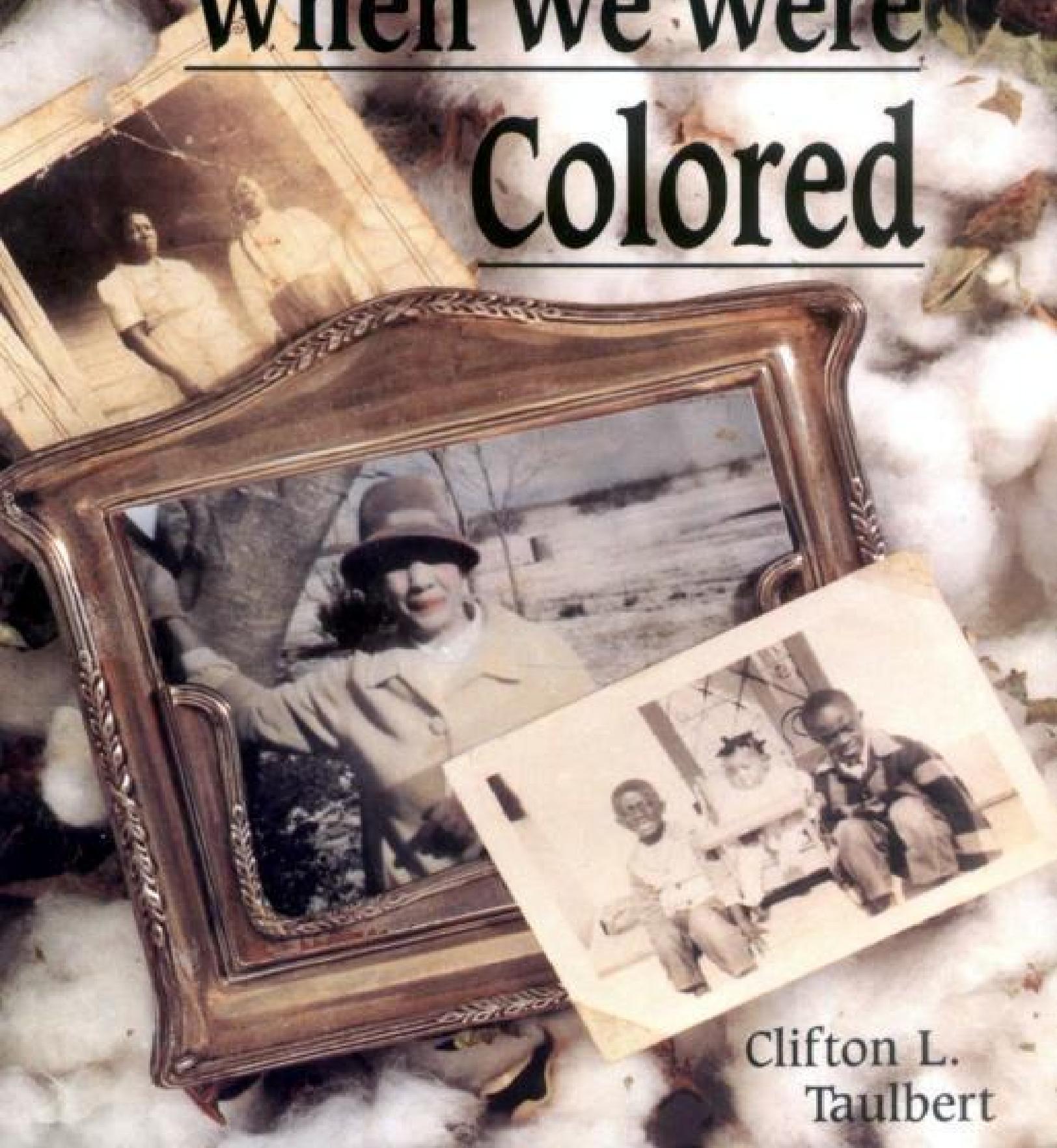
