

‘Colonel Howard Meets Granny Dollar’
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Vagabond Discovers Rare Soul By Milford W. Howard

Heretofore I mentioned ‘Granny’ Dollar, her dog Buster & the little brown hen in these sketches. Other’s including Winifred Black, have written about her but no one has really thought to interview her just as one would interview some great celebrity.

I have been ‘threatening’ to write a story about her for quite a while, & this morning I went to her cabin for a real interview, thinking I might get an interesting story for one of my vagabond sketches, little dreaming of the big vital message poor old granny dollar had for the world.

I sat on the front porch of her cabin where I could see the vegetables in her well tended garden, her flower yard, roasting-ear ‘patch’ & other ‘truck’. Granny was attired in a sort of cross between a dress & a ‘mother Hubbard’, barefooted, with her friendly pipe in her hand ready for use. She is the best gardener in her community, & always raises all the vegetables she can eat & plenty to give away to anyone who comes along.

Inasmuch as Granny’s chief appeal for fame is her great age, I tried to cover this point more definitely than I have ever done before in my various conversations with her. I wanted to get something tangible as verification of her claim that she is more than 100 years old, & I got it.

She remembers when the Cherokee Indians were removed from Alabama & Georgia to the Indian territory. A fort was erected at Fort Payne, so named after a Captain Payne, who commanded the fort, for the protection of the soldiers & as a gathering place for the Indians. This was in 1835. She remembers all about those tragic times in the history of her people, & told me a number of incidents that came under her personal observation.

For instance, she related how, when they were marching, & an Indian woman was about to become a mother, she stopped by the road side; when she was surrounded by a circle of Indian squaws, an Indian midwife you enter the circle, & after the arrival of the baby it would

be wrapped in a blanket, strapped on a mother's back, & she would fall in line & continue on the march.

Granny says she was about 13 or 14 years old at this time & a 'keen' runner. Her father & mother & some of the children were hiding on the west side of Sand Mountain, near the Tennessee River, in what is now Jackson County. She made her escape & fled through the woods until she came to Saltpeter Cave, in the side of the mountain where she found her father, mother, & children (sic) hiding, a few miles from their home. At night she would steal forth, go to their home & return with potatoes & other such provisions as she could find & thus they lived in hiding until Indians & soldiers were far away on their trek towards the West.

She also told me that her father was away from the home in the Florida War on the interesting occasion of the arrival of 2 sets of triplets, about which I shall speak presently. This 'Florida War' I take it was the Seminole War, which covered quite a period of time. But she told me how & why she had to take care the two sets of triplets. Let the historian look this up & figure it out, & see what conclusion they arrive at as to her age.

I am convinced she is at least 106 years of age, & possible older. She must have been a giant in physique & strength in her prime, for she is 6 foot tall, with a powerful frame, rugged features, & a voice that can now be heard for a greater distance than any man's voice in this community. Her father, a full blooded Indian, was six feet 5 inches, weighed 275 pounds and, according to Granny's stories of his prowess, he was an Indian 'Goliath'.

How 'Granny came to be a ward of the Master Schools, & thus escape the 'poorhouse' or suicide, is most interesting, and as she told me with tears in her eyes:

'God has spared my life for some good reason, I know'. I was glad we took her in at a time when the questions of where our next meal would come from was often the problem.

It was just after the opening of the Master schools, almost 5 years ago, that Granny walked several miles to make our acquaintance. The boys were thrilled over the arrival of Granny, & she was pleased as a child. I was in California at the time, & when I returned to Alabama I found her installed in one of the houses (Near County Road 89) on the school property; the boys were cutting her wood, making her fires, carrying her water, & treating her like a queen....something she had never known in her life before.

On my return, I had to face the serious problem of feeding & clothing Granny, along with 40 to 50 mountain boys & girls. In the

enthusiasm of the moment, my cousin, who was dean of the school, had allowed Granny to become a part of our institution, as it seemed, & she was enjoying the greatest adventure of her life. Of course, there was nothing for me to do but to accept the situation, which I did gladly, for I thought if we all starved, Granny might as well go along with the rest of us.

She insisted on a private interview with me and, despite all efforts to prevent it, she eluded everybody & walked into my cabin one morning & announced that she wanted to have a talk with me. 'I am an Injun' she said, "and we Injuns don't want to fool nobody so I thought I would come & ask you some questions afore I decide to live with you all the rest of my life"

I told her to go ahead & ask me any questions she wanted to.

"You all don't eat meat at school" she said, "but I got to have a little 'fat' to put in my biscuits, an' fat meat to bile(boil) with my cabbage & turnip greens."

I assured her we would make this exception in her favor, & she fairly beamed on me.

"You all don't let the boys 'chaw' or smoke, but I jest got to have my baccy, Child. Kin I have it?"

Again I assured her she could, & she called me "Pa"

'Pa, you is shore a good man, an I want to call you 'Pa' because my Pa is dead.'

I did not much relish being 'Pa' to a centenarian, but I grinned & pretended to be pleased.

'Now Pa, I want to ask you to let me keep Buster' He is my dog an I jest can't live without Buster. It won't take much to feed him.'

Of course, I capitulated, for, having yielded in the beginning, I was lost.

"An Pa, I got some chicken I want to bring. Kin I have my chickens?"

I began to demur about the chickens, telling her I was going to plant vegetables around the house and the chickens would destroy them. She countered with, "Pa, them chickens of mine is Injun chickens. They don't eat vegetables. They wouldn't tech cabbage or lettuce or any sort of vegetables if they was starvin'

She had me going now, so nothing mattered. I said 'Yes, keep your chickens. Is there anything else you want this morning?'

'I was about to forgit to tell you Pa, I got me six little roosters jest beginnin' to crow. Kin I keep all of them, Pa? I love to wake up in the mornin' just before day & hear em' all crowin, asnswering one another. It's jest like music. Kin I keep all of em'?'

I assured her I would be delighted, my only regret being that she did not have 60 in place of 6.

'Pa, there is one more thing I want to ax you. Don't let mother Harper ax me to pray when I come to school. You know I 'conjures' and folks what conjures don't pray. Course you is part Injun an' understands that injun conjures is like white folk's prayin, but mother Harper don't know this.' (Editor's note: Granny insisted that most people she liked were part Indian.)

She rose to depart, so I thought, after receiving my assurances that she would not be called upon to pray. But she still had something on her mind.

'Pa, I never set in a rockin' cheer in my life. Won't you give me that rockin' cheer you're sittin' in? I'd rather have it than anything I ever seed in my born days.

By this time I was ready to give her my cabin & take to the woods. So I gave her the chair, which she placed proudly over her head & marched away. I sat down in a 'straight-backed' chair & heaved a sigh of relief....glad the interview was over.

I head a heavy step on my front porch & glanced up to see Granny coming back for one last word.

'Pa, I jest thought I'd tell you I'm coming to see you every day.'

Here words fail me.....