
GOLD STAR MOTHER

I had been traveling since daybreak. By early afternoon I arrived at the entrance to the Tucker's Mill Cemetery and tried to decide if it was wise to go any farther down the dirt road that encircled the grounds and once served as a dividing line between the white and black sections. Several cars left parked on the shoulder of the main road indicated that their owners thought not, so I pulled over and began to walk. It was the correct decision because the road was no longer being maintained by the county and was so washed out in several places that it was virtually impassable. Just around a sharp bend I heard an angry voice.

"Dammit to Hell, I'm gonna find the sumbitch that said to bury this old lady in such a godforsaken place and kick his ass!" The driver of the hearse had slid into a ditch about 20 feet from the grave that had been prepared for Dorothy Lynne Carroll, whom I knew as Aunt Dottie. I offered my assistance, as did several other men who were waiting for the service to begin, and we carried the casket up the bank to her final resting place. By then the driver had regained his composure and wanted to make amends.

"I didn't think nobody would hear me cussin' and carryin' on back there and I didn't mean no offense to you good people," he said in a plaintive tone. As both next-of-kin and the sumbitch, I felt it was my place to grant absolution.

"None taken," I replied, as the others nodded in agreement.

Aunt Dottie was actually my grandmother's sister, my great aunt, and my favorite aunt. She lived by herself in her family home on a side road about a quarter of a mile from the center of town. Her lifestyle was considered eccentric to say the least, especially her ritual of midnight walks from her

house to the bridge on the main road and back. She didn't go to church, she drank whiskey, she was given to outbursts of salty language, and, according to local gossip, she experienced earthly pleasures without benefit of marriage. None of this set well with my parents and older relatives of similar mind. I would see her at family gatherings, but my mom especially did not wish my seeking her counsel on issues of manners and morals and attempted to ensure that our contacts were carefully supervised.

There were maybe ten people at her graveside services and that included the minister, the driver of the hearse, and several employees of the nursing home where she spent her last years. The absence of friends and relatives did not reflect any lingering estrangement; she had simply outlived all of them. The minister said a few words, we recited the 23rd Psalm, and it was all over. There were a couple of introductions and exchanges of sentiments, quickly followed by sounds of car doors closing and engines starting, and then I was all alone.

Aunt Dottie was my last connection with Tucker's Mill, the town where I grew up. It had arisen around both sides of Shoal Creek where Clement Tucker built a gristmill in the 1870s. My family had been a part of the community since shortly before the turn of the century when Aunt Dottie's father, my great-grandfather, a land surveyor, and his new bride came over from Georgia. He did well in his profession and soon was able to purchase a small tract of land and build a house where he and my great-grandmother raised five children.

Later generations included my mom, Lillian, who was born and raised in Tucker's Mill and taught English at the school until she married my dad, James Ashley Baker, in 1939. They had met when he was an Army lieutenant stationed at nearby Fort Benning, Georgia, beginning what he thought was a peacetime tour of duty. I came along the following year. When he was finally discharged at the end of the war in 1945, my parents decided Tucker's Mill would be a good place to settle down and raise a family, which now included a baby brother. My dad opened an insurance agency

in Waterford, a nearby town in an adjoining county, and my mom took care of my brother and me, although she occasionally did substitute teaching.

During those years the gristmill still operated, and in the main part of town were three general stores, an auto repair shop, a cotton gin, a planer mill and lumber yard along with two churches, a post office, and a consolidated high school. On the main road was a traffic signal, a status symbol that distinguished a town from a crossroads community.

Tucker's Mill offered all the pleasant growing-up experiences one associates with rural Alabama in the 1940s and early 1950s such as learning to swim in the creek, fishing for bluegills, drinking cold buttermilk from blue Mason jars, hunting for arrowheads in freshly plowed fields, and tramping through the wood for hickory nuts and persimmons. But unlike kids who lived in the country, I had friends who lived nearby, and within walking distance were a packed-earth playground at the school with swings and monkey bar, and stores where we could buy an RC Cola and a Moon Pie.

This was my first trip back in thirty years. For most of the day it had seemed that I was going home, but I knew this was only an illusion. The accumulated wisdom of writers, poets, and psychologists makes it clear that "home" is a place that exists only as long as you're there. Once you leave, you can never go back. They cite many reasons why this is true, and when I had driven across the bridge and had seen where the dam had washed away and the stone piers were all that remained of the gristmill, I discovered the one that applied to me: there was nothing to go back to. A few empty, dilapidated buildings were all that was left of downtown, the school was closed, churches no longer held services, and the traffic signal had been replaced with a flashing yellow light. Most of the people had moved away, including my parents, who bought a house in Waterford shortly after my brother graduated from high school. Before they died, they purchased lots in Waterford Memorial Gardens because it offered perpetual care.

