

The Roberts Settlement, NUVO Newsweekly, July 31, 2002, by Kurt Meyer

Thirty miles north of Indianapolis in a rural corner of Hamilton County, a farmer bounces gently down the road behind the wheel of a rusty John Deere tractor, passing between an old gray farmhouse and a glistening white country church. His neck is brown from the sun but his face is pale white thanks to the Pioneer hat pulled tightly on his head. In the surrounding fields, the corn was indeed “knee high by the fourth of July.” He steers gingerly between cars parked bumper to bumper on the shoulder of either side of the road. The license plates read Indiana, Ohio, Alabama, Missouri, Michigan, Maryland, California. As he passes, the farmer curiously eyes the nearly two hundred African Americans on the church lawn, socializing and eating picnic lunches, sitting on lawn chairs or on blankets spread on the grass. He seems not to know that those people are central to one of Indiana’s most remarkable chapters in African American history. Some are the last generations to play an active part in this place. All are descendants of a proud rural black farming tradition known simply as the Roberts Settlement.

The church, the farmhouse and barn across the road, in fact the surrounding farms for several miles, were part of the Roberts Settlement, a farming community established by free African Americans in the 1830s. They came from North Carolina, fleeing the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion. They acquired federal land grant plots, cutting farms out of the wilderness alongside white farmers. They were kept safe and treated well by the county’s large Quaker population. Through the 19th and 20th century, in fact until the 1990s, African Americans farmed the land here, living in harmony with the surrounding white farmers. During a century before desegregation their children were schooled alongside whites. Since 1925 descendants of those original settlers have appropriately gathered around Independence Day to renew family ties and keep the memory of the Roberts Settlement’s rich heritage alive.

Sitting in the shade beneath a tree at the edge of a semi-circle of men, Lawrence Duvall watches the tractor pass the old farmhouse. Lawrence has a kind, round face and a gently receding hairline. Though he now lives in the Butler/Tarkington neighborhood of Indianapolis, he grew up and lived in the settlement until 1969 when he went off to serve in Vietnam. That farm across the road has been in his family since the original land grant.

I ask the men if they felt isolated from the civil rights movement growing up out here.

“Yeah, I guess we did,” Lawrence says softly, as if trying to remember how it really was.

Steve White, sitting beside him adds, “Though I’m a descendent, I never lived out here. I grew up in Marion. But then we moved to Mississippi . . .” The slender man laughs from beneath sunglasses and a wide brimmed straw hat, elbowing Lawrence, “and hell, I was shot at as much in Mississippi as I was in Vietnam.”

Lawrence laughs at the absurdity. Before more can be said, he sees a long lost relative over my shoulder and smiles wide, stands, shouts hello, and disappears into the crowd.

The church sits in the middle of the property. It has a fresh coat of white paint. Its pointed bell tower rises up above a double doorway, standing out against a blue sky streaked with sparse clouds. On the right side of the front lawn a large tent shades people talking and eating. Children play badminton in the west side yard. A herd of black and white splattered cows graze just over the fence, examined by city children as if they're aliens. Sounds of laughter and conversations fill the now crowded lawn.

Behind the church, beyond the white, men's and women's outhouses, I find Charlotte Stennis resting her arms on the fence that surrounds the graveyard. The fieldstone pillar beside her has a plaque that reads, "Est. 1839." She's watching her twelve year old daughter who sits thirty yards away beneath a tree among a group of girls at the edge of the gravestones. In the space between mother and daughter are graves of their ancestors reaching back a hundred and seventy years. I put the question to her that went unclarified between Lawrence Duvall and Steve White.

"Yes, we did feel isolated from the civil rights movement," Charlotte says, staring out across the gravestones. It was different for us because we lived among and went to school with white children. I mean, I never came in contact with racism."

Charlotte is a home health aid who lives in Anderson. She's a lovely woman with curled shoulder length hair. She tells how her grandfather was called "Chief" because he had stereotypical Indian features. Charlotte has some graceful bits of that too - a strong nose and high cheekbones. She grew up the youngest of nine children on a farm just down the road.

She puzzles over my question again. "We never had to go through the hatred that blacks in other parts of the country went through. Maybe it gave us a broader view. I mean," she shrugged her shoulders, "I was a cheerleader in an overwhelmingly white school. I have no anger or mistrust for white people."

Across the graveyard Charlotte's daughter and friends let out loud squeals. A girl jumps up and runs around the tree, laughing loudly.

"Out here, everything wasn't so complicated then," Charlotte says. "Life is complicated now. Sometimes I wish I could move back to the farm and share that with my daughter." She narrows her eye on me, "Would she like it out here?" she laughs self-consciously.

"Back then we didn't lock our doors," she says. "We caught lightning bugs and played hide and seek. Do kids do those things nowadays?" she wonders out loud. "On hot nights we would pull our mattresses out in the yard and sleep under the stars."

