

sunday living

Sun-Times Section 4

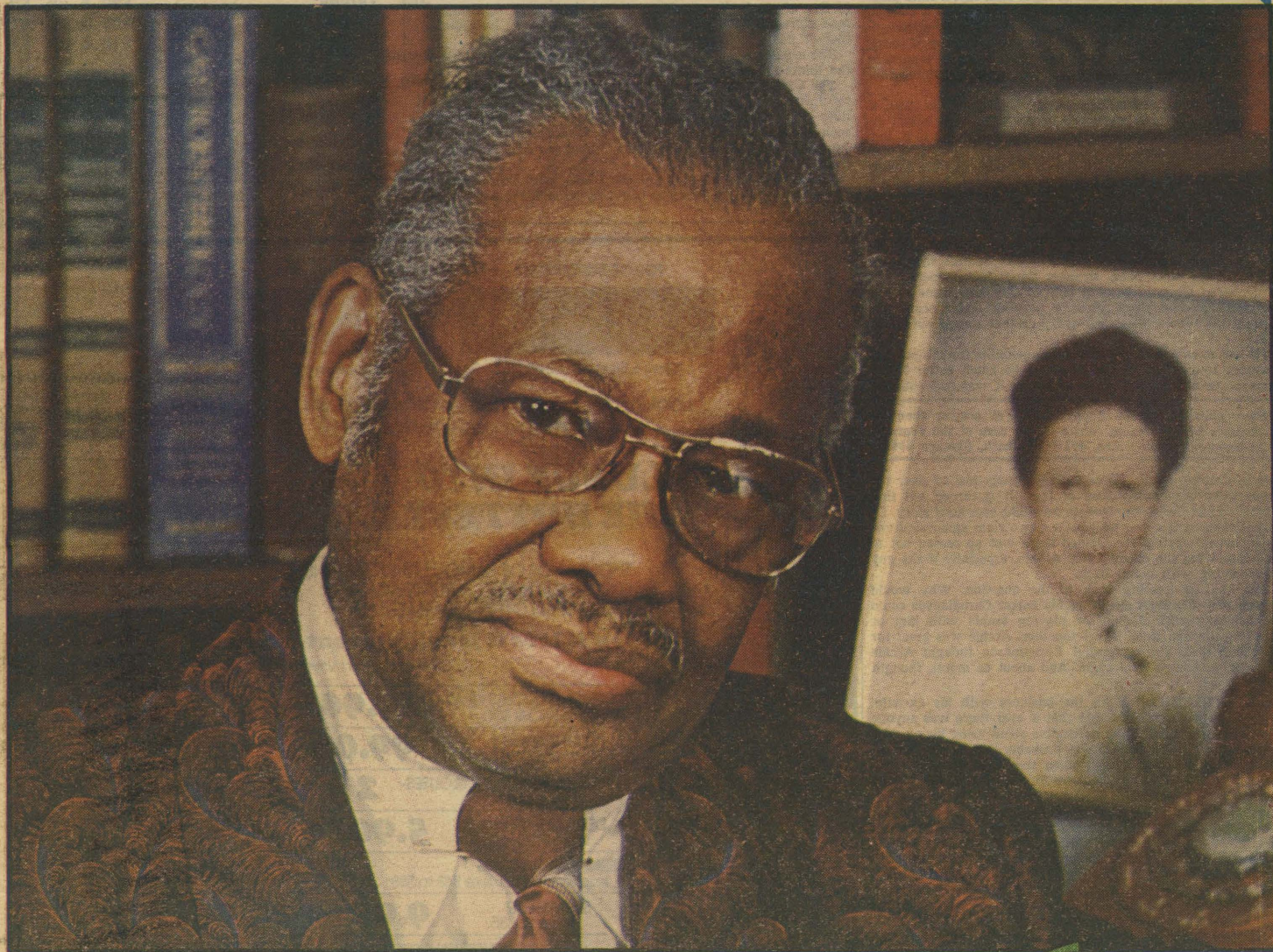
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Sun-Times Photo by Jim Frost

'How did you get here?' the white doctor at the medical conference asked his black colleague.