During her sojourn in the nursing home, Aunt Dottie didn't know who I was when I came to see her, but the real Aunt Dottie never left Tucker's

THE HOUSE ACROSS THE ROAD

Marcus Edward Clark, Jr. was sitting at his kitchen table, madder than Hell. Not that this was anything unusual. He was always in a bad mood, but it was barely daylight that Friday morning, and it usually took a couple of hours before his rotten disposition completely settled in. Marcus hated everything and everybody. He hated the government, the weather, the Jackson Sun, radio station WELR in Waterford, the Alabama Power Company, Christmas, his sister, his late father, and most other people including preachers, salesmen, politicians, doctors, veterans, Jews, Catholics, and niggers. Especially niggers, who had been getting more and more uppity since the war.

And the feeling was generally mutual. It was near impossible to have a normal conversation with Marcus on any subject without being forced to listen to a tirade about the sorry state of the world and the people in it. About the only people who could tolerate being in his presence for more than a few minutes were those who had to put up with him to get paid: his lawyer Arthur Calhoun, J.L. Sims who fixed his car, and a group of losers and misfits who had organized a Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan in Forrest Springs, about thirty miles North of Tucker's Mill in Ranburn County.

The Klavern met on the first Monday of every month in a room the back of Aubrey Hudson's Flour and Feed Store, where they discussed ways and means of defending the Southern way of life, the Christian religion, and white women from niggers and their race-mixing, communist sympathizers who conspired to destroy all that their ancestors had fought for. But citizens were complacent, and politicians either would not take a stand or were part of the conspiracy. Like, for example, "Big Jim" Folsom, who was running

for a second term as governor and openly courting the black vote, and his chief henchman, George C. Wallace, a liberal circuit judge, well known for his opposition to states' rights.

Marcus lived alone in his family home on the three hundred acre farm where he grew up, about a mile from Tucker's Mill. The house was in decent shape when Marcus moved back in after his father died, but ten years of neglect had taken its toll. The front porch was rotting, the roof leaked, and the paint had weathered away. In the side yard, overgrown with weeds and saw briars, sat a rusting hulk of a tractor, along with an assortment of abandoned implements. Toward the back was a chicken house, several sheds in advanced stages of disrepair, and a barn that had partially collapsed. Other than one field Marcus had rented out which was planted in cotton, the place was overgrown with tall weeds and brush, and the pasture fences were falling down. His father, who'd had the same name, but was called Edward, would have been dismayed.

In addition to running a farming operation that included corn, sugar cane, cattle, and cotton, using three sharecropper families, Edward owned the cotton gin in Tucker's Mill. He made a considerable amount of money during the 1920s, which he kept in the Bank of Waterford, the only bank in the area that did not fail during the Depression. Marcus's mother died giving birth to his sister, Lucia, when he was five years old, and they were both raised by a series of black domestic workers because Edward was preoccupied with business interests most of the time. He was cold and distant with both children.

Beginning when he was a young boy and until he was almost thirty, Marcus worked for his father, mostly on menial tasks on the farm and at the gin, tasks that didn't involve physical effort or exposure to the elements. Edward regarded him as lazy and undependable and not likely to ever amount to much. These sentiments were shared by the sharecroppers and hired help, although they had to tolerate him because he was the boss man's son. He hated his life, but he had little choice but to stay on, because

the country was in the middle of the Great Depression and even day labor jobs, which Marcus regarded as beneath him, were hard to find. He at least had a place to live and enough to eat, which was more than many people had during those times.

His sister, Lucia, didn't much care for her situation either because Edward wouldn't let her out of the house except to go to school and church. Actually having dates with boys was out of the question. After several unsuccessful attempts to persuade her father to let her have a social life, she took matters in her own hands. On the night of her graduation from Tucker's Mill High School, she arrived a few minutes early and whispered to Jim Bob Reynolds. He had finished the year before and was attending Alabama Polytechnic Institute where he was studying to be a mechanical engineer. When she walked across the stage to receive her diploma, instead of filing back into the auditorium, she went out the back door and got in his car. By the time Marcus discovered she was missing, she and Jim Bob were exchanging vows before a justice of the peace in Opelika.

By the late 1930s the economy was improving, companies were hiring again, and the REA had come to provide electric power to rural areas. After despairing of ever being able to please his father, Marcus found a job as warehouse clerk with the Shoal Creek Electric Cooperative, but the pay was low, he didn't get along with his supervisor, and his father started charging him room and board, so he didn't see that his situation had improved much, if at all. But in his mind, doing blue collar work was still the worst thing he could imagine, except for being in the Army, especially while the war was going on. However, by 1943, his draft board had started taking single men over thirty five, so he quit his job with the cooperative and went to work on the loading dock at the powder plant in Childersburg so he could get a deferment.

His father died shortly before the end of the war and left everything to him and his sister, so Marcus moved back home. Now boss man, Marcus lived up to his father's low expectations and quickly proved unequal to the