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**GREAT-AUNT IDA MAE REMEMBERS THE OLD DAYS**

by *Mary Alice Cook*

*In 1967, when she sat down with relatives to record some of her recollections of coming of age in East Texas, my husband's Aunt Ida Mae Thomas Collier was an old woman. Her great grandfather, Benjamin Thomas, son of a Revolutionary War soldier, settled on the Ayish Bayou, now San Augustine, in 1824. Her grandfather Theophilus was a veteran of the Texas war for independence. Aunt Ida Mae's lifetime spanned parts of two centuries and she lived long enough to see revolutions of her own – from her young womanhood when she scorned wives who “went to work in the field,” until middle-aged widowhood when she had to become a working woman herself. She remembered an era in which “nigras stayed in their places” but lived to see the beginning of the end of the old “separate but equal” system. She reveals in her story that an impressive family pedigree did not guarantee material riches – she recalls eking out a living on a farm in Nacogdoches County where “everyone was on the same level.” Some of her comments are unselfconsciously paradoxical. She bemoans modern folk who are always “blowin’ and goin’,” rolling stones who never stay in one place. Yet she admits that her own ancestors journeyed to Texas from places afar and that she herself had found it necessary to leave East Texas for Houston, where she died in 1970. Many will sympathize with Aunt Ida Mae's observation that the old-fashioned moral code she knew was breaking down and agree with her prediction that things would only get worse. In fact, thinking of her turn-of-the-last-century world of brush-arbor revivals and teenagers going to church singings just for fun, we could say, as she did about her Grandpa Thomas, “she wouldn't know this world*

“Now what is it you're wantin' to know? The old days in East Texas? I remember the old days - why I was born right there in San Augustine and lived in the same house till I was up grown. Eighteen hundred and seventy-four - that's when I was born.

My papa's name was Henry Clay Thomas. He was born right there in San Augustine. His people come over to Texas from Alabama. I always heard the first Thomases was from Wales. Mama – her name was Sallie – was a Womack. Her people was from North Carolina.

Grandpa Thomas was a fine man, I tell you. He was a preacher – Theophilus was his name – and people used to come from all over to hear him preach. I remember Grandpa's place there in San Augustine. When he first built it, it was just woods as far as you could see. Grandma had to go to the fields with the men and set there all day long while they cut down trees and burned brush – clearin' the land, you know. She couldn't stay in the house on account of the Indians. They'd come through there and steal the horses, do all kinda dirt. Why, they'd set fire to somethin', just to see it burn ...

Grandpa give every one of his children a home when they married out.

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*Mary Alice Cook is a native East Texan residing in Eagle River, Alaska.*

My Papa lived right there on the place his papa give him and he raised his family there. My papa was a hard worker. I was born in that same house in San Augustine and lived there till I was eighteen years old. That's when we come over to Nacogdoches County ...

Well, right there, when we left San Augustine, I just thought my life was to a end. Never had been away from there. Lived there all my life, knew ever'-body in miles around, all the people. And for awhile I thought my life was at the end. But I begun to meet the young people around Nacogdoches and get acquainted. Well, then I became very well contented ...

Did I ever tell you how I met my husband George? I never will forget – it was just by mere accident. We was goin' over to Melrose, to a singin' or a prayer meetin' or somethin' there at night. It wasn't too far – we didn't think nothin' about walkin' ten miles then. We didn't sit around and wait on somebody to take us somewhere. If we wanted to go, we walked. And we wasn't afraid – there was no boogers around in them days.

So that night me and sister Annie – a whole gang of us it was – went by this woman Mattie's house. Annie's man, Rich Kendrick, was over there that night. Well, here come Mattie's brother and he hitched his horse at the front and come on in the house to eat his supper. Annie's man, he knew Mattie's brother and he introduced him to me. George Collier, that was his name, and he asked me would I go with him down to the singin' that night.

Well, Mattie, she was a sight! She begin to tease me right straight. She told me her brother never did go with the girls – he never went with a girl in his life! Oh, she begin right straight to tease me about it.

When Annie married, I cried myself to death, I missed her so. Mattie come to the weddin' and she wanted to know when me and George was goin' to get married and I said, well, I hadn't heard about it if we're goin' to get married a'tall. I said I believe I'd go on over to San Augustine and spend a while. Later on Mattie come over and says, you know, brother George is goin' on back to Georgy. He decided to go back where they moved from – he was about grown when they left there. I said well, I don't see nothin' to keep him from goin' if he wants to. Mattie, she's tryin' to pick me to get somethin' out of it. But I was watchin' all the time.

I had this big old trunk and Mattie tried to get in that trunk – thought if she could get in there, she could find out what she wanted to know. But I was too sharp for her. I kept the key with me all the time. Used to have a lot of fun out of her. That Mattie, she was a sight ...

Me and George married on New Year's Day in eighteen hundred and ninety-six. Had my first baby the next Christmas Day. Why, I thought I was just as happy as a June bug. George rented a farm from his brother-in-law, and we had us a little old shack of a house. We picked up things here and there and we just *got by* is what we did. His people give us things, my people give us things, but we didn't have nothin' really. And we thought we was flyin' high. I always believed a person can get along about as well as he makes up his mind to ...

