

## CHAPTER 1

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# Pine Bluff: The Moral Resources of a Southern Black Community

Ivory Perry's story begins in the fertile farm country along the banks of the rivers flowing through central and southern Arkansas—the Ouachita, the Saline, the Arkansas, and the Mississippi. Born on May 5, 1930, in a sharecropper cabin in Desha County **near** Dumas, Perry got his first lessons about life from labor in the cotton fields **during** the hard Depression years of the 1930s in rural Arkansas. As soon **as** he learned to walk, he learned to work. Perry was just **two** years old when his mother tied an empty fifty-five-pound flour sack for holding cotton around his neck and brought him to work alongside her in the fields. With **his** sisters Kathen and Earl Lean, he picked and chopped cotton all day long; the entire family earned perhaps \$1 per day. Pearl Barnes Perry supplemented what little money she and her children earned in the fields by cooking and cleaning in white people's homes at the end of her long days picking cotton.<sup>1</sup>

Pearl Barnes had known little but hard work her entire life. She grew up on a farm near Bastrop, Louisiana, where she cut sugarcane, raised chicken, chopped wood, and picked cotton. **Her** father died in a sawmill accident when she was young, and her stepfather treated Pearl and **her** sisters cruelly. He would feed his own children first, giving the stepchildren only leftovers. He made them work in the fields all day and forbade them to attend school. He subjected all the children and his wife to frequent beatings. When her family moved to Arkansas in the 1920s, Pearl Barnes met and married a young sawmill worker, Ivory Perry, Sr., known to his friends as "Son" Perry. Together Pearl and Son worked as field hands and sharecroppers, but he often went **off** to jobs in the lumber camps and sawmills, leaving his **family** behind. Pearl never knew when her husband would be home, and she gradually took on more and more of the task of raising and supporting their three children.

In 1933, Son Perry left for good, and started living with another woman. Kathen, Ivory, and Earl Lean still saw their father from time to time, but their upbringing and their survival depended solely upon their mother.<sup>2</sup>

Ivory and his sister Kathen remember their mother as a woman whose only activity outside of work was church services. Kathen Perry Wright explains. "I never knew her to do nothing else, really I didn't. Like a ballgame or a dance—she didn't care for that. She didn't even wear makeup or nothing like that. I don't know nothing she liked to do. Nothing. She didn't like to listen to the radio; I never knew her to go to a movie." Ivory remembers his mother wrapping her legs in burlap so she could walk through the snow to her job as a cook for a local judge, and he recalls her enjoyment at spending all day Sunday in church—at least on those Sundays when she could get the day off from work. "She was just a hard working lady," says Maggie Lewis, Pearl's sister. "She'd chop cotton, cut wood, and take care of her kids." A neighbor, Katherine Jiner, tells how Pearl Perry would work all week long in white people's kitchens to bring home \$2.50. "His mother worked all the time," emphasizes Ivory's cousin Doris Caldwell; "sunup to sundown, she had to work all day."

The peculiar injustices of sharecropping and day labor made Pearl Perry's unremitting work necessary. Landowners allowed families like the Perrys to live and work on their land in return for half the crop outright and the rest at a stipulated price. When political and technological changes in the 1930s undermined the sharecropping system, many workers found themselves even worse off than before—reduced to working as day laborers, paid only for the crop they picked each day. Most owners required tenants to do all their shopping at plantation commissaries, which inevitably offered inferior goods at inflated prices. The commissary system also enabled the owners to exert paternalistic control over their tenants by instructing storekeepers to refuse selected tenants the opportunity to buy candy, alcohol, or other "unnecessary" items.<sup>4</sup>

Ivory Perry remembers that sometimes his family had to pick hundreds of pounds of cotton a day just to break even and pay for the food, clothes, and tools they had purchased on credit during the previous winter. Even when they picked enough cotton to come out ahead, Pearl Perry and her children had to contend with the discretionary power wielded by the people who employed them. Plantation owners prevented sharecroppers from looking at the scales that weighed how much they picked and from seeing the ledger books that recorded how much

money they owed. No matter how many bales of cotton her family managed to pick, every year Pearl Perry heard the same story: "You almost got out of the hole this time; try again next year."<sup>5</sup>

The Perry family "worked the shares" and performed day labor on plantations near Dumas and Grady, seldom staying on any one farm for more than two years. From six in the morning until six at night they chopped and picked cotton. Pearl worked one row by herself; the three children took the next one together. At night, Kathen cooked dinner for her brother and sister while their mother went off to cook and clean house for other people's families. On days when they were not reeded in the fields, the children went to school, sometimes walking as much as eight miles in each direction. Ivory liked going to school, he enjoyed fishing and hunting expeditions with other boys, and he even derived a certain satisfaction from work in the fields. "I'm a Taurus, an earth sign," he explains, "and I like farming and working with my hands in the soil—if I could own my own farm." But working for others meant having to labor at their pace and for their benefit, and it meant having to endure their manipulations of the ledger books and scales. "Sharecropping would have been ideal for some people with large families," he observes, "but you always get tricked in the end."<sup>6</sup>

The "trickery" of sharecropping meant poverty and dependency for Pearl Perry and her children. Throughout his youth, Ivory suffered from severe and recurrent earaches caused by an infection. Kathen remembers their mother's concern over his condition and her efforts to get some treatment for her son. She took him to a doctor, but the physician wanted \$25 in advance, which she did not have. She prayed instead, asking God to take the infection away. Fortunately, the infection got no worse and eventually did go away, but other problems emanating from the poverty and dependency of sharecropping remained.<sup>7</sup>

One plantation owner used to come to their cabin to get Ivory to help him with his illegal bootlegging excursions. The child had no choice but to help. "My mother really didn't like it," he recalls, "but what could she do?" One time they drove off during a thunderstorm to deliver some homemade whiskey to a new customer. The plantation owner kept sampling his own product as they rode, and every time it thundered he would shout out curses against God. "I was afraid of what would happen with him yelling like that," Perry remembers. "With all that thunder and lightning going on, I expected that lightning to strike him, because, man, he was hard on God."<sup>8</sup>

