

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

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Ms. Higgs: Remember when your mama said she didn't see how I could remember things? Now that, her father-in-law, Mr. King, which was William's grandfather, was a cook.

LCR: She told me that.

Ms. Higgs: Mr. King, we lived near the house, and he would bring things that he had cooked down to Mama, and send it down to me, and Mama didn't think I'd ever live with that, and she said that when I was staying with them, she said, how did you ever remember that?

LCR: How old were you, about then?

Ms. Higgs: I'm sure I couldn't have been more than about four.

LCR: Uh-huh. Then Big Ma must be somewhat older than you, about ten years, then?

Ms. Higgs: Well, I don't know, but anyway –

LCR: Four years, now that I think about it. You were born in 1904, and she was born in 1900.

Ms. Higgs: Anyway, I know when she came to Memphis, after she left Mississippi, she came to Memphis, see, her father was my father-in-law. I married her brother. But I didn't know her brother then. Her brother was still there in Mississippi, I didn't know him.

LCR: How did you know ...

Ms. Higgs: We lived on the same street.

LCR: Oh, I see. Yes.

Ms. Higgs: And her father worked at the railroad and my uncle worked for the railroad.

LCR: Yes, Aunt Irene's husband.

Ms. Higgs: And that's how I knew them. And of course, Vivian – it seemed like she was older, much older than I was, but if she was that much older, you would call her Miss Vivian. She wouldn't let us call – we called her Vivian.

But did you see that scar on the side of her face?

LCR: Yeah, right on her cheek there.

Ms. Higgs: Now there used to be trolleys, streetcars then, and churches used to get them, and it would be an outing, we'd ride to the end of the line, which was Raleigh.

LCR: What street was the trolley on?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, I don't know, they were like bus routes, and they would go the whole route, but we were allowed to have the whole bus, because we had rented the whole streetcar. And they would have lunch on that, and we would go, and we rode out to Raleigh. You not knowing anything about Memphis, this doesn't mean so much to you, but it wasn't too far outside the city limits, and so naturally they just did not let you out there. And they threw rocks. I was sitting next to her, and that mark was on her right side. She was sitting next to the window, and it was on the right side of her face. And they threw this rock through that window and hit her on that side of her face, and of course then the motorman, he – naturally it scared everybody, and all these, throwing rocks at the streetcar, and he was just going as fast as he could, he outran them.

LCR: Was he black?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, no, in those days, honey, we didn't have no bus drivers.

LCR: I was just wondering, why he was so scared. He could've just left y'all out there.

Ms. Higgs: No, he brought us on home. He brought us back. He didn't even stop, he just brought us home. We had to get off the streetcar, and – have you ever seen a trolley turn around? Sometimes they'd turn around and somebody had to get off and take those – have you ever seen a trolley car?

LCR: I guess I have seen them, but –

Ms. Higgs: When they get to the end of the line, sometimes they had to loop around, and then at other times they did not, they would take the trolleys, and I guess they were on sort of a –

LCR: A table –

Ms. Higgs: And they would pick up those bells and put them back on the table again, and then turn the end down.

LCR: Oh, that's right. They'd take one end down, put the other end up on the wire, and flip the seats over. Yeah, I've seen that.

Ms. Higgs: That's the kind that was.

LCR: This was the flip kind.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes, I knew, and in Mississippi, she knew Miss King, who Margaret is named for, which was Margaret's, well, Vivian's husband, Walter. Margaret is named for Miss King.

LCR: Wait a minute. Who was Miss King now?

Ms. Higgs: Vivian's mother-in-law.

LCR: Oh, that's right. In Memphis, her father was married to a woman by the name of Margaret. Is that the Margaret?

Ms. Higgs: Her father was married to Josie, Josie Campbell. Her mother-in-law was a King.

LCR: Oh, it's her husband's mother that was Margaret. Yes, I see now. I see how it fits in.

Ms. Higgs: She and Mr. King, he was the cook. And then my mother and they were friends, and my mother knew Walter and Jim and James, and Miss King.

LCR: But your mother wasn't in Memphis.

Ms. Higgs: They came from Benoit together.

I think you're getting mixed up.

LCR: I am. I am getting mixed up. I'm thinking about, in Memphis, he had a restaurant, and I thought you lived on the same street in Memphis.

