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THE FAMILY HICKMAN, COLORED

For one family to own the same land for a century or more is unusual. For this to be a Negro family is even more unusual. In the Croatan section of Craven County, within the boundaries of Croatan National Forest, fourteen miles southeast of New Bern, N. C., on a tract of land lying between US Highway 70 and the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad, lives Needham Hickman; surrounded by his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren; all living in houses of varying architectural style and degrees of preservation.

Needham is eighty-one years old, but in spite of his years and the somewhat feudal manner in which he lives, there is nothing of the patriarchal in his appearance, as might be expected. Of average height, inclined to slenderness and carrying himself, head erect, with a springy stride, he could easily pass for a man of sixty or less. He still thrills to the baying of hounds on a cold winter morning, and his tales of deer hunting with his white friends in earlier years prove both fascinating and innumerable. In fact, Needham is an accomplished raconteur. To know that this high-sounding word was used in describing his talent for story-telling would, no doubt, fill his old soul with delight. His own preference for polysyllabics often leads him into amazing blunders; as, for instance, when on a recent visit with him, he chided: "Boss friend, you can ask some of the most preprosperous questions!"

Needham's children number seven. By name, and in the order of their birth, they are: Katie Hickman, age sixty-one, the mother of four girls and three boys, all living; Susan Johnson, age fifty-eight, the mother of one girl and one boy, both living; Carrie Battle, age forty-two when she died, leaving four girls and four boys, all now living; Elijah Hickman, age forty-seven, a widower with no children. Rosa Grady, age forty-five, the mother of three boys and one girl, all living; Needham Hickman, Jr., age forty-three, the father of two girls now living; Mary F. Taylor, age forty, the mother of two girls and two boys, now living. All of these children, grandchildren (and five great-grandchildren) with their husbands and wives, now live on the Hickman place, with one exception. Hardly a year, fat or lean, goes by without the addition of two or more babies to the clan.

Needham Hickman was born in slavery. He and his mother, Sarah Hickman, were the slaves of Captain Elijah Dudley, one of the largest land owners of the pre-civil war period in Carteret County. Upon the marriage of Captain Dudley's oldest son, "Kit" Dudley, the two slaves were given to him as a wedding present by his father and were removed to his home near the mouth of Slocumb's Creek. Needham's father, David Hickman, was owned by James Rowe. In 1834 James Rowe acquired the land, now owned by Needham, under most unusual circumstances. In appreciation of David Hickman's faithful services as his body-servant and "head man" on the plantation he entered into an agreement with him, the conditions

of which provided that the slave was to become the owner of a sizable tract when he, Rowe, had completed payment for the whole. It was doubtless his intention to give the Negro his freedom at the same time. Rowe died sometime close to the year 1854. David Rowe, his son, succeeded him in possession of the land. David Hickman continued to live on the place as a slave until the general emancipation and from that time on as a freedman. In the year 1873 he acquired title to his promised portion of the plantation after paying a nominal price per acre to David Rowe. It is supposed that the apparent disregard of the deceased Rowe's promise of 1834 was the result of straitened circumstances brought about by the catastrophe of war rather than a niggardly spirit. At any rate David Hickman continued to live upon the land in harmony with the Rowes until his death.

Needham's recollections of his father are not as vivid as those which he has of his mother and others, as much of his time during his fathers life was spent on a different plantation; but the story he tells of his land is confirmed by the older members of the Rowe family now living.

Needham's dwelling is one of six houses that dot a twenty-five-acre semicircular clearing without special regard to landscaping effect. It is an unpainted frame structure, typical of the rest, with tin roof and outside end-chimneys. It has two rooms downstairs in front and an open attic above, reached by an unrailed stairway leading up from the "main" room; there is

