

LIGHT
in the Dark Belt

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Rosa J. Young, 1949

THE STORY OF ROSA YOUNG
as told by herself

LIGHT
in the Dark Belt

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Saint Louis, Missouri - 1950

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Route #1 Box #67,

Snow Hill, Alabama,

December 16, 1939.

Dear dear Miss Thumstedder;

Please accept my heartfelt and sincere thanks for the invaluable package of clothing which you sent to me for the needy people here. They reached me safe yesterday. I dare say that this gift of clothing will make many a little negro kids ^{here} happy. And their parents also. The colored people haven't much of this world's goods. Both men, women and children are greatly in need. Please extend to the donors of these gifts my sincere thanks.

Dear Miss Thumstedder, I am enjoying fine fine health this fall. I am able to go out now and work for Jesus some more. As not that wonderful, I love to do mission work. It is all my business here below to tell that old, old story of Jesus and his love. Save myself and some one else. Please write again sometime. Again I thank you.

Yours in Jesus our Savior,

Rosa J. Young

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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FIRST, I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THE YOUTH OF OUR Lutheran Church, both white and colored. The aged members of our Church are passing on. They have served their time, and, one by one, they are leaving the great commission of Jesus: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19), in the hands of the present and the future generations. It should be helpful for these young people to have a more complete knowledge of our Negro mission work in Alabama, to be informed regarding its origin, its accomplishments, and its needs.

Second, I dedicate this book to our God-given white friends in Alabama, particularly to Mr. J. Lee Bonner and Mr. J. C. Harper of Oak Hill, Mr. H. L. Bruce of Catherine, and Mr. George Cook of Rockwest; and to the memory of the late Mrs. J. Lee Bonner, Mr. J. T. Dale of Oak Hill, Mr. G. T. Wiltsie of Prairie, Mr. Dennis Forte of Buena Vista, and Ex-Governor B. M. Miller of Camden, and to their descendants.

In the early days of our mission endeavors, when help was sorely needed, these white people gave their moral and material support, which made it possible for us to organize and to extend our mission work into new places. It will be beneficial to give their descendants a clear knowledge of

what the Lutheran Church, which their forefathers encouraged, has done, and is still doing, for the colored people on the plantations and in various communities. Our desire is to reach more new territories in our mission work in Alabama, and to do so we shall always need our white friends.

Last, but not least, I dedicate this book to our faithful Lutherans everywhere, who out of love for Jesus have given, and continue to give, their words of encouragement, their earnest prayers, and their money to bring the pure Gospel to the colored, many of whom are still groping in spiritual darkness. I wish it were possible for these dear Lutheran white friends to know our innermost thoughts and to understand how grateful we are for what they have done for us. We must continue to ask them to help us bring the truth of God's Word to many more of our benighted brothers and sisters in Alabama.

THE AUTHOR

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LIFE IN THE BLACK BELT WHEN THE AUTHOR WAS YOUNG



THE AUTHOR IS WHOLLY A PRODUCT OF THE BLACK BELT OF Alabama. She was born, reared, and educated in the State, under rather adverse circumstances. She has devoted forty years of her life to serving her race as a teacher. She has served in the rural districts, on plantations, in the darkest and most dangerous nooks and corners. Her work has been among the lowly, humble people, not among those who had attended high school and college. Perhaps they had heard of "Big" Tuskegee, but not of Hampton Institute. Some of them did not even know that General Lee had surrendered to General Grant. She lived with these people, she ate with them, drank with them, slept with them, rode and walked with them. She writes of the things which she observed and experienced among her people.

HOUSES AND HOME LIFE

Some of the houses in the Black Belt were one-room log huts with only one door and no other opening for air or light. In these huts father and mother and children lived. One room was to them bedroom, living room, storage room, bathroom, dining room, and kitchen.

There was another type of dwelling, a large one-door hut, so large that it was called the "big" house, though it could not boast of a single window. In the yard, a few feet from the "big" house, a small log hut with dirt floor was built.