Doctor with Roots

Now, Dr. Leonidas Berry relives his past and tells just how he got where he is in a compelling story kept alive through slavery and freedom in the minds and hearts of an extraordinary family.

Doctor with Roots

Dr. Berry relives his past and tells about the journey through racial bias to success

Betty Washington

SOME YEARS AGO, a man attended the World Congress for Digestive Diseases in Paris. He was there to report results of his studies of the stomachs of Chicago's Skid Row alcoholics. It should have been a memorable occasion, and it was. There was more than one reason for that.

Proud of his research, Dr. Leonidas Berry, black and well into his career, was in his glory. But the glory was short-lived. On the eve of his lecture, Berry came face to face with a white colleague whose snide greeting, "Well, how did you get here?" set the air crackling.

Berry tensed and replied, "By airplane, sir; it was a bit rough for swimming." It quieted some of his discomfort, but made him wish the medical profession would cure its virulent racism.

The white doctor was secretary of the American Gastroenterological Association, a group whose members, Berry said, were unhappy with Berry's participation in the Congress, and had discouraged it.

Last year Berry, 79, again responded to the question, "How did you get here?"

This time he did it with the publication of his book, *I Wouldn't Take Nothin' for My Journey: Two Centuries of an Afro-American Minister's Family* (Johnson Publishing Co. Inc., \$14.95). The book, said Berry, had an uneasy birth.

"I started out to write my father's biography. He was an interesting man and very accomplished, and a wonderful family man. I admired him tremendously," said Berry. The Rev. L. L. Berry had been influential in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He had been a circuit-riding preacher who later became pastor of large churches in Virginia and North Carolina and eventually directed African Methodism's home and foreign missions.

"When my father died, it was quite an emotional experience for me, and it was then that I realized how much I'd really loved him," Berry said.

"But as I began pulling material together, I went into his father's history and found so much that was interesting about John Berry. He escaped from slavery by putting his master's saddle on his shoulder as a decoy to get past slave hunters. Then I didn't know who to write about."

THE BOOK BRINGS together three stories.

It's the saga of Berry's forebears and tells about black survival across six generations, through slavery and the Civil War to the present. The history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is threaded

throughout the story and is a constant reminder of the church's influence on the development of the Afro-American family and community life.

Then there is Berry's journey. His work as an endoscopist, a physician who examines body organs to detect early signs of disease, brought him national recognition. He was a pioneer in the development of modern gastroscopy and invented the Eder-Berry gastrobiopsy scope, the first direct-vision suction instrument used for removing diseased stomach tissue for microscopic examination.

Berry got his medical degree in 1930 from Rush Medical School, then at the University of Chicago. He did his internship at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and then returned to Chicago to train in internal medicine and gastroenterology through an affiliation between U. of C. and Provident Hospital, the institution where the black doctor, Daniel Hale Williams, performed the world's first successful open-heart surgery.

Berry taught other black medical students and earned a master's in pathology at the University of Illinois College of Medicine.

The going was rough all the way. He faced a constant battle with racial bias. The book graphically presents the horror of it. For instance, it took 17 years and special appeals to the Michael Reese Hospital board before Berry was advanced from a limited courtesy appointment to the attending physician staff.

"I was determined to break the racial barriers against appointments to hospital staffs in Chicago," he said.

His efforts to do medical research were undermined because of his skin color. Research funds were only for white doctors, leaving Berry to engage in what he called, "bootstrap research," meaning that he paid for his work.

Nothing stopped him, he said, because the journey was important and, in time he did get the recognition he deserved. He asked to lecture before medical groups at meetings around the world. He also edited a comprehensive text in his specialty that was published in 1974 and included contributors who were renowned in his field, as well as reports of his own research findings.