a rear one-story ell of three rooms facing and opening upon a long unceiled side porch. Back of these rooms is a long shed-like projection with a dirt floor. The "main" room of the house is papered with old newspapers; over the front door hangs the traditional horseshoe. A worn linoleum rug covers the floor and curtains made of dingy towelling shade the three windows. The antlers of a five-snag buck, souvenir of the owner's more active years, hang upon the wall and serve as a coat and hat rack. On the mantel above a wide open fireplace an eight day cabinet clock ticks out the time. An old sewing machine, a washstand, a bureau and four straight chairs are the only pieces of furniture. There are no women living in the house now and it is not very neatly kept. Needham offered apologies for this, explaining, a touch of sadness inhis voice -- "Since my old-woman died about eighteen months ago I've been living here by myself most of the time. She was an invalid for twenty-eight years off and on but she could hobble around enough to spic and span. Some of the girls would come in and clean around for me now but, somehow, I'd rather let things be." So here Needham lives -- with his memories, his two hound dogs and his little private, fenced-in, garden of collards, turnips and sweet potatoes. He is still lord of the manor and leader of the clan; the arbiter in family disputes and general supervisor of the farming of the various groups; the responsible head. But since his wife's death he dwells somewhat apart. On warm sunny days he can usually be found seated in a

slat-bottomed straight chair on his front porch -- from this point of vantage he can see the "going-ons" of the place.

And the "going-ons" are numerous and at times colorful. On an average week day at this season of the year, early winter, smoke is seen curling from the chimneys of all the houses in the little settlement with the first shadowy show of dawn. Needham is the first to rise. He builds his own fire, puts on his "kittle," washes his face in cold water on the open back porch and then goes to the front porch to survey the scene. If a chimney of any of the group of houses fails to reveal the tell-tale sign of stirrings within he walks straight to that house and makes inquiry. Perhaps there is sickness. If so, and of a mild form, Needham prescribes for the sick one, offers a few words of sympathy and goes on his way. Or perhaps there has been no fire made because no wood has been provided. In that case the party at fault is in for a good verbal "dressing down" at the hands of the old man, which will include a somewhat classical tirade on "the worthlessness, indifferentness, non-comprehensibleness and general cussedness of these here younger generations," and "gadding about in gasoliners" (a favorite topic for heated exhortations). Then, with an inner feeling of satisfaction at an early morning chore well done, Needham will return to his own domicile; eat his breakfast, read a chapter in his Bible and settle down to await the coming of the son, the daughters, and the in-laws to receive their orders for the day from him.

Needham can read -- his white folks taught him his letters.

And "when Mister Kit sent Miss Reba to New Bern in the war to refugee" she took Needham with her and had him put in a private school on Hancock Street. He is a great believer in education and sees to it that all the children of school-age on "the place" attend school regularly. There are eight of his grandchildren and four of his great-grandchildren now in the public school at Croatan.

The members of the tribe usually come up for orders in groups of three or four. The business of giving orders proceeds something like this: "Lige, hook up the two oxes and snake them three gum logs up outer Little Swamp onto the ridge. Sure 'nough cold weather will be onto us nigh soon and we'll be a needin' them logs. When you get that done put new beddin' in the ox stalls -- heap of it."

"John, when Lige's shet of the oxes, take 'em and plow dem corn-starks under -- told you to do dat last week, 'member? Well, done and do it. Was agoin' to plant that piece in tobacco last year -- had my fertilize all bought an' paid fer -- then the dang govermint farm man come along and sed, 'No tobacco, nary hill.' Well, guess I can use that fertilize under somepin' they can eat. That's 'bout all us farmers can get these days -- somepin' to eat! That ain't so bad; but I was hoping for a little ready cash to pay on the taxes -- old back taxes -- when the rate was high, way back, taxes was thirty-five dollars on this place. Ain't so bad now. Well, reckin that fertilize'll make good yams en corn, enyways."

"Rosey, go by your Aunt Katie's and tell 'er to send her Little Lige down to Rowe's today. Hardy was here for him yestiddy -- said he had two, maybe three days work for him in that cane-brake. But he was off gasolining! An' that air extra cash would help out a lot with dem taxes -- oh, well, some enyways."