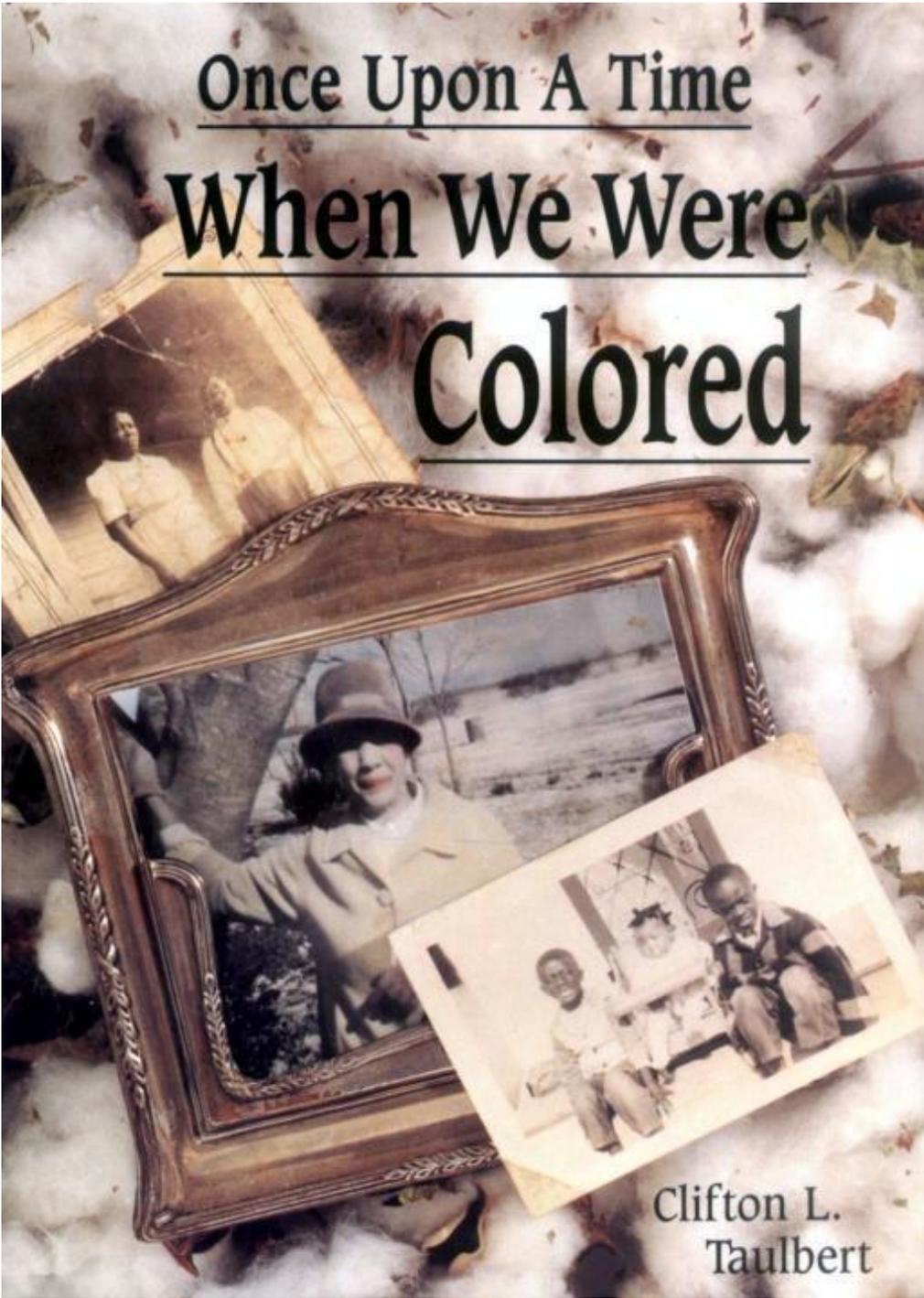


