

'Strange Fruit': The Death of Reconstruction and the Birth of Jim Crow

Read the following story taken from an oral history of An African American family that lived during the 1890s and then, **on a separate sheet of paper**, answer the questions that follow the story. Be prepared to discuss this story in class tomorrow. Be aware that the language used in the story, although not appropriate today, is the language that was used during the time period and is taken verbatim from the interview. Also, the story is sad so be prepared.

The pine-board shack in which Charlie Holcombe spent his childhood in the late nineteenth century rested on top of a red clay hill about a quarter of a mile from the main road in Sampson County, North Carolina. His father, a tenant tobacco farmer, rose each morning at four o'clock, laid the logs for a fire, and roused the children, while Charlie's mother prepared a breakfast consisting of a pot of grits and a slab of salt pork. It was important to be in the field at sunup during the growing season, as the soil was poor and the labor that much more demanding. They worked until sundown.

Grandfather Holcombe did not work in the field; he had "de miseries" in his back and walked with a stick. But he performed other chores, slopping the hogs and feeding the chickens. Charlie Holcombe, considered too young and frail to fork in the fields, helped his grandfather with the chores and often accompanied him to the nearby creek to catch "a mess o' catfish" for supper. As they sat there, waiting for the fish to bite, Grandfather would "do a heap o' thinkin'." And sometimes he shared his thoughts with Charlie, his youngest grandson, often imparting practical lessons drawn from his own life on how a black boy might hope to survive in the South less than half a century after emancipation.

Charlie remembered one lesson in particular. After catching a large catfish, Grandfather Holcombe toyed with it for a time, admonishing his grandson to watch him. He carefully lifted the fish out of the creek, let it thrash about, then lowered the line and returned the fish to the water. It would swim again, but not for long. Grandfather suddenly pulled it out on the bank, where it thrashed about until it died. "Son," his grandfather observed, "a catfish is a lot like a nigger. As long as he is in his mudhole he is all right, but when he gits out he is in for a passel of trouble. You 'member dat, and you won't have no trouble wid folks when you grows up."

Neither Charlie's father nor his grandfather had owned the land they worked. But as a young man Charlie Holcombe aspired to improve himself and be independent of whites, and he possessed an abundance of confidence about his ability to succeed. He vowed to break with a bleak past of arduous and mostly unrewarded labor. "I thought I could manage my business better and dat I was gonna be able to own a place o' my own someday...I was a high-minded young nigger and was full of git-up-and-git. Dey wan't nothin' in de world dat I didn't think I could do, and I didn't have no patience wid niggers what didn't look for nothin' but sundown and payday." After his parents died, Charlie moved to Johnston County, North Carolina, took a job on public works, saved some money, and married. In 1909 he settled down on a farm, determined to make it his own. But like so many aspiring young blacks- the children and the grandchildren of slaves- he confronted formidable obstacles in his struggle to be independent. "Dey was always sumthin' come along and knocked de props from under my plans." That "sumphin'" might be the worms, rust, or blight consuming the tobacco plants or, more often than not, poor and declining prices and the rigid controls exerted by white men over black income. The only certainty was that by the time the landlord had taken his share and deducted the cost of the fertilizer and the money or credit advanced he had made, "dey wan't but jist enough to carry on till de nex' crop."

But Charlie persisted, and one year he seemed primed to break out of this cycle of indebtedness. After selling his tobacco and settling with the landlord, he had something for himself- or so he thought. That was when "the man" called him back and told him he had underestimated the amount Charlie owed him for warehouse charges. The tactic was all too familiar, and Charlie's inability to read the books made and legal protest impossible. "I knowed it wadn't right, and it made me so mad I jist hit him in de face as hard as I could. Den I kinda went crazy and might nigh beat him to death." The judge sentenced Charlie to a year's labor on the roads- a lenient sentence for an interracial altercation. His wife and children did what they could to make a crop, but was not enough to meet expenses. The landlord agreed to carry them over, and it took Charlie three years to pay him back. "By that time I knowed it wan't no use for me to try to ever make anything but jist a livin'."

