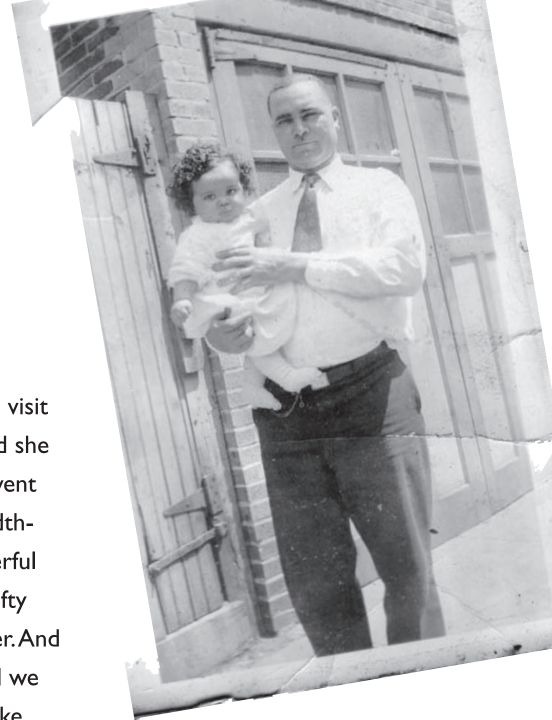
By Linda Goss, Yvonne DeVasty, & Jeannine Osayande

Transcribed & edited by Thomas Owens

"do these stories exist in other



families?"

Linda Goss:

Okay, well, I went to Elyria, Ohio, to visit the oldest relative in my family.[1] And she is my great aunt, Alma Willmore. I went there to celebrate her one-hundredth-and-one birthday. And it was wonderful because, I would say, maybe about fifty years ago was the last time I saw her. And she didn't remember that time until we really started talking. I discovered, like most of the people in my family, she's afraid of thunder and lightning, too. And this really started my research into my family—because of a story that my mother had told me, that had been passed on by her mother, and I wanted to know if Aunt Alma knew the same story…

I can't remember how old I was, but I know I was young—probably pre-teen. And I remember standing in my mother's kitchen in Alcoa,[2] Tennessee, and all of a sudden she started telling me this story that her mother had told her. It was about when Aunt Alma and them were young. Their father was named Pappy, Pappy Hunter, and he was a good cook. And every so often, usually on a Saturday, usually when the sun was going down, you could hear these horses coming up, 'cause they lived, like, on a farm. And it would be the paddy rollers[3]—and another name for the paddy rollers [Continued on p. 22 >]

Top Left, Jeannine Osayande. Photo courtesy Jeanine Osayande. Left, Linda Goss Photo: Ife Nii-Owoo Above, Yvonne DeVasty and her father. Photo courtesy Yvonne DeVasty.

This March, the Folklore Project opened our doors for a series of conversations with storyteller Linda Goss. Linda had recently undertaken research into her family history, and each session began with Linda sharing stories—and stories about tracking down stories. She talked about uncovering different versions, and about how complex meanings unfold behind "simple" tales, sometimes over the course of many decades. Those attending each session were invited to share, comment, and respond. Each session took on its own shape. People connected and powerful tales emerged. Some spoke of the uncertainty of the past, and the process of searching for—or confirming first hand—important narratives and memories. Others shared vivid recollections of times when, as children, they refused to be silenced by racism or injustice. Others spoke about what these experiences taught them about the need for reparations or the work they saw ahead for themselves. Here, we share stories offered by three women at these sessions. We'll offer more opportunities for storytelling with Linda Goss and Irma Gardner-Hammond this fall.

are the nightriders—or just a group of drunken men. And they would come, and they would have him kill a fresh chicken, 'cause in those days, the best food was fresh, you know. And he would kill a chicken, take the feathers off, and he would fry it, 'cause he was known for really being able to fry good chicken. And anyway, after he would fry this chicken, after they would eat it, they would drink whiskey, and then they would actually shoot at his feet—take out their gun and shoot at his feet and make him buck dance! And then the question was—it was like a game—"Where are the women?" And he knew what to say: "The women aren't here," because you didn't know, if the women were there, you didn't know— but use your imagination. I was never told what was gonna happen. And so, most of the time, when they could hear 'em coming, the women would hide under the bed, and they would just stay there until they were gone.

