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MAMA SAY SHE HAD A DREAM

—An excerpt from *MaDear's Memories*

A lot of babies died back then of disease, influenza, chicken pox, small and every other kind of pox. Grandma was the mother of a whole lot of chillren, but she only raised eight. Three daughters—Louvenia, Ruth, and Ethel and five sons—Jimmy, Frank, Lucious, LeRoy, and Nate. The others died when they was babies. Grandma said the children was born, but they wouldn't live no time.

See, back then, they didn't have good medicines and things. Sometimes the mama be done worked hard out in the fields chopping cotton and what have you. A whole lot of times the babies would be born dead or either die right after.

You take my little brother Venter Junior, he lived to get, oh, I reckon about a month and a week old. The baby was born, but Mama say she had a dream that the baby died. And it happened just like she say. He lived a month or so and then he got sick.

My sister Scrap was holding the baby that morning when he had a spasm. Just commenced to jerking. And so Scrap was finna throw the baby down and I got the baby and he had another something.

Papa was out in the fields plowing. Mama had a piece of cloth that she used when something done happened at home and she wanted him. She waved that rag and he come running.

He say, "What's the matter Mamie?" Papa called Mama, "Mamie" and Mama called him, "Mr. Hunter."

She say, "Something done happened to the baby. He

looked like he having a spasm. Hitch up the buggy right quick and go get Mama.”

Well, Grandma got there time enough before the baby died. She said, “Give me my baby. What y’all done did to my gran’baby?”

Mama say, “We ain’t did nothin.” The chillren was holding the baby and all at once he just commence to jerking like a dog when he having a fit, you know.”

Grandma took the baby, rubbed his little head, pulled up his dress—‘cause the baby had on a little dress. And in a minute, he had another one of those things and he kind of throwed up. And what he vomited up looked like an egg.

Me and Scrap was standing there with our little eyes bucked and I say, “He ain’t ate no egg.”

Grandma laughed. But in a few seconds the baby commenced to breathing harder and, in a minute, he was gone.

We hollered. Oh! We hollered. Papa hollered just like a woman. He said, “My little boy. Got three little girls and I prayed for a little boy.”

By Mama say she seed it in the dream before the baby was born that the baby died. It was born, but he died.

Mama ‘nem carried on so that they had a little wait. When some of your folks died they would have somebody to come in or either some of the family would wash your people up, put clothes on them and lay them out on something they called a cooling board. People would come, bring food and stuff—‘cause you wasn’t able to cook, you was crying and going on.

The house was so full, me and my sisters—Scrap and Alean—we was just up in the middle of the bed. I never will forget it. I can just see us laying there ‘cause the house was so full. Folks was setting on the bed and standing everywhere for one little baby. But that’s the way people was in them days.

Grandma dressed the little baby. Papa went and bought a casket and Grandpa picked him up and laid the baby in the

casket. Some of ‘em had already notified the Old Nonconnah, the church we went to. So, the next morning, Papa and Mama hitched up the buggy and put the little casket cross of front of them in the buggy. They carried it down to Old Nonconnah where they’d dug the little grave and they buried him.

After the baby died and was buried is when we moved into Johnson Sub.

Venter Junior’s passing is a memory I heard my grandmother verbally revisit time and time again. MaDear was likely between 8 and 10 years of age when she witnessed her infant brother’s death. It was an experience that appears to have left an indelible impression on both her psyche and her subconscious.

Despite the tragic ending, the story is one of my favorites, if only because in it MaDear presents such a tight snapshot of her kin and their community. When the baby takes ill, Papa is right there for Mama to call on; likewise, Grandma and Grandpa are merely a buggy ride away. Amid the grief that erupts in the wake of Venter Junior’s last breath, the entire neighborhood, it seems, descends upon the house seeking to lend support.

Remarkable is that all of this occurs in the rural south of the 1920s and among impoverished Blacks barely a generation removed from slavery. The image my grandmother paints is one of a relatively cohesive family unit, not fractured or fragmented. Not only are they capable of pulling together in a crisis, they live in a community, albeit rural and poor, where neighbors are quick to reach out to one another.

Also, worth noting is MaDear’s detailed knowledge of and about the people in her family, in particular those on her mother’s side. “Grandma” and “Grandpa” are what she called Margaret and Charles “Charlie” Cannon and everything about their appearance in the Venter Junior death scenario suggests a close and loving relationship.

In some ways Margaret Cannon's presence at her grandbaby's premature exit from his world is especially meaningful. For one, according to MaDear, Grandma Cannon was a midwife, who may very well have assisted in baby Venter's birth. Then too, there is the issue of her own children. Only eight of Grandma Cannon's babies lived to see adulthood--this much my MaDear knew. What might have shocked her (it certainly astounded me) was that according to the data from the federal census (*Civil District 12, Shelby, Tennessee 1900 & 1910*), a total of 16 children had emerged from Grandma Cannon's womb.¹ Assuming the figures are correct, the poor soul buried half as many babies as she birthed.