Once Upon A Time
When We Were
Colored



Clifton L.
Taulbert

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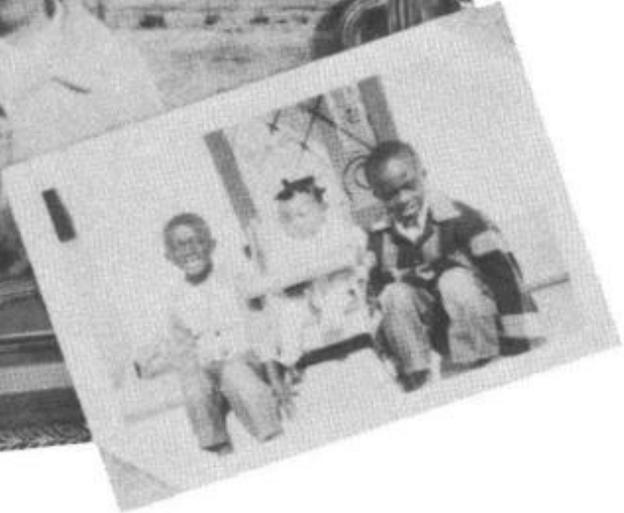
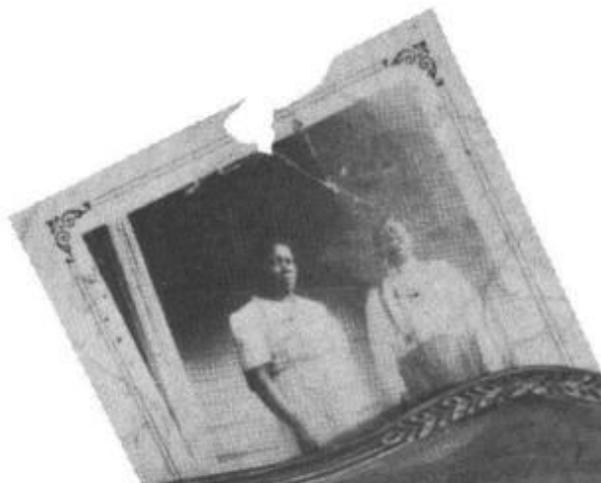


Clifton L.
Taulbert





**Once Upon A Time
When We Were
Colored**



Clifton L. Taulbert

Council Oak Books
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Council Oak Books
1350 East 15th Street
Tulsa, OK 74120

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Dedicated to . . .



My son, Marshall Danzy
who thinks “colored” means crayolas.

My daughter, Anne Kathryn
who was born the day after I
made my first excerpt public reading.

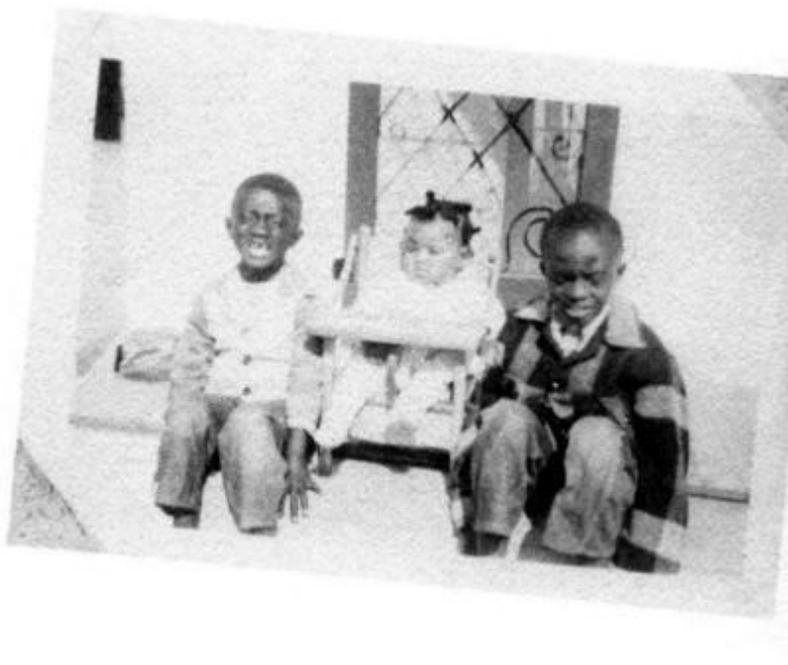
My wife, Barbara Ann
who endured my early dawn writing habits.