Then, years later, I received a letter from my Uncle A.B., my mother's brother, and he told me that same story. So then I wanted to know, since Alma was the last remaining, if they remember this actually happening. 'Cause this was told, let's say, second hand, and I wanted to know the people who were actually there—what do they remember? So when I asked Alma about it, she said, "I was probably too little." When I told my Aunt Marva, who was sixty-seven, that I was going to Elyria to find out about the story, she says, "Oh yeah, I heard that story." I said, "Well, Marva, how come you never told it to me?" And she acted like it was no big deal. And then my grandmother, her mother, who I never met, was very afraid of thunder and lightning. So I'm wondering, is that one of the reasons? Because all of my aunts were afraid of thunder and lightning. And it made me think about when people use that word, "terror." You know, what does it mean to be terrorized? And I wondered, "Do these stories exist in other families, stories that really don't get told until out of the spur of the moment, you know?"

Yvonne DeVasty:

As a child growing up, my father would take us down to North Carolina, which is where he was born, every summer. And whether it was a Model T Ford, or a Dodge, or whatever, he would take us down there, and what would be down there would be a log cabin. And I remember seeing the rifle over the threshold, or the horseshoe, or the broom made out of the long straw for the hearth. But there was something about North Carolina, specifically my father's home, that held a kind of mystery to me. Now of course, my father was some kind of a mystery, and of course he was my hero.

So the two really drew me to North Carolina, and I always wanted a piece of land. And I remember as I grew up, and went back to visit, I would talk to my relatives, saying, "I would like to buy some of this land down here," because it didn't come down through the hereditary route to my lap. Well, they'd always say, "Yes." And those of you who know the South, know the South holds many mysteries, and many, many interesting ways of dealing with questions. So I wanted a piece of the land, because I felt it held some of the answers to the mysteries that I grew up in. And some of the mysteries I grew up with were: I never knew my paternal grandfather. We had glimpses of ideas of what was going on, and, you know, there were parts of our family that would go here, and then drop off. You had no way to go there, and then people were silent. And you all know there's lots of stories like that of the South.

So, one day my cousin called me. And she had known for about ten years that I had been interested in getting some land, and so forth. So she told me that she had gotten through the inheritance about a hundred-some acres. And she said, "You know, we all talked about this, and you should get some of the land, because you never got your inheritance." And from that moment, of that possibility of actually getting some land—of course it's taken a very circuitous route . . . isn't quite in place—but it started to sort of titillate my fantasies of what the land could represent. And not so much for me, but for the family coming: my grandkids, my kids.

Coming down from Philadelphia, down through Route One. At that time, I guess you went about—I can't remember the highest speed—maybe forty miles an hour back then. And you'd finally get down towards North Carolina. Well, if we got there at nighttime, there were no lights on the road. Obviously, if there was a log cabin, it was not in the city; it was way back in the boondocks. So we get down there. If it was at nighttime, there was a fork in the road, and even my father could not quite find his way 'cause you couldn't even see your hand in front of you. So, his nephew would be at the fork, with a kerosene lantern. And he would sit there no matter what time—don't know when he started sitting there, and I'm not sure what time we got to that point. But he would be there, and he would shine the light. And then we would follow him, and go on through. That would be one time.

If it was in the daytime, I remember coming from the road. I would always see the log cabin with this beautiful chimney, the big stones with multicolored patinas—just gorgeous, I kept some pictures of them. In any event, we'd turn off the road there, and we'd trundle out of the car, the four of us. And here we city folks had come, and, you know, this is all country folks down here. So there would be my two aunts out in the yard. One would be sittin' kinda like I'm sitting now, with one of the big old metallic bowls, and she'd be snappin' beans! And then the other aunt'd be off to the side, and she'd be kinda slew-footed, like my father, and she'd be wringin' chickens' heads as she

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came. And so we'd pull in, and of course they'd stop momentarily to come to greet us, because my father was the only one who came back to his home, from all the brothers who were around and all. I think he's the only one who went North, too. But anyway, he came back, so he was everybody's hero.

