Part One : 1901–1949

THE YOUNG Murphy brood—all ten of them—huddled on the porch of the family's rural abode near Anderson, South Carolina. The larger children used their heft to get up front, flush with the door, and pressed their ears to the sun-bleached wood. The little guys did their best to penetrate the tangle of slender brown legs and faded coveralls.

In the room on the opposite side of that door a crackling fire neutralized the spring chill, yet the three occupants felt anything but comfortable.

Sweat and steam dampened Jessie Mae McDugal's body like soft rain as she stirred the rags being sterilized in boiling water over the fire. Inwardly, Jessie Mae was a cool, deliberate, and experienced midwife. For the drained man sitting on a milking stool by the bed, it was a different story. Dave Murphy was sweating in nervous anticipation through the long and difficult labor his woman was experiencing. A very pregnant Hannah Murphy was drenched, by now, after hours of excruciating pain.

It was April 19, 1901, and getting late in the evening when the baby's head appeared. Hannah grunted and pushed; Jessie Mae McDugal gently pulled and consoled; Dave Murphy paced the floor and praised the Lord.

The Murphy children squealed, hugged, and danced with delight when they heard the strong wail that was Gertrude Willa Azalee Murphy Ward's first solo.

Gert was just getting old enough to enjoy being the baby of the family when another baby came to slide her out of that favored position. The twelfth child was a boy named David. The Murphys' plentiful homegrown workforce was kept busy with farm chores. Chickens

needed feeding and plucking. Cows had to be milked and taken to pasture. Wood was gathered for fires. In the spring, the ground was plowed by Dave and the older brothers, then raked and furrowed by Hannah and the younger children so that seeds could be planted. A new outhouse trench was dug. Lord knows, the old site had to be covered. A winter of daily offerings by fourteen people pretty well necessitated it.

Summer produced not only crops to pick, pickle, and preserve but abundant weeds and pests to dispose of. The Murphys were sharecroppers and had a fairly large tract of land to tend, most of it planted in cotton. Everyone picked. Sometimes they picked all day and ate lunch in the field. Songs helped break the monotony and take their minds off aching backs. One person would begin and then the others would join in, harmonizing or counterpointing. Some verses often humorous, were created on the spot.

The fall was a hectic yet happy time. Although the days were crammed with chores, some hours were always squeezed out for fellowship and merriment. For example, when animals were to be slaughtered and smoked, neighbors would gather together at one farm and all pitch in. Then, in the late afternoon, the celebration would begin. A huge fire illuminated the area and showed off the tables laden with mouth-watering country cooking. All the families contributed. Occasionally the men ambled off to the barn or some other designated spot, returning mellower and happier. Everybody knew they were drawn by that powerful magnet—good corn liquor.

Jokes and stories were popular, and one storyteller would try to top the other; you could hear the singing and laughter way up the road. When jokes about "Mr. Charlie and ol' Sam" (master and slave) evolved into tales of the not too distant past, however, emotions often sagged heavily between jollity and anguish. Accounts of the "worser than now" days puckered brows as if crimped by a rough drawstring. Mouths that had opened wide in mirth narrowed to tightly clenched wedges; lips were caught by the teeth to control the quiver. Every adult had a bitter ingredient to add to the memory cauldron: "Yeah, pickin' crops, if you missed a worm you had to eat it."

Mindful of letting the "young blood" know how it was, blacks at such gatherings all over the South shared almost identical stories. Stories of a father's flight from armed white men and baying hounds, while his trembling offspring crouched in their mother's arms. Stories of false accusations too often backed up by the white accuser's gallery of friends. Some whites, of course, put their reputations or lives on the line for blacks. In slavery days they supplied escapees with safe houses, food, contacts, and transportation. Some owners also broke the law by teaching their slaves to read and write, even though discovery meant severe punishment for both races. In these instances, whites had all to lose and nothing to gain except righteousness. Many of us would not exist if our foreparents had not been aided by a few gallant Caucasians.

Once the oldtime stories—good and bad—had run their course, someone would invariably pull the crowd back to frivolity. Some came willingly; others lingered in the decomposing sadness, but such evenings generally ended on a note of gaiety.

Church attendance was another frequent activity among the Murphys and their neighbors, for the churches provided collective strength and social as well as religious release from daily problems and everyday drudgery. Folks outside the experience may be unaware of the fervor of Baptist services. Bible passages read by a deacon or assistant pastor are commonly repeated and expounded upon at length by the regular pastor. He admonishes his hearers with threats of burning in hell for the sins of lying, drinking, fornicating, gambling, or disobeying any of the commandments God gave to Moses. He may begin his sermon in a slow, deliberate voice, then artfully modulate the intensity and tempo until his listeners are aroused to ecstacy. Almost every sentence is permeated with shouting and moaning from the congregation, each member contributing his or her own, seldom varying expression such as "Well, well," "Um-mmm," or "Preach it!"

