

Father's Day Special...

MY HERO

He didn't come home carrying a briefcase, wearing a suit or with clean fingernails. He didn't even have a lunch bucket--not back in the early days. He had a brown bag folded up in a back pocket of his overalls. That's what he carried his lunch in and he couldn't even throw that bag away because we didn't have occasion to get too many small brown bags from the stores, so he took care of the brown bag he had. We all did.

He didn't always come home from the same job. Many times he worked wherever he could find work. His work was always dirty and the pay was always small. Often, he would be paid by the day because the next day there might not be a job for him. He and other black men went out early and hoped that they would be lucky enough to be picked for whatever the job of the day might be. Funny. Today we call such people "street-people."

Those who did the hiring knew that they had those men over a barrel. That was especially so for those with families. Single men could leave if the cussing and name-calling directed at them grew unbearable. After all, they only had themselves to worry about. Even at that, if they refused to be humbled too often they could be blackballed and never work again. Family men, on the other hand, had to take whatever was dished out. They had mouths to feed and in taking that responsibility they were called upon to pay a high price.

Some of those men resorted to drink. Some even beat their wives and children. Those who were able to understand the dynamics of what was taking place became rather stoic. He was that way. My brothers and sisters and I called him Mr. Sandy even though it was not at his request. His demeanor seemed to demand that sort of respect. Long before I heard of Zeno--and he never did--I saw a stoic at work. Out of his stoicism came a quiet strength and that nurtured one of the few examples of justifiable arrogance on record.

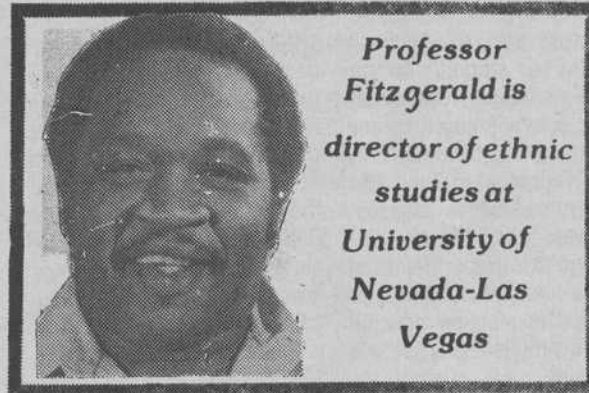
When he was paid by the day, he brought all of his earnings home and when he was paid by the week, he did the same. Whichever way it went he usually earned twen-

ty to twenty-five dollars a week. The rent was eight dollars per week and between his earnings and my mother's and whatever we kids generated from odd jobs, we had food, shelter and the other basic necessities of life.

We've all read about deprivation and starvation and all that. We were indeed poor but we were never hungry or without shoes on our feet. My dad (stepfather) never let us be despondent or have to do without. He never transmitted the uncertainty of the next day to us. Even within the social order of the black community in my hometown, we were outsiders to the insiders, but we were insiders with ourselves. Our family was strong and it was not unusual. Most families were in similar situations but there was unity.

Mr. Sandy was a quiet man. He spoke so softly one had to really listen to hear him speak. He sat on the front porch in the evenings almost ten months of each year. He sat on a straight back chair which he would lean against the wall of the house. At times, when he would forget, there would be fire in his eyes. Many times, shortly thereafter, he would get his hat and say: "I think I'll walk up the street for a little bit."

There was really no where to go--to the barber shop, on the corner or down to the blacksmith shop and play checkers. I know that there were some people who would drive by and see black men standing on a corner and talking and describe them as lazy, sloven or no good. Ha. Those same people wouldn't allow those men in many of the public places. My dad couldn't go into the city library or park or down to the bowling alley where "others" were able to waste



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by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

their time engaged in recreational activities. We grew up with a tradition of hanging out on the corner because there were few other places to go.

When I was a little boy he took me along. Once I asked him what he and the other men talked about and he said, "Nothing important." He let me know that most of what is spoken is unimportant even though most people like to think that everything they say has value.

He included me in many of his activities and he did so even though I was only his stepson. He treated me as a young man on the way to growing up and he let me know that the process of becoming a man was a lifetime task. He was more grown up than I but not as grown up as his father. There is a point, perhaps, when physical growth maximizes but that other thing--that which makes the whole person--goes on until death. He never reminded me that I was a child. I was always a real person with him. He understood the process. He did not expect me, as a child, to be as mature as he, but he did always expect me to be more mature the next day than I had been the day before. I

enjoyed growing up, day by day, under his watchful eye. The closest he ever came to berating me was the one time he said, "You made that same mistake two weeks ago."

There was one event which occurred one year that I'll never forget. It wasn't anything spectacular and, probably, in the minds of many, it was no big deal. I'll tell you about a part of it.

It was the first day of the hunting season that year and

I was eleven years old. I had come straight home from school, completed my chores and my homework and was sitting at the kitchen table eating spaghetti and meatballs. I heard the front door open and I knew he was home. I ate faster. He came straight through the house and into the kitchen. We spoke and he put down his lunch bag.

My mother was on the back porch shelling crowder peas for the next day's dinner. He always kissed her when he came home and that day was no different. She put aside her task and they both re-entered the house. "I'll fix you some dinner," she said. "Ain't got time for dinner. Gotta be in the woods before dark. Just throw something together that I can take along." He was always that way on the first day of hunting season. There was no time to waste.

I ate faster. While she prepared his food for the trip, he changed clothes. He was ready before me and spurred me on when he said, "I'm gonna leave you if you ain't

ready." I got ready. This was going to be my first hunting trip. I "raked" my remaining meatballs and spaghetti into a paper bag and somewhere between the front porch and the car, the bottom of the bag broke and all my stuff spilled out onto the ground. He laughed. So did I. With his twelve gauge over his left arm, he put his right arm around my shoulder and we walked over to the 1952 grey chevrolet to go hunting on the first day of the season.

We didn't get anything, but we talked a lot. He told me not only how to stalk the woods but that life was much like a hunting trip--most times you don't get anything but you don't give up--you keep going back. Life, like hunting is not something you give up on. Like the game, it's always there. You just have to see it and when you do, you must be prepared to take your best shot.

Mr. Sandy died thirty years ago without ever having gotten his name in the papers. Well, I just fixed that.



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