Although Charlie Holcombe made his accommodation, he wanted something better for his oldest son, Willie. "I was 'termined my oldest chile was gonna hab a chance in dis world, and I sent him all de way through high school." That was more education than any Holcombe had known. But after completing high school, Willie wanted to go to college, arguing that it would enable him to improve his economic prospects significantly. At considerable sacrifice, the Holcombes sent their son to the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina in Greensboro. Willie worked hard, made good grades, and in the summer returned to help his parents with the crop. He would take the tobacco to market, carefully scrutinize the accounts, and invariably return with money in his pocket. As Willie progressed in college, however, his horizon widened and he became more ambitious. Increasingly dissatisfied with the tobacco business, he told his father this was no future for a black man with an education. He did not want to return to the farm. "Dat hurt me," Charlie Holcombe confessed. "'cause I had counted on Willie helpin' me, but I wanted him to do what he thought was best." Willie Holcombe graduated near the top of his class. That, remembered Charlie, "was when de trouble started."

Despite his education, Willie found few opportunities open to him. He returned home from college, disillusioned with his life and bitter over his limited prospects. When he "started settin' around and drinkin' and gittin' mean," Charlie tried to reason with him, but little he could say would alleviate the disappointment and frustration. That fall Willie took a load of

tobacco to the warehouse and returned home angry and sullen; the next day he insisted on taking another load to the warehouse. Near dinnertime he had not yet returned. A neighbor finally appeared to inform Charlie that there had been a fight at the warehouse involving Willie. When Charlie reached the scene, he spotted his son lying on the ground, a puddle of blood around his head, and a group of white men standing nearby. "I knowed he was dead de minute I seed him." For a while Charlie just stood there, not knowing what to do. He looked at the crowd and could not find a friendly or sympathetic face. "Right den I knowed dey wan't no use to ax for no he'p and dat I was jist a pore nigger in trouble." Holding Willie in his arms, Charlie could see that his son's head had been bashed in. "Dey was tears runnin' down my cheeks and droppin' on his face and I couldn't he'p it." He placed his son in the wagon, tied the mule behind it, and began his journey down the road. Reaching home, he washed Willie's head and dressed him in his best suit. Charlie and Dillie Holcombe then buried their son at the foot of the big pine tree near the well and planted some grass on the grave.

Charlie Holcombe was never the same again. The spirit had had once shown in his determination to succeed no longer animated him. "For a long time atter dat I couldn't seem to git goin', and dey was a big chunk in de bottom o' my stummick dat jist wouldn't go away. I would go out at night and sit under de pine by Willie's grave, and listen to de win' swishin' in de needles, and I'd do a lot o' thinkin'." He knew his son had been killed because of an argument, no doubt over the "settlin' price" for the tobacco Willie had delivered. But Charlie blamed himself for his son's death. He had failed to heed his grandfather's admonition. "I got to hinkin' 'bout what gran'pappy said 'bout de catfish, and I knowed dat was de trouble wid Willie. He had stepped outen his place when he got dat eddycation. If I'd kept him here on de farm he woulda been all right. Niggers has got to l'arn dat dey ain't like white folks, and never will be, and no amount o' eddycation can make 'em be, and dat when dey gits outen dere place dere is gonna be trouble." When in subsequent years Charlie would encounter some "young bucks" dissatisfied with their lives and wanting to "cut loose and change," he would listen to them, then take them out to see Willie's grave.

No other Holcombe child would be sent to college. They all settled down with their families and accommodated to the New South in the same way their father- and grandfather- had accommodated. They went about the business of surviving. "Dey don't hab much, but dey is happy," Charlie Holcombe said of his remaining children, the advice of his grandfather still vivid in his mind. "Niggers is built for service, like a mule, and dey needn't 'spect nothin' else...A nigger's place is in de field and de road and de tunnel and de woods, wid a pick or shovel or ax or hoe or plow. God made a nigger like a mule to be close to nature and git his livin' by de sweat o' his brow like de Good Book says." Resigned to his "place," Charlie no longer worried that much about the price his tobacco might bring him. The children came by occasionally to help him with the crops. He now had ample time to engage in his own "heap o' thinkin'," and his final years were increasingly reflective. Sitting by the fireplace, his mind often wandered back to his childhood. "And I 'member how my gran'pappy used to...take me fishin' wid him. Seems like when a feller thinks back he only 'members de good parts."