Ms. Higgs: The one who had the restaurant came from Benoit, that's the same Mr. King I'm talking about.

LCR: I see, he came from Benoit and opened up the restaurant in Memphis.

Ms. Higgs: And he knew my parents, and my parents knew him, in Benoit.

LCR: He's the one who came from Benoit.

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. Not Mr. Campbell.

LCR: They came to – starts with a B. Bridgeview, maybe, something.

Ms. Higgs: But anyway, my mother knew them in Benoit, and Miss King was one of those clean kind of people, she was the kind of woman, you couldn't go to her house in the wintertime, because it was muddy in the country, and she would make you leave your shoes on the porch.

LCR: Oh, yes, I remember you telling me about her now.

Ms. Higgs: And she was the one who would never – I was the only child that she would allow in her bed. Because my mama was a fanatic too, and she always kept me all clean, and she could put me in Miss King's bed.

LCR: That was the one that this white lady used to be in competition with, for cleanliness.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, she couldn't stand it because Margaret King was cleaner than she was. (Laughs)

LCR: Sweeping up under the house and stuff!

Ms. Higgs: She got up and put a little cotton sack around that stove, so the ashes wouldn't fall on the floor and the breeze wouldn't blow them around, and would take them broomstraws and sweep them up and down the floor in those cracks.

LCR: That woman must have been a fanatic.

Ms. Higgs: She was. And everybody in the country knew that about Miss King.

She died here, I guess Mr. King died, and then Walter died –

LCR: In Chicago? When did they come up?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, I don't know when Miss King and them came up, I sort of lost track of them, the dates when they came. I really don't know. I sort of remember when Vivian's mother, when her grandmother and father came, I knew Albert and I were not even married, when they came from down there. I don't know whether Vivian and them were still in Memphis, I think they were still in Memphis but I really don't know. But I do know that when Mr. and Miss Campbell came to Chicago, because there were a lot of those Campbell brothers –

LCR: She said she had about 10 uncles.

Ms. Higgs: They were kind of well-to-do. They kind of had a moving van business here. And they came here and stopped with Mr. Will. And Albert and I were not even married, it had to be in 19 and 20, I suppose, when they did. Because we didn't marry until about '23.

LCR: How many kids did Big Ma have altogether? She had Lois -

Ms. Higgs: She had about nine. She had twins, Richard and Charles, Lois, Margaret, Walter, and William, that's six.

LCR: Good grief.

Ms. Higgs: Did the twins get counted in there?

LCR: I might have to start all over again. Lois and Margaret were the two girls, then there was Walter, William, and the two twins, that's six. And I know all of them. And all of them were by Walter King?

Ms. Higgs: Well ,,,

LCR: I mean, if you don't want to tell me, you don't have to.

Ms. Higgs: I know, Albert used to say, Margaret wasn't.

LCR: That's the part I guess you don't want me to know about. She doesn't want me to know about it. I don't plan to ask her.

Ms. Higgs: You can just look and tell, you know.

LCR: Yeah. I wish she'd loosen up and tell me about it, because I know the lady has probably got a whole bunch of stories to tell. But she ain't giving up nothin'. But it's all right.

Ms. Higgs: In the long run, maybe it won't make too much difference.

LCR: It probably won't. It won't make no difference, but I'm getting nosy now. (Laughs)

Ms. Higgs: Well, you know, I tell you, I don't know whether you are aware of this, aware of Margaret's sickness here lately.

LCR: Just rumors, nothing –

Ms. Higgs: Well, then that is one of the things that is bugging her. That is even before Bea died. She had been bugging her mother about that. About who her father was.

LCR: Is that right?

Ms. Higgs: And she is, so when Bernice came back, and Margaret was just – you have this thing on now, don't you?

LCR: It is on. I can turn it off. (Turns machine off)

Okay. Go ahead.

Ms. Higgs: She was kind of funny -

LCR: Aunt Irene?

Ms. Higgs: Yes. She would stand there, clean as a pin, and she'd turn around and say, well, I got the door. She knew what time she'd have dinner ready. And Annie was one of these kind of really good cooks, she cooked for the Jews in Benoit. There were three good cooks in my family –

LCR: That must be where you learned to cook, then?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yeah, I learned it from her.

LCR: I see. I was wondering where you picked that up!