Charlotte laments that in Anderson, she doesn't even let her daughter walk alone. "Everyone today lives with a certain level of fear.

“I guess I wish my children could experience the calmness of this place. The smell of the air and the sounds are different.” She narrows her eyes at me again and shakes her head gently side to side, wondering if I understand.

I understand.

She smiles. “Did you see that old Ebony magazine article about this place, from 1951, pinned up in the vestibule of the chapel?” she nods back toward the church. “I’m the little girl in the family photo.

“I’m proud of my family’s history,” Charlotte finishes, sensing that she’s said enough. “I’m proud that they came here free and lived independently.”

The lawn is filled with the staggering array of personalities that make up any family reunion. I shake hands with Wayne Glover, who owns a liquor store in Noblesville and recall that I’ve bought a six pack or two from him. He laughs and reminds me that he’s been retired a few years. I see the aging Murphy White, former long-time city councilman in Noblesville. He’s still fit and comments on his golf game. In a circle of women I meet and talk awhile with Eula “Babe” Mitchell, whose husband Ralph retired in 1997, the last African American to farm land out here.

There are middle aged women in colorful head wraps and summer hats, men in Hawaiian shirts and blue jean shorts, teenagers with their pants hung low, and folks in t-shirts printed with the Roberts Settlement family tree. I’m scanning the crowd looking for Lawrence Duvall’s mother, Jeanetta, a woman I met several years ago.

I look in the chapel. The vestibule is filled with memorabilia from the settlement. I read through a list settlement farmers who fought in the Civil War. People are milling around, admiring recent renovations and remembering youthful Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings spent worshipping here.

I sit down in front of an elderly man. He’s Herbert Rice. Herbert is bald and has remarkably youthful looking olive skin stretched over taut and still muscular arms. We talk. Herbert points out the window of the chapel to the west, to the farm his ancestors began tilling in 1835 and that he too tilled off and on. He tells me of the twenty five years he worked in a Ford plant in Detroit, and another eighteen years on the Grand Trunk Railroad, and yet another seventeen years in a hog handling facility, and then finally of a few years spent working at O’Malia’s grocery store in Carmel before retiring just last year at age eighty five.

Knowing he was a young boy in the 1920s, I ask him about the Ku Klux Klan, a group so powerful in places like Hamilton County during that decade. Herbert cocks his head back, surprised by my question. “I didn’t know a thing about them back then. Never gave us any trouble.”

I ask him what made this place different for African Americans. He squints, staring into the pew in front of him seeming unable to grasp the thought. His lost expression and stiff posture remind me of my own grandfather’s last years when he was in the grip of Parkinson disease.

A man standing in the aisle overheard my question. He kneels down near us.

“You know,” he says, “I’m not connected with this place other than my wife is a descendent and so I’ve been coming here for twenty five years. I’m from Washington D.C. My ancestors were slaves at a time when the people living here were free. The people who came here came as free people, able to make their own decisions about their lives. It’s about independence - having the independence to make your own choices.”

Herbert had been staring blankly, but suddenly leans forward, his face coming to life at those final comments. He shakes his finger at the man. “Yes, you’re exactly right.”

The man goes on. “The people who lived here didn’t have to ask permission to build a tight community and nobody here was afraid of them doing so. From what I can see - more than a hundred and fifty years down the line - it built more cohesiveness and a strong family tradition.”

Herbert Rice relaxes back into the pew and looks at me nodding a silent, “Yes,” smiling the satisfied smile of a man pained for words who’s found the relief of understanding.

In the big tent I finally find Lawrence Duvall’s mother, Jeanetta, talking at a long table with a group of women, many wearing colorful cotton summer dresses. There are full, empty, and half-finished plates of pasta, fruit salad and chicken before them. A teenage boy wearing headphones slouches nearby, fiddling with his cell phone.

I met Jeanetta several years ago when she called the area preservation group I led and invited us out to the old family farm. She was looking for preservation ideas. She looks much as I remember her - incredibly beautiful blue-gray eyes looking out from beneath a head of pure white hair.

Jeanetta was born in the Roberts Settlement in 1916, the great, great granddaughter of one of the settlement’s founders. She tells me she’s two weeks younger than Herbert Rice. I ask her if the farm life was hard back in the ‘20s and ‘30s.

“My mother thought that girls had no business working in the fields. So we worked in the house and tended the garden. You had to have a garden if you were going to survive, you know.”

Someone mentions her beautiful eyes and she brightens, “I got those from my mother.”

In 1937 she went to Indiana University to study music. I ask if it wasn’t unusual for a black woman to go to college back then. “Not for us out here. My father went to college in Danville and studied law. He was a practicing attorney in the 1890s, even acted as prosecutor in Arcadia for awhile. My older sister went to Marion College fifteen years before I went to I.U. Education was of prime importance in the settlement. When the settlers first came in the 1830s, the ones who could read and write taught the others, and it went on like that through generations.”