Preachers adopt various styles. The singing preacher may introduce, accompany, and end his message with songs to create a mood of joy or sorrow or repentance and to wrest passionate responses from his flock. The healing preacher calls on the power of God to mend and

cleanse the body and mind of a sufferer, usually transmitting the divine energy by the "laying on of hands" and repeated entreaties. Whatever the style, something mystical envelops the worshippers. Weak, strong, bold, or timid—all leave conscious posturing behind and "get the spirit"; they may speak in tongues, scream, faint, laugh, cry, or dance. The unbridled spontaneity of "getting happy" is the chief joy that some have in life.

Christians in the South worshiped the God of the Bible and loved Jesus, but some also relied on the voodoo conjurer or "root doctor" to remove spells or illnesses that they believed were brought on by evil forces, or to "fix" (place a spell on) another person or turn his evil work back on him. Root doctors, male and female, worked with herbs, grave dust, shells, dolls, fingernail parings, eggs—even animal sacrifice. Equally fearful were their maledictions and supernatural incantations, rituals that combined African and Catholic elements with inspiration from the "forces." We need to remember that all societies and religions have aspects and practices that outsiders find strange. Walking on water, raising the dead, and parting the sea are not everyday accomplishments either.

Gertrude and the other kids trudged almost ten miles to attend the Ebenezer Baptist Church, a one-room structure that was also the schoolhouse. There the teacher had her hands full teaching all the grades. The big boys were responsible for keeping the fire going in the stove. The other children had the task of collecting wood.

The end of the school day was welcomed by all. It was great fun to imitate the way the elders talked and walked. Gossip was just as juicy then as it is now, so it was on practically every day's menu. The walk home also provided the opportunity for courtships. A boy named George Ward really had eyes for Gertrude. Time would prove that she found him attractive, too. They had shared many warm moments by the time they finished eighth grade and left school.

Meanwhile, John, James, and Foster Murphy, Gert's older brothers, were becoming good musicians. They derived their music and lyrics not only from material they picked up at minstrel and traveling tent shows but from life experiences. Prisoners working along the roads and rail-

road tracks or busting rocks were the source of some of the more poignant songs in the Murphys' blues repertoire. Other tunes often had no words, just sounds borrowed from animals, wind, raindrops, saws being pulled through wood, train whistles and wheels running on the tracks—even lovers' utterances at the apex of passion. The rhythmical gestures of women working over washtubs was further inspiration; the *wu, sha-wu, sha-wu* of their knuckles on scrub boards evolved into the crisp, deeper tones produced by the strumming of masculine, work-hardened fingernails. (Do you suppose jug playing began with men long-sipping the homemade alcoholic joy the jug held? When your palate and lips get happy, there is a strong possibility you might want to get creative.) Soon the Murphy boys were skillful enough on banjo and fiddle to be in demand as party entertainers. The local white folks used their talents quite often. Payment varied; they never knew what or how much it would be until it was handed to them. Although cash was what they liked best, chickens and hams and the like were what the boys brought home most frequently.

One family that hired the Murphys consisted of a spinster, her two widowed sisters, and their grandfather. The local gossip was that the sisters were trying to snag husbands and used the parties as showcases for their culinary abilities. After playing for these three women and their guests one night, the Murphy boys came home later than usual and—what was worse—they were empty-handed. When Ma Hannah questioned them about the missing payment, her boys stammered and stuttered that somewhere between the party and home the money was lost, so they had retraced their steps in an effort to find it.

For days afterward, the boys found a lot to whisper and giggle about. The other kids had their own suspicions, as did Hannah and Dave, as to what had really happened and what the actual payment was—it most certainly wasn't anything that could be brought home. The boys' parents warned them never again to come back without something to show for their efforts. The older Murphys were concerned about more than the loss of payment. They knew that as willing as party guests might be to mix it up, such a mixture could prove to be deadly (literally).

In the room just off the porch of the Murphy home, where Dave had witnessed so many births, he experienced the other end of life's spectrum. The Murphy children's father died of a cerebral hemorrhage that left the floor stained with his last physical offering—a small precious pool of dark red blood. The year was 1918.

After the death of her husband, Hannah spent long hours rocking back and forth in her old chair, by now as comfortable as an old friend. The worn porch creaked in unison with the antiquated rocker. Sometimes she sat in silence, sometimes humming a spiritual over and over again, but always clutching and drawing on an old pipe whose bowl was almost burnt through. Each puff sent up lazy curls of smoke that seemed synchronized with the half-sighs, half-whimpers that emerged from a spot between her throat and her empty, broken heart.

One by one most of the Murphy children married and some migrated to the North. The preferred location was Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. By this time George Ward and Gertrude Murphy had decided to share their lives and to bid Anderson, South Carolina, farewell.

WHEN AMERICA entered World War I in 1917, the government needed more manpower both to fight overseas and to fill jobs in defense plants at home. Blacks were encouraged to sign up for military service. Good money drew others (male and female) to the industrial North: Henry Ford's assembly plant in Michigan, the steel mills of Pittsburgh.

And then there were those who had a burning desire to be part of the musical excitement spreading out from New Orleans. Early on, Charles "Buddy" Bolden was mixing ragtime with jazz—that wild new music taken to the heights by innovators such as "Kid" Ory, King Oliver, Freddy Keppard, "Jelly Roll" Morton, and Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong. The saloons, brothels, bistros, dance halls, and even funerals were jump-