My mother, Mary Taulbert
a strong lady with a definite sense of purpose.

The memory of my aunt,
Elna Peters Boose (Ma Ponk),
who raised me; an original colored lady.

My four sisters and two brothers:

Claudette
Clara
Carolyn
Connie
Claiborne
Johnny.





7-11-1901



CONTENTS

[Introduction](#) 1

Chapter One

[Poppa, Black Buddha of the South](#) 9

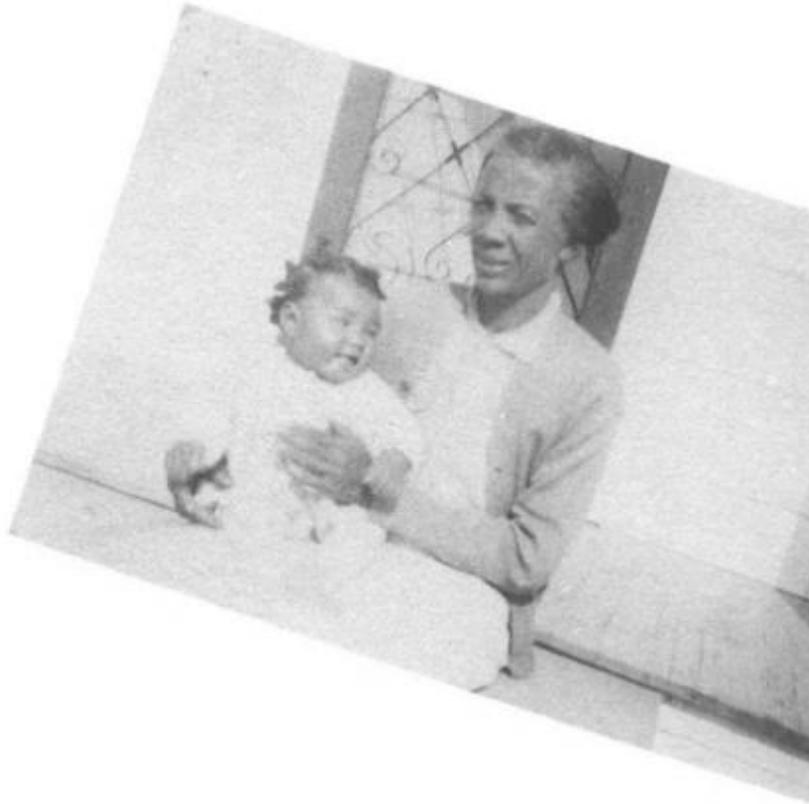
Chapter Two

[Long Brown Stockings and Colored Debutantes](#) 25

Chapter Three

[Colored People, Just Passing Time](#) 39





Chapter Four

[Luggage, Legs and Gorgeous Colored Women 55](#)

Chapter Five

[Fear, and Hope: Childhood Memories 69](#)

Chapter Six

[The Ice Man 75](#)

Chapter Seven

[Colored Politics in a Small Southern Town 83](#)



Chapter Eight

[Some Glad Morning, Some Glad Day, I'll Fly Away 91](#)

Chapter Nine

[The End of a Season 111](#)

Chapter Ten

[All In A Day's Work 119](#)

Chapter Eleven

Introduction

10

DEED

No. 4128

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co.

TO

Rufus Jefferson

1/2 Lot 3

Sec. 11 Twp. 13 Rge. 8 West.

State of Mississippi

County of Washington

I, M. M. Sperr Clerk of the

County and State aforesaid, do certify that the within

Deed with the releases endorsed thereon, was filed for

record in my office on the 21st day of March

A. D. 1906 at the hour of 4 o'clock and

minutes 2 P. M., and that the same (together with the

said releases) was this day recorded in Deed Book CC

page 187 of the record of deeds in my office.