At the same time, Berry devoted time to civic endeavors. He directed the A.M.E. church's medical programs, provided free medical care in Chicago and elsewhere, and helped organize programs to assist young blacks seeking careers in medicine.

In 1977, Dr. Berry received the Rudolph Schindler Award, the highest honor given by the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy. The honor capped a long and brilliant career, and is one of many bestowed upon the physician.

The oldest of six children born to his father



Emma Berry (above, sitting) encouraged her husband, Dr. Leonidas Berry, throughout his years of research that went into writing *I Wouldn't Take Nothin' for My Journey: Two Centuries of an Afro-American's Minister's Family*. (Sun-Times Photo by Jim Frost) Berry and his family at his father's funeral in 1954 (below). Berry is second from right, standing, and his mother is seated in the middle. The book started as a biography of the Rev. L. L. Berry. (Cover design by Tom Burnison; photo by Jim Frost)



and Beulah Berry, a schoolteacher, Berry was born in Woodsdale, N.C. As a youngster, he decided to become a doctor. After completing high school in Norfolk, Va., he studied at Wilberforce University in Ohio.

Getting into medical school—and through it—was an experience worthy of a separate book, so mean was the racial climate he confronted.

IN HIS OFFICE at his Hyde Park home, where Berry sees patients only a couple of days a week, he talked about the years of work that went into the book's preparation.

"The research and writing wouldn't let me go," he said. "It was shuttled from the back burner to the front burner. But I decided that this chronicle would be completed even if I was the only one interested enough to read it." He said those who have read it, "tell me I did a pretty good job."

"The title, *I Wouldn't Take Nothin' for My Journey*, comes from an expressive stanza in a Negro spiritual," Berry said. "It means that life on this Earth is only a journey. It can be an experience of success and joy in spite of overwhelming hardships. There is reward in

the struggle itself and in the spirit of survival." Choosing the title was a cinch. Putting the book together wasn't so easy.

Although family history was alive in the memories of his relatives, there was much research to be done. It took 25 years to complete the work as Berry, continuing his medical practice, went combing through county courthouse records. He interviewed scores of relatives and took trips to places where his ancestors once lived, while his wife, Emma, though concerned about his health, gave encouragement. The research became an obsession.

With help from the National Archives and other sources, the story gradually came together.

"I was fortunate in that I was able to interview elderly relatives who lived into the 1950s," he said. In addition, he had access to A.M.E. church records and his father's own papers. The Rev. Berry had been a dynamic speaker and made several trips to countries in Africa, and some of that material had been saved.

The real treasure was Beulah Berry's two dozen scrapbooks that were crammed with decades-old pictures, letters, church programs

and other documents rich in history. They tell what family members saw, felt and said.

Among Berry's discoveries were John Berry's request for a Civil War disability pension, a document that identifies his grandfather's regiment, company and commanding officers and his enlistment and discharge dates. Similar information was turned up for Sam Jenifer, another forebear.

Berry traces his family back to Nace Jenifer, born in 1816 in St. Mary's County, the same year the A.M.E. church was organized. This history, which weaves the stories of the Jenifer-Berry-Harris-Jordan clan, gives a detailed description of how the lives of two primary figures, a Berry and a Jenifer, came to be friends during slavery and the Civil War and how their lives were joined permanently following their meeting in the Union Army. The book's fascinating stories about individuals also provide a sense of America in those times—friendships, racial friction and miscegenation.

Tobe Harris, Berry's maternal grandfather, born of mixed racial parentage was mysteriously poisoned when he began accumulating wealth as a Southern tobacco farmer. Henry "Doc" Jenifer was a man of medicine in the

tradition of the African root doctor, a healer in St. Mary's County until he escaped from slavery and went to Canada.