The story of Charlie Holcombe evokes the contradictions of black life and coming of age in the New South- the initial hops and aspirations, the often heightened expectations, as well as the frustrations, the terrors, the tensions, the betrayals, and the necessary accommodations. What came to be impressed on several generations of black Southerners- the first born in freedom and coming to maturity in the 1890s and the early twentieth century- was the material, political, and military superiority of white people, the extraordinary power white men and women wielded over black lives and prospects in virtually all phases of daily life. "The only thing that you would be thinking of," remembered Ardie Clark Halyard, was "that they were the ones that had everything." And they maintained their dominance, she sensed, because "all the time...they were taking advantage- you could see that."

The New South into which a new generation of African Americans would be born had clearly drawn racial boundaries and modes of behavior based on centuries of enforced custom and thought. Every black child would come to appreciate the terrible unfairness and narrowness of that world- the limited options, the need to curb ambitions, to contain feelings, and to weigh carefully every word, gesture, and movement when in the presence of whites. To learn to live with this kind of harsh reality became no less than a prerequisite for survival. "In this perilous world," Benjamin Mays recalled of his childhood in rural South Carolina, "if a black boy wanted to live a halfway normal life and die a natural death he had to learn early the art of how to get along with white folks." Any deviation from white expectations invited instant and often violent reprisals.

Source: Litwack, Leon. *Trouble in Mind: Black Americans in the Age of Jim Crow.*

1. What is your reaction to the advice that Grandfather Holcombe gave to Charlie in the third paragraph?
2. How was Willie different from his Father Charlie and Grandfather?
3. What is your reaction the fate of Willie Holcombe?
4. What seems to be the overall message behind the life stories of the Holcombe family?
5. What is your overall reaction to the story? Why?

'Strange Fruit': The Death of Reconstruction and the Birth of Jim Crow

The following is a list of actions taken towards African Americans after the Compromise of 1877. Examine each and label them with a **D** if they disenfranchised (took the right to vote away) African Americans, and **S** if they restricted the social interactions of the races, or a **\$** restricted the ability of African Americans to succeed economically. Also, use an **!** for anything that surprises you and a **?** for anything you do not understand.

Label	Action
	Convict Labor Lease System: After being arrested for such crimes as vagrancy (being somewhere public without being able to prove you had a reason to be there), selling cotton after sundown, speaking rudely around women, being in groups of three or more on a city street, or cursing these convicts were then leased to mine owners, factories, cotton and tobacco plantation owners, levee builders and other owners of manual labor jobs. The convicts worked for free and were beaten, whipped, starved, and forced to work in extremely unsafe conditions. The majority of convict laborers were African Americans.
	Jim Crow Laws- Named after a popular minstrel show in the 1840's, these laws restricted the use of public facilities such as hospitals, parks, water fountains, theaters, streetcars, ballparks, bibles for swearing in ceremonies, blood banks, cemeteries, amusement parks, etc.
	Poll Tax: Imposed by southern states, required all voters to pay a tax 8 months prior to voting and then present proof of having paid the tax.
	Grandfather Clause: Imposed by southern states, the clause stated that only people who had voted prior to 1867, or whose relatives had voted prior to this date, could vote.
	Literacy Test: A test of written language, imposed by southern states, to insure that all voters were "qualified."
	Civil Rights Cases (1875): The Court held that Congress lacked the constitutional authority under the enforcement provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment to outlaw racial discrimination by private individuals and organizations, rather than state and local governments. More particularly, the Court held that the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which provided that "all persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law, and applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude" was unconstitutional.
	Plessy v. Ferguson (1896): The Supreme Court declared that separate facilities based on race were to be considered equal and therefore constitutional.
	United States v. Cruickshank (1873): The Supreme Court declared that the 14 th Amendment only protected citizens from discrimination from state governments, not from discrimination by private individuals. Therefore, The court stated that the 14 th Amendment did not give the federal government the right to punish whites that oppressed blacks.
	Slaughterhouses Cases: The 14 th Amendment protected the rights provided by citizenship but civil rights were provided by the states and the court stated that the 14 th Amendment did not apply to the states.
	White Primaries: During this period, the South was totally under the political control of the Democratic Party. This meant that the general election was far less important than the Democratic primary, in which the Democratic candidates were selected. With no Republican opposition, whoever won the primary was sure to win the election. By declaring the Democratic Party primary the internal election of a private organization, an organization that could and did exclude blacks.
	Sundown Towns: A town that is or was purposely all-White. Residents were often systematically excluded from living in or sometimes even passing through these communities after the sun went down. This allowed maids and workmen to provide unskilled labor during the day. Sundown towns existed throughout the nation.
	Understanding Clause: Passed by southern governments and required voters to either read a section of the state constitution or explain its meaning or be able to understand that section when it was read to them.
	Share Cropping: Tenant farming/Sharecropping is an agreement in which a worker provides farm labor in exchange for on farm housing. The cropper brought to the farm only his own and his family's labor. The landlord, who generally also advanced credit to meet the living expenses of the cropper family, provided most other requirements—land, animals, equipment, and seed. Most croppers worked under the close direction of the landlord, and he marketed the crop and kept accounts. Normally in return for their work they received a share of the money realized. From this share was deducted the debt to the landlord.
	Crop Lien System: The crop lien system allowed farmers to receive food, supplies, seeds, etc. for credit from the local merchant. Farmers then paid this debt back after their crop was harvested and sold. The amount of credit that was received was based on the estimated value of the crop. When the crop was harvested the local merchant determined the value of the crop, subtracted it from the debt owed and then provided more supplies for the coming

