

Online Journal of Health Ethics

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 7

Stories From The Tuskegee Era

Jennie Gunn FNP, Ph.D.

University of Mississippi Medical Center, jgunn@son.umsmed.edu

Carroll Gunn B.A.

University of Mississippi Graduate Student, carrollgunn@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/ojhe>

Recommended Citation

Gunn, J., & Gunn, C. (2008). Stories From The Tuskegee Era. *Online Journal of Health Ethics*, 5(1).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.18785/ojhe.0501.07>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Online Journal of Health Ethics by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

STORIES FROM THE TUSKEEGEE ERA

Jennie Gunn, FNP, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
University of Mississippi Medical Center
Oxford Campus

Carroll Gunn, B.A.

Graduate Student
University of Mississippi

Abstract

A study of botanical healing ways recalled by elder African American women in the Mississippi Delta brought stories of healing as well as stirring memories of events that occurred during the same period as the 40 year Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The original research was an ethno nursing study that included an ethno nursing history. Within this ethno nursing history, memories from the elders tumbled forth; memories, both-happy and sad, reflected the times and conditions of the past. The stories recalled were often difficult for the researcher to hear but the stories were shared freely by the participants. The researcher felt a sense of obligation and duty to share the stories without dissection or evaluation so others may hear the voice of the elders and understand the way of life that existed for African Americans during the time of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The stories allow a glimpse into the life of African Americans and demonstrated the innocence of the people during a time of unethical scientific experimentation.

Keywords: Narratives, Tuskegee

Stories from the Tuskegee Era

Introduction

The research for the study was underpinned by Dr. Madeleine Leininger's theory and method of research, ethnonursing. This study specifically looked at botanical healing ways to discover new knowledge about botanical use as a way of healing-but the study yielded unexpected data as well. To enhance the ethnonursing method, Leininger created several aids or enablers; one important aid was the ethnohistory. The ethnohistory was defined as a "sequence of facts, events, or developments over time as known, witnessed, or documented about a designated people of a culture" (Leininger, 2002, p. 83-85). The ethnohistory gleaned rich stories from the past that provided insight into a way of life for the elders.

The elders told the stories of their childhood experiences so the researcher might understand their ways and beliefs. The stories formed a bridge between the researcher and the elders; a bridge of understanding. At the same time these recalled events were unfolding, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study began. The key informant elders were interviewed in 2005, and their ages ranged from 81 years of age to 91 years of age; the elders were born between 1914 and 1924.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study took place beginning around 1932, and lasted until 1972 (Brunner, 2008). The 40 year study evaluated the effect of syphilis on African American men. The men were not told the truth about the study. The men were from some of the poorest counties in Alabama and "were never told what disease they were suffering from or of its seriousness" (Brunner, 2008, para. 1). The researchers were not interested in curing the men but were interested in their bodies after death. The goal was to determine how syphilis damaged the body. The real reason for the research was never shared with the men. The status of the African

American in America during this time made them easy prey for the researchers. Few of the men had ever seen a white doctor as a patient and this was a remarkable event for them; they were trusting of the doctors. The end results were horrific as this study became the longest unethical study of all times.

The African American elders in this research were children at the initiation of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The stories tell the time of the study and enhance the understanding of life at that time. The stories are vibrant, rich, brave and endearing. They call out grief and pain, joy and accomplishment. They are truth and clarity. The women were all born in Mississippi Delta, a flat farming area that borders the Mississippi River. Many of the elders were able to trace their ancestors back to slavery and recalled information about the plantations their family worked. Many of the elders lived on those very plantations caring for white children, farming, or cleaning.

School Buses, Babies and Cotton

Stories of work in the fields, of school buses and lunches, school days and storks tumbled out like shining gems from their memories. Other precious stories were shared as well to provide insight. Once the door was opened, the elders freely walked down memory lane. The narratives were transcribed, studied and retold here in story form with as little alteration as possible; they are true stories. The names were substituted and the places renamed but the stories were from those who remembered the past.