The plantation owners also worked to keep black and white share-

croppers hostile to each other. They told the white tenants that black workers held everyone else back, reducing income for all sharecroppers. Ivory recalls the situation confronting the white sharecroppers:

They were treated worse than we were, but there **was** a lot of racial problems there because the plantation owners didn't want them to socialize with us. But there wasn't nowhere else for them to go. They couldn't socialize with them [the owners]. I made some very good friends with some of the white sharecroppers, young boys my age. We used to go hunting and fishing together and we had a lot of fun.<sup>9</sup>

Racism discouraged black **and** white sharecroppers from uniting to press for solutions to their common problems, and racial discrimination left black sharecroppers with few alternatives to farm labor. On a personal level, black and white tenants might get along **and** be friends, but the owners had a stake in perpetuating a social structure that kept the races divided.<sup>10</sup>

In their lives as sharecroppers, the Perry family inherited the burdens of hundreds of years of racism and exploitation. "History is what hurts," claims Fredric Jameson, referring to the ways past events and their consequences impose inexorable limits on each of **us**; certainly Pearl Perry and her children knew something about that kind of hurt." The experiences of their ancestors as slaves and the traditions and hierarchies that arose after slavery ended had a lot to do with the hardships they faced every day.

But history can also be what helps, a resource from the past that addresses present hurts and eases current pains. The collective memory of communities contains historical information that expands the present by infusing it with the experiences and accumulated wisdom of past generations. Ivory Perry's personal experiences **as** a child had a collective historical dimension; they had been shaped by events and attitudes that originated before he was born. **But** just as his history contained legacies of oppression, so did it involve traditions of resistance. The experiences of slaves, sharecroppers, and social activists in his community's past permeated collective memory and legitimated demands for decency and justice in the present.

All Afro-American history begins with slavery, but we sometimes forget that contemporary individuals have direct **as** well as indirect connections *to* that institution. When Ivory Perry was growing **up** in Arkansas

in the 1930s and 1940s, some of the old people that he saw on the street had been born slaves. In 1938, interviewers from the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration contacted some of these people and recorded their memories of slavery and its aftermath. Their recollections display the values and traditions shaping the community that nurtured Ivory Perry and they shed important light on the sense of legitimacy that guided Perry's subsequent social activism. For example, James Davis, a ninety-six-year-old cotton farmer, remembered with pride his efforts to harass the Ku Klux Klan during their first reign of terror after the Civil War. He told the WPA interviewer:

I've seen them Ku Klux in slavery time and I've cut many a grapevine. We'd be in the place dancin' and playin' the banjo and the grapevine strung across the road and the Ku Klux come ridin' along the run right into it and throw the horses down.<sup>12</sup>

Attitudes about the 1930s revealed in these interviews proved much less combative. "The way things is goin'," said eighty-year-old George Benson, "I don't think the white man wants the colored man to have as much as the white man." J. N. Brown, seventy-nine, voiced a similar sentiment:

We colored people are livin' under the law, but we don't make no laws. You take a one-armed man and he can't do what a two-armed man **can**. The colored man in the south is a one-armed man, but of course the colored man can't get along without the white folks. But **I've lived** in this world long enough to **know** what the cause is—I know why the colored man is a one-armed man.

And in words that would prove somewhat prophetic, seventy-eight-year-old Tanner Thomas argued:

God intended for every man in the world to have a living and to live for each other but too many of 'em living for **themselves**. But every-thing's goin' to work out right after a while. God's goin' to change this thing after a while. **Lou** can't rush him. He can handle these people. After he gets through with this generation. I think he's goin' to make a generation that will serve **him**.<sup>13</sup>

These **men**, and their contemporaries, had witnessed enormous changes in a lifetime. Born **as** slaves, they remembered the promises of emancipation and the achievements of Reconstruction. They partici-

pated in the economic and social system that replaced slavery, a system built around the imperatives of tenant farming. Faced with an uncertain labor supply after the Civil War ended slavery, southern planters devised a means of tying their work force to the land and of paying less for labor—the sharecropping system. In Arkansas, sharecropping expanded dramatically after 1900 when lumber companies had finished clearing much of the land in the eastern part of the state, and when floods, the boll weevil, and soil exhaustion undermined the cotton economy in other parts of the South.<sup>14</sup>

Everywhere the system existed, sharecroppers faced the same abuses that confronted the Perry family—instability, low wages, and fraudulent bookkeeping. A 1935 study found that 57.1 percent of Arkansas Delta sharecroppers had lived on their current farms less than two years. The average annual net income for sharecroppers in 1934 totaled \$284; wage laborers averaged only \$203.<sup>15</sup> Historian Lawrence Levine's studies of black folklore identify numerous tales based on the propensity of plantation owners to cheat their tenants. In one version

a black sharecropper, tired of doing nothing better than breaking even year after year, decides to report only ten of twelve bales of cotton he raises one exceptionally good year. After elaborate figuring, his white landlord informs him, "Well, well, you done putty good dis year too, Fred. You bmke dead even." "Well, dat's good," the sharecropper replies, "but dere's two mo' bales I didn't tell you 'bout." "The hell you did," the white man screams as he tears up the paper on which he had been figuring. "Don't you never do nothin' like dat again, nigger. Have me refigurin' yo' crop all over so you can come out dead even."<sup>16</sup>

Sharecropping enabled plantation owners to share the risks of farming with their tenants while keeping a disproportionate share of the benefits. The system secured a steady and inexpensive work force for wealthy landowners, but it also provoked resistance and rebellion among the workers. In 1919, Robert Lee Hill, a black sharecropper from Phillips County, organized the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, a self-help group based on the principles of Booker T. Washington's Negro Business League. Their main aim was to get fair reward for their labor by obtaining accurate information from plantation owners on how much money they owed and how much cotton they had picked. When police officers stumbled upon a union meeting in October 1919,

an exchange of gunfire touched off a complicated series of events known as the Elaine Riot