year. This usually resulted in continuous debt for the farmers.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture: The Post-Reconstruction South Wing

You have been invited to contribute to the new exhibit at the soon to be opened Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The museum is developing an exhibit on the changes that occurred within the south after the failure of Reconstruction. Your exhibit must include at least five items that would help a visitor to the museum understand the specific changes that occurred within the south after the failure of Reconstruction. Exhibits may include artifacts, documents, maps, biographies, or any other materials that help people understand these changes. Be sure to consider disenfranchisement, economic changes, social restrictions, and of course, blues music!

Item Description	Justification for Inclusion in the Exhibit

"Pick a Bale of Cotton", by Leadbelly

Born in Louisiana in 1888, Ledbetter's volatile temper sometimes led him into trouble with the law. In 1915 he was convicted "of carrying a pistol" and sentenced to do time on the Harrison County chain gang, from which he escaped. In January 1918 he was imprisoned a second time, this time after killing one of his relatives, Will Stafford, in a fight over a woman. In 1930, Ledbetter was back in prison, after a summary trial, this time in Louisiana, for attempted homicide — he had knifed a white man in a fight. He was imprisoned in Angola prison in Louisiana. .

A bale of cotton was approximately 500 pounds

When I was a little bitty baby
My mama would rock me in the
 cradle

In them old cotton fields back
 home

It was down in Louisiana
Just a mile from Texarkana
In them old cotton fields back
 home

It may sound a little funny
But you didn't make very much
 money
In them old cotton fields back
 home

It may sound a little funny
But you didn't make very much
 money

In them old cotton fields back
 home

Oh when those cotton balls get
 rotten

You can't pick you very much
 cotton

In them old cotton fields back
 home

It was down in Louisiana
Just a mile from Texarkana
In them old cotton fields back
 home

I was over in Arkansas
People ask me what you come
 here for

In them old cotton fields back
 home

I was over in Arkansas
People ask me what you come
 here for

In them old cotton fields back
 home

"Parchman Farm Blues", by Bukka White

White was born Houston, Mississippi. White learned to play the fiddle from his dad, a part-time musician, later picking up the guitar. At the age of fourteen, White went to Clarksdale, in the Mississippi Delta, to live with an Uncle. While working as a farm hand, White would play juke-joints and parties, but he would soon leave the Delta to travel the South and play his blues for spare change. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to make a living with his music, White worked in a number of fields; he played ball in the Negro Leagues and tried his hand at boxing for awhile. In the early 1930s, White had reputedly shot a man in Mississippi, however, and he jumped bail while awaiting trial, traveled to Chicago, was caught and shipped off to the notorious Parchman Farm. He served three years at Parchman for assault. Parchman Farm, aka, Mississippi State Penitentiary, was built in 1901. Inmates work on the prison farm and in manufacturing workshops.