Cora Sue: My Little Girl

I didn't have too many sick children except my little girl that died. When I came out of the fields they said she was sick. It was too late then. We had to find someone to take us to the doctor and

it took a while because we lived a long way from town. We finally got a ride and the doctor said she was too sick, her stomach was going in and out and he gave her a shot. She died that night at home. She passed pretty soon after we got home. She was 15 months old and we buried her in the grave yard...you know like the rest of the people. When my twins died my husband just put them out in the garden. I don't know where they are now. I guess they are plowed up. The house is torn down and now it's a field. Premature babies were just put in the ground, no funeral or grave yard. We tried to bury them deep so they weren't plowed up. My little girl, she just got sick. We had to find someone to take us to the doctor because black folks didn't have any cars during those days.

Studies: Learning About Storks

When my sister was born, I asked my Momma where the babies come from and she said the birds bring the babies. The birds didn't bring the babies, the doctors come in and carried a case that that looks like a suitcase, a pocketbook with straps on it and fastened together. So, when my baby sister was born, I got down on the floor, the house use to have cracks everywhere and I made me a peep hole underneath the door and I saw momma having this baby and I was stretched out looking and I said um hum...they didn't tell me the truth. I peeked under the crack and I said they won't tell me anything else. I never told anyone about that.

I didn't have know anything about birthing babies but I saw the midwife coming and she sent me over to my grandmothers house. It was about five dollars then to deliver a baby and she would wash the clothes and take care of everything. When my fifth brother was born, I must have been about 8 years old. After the midwife left I returned to the house and I found mother crying. I asked her what was wrong and she said my father was in the fields and he wouldn't have

anything to eat when he came in. She never mentioned a baby. I asked her why not. She said it was none of my business. She told me just to do what she said to do.

She told me to go into the kitchen and so I did. Something was wrong, I knew there was no baby but she told me nothing. I went into the kitchen and made a fire in the old iron stove. She called out and asked me what I was doing and I told her I was getting ready to cook. About that time I heard a baby cry. I went into the room and said let me see the baby. She asked who said anything about a baby. I again heard him crying. Again she reminded me it was not my business. I told her I heard the baby crying. She said, well you just heard a lie. She said the doctor did bring a baby here but he said the baby was dead and he was over there in the drawer.

I looked at her and said, Momma, the baby isn't dead, and I hear him crying. She said the doctor would not lie. He worked with him for about an hour and he couldn't save him so he wrapped him up because he didn't cry or breathe and put him in the dresser drawer over there. He told me to get your father to take him and bury him in the yard. He told me to have your father bury him deep so no one would plow him up or cut him up digging.

I went to the dresser and got the baby. He was crying. I asked her if I could have the baby. She said she was tired of babies and me too. I said well, I'll take him. I got him stopped crying and I didn't know how to hold the little baby cause he was soft and I was afraid I was going to hurt him. When I picked him up he bent his knees to his chest and he screamed and my mother said, what did you do? She asked why he was crying and I said I don't know. Come to find out the doctor had put a towel clip on the umbilical cord and when I picked him up, the towel clip punched him but he lived after that. I gave him a bath and put him on some clothes and that was in 1943, I believe. He's still living now to this day.

Sara: School Buses and Dusty Roads

Picking Cotton was fun then. I remember it as being fun anyway. I am just so thankful that we finally made it. I appreciate that too. I thank God for all of us, the ones who rode the bus and the ones that walked-school was not easy though. We lived in the country and there was hardly anything. We would walk a mile north to get to school and half mile of that was gravel road. We would be walking when the bus would come by and white children were on the bus. They would throw spit balls or spit on us out the window. They would call us names, you know, and say things they should not have said.

My cousin was three months older than my brother; the two of them decided to fight back so they made sling-shots. One morning we saw the bus coming and we were walking but the boys were hanging behind and I knew we would be late. They walked down the center of the road and the bus driver blew the horn at them. They just kept walking, they wouldn't move out of the center of the road. The bus driver asked what they were doing; he told them they were going to be killed doing that. My brother and cousin said it didn't matter because they were going to kill them anyway, one way or another. The bus driver kept blowing the horn and threatening to run over them.