Rumors spread that blacks planned a general uprising and that they intended to kill all whites; the white population formed vigilante posses to round up the "troublemakers." Within five days, five whites and anywhere from twenty to two hundred blacks, depending on which estimate one uses, had been killed in the fighting. A self-appointed committee of plantation Owners and storekeepers interrogated the more than one thousand blacks taken captive by law enforcement officers and federal troops, and they held seventy-nine of them for trial on charges of insurrection and murder. In five days, they convicted sixty-seven defendants and sentenced them to jail terms ranging from twenty years to life in prison. Twelve of the accused were convicted of murder and sentenced to death.<sup>1</sup>

Investigators for the NAACP contended that the police started the violence by opening fire on a peaceful meeting, and that the trials violated American standards of due process. They noted that not a single white person faced any legal action as a result of the violence that left many blacks dead, and that intimidation and torture had been used to secure confessions. Charging that the real crime of the Elaine Riot victims had been their decision to form a union, the NAACP appealed the convictions to the federal courts and eventually the jail sentences were overturned. However, union organization among the sharecroppers died out until the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union fifteen years later."<sup>2</sup>

The problems of sharecropping facing the Perry family were hardly unique, but they entered the world of tenant farming at a particularly crisis-ridden time. By the time Ivory Perry was born in 1930, 78 percent of the nation's 2,803,756 black families lived in the South, 44 percent in rural areas. Of those in the countryside, 80 percent worked as tenant farmers or day laborers. In Jefferson County, where the Perrys did much of their sharecropping, more than half of the entire population lived in the country, with blacks constituting 83 percent of the rural population. Cotton covered three-quarters of Jefferson County's cropland and accounted for 90 percent of the land worked by sharecroppers. The largest plantation in the county had 1,560 acres devoted to cotton, with 1,314 of those acres worked by 107 sharecropping families and the rest tended by hired day laborers.<sup>19</sup>

During the Depression, cotton prices fell from seventeen cents per

pound in 1929 to seven cents per pound in 1932. President Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) sought to alleviate the farm crisis by raising crop prices and reducing acreage through subsidies for fallow land. As a result, Arkansas plantation owners received \$72 million from the federal government by 1938 to take land out of production—which the owners accomplished largely by evicting sharecroppers. From 43 million acres under cotton cultivation in 1929, southern farms fell to 23 million acres by 1939. Displacement of Sharecroppers provoked two responses: collective resistance and individual migration.<sup>20</sup>

Collective resistance coalesced around the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). In 1934, seven black and eleven white men formed the STFU near Tyronna, Arkansas (about 150 miles from Pine Bluff). By 1935, the organization's membership soared to 15,000 tenants from the Mississippi Delta cotton fields, and it waged a fierce strike that year, seeking better pay and improved living conditions. In Arkansas alone, 22,000 workers joined the STFU between 1934 and 1938, and total STFU membership throughout the South in 1938 exceeded 38,000.<sup>21</sup>

The rapid growth in STFU membership stood in marked contrast to previous attempts at organizing Arkansas sharecroppers. Violence and intimidation still characterized relations between plantation owners and sharecroppers in the 1930s, but historical changes created a new determination to resist on the part of the workers. Declining cotton prices, AAA subsidies, and increased agricultural mechanization all undermined the stability of the sharecropper system. STFU members had even less economic power than their predecessors in the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, whose labor had provided an indispensable resource for the owners. In addition to the traditional problems of low wages and poor working conditions, sharecroppers in the 1930s also faced eviction from the land and an end to their way of life. By the early 1940s, federal policies, mechanization, and repression combined to defeat the STFU and to force sharecroppers off the land in large numbers.<sup>22</sup>

Pearl Perry and her children participated in the exodus of sharecroppers from the countryside when they moved to Pine Bluff in 1943. In that city they encountered a different kind of historical legacy, one composed of decades of Afro-American struggle and accomplishment. In the nineteenth century, a former slave named Wiley Jones had amassed a fortune in Pine Bluff by investing the money he earned as a barber and shopkeeper in local real estate and transportation ventures. Jones built the city's first streetcar line, and he owned the local fairgrounds, park, and



racetrack. He served as treasurer of the Annual Colored Industrial Fair held each October to display the accomplishments of local blacks.<sup>23</sup>

During the Reconstruction era, a series of compromises between whites and blacks in the Pine Bluff Republican party organization divided localelective offices between the two races. Ferd Haviss, a blackman, was elected alderman in 1871, state legislator in 1872, and Jefferson County assessor in 1873. Eavis and Wiley Jones attended the 1880 Republican National Convention as delegates from Arkansas, and for ten years Haviss served as Jefferson County circuit clerk. Another black officeholder, John Gray Lucas, served as state representative and commissioner of the U.S. Circuit Court, while other blacks routinely won election as county coroner and common council representative.<sup>24</sup>

Business and political achievement led to opportunities for black education in Pine Bluff. J. C. Corbin had come to Arkansas from his native Ohio in the 1870s, and he quickly became one of the most influential black leaders in the state. A graduate of Ohio University who spoke nine languages and published scholarly articles on mathematics, Corbin served as chief clerk in the Little Rock branch of the U.S. post office and filled the office of state superintendent of public education for one term. At the behest of Governor Augustus H. Garland, Corbin moved to Pine Bluff and established Branch Normal College for Negroes in 1875, an institution that later became Arkansas AM&N and then the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.<sup>25</sup> The existence of that institution helped secure an important role for Pine Bluff as a center of black education, culture, and business in the state of Arkansas.

