

REVIEW OF "I WOULDN'T TAKE NOTHIN' FOR MY JOURNEY"

FOR THE CHICAGO GENEEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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It is an instinctive quality of himanity to love and to desire to be loved. There is a popular song that says everybody loves somebody sometimes. The intensity of love varies throughout the life of the individual and there is a wide variation in the human concept of how people feel about each other. Geneology as a study may be thought of as an extension of a sort of family love to the other extreme of a kind of curiosity about one's procreators. The geneological researcher inquires into the who, the when and the why of one's individual existence and family relationships. There is a set of values which serves as a standard in out culture against which one evaluates the worth, whether kingly or commonplace, of his progenitors or forbears.

In man's struggle for existance there is the likely concept that only the fittest and the more fortunate survive. Individuals are egocentric in varying degrees and the stimulation of the ego is an important factor in survival and clutural growth. Yet there is sufficient breadth for all variations in the degree of personal concern in human relationships.

Geneologists and students of geneology are a class of people whose love and curiosity extend and encompass not only the living family around them but those who came before with projections into the future.

"I Wouldn't Take Nothin' For My Journey, Two Centuries of an Afro-American Minister's Family" is the chosen subject of a book which I have written. It

was recently published by the Johnson Publishing Company and I have been invited to review and make available autographed copies at this time. It chronicles the fascinating ups and downs of my family clan during 200 years on American soil.

I will discuss the why, when, how and some of the interesting stories uncovered in researching and writing this book. But first, why did I carry out years of research and write this book?

I think that it is fair to say that people who study their family histories are at least moderately egocentric and essentially history buffs. In my case the serious look at my family history began when my father passed in 1954, more than 25 years before the book came off of the press.

The four sons of Rev. L. L. Berry, an unofficially adopted son and a first cousin decided that we would be his active pallbearers. This brought on greater emotional strain and stimulations than I had anticipated. I felt more strongly than ever before the love and appreciation of my father. Like many of us I think I had been brought up to feel that one loves momma and takes poppa for granted. The acute awareness of my father's role in his family and his success in the community which he served as a minister, led me to the firm decision to write his biography.

As I became involved in the research, I found his father's story so interesting that I wondered whose biography I should write in the intermittent

periods I would have to find between the practice of medicine and the many other things with which I was involved.

I finally decided to search and write a story involving my father's and mother's parents and their foreparents as far back as I could reasonably trace them. As the search progressed I decided to call this effort the story of the Jenifer-Berry-Harris-Jordan family clan.

On my father's side, John Berry had married Nancy Jenifer in Norfolk, Virginia in a newly organized African Methodist Church on September 14, 1867 one year after John Berry was mustered out of a light artillery unit of Colored troops of the Civil War. These grandparents had been teenagers enslaved in St. Mary's County of Maryland.

On my mother's side, her parents Tobias Harris and Elizabeth Jordan, had married in Person County North Carolina December 4, 1870. Tobias Harris was born in Halifax County Virginia in 1857 three years before the beginning of the Civil War. Betty Jordan was born in 1860 as the war began. Both had slave status although Tobe Harris was fathered by his slave master.

At the time of my father's death there were four surviving brothers and sisters. My mother, 3 of her sisters and one brother were still alive. So, I had no problem learning the names of my grandparents' enslavers and where they had lived.

I began a research journey which eventually added up to thousands of miles and covered the states of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and the eastern seaboard. I also followed my father's trail and his activities as the General Secretary of Home and Foreign Missions of the A.M.E. Church from his New York headquarters to West Africa, the Carribean Islands, South America and Canada.

My final written story records my locating and visiting the plantation and slave owners' mansions where my father's parents were enslaved in St. Mary's County, Maryland and the corresponding points of enslavement on my mother's side of the family in Halifax County, Virginia and Person County, North Carolina.

My research was further carried out at the National Archives in Washington, D. C., county courthouses and libraries where I examined Civil War records, family bibles, census records, wills, land titles, church conference records and my mother's two dozen scrapbooks of photos, marriage and birth certificates. I interviewed more than 150 relatives, friends and associates and collected more than 100 tributes to my father.

The Journey for which the title says I Wouldn't Take Nothin For includes a review of the career of my father, the principle character, the role of my mother, a partial coverage of the lives of 6 brothers and sisters, 5 of whom were college trained, my own career, the ups and downs, struggles against racism, successful accomplishments, love and togetherness of a multi-nuclear family clan from 1816 to 1981.

I will now briefly describe a few of the interesting and for me so often fascinating, sometimes doleful, stories of this Afroamerican family.

"Where you goin boy?", said the slave catchers to John Berry as he encountered them along the route of his escape from slavery to hopefully join the Union Army. The 19 year old youth who had known only back breaking labor and sometimes torture in the tobacco fields of southern Maryland, would throw a horse's bridle over his shoulder in plain view to substantiate his reply to slave catchers on the prowl, "I'm goin after a horse for Massa"; he told this story to his young son Llwellyn years later. His name as a slave was Johnnie Miles, but when asked by the enlistment Sargent at Point Look Out Maryland on February 4, 1864, "What your name Boy?" He replied, "My name John Berry". So in a loud and determined voice he casted off his slave name of Johnnie Miles and became John Berry, escapee from Tom Gardner's plantation of human bondage seeking to become a soldier of fortune, in search of a new life of freedom and justice for himself, his family and his race.

Tobe Harris, son of hisslave master and a mulatto slave seamstress was reared in the mansion house with his white half brothers and sisters during the war and for a few years thereafter. At the age of 10 or 12 years, he left this abode, undoubtedly by request. But he had learned to read and write and figure.

With a badge of blondish hair, bluish eyes and some education he got ahead fast in the Black community of Person County, North Carolina. He

married early, started a family and purchased 60 acres of Tobacco land with one of the smaller former slavemasters' mansions already on the property.

According to the land title recorded in the Person County courthouse he purchased an additional 305 acres at a cost of \$1,880.00 in 1897. This was too much for his white neighbors and they were quoted by Black farm workers and house servants as saying, "If he keeps on pretty soon Tobe Harris will own half of Person County." About 1 year later he met his death with strong evidence of having been poisoned by jealous neighbors.

The remaining stories of the lives of Beulah Harris Berry, Tobe's oldest daughter and my mother, and other family members are written much more romantically and scholarly in 550 page hard cover book titled "I Wouldn't Take Nothin' For My Journey, Two Centuries of an Afro-American Minister's Family".

Finally I must say that I observed a continuous thread of woven experiences which formed a mosaic of Black family love and togetherness through generations. There is overwhelming evidence, both written and unwritten, of similar experiences of thousands of Black families which have climbed the same mountains to notable achievements. Family love and togetherness extended into the era of slavery as a technique for survival. The Black Church has been a momentous support of the cultural growth and togetherness of Black families. This story and many others, written and unwritten, represent the other side of the coin with reference to the usual depreciatory and stereotypical treatment of Black families as emphasized in the media, schools and

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colleges. This book is written as a narrative with extensive dialogue. My readers, including educators, historians, book reviewers and those people who just like to read an interesting story tell me that I didn't look so tired and aged they would tell me to continue to write more books!