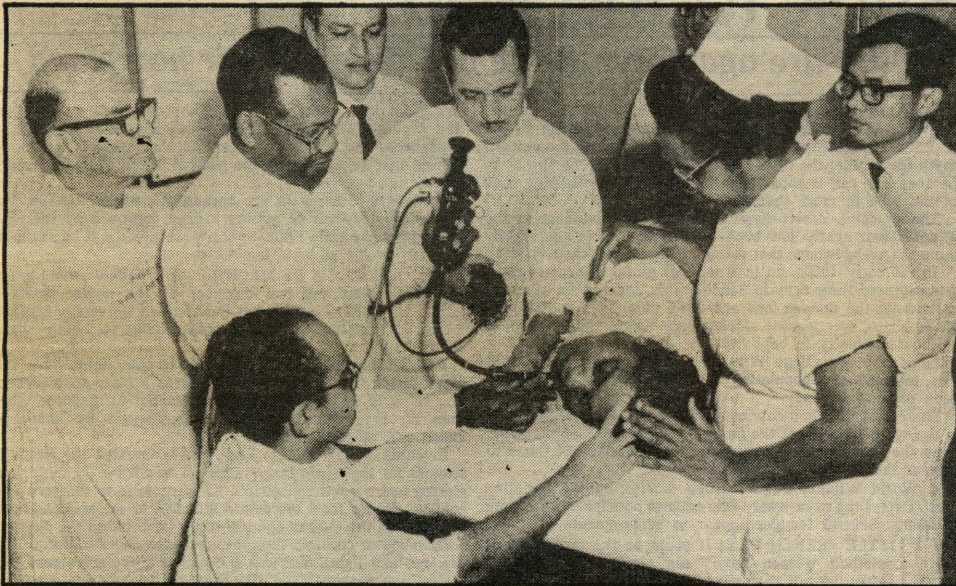
IT IS A BOOK filled with strong black men and women, Berry's kin and others.

Berry, who is a grandfather, said he wanted to write his book "not to glorify my own family, but to say some positive things about black families and the influence of the black church. I wanted to counteract all the negative propaganda about black family life that is often deprecating."

"There is no claim that my family is exclusive. Tens of thousands of black families have climbed the same mountains as the Berrys and Jenifers," he said.

There is much to admire in this family. Berry's daughter, Judith Griffin, is the author of several children's books and is director of a Boston-based program that recruits black youngsters to Ivy League schools.

Moreover, there is a tradition here that reaffirms the importance of personal striving and achievement that reaches out to aid and support others. Berry's life serves as an example



Berry demonstrates a gastroscopy for a post-graduate class in gastrointestinal endoscopy, his specialty (above). Berry was the oldest of six children born to his parents, the Rev. Berry and

Beulah Berry, who was a schoolteacher (top right). Berry and his mother after his graduation the University of Chicago in 1930 (bottom right).



John Berry escapes to join the fight for freedom

Leonidas Berry's research into his family's roots took him through many states and hundreds of years. This excerpt from his book, *I Wouldn't Take Nothin' for My Journey*, is the story of a forebear whose foresight took him off the plantation and ultimately out of slavery.

Leonidas H. Berry, M.D.

"WHERE YA GOIN' BOY?" This was an expression as common as "good morning" in the white man's slave parlance of southern Maryland in 1864. "Yes suh! I goin' after a horse for Massa," was the answer in this case.

It was a fact that the white man did not know that "the boy" (getting to be a man) was 10 miles away from the plantation of Tom Gardner where he belonged.

It was near noon on this chilly January morning, and there was a bright sun shining directly overhead. The inquirer was astride a prancing blaze-faced horse with white hoofs; a bag was hanging from each side of his saddle. Protruding from one of them was a bullwhip and from the other a set of leg irons. A pistol protruded from a holster over the rider's left hip and a crude cowboy-type lasso was curled around the right front post of the saddle. The rider was unmistakably a roving "slave catcher" on his morning prowl.

However, the 20-year-old slave "boy" had an effective

decoy that set the hated hunter of black humanity unsuspectingly galloping away.

The "boy," not nearly as dumb as the slave hunter thought him to be, had an easily visible horse bridle thrown over his right shoulder. Nor had the white hunter noted the bulging pockets under the ragged overcoat and patched overalls caused by his survival rations.