Kids from the bus were throwing rocks and different things and they turned around with their sling-shots and I heard the children on the bus screaming-he's got a shooter, he's got a shooter. I looked to see what they had and they had the sling-shots. They threw them up and shot at the kids on the bus and I heard them screaming again. One girl got hit on the collar, some boy got hit on the jaw and the man driving the bus kept yelling: What in the world are you little boys doing?

My cousin and brother yelled back, we are not little boys we are little...that's what you always call us. We are fighting back, they screamed. They were around 5 years old at the time.

My grandfather heard the noise and came up the road. He asked what was going on and I told him they had sling-shots. They had been given money to put in the church collection but they had used the money to buy rubber and made sling-shots. They broke the glasses in the bus and the bus driver said they would go to jail for that. Grandfather promised he would see to it that they boys got a good whipping, and the bus driver again said he would see to it that they went to jail. The boys were still arguing that they were not boys but were...because that is what the bus driver called them. The point they were making was that if the bus driver said the...did it, then it couldn't have been them because they were boys and not... They asked the driver: How can you find us if you are looking for...and not boys?

The driver continued to say he would see to it that they went to jail for breaking the windows and that their Daddy would whip them. They began to walk again and Grandfather had a strap and he walked behind them with it. He never hit them though but instead hit the ground. He told them when they got up the next morning their Daddy would tear them up. They told their Grandfather how there wouldn't be anything to "tear up" because the white children had been shooting them with bebe guns and if they continued they would be dead anyway. That was the end of it. After that we moved to a new town in the Delta. That was about in 1936. The girls never fought because Momma wouldn't allow it but the boys did. The boys would go and fight. We still had to walk to school but it wasn't as far from our new house.

Laurie: On Picking Cotton and Men

I started picking cotton when I was 7 years old. My dad was a share cropper. When I picked, I was barefooted. At first there were no snakes but later on I did see snakes but I wasn't afraid of them. I would stick my tongue out at them and they would crawl off. Every morning we would get up around 9 am and it would be hot. I stayed in bed until I felt like getting up. I was lazy you might say. I would pick about 6 hours and leave the field at about 3 in the evening. We all slept late, even Daddy.

When I was small I could pick more cotton than my sisters and brothers. One day when I was picking, my Daddy wanted to finish the bale but my sister was thirsty so we went up to the house to get some water. We stayed a little longer than we should have while Daddy was in the fields trying to finish picking the bale of cotton. My sister and I tied the mule at the house and he started to paw the side of the house; I was afraid. I was afraid of most everything including the mules and cows. After we stayed there for awhile, Daddy came to the house to see what was wrong with us.

We said, Daddy, we were afraid of that mule and we thought he was going to get us and he said I'm going to show you what a mule can do. He had a piece of little old belt about that long and he was hitting the ground behind us and we were running. I finished the bale of cotton myself and he was so proud of me because he knew I could pick more cotton than any of the others. I could pick as much as they could and lay down and sleep and then have more than they did. I would go down one cotton row and when I got to the end, I would put my foot in my sack and press it down. I carried that bag and threw it up on the scales, weighed it and then threw it up onto the wagon. Then I would jump up there and empty it. I carried that bag. See there were

wagons at that end of the row and we would go to the low end and walk back. I had my sack on my shoulder as I walked down the cotton row and I picked and put it in my sack the whole time. I loved picking cotton but I did not like to chop it. Chopping was hard-cutting down the cotton stalks. I would get way behind and let them meet me on the row. You chop so the cotton will not be too thick. I could out pick anyone but I couldn't chop as well. I could show them something picking. I carried my lunch with me, boiled vegetables and bread. I would rest under the tree instead of going home to eat.

My parents were strict and even though I had the chance to marry early, I didn't, I waited. I did vow, though, to marry a man who could take care of me. I would look down the cotton row and beg the Lord to let me marry someone who would not make me pick cotton. I was tired of those days of picking 75 to 80 pounds of cotton a day by noon and then in the evening the same thing. I could pick 250 pounds of cotton a day sometimes but my mother could pick 400 pounds of cotton in a day. We worked to help our Daddy. I would not pick for anyone else but him.