This small hut was the kitchen. The "big" house was the bedroom for all, also the storage room, and the living room for the grownups. The children's living room was the yard behind the house or the kitchen if the weather was rainy or cold. The children were not allowed to go into the "big" house until night unless they were sick. If a little tot got sleepy during the day, he slept on the kitchen floor or in the yard on an old piece of quilt.

A third style of house was the log pen. A log pen consists of two rooms connected by an open hall. One room served as bedroom, living room, and storage room for the parents; the other as kitchen and children's bedroom.

The fourth type of house was more aristocratic. It consisted of one or two rooms built of planks in box fashion. They were called frame, or box, houses. If there were two rooms, they were connected by an open hall. These houses were usually whitewashed, not painted. Only people of importance in the community lived in these houses. The author, in her years of service as a teacher, was often invited to share the hospitality of these larger homes. Any of these houses, though comfortable in summer, was likely to be most uncomfortable in the winter season, because chimneys were seldom built high enough and a draft of wind would send a cloud of smoke into the room, compelling the occupants to put out the fire and shiver in the cold.

Though the houses were usually not built level with the ground, steps were almost unheard of. Once the author visited in one such home. All the members of the family were elated to see their teacher coming. The father, to show his delight, rushed to the door, with outstretched arms, to lift the teacher into the house. But she was young and able to take the step without assistance.

The furniture consisted of one or two wooden beds, scalded almost white (mute evidence of frequent battles with bed-bugs), rough, homemade tables, boxes, empty nail kegs, benches, and wagon seats, to be used for chairs.

There were no mirrors. The people felt to find out whether they had their clothes on correctly, or one told another when he was dressed properly.

There were no timepieces. To tell time, most of the people watched their shadows. When the human shadow was short enough for the person's feet to touch its head, it was noon. Some listened for the big plantation bell to ring for the noon hour. Others listened for the braying of a jack, which, they believed, brayed every hour. There were others who watched the sun ascend and descend in the heavens.

There were no factory-made brooms. The women swept their floors with bunches of broom sage, a tall, bushy grass, or with the branch of a pine tree. Some used rags, especially those who lived in the one-room log huts. Those who lived in the plank, or box, house used palmetto brooms, which were made by broommakers on the plantations.

Quilts large enough to cover the bed and hang over a considerable length to make sure that all in the bed would get a share of the cover were used on the beds. There were no sheets. Some used a dirty quilt to cover the mattress, which was made of hay or pine needles. Pillows were rags or soiled clothes. There were no towels. The women wiped their hands and faces on their aprons or dress tails. The men dried their faces with their arms and wiped their hands on their trousers.

There were no cooking stoves. All cooking was done in the fireplace in iron skillet and pots. Wide pieces of tin were used for lids. Wooden trays were used for bread, gourds

for dippers, pine knots for lamps. There were no washbowls or wash pans. One would pour water for another while he washed his face and hands.

The meals consisted chiefly of white bread or burned corn bread, sweet potatoes, sorghum, collard greens, bitter turnips, black-eyed peas, milk, and butter. Seldom was there a table at which the members of the family might sit down together. The food was served in tin plates, pans, buckets, or bucket lids. The members of the family sat down wherever they wished and ate with their fingers—except the few. Some said the food tasted better when eaten with the fingers.

In almost every yard a mulberry tree provided the shade. Very little cleaning was done in the house or in the yard. A sickle was seldom used on the weeds and grass. The garbage can was unknown. Peelings, seeds, corncobs, watermelon rinds, and pinder (*peanut*) hulls were all thrown into the yard. Cows, mules, goats, pigs, dogs, and chickens came and went—and snakes, too. Parts of the hall or bedroom were often used for storing piles of corn and cottonseed.

The women usually wore one-piece dresses tied around the waist with a string. They combed their hair with a table fork and tied the braids with string. Men wore their trousers rolled up halfway to the knees and held them up with one homemade suspender. All went barefoot. They did not bother to wash their feet before retiring at night, even at the end of a rainy day.

Most of the people had learned to be polite to teachers and ministers, but among themselves they were rough and uncouth. The moral status of the people was at a very low ebb. The people, ignorant of the true way of salvation, lived in spiritual darkness.