Judge gimme me life this
morn'in
Down on Parchman Farm
Judge gimme me life this
morn'in
Down on Parchman Farm
I wouldn't hate it so bad
But I left my wife in mournin'

Four years, goodbye wife
Oh you have done gone
Ooh, goodbye wife
Oh you have done gone
But I hope someday
You will hear my lonesome song,
yeah

Oh you, listen you men
I don't mean no harm
Oh-oh listen you men
I don't mean no harm

If you wanna do good
You better stay off old Parchman
Farm, yeah

We go to work in the mo'nin
Just a-dawn of day
We go to work in the mo'nin
Just a-dawn of day
Just at the settin' of the sun
That's when da work is done,
yeah

Ooh, I'm down on old Parchman
Farm
I sho' wanna go back home, yeah
I'm down on the old Parchman
Farm
But I sho' wanna go back home,
yeah
But I hope someday I will over
come.

“Boll Weevil” by Leadbelly

Born in Louisiana in 1888, Ledbetter's volatile temper sometimes led him into trouble with the law. In 1915 he was convicted "of carrying a pistol" and sentenced to do time on the Harrison County chain gang, from which he escaped. In January 1918 he was imprisoned a second time, this time after killing one of his relatives, Will Stafford, in a fight over a woman. In 1930, Ledbetter was back in prison, after a summary trial, this time in Louisiana, for attempted homicide — he had knifed a white man in a fight. His was imprisoned in Angola prison in Louisiana. .

A boll weevil is a grayish beetle that infests the cotton plant and feeds on the squares and bolls.

Sees a little boll weevil
keeps movin' in the, Lordie!
You can plant your cotton and you
won't get a half a bale, Lordie
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where's your
native home? Lordie
"A-Louisiana raised in Texas, least
is where I was bred and born",
Lordie
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord, a-
circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie
The next time I seed him, Lord, he
had his family there, Lordie
Bo weevil left Texas, Lord, he bid
me "fare ye well", Lordie
(spoken: Where you goin' now?)
I'm goin' down the Mississippi,
gonna give Louisiana hell, Lordie
(spoken: How is that, boy?)
Suck all the blossoms and he leave
your hedges square, Lordie
The next time I seed you, you
know you had your family there,
Lordie
Bo weevil meet his wife, "We can
sit down on the hill", Lordie

Bo weevil told his wife, "Let's
trade this forty
in", Lordie
Bo weevil told his wife, says, "I
believe I may go North", Lordie
(spoken: Hold on, I'm gonna tell all
about that)
"Let's leave Louisiana, we can go
to Arkansas", Lordie
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord a-
circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie
Next time I seed him, Lord, he had
his family there, Lordie
Bo weevil told the farmer that "I
'tain't got ticket fare", Lordie
Sucks all the blossom and leave
your hedges square, Lordie
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where your
native home? Lordie
"Most anywhere they raise cotton
and corn", Lordie
Bo weevil, bo weevil, "Outta treat
me fair", Lordie
The next time I did you had your
family there, Lordie

“Revenue Man Blues” by Charlie Patton

Born in April 1891, in southern Mississippi, Charley Patton was the child of sharecropper parents. In 1900, his family moved to the 10,000 acre Will Dockery Plantation, which farmed cotton and Manufactured milled wood.

A revenue man was a tax collector

Aw, the revenue man is ridin',
boy, you'd better look out
(spoken: High sheriff ain't
purrty
Aw, the revenue man is ridin',
boy, you'd better look out
(spoken: Boy, if he hollers you,
you don't stop, boy)
If he hollers you, don't stop,
you will likely be knocked out
Oh, a doney loves her saltwater,
well, she always wants a drink
(spoken: Got to have a drink!)
My doney loves saltwater,
she always wants a drink
(spoken: Boy, if they see you
with a bottle, though)
If they see you with a bottle,
they will almost break your neck
Oh, take me home to, Lord, that
shiny star
(spoken: Aw sho'!)
I say take me home to that shiny
star

(spoken: She don't need no
tellin's, daddy, aw sho')
She don't need no tellin',
daddy will take you in his car
Oh, come on, mama, let us,
go to the edge of town
(spoken: Aw sho'!)
Come on, mama, let us, go to the
edge of town
(spoken: Baby, I know where
there's a bird's nest built at)
I know where there's a bird's
nest,
built down on the ground
Oh, I wake up every mornin',
now, with a jinx all around my
bed
(spoken: Aw sho!)
I wakes up every mornin',
with a jinx all around my bed
(spoken: You know I'll have
them jinx forever)
I have been a good provider,
but I believe I have been misled

“Mississippi Boll Weevil Blues” by Charlie Patton

Born in April 1891, in southern Mississippi, Charley Patton was the child of sharecropper parents. In 1900, his family moved to the 10,000 acre Will Dockery Plantation. which farmed cotton and Manufactured milled wood.

