

Part I
Looking Back



Flonzie's first school day picture at age 5!

Chapter 1
A Long Way Back

On the day of my birth, August 12, 1942, my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Brown, Sr., had their prayers answered. They had their baby girl. They could not have been more proud. My aunts and uncles, Grandpa Bozie, other relatives and friends came to welcome me and to celebrate my arrival. My older brother, Syd, was less than two years old when I was born. From what I am told, he was ready to play big brother. As time went on and my younger brother, Frank Jr., was born, I was ready to play big sister to him. We lived in Farmhaven, a small rural farming community between Canton and Carthage, Mississippi. This was and remains one of those areas predominately owned by Blacks.

I was not privileged to know either of my grandmothers. My dad's mom was named Frances. I was named Flonzie, for my mom's mom. Both my grandfathers impacted my life. Papa Bozie, my mom's dad, was a tall giant of a man of African, Indian and Caucasian heritage. While he stood tall in stature, he stood taller in principles. He was a very smart man and did not accept the "sharecropping syndrome" as a way of life. He was very independent. He leased his land, owned livestock and made a good living for his family. My dad's father, Papa Rob, owned a molasses mill and made molasses for many surrounding communities. At an early age he lost his hearing, but could understand anything said to him. He intently watched facial expressions. He was not a learned man by educational standards; but was endowed with old fashioned mother-wit. He was a successful businessman who lived until the ripe old age of eighty-eight. At that age he was still making molasses and showing others the skills of the molasses-making trade. His tenacious spirit encouraged each of their 12 children to also be self-employed.

I remember so well as a child being visited and nurtured by both grandpas. Papa Bozie, a learned Bible scholar, used to tell me Bible stories from the time I can remember. He told me all about Moses and how Joshua "fit" the Battle of Jericho, about Job and his patience and about Jesus, the Christ child. He would then pick up his guitar and sing songs to my brother and me. He died when I was twelve. I never forgot this towering giant

When Syd became of school age, we were inseparable. His first day at school in Farmhaven was just as traumatic for him as it was for me. He cried all day at school. I cried all day at home. He was five and I was four. For the first time in our lives, we were separated.

The trauma was so bad that Mother asked the teacher if I could come to school and be with my "Bubba." She readily agreed, because she was also .my Sunday School teacher and felt that my parents were doing, as she used to say, "a good job in raising us."

After being in school for a couple of days, I began to learn along with the older children; and after a month, I was studying at the same level as my first grade peers. I was now, officially, in the first grade at the age of four. Our school was one of those old fashioned schools where all 8 grades were in the same room and taught by the same teacher. I remember the big black pot-bellied stove, the wood pile in the corner of the room, the home-made rack for our coats and the table for our lunches. There were not enough desks for each of us to have our own. Our teacher, Mrs. Lillie Pickett, was very kind and allowed some of us to study at the corner of her desk.



Throughout the day, men from the community would come and check on the stove. They took pleasure in seeing that it was filled with wood. They believed this to be a "man's job." The blackboard was an old wooden door that my dad painted black. Mrs. Pickett was ever so creative and used every opportunity to improvise so that we would get the benefit of her knowledge and creativity. She loved each of us in a very special way and always had time to listen to us and to share in our problems. We would come to her, one after another, with our scraped knees, runny noses or broken pencils. What was a series of crises for us, was an everyday occurrence for Mrs. Pickett.

There was no such thing as integrated schools which would have provided an opportunity for an equal education. The books from which we studied were books that had been transported from Michigan, Tennessee and from wherever Mrs. Pickett could get them. They were overly used, marked up and had worn covers. Our teacher made an effort to erase as much of the scribbling as she could. Mrs. Pickett taught us to cover our books using either brown paper bags, Christmas wrapping paper or left over wall paper scraps.

There were no school buses, so each day we walked back and forth to school, in the sun, in the cold, in the rain, muddy roads and all. Luckily, the school was not that far and Syd and I walked along with our neighbors. Mom watched us as we left for school everyday, and waited for us in the evening at the little bridge to our house. Sometimes, she would walk us part of the way to school.

She would meet us at the bridge and return with us in the afternoon. Not that she was afraid that we would be kidnapped or harmed, this was the manifestation of the love that she taught and shared.

During some of that time my dad was out of town working on what is now known as the Natchez Trace. Mom did not work. There were few opportunities for a rural Black woman. The only work choices at that time were housekeeping for folks in the "big house," going to the field or staying home. Mom elected to stay home and give her children all the tender, loving care that she could. Things were tight, but Mom always had a remarkable way of "stretching the eyeballs" off a dollar bill, even so today.

Grandmother Flonzie died when Mom and her siblings were quite young. Aunt Tommie, Grandmother Flonzie's sister and her husband Uncle Gus, provided nurturance and guidance to Mom, her sisters and her brothers. They also lived in the Farmhaven community and often brought sweet potatoes, meat and a variety of vegetables to them. The extended family concept was manifested in their love as they assisted in their rearing. Mom's youngest sister, Aunt Bertha and her baby son, John, came to live with us. I became the daughter she wanted. She'd comb my hair and starched and ironed my dresses. She often shared how she'd slip and re-iron my dresses because, according to her, Mom didn't put enough starch in them. She and Syd were pals also. Everyday, she'd dress us twice daily. Over the years, she became a big sister to us.

At each phase of my life, my parents, my aunts, my neighbors, my teachers and my grandfathers, taught me to do my best and to help others to help themselves. As I grew older, the significance of their teachings became more evident.

Syd and I have never lost our closeness. As we grew, so did our love and respect for each other. Today as I observe him, I see him implementing many of the "fireside" values taught to us by mom and dad.

He really is the best brother a sister can have.

Flonzie at age 4, Syd at age 5