Thus Ivory Perry grew up in a region characterized by a rich history of Afro-American struggle and accomplishment. Born in a rural area known for militant activism by sharecroppers, he moved to a city with rich traditions of self-help and political mobilization. But neither the urban nor the rural strains of activism had much of a direct effect on him personally. In the mid-1930s the STFU had eighteen locals in Jefferson County and enjoyed a following among both black and white sharecroppers. When county officials denied welfare relief to destitute black sharecroppers under the pretense of having run out of application forms, the STFU staged successful protest demonstrations. Yet Ivory Perry never heard of the organization when he was growing up, and to this day his relatives cannot recall any contact with it. The STFU had its greatest strength in Jefferson County north of the Arkansas River; while the Perrys did most of their farming south of it. But even if they had known of

the union's existence they would not necessarily have joined it. They certainly resented the terms and conditions of sharecropping, but like most people they tried to survive as best they could under the system that existed, giving little thought to prospects for systemic change.<sup>26</sup>

In Pine Bluff, the Perry family lived with relatives on Mississippi Street as they made the transition from rural to urban life. Even though his father had long since abandoned the family and even though his mother spent much of her time away from home at work, Ivory grew up in a warm supportive atmosphere, surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors who treated him like a family member. That experience conformed to a larger pattern among southern black families in which kinship clusters, flexible extended families, and neighborhood support networks provided a stable source of affection and identity even when economic pressures disrupted the nuclear family.<sup>27</sup> To a youth raised in the country, the city had a lot to offer, and Ivory especially enjoyed going to school right down the street without having to miss class regularly for work in the fields. After school, he explored the shop windows and motion picture theaters downtown, both of which helped stimulate his curiosity about the rest of the world.<sup>28</sup> Yet even after moving to Pine Bluff, Ivory continued to work in the fields. He often got up at four in the morning to catch the truck that stopped at the corner of Otis Street and Twenty-ninth Avenue to take day laborers out to the plantations. He also took jobs in the city—delivering packages for a grocer, caddying at a golf course, and shining shoes.

While Perry encountered new surroundings in the city, poverty and racism continued to shape the contours of his experience. Sometimes the labor contractors who took him out to pick cotton in Grady or to shuck rice in Stuttgart Mould just pocket the money Ivory had earned, knowing full well that the youth could not afford to complain and risk not being hired again. In addition, Pine Bluff made the nature of white racism more evident to him than ever before; signs everywhere designated public facilities for "whites only" or "colored only." At the Strand Theater, blacks had to sit in the "colored balcony," and Perry remembers being careful not to laugh at the funny parts of the films until the white people had laughed first. Even white children could pose a threat, as Ivory discovered one day when he told a white boy that he had seen another white boy break the first's bicycle. Pearl Perry, overhearing the exchange, beat Ivory. She knew that he had told the truth, just as she had always instructed him to do, but she felt she had to impress upon

her son the dangers of antagonizing white people—even those who were only nine years old.<sup>29</sup>

His family taught Ivory Perry more affirmative lessons as well. Through family stories he received instruction in what made for a good life. His relatives cultivated moral and psychic resources in the children by celebrating family members whose exemplary conduct provided useful lessons. Ivory's cousin, the Reverend Robert Pierce, remembers on?hero venerated in those stories:

We had an uncle in those days, who was real old, that we considered to be a success. He had migrated out of the state of Louisiana and came to south Arkansas where he was a little teacher and a little preacher. And he could read and write, which was rare for people his age. And to us, we considered Uncle Willis a very successful man. And our parents kind of disciplined us into his tracks—to stay in school and learn how to get along with people, and help people, for you can't make it by yourself.<sup>30</sup>

Robert Pierce took those lessons to heart and became an example himself to Ivory and his sisters. When Pierce was in the ninth grade he did yard work for a white family and became friendly with their son, who was in the seventh grade. He noticed that his new friend's seventh-grade books were the same ones that he got in the black school in the ninth grade. In addition, the boy had supplies at home, like lung pieces of chalk, that Pierce had never seen in his school. The black schools got only little end pieces of chalk once they had been discarded by the white schools. just as they received only hand-medown books and science equipment. Wanting to win the approval of his teachers, Pierce borrowed a long piece of chalk from his playmate and brought it to school. But when he showed it to the teachers, they assumed he had stolen it. Pierce escaped punishment when the white youth verified that he had given him the chalk, but the experience left Pierce with a lingering resentment against the constraints imposed on him by racism, and with a determination to fight against them.<sup>31</sup>

When Pierce returned to Pine Bluff from military service in World War II, racism bothered him more than ever before. He remembers boarding the Main Street bus and observing that the sign ordering black people to sit in the back read "COLORED SIT FROM THE REAR OF THE BUS." Seeing no whites on board, he sat down on the seat directly behind the driver. The driver ordered Pierce to move back, but Pierce retorted that he was in full

compliance with the sign, and that if the bus company wished to convey some other message by that sign, then they should change its wording. "We had gone to war and given our guts for our country," he says, "and we felt like we deserved the same privileges as anybody else." With that principle in mind, Pierce quietly tested the limits of segregation whenever possible. He took a drink from the "whites only" water fountain in a downtown store, refused to move when a white man sat down beside him on the bus and then insisted Pierce should move farther back, and suggested to white store owners that hiring black employees would increase their sales to black customers. In one hardware store, a black employee routinely helped customers with all their selections but was not allowed to work the cash register. Pierce told the owner that he faced a mass exodus of black customers unless he changed that policy. Soon the black employee began to work the register.<sup>32</sup>

Robert Pierce followed his conscience in defiance of those who considered him to be a troublemaker.

Here's what the white man calls a troublemaker. If you were black and a white man waked up and started talking to you, if you found a way of not saying 'yes sir' to him, then you were a "smart nigger." I could find a hundred ways never to say "yes sir." I could talk all day and don't have to say "yessir."<sup>33</sup>

Another of Ivory Perry's cousins, Doris Caldwell, echoes Rev. Robert Pierce's sentiment. "I ain't never said 'yes, sir' or 'no, sir,'" she insists. "I just couldn't use the words. I didn't. Why should I?" Like Pierce she waged her own battle with segregation. She remembers having to confront whites on the street where she was a teenager, whites who expected her to step off the sidewalk to let them pass. "I fought many a day with kids my own age when they tried to push us off Main Street," she recalls. "They tried, but they didn't get nowhere because we fought back." Shortly after Caldwell married she went to Newberry's department store to buy handkerchiefs for her husband. The clerk refused to let her touch the ones she wanted, insisting instead that she tell him her preference so that he could pick them up from the display case. Incensed by his refusal to let her touch the handkerchiefs, Caldwell waited until he had wrapped the box and then told him, "OK, now you pay for them and take them. You picked them out, they must be yours." Caldwell stormed out of the store, never to shop there again.<sup>34</sup>

Attitudes of self-respect and antagonism toward racism permeated

Ivory Perry's family and childhood community. What he learned at home found powerful reinforcement at school, especially in the classes of Miss Myrtle Jones, his eighth-grade teacher at Pine Bluff's Merrill High School. By the time Ivory entered her class, Miss Jones had already established her identity as an indispensable resource and role model for black children in the area. Being her student entailed special responsibilities and offered special rewards, according to the things Ivory had heard people say, and once he became a student in her class she did not disappoint him.