"Praise God, from whom all blessing flow," cried Johnny Miles, soon to be John Berry, for he had just made another hurdle in his plan to break the chains of slavery, escape, find and hopefully join "Massa Linkuns' army, which the black grapevine had placed several more miles in the woods near Point Lookout, Md.

Years later, John Berry told this story many times to his inquisitive young son, Llewellyn, as he relived the dramatic and courageous experience of his escape from slavery; the beginning of his life as John Berry, free man; and the end of his life as Johnny Miles, slave.

"I made my break a little while after New Year's, in 1864. I had been makin' my plans for 'bout two years; I suffered too much myself, seen too much, people bein' whipped and drove like cattle, from sunup to sundown, 'kin to cant,' [from can see to can't see]; young women bein' forced to white overseers' beds to be 'broke' in, to have the white man's chilluns; for him to sell his own flesh and blood at auction."

"Nearly every day some mother was sold away from her chilluns; sisters, brothers, husbands and wives separated

maybe never see'n each other agin."

"Two years befor' I made my jump, we got a new overseer on Tom Gardner's plantation, where my kinfolks wuz held in slavery as far back as anybody could remember. The new man was to be a 'slave-breaker.' Eve'yday he was beatin' up somebody, a man, woman or child."

John Berry continued to tell his story of escape to his son Lew.

"WE KEPT HEARIN' 'bout de war, and we found out dat the North and the South wuz fightin'. I had several ideas 'bout escapin' to de North. Another year pas', and we started to hear dat soldiers from the North army wuz in Maryland. Soon I hear from de black dispatch [slave gossip], dat if a slave could escape from de plantation that the North army would take him as a soldier; if he was strong, brave and healthy. We heard de North soldier wuz wearing blue uniforms, and we seen soldiers of de South army wearing gray uniforms. De word was dat it was dangerous to try to reach the North troops, and many slaves had been caught by slave catchers and were turned back to de plantation, tortured and sometimes killed."

"Pop, weren't you 'fraid of being shot with all those slave catchers round that you told me about?" Lew asked.

"Like I said, my mind wuz made up; I wuzn't 'fraid to die; I wanted a chance to fight for freedom. I wanted to fight for

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John Berry escapes to join the long battle for freedom

Continued from Page 9

myself, my mother and brothers and all de slaves dat had been kidnapped from Africa for 100 years back," the father replied.

In the early afternoon of that second day, Johnny Miles caught sight of a clearing as he came out of the woods. There were tents and soldiers in blue walking around the campground. "Thank God," he cried, and tears welled in his eyes as he shook with a mixture of fright and joy. John Berry was reliving those emotional war years of a quarter of a century before and telling it to his spellbound son. Lew would not let him stop, so his father continued. "All de soldiers I saw wuz white; it was de first time I see soldiers in blue; we all knew dat soldiers in gray wuz 'rednecks,' fightin' fer slave owners.

"I come up close to a soldier standing by his tent. 'How de do boy,' the soldier said. 'What brings you here?' 'I want to join de North army and fight fer President Linkun,' "

Many slave minds were keen on the political issues they had heard discussed at the dinner table of the big house and in market-places. They would pass on the intelligence through the "black dispatch" or "grapevine" to the slaves in the field. They knew that fighting with the North was no absolute guarantee that freedom would be gained. Moreover, if the South should win there would be hell to pay for soldiers and others guilty of helping the North.

Still, they felt that if enough of them joined the North and fought bravely enough, their positions as chattel slaves would have to improve. As philosopher-educator and freedom fighter W.E.B. DuBois said, "They had the good sense to smell freedom in the air." As expressed in the old Negro spiritual, "Over my head I hear music in the air, there must be a God somewhere."

John Berry did not tell the white man, "I want to fight for my freedom or I want to fight for the North," but, "I want to join de

North army and fight for President Linkun."