It was at I.U. that she met her husband, a Crispus Attucks graduate. He studied physics and chemistry. But the kindness that whites in Hamilton County

showed members of the settlement didn't transfer beyond its borders. "Unfortunately, in those days, the only job he could get was pushing a broom. He applied for jobs all over, even Eli Lilly, but they told him, even though he was qualified, they could only offer him janitorial work." They came back to the Roberts Settlement to farm. "He eventually found a job at the foundry in Noblesville," Jeanetta says.

And then she mentions that word that keeps coming up: Independence.

"Everyone here always cherished their independence. [Early in the 20th century] the old timers were heartsick seeing the younger people take factory jobs in the towns around here. The old timers felt the youngsters were giving up their independence . . . that thing that made us strong."

She gestures out the tent flap, "That church was the center of our community. That's where we came to be together. I came to every class party and Sunday school picnic so I could see me friends."

She left the 1860s farmhouse across the road in the 1990s after her husband died, moving into an apartment in Noblesville. I ask about her attempts to have the house restored. "Well, I've given up hope on the barn. The west end of the roof has been open to the elements for awhile."

Tears start to well up in her eyes. "And I've almost given up hope on the house."

I ask her why there are no longer any blacks working the farms around here. Indianapolis's Baltimore family still owns their original farm, as does Jeanetta, but they're land is leased out to white farmers.

"It's those factory jobs that came with a weekly paycheck, which is something you didn't get on the farm." She tells me it was decades of youngsters taking those jobs and going to college that ended African American farming in Hamilton County.

I point out that there are white farmers all around the area still in business. How could it be that no black farmers are still in business?

"Well, now you've raised a great big question," she says. "We always thought we got fair treatment, but who knows."

I wonder if perhaps her husband's employment fate is the metaphorical answer. Though the independence of the Roberts Settlement nurtured them to an extent undreamed of by most African Americans, it could not insulate them forever from the larger culture and the myriad of big and small decisions that culture made about who would thrive.

The chapel bell rings and people file inside. I come late and can only find an angled seat up front. But it's great; like being back stage at a concert. I can look out at all the faces in all the pews.

Stacey White, Noblesville high school's band director and perhaps the most enthusiastic man I've ever seen in my life, jumps up and leads the crowd singing, "The more we get together, together, together . . ."

In the front row, Vince and June Newsom's daughter, Erika, a high school sophomore, rolls her eyes, as the adults sing gleefully, "cause your friends are my friends and my friends are your friends . . ."

Singing that song is hopelessly corny, and in this kind, welcoming crowd: infectious. You *want* to sing.

After the song, Lavella Newsom takes the stage and reads a clip from a 1925 issue of the Noblesville Daily Ledger. It tells the story of the original settler's difficult journey to Indiana from North Carolina in the early 19th century.

While she reads to the packed chapel, my mind wonders back to last night, to the wienie roast and hay ride that was held for the children. I'd stood out front and talked to Lavella. I'd asked her why she went off to California.

"I wanted to experience diversity. I wanted the arts and museums. But I come back here every 4th of July like a moth to a porch light. Indiana is in my soul," she said, laying her hand on her chest. "There are no roots in California. Out there, people see the rural black as an oddity.

"I was my father's shadow," Lavella said.

At that moment her sister Beverly had walked by and said, "You're not the only one who drove a tractor."

"You never drove a tractor," Lavella shot back with a mock sneer, "You were always *inside*."

She returned to her thought.

"We were up sunrise to sundown," Lavella continued. "We helped birth cows, we bailed hay. I miss it. Every time I see a John Deer tractor, I think of my father."

Back in the moment, Lavella ends her reading and the room applauds. Lavella's brother Vince invites people to the altar to place a flower in a vase for each Roberts Settlement descendent who has died in the past year.

The solemn moment passes and finally, Jeanetta Duvall and Herbert Rice are given awards for their years of service in keeping the memory of the Roberts Settlement alive. Stacy White gets up and invites the crowd to share success stories of the past year. Across the room various people stand in turn to share news of weddings, births, graduations and anniversaries celebrated in the lives of the greater Roberts Settlement family. Afterwards, everyone assembles on the front steps for a group picture.

In that group picture you see a startling array of people. They've come from all over the county and all over the country, those newly departed from Roberts Settlement and those who left long ago. And at last night's gathering, Vincent Newsom had told me that every year brings newcomers. "They want to know where they belong," he'd said, "and we welcome them." Some come from as far away as Alabama or as near as Indianapolis and have just recently discovered that their ancestors were part of a remarkable community. They've come searching for roots, and found them.