

## INTERVIEW: GROWING UP BLACK IN THE 1930s IN McCULLEY'S QUARTERS, ALABAMA

*Mrs. Peacolia Barge, born in 1923, lived as a small child in an area called McCulley's Quarters and grew up in Bessemer just outside Birmingham, Alabama. Mrs. Barge completed her college degree after her marriage and then began a long career in teaching. Her grandparents were slaves in Alabama, and her three children are college-educated, professional men and women. She defies all stereotypes, just as Calpurnia does in To Kill a Mockingbird. The interview that follows was conducted in 1993.*

*Interviewer:* Tell me what you know of your background and ancestry, Mrs. Barge.

*Mrs. Barge:* My mother and father came from two different areas of Alabama. My mother grew up on the Morrisette Plantation in Alabama. We know that my grandmother was a servant there in 1880. My grandmother had more privileges than other servants because she worked in the house rather than in the fields. And she never lived *in* the slave quarters. When the overseer left the plantation, she and her family were allowed to move into his house. Her father was owned by one Alexander Bryant from Kentucky, and he willed his slaves to his children. From his will, we found that my family that found its way to Alabama was worth \$385. All of my great-grandfather's and great-grandmother's children were born in slavery.

The curious thing is that even though their children were born in slavery, they weren't married until 1867, after the Civil War. And researching the records, we found that there were a surge of marriages after the War, as if only then were they allowed to be married.

Anyway, the Morrisette Plantation was where my grandmother met my grandfather. They were married in 1884 at a time when we were led to believe few blacks ever married. When I was growing up, I knew nothing about all this. Anything related to slavery, we didn't want to hear it. I don't think any blacks wanted to hear anything about slavery. My mother grew up on the Morrisette Plantation and came to Birmingham when she was 21 years old. My father's people came from the area near Panola, Alabama. This may shock you, but the plantation owner had seven or eight children by two of his slaves. One of those offspring, Lorenzo Dancy, was my father's father. We assume my father was illegitimate since there are no records of any marriages there.

*Interviewer:* How was town life near Birmingham different from rural life when you were young?

*Mrs. Barge:* My father seemed to think living near Birmingham was a great improvement over the country. He said he left the country because he hated to be told

what to do and he could be more independent in the city. He always said that he would refuse to be treated like a boy. I've been trying to understand my father's rebelliousness. There were times when he would rebuke people who said certain things to him, because he thought everything had something to do with race. Nobody could ever tell him he couldn't have a thing or do a thing. He carried the Bessemer Housing Authority to court in 1954 to keep them from taking his property for a housing project. No black person had ever challenged the Authority. He didn't win, of course – he knew he wouldn't win. But my father would challenge anybody. I think it went back to his early environment. He felt he and other young men were being dealt a raw deal from the overseers of the land. The workers were being cheated out of their profits.

Mother moved to the Birmingham area to get away from a bad personal situation. But lots of people moved off the land because of crop failures. The land was just worn out and the South was suffering from terrible droughts. People got deep into debt – debts that were kept on the books, even when they had actually been paid off. It was hard to challenge the records kept by the landowners. Through the twenties and thirties, many black people hoboed away from the South because they realized that on the farms the more you worked the more you owed. For myself, I was never taken to the country until I was quite a big girl.

*Interviewer:* So, you would describe yourself as a small-town girl, growing up just outside Birmingham?

*Mrs. Barge:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* And you are writing a history of that area?

*Mrs. Barge:* Yes, McCulley's Quarters was a place where poor, working class black people, like my mother and father, lived until they could afford to move to a bigger house or could afford to buy their own house. Someone I have contacted wrote me that the area was once part of a plantation – a slave quarters. Even when we were there, three white families lived in McCulley's Quarters in large houses on the edge of the neighborhood and owned all the other houses. I remember that one white woman in particular, Mrs. Kate, kind of kept up with what was going on in the neighborhood and came around to help when there was sickness or a death in the black families.

*Interviewer:* What were the houses like? the living conditions?