A boll weevil is a grayish beetle that infests the cotton plant and feeds on the squares and bolls.

Sees a little boll weevil keeps
movin' in the, Lordie!
You can plant your cotton and you
won't get a half a bale, Lordie Bo
weevil, bo weevil,
where's your native home? Lordie
"A-Louisiana raised in Texas,
least is where I was bred and
born", Lordie
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord,
a-circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie
The next time I seed him, Lord,
he had his family there, Lordie
Bo weevil left Texas, Lord,
he bid me "fare ye well", Lordie
(spoken: Where you goin' now?)
I'm goin' down the Mississippi,
gonna give Louisiana hell, Lordie
(spoken: How is that, boy?)
Suck all the blossoms and he leave
your hedges square, Lordie The
next time I seed you, you know
you had your family there,
Lordie Bo weevil meet his wife,
"We can sit down on the hill",
Lordie Bo weevil told his wife,

"Let's trade this forty in",
Lordie Bo weevil told his wife,
says,
"I believe I may go North", Lordie
(spoken: Hold on, I'm gonna tell all
about that)
"Let's leave Louisiana, we can go
to Arkansas",
Lordie Well, I saw the bo weevil,
Lord a-circle, Lord, in the air,
Lordie Next time I seed him, Lord,
he had his family there, Lordie Bo
weevil told the farmer that
"I 'tain't got ticket fare", Lordie
Sucks all the blossom and leave
your hedges square, Lordie
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where your
native home? Lordie
"Most anywhere they raise cotton
and corn", Lordie
Bo weevil, bo weevil, "Outta treat
me fair", Lordie
The next time I did you had your
family there, Lordie

"When Can I change my Clothes" , by Bukka White

White was born Houston, Mississippi. White learned to play the fiddle from his dad, a part-time musician, later

picking up the guitar. At the age of fourteen, White went to Clarksdale, in the Mississippi Delta, to live with an Uncle. While working as a farm hand, White would play juke-joints and parties, but he would soon leave the Delta to travel the South and play his blues for spare change. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to make a living with his music, White worked in a number of fields; he played ball in the Negro Leagues and tried his hand at boxing for awhile. In the early 1930s, White had reputedly shot a man in Mississippi, however, and he jumped bail while awaiting trial, traveled to Chicago, was caught and shipped off to the notorious Parchman Farm. He served three years at Parchman for assault. Parchman Farm, aka, Mississippi State Penitentiary, was built in 1901. Inmates work on the prison farm and in manufacturing workshops.

Parchman Farm, aka, Mississippi State Penitentiary, was built in 1901. Inmates work on the prison farm and in manufacturing workshops

Never will forget that day
When they had me in Parchman
Jail
Would no one even come and go
my bail
I wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes?

So many days I would be sittin'
down
I would be sittin' down lookin'
down on my clothes
I wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes

So many days when the day would
be cold
They would car' me out in the rain
and cold
I wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes?

So many days when the day would
be cold
You can stand and look at these
convict toes
I wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes?

So many days I would be
Walkin' down the road
I can hardly walk for lookin' down
on my clothes
I wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes

Never will forget that day
When they taken my clothes
Taken my citizen's clothes
And throwed them away
Wonder how long
Before I can change my clothes?
I wonder how long
'Fore I can change my clothes

“I Worked Down On The Chain Gang” by *Lightin’ Hopkins*

Born in Texas, Hopkins traveled the south learning the Blues and working as a field hand on various farms. In the mid 1930s, Hopkins was sent to Houston County Prison Farm for an unknown offense.

Yeah you know I worked on the
railroad

I even worked down on that
chain gang

Yeah you know I worked on the
railroad

Oh boy and I worked down on
the chain gang

Yeah they put me in jail when it
was raining

Honey that was the best for me
Threw me in the jail when it
was raining

Honey and that is the best for
me

You know the jail kept me in
[from] the wet

I didn't have no place to stay,
don't you know

When I workin' on the chain
gang,

ball and chain all around my leg
I was workin' on the chain gang,

ball and chain all around my leg
I said Please don't drive me too

hard, I'm an old man

They say We don't pay no
attention to the age

He said Who sent you down
here, boy

What did you break in this jail
for?

