

SWINGING HIGH ON A WILD MISSISSIPPI GRAPEVINE

Yes, I take my pen and paper in hand (this was the salutation of friendly letterwriting in those days) and with loving memory proceed to tell the world our story — a story about us growing up and becoming the Somebodies of the Great Society.

I came in, ushered by the early part of the century, with my eyes open just a few hours after birth. I got off to a seeing start for myself with a will to demand what I wanted, such as taste for certain food: really I kept up a continuous sucking after birth, even after I was nursed, until one day my mother gave me some peach juice that satisfied my taste and I stopped sucking. That juice satisfied my hunger and I have been seeking what I wanted ever since.

My grandfather, Nelson Hewlett, was born in 1849, before the Civil War was fought. He was 16 years of age when he was accepted as a drummer boy. The Hewlett family (that's the family name of the slave master Hewlett in Panola County, Mississippi, which my family took as freedmen) had their own dreams after the war. The family came out of slavery hard working and ambitious — everything earned by the sweat of their own brow. Everything was accomplished with struggle and hardship — not only for the freed slaves but the landowners, too, who were hard pressed to emerge on their own as tillers of the soil without the help of slave labor.

My parents had a forty-acre farm of their own at Longtown. I remember giving mama problems of hide-and-seek, such as hiding under the house playing with my father's hunting dogs. I like dogs very much and am happy keeping them around. I was jealous, seeking my mother's attention from my new sister, so I would hide away from her and her baby.

My parents farmed mostly cotton and corn. Mother raised chickens — big red hens that laid large eggs, easily sold for fifteen and twenty cents per dozen. My father would often boil a tea kettle of eggs in the evening; sometimes he would roast eggs in the fire-place. These were fun times. I don't remember any of us having the stomach ache from such roasting parties.

Grandpa and grandma came back from Arkansas where they and other members of the family had settled after the war. They bought a home in Crenshaw, Mississippi, on Front Street facing the railroad track, across from the train depot. Passenger trains stopping, mile-long freight trains rumbling by, even rattling dishes on the kitchen shelves—this was some lifestyle for cousin Jim and me. At first it was exciting; soon we got used to it and we had fun playing with our friends and making friends with the train crews, waving at them as they passed through our town.

We spent the winters with grandpa and grandma and summers with our parents on the farm. Grandma took on the role of assistant cook in a local hotel; many times she brought home to us what my grandpa called "a thank you mam pan" — really it was leftover food shared with the kitchen helpers, such as ham hocks and baked beans. The five-dollar-a-week salary helped to provide for the family. Quite often she saved her weekly pay by sewing it into her corset like a patch on the inside. In 1950 when she passed away that corset was inner-lined with five- and ten-dollar bills. I had the experience of counting \$550 in patches.

Grandpa Nelson (many of his friends called him Li'l Nelse because he was short in stature) worked at odd jobs – service jobs, small-tract cotton farming, promoting home ownership and selling real estate to his people. Really his farm interest gave local children, with parents living in town, the experience of learning how to pick and chop cotton and earning money. From those days of experience many, boys especially, decided to stay in school and prepare themselves to do something different in earning a living. The hot sun, the long hours, the sweat and fatigue, put into their heads becoming 'somebody' else.

I often spent evenings around the fireside reading the News Scimitar to my grandfather. I enjoyed reading; he was a good listener, assisting me, of course. Really from these experiences my hobby became reading.

The small-town society of those days is still vivid to me today: living across the railroad tracks (two divided the town). On the eastside of the tracks our white neighbors lived, on the westside blacks lived. The first street on each side of the tracks housed small businesses. The white farmers and merchants operated grocery stores, the post office and doctor's office. There were no movie houses, only drugstores where whites gathered for eating ice cream, etc. Blacks were served in the rear; all the young people would meet there and enjoy themselves. The trains stopped in Crenshaw to take on water from the pumphouse; there was the water tank operated by a black – he had the best paying job in the town. The passenger train station was operated by a white family – a father, mother, son and daughter. I remember them well, because even though they had a public job they weren't too friendly or courteous with passengers and their service needs. These were the days, remember, overcoming the slavery ideas and customs.

Primarily we children liked to play; we made up all sorts of simple games. My mom bought me a pair of brass-toed shoes – straight from the Bellas Hess mail order catalogue from the big city of New York. They were all shiny brass. We children liked to jump Brother Rabbit – a fiery buck dance that wore the toes of your shoes off. Jumpin' Brother Rabbit in the Pea Patch was the game for outdoors and indoors – if your mother permitted.