Before students could enter her classroom, Miss Jones held inspection to make sure that they had combed their hair, cleaned their fingernails, and shined their shoes. "They had to prepare themselves to go into manhood and womanhood," she explains, adding that she wanted them armed with respect for themselves and respect for others. "We were striving for the virtues, honesty and truth," she recalls, never acknowledging the vices—"we didn't even call their names"—because she wanted her pupils to be guided by positive aspirations. "Above all, tell the truth," she told them. When students asked what they should do if someone threatened to cut off one of their arms unless they lied, she told them, "Lose the arm, but tell the truth."<sup>35</sup>

Black educators like Miss Jones had the difficult task of encouraging their students to work for success in a society that had stacked the deck against them. Too much emphasis on racism and the limitations it imposed on black people might lead to despair and resignation, yet insufficient attention to the obstacles ahead might give students a dangerously unrealistic notion about life in a segregated and racist society. Like other teachers in that situation, Miss Jones asked her students to dig deeply inside themselves for internal resources to transcend unfair, unjust, and immoral circumstances.

Self-discipline constituted the core of Miss Jones's philosophy. She took an active role policing the extracurricular lives of her pupils, driving up and down Pine Bluff's notorious Third Avenue in her big white Chevrolet looking for young people about to enter taverns or juke joints. All she had to do was honk her horn at her students, and they would dutifully turn around, go home, tell their parents that Miss Jones had seen them on Third Avenue, and accept their punishment. On occasion, Miss Jones would walk right into the Strand or Vester theaters to search for students skipping school, and she would drag them out on the spot. After she retired from teaching, Miss Jones continued youth work for

twenty years as an officer of the juvenile court. Even after retiring from that job, she continued to do the same work on her own, without pay.<sup>36</sup>

Miss Jones worked tirelessly to help her students avoid the temptations of drinking, dancing, and motion pictures, but she wanted to do much more. It was important to her that young people do something for others and that they recognize their responsibilities to society. She organized "tag day" sales every year to raise money for needy families. She encouraged her pupils to share with one another and to take an interest in one another's well-being. She never directly addressed racism, but she told her classes as emphatically as she could that they should "treat everybody like you've been raised to be—polite, honest, and truthful." She reminded them, "Have respect for yourself and then respect for others."<sup>37</sup>

Ivory Perry learned those lessons well; the things Miss Jones taught stayed with him his whole life. "If it weren't for Miss Jones, I'd probably be dead now," he says. "She taught me respect for people and a respect for truth—that your word is supposed to be your bond." Her emphasis on caring for others became second nature to him and helped prepare the groundwork for his later social activism. Robert Pierce observes, "He walked to school through the mud in the rain and carried his little lunch in a brown sack. And he learned to share what he had with others, because somebody always shared with him." Yet Perry also learned at school about the divisions in the black community, about the status rivalries and petty jealousies that divided him from his classmates. "If one little kid got a new shirt and I couldn't afford one, he called himself better than me," Perry recalls. "And they had little societies and cliques based on what church you went to or how much money you had."<sup>38</sup>

The moral lessons that Ivory Perry learned at home and in school were supplemented, at least in part, by his experiences in church. Whenever she could get away from work, Earl Perry went to church and always took her children with her. Most of the time in Pine Bluff they attended Rev. Albert King's St. Hurricane Baptist Church at Thirty-fourth Avenue and Ohio Street. Church activities included Sunday services, choir practice, weeknight prayer meetings, Bible study groups, Baptist Training Union, and home mission visits."

Ivory believed in the existence of a Supreme Being and accepted the moral imperatives taught in church, but he had his doubts about organized religion especially as it related to racism. "These whites doing lynchings, they was Baptists too," Perry remembers thinking, "and I

couldn't figure out, if they were such good Christians, why were they killing innocent people?" In addition, the preaching in church about humility and meekness in this world in return for eternal reward in heaven made no sense to him. "I want to get my reward in this world," he insists, "because I never been to the other world and I don't know how it's going to be; but you know the whites running this world, so you know they gonna be trying to run the next world—so I want to get mine while I'm here."<sup>40</sup>

Questions of race occupied his mind on subjects other than religion. Merrill High School had no black history courses, and Ivory's textbooks never touched on the specific experiences of black people, but one of his teachers used to talk to him privately about the civil rights activist and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois and about the black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. "At the time I heard about Garvey and how he wanted to go back to Africa, I was hoping it would become a reality, because I knew I just had to get away from all this racism," Perry remembers.<sup>41</sup> But like many others attracted by Garvey's message, he had to postpone thoughts of exodus to Africa while he grappled with the problems and concerns of his immediate surroundings.

