

THIS BUD'S FOR FOR HER

Over the past few years we've heard quite a lot about black families in the United States and most of it has been negative. Such stories have appeared in special documentaries, news items, studies, films and just about everything else. There are some people, who don't know any better, who buy into all of the media reports and seem to come to just about the same kinds of conclusions the detractors of black families have drawn. Such people as those need to look at history before they begin jumping to conclusions.

Seemingly central to the problem is economic status of black people in the United States. There have been dozens of documentaries and news reports describing the disciplinary hiring practices of many businesses in this country. We've seen the duality of the justice system which seems to manage to always find black suspects and mete out jail time. We all know about black people who get passed over for promotions on their jobs. We see the daily harassments of black people by white supremacists. We see the absence of blacks in text books and, lately, we've seen that, just like in the science fiction films of the 1950s, black people are not being thought about in terms of the future. Just today, in the Review Journal (May 6, 1990) we see that in the local library district, the library branch in the black community gets the smallest amount of funding of all branches.

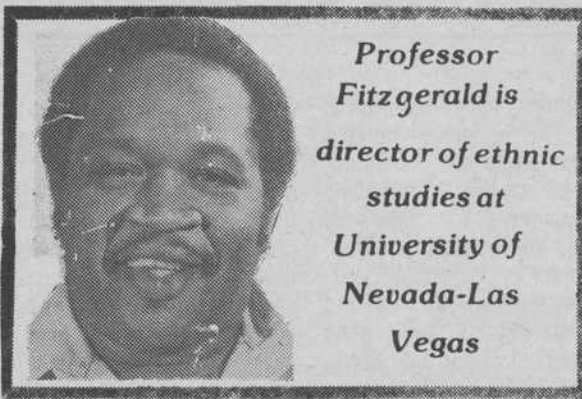
Yes, we've heard a lot about black families that is not complimentary. Some of it with some of them is indeed true but it is not representative of the race. Actually, it is asymptomatic and brought on by forces which we are aware of but reluctant to see the association. I'll do that next time. For now, one story which can be repeated millions of times by many of us.

She was born in the country in a place called Churchill. There was no hospital and no doctor was in attendance at her birth. There was a midwife and boiling water on a wood stove. She, like millions of others like her during that time, was born into a society--a country--where the overwhelming majority of people hated her. She was well loved at home and well taken care of. She attended a one room school

where there was one teacher who taught all grades. She walked the "big road" to get to school and she carried her lunch in a bucket. There were no pretty little dresses but her hair was always combed and her face was clean. Sometimes the road was dusty and other times it was muddy but it was always long. She managed to get through the fifth grade and then she had to go to work in the fields.

They say the great depression started in October of 1928 or was it 1929? No matter. The real depression had been going on for years for people like her. It only became official in the late 1920s. She moved to town--Natchez--just as that depression got underway. Before it began to end with the United States entry into World War II, she had given birth to four children--a girl, the oldest, and three boys. Each, as they were old enough, was sent to Catholic school. She wanted them to attend school there because she believed they would get a better education and she wanted them to have a better chance at life than she had had.

It cost money to go to Catholic school--even a segregated Catholic school. To help pay the tuition she took in washing and ironing and cooked and cleaned houses. Unlike when she was a child, her children wore shoes to school and their clothes were always cleaned and pressed. The boys got their hair cut every two weeks and she "pressed" her daughter's hair. They never went to bed hungry and always had a good breakfast before going to school. She made sure they had ten or fifteen cents in



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their pockets everyday so that they wouldn't have to steal or beg.

After school they had to do their homework and then their chores. As the boys got a little older they got after school jobs: selling papers, boxing groceries, shining shoes, portering at hotels, unloading boxcars. In the summers they did other things on a full-time basis. She made sure they learned the meaning of work and responsibility. She made certain that they understood that while it is important to be responsible, it is equally important to realize that they were not responsible for things that they were not responsible for. Of the money they earned, part of it was "turned over" to the family so they did not grow up leeching off anybody--not even their family. Combining the two parents' meager wages and that of the children, they just about came up to beneath the povert level. An indication of their economic status is seen in a comment she made one evening as one of the children read aloud (they took turns) about Abraham Lincoln. He had just finished reading about how poor Lin-

coln's family and been and that they had lived in a log cabin. Her comment was: "Well, we wasn't born in no log cabin but as soon as we got ahold of a few dollars we moved into one." Everybody laughed.

Her life had been hard. Her hands bore scars from working in the cotton fields and her shins were burned by insecticides used in those fields to ward off boll weevils. She never went to a picture show after her children were school age--every nickel went toward making sure that they always looked nice. She always worried about them. By the time her last two children were born and ready to go to school, the Brown case had been rendered and what had been years in the making began to come to life. She feared for her sons' lives much more so than her two daughters. She didn't know what was going to happen to them.

The oldest boy joined the Air Force because there was no work for a black high school graduate who had ambitions in Natchez, Mississippi. The next oldest boy joined the Navy because he had a "temper" and she

was afraid that if he remained at home he would be killed. The next boy, me, graduated from high school as valedictorian and didn't know what he was going to do. The oldest daughter finished high school and got married.

As I look back over those years and call into memory images of the times, I cannot help but see her face. There was a sadness there right alongside the strength. There had been years of humiliation and debasement. She was never a real person to so many who thought of themselves as being better than she. That was so even among some black people who wouldn't dream of inviting her into their homes or being seen talking to her. They never knew this woman. Sure, she was poor, barely literate, lived in a house with a toilet out in the back yard. She never went more than 300 miles from Natchez in her entire lifetime--once to New Orleans and to Jackson, Mississippi to my graduation from

college. I was the first in the family to go to college and I owe it all to her. She was my cheering section. She gave me the strength and resiliency and the understanding necessary to achieve. She used to say: "Don't be disappointed in what people do or say. Don't be hurt by it. Remember, most of them are just average or below. Keep your word and don't do nothing to be ashamed of."

Life was hard but she got us through it. None of us ever went to jail, abused any kids, beat up old people, or took advantage of anybody. Her name was Harriett. It's Mother's Day. We used to wear little rose buds in our lapels on Mother's Day. I remember it well. Using the old terminology, "This Bud's For Her."



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