*Mrs. Barge:* They were all shotgun houses, mostly two-room places. No electricity, of course. Even after TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] came to the Birmingham area, we had no electricity until my father, who could be very stubborn and hot-tempered, fought and fought until he managed to get electricity run to our house. The thing we

hated most about not having electricity was that we couldn't use a radio. It wasn't until about 1940 that we got a radio.

*Interviewer:* About how large was McCulley's Quarters?

*Mrs. Barge:* It was only about a one-block area, but it had everything we needed—a grocery store and a barber shop and a blacksmith shop.

*Interviewer:* How did a typical little girl spend the day when you were about six years old?

*Mrs. Barge:* Oh, I led a sheltered life. Mother always kept me dressed in the dresses she made and I was kept close around the house. I visited neighbors and played house and read. I never wore slacks or jeans. And I never took part in the boys' rough games. Boys picked berries in the summer and sold scrap iron.

*Interviewer:* As a child, did you have contacts with white people? That is, did you have a sense of yourself as black and without certain opportunities?

*Mrs. Barge:* Except for the few white people who lived in the Quarters, as a child I didn't know many white people or have a sense of being discriminated against. My friends were right there in the Quarters. There were very, very few children there, so I remember primarily being with the adults. It wasn't until after I started to school that I became aware that we couldn't go to certain parks, couldn't swim in certain places. During the thirties my mother had to begin taking in washing and ironing for white people, so I began to see the white people she worked for. Then later I came to realize other differences. For example, there were no hospitals for black people. The one or two hospitals that would take black people put them in the basement. And of course the black doctor, who had been taking care of you, would not be allowed to practice—to attend you in the white hospital.

*Interviewer:* Did your family have any contact with white people who were in an economic situation similar to yours—people whom we would call "poor whites"?

*Mrs. Barge:* My mother and I didn't, but my father did at his work. I remember him talking particularly about the woman who worked as a nurse at the factory who always abused any black workers she had to treat who were injured on the job. Many workers would just try to treat their own wounds rather than go to her to help them. Some would pull their own bad teeth for the same reason, rather than be badly treated by some white dentist. A few of the men my father worked with were white and poor. Many years later I learned that he had once gotten into an argument with a white worker, hit him over the head with his lunch bucket, and knocked him out. I never

knew what the argument was about, but my father thought he had killed the man so he left and went back to Aliceville, Alabama. He stayed for a few days until the foreman sent a message to him by my mother telling him that the man wasn't really hurt and that they wanted him to come back to work. Actually, I think my father was more highly regarded by the factory management than white workers were.

*Interviewer:* Were conditions rougher in the 1930s during the Depression, or was it more or less more of the same?

*Mrs. Barge:* We were always poor, but the Depression was definitely worse. People who had had jobs lost them or, like my father, were laid off for periods of time. And if you worked, the pay was often something like 3 or 4 dollars a week. What my mother always said was that people used the old plantation skills to survive: growing gardens, canning, making absolutely everything and buying almost nothing.

*Interviewer:* What was education like for African-Americans in Alabama at that time?

*Mrs. Barge:* My mother, growing up on what had been the Morrisette Plantation, was well educated. Churches maintained schools in the country, and children who showed promise as good students were sought out and sent to these schools, if their parents would pay. My mother was sent for a time to Snow Hill Institute. Her parents scraped and picked cotton so that she could attend, but she didn't finish. The last year the crops were too bad, and she couldn't go. Most, of course, were not educated. My father attended school through the third grade only. In my generation, most children I knew attended school, though many left at an early age to go to work. I believe that compulsory schooling to the age of 16 did not come about until about 1941.

*Interviewer:* What occupations were open to African-Americans as you were growing up?

*Mrs. Barge:* For women, aside from domestic work and labor like laundering, the only professions or trades were nursing and teaching. Of course, you only nursed or taught black people. Many women worked as cooks in private homes or restaurants, as maids in private homes or businesses. There were no black sales clerks in stores. Men worked in the mines, in factories, as delivery boys, carpenters, and bricklayers. They could operate elevators, but they couldn't become firemen or policemen or salesmen. Some black men worked as tailors. Those who went into professions became doctors or dