

Rich White Folks

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Growing Up Black in America

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my five beautiful children, Alicia, Mary, Robbie, Jason and Jon, with whom I want to share what growing up was like for me. My fondest hope is that life will be much better for them and their children and that someday we can all be proud of and never forget where we came from.

In addition, this book is dedicated to Alice Bucca, my life partner, who encouraged me to keep plugging away at getting my story on paper. Alice is the person who helped with the last details of editing, for which I am eternally grateful and thankful.

Finally, this book is also dedicated to Jerilyn Bredbury. She is the person who lovingly listened to my childhood stories and suggested that I share them with others. Thank you, Jerilyn, for your loving support and for helping me to see your vision of what other people might find important.

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Introduction

This book is about the phrase I heard most often from my Dad, while growing up. The phrase was: “..... like rich white folks.” The complete sentence usually referred to something I was doing or not doing properly. For example, Dad would say, “Rich white folks don’t use words like ain’t.” He might even say, “Put your shoulders back like rich white folks do.”

Rich white folks were the standard by which actions, speech, manners, and dress were constantly judged. It was a long time before I was able to observe rich white folks doing all the “right” things. By the time, I was eighteen, I moved to college, away from my father’s overarching influence. The major result of my four years of college was learning to think for myself. I realized that the real goal in life was to become a human being without any labels attached. I further realized that “like rich white folks” was only a simile for being bold, classy, confident, and civilized.

In any case, I hope you will have some fun reading my story. I hope that it will trigger some of your own remembrances about the standards that your parents used to keep you from becoming a social outcast. The “rich white folks” standard was especially pungent to me as a little black kid growing up during the forties and fifties. I can now thank Dad for his wise and often misunderstood guidance. When my Dad died in 1976, at the relatively young age of 67, he left me very little that was of material value. In retrospect, his legacy was

much greater. Indeed he left me with true wealth -- the knowledge of how to be and function in a world with all kinds of people. I learned how to get along with everyone from the staunchest racists, to winos, to princes, without losing my own identity or sense of self-worth. I learned to discard the labels. This made it okay for me to always express my own essence, my human being-ness.

The simplistic way of looking at all of this is that buying into labels means limitations. Stripping away the labels means true freedom.

Up From Slavery

IT WAS SEPTEMBER 1987 in Brussels, Belgium. I was one of several International Data Corporation's (IDC's) Analysts invited to a special dinner hosted by Solomon Brothers. The dinner meeting took place in a private dining room at one of Belgium's premier restaurants. The special dinner guests were Solomon's major investment clients from all over Europe.

Starting on the opposite side of the table, each IDC analyst was to stand and give a five-minute speech on his area of computer market expertise. My colleague finished his five-minute presentation and suddenly all eyes were on me. I was the IDC Analyst responsible for tracking the products, and the marketing and business strategies of Digital Equipment Corporation. My talk would be one of the most important ones. I began my talk slowly, but determined to capture the moment with a spellbinding speech that would stay within the five-minute time limit.

"Digital is riding an interesting wave of success right now, but there are some flaws in its strategy which I will highlight over the next few minutes," I said, while glancing around the room to see the impact of this dramatic opening statement.

I knew I had scored a home run, when I sat down six minutes later and asked, "Are there any questions?" The stone cold silence told me that my mini-presentation had been so complete and clear

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that the audience had no questions. As I looked around the room, I remember thinking about the irony of this situation. Here I was, the first generation grandson of an African American slave from Central Texas giving a speech to some of the most prestigious, high-powered investors in Europe.

How did I get here? What events brought me to this place? How had I prepared myself to be here? There was indeed much for which to be thankful.

According to my family's oral history, my paternal grandfather was born about 1832 in Central Texas, a few miles north of the Brazos River. My grandfather's slave-master allowed him to be educated such that he was very skilled at reading, writing, and arithmetic. Ultimately, Grandpa Bob Henry -- I was named for him -- worked, wheeled and dealed enough to purchase his freedom from slavery. He apparently saved enough funds to buy a 100-acre plot of land just across the road from his former owner.

The farm was halfway between the towns of Marlin, and Chilton, Texas. Today, Texas interstate Route 7 connects the two towns. Marlin, which is about thirty miles east of Waco, Texas, is the county seat of Falls County. Chilton is a very small town that was originally built around a cotton gin where all the surrounding farmers brought their cotton crops to be "ginned" -- removing the seeds from the cotton fibers.

Grandpa Bob Henry designed and built a four-room house, which is now rapidly decaying. That house on what we, in the Randolph family, refer to as the "Randolph Homestead," consisted of two bedrooms, a small kitchen, and a large dining room. There was a good-sized back porch at the back of the second bedroom. With the farm in place, Grandpa Bob Henry decided to have a family. In 1875 he married Delila Jourdan. They had ten children and prospered for some time. Because of his education and inherent intelligence, he became an advocate, or lawyer, for many of the surrounding Black families.

He probably spent a lot of time keeping his brother, we called him Uncle Archie, out of jail. You see, Uncle Archie was a notorious

cattle rustler feared throughout Central Texas for his brazen looting of large cattle herds. Uncle Archie was sort of the “Speedy Gonzalez” of cattle rustlers -- now you see him and now you don’t. Eventually, a determined posse of Texas Rangers and irate cattle ranchers surrounded Uncle Archie in a small log cabin. He climbed through the chimney and made a daring escape. After this close call, Uncle Archie’s only choice was to flee to Eastern Canada, where he established a whole other branch of the Randolph family. However, that is another story.