And so what happened is, we come in. We knew, over in the kitchen there, there were these smells coming out, because every horizontal surface in that kitchen was loaded to groaning with chicken, and ham, and sweet potatoes, and string beans, and greens, and biscuits, and coffee with chicory in it, and pineapple cake—layer cake, with coconut on top—and just on and on and on. So back in the yard, here we would be, and the two aunts would be asking us, "How was the trip," etcetera. We would tell them. And then, while we were telling our experience of the trip, the chickens were getting' barer and barer, and the beans were piled higher and higher, and somebody was over here mixing biscuits. The next thing you knew, it was time to eat. And they never—you know, we were just talking away, and here they are preparing this enormous feast. And I remember one of the aunts would yell down—there'd be the field hands out there; tobacco was the crop in those days, as some of you know: "Go call so-and-so! Tell him his brother done come!" And So-and-so'd go on down there, trundle down the road. And not before long, there'd be a whole long line of folk coming in to see these northerners who had descended on the place. So that's kind of some of the memories that I recall.

Jeannine Osayande:

I was about eleven, and my friends were having a party. And one of the girls at school, who I was really friends with, where you just ate lunch with, you laughed 'til your belly hurt with, it was her birthday. And everyone got an invitation but me. I was the only Black girl. That's still when you actually wore a dress, sort of getting in the '70s. You just didn't wear a t-shirt or whatever. So you do the whole thing for the party, and the mom would do the invitations. Anyway, I felt like she didn't invite me because I was Black, but I wasn't sure, but I really felt it. But I also felt like, "She's my friend, and everybody else is going, and there isn't any reason why I shouldn't be there." So I told my mother I was invited to the party.

You know, she got the gift, and took me to do all of that. And I got dressed; she dropped me at the front door. Ring the bell. And when the mother opened the door, her jaw dropped. So then I realize, "Okay, she didn't invite me because I was Black" [laughing]. But I'm on her step. So, she was gracious enough to open the door and let me be there. And so we had the day at the party. And then, the next day, people heard that I came, but I didn't have an invitation. And time passes and all of that, and I got older, and I even wondered, "Did that actually happen?"

So, I'll speed you up thirty years. And I'm visiting my father at a nursing home. And I walk out of his room, and right across the hall, sitting in the wheelchair, is the mom. And she's like, "Jeannine!" Well, back then they called me "Rachel," so she's like, "Rachel!"

And I understood what happened: it was in the '70s then, and people were coming out of a lot of things. Or maybe not even out of it, just exploring it. She was an older mom, too, so I understood where she was. Even if I was little, I understood. But still, the question was, "Was it a figment of my imagination in childhood, or did it happen?" The next thing she said was, she took my hand and said, "Remember the birthday party?" And I was like "Yes!" 'Cause I was like, "Was that a dream?"

You know, sometimes you keep having dreams throughout your life. So I knew, "Okay, this happened," and we talked about it. I didn't say anything; she just said, "You know, it was a different time then, and we didn't have enough money for all the food." She kind of started to go that way, and I let her. But I knew she was giving me some kind of connection and some kind of peace. So every time I'd visit my dad, I'd be in her room. She's telling me stories and things, you know.

But for me, the defining moment is that I look back and it made me bold. 'Cause even though people see me as bold growing up, I wasn't really that bold. But that incident, about just standing up, even if you had to be sneaky and go to a party—but to stand up one way or another. Yeah.

Notes

[1] *Linda's research trip was supported by a grant from the Fund for Folk Culture.*

[2] *Alcoa is a tiny town in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. An aluminum factory town, Alcoa takes its name from the Aluminum Company of American, located there.*

[3] *Before emancipation, paddy rollers, or slave patrollers, were organized groups of white men who hunted down African Americans escaping slavery. Later, the groups evolved into the Ku Klux Klan and other formal and informal groups, exercising their own brand of social control by terrorizing African American communities. See Gladys-Marie Fry, Night Riders in Black Folk History (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).*