Who sent you down here, boy
What did you break in this jail
for?

He say You look like a man
would kill your mother
(And I believe he did)
Oh boy what did you kill that old
woman for?
(A sad time, and I had to cry...)

I said mmmmmmm mister jailer,
will you please sir bring me the
key

I said mmmmmmm mister jailer,
will you please sir bring me the
key

I says I just want you to open the
door

Cause this ain't no place for me

"Tim Moore's Farm" by Lightin Hopkins

Born in Texas, Hopkins traveled the south learning the Blues and working as a field hand on various farms. In the mid 1930s, Hopkins was sent to Houston County Prison Farm for an unknown offense.

Yeah, you know it ain't
but the one thing you
know, this black man
done was wrong
Yeah, you know it ain't
but the one thing, you
know, this black man
done was wrong
Yes, you know I moved
my wife and family
down on Mr. Tim
Moore's farm
Yeah, you know Mr. Tim
Moore's a man, he don't
never stand and grin
He just said, "Keep out
of the graveyard, I'll
save you from the pen"
You know, soon in the
morning he'll give you
scrambled eggs
Yes, but he's liable to
call you so soon, you'll

catch a mule by his hind
legs
Yes, you know I got a
telegram this morning,
boy, it read, it say, "Your
wife is dead"
I show it to Mr. Moore,
he said, "Go ahead,
nigger you know you got
to plow old Red"
That white man says,
"It's been raining, yes,
and I'm way behind
I may let you bury that
woman one of these old
dinner times"
I told him, "No, Mr.
Moore; somebody's got
to go"
He says, "If you ain't
able to plow, Sam, stay
up there and grab your
hoe"

"Spike Driver Blues" by Lightin' Hopkins

Born in Texas, Hopkins traveled the south learning the Blues and working as a field hand on various farms. In the mid 1930s, Hopkins was sent to Houston County Prison Farm for an unknown offense.

Take this hammer and
carry it to the captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell
him I'm gone, tell him
I'm gone

Take this hammer and
carry it to the captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell
him I'm gone, tell him
I'm gone

I don't want your cold
iron shackles

Round my leg, round my
leg, round my leg
I don't want your cold
iron shackles

Round my leg, round my
leg, round my leg

It's a long way from
Colorado
To my home, to my
home, to my home

It's a long way from
Colorado
To my home, to my
home, to my home

This is the hammer that
killed John Henry
Won't kill me, won't kill
me, won't kill me
This is the hammer that
killed John Henry
Won't kill me, won't kill
me, won't kill me

Take this hammer and
carry it to the captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell
him I'm gone, tell him
I'm gone

This is the hammer and
carry it to the captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell
him I'm gone, tell him
I'm gone

“Wonder When I'll Get to be Called a Man” by Big Bill Broozny

Born in Arkansas in 1893, Broozny worked as a sharecropper and preacher until he joined the United States Army in 1917. In 1916 his crop and stock were wiped out by drought. Broozny went to work locally until he was drafted into the Army in 1917. Broozny served two years in Europe during the Great War. After his discharge from the Army in 1919, Broozny returned to Pine Bluff, Arkansas where he is reported to have been called a racial epithet and told by a white man he knew before the war that he needed to "hurry up and get his soldier uniform off and put on some overalls." He immediately left Pine Bluff and moved in 192 north to Chicago in search of opportunity.

When I was born into this world, this is what happened to me
I was never called a man, and now I'm fifty-three
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get to be called a man
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?

When Uncle Sam called me, I knowed I'd be called a real McCoy
But I got none of this, they just called me soldier boy
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get to be called a man
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?

When I got back from overseas, that night we had a ball
Next day I met the old boss, he said "Boy get you some overalls"
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get to be called a man
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?

I've worked on the levee camps, and axer gangs too Black man's
a boy, don't care what he can do
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get to be called a man
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?

They aid I was uneducated, my clothes were dirty and torn
Now I've got a little education, but I'm still a boy right on
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get to be called a man
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?