Chopping cotton, if you didn't have a hoe, hurt your hands and if you did not do it right, you would have calluses; I still have some calluses they just now diminishing. It is like wearing your shoes too tight and you get those calluses on your toes. I had those same calluses across my hands because I held the hoe too tightly with my small hands. There was not much you could do about it except put Vaseline on them. Sometimes I put on a glove and some powder in the glove. I use to have nice hands, but now I do not because of the cotton.

Edna: On Living Right

And my momma...they preached and preached. I know what they did believe and I'll tell you what they believed and you can put that down. They didn't care what you did, prayer was the

answer. Come Sunday, when I was young, we walked to church. A mile was nothing to walk. We walked everywhere we went. If you stayed three or five miles from town, you said-oh we stay we stay pretty close to town, just five miles and you walk on up there. If you went to church and you didn't have gravel on the roads at the time, you just had dirt. So you could either go barefoot or wear your old shoes and then carry your church shoes in your hand in a bag or something. When you got to church, you had a cloth to dust off your feet and put your Sunday shoes on and step on into church. When you get ready to come on out of church again change shoes and get in those slides and walk on home that mile or two. And we went to church day and night. Sure did. But everyone had galoshes and boots and raincoats because we expected it to rain. Rain didn't stop anything because we were use to walking.

Now you know one thing, that's a good thought...the Lord gives us our strength, he's our all and all. And I think if you go to him and talk to him, he's the God over all your healings, your sickness...you go to him. I think that's how you get healing because there is nothing we can do sometimes but go to him and talk to him. That's where we get our strength from and I just love him. Oh I just love Him because if it weren't for him, I believe I would have been gone. I didn't always know God like I know him now. For a while, I was just surviving and going on and doing those chores that I had to do. I just went on and did them but when I got older...they were talking about God this, God that. Now I understand and I can sit around and just thank the good Lord and tell Jesus to take care of me. He gives me the strength and it just flows right on in and I thank him.

I was baptized in the river...in the Sunflower River. They dunked me under and brought me back up. I was 12 years old or maybe 13 years old. Once I went to revival and I confessed my

sins and my Daddy told me he wasn't ready for me to go back to confess again. I went back anyway and my mother told them to leave me alone and they allowed me to be baptized that time. The next Sunday, we went down to get baptized in the river and I was baptized. My sins were washed away. It was a wonderful time with me, a happy time, and I been trying to serve Him ever since.

Evetta: Rex Jelly Cans and Cotton

For lunch I took smoked sausage in my jelly bucket. We had jelly bread and crackers, stuff like that. Peanut butter sandwiches were good; my momma made the bread or biscuit and put the peanut butter inside. She didn't make the jelly, we bought it. We also made up some sandwiches out of oil sausage. She would buy a big can full of those and make up sandwiches. Since I had a heart attack, I cannot eat them anymore. My little bucket was like a molasses bucket with a lid. Momma would buy that jelly too that comes in a bucket. We drank plenty of water and ate our biscuits, sausage and jelly. It's funny but the water was really good back then. It was pump water and it was cool. Sometimes I would drink out of my hands-you make a little cup.

Oh yes, I picked cotton, I could pick 200 lbs. My sister never could pick up much as I could. I think I could pick so fast because my sister got married after Momma died and I stayed with her and her husband. My sister's husband could not pick cotton, or at least not enough, so by our staying with her all three of us children could help him out. I could pick the most, 200 lbs. He was not really mean; I would say he was cheap. He was stingy. On Saturday after I picked most of the cotton, he would get 100 lbs. or so. My sister would dash out and pick about 100 lbs. I was the one who wound up picking the most and I got angry about it. I just decided to go ahead and get married if I had to work like that for someone else. He took the cotton to the gin and he

would keep the money except for the 50 cents he gave to me. Back then, the men could do whatever they wanted to do. It was just the way it was then. He wasn't a mean man he was just doing what men did then. He wouldn't ever give me the dollar I wanted but he would give me 50 cents.