So we just got there in that little house and we made a crop. Now I say “we” – *George* made a crop. I didn’t go to the field. George had a brother married a girl name of Sadie. Sadie went off to the field and worked. I told one of George’s sisters, I said now listen – that Sadie is a fool to go to the field and work. If she’s goin’ to work, then she might just as well have stayed single. I said *I ain’t* about to go to the field and work. If I got to work in the field, I’d just as soon go on back to my Papa’s house. George, he hired nigras to work on his place. And they was all humble and good nigras, never had no trouble with ‘em ...

George planted cotton and corn and sweet potatoes and we raised some fine watermelons. My people give us a cow. And my papa, first year I was married, he give me a little piece of land close to the river bottom. It was fine land, it would grow anything. So George went on ahead and built a little house. I could see Mama’s house from where George was buildin’ my house. We made a fine crop the second year we was married. Finally got us a hog and some good horses. Oh, I’m tellin’ you! We thought we was goin’ to get rich right off the bat!

Folks in the country didn’t have cars then and most people didn’t even have a horse and buggy. They got where they was goin’ with a mule and old buckboard wagon. We never heard of a radio or a T.V. – couldn’t buy one if we wanted to. Everybody was on the same level, you know, just what little bit of crop they’d make and money they’d get out of that was the only money they had. No other way to get it. Besides, money don’t make happiness. It don’t make people good.

You know, the Bible has a lesson about that. You remember how God sent Moses down into Egypt to bring the Israelites out from the bondage? The people of Israel was slaves but God brought ‘em out of there and he give ‘em this land of milk and honey. Promised ‘em everything, give ‘em everything. Told ‘em how He wanted ‘em to live. They’d be His people, He’d be their God. He told ‘em to have no dealins with the infidels, them people that didn’t believe in God.

But you see they turned on the Lord and they went to dealin’ with the infidels and they forgot God. They become proud and pompous. That’s when God turned against the Israelites. I believe the same thing is happenin’ today, don’t you? Why Grandpa Thomas wouldn’t know this world we live in. So much devilment that goes on now ...

Did you ever go to a brush arbor revival? Over cross the river, over there ‘tween Chireno and San Augustine, they used to have a campground. Cold Springs Campground they called it, and they had big camp meetin’s there, went on for days and days. People went over there and built houses, you know, to stay in for the camp meetin’s. Had a big old brush arbor, might near as big as a city block. My grandpa would do the preachin’ sometimes – way back when I was a small child. He was a fine man, a fine preacher ...

Well, I reckon by now they quit havin’ them revivals. The last one I ever

went to, I went with sister Annie. I never seen such a crowd of people. Old man Jim Wilson preached that day, the same preacher that married me and my husband. They was two brothers, John and Jim. Old man John was a preacher and so was Jim. Why, Jim was a old man when I married – and I been married fifty some-odd years then! I'll never forget goin' there that day and meetin' old friends that I hadn't seen and never seen no more since ...

Well, I raised eight children. Lost my oldest one when he was three years old. George died in nineteen and thirty and I couldn't stay on the farm so I moved down to Houston where my oldest girl was. I lived in a house off Harrisburg Street, you know where that big Catholic church is? Them street-cars was runnin' right up and down Harrisburg, night and day. I been there several years before they ever taken 'em off.

The house where I lived was apartments. I rented out the rooms, kept the hallways and the yard clean. It was a job, I can tell you that. Hired a nigra woman to help me with it. She come there ever' mornin'. If I seen her, I'd call her, tell her to come in my kitchen and I'd give her some dinner. No, I never hated the nigras. I believe they're welcome to town and if they work for you, you give 'em food. Anything you can help 'em with, you do that too. But in those days, nigras stayed in their places. I tell you, ever'thing was so different then ...

People used to live different than they do now. They lived different and they *was* different. People didn't travel and go like they do now. They got anywhere, they stayed. They settled on a farm and they'd raise a family there and the children would all marry out of that house and settle right around where they was raised. My mama was raised in San Augustine and she died right there. Her papa and mama died there and all of her brothers and sisters too. Not now though, people are always blowin' and goin'. And I tell 'em a rollin' stone never gathers no moss ...

What's that? How old am I? Ninety-three next month. My mama lived to eighty-seven. Mama was like me, lived to see the last brother or sister she had go. All Mama's brothers and sisters went before she did.

Did you ever hear how Grandpa Thomas died? They say he was sittin' in front of his house – I was just a small child then – and some kind of big ol' bird, a hawk or eagle or somthin', swooped down out of the sky and pecked him. Killed him is what it did. Now did you ever hear of such a thing? He was a fine man, a fine preacher ...

Well, I'm too wore out to talk anymore. I believe I'll see what's on the news before I go to bed. There's so much of this devilment in the world now. You just can't tell about people no more. They'll talk one way and do another. And it's because the people forgot the promise, because they turned against God and He turned against them. An I tell you right now, it's liable to get worse. . . .”