We jumped rope, too – no fancy rope, but papa's used plow lines. Jumpin' fast, jumpin' high – if you couldn't stand the hot soup get out of the kitchen – fast, real fast, until you tripped. We jumped all over the backyard and the frontyard – maybe on a rainy day on mama's front porch.

But funtime was springtime in the Southland. The joy of swinging from limb to limb on a wild grapevine – swinging from daydream to daydream – I don't believe Tarzan himself could have accomplished a better feat. These were honest-to-goodness God's children learning how to use what they'd been given. We were afraid, of course, swinging out and in from limb to limb on a tall cottonwood; competing with each other, swaying from shade to sun – the fear of gliding high on a breeze was incidental to swinging on a Mississippi grapevine.

–Angie V. Mitchell

A CHRONICLE OF THE REVIVAL OF MOLEHILL

MOLEHILL IN MAY

Having just rebounded from the latest bout between the Snappers and the Lots-to-Lose Club, Molehill is feeling the faint throbs of a fresh disorder. Waves of conjecture in wide circulation carry signals of some far-fetched scheme to harness our river, the Goawin, for promotional and, stretching the argument, for educational purposes. In order to dazzle the nickels and dimes from passers-by, one of our foremost designers, Erec O. VerDunn, in an illustrated story repeated for the precious few in the Reiterator, has submitted plans to our city for a river spectacular. His proposal calls for the erection of a huge Ferris wheel-like construction in the middle of the river. It goes without saying that this project would be built at public expense and O. VerDunn quickly offered his services along with his designs.

Visitors traveling through the city would somehow be enticed by the sight of this structure and the attendant pouting pleas of their kiddies to abandon their vehicles on the through-bridge and ride the thing down to the city. This trip, it should be pointed out, would be educational for the participants in that they would be afforded a panoramic view of our river system and, as the wheel makes the descending loop, be allowed an unprecedented inspection of it too, for their glass-enclosed cars would be plunged beneath the river's surface before turning to a stop.

But how clumsy of me, I failed to mention the full beauty of the project and its most convincing aspect for its -Loser backers. Riders, by way of being dashed from the sky to the river, will be lured to Molehill before they've had a chance to pass us by. There will be a place for them to temporarily dispose of their vehicles on the bridge and from that moment on they will be the captives of every commercial venture in Molehill. They will be tempted farther, inch by inch along the small peninsula under the bridge, by junk food and river tricketts, like river-algae milkshakes and genuine driftwood toilet seats, spending every cent they have as they pursue the chain of cons, like dominoes, down the streets of Molehill — the end of their stay being the hockshops and the bus terminal or a distressed telegram home for another fix.

But the trump of the entire deal, to benefit us all and induce public financing, is that the Ferris wheel, from whence the effluence of this idea emits, will all the while be powered by the river's current and connected to a generator, thus providing electric energy to all of Molehill.

The only snag to this turn of events, however, is the very contentious Snappers, who like the Goawin boatmen smell some city-factured additive at the river's edge. The Mentor had supported suggestions to adapt the peninsula, on which the Ferris wheel and generator would be installed, into a natural recreational area where Molehillians could view the primitive elements of our riverscape and be diverted from the everyday money-mechanisms mainside.

The Snappers, therefore, have flooded out the ravenous enthusiasm swelling through the community for what they term 'a swindle that will make the Grand Bazaar look like a bake sale.' They have issued a call for a gathering down by the river so that others, including Erec's own brother, Simpson B. VerDunn, can present alternatives for public exploration.

— Gibbin Nash

*Missississississippi
sinkin' mighty low;
I'll build a bridge of shops and wops
and call the muck the AreNo.*

THE BEHAVE-YOUR-ASS

*B. F. desires that all should be controlled
– by men, that is –
and that I think is fine:*

*Imagine a concrete god or board of gods
whose full-time job would be
to keep your life in line.*

*But Lord S. heed a warning
lest you fear to show your face
as bygone gods have been:*

*Should re-creation go awry
and prove to be the same
you mayhap meet an end like Christ
the closest butt at hand.*

PAUSE

*Fired from an Indian bow
into the air of the city,
I hover like a hummingbird
above the honeysuckle,
Sucking its sweet produce.*

*And shoot again
in another direction.*

*(Or, like a pidgeon, perch
above the heads of its inhabitants
To drop on them that linger.)*