He probably did not get but 10 to 15 dollars for the cotton total. In those days a dollar was a great deal of money. When we went to church, we put in a penny or a dime in the plate out of our money. That was why it was called the penny collection. Anyway, that is why I got married. I told my sister, I'm not going to stay out there day after day and pick that cotton and he just give me 50 cents on Sunday.

Cynthia: Babies

My first baby, the doctor said I was in labor too long. The baby was too big and the midwife smothered the baby with...back there then midwives would use Lysol towels and warm water. I don't know what that was for, to give the baby a more activity or something. She put too many of the towels on me. The doctor said I was in labor too long. I used midwives with all my babies except one. I used a doctor for that one, an intern. The young man didn't know what he was doing either. He gave me some pills and he went off to read the book to see if he could figure out what to do. He got his needle out to give me another shot and I said uh huh, I'm not taking another shot here and it made him angry and he said you can get who you want. He said he was going to see his other patients. Another lady across the street ran and got the midwife and she stayed with me until the baby was born and then he came just in time to see it. The doctor was there when the baby was born and she was too sleepy from the shots he was giving to me.

Hattie: The Big Flood

One thing that is buried in my mind happened in 1927; they told me that was when the great flood happened. I remember that flood. We were living by a big canal and the water came out of that canal as the levy broke over there somewhere. My parents had a wooden bed under the house and the water came up and floated that bed out from under that house. It was floating it away and I remember my mother put on some boots and went out and caught the bed to keep the water from taking it away.

My childhood was happy. I had as much as the average child would have back then. We had plenty food and we didn't have too much to buy except sugar, flour, and rice. All the other stuff was grown on the farm; we were sharecroppers. We made a little money sharecropping and I don't know anything we suffered for, we always had plenty to eat, plenty clothes, wasn't the finest...but they were clothes. My mother would buy remnant bolts form Sears and other places and it would be a yard and half of cloth in those bolts and she would take that and make me little dresses and things. We never suffered for anything, there never was a day in my life that I was hungry and there was no food, we always had plenty of food. My mother was about four feet tall, and she weighed about 99 lbs but she was a provider.

She would go back out in the woods with the black berry vines and she would pick tubs of blackberries. I would wash them and do all that and she canned them in jars. We had fruit trees and we canned peaches and when we ran out of jars. She would slice those peaches and put a wide bowl like this out in the sun put some brown paper on it and slice those peaches and apples and put them out in the sun and let them dry. Then we had dried apples and dried peaches...peaches in the jar, apples in the jar, pear preserves and when she ran out of jars for the

pear preserves she would use snap buckets. At that time we made our own molasses and had those snap top buckets you could buy. Momma would make those preserves and put them in the buckets and place the cheese cloth on top and snap down the lid...we always had plenty to eat; we grew corn, chickens, turkeys, guineas.

My grandfather worked for the man who owned the store in town. His son was off at college, the owner's son, and he would come home sometimes to help out in the store. Well my grandfather would figure out his bills for him and the owner would take the figures without question. He would look at them and tell him, they look right, and I think I take your word for it. The next year when my grandfather went back, this youngster, the man's son was there and he said what is this suppose to be? My grandfather told him he had everything figured out. The owner's son said he hadn't seen a...that could read yet and he wasn't about to use those figures.

My grandfather said he didn't have to use the figures but he should pay him for what he put down for his father. The words continued and finally he swore at my grandfather and threatened to kick him...that was the wrong thing. Someone came to the house and got my father because there were words. He was a fast runner. My father brought my grandfather back home.

Grandfather found my mother cooking in the kitchen. He told my mother that as hard as he worked they were not going to pay him the money because this young man doesn't want figures from him. Momma said don't do anything foolish and he asked her what she would cook that day without the money to buy food. She told him she would make do with something. He said, they owe me the money and they need to pay me.

I guess I was about 7 or 8 years old at that time. This white man came up that afternoon, he was in a car. He asked where my grandfather was and I told him he had just left with my father. He

asked where they were going but I didn't know. He made a circle on the lawn and went back toward town. By that time a white man came on a horse and he asked where my grandfather was again and I said I don't know. I asked him why they were looking for him. He said he wanted to see what he was doing. My mother came to the door and he asked her where my grandfather and father were and she told him they were upset. So he went back to town too.