Ms. Higgs: And oh, that lady could cook, honey. That was the first person that I'd ever – she was the first person, at that age, that she could not stand vegetables overcooked.

LCR: Aunt Irene! Where did she learn it?

Ms. Higgs: I don't know. Her mother was the one that was a slave. And anyway, Josie would make these pies. Mr. Will loved pies.

LCR: That's Vivian's father.

Ms. Higgs: She always made these pies, but she never put any top on them.

We always called them the wide-open pies. (Laughs) She'd put the apple, and she'd put what was in there, and cooked them with no crust on top, just wide open.

Mr. Will had a cousin, Cousin Belle, who watched and raised Vera, she owned her own home, and we still got some in Memphis now. But she said Mr. Will, he deserved Josie, because he used to, you'd have to see his picture. He was a good-looking man, tall and he was kind of light-skinned. I guess all those Campbells were, you'd call them a bunch of yellow –

LCR: A bunch of yellow niggas.

Ms. Higgs: And he ran on the road bed, you see. He was going from Belzoni, somehow they went from Belzoni, and he ran from there to New Orleans. And that's where he met Vivian's mother, in New Orleans. She was part Creole. And he married her, and of course, he took these two little children

LCR: Vivian and Albert?

Ms. Higgs: It was on his run down there, and he was going to take them to the drugstore, to get them some ice cream. And she never saw the children again.

LCR: Josie? Wait a minute. Vivian's mother?

Ms. Higgs: She never saw the children again. Never.

LCR: I thought her mother was dead.

Ms. Higgs: She is dead now, but she wasn't dead then. She died, I don't know, I must ask her some time, did she ever know when her mother died, because

LCR: Aunt Vivian just told me her mother died when she was about 4-5 years old, and that's how they went to Mississippi.

Ms. Higgs: She didn't go there for that.

LCR: She said her father took her to live with her grandparents.

Ms. Higgs: He stole them. He walked away. He took them away from, as if he was going to take them to the drugstore to get some ice cream. And I guess they were with her sister. I think she did say she was staying with her sister, with her mother's sister, and she never saw them again.

LCR: So her mother lived for a while, then, I guess, after –

Ms. Higgs: Yes, she did. I was thinking, he took them from their mother, but I guess he took them from the aunt. And she never saw them again. And she went back, because she was pregnant with William, and William was born in New Orleans. Let me see – because Lois was a baby, and William was born in New Orleans.

LCR: She went back to New Orleans.

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. She called it leaving Walter. And she swore she was going to kill Mr. Will any time she saw us, for taking those children.

But cousin Belle, she always said, Oh, Willie was such a good man. And we used to say how Albert was. And she'd say, He's just like his daddy, he's going to change, and you should go back to them, he's going to change.

But see, he never did. He just went from bad to worse. That's how they came – he stole them from their aunt in New Orleans.

LCR: Do you remember her aunt's name?

Ms. Higgs: No. One day here, there's some people in – a woman who's 90, who rides the bus, who belongs to my church, and she was talking about New Orleans, she was talking about where she lived, and so I asked Vivian one day, did she remember anything about when she went back, anything about the name or whatever this lady was. And Vivian said, they had some kind of quarters or whatever, and they went too far from where they lived.

LCR: Did she know her?

Ms. Higgs: No, she didn't know her.

I never talked to her. And when I first came here, I used to call her occasionally, but she never calls me. But she'd always say something nice when I talked to her. I always try to tell her the children, I say Marie is all you have on your father's side, I always tried to call her, she'd an old woman. Marie would always have her over here, and Bernice always went out there, and Vera used to always go out there, and she would shampoo her hair and take her places, because Vera seemed to have patience with her. But then Ma got jealous.

LCR: And probably put an end to that stuff.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, that's Mama. And Mama used to say, when Bernice and me and Mama are together, everybody would say, I know that's your daughter.

LCR: Talking about Vera.

Ms. Higgs: And Bernice. Because Bernice looked like her. Cause Bernice was the spitting image of her daddy. And Vera's the spitting image of her mama. She looks just like her.

Well, I don't now if she'll ever – maybe she'll die not telling Margaret, I don't know.

She might.

I'm going to cut this thing off.

Ms. Higgs: Maybe it's a waste.

LCR: It hasn't been a waste so far. But I am going to cut it off.