireless. The men would capture the animal and prepare it for slaughter. The first time I ever saw it happen, a sledge hammer was the instrument of death. The forelegs and the hindlegs would be tied and the animal would be tethered between two stakes. It would continue to resist pulling first one way and then the other and my uncle would sort of dance, with sledgehammer cocked, and wait for just the right moment to deliver the deadly blow to the head of the animal.

As carefully and attentive as I would watch, I would never see the actual blow because my uncle was so

deft and swift. It would only require one swing and the animal would drop.

Through the morning, afternoon, evening hours and on into the night, the butchering would take place. The entire family participated. Gutting, skinning, shanking, cooking, boiling, separating, sausage making all required total family involvement.

What has been described is the actual event itself. One of the more memorable aspects, however, was the family interaction. In the course of that interaction, elements of the family's history would be discussed, jokes would be told, songs sung and children would play. The family members involved ranged in age from tykes to early nineties. It was a time when children could stay up as late as they could stay awake and every waking hour brought not only the discoveries of how things were done but why they were done that way.

The men would describe their activities to the young

and answer questions. When the work being done would be routine is when the storytelling would take place. The oldest women would cook the meals and they were hearty meals. The younger women would do the fine cuts and tend the crackling. The oldest woman would make brushes with the bristle from the hogs by using the small pieces of wood whittled by the oldest man. The youngest children would gather kindling from the area where the bigger little boys would spend the greater part of the day cutting wood for use in the house and in the cooking in the yard.

The smoke house would be prepared for the hams, bacon and chops. There was smoke, the sound of wood being cut, the laughter of children, the chit chat of the women, the pitter patter of the men, the bubbling noises of lard cooking and the array of an assortment of other sounds and smells which accompany the slaughter of

an animal.

Throughout it all, there was the constant humming of everyone who had their own tune to hum. From time to time several members of the family would just happen to hum the same song and without anyone assuming the role of director, singing would begin. The songs were always old songs—old spirituals which talked of a time long since passed but still there in the minds and the memories of the people. A kind of ceremonial quality would take over and the children, the small ones, would even stop their running and playing. There was something about different moments in the collective activity of a family which transcended words and I remember, clearly, more than once, seeing both men and women cry for no apparent reason. I would learn the reasons later.

Many of those activities dated back to slavery and beyond to Africa. In such communities and families, traditional lifestyles were common. Those sorts of gatherings allowed for those traditions to be passed on from one generation to the next. Older members assumed the responsibility of educating the young about the family and they did so

without having to formally teach them or take them aside. In normal conversations references were made to ancestors and/or some event they had been involved in. Those conversations included the recollections of deeds and strength, courage, tenderness and intellectual prowess. All were required in order to survive and more was needed to remain together and move ahead.

By today's standards we were poor and ugly and ragged. Ha. We didn't have money or fancy clothes or houses with conveniences and all that, but we had family, in every direction who, as the man symbolically said, "didn't have much but what they had was pure gold."

As I grew up, I did not learn to speak ill of others. I did not become exposed to that until I entered this civilization — the kind we have now. We were straightforward but called naive. We were pensive but called docile. We were hardworking but called lazy. We were thrifty but called spend-thrifts. We were honest but called unsophisticated. Our word meant something but we were called fools. We were family. My, my. I miss it so.

1 MILLION MEMBERSHIP STILL NAACP GOAL

by Shirley Reed-Blash
NNPA Correspondent

It was hailed as one of the most ambitious recruitment efforts the organization had undertaken when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) announced plans to hold a one-day radiothon.

The 79-year-old civil rights organization had sought to double its membership rolls from 500,000 to a total of 1 million. Black youths and middle-class Black professionals were the primary target during this national membership drive.

The campaign was preceded by a major promotional effort. And, over 500 radio stations participated in the NAACP National Membership Radiothon on Sept. 24. In support of this activity, listeners were treated to an

exciting line of programs broadcast throughout the day that included entertainment, human interest stories, civil rights documentaries, local telethons and a three-hour national program broadcast from New York (with on-air appearances by celebrities, including Bill Cosby, Phylicia Rashad and Quincy Jones).

Although she would not indicate the exact number of radio stations that had reported in, NAACP special projects director Jondelle Johnson, said the organization had increased its membership by only 100,000 during the radiothon. Johnson emphasized this was a partial count and the NAACP is still waiting for many stations which had not provided their final tallies.

The campaign was hampered by radio stations receiving short notice of the

radiothon. This was compounded by the late arrival of material from NAACP national headquarters in Baltimore, it was reported.

The NAACP spokesperson said the radiothon was a special endeavor and the organization regularly encourages new membership. "People can always support the NAACP year-round," Johnson asserted. She added that, while it would have been good to attract 500,000 new members during the radiothon, the NAACP is confident it will reach the 1 million goal by its 80th anniversary, which is in February 1989.

Headed by Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks, the NAACP has over 2,000 branches nationwide. The organization moved its headquarters from New York, after 70 years, to Baltimore, Maryland in 1986.



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