I found out later that the owner went back to the store and asked his son what he did to my grandfather. The young son said this old man came bringing him figures and he wasn't taking them. The owner said the figures are alright and I'm taking them. If you don't want his figures you go on home and I'll take them. Grandfather went back to the store and the owner told him he would take the figures and he paid him. My grandfather told him he was going to move from the place.

When we got back home, he told my mother we were all going to have to move. He told her he didn't want to hurt anyone but when he worked hard doing those figures and the son cursed him and called him a liar; he wanted to hit him. He told her he couldn't hit anyone's child so it would be better if we just picked up and moved. We lived there about a week after that. There were six brothers and all but three of the brothers were married and in a weeks time they got all their crops together and made sure they had paid the owner for the use of the land. They didn't tell him they were moving but they did. All six brothers picked up and moved.

Lucille: Sharecropping

My childhood was good. My mother died when I was very young. I can't remember her. I worked in the field's everyday. I was about five when I started to chop cotton. My dad would take me to the cotton fields; we had to help out. It was the white man's land and we worked it

has halves. He would give us some of the money but we didn't get much. That was share cropping. We worked his land and ours too.

We planted crops to eat on the land-like potatoes, corn, and other garden things. We also had cows and hogs. Days were good because that was all we knew. We never went hungry though but we never had much either. The white man would give us something to make out with because we had to have clothes and shoes.

Georgia: Who's Children Matter Most?

I might have been about four or five when my Momma and Daddy moved. It started out that things were good and my father built us a house on the white man's land because he said he could although my father didn't own the land. Now my father and this man were friends, they had grown up together. They didn't go to the same church of course and this man was fortunate enough to have inherited money and land. My dad and mother worked on the farm as well as us children.

My mother cooked for the family and cared for the children. One day, my baby sister was sick and my mother went up to the house and told the owner of the land and house that she wouldn't be in that day because the baby was sick. He cursed her and she started back home. He told her she better come back and get his breakfast and take care of his kids. She said she couldn't dress his children and hers and he told her to leave her children and come take care of his.

My mother told my father that the landowner said she should take care of his house first, my father was upset. So that night he decided they should move. He said, I just better do it right now, I won't have any more problems with that, I live in his house on his property so I will

move, and my father had just built a house on the land. The house was newly finished; I hadn't even been inside it yet. He told my mother to get up and get the children ready, we were leaving this house and leaving this land. No man will curse my wife. She told him she was not prepared to go and he told her to get some things together for the children and forget the rest. She did that and we moved that day. We left our new house but we did okay.

It was alright to be an African American woman, as long as you could stay within your own area; I learned that when my mother was younger. We lived next door to some white people and they didn't speak to us, the children would speak but grown ups didn't and my mother would just say hello and come on in the house. Finally, the little white girl asked her mother if it was okay to talk to us and she told her yes. So she would say hello to me and I would speak and finally she came in with a pretty doll and she said do you have a doll and I said oh yes. She said she was going to let me play with her doll but I had a doll my mother made for me, it was a sugar sack doll. She had cut fur off an old coat and made some hair. I thought my doll was real smart and I liked her a lot. Momma had painted her face brown and sewn eyes on her.

The white man's wife was pregnant. He came over one day and knocked on the door. My daddy went to the door and asked him what he was looking for this early. He said he came to get my mother. My father asked him what he wanted with my mother. He said he needed her to come and fix the children some breakfast. Daddy said, let me tell you something, say we are not friends and this way we not going to get to be friends. Don't you ever come to my door and ask for my wife again as long as I'm living and I'll give you the same respect.

He said his children were hungry. Daddy said he was sorry about that but he shouldn't ever come to his house again asking for his wife. That's not how men respect each other. He said well I

need her to come down and fix my children some breakfast; my wife just had a baby. Daddy said he would ask momma about it. My momma was expecting a baby too. Momma said she would go and fix the children some breakfast, it wouldn't take long so she went and fixed the lady breakfast and for the children and his breakfast too. When she got home, Daddy asked her what did he have so special to eat and she said biscuits and rice. They did have ham but we are saving ours for Christmas.