Given under my hand and official seal this

day of April 1906

M. M. Sperr Clerk

By _____ D. C.

Shen Allen Moss

DEED OF TRUST

FROM

Eddie Williams & Co

TO

Shen Allen Moss

State of Mississippi, Issaquena County.

Chancery Court.

I certify that this Deed of Trust was filed for

record in my office at 10 o'clock AM, on

the 21st day of February 1917

and was duly recorded the 21st day of

Feb 1917, on page 311

Book No. 27 in my office.

Witness my hand and seal of office, this

21st day of February 1917

By P. J. [Signature] Clerk.

By _____ D. C.

STATEMENT OF CLERK'S FEES:

Acknowledgment,	\$
Certificate,	\$
Abstracting and Indexing,	\$
Recording— words at 10c per 100, \$	\$
Total,	\$

It was a beautiful October day in the 19-'(0)s. It was not quite like those other October days when I «as a child growing up in this southern cotton community, but it was beautiful nonetheless. I had come home for my yearly pilgrimage to see Glen Allan, Mississippi, to remember the life I once knew and visit my older relatives. Somehow I always felt better after visiting those tired old people who had given me strength when I was a child. So many changes had taken place in Glen Allan. "Colored" people were now "black," soap operas had replaced quilting bees in their homes, and the schools their children attended were now integrated. But the land was the same: the rich delta land had not changed. And the cotton smelled as it did in the early '50s when I picked it as a way of life. Now, however, the quarter of a mile long cotton rows seemed shorter and instead of the bent backs and scratched hands of hundreds of coloreds picking cotton, there were scores of big red machines harvesting the white fields. As always, the land was giving life, being faithful, fruitful and productive, providing stability and a sense of worth.

I made it a point to visit my old aunt, Mozella Alexander. She insisted I sit and listen as she vividly recalled the times when her grandparents owned a plantation five miles from Glen Allan - a plantation they called Freemount. As we sat in her shotgun house that was falling on one end and propped up on the other, she rocked, swatted flies and told ~ e all about old man Sidney Williams, Miss Phoebe, Rosa Morgan, Tom Williams and the rest that were known at the turn of the century as "the big colored landowners."

As she talked, her smooth black face shone with a pride that I don't know if I'll ever possess. "Son, my pa and your great-great grandpa were somebody. Oh chile, they had plenty land, mules, hogs and chickens and jest bout eberthang."

She talked with increasing excitement. Even though she was renting a run-down house, she knew that she was descended from the colored landed gentry. I guess that's why she was labelled "uppity" Even at her age she walked straight as an arrow

'All out dar in de colony was colored when I wuz a chile. Yez sir my ole grandpa worked dat land like it was no t'morrow"

I knew the land she spoke of, although Freemount no longer existed. It was near the colored colony, a large parcel of land which I'd also heard was once in my family I remember some of the older people saying, "Chile y'all folks shore had some land out dar in de colony." But for some reason those sayings never reached my belly. Land ownership and the sense of worth it brings seemed to have died out during my parents' time. I responded to this story as if it might be colored folklore. All my life most of the land owners had been white. When I'd go to the colony, it was their stately homes I'd see first. It never dawned on me that these houses, so seemingly permanent on their sites, were not the beginning. Little did I know they were built upon the sweat and blood of a different set of landowners, black men and women who tamed the land and gave it such an appropriate name, "Freemount."

Aunt Mozella talked for hours and I listened politely. At last I attempted to take my leave, but she stopped me.

"Set down, son. Lemme give ya something. And you hold onto it. It's valuable. No matter what happened to me, I've always held onto these."

She got up and walked over to a trunk that was probably twice her age. She was old, colored and proud, with not a wrinkle in her cinnamon face. As she bent over her trunk and undid the double locks, I looked around at her tattered home, wall papered with pages from the Sears catalog. I wondered what of value she could possibly give me, her educated grand nephew.

Turning from the trunk she stood in front of me holding in her black hands a bundle of papers tied securely with old rags. Her cinnamon face shone as she pressed the papers to my hands.