THE NEGLECT OF CHILDREN

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God. . . . And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them.” (Mark 10:14-16.) The parents, instead of leading the little ones to God, their Creator, often severely neglected them both in spiritual and in temporal things.

A bath was not even a weekly experience for many colored children. Often a baby was not given a bath until after its weaning time. As the child grew older, its kinky, dirty hair became matted with cockleburs, cotton lint, and pine needles. Banks of dirt accumulated on the back of the neck, elbows, wrists, hands and feet. Fingernails were long and dirty. Yet they must eat with their fingers. As a rule the superstitious parents did not permit them to remove the fingernails, because to do so would make them roguish.

Until the girls reached the teen age, they wore only one garment. Usually there were two garments for a change, but some had only one “piece,” which they wore until the mother decided it should be washed. While the washing was being done, the child went about naked. No washing was ever done in inclement weather. Some were so unfortunate as never to have a change of garment until the old one had entirely worn out. Shoes were almost an unknown luxury.

Chiefly the food consisted of a piece of corn bread, a sweet potato, and a generous helping of collard greens or peas cooked with okra with no seasoning at all. Some were less fortunate, having only cold corn bread or a roasted sweet potato, with water to drink. Sometimes, between meals, the children were given raw potatoes, parched corn, peas or rice uncooked.

Sometimes when the children were given a piece of bread for breakfast and were told they would get another piece with a glass of milk mixed with water for dinner, they would save their piece of breakfast bread until noon so that they would have what they called a "good eat."

Mr. A. was one of the important men. He lived in a log hut with the kitchen out in the yard. Once he bought a barrel of flour and a can of lard. There was no place to put this big supply but in the big house behind the head of his bed. Mr. A. was a preacher and held family prayers each night. When the family gathered for prayers, first one and then another of the hungry children would kneel behind the bed, near the flour and lard. While the prayers were being said, it would be easy to steal a pan of flour and a cup of lard. Then the culprit would sneak out to the kitchen in the yard, and after prayers all the children would cook and eat and return to the big house to go to bed.

Some of the colored people put their little children into the field to work when they are very much too young. It seems as if the parents were charging the children for the right to live. The very small ones are given the task of picking up sticks and bringing water for the kitchen. If they fail to do their tasks, they are often whipped, and sometimes they are denied the scanty meal, while the others eat.

CHRISTMAS

Before Christmas the children were always told to clean up the house and yard if they wanted Santa Claus to come to them. Then the children would rake and sweep and carry dirt until they ached in every limb, hoping to receive something from Santa, if only a "bite." When all the cleaning was done, they went among their neighbors or kinsfolk to borrow stockings to hang up, for even the colored boys and

girls must hang their stockings before the chimney. On Christmas Eve, when all were fast asleep in bed, the poor mama would put into their stockings what she had. She split an apple into halves so that each child might have a taste; the oranges were divided in like manner. To these halves she would add one or two sticks of candy and sometimes a dozen raisins. On Christmas morning the little ones would rise long before dawn to lay claim to their stockings. Oh, how happy they were! Many, many children never tasted candy, apples, or oranges except on Christmas.

RELIGIOUS TRAINING

Far below everything else was their religious training. The little colored children did not know any prayers. They did not know that God had made them. They did not know that God made the world. They did not know what was meant by a Bible verse. They did not know how to sing. They did not know what was right and what was wrong.

Only a few had ever attended church or Sunday school. They did not know what a church looked like on the inside. Their job was to stay at home and take care of the house while the grownups went to church to worship God. When a member of the family died, the children were usually left at home during the hour of the funeral. One little boy, who was taken to his little sister's burial, said, when he returned home: "I saw dem men puttin' all dot dirt on woman. Um gyin back dow da and git her up."

Marriages were not usually witnessed by the younger children. Mr. L. had a daughter who was about to get married. The marriage was to take place in the home. The youngsters, wondering what all this could mean, determined to see for themselves. They were put to bed long before the hour set for the wedding, but they did not go to sleep. From under