She said; don't be so quick to tell people off, the children were hungry. The woman got sick yesterday. The children had been eating sandwiches from the grocery store but the children wanted some hot food and he was trying to get it for them. When he brought my mother home, my father told him from now on to have some respect for them. They were friends from that day on. Daddy told us he wasn't trying to teach him anything, he just wanted him to remember he was leaving his house and coming to another man's house.

Jake: Just Words and Nothing Else

My brother, my oldest brother, use to work for the plantation and the way they had it set up, he was suppose to be getting half and when the internal revenue came through, he didn't get half none. He didn't have anything to show for it but it was in his name. We had to watch them because if you go ask them for anything you had to make sure it was on paper because back in those days your grandparents didn't know how to read and write, they X ed everything so they could use the X for anything. Sometimes they would say you received something you did not and count it against you and you don't go against them, your word is just your word and their word was the law. Even though slavery had passed, you still you might get kicked out and still no place to live. Back in those days, my mother who was just a girl, baby sat, did the house work

and everything but we still had to make a living. We still had to plant our own garden and raise hogs and cows and other things to help.

Edie: A Shoebox Burial for John

Midwives practiced their own medicine of course. They had their own medicine for dealing with having babies. After you have a baby, the midwife would scrub your feet for germs I think. They would get something and rake over the bottom of your feet to clean the feet. My mother told the story of my brother who died; he was prematurely born and she said they would turn the heater up really, really high. And I asked Momma, why did they turn the heat up? She said the midwife would put the baby on the floor and check it out and she would be sweating in the bed...so hot. Momma was actually bleeding to death but everyone was focused on this premature tiny little baby, they didn't notice. Back in those days most of the time those little premature babies did not live and so the midwife was really focusing and everybody else was focusing on trying to make sure this baby was alright. Mother could not speak to tell them something was wrong. Finally her mother saw blood was dripping underneath the bed and she pulled the covers back and she was soaked from the waist with blood. They wrapped the sheet around my mother, my father did not have a vehicle, so they had to go borrow a neighbor's car and they put her in his lap and she went to the hospital. At the hospital they gave her pints of blood. Two days later the baby died. Why did they turn up the heat and why did they scrub your feet? They get like a butter knife or something and scrub the bottom of your feet. It was more of a cleansing tool and I guess maybe bacterial, germs. Momma had been home from the hospital two days when the police came and asked her if she had a baby and then they asked her the baby's name. She told them and then they said the baby had just died so of course she cried. His name was John...my

father went to the hospital and got the baby and they buried the baby in a shoebox. It was the size of your hand. They buried him in the shoe box and said a prayer over him. He was really tiny.

Joshua: Movie seats

My uncle just moved back home from up north. He remembered the whole thing, growing up black in the Delta and the way it was. When he left here long time ago, he couldn't sit in the movie theater with the whites. When he came back, he said he wanted to sit where he wanted to in the theater in the Delta town and so we went. He sat in the seats that were forbidden him as a child. He was able to sit where he wanted to finally.

He's old now but Uncle Joshua is glad to be home. He has many stories that he tells us now. Like the one about chopping grass. White men would pull up to the corner and ask if anyone wanted to work. He would always say yes and he would work. One day a man came up and he got in the car with him at the gas station. He took him and showed him some weeds that were about up to his shoulders and he gave him this long thing to cut the weeds down. I believe it was like a swing blade or something. He said there were many weeds and the weeds were so high. He was the only one working and it took him all day to knock the weeds down.

The man came back and asked him if he was hungry and he said yes. He told him to sit down on the ground and he gave him a plate. After he ate, he got up and finished chopping down the weeds. When he was finished at dusk, he knocked on the man's door and told him he was finished. The man asked him what he wanted and he said to be paid. The man said he paid him with food. He asked if he worked for all that day, cut down all the tall grass and his pay was just food. The man said it was and that was his pay.

