

A Little Farm in Arkansas

by

LaToya Minton

The Watson farm in Jersey, Arkansas, was first owned by my great-grandpa, Deacon Denson Watson. He bought the land where the farm sat at a time when an African American owning his own property was unheard of. He owned eighty acres of prosperous land, so he was considered to be one of the more wealthy black men in the area. Several times he was approached to sell the land, but he refused. When he died, he left the farm to his children, and it will continue to be passed down through the generations. What I know to be the symbol of my family's history is that farm, and many of my childhood adventures took place there when we visited.

Jersey is one of many small towns in Arkansas that takes only a few minutes to travel through. As a child, I used to love the drive from Warren, Arkansas, where our hotel was, to the farm in Jersey. We traveled straight on a seemingly endless road, surrounded by vast expanses of trees on either side. In just thirty minutes, we drove through three different towns, passing only an occasional logging truck. Finally, we would turn right onto a gravel road, then travel a ways until reaching a crossroad.

On one side of the road was Mt. Zion Baptist Church, where my family attended. It is an old wooden structure with white peeling paint, surrounded by woods and shrubs. The farm is at the end of the adjacent dirt road. Halfway along the road is the gate to our family cemetery that I never noticed was there until my great-grandma passed away in 1999. It is ancient, with graves so old that they are marked with sticks or rocks with the deceased person's name hand-carved on it.

As a little girl, I would have been restless and bouncing back and forth between the windows as we continued up the road. My sister and I always wanted to be the first to spot one of the twelve dogs, who were by then the only animals raised on the farm. The trip to Jersey was always like driving into another time period to us city kids, and we could not wait to get out of the car and explore. In Omaha, we were not used to seeing frogs sitting on the front porch or deer and foxes walking out of the woods while we played. At home, we were not allowed to play outside alone, but because the farm's only neighbor was my great-aunt who lived miles down the road, we no longer had that restriction.

The part of the farm that both fascinated and frightened us the most was the little wooden shack that my great-grandpa built for his mother, who was half-Cherokee and half-white. The little house seemed like a scene from an old movie, complete with hand-made wooden chairs and a table on the front porch. There were just two small windows and a sagging tin roof. It was surrounded by weeds, and my sister and I steered clear of the house while we played because we were told it was infested with snakes and country rodents. Whenever my Great-Aunt Lula-Faye would go inside, our imaginations ran wild as we held our breath and waited for her to come out.

The main farm house was cozy and inviting with its wood floors and country kitchen. The bedrooms had high four-poster beds covered in hand-sewn quilts and afghans. In the sitting room hung old black and white portraits of my great-great-great-grandparents and other relatives. This was the one room where we were not allowed to play, so naturally we were tempted to peek inside any chance we could.

The weekend reunions at the farm were always exciting. Family members from all across the country would come, and we would all get together. On Friday and Saturday, we barbecued or fried fish, while everyone caught up on each other's current lives or reminisced about the past. Then, on Sunday the family would all join together at Mt. Zion Baptist Church for a morning service before parting ways.

When I was a child, visiting the family farm in Jersey was the equivalent to a trip to Disneyland. However, I was disappointed at how much it had changed when I went back a couple years ago. The woods along the road to Jersey have been reduced to dots of trees and shrubs here and there. The main farmhouse, my favorite feature, has recently been torn down and replaced with a modern pre-fabricated trailer. Although the farmhouse had started to rot and fall apart, I was still saddened to learn that the house that was the center of so many childhood adventures had been bulldozed. My great-great-grandmother's little shack is the only original structure still standing.

My family farm in Jersey, Arkansas, was special to me as a child. It was a place of adventure and unrestricted play for me and my sister. Now that I am all grown up, the farm preserves my family history, and even though the property has changed, I look forward to sharing it with my future children. The acres of land that my great-grandpa worked with his bare hands will always be the reminder of where my family has come from.