

mie Douglas for keeping the AME Zion Church in Water Valley running after most of the male leaders left or passed away.

Even with all this travel, my mom never owned a brand-new car. I remember our having more than one flat tire. I mean we had a lot of flat tires. The very worst came one Sunday on our way to Green Goshen CME Church in what we call the bald hot summer sun. My mom knew how to change a tire. However, we did not always have a good spare, but eventually we would get to the program she was sponsoring. Seems like someone always came along to help us – sometimes black and sometimes white.

When Eva's father, my Uncle Red (Andrew) Chatman, lost his best friend and needed transportation, my mom stepped in to take him wherever he needed to go, picked up his medicines and assisted any other needs. She always visited the sick in their homes and the hospital. During the last months of my aunt Ann Chapman's life, we were at the house in Oakland every Sunday evening. I remember mom giving her last to anyone in need many times when we did not have enough for our family. Our door was always open to anyone in need and to family. Relatives from Memphis, Chicago, Detroit and Grand Rapids spent summers at our house in the fifties and sixties on a regular basis.

My mother traveled often to visit my grandfather, Alfred Pritchard, in Haiti, Missouri, and I was always afraid when we crossed the Memphis-Arkansas bridge. It was high and narrow, and there was always an accident. We would spend the night with relatives in Osceola, Arkansas before driving on to Haiti. Stanhope Cox drove us often as he was an experienced long-haul truck driver. Granddaddy changed his last name to Turner for reasons unknown to me. I suspect he had an encounter with the law in Mississippi – which might also explain how he ended up in that tiny little town.

By 1962 my mother was raising the first of her four grandchildren. By 1968 she had taken in the other three because she did not believe Chicago, where my sister and their mother lived, was safe. We farmed cotton on our land and even did some sharecropping. My mother did it all, chopping the cotton, growing all sorts of vegetables and tending our orchard. She loved to fish and pick blackberries. We helped relatives harvest okra and soybeans, especially when more labor was needed, and time or weather threatened to destroy the crops. It was hard work but so necessary to survive.

My mother plowed her own garden when my dad and brother were too slow for her liking. I tried to do everything my mom or sisters did but plowing with a mule was much too hard. Though I learned to drive the tractor, I was no expert. My mom could pick a lot of cotton, and again I was not good at that either! The kids from town, who would come to pick cotton for us, always picked more than I did. They were getting paid. I was the water boy – or girl – I should say. County officials set the calendar for black students to allow us to miss school to pick cotton when it was time to harvest. I do not



Dottie Chapman Reed with her mother, Helen Chapman, at her wedding in Oxford at Burns CME Church in 1981.

need to describe how I and others felt when we were in the hot fields as the buses with the white students, usually heckling, passed by.

My grandmother, Jane Ophelia Williams Pritchard (December 20, 1871- September 15, 1969) also lived with us for several years. Even in her 80s she walked to and from town on the days when she wanted to cash her check and buy her snuff and groceries.

She was the fifth child of Samuel Tom Williams and Sylvia Hale, both of whom were born in North Carolina. According to oral family history, Sylvia, my great-grandmother, was the daughter of a Confederate soldier from the Carolinas and an unknown white woman.

Because she was born out of wedlock, she was put with slaves and encouraged to pass as a mulatto or mixed. Sylvia's daughter, my grandmother, married Allen Taliaferro in 1895 in Yalobusha County. They had five children. He died in 1903, and she married my grandfather, Alfred Pritchard, in 1906. They had two daughters, my aunt Coree and my mom, the youngest.

Mom worked as a maid for the Gurners, the Porters, the Weavers, the McNamees, the Nolens and a few others that I cannot recall. Mr. Nolen worked in the post office, and though Mrs. Nolen taught at Ole Miss when I was a student there, our paths never crossed on campus.

My mother and sister, Faye, also worked at the infamous, but now closed, Mott's Chicken factory as did many of the black women in Yalobusha county. It was horrible. While I

never set foot in the place, I knew the conditions were deplorable when I saw the cuts and scratches on my mother's swollen hands after her shifts. The odor on their clothing penetrated.

While the pay was good, the wear and tear on their bodies was debilitating and clearly manifested in our black community. Yet this type of employment in the late sixties and seventies moved blacks from the fields into the factories.

My mother understood hard work and servanthood and showed it by her example and leadership. Politically active and outspoken, she maintained her memberships in the PTA and the NAACP. I have come to understand myself better as I have learned more about her. Her keeping us overly active in church, I now see,

was the training we needed to get us through life and to promote our spiritual growth towards discipleship and servanthood. Those speeches surely gave us more confidence. Those trips no doubt birthed a desire in us to see what lay beyond Yalobusha County, beyond Mississippi and Memphis – all of it helping us learn or develop organizational and leadership skills that we are using today.

My mother only finished 8th grade. My father could not read or write. Simply put my mother – like the women we have learned about in this column – helped many people, wore many hats, put others first and enriched the community in remarkable ways. I saw another side of her in December 1973, the fall of my senior year in college, when Gabby, now a Viet-



Helen and Alvin Chapman with daughters, Faye (left) and Tomie (right), in 1947.

nam veteran, died from carbon monoxide poisoning in his apartment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. During this time of deep loss, my mother showed great strength through her faith I never saw her cry, even in this painful moment.

In the early eighties, one or two years into my job with The Wall Street Journal, I was having dinner in the restaurant on top of the World Trade Center in New York. As I looked out at the ships and boats on the Hudson River in awe, I started to cry and remem-

ber thinking, "I am just a little black country girl from Water Valley, Mississippi who owes it all to the examples set by my mother and many other outstanding black women."

By this time my mother was terminally ill. She passed away in 1983, before my sons were born. When Cameron, my middle son, was accepted to the US Military Academy at West Point on the other side of the Hudson River, on our first visit I thought of how proud my mother would have been. My

cousin, Janie Toliver Curry, who just celebrated her 91st birthday, remembers my mother as a very beautiful person who walked close to God and kept God in everything she did. My mom had a signature song that perhaps sums up her goals in life, her service to mankind and describes her journey to make the world a better place. "There is joy in that land where I am bound," she sang. "Don't you wanna to go to that land where I am bound?"

In her own way she invited us to come along.

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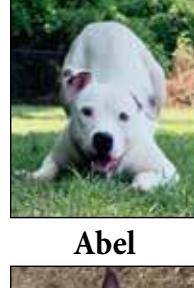
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