Uncle Joshua said he took advantage of him. The man admitted it, he had taken advantage of him but there was nothing he could do about it. He walked home after that. He learned a lesson from that job.

Kona: Peppermint

The first memory I have from being a child was on Mr. Carroll's plantation right here on this road. We had a pump that stood primed and you didn't have to prime it and I remember getting off that wagon running because we didn't have to prime that pump and the water flowed freely. I remember when Mr. Harry had a commissary up in town, you know what a commissary is....where you get groceries and stuff and when he went up there to get some groceries, Mr. Harry knew Daddy had a whole lot of kids at home so he gave him one of those big old round sticks of peppermint candy. He told my daddy to give it to the children-that big old stick of peppermint candy. I remember that; that was good because of all the plantations we had lived on, this was the only one that we ever had candy to eat. Usually we didn't get anything like candy, so I remember how we broke off a little piece with the hammer and ate it. It was really good candy. Every now and then, Momma would let us have a little piece of it.

Zetia: Settling

All I know is that they worked all the year and in the fall of the year they would get enough crops and go and get a settlement. When we were working, we worked. We picked cotton and chopped cotton and everything. Daddy would go and get a settlement and sometimes he cleared a little money, sometimes they said he didn't clear anything. We didn't know the difference, all we knew was we were eating. It kept us eating and clothes to wear....so we didn't worry about nothing else until we got up to big size children going to school. They would sometimes tell us

they didn't clear any money and the man would make a way for us to get school clothes and we could have things for the winter.

I know that was wrong because sometimes we would pick 12 and 13 bales of cotton, and I would pick that cotton up and take it to the cotton house and weight it and help load it on the wagon and then in the end, we didn't clear anything. I think that was terrible...that was awful...but we did it and had it to do...they wouldn't do anything else at that time...

Peonie: A Good White Girl

I went to school three miles from home; we walked to school every morning and walked back every evening. We lived down in the field and when it rained my daddy would have to meet us at the road with the wagon...take us from the road back down to the house and in the morning if the weather was bad, he had to bring us out to the road. It was too muddy and bad to walk out from our house to the road. He was a good Daddy. There were three of us girls. We were living on one side, just like across the road over there....it was the white people lived on that side of the road and we lived close over on this side. The school bus would pick up the white people on that side but we would have to walk to school. The white children would pass us everyday on the school bus going to school and we were walking. They were riding. They never acknowledged us. I imagine they would be laughing on the bus but we didn't hear it.

But when the children were at home, you know our field ran to the end of their road...sometimes we would play together. One day one of the little white girls was talking to me and my sisters and she said, you know in the morning time when we pass you in the road, I was just wondering why you all couldn't ride on the bus with us. All of us are going to the same place to school. I said we don't know either. She went on to say, a lot of mornings how she hated to see us walking

out there in that cold. I said, well now...I told my sister there was nothing they can do about it because the driver wasn't going to pick us up. I don't remember her name now but she had some sense. I said if she were living today, I imagine she did some good things after she got grown.

Cleo: Being Proud

What's the most important thing to me? The most important thing about me is that you know I'm proud that I am an African American. You know, the race sometimes was real hard to stand, you know because the other races didn't like the black race. You know...so it was hard while coming up like that cause they wouldn't treat you right, they wouldn't do right at all and you know they rather give to their color than to give to us. Even if we were qualified for it we couldn't get it so that's the hardest thing...but I'm proud, proud to be one even after all that. I'm just proud to be one, an African American, and that's who I am, I'm just proud of it.

Conclusion

The stories set the tone for the times of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. African Americans owned little, had little power but retained pride and integrity. The men in the Syphilis Study were trusting of the white doctors and some were treated by the doctors for the first time in their lives. The narratives painted a picture, a backdrop, of the time when research went array. Unethical research was made easy by a lack of power of some people and by strong power within others.

References

Brunner, B. (2008). The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. Retrieved April 2, 2008, from:

<http://www.tuskegee.edu/Global/Story.asp?s=1207586>

Leininger, M. (2002). Culture care theory: A major contribution to advance transcultural nursing knowledge and practices. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 13(3), 189-192.