Ivory tried to learn about racism from every available source. When he worked in white people's houses, he surreptitiously read the books and magazines he found there in the hope that they would have answers to his questions about racism. He listened to the radio at home, and drew particular satisfaction from the triumphs of the black boxing champion Joe Louis. Conversely, the demeaning stereotypes of black people in radio programs like "Amos 'n Andy" made him feel both embarrassed and angry. He found no humor in that program's presentation of blacks as lazy, shiftless, and amoral. He felt that southern blacks like himself suffered directly from the racial stereotypes perpetuated by "Amos 'n Andy," as typified by an incident that happened to him in Warren, Arkansas when he was seventeen years old.<sup>42</sup>

Working as a bellhop in the Southern Land Hotel in Warren, Perry began to shine the shoes of a white salesman from Shreveport, Louisiana. Without warning, the man began to slap Ivory's face and punch him, screaming, "You're the blackest nigger I've ever seen." The hotel manager, an elderly white woman, made the salesman stop and ordered him to apologize. Contritely the salesman explained that he had been drinking, and he gave Perry a \$20 tip. But the irrational rage behind the attack underscored the menacing presence of racism in his life, and Perry

felt suffocated by the obsession with skin color that seemed to dominate the thinking of white people. Everywhere he looked he saw evidence of it—on the signs that differentiated white water fountains and restrooms from those designated "for colored only;" in the words of white people who assumed that they could address any black man as "boy," and in the obvious discrimination that relegated black workers to menial and low-paying jobs.<sup>43</sup>

One respite from the indignities of racism and the alienations of labor came from leisuretime activities with his friends. Perry liked to ride horses through the open fields around Pine Bluff with his best friend, Jewel Gonder, whom everybody called Sam. They pretended to be the cowboys they saw in the movies, with Ivory imagining himself as Don "Red" Barry and Sam pretending to be Lash Larue. Sam and Ivory stayed overnight at each other's houses and played until dark in their back yards. They filled up their weekends with marble games, fishing trips, and hunting expeditions.<sup>44</sup>

When they became teenagers, Gonder and Perry sneaked into places like Eddie's Pool Room, the Swingland Grill, and other juke joints along Third Avenue. Neither of them drank alcoholic beverages, but they liked to dance and to listen to the music of blues singers like Muddy Waters and Louis Jordan. They had to conceal these excursions from their strict parents and from the eagle eye of Miss Jones as she cruised up and down in her big car. Miss Jones did pull them out of the Strand Theater once, but she never caught them in the juke joints. Perry and Gonder reflect upon their youth in Pine Bluff with happy memories. They recall a closeness with each other, as if they had been brothers. They remember how you could trust people and never have to lock your door or worry about someone stealing from you. They cherish the atmosphere of mutual respect that characterized their community as well. "It wasn't a whole lot of 'jokin' [aggressive teasing] like a lot of these kids do today," observes Jewel Gonder.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time that life in Pine Bluff increased Ivory Perry's exposure to white racism, it also enabled him to learn about methods of resistance and contestation. In Pine Bluff, the Perrys came into contact with civil rights activism, although more as spectators than as participants. An active NAACP chapter dominated by small-business owners and civil service professionals made its presence felt in the city, but within the limits mandated by the realities of southern racism. When the local chapter participated in the national NAACP campaign for federal



legislation against lynching in 1937, they had to return 150 campaign buttons to the national office because they could not be displayed safely in Pine Bluff. As postal worker and chapter chairman W. B. Cloman wrote to the national office, "It was found in some cases to be dangerous to display them in some parts and places of our city and county. The wrist bands and large placards we could not handle at all on account of prejudice here among the whites."<sup>46</sup>

If that atmosphere of intimidation constrained the actions of business owners and professionals whose livelihood did not depend upon white approval, it virtually precluded social protest by sharecroppers and day laborers. Yet one incident played an important part in the Perry family's understanding of racism and their desire to struggle against it. It took place before Pearl Perry and her children actually moved to Pine Bluff, but their relatives talked about it often as a lesson that proved they need not submit passively to racist provocations. The incident involved two brothers from one of Pine Bluff's most distinguished black families—Leo and Wiley Branton.

On an early September day in 1940, eighteen-year-old Leo Branton and his younger brother Wiley walked into the Henry Marx department store in Pine Bluff to buy clothes for the impending school term. A salesman showed Wiley Branton a gray "by-swing" jacket with pleats and a belt across the back. He was anticipating a nice commission on the sale—until the young man asked his brother's advice. Leo pointed out that Wiley already had a gray suit and that the by-swing was out of style. Angered by the prospect of losing his sale, the store employee whirled around and asked Leo, "What the hell have you got to do with it, nigger?" Leo replied that he had a right to advise his brother, but that response only made the salesman more irate. "If you don't shut up, nigger," he warned, "I'm going to hit you in the mouth." The youth vowed that he would do no such thing, and with that, the salesman struck him.<sup>47</sup>

Leo Branton put his hand to his mouth. When he saw blood, the 135-pound teenager hit back, knocking the zoo-pound salesman against the wall. In his fury, Leo knocked the bigger man to the floor, jumped on his stomach, and began to pound the man's face with both fists. Store personnel finally intervened, enabling Leo Branton to stand up and step back. As they dragged the salesman to the back of the store, the owner asked what had happened, and Leo Branton explained, "He struck me and I hit him back." The owner told the Branton brothers that they

should leave before there **was** any more trouble. **As** they turned to walk out of the store, Leo Branton heard someone shouting, "No, Carl! No, Carl! For Christ's sake, don't do that!" When he turned around, Branton **saw** the salesman coming toward him from the back of the store, brandishing a handgun. He chased the teenager behind a rack of clothes; in self-defense Branton pushed the rack over on top of his pursuer. Leo and Wiley Branton ran from the store to their father's taxi company office four blocks away. They told Leo Branton, Sr., what had happened in the store. Believing his sons and supporting their actions, Branton nonetheless sent Leo off to stay with his grandfather for safety's sake.<sup>48</sup>

A fight between a black teenager and a white man violated the southern code of racial deference, but Leo Branton had no thought of that at the time. Looking back on that day, he reflects:

I never thought about it. I'm just not a person who allows people to run over them. The thought never occurred to me that this is a white man I'm fighting with and the consequences are going to be great. I mean, the man struck me and I did the natural thing. I struck back.

