



BLACK HISTORY MONTH BEGINS WITH ME: TRACING YOUR FAMILY TREE

by Eunice Hart

THE GRAYS OF JAGOE, MISS.

BEFORE THE INTERNET, MANY AFRICAN AMERICANS TOOK ON THE ARDUOUS TASK OF RESEARCHING THEIR FAMILY ANCESTRY THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY. THEY STARTED WITH ORAL TRADITION AND ATTEMPTED TO BACK IT UP WITH ACTUAL DOCUMENTS PULLED FROM COURTHOUSE RECORDS AND FAMILY ATTICS. After Emancipation in the late 19th century, documentation wasn't commonplace for newly freed slaves whose main goal was survival. The undocumented migration of a group of people trying to find their place was the norm and this is what makes the prospect of tracing one's family lineage back to Africa almost impossible for most Americans of African descent.

And then there are the Grays, who have one of those family lineages that make genealogical research a joy. Dr. L. LaSimba Gray, pastor of New Sardis Baptist Church, speaks with pride as he recounts the establishment of Jagoe, Miss., an independent community (now Southaven), by his great grandfather, Robert Gray, Sr. and other African Americans in the DeSoto County area after Emancipation.

Like many African Americans in the 1970s, Dr. Gray watched the landmark television miniseries, *Roots*, which was based on Tennessee author Alex Haley's novel about his family lineage. It was a story that

reached across the ocean from West Africa landing in Henning, Tenn. It was at this time that Dr. Gray decided to research his family lineage. It's a story told every other year in the front yard of his grandfather's home in DeSoto County at their family reunion.

"In that community, there was not an African American sharecropper," Dr. Gray said. "The first generation of sharecroppers in that community were sharecroppers with their fathers."

Dr. Gray said African Americans in the Jagoe community owned their own land and Robert Gray, Sr. owned his own cotton gin, a machine that separates cotton fibers from the seeds. It also didn't hurt that the land in Jagoe was known to be fertile enough to produce a bale of cotton per acre without the use of fertilizer.

Dr. Gray and his family did not have to look far to find out where Robert Gray, Sr. was from. He was born and grew up a slave in Pleasant Hill, Miss. He was 20 years old when the Civil War ended. Knowing his family owned land and had a major stake in the Southaven area, Dr. Gray started there.

"I went to the courthouse in DeSoto County and started to pull land deeds and the writings of my grandfather, James Arthur Gray, and how land had been passed on to him and how he passed land on to his children."



Dr. Gray says although records are good, talking to the elders is better. "The most intriguing part of that is to talk with the elders, so I called a meeting of the elders and a white couple came," he said.

That meeting was how they found out the true origin of the name Jagoe, a name the family had always thought was African until that couple showed up. The woman was the granddaughter of Dr. A. J. Jagoe, an Italian traveling physician who never hesitated to treat a person of color. She came to the meeting to explain where the name Jagoe came from and how Jagoe was established.

Robert Gray, Sr. was one of the organizers of New Hope Baptist Church in 1870 and from that came the New Hope School. The land for Jagoe was deeded from Thomas Oliver Bridgeforth, owner of the Bridgeforth Plantation, and was essentially founded around that church and school as well as the cotton gin and post office, both located on Swinnea Road. The post office had to be given a name.

"Professor Horatius Hill, who was a schoolmaster at New Hope School, applied to have it named in his honor but they discovered that there was already a Hillsville in Mississippi," Dr. Gray recalls with amusement.

As a tribute to Dr. Jagoe, they applied to have the post office named Jagoe. The name lasted until the 1940s when the post office was moved to Horn Lake.

"I was born in Jagoe but it was no longer listed as Jagoe; it was listed as Southaven," he said.

Thus far, the Grays have only been able to trace their lineage from James Arthur Gray back to his father, Robert Gray Sr. They are now to the point of tracing their white ancestry.

"We couldn't go beyond him because at that point there was no man to say that was his father, except the plantation owner," Dr. Gray said, "They say he (Robert Gray, Sr.) wore a full beard and looked like a white man."

Although the majority of their research was done by oral tradition and good old-fashioned legwork, Dr. Gray hasn't failed to enlist the help of Ancestry.com to look for the father of Robert Gray, Sr. and the date Jagoe was established as a city. He said he's had no luck in finding either.

His next step is to further search DeSoto County archives of federal institutions such as the Farmer's Bureau in order to find the exact information regarding the establishment of Jagoe as a city. This is one of the final missing links of their rich family heritage that Dr. Gray is determined to pinpoint.

"I want to be exact in terms of when did it become Jagoe," he says.

"By Their Fruit Ye Shall Know Them"
Mt. 7:20