The private on the campground at Point Lookout said, with some patronizing in his manner, "All right sir, I will take you in to see the sergeant." The soldier took John Berry into the headquarters barracks, which was a large one-room office with several windows and one door; a pot belly wood and coal stove and two crude writing desks completed the furnishings.

"Sergeant, this boy says he wants to join up." The sergeant looked up. "Hello, young man; so you wanta be a soldier?"

"Yes suh, Massa."

"From how far away did you come?"

"Long ways, suh! I don't know how many miles."

"How long did it take you?"

"Two days, suh."

"Did anybody know you planned to run away from the plantation?"

"Nobody but my mama, suh."

"How old are you?"

"I ain't fer sure but I think 20 years. I wuz born five or six crops 'fore the gold rush, my mama said."

"Yeh, that would make you about 16 or 17," said the sergeant. "What's your name?"

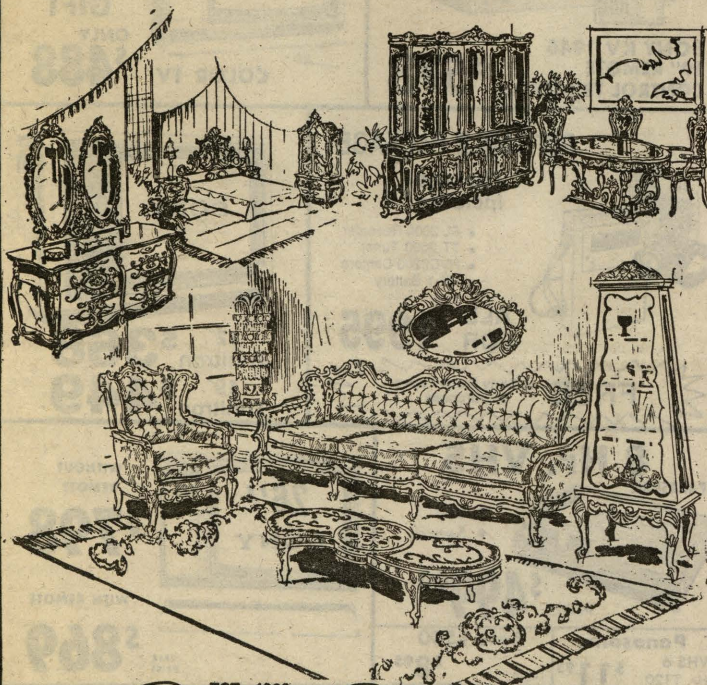
At this point, the new name of the escaped slave was revealed for the first time. Up to that moment he had been called Johnny Miles. An important ingredient in the master plan for escaping slavery and becoming a part of the freedom movement was to change names and take on a new identity. This was the bridge-burning technique that would help to cut Johnny Miles off forever from Tom Gardner's back-breaking name, and it came out loud and clear, "John Berry!"

He had said goodbye to Johnny Miles, son of John and Sarah Miles, and chattel owned by Tom Gardner, at Old St. Mary's, Md.

John Berry was my grandfather.

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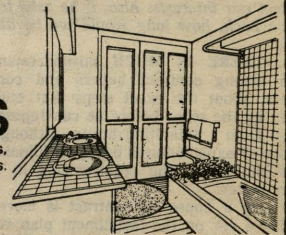
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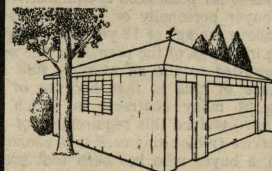
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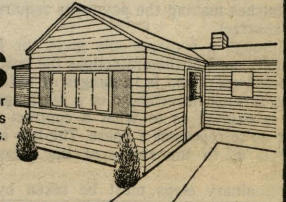


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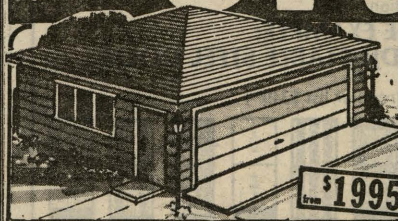
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