Yet the salesman hardly thought of Branton's response as a "natural thing," and he demanded prosecution. The Pine Bluff chief of police refused to act because he considered Branton had acted in self-defense, but the county sheriff agreed to arrest the youth.<sup>49</sup>

Leo Branton went to court thinking he would face a minor charge of disturbing the peace, but the racial implications of the case soon produced a bizarre turn of events. Pine Bluff had only two black attorneys at that time; one did not handle criminal cases, and the other had spoken out so frankly against discrimination and segregation that the Brantons feared that his involvement in the case would surely lead to conviction. The family hired a white attorney, but he withdrew from the case on the morning of the trial, leaving Leo Branton to face the charges without benefit of legal counsel. To his shock, the youth discovered that in addition to a charge of disturbing the peace, he faced prosecution for assault with a deadly weapon. The salesman needed sixteen stitches and alleged that Leo Branton had used the butt end of a knife in the attack. Wiley and Leo Branton told the court their version of what had happened in the store—that Leo had acted in self-defense and had used only his fists. But the judge found him guilty on all counts. "He sounded like a tobacco auctioneer," Leo Branton recalls, remembering how the judge called out "thirty days on the county farm for this and thirty days

on the county farm fort that." Befwe the sheriff could take Leo off to jail, his father arrived with an attorney who informed the judge of his intention to appeal the case, which under the system then in effect meant an automatic retrial in front of a jury.<sup>50</sup>

Within the Pine Bluff black community, the Branton case became an important symbol. The president of Arkansas AM&N, Dr. John Brown Watson, discussed the issues raised by the trial in a speech that helped mobilize the entire black community. As Wiley Branton remembers it, "Dr. Watson did not exactly call for a boycott of the Henry Marx department store. But he did say that if he saw any faculty members coming out of that place of business, they should tell him where to send their final check, and if he saw any students coming out of that store they should tell him where to send their final transcript." The response to Dr. Watson's appeal was immediate and emphatic. With no central organization or public meetings, all the important black groups in Pine Bluff, including the NAACP and the Prince Hall Masons, spread word of the boycott. The removal of black business cost the Henry Marx store thousands of dollars, and when Leo Branton's case finally came to trial before the jury, black people filled up their designated area of the courtroom to demonstrate support.<sup>51</sup>

Yet that very solidarity made prosecutors determined to secure a conviction. Leo Branton remembers that when he testified in his own behalf, the prosecutor asked him nothing about the events in the store, but instead posed a series of questions designed to establish that Branton attended college at Tennessee State University. Branton discovered the reason for that line of questioning during the prosecutor's final speech to the jury. Branton remembers him saying:

If this was an ordinary cornfield nigger, I would tell you to fine him and let him go, because fining him would be punishment for him. But here's a nigger that's got money, got enough money to go away to college, and in another state! So fining this nigger wouldn't be no punishment for him. The only thing that would be punishment would be to spend some time on the county farm, and I want him to spend some time on the county farm.<sup>52</sup>

The jury returned a guilty verdict and the judge sentenced Leo Branton to a term on the county farm.

The Branton family vowed that they would never let Leo serve a day in jail, and they had their lawyer file another appeal. As he went back to

school while awaiting the outcome of his appeal, Leo Branton decided that he would never return to Pine Bluff if it meant going to prison. "I never would have gotten out of the jail alive," he contends. "They would have gotten me down on that county farm and they would have killed me." Anger over the verdict within the black community and embarrassment over it among whites led to a compromise solution, however, that kept Leo Branton out of jail. The judge who presided over the case told Leo Branton, Sr., that he felt the verdict was unfortunate, and that he would welcome information about any extenuating circumstances that could be used to suspend the sentence. They worked out an agreement to have a physician certify that confinement would damage Leo Branton's health so that the judge could commute the sentence. That outcome satisfied the prosecutor, who still had his conviction, and it delighted the black community, which from that point on looked at Leo Branton not only as one who stood up and fought back but as one who "got away with it."<sup>53</sup>

The Branton case illustrates the important role played by independent black businesspeople in building community resources for social betterment in southern cities. Leo and Wiley Branton's grandfather on their father's side owned the taxi company; their grandfather on their mother's side drove a parcel post truck for the post office. Along with other black families whose incomes came from insurance, undertaking, and other businesses serving a primarily black clientele, they provided an economic basis for civil rights activity in Pine Bluff. Of course, the community was not monolithic and not every black business owner could or would support civil rights activity, but they did serve as a potential and sometimes an actual base of support.

Even in the course of their everyday functions, black businesses sometimes provided vital services to the community. For example, the Branton taxicabs transported sick people to hospitals when the public ambulances would not serve blacks, and they picked up children from school on inclement days. The cabs connected people on the outskirts of town with friends and relatives in the city at a time when few black people in Pine Bluff owned automobiles. On more than one occasion they provided a radio-spliced fleet of cars descending on the scene of potential racial violence to remove black people from possible physical danger. But their most important contribution was providing a base of support for civil rights activism. Wiley and Leo Branton's grandmother waged a fight to get black people to vote against funds for a new library

because city officials announced that only whites would be able to use it. They didn't always win, but as Wiley Branton says of his parents' and grandparents' generations, "Even though they knew that white folks were in control, they would by and large give them a run for their money."<sup>54</sup>

The presence of Arkansas AM&N also made a difference in black activism in Pine Bluff, as evidenced by President Watson's stand on the Leo Branton case. Black educators worked quietly to lobby for funds for black schools and they insisted on high standards of educational quality at Merrill High School and at Arkansas AM&N. They also engaged in delicate negotiations with the white community over scarce resources. One folk tale collected in Pine Bluff by folklorist Richard Dorson underscores the diplomacy demanded of these educators. "The appropriation for the negro school was used for the white school. The superintendent explained this to the negro principal who of course couldn't make a direct protest. So he said, 'The one thing we need most of all is educated white folk.'"<sup>55</sup>

The community resources of Pine Bluff and its environs established a firm foundation for social contestation within the black people raised there. Leo Branton went on to become an internationally renowned attorney who successfully represented black activist Argela Davis in the early 1970s. Wiley Branton became the first black graduate of the University of Arkansas law school and a leader of legal efforts to secure voting rights for blacks in the 1960s. But for Ivory Perry, raised in the same community, the translation of childhood memories and resources into social activism took a more roundabout path. It is perhaps significant that much of his later activism mirrored the pattern established in the Branton case — resistance to racism by individuals provoked official reaction and overreaction, which in turn mobilized collective support from the aggrieved community. Many of the coalitions that he formed later in life resembled the alliance among educators, business owners, fraternal organizations, and individuals that rallied in support of the Brantons in Pine Bluff in 1940.