"Here son, take 'em. Hold 'em. Yessir, heres de proof. It's all here. All dat my granddaddy worked for is right here."

I would later learn that in that moment, she had released to my generation the legal proof of our family's land ownership. All I had heard as a child was true.

I stood there at the foot of her iron bed holding the ancient papers. I'd been led to believe that coloreds never kept their papers. Nervously I untied the bundle and unfolded the fragile deeds. I was holding not the copies but the actual documents signed in ink by my great-great-grandfathers Sidney Williams and Ben Morgan, and the land commissioner for the State of Mississippi. Almost a century later these deeds spoke to me from their faded pages and verified for all time to come that Freemount had once really existed.

My discovery of these deeds affected me oddly. All my life, growing up in the colored section of the little Mississippi town of Glen Allan, I had been taught to respect the owners of the large plantations. In the agrarian South, land ownership more than any other factor decided who had status; the more land a person owned, the more he was worth. The realization that I was the descendant of black plantation owners gave me a sudden sense of pride. At the same time I felt cheated. The land which should have been my birthright had been lost, taken from my family during the Depression, sold without my great grandparents' knowledge at a tax auction for money they'd never known they owed. I'd grown up in the '50s, under a system of segregation which enforced on all people of my race an inferior status - a sense of worthlessness which was wholly illegitimate, but which I had striven all my life to overcome.

On further reflection, I realized that many of the values of the Southern culture had been illegitimate, even, perhaps, the value placed on land ownership. For the truth is, man cannot really own the land; we are only trustees for a time. Eventually the land will claim us and we'll return to our mother earth. Knowing this gives me some solace as I look at antiquated deeds dated in the late 1800s and signed over to my great-great-grandparents by the vice-president of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad Company and its land commissioners. This land, once called Freemount, has probably had more trustees and names than we'll ever know

If land ownership is not a legitimate measure of a people's worth, I wondered, what is? I began to think about my childhood and other values I'd learned as I grew up in an environment much like that experienced by

thousands of other colored Americans. Even though segregation was a painful reality for us, there were some very good things that happened. Today I enjoy the broader society in which I live and I would never want to return to forced segregation, but I also have a deeply-felt sense that important values were conveyed to me in my colored childhood, values we're in danger of losing in our integrated world. As a child, I was not only protected, but also nourished, encouraged, taught, and loved by people who, with no land, little money and few other resources, displayed the strength of a love which knew no measure. I have come to believe that this love is the true value, the legitimate measure of a people's worth.

I was barely seventeen when I left my childhood home in Glen Allan and boarded the Illinois Central north to Saint Louis and into the 1960s, which would forever change the fabric of our society. Today my children are growing up in a world where "color" is something that comes in a box of crayons - a world of Bill Cosby and Yves St. Laurent. I have written *Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored* because I want my children to know of the life-style that gave them their father and their mother. It is very difficult to master the present and make a meaningful contribution to the future unless you understand and appreciate the past. In our desire as black Americans to put segregation behind us, we have put ourselves in danger of forgetting our past - the good with the bad. I believe that to forget our colored past is to forget ourselves, who we are and what we've come from.

This book is not the story of Freemount and the years when blacks owned the land. It is the story of a mostly landless people, the coloreds, who lived in Glen Allan and other small southern towns during the last years of segregation. I have written it to recall a treasure more valuable and enduring than land ownership. It is the treasure that stood out in my colored childhood when there was so little else, and it has been a source of strength to me in all the years since then. That treasure is the nourishing love that came to me from my extended family of aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, cousins, neighbors and friends. Rich in love, this congregation of black maids, field hands and tenant farmers worked the cotton fields, fished Lake Washington, gathered at St. Mark's Missionary Baptist Church to sing and pray, and gathered at the Greenville train station to bid farewell

to loved ones moving north. In ordinary daily living through very difficult times, they showed themselves to be a great people. They are the reason I want today's world to remember an era that in our haste we might mistakenly forget - that era when we were called colored.