Documentation of the high infant mortality rates in Memphis and Shelby County, particularly within the African American community dates back to the early 1900s and sadly is an issue that persists to this day.² Equally galling is the fact that many of the primary contributors to the high infant death rates that existed in Margaret Cannon's day--poverty, food insecurity, and the lack of adequate prenatal care--are the same issues facing many parents and children today.³

In Margaret's case, one has to wonder if the demands of slavery, if not the challenging life of a newly freed slave, might have also been a factor in both the number of babies she had and their early deaths?

While the physical demands inflicted upon those who toiled the fields is perhaps better known, the enslaved who labored inside homes didn't necessarily have an easier experience. One of the more sobering stories that G. Wayne Dowdy shares in his book *Enslavement in Memphis* details the sad life of an enslaved woman named Matilda.⁴ After giving birth to twins, Matilda's cooking and cleaning duties were increased by her spiteful mistress, who apparently could stand what she perceived as the enslaved woman's haughtiness. In due time, the workload, coupled with the mistress's ongoing physical and verbal abuse overwhelmed

poor Matilda. In spite of her best efforts to feed and care for them, her babies became malnourished and eventually died.⁵

My MaDear lived in close proximity to her grandparents, interacted with them regularly and knew certain details about them (*e.g. Grandma Cannon was born a Morgan; she had a lot of children and she might have been part Indian*) but oddly enough, not once did she mention that either Grandma or Grandpa had ever been enslaved. Surely, at some point Margaret and Charlie talked about their years in bondage. But then again, maybe they didn't.

While I have documentation that corroborates Charlie Cannon's life of servitude, the same is not true for Margaret, which leaves open the possibility, however slight, that she was never enslaved. Even though I haven't been able to find any of their names on the listings or accounts I've seen of the free Blacks known to reside in the Memphis/Shelby County area, Margaret's family appeared to have owned quite a bit of land and property in 1870, so the idea that they were free people in the years prior to the end of the Civil War isn't that far-fetched.⁶

There might be yet another reason that Margaret and Charlie's enslavement never arose in the conversations I had with my grandmother. Sometimes our old folks will deliberately skirt around subjects to keep certain indiscretions (*personal, family or otherwise*) hidden. Or they will avoid discussing what, in their opinions, may simply be too terrible to tell. But when it comes to my own MaDear, who seldom shied from any subject, the truth is that I simply neglected to ask what she knew about her grandparents' lives as enslaved people. Had I asked, no doubt MaDear would have told me everything she knew.

My own omission might not have occurred had I known then what I know now about the communities referred to by researchers and historians as freedmen settlements, freedmen towns and/or Freedom colonies.⁷ Established after the Civil War by the formerly enslaved and/or their descendants,

many of these communities have been well-documented throughout Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma and even Washington, D.C.⁸ But information on those that existed throughout the Mid-South--Mound Bayou, Mississippi being one of a few exceptions--is limited. Oddly, the very existence of such communities remains largely absent from most current discussions involving history, whether it be local Memphis history, Southern history or even within the broader context of African American or United States history.

My family's lack of surviving oral history on the subject of slavery takes on even greater significance when viewed in light of Charlie Cannon's well documented participation in the Civil War. On April 11, 1927, approximately sixty-two years after the war, Charles "Charlie" Cannon filed a *State of Tennessee Colored Man's Application for Pension*. The five-page document—witnessed, notarized and signed with his X—contains details of Charlie's service alongside his owner James (Jim) Cannon in the 154th Tennessee Regiment Company B of the Confederate Army.⁹

In recent years, the role African Americans may or may not have played in the Confederacy has been a hot topic of debate. At one end of the discussion is the issue of whether or not men of color were ever actually employed as soldiers who bore arms. At the other end of the spectrum are those who herald the presence of African Americans in Lee's army as proof of their belief in the rebel cause. To many in the latter camp, the fact that most of the Black Johnny Rebs were enslaved with little, if any, freedom to dictate the course of their lives seems a moot point, indeed.

Most reputable historians agree that Black Southerners served the Confederacy in a number of different capacities, including those of musician, cook, body servant, teamster, hospital aide and general laborer. But there is little evidence to suggest that these individuals were ever considered actual soldiers who wore uniforms, bore arms and fought in battles alongside their White Southern counterparts, at least not in

any significant numbers.¹⁰

According to author and Civil War scholar, Sam Smith, in the *Official Records of the War of The Rebellion (a collection of military records from both sides that includes more than 50 volumes and exceeds 50,000 pages)*, there exists only three eyewitness reports of Black Confederates shooting at Union soldiers and one mention of a few armed black men who were captured with a group of Confederate soldiers.¹¹ Smith also states that within those same records, no Confederate ever mentions the existence of black soldiers either under his command or within his unit.

The idea of thousands of enslaved and/or free Blacks fighting for the Confederacy is largely thought to be a myth promoted by those invested in the concept of the “faithful slave” or the loyal and happy Black Southerner who was basically content with his or her lowly station in life.