And to three new arrivals, with upraised, admonishing finger: "An' let me tell you younguns from over there at Rose Grady's, I heerd you creepin' around my wood-pile last night. My shot-gun ain't loaded wid fat meat (banteringly). An' I'se told your Mammy dose two oldest boy younguns of hern was plenty big an' able to tote wood from de big pile." (In direct conversation with a white person Needham uses a fairly creditable form of English but when dealing with his own he readily lapses into dialect.)

By nine o'clock the children of school age are all off, the adults have settled down to the day's routine; men cutting wood, plowing and hauling; women cooking, washing, and sewing. Then is the best time of day to engage Needham in reminiscent conversation in the quiet of his little cottage. He likes to talk. He will tell you of his childhood memories of the Dudley "white folks"; the Yankees and the war days. He will show you his "bomb-shell," embedded in an earthen bank since 1862. He will tell you about the time he saw the six-mule Yankee transport team plunge through the rails of Trent River bridge at New Bern. How three of the soldiers disentangled themselves from the hooded wagon and by expert swimming succeeded in cutting all but the two wheel-mules from their harness -- and then swam

ashore to safety. He will tell you of the hard work he has done -- rail-splitting, tar-kilning and log-rolling. He will tell you of the time that The Ghost followed him, in a dead run, from Little Swamp to the Top of Hickory Hill. But most of all he'd rather tell you about the good old deer and bear hunting days with his best white friend, Noah McGowan. Days before game laws and game wardens were known in these parts and every man set his own seasons and his own bag limits -- and the forests "worked" with game. Noah and Needham, both familiar with every square foot of the district, served as guides to "up-staters" and Northerners;and many were the thrilling, sometimes humorous, adventures that they had with their charges.

But not all of Needham's stories deal with such pleasant aspects of life as the chase and somewhat dimmed memories of earliest childhood. Tragedy in the form of violent death has struck twice in the little family settlement within recent times.

Louisa Whitehead, the daughter of Needham's daughter Annie, was killed by her husband two years ago. Needham tells the story simply -- "James asked Louisa to go to the filling station for him to get him some cigarettes and drinks. She went. While she was gone James come in the house and asked Annie, that's Louisa's Ma, where his gun-shells was. She told him. He took his gun and went down the road a piece and sat

down awhile. Then he got up and walked back towards the house; then he walked fast back down the road. Louisa and five or six other girls was coming back by then. James levelled his gun and shot her. It was about dusk then; she died 'round eight o'clock. Nobody never did know why he done it. He got eighteen years."

About fifteen years ago the brother of this same Louisa waylaid a white man, the paymaster of a large lumber company, and shot him to death on the highway near the settlement. For this crime William Henry Singleton was electrocuted. With commendable impartiality Needham expresses his approval.

On Sunday the Hickman place takes on an appearance of new life. This is the big day. All through the week the men and women have been rather hard at work and most of the children have been in school. The only diversions, perhaps, have been to gather around the little battery set radio at Annie's house or to go for short automobile rides with some of the neighboring Negroes who have cars. (There are no cars on Needham's place; "gasolining" is his pet aversion.) Maybe some of the men and boys have done a little hunting or fishing. But all in all the week has been dull. Sunday offers escape. All dressed up, shoes shined and hair slicked, the Hickman Clan, except for those too sick or kept at home by unavoidable duties, wend their way to the little Missionary Baptist Church in a grove of tall pine trees just beyond the railroad tracks. Even Willie, the congenital syphilitic, with scarcely mind enough to dress

himself, but ever in communication with fanciful voices, lurches and stumbles his way along at the end of the happy procession, heedless of the taunts and gibes of the younger members of the clan.

Several of the Hickmans take active parts in the church services; all join in the singing, and especially in the shouting. By midafternoon the services draw to a close. The Hickmans return to their houses, after goodbyes to the "outside" members of the church, with the feeling that the day has been one of refreshment and social relaxation, if not of soul-searching.

Thus living from month to month and year to year; mingling little with the outside world, yet by hard work and thrift deriving a steady, if somewhat frugal, existence from their own inherited soil, the members of this large colored family appear to find their lot in life not only entirely bearable, but largely free from the uncertainties and barriers met with by wage earners of their race segregated in the larger towns and cities.