Grandpa Bob Henry’s first wife, Delilla, died over the course of time. Finally, at the age of seventy-seven, he married a lovely, Mexican woman named Margaret Bell. Her family still lives in Marlin, Texas. Margaret was only thirty-six when she bore a son (my Dad) in 1909. Almost eighteen months later, Grandma Margaret died during the birth of a second son. She left two young babies, my Dad, Robert Cartelyou Randolph, and Collis B. Randolph.

One of Grandpa Bob Henry’s sons from his earlier marriage moved to the farm to help. This son, Benjamin Glover Randolph (I called him Uncle Glover) gradually took over the day-to-day operation of the farm. About five years later, in 1914, Grandpa Bob Henry died at the age of 82, leaving the two young orphans in the care of their older half brother and his wife. Dad’s brother was a tough taskmaster. As soon as his kids (there were eleven of them) and his two orphan siblings were old enough to work, they became an integral part of the farm’s workforce.

Because the pressure to make the farm sustain a large family was so intense, Dad had to leave school to do farm work full time. He only finished the third grade in his one-room country school. It made no difference that he was a bright kid or had more potential than the other kids. The survival of the farm took precedence over his formal education.

Since Grandpa Bob Henry had died reportedly of acute indigestion, Uncle Glover made a rule that no one could eat any food after 5 PM. Guests, preachers, relatives or others were included in this rule -- if you were in that house you did not eat after 5 PM. That left time for

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one of Uncle Glover's favorite past times -- telling stories. This usually took place on the back porch. Uncle Glover would fill his corncob pipe, lean back in an old rocker and launch into a story. Kids could sit and listen as long as they didn't say a word. This was the era when kids were better seen than heard.

Sometimes the stories were about the old days. For example, Uncle Archie's exploits were one of his favorite subjects. Sometimes he would give his analysis of a current event, like the Great War (World War I) that was raging in Europe. One evening, after reading a horrendous account of the devastating and death wielding attacks by German submarines, he launched into a story that frightened everyone within earshot.

Dad and the other kids listened with rapt attention as Uncle Glover laid out the awesome feats of the German submarines. Having heard some of Uncle Glover's stories myself, I am sure he embellished the World War I stories heavily. He probably embellished them to the point of creating the affect of the most gripping ghost story that anybody had ever heard. He evoked some very frightening images of German submarines in the fertile minds of his young audience. Here, in my Dad's own words, is the story of his first and only direct encounter with a "German submarine."

"Glover had a way of telling us news that made it so real that we started thinking that the war was going on right in the next county. He spared us no details about how the war was being waged.

German submarines were the horrific war machines that he was most fascinated with. His stories about how viscous they were, and how they were responsible for so many deaths scared us nearly to death. We often had nightmares about German submarines spewing death and destruction across Texas. We knew that there would be no escape if we ever got close to one.

Then one fateful day a strange thing happened. It was a

typical super hot day in Central Texas. It must have been at least 115° in the shade. Three of us boys had sneaked down to the pond near the center of the farm. The pond was a good place to hide out from work. As I stepped out of the pond and picked up my pants (we didn't wear shirts or shoes), I heard this terrible roaring noise in the sky. It was off in the distance, but it kept getting closer and closer and sounding louder and louder. I could see fire and smoke spewing out of this thing. As the sound got louder and louder, it hit me -- this must be a German submarine. I knew I was going to die any second. The only hope was to run for a nearby neighbor's house.

I shouted, 'German submarine, German submarine!!' to save my buddies, who were still splashing around in the pond. Then I took off running as fast as I could to the neighbor's house. I was shouting 'German submarine, German submarine!!!' As I ran for my life, I managed to get one leg in my pants so I wouldn't die naked. The thing kept coming and coming. It was almost right on top of me. I expected one of those torpedo things to hit me on top of the head any second. By the time I got to the neighbor's, I fell into their front door. I was so out of breathe that all I could do was point up at the sky and stammer. 'German Submarine, Geeerrmann sub, sub mar, mar, German submarine!!' The neighbor, Ma Scruggs, kept asking, 'What's the matter with you boy? What's the matter with you?' I kept pointing to the sky, saying, 'Ger.....man.....sub.....marine, Ger.....man.....sub.....marine!' It was a whole couple of days later before I learned that I had seen my first airplane. It was a big relief to know that we wouldn't be killed by a German submarine."

At age fifteen, Dad ran away from home. He decided that he would rather take his chances out in the world than live the rest of his life as an indentured slave. Dad often told a funny story about one of his adventures while making the big escape from home. It seems that

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several other boys had the same idea. They ended up in a small pack headed for West Texas, where they had heard there was a lot of cotton to be picked. Eventually, an older man joined the pack and became its de facto leader. One night, during a full moon as the group moved through the woods they were stopped dead in their tracks by a huge, ferocious appearing animal transfixed in the bright moonlight. It had to be a mountain lion or perhaps even a bear. The leader took the initiative and started surreptitiously looking for a stick to chase this ferocious animal away. Each time the leader would find a stick he thought big enough to do the job, he would test it by trying to break it across his knee. Dad said that, "By the time he found a stick that was big enough, there must have been at least a cord of wood stacked in the clearing." It seems the leader had created a very large pile of wood before finding the right stick. Finally, after all of this fearful activity, the animal turned and ran away. They had just enough time to discover that the "mountain lion" or "bear" was only a large opossum.

Eventually, Dad and the group made their way to West Texas where there was plenty of cotton to pick. Dad left for the big city of Dallas, Texas, in late fall, when the cotton season was over. Dallas was where he learned about rich white folks, and where I was born.