Yet while Ivory Perry and his family took pride in the civil rights activism in Pine Bluff, they did not participate in it directly. They had no independent income and could not afford to alienate white employers. The matters decided in voting booths and courtrooms seemed very distant from the daily struggle for survival that occupied most of their time. Although the Branton case and its aftermath inspired and encouraged

the Perry family, the economic and social circumstances of their everyday life demanded a more personal struggle. In subsequent years, when he became a community organizer and social activist, Perry realized his childhood experiences gave him some important insights into the obstacles that keep poor people from joining movements for social change.

It seems understandable that the child raised in an extended family and community kinship network would develop a philosophy as an adult that called for helping everyone in need, not just blood relatives. Similarly, one can see why a child stung by playmates' scorn of his old clothes and his membership in the "wrong" church might come to distrust materialism and status hierarchies later in life. But Perry also learned from his youth that people do not become involved in activism simply because they are unhappy. Poor people fight a battle every day to put food on their tables and to keep a roof over their heads, and they cannot afford to waste any energy on behalf of abstract principles. Political action requires risk and presumes that short-term sacrifices will yield long-term benefits. But most poor people have no assurance that there will be a long run for them, and regardless of their sympathies, they often cannot afford to think about political change. Ivory Perry came to feel that social change had to touch the lives of people on the bottom of society to really make a difference, and that in order to reach these people it had to begin with their everyday needs and concerns.

But those perception: fell into place only after adult experiences made Perry reflect back on his youth. At the time, he had his hands full just trying to understand the personal and historical circumstances facing him and other blacks all across the country. Mechanization of agriculture drove his family to the city and disrupted the rural life they had always known. World War II cushioned part of the impact of that displacement by providing job opportunities in the cities, but war mobilization also disrupted the fabric of urban life. Defense spending in the 1940s ended more than a decade of economic depression, and in a relatively short period of time a chronic labor surplus became a labor shortage. Fourteen million Americans entered the armed forces and millions of others crossed city, county, and state lines looking for work in defense production centers.

These migrations disrupted old networks, strained the resources of the cities, and created unprecedented transformations in race, class, and gender identities. Black people responded to war mobilization with demands for "double victory"—victory over fascism abroad and over rac-

ism at home. A. Philip Randolph organized the March on Washington Movement, which secured an executive order from President Roosevelt mandating fair hiring in defense industries, and a new militancy invigorated civil rights protests nationwide.<sup>56</sup> War mobilization also accelerated changes in family structure that had been underway since the start of the Depression. With large numbers of men in the military, greater numbers of women entered the work force and became the major source of support for their families.

In Pine Bluff, the Committee on Negro Organizations (CNO), under the leadership of black attorney Harold Flowers, engaged in highly publicized battles to desegregate bus station waiting rooms and city parks.<sup>57</sup> Juvenile court records showed a tremendous rise in delinquency cases during the war years and a gradual lowering of the average age of delinquents.<sup>58</sup> Ivory Perry moved from a rural society in transition to an urban community undergoing profound changes itself. As a result he spent his entire youth in unsettled and unsettling circumstances. Old patterns of social relations rooted in sharecropping had broken down, and new patterns remained fluid and transitory. Economic changes undermined traditional avenues for employment, and families faced extraordinary changes that left them uncertain about the future. Social strain displaced and disoriented individuals and it disrupted the patterns of the past for communities and institutions.

But for Ivory Perry, important continuities endured and offset the effects of rapid social change. Within his family, at school, and out in the community at large, he absorbed lessons in self-reliance, mutuality, and struggle. His family respected hard work and education, provided examples of sharing and compassion, and offered role models who did what they could to resist racism and exploitation. His favorite teacher demanded punctuality, cleanliness, and moral excellence. She instructed him to care for others and to share with them, and she insisted that he speak the truth no matter what the consequences. His community honored the memory of achievers in business, education, and government; it established networks of support to help those in need, and it mounted a sustained effort on behalf of the Brantons and others in pursuit of racial justice. In collective memory about the past, in the institutions indigenous to the black community, and in the practices and traditions of family, Ivory Perry learned standards of behavior that would anchor all his moral and political commitments in the years ahead.

Yet as Ivory grew older, a series of economic and personal hardships

hit his family. Pearl Perry contracted bronchial pneumonia and the doctor ordered her not to leave the house. But the children had no food, so she walked in the rain to her two jobs that day. Shortly after, she suffered a stroke, and on November 20, 1946, she died at the age of forty two.<sup>59</sup>

Ivory tried to stay in school after his mother died, but he had to put in ever-increasing hours at work **just** to earn enough money to survive. Kathen had gotten married by this time, **so** Ivory and Earl Lean moved in with **their** older sister and her husband. But money was scarce in the household, and Ivory had trouble finding a job that paid enough to support himself, much **less** contribute to the rest of the family. He set out to find his father in hopes that Son Perry might be able to lend him some money. He searched on foot, walking the back roads of rural Arkansas, asking sharecroppers and timber workers if they knew Sun Perry. When he finally found him, his father wanted to help but had very little money himself, **and** his new wife frowned on lending any of it to Ivory.

Ivory returned to Pine Bluff empty-handed and dropped out of school to find a full-time job. For more than a year, Perry worked wherever and whenever he could, but he never made more than \$18 a week. Frustrated by low-paying menial jobs and unhappy about not being able to contribute more to support his sisters, he decided to leave Pine Bluff and join the army. That meant leaving home and leaving his family. But his room and board would be provided in the military, and he might even have enough money to send some back home. On November 2, 1948, Perry enlisted in the U.S. Army.<sup>60</sup>