Charlie Cannon’s pension records contain no information about how he felt about his service to the Confederacy, if he ever handled a weapon or was ever considered a soldier. He is described in the document as “*a servant from the State of Tennessee*” who was with “*Jim Cannon of White Station, Shelby Co. Tenn.*” After Jim Cannon, who later in the document is listed as “James Cannon”, dies in the aftermath of the Battle of Murfreesboro at Shelbyville, Tenn, Charlie states that he “*went back to the regiment but stayed with Mr. Ben Simmons . . . of Company B.*”¹²

Having been raised in a military family, as well as being able to count a number of Black veterans and current enlistees as friends and family members, I feel safe in saying that for a great many African Americans military service is typically more about the securing of economic and education opportunities than any flag-waving sense of patriotism. But while I’d like to think that my great-great grandfather would have been humored by the newspaper op-ed I penned in 1989 denouncing the on-going love affair certain members of the South persist in having with the Confederate banner,¹³ the

true nature of Grandpa Cannon's feelings for and/or about the Confederacy will likely never be known.

When it comes to Charlie Cannon's motives, the only thing that can be stated with any degree of certainty is that his pension request was based on absolute need. The application records his and his wife's combined yearly gross income as a meager one hundred dollars. Margaret Cannon's name also appears on the document as the owner of the home she and Charlie shared—a two room box house situated on a half-acre of land and owning an assessed value of two hundred dollars.

According to additional information found in his petition application, Charles "Charlie" Cannon was born in Williamson County Tennessee in 1841, which means he would have been an old man of 86 at the time of his filing. Quite possibly he was even older. The year of birth recorded on his death certificate is 1836.¹⁴ Either way, in 1929, no less than two years after his application's approval, Charlie was dead.

NOTES

1. "1910 United States Federal Census," Civil District 12, Shelby, Tennessee, database with images s.v. "Margatel Cannon" *Ancestry.com*, downloaded 31 January 2021; citing "National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C."
2. "Infant Mortality Of Memphis in 1911." *The Commercial Appeal*. Memphis, TN. February 15, 1912. Pg. 9; "Infant Mortality Rate in 1933 Shows Sharp Increase Over 1932." *The Commercial Appeal*. Memphis, TN. January 4, 1934. Pg. 5.
3. Anna Lummus & Anna Walton, *Why are Tennessee moms and babies dying at such a high rate?* (Infant and Maternal Mortality Policy Brief). Tennessee Justice Center. PDF

- File. September 26, 2018; Tennessee Department of Health. *2021 Child Fatality Annual Report Tennessee Department of Health: Understanding and Preventing Child Deaths in Tennessee*. PDF File.
4. G. Wayne Dowdy, "Chapter 3: Nothing But The Devil Up Here" in *Enslavement in Memphis*. (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2021), 41-42.
 5. Dowdy, "Chapter 3: Nothing But The Devil Up Here." 43.
 6. Arthur L. Webb, Index To The 1830, 1840, 1850 and 1860 Censuses Indicating Free African Americans in Shelby County Tennessee. 1990. (Memphis, TN. The Memphis Room. Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library)
 7. Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1979; Walk-Morris, Tatiana. "Putting Freedom Colonies on the Map." *American Planning Association*. February 2020. <https://www.planning.org/planning/2020/feb/intersections-engagement/>
 8. DeNeen L. Brown, "All-black towns across America: Life was hard but full of promise." *Washington Post*. Washington, D.C. March 27, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-list-of-well-known-black-towns/2015/03/27/9f21ca42-cdc4-11e4-a2a7-9517a3a70506_story.html
 9. Charles "Charlie" Cannon's 1927 State of Tennessee Colored Man's Application for Pension. Tennessee Confederate Pension Application, microfilm with images s.v. "Chas. Cannon" Memphis/Shelby County Public Library, accessed 2002.

10. John Coski, "Myths and Misunderstandings: Black Confederates." *The American Civil War Museum*. November 7, 2017. <https://acwm.org/blog/myths-misunderstandings-black-confederates/>
11. Sam Smith, "Black Confederates: Truth and Legend." *American Battlefield Trust*. February 10, 2015. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/black-confederates-truth-and-legend>
12. Charles "Charlie" Cannon's 1927 State of Tennessee Colored Man's Application for Pension. Tennessee Confederate Pension Application, microfilm with images s.v. "Chas. Cannon" Memphis/Shelby County Public Library, accessed 2002.
13. Lori D. Johnson, "Flag remains a symbol of oppression." Guest Column. *Commercial Appeal*. Memphis, TN. April 7, 1989.
14. "Tennessee, U.S. Death Records 1908-1965," database with images s.v. "Charlie Cannon," (1836-1929), certificate 3035, *Ancestry.com*, downloaded 20 December 2020; citing "Tennessee State Library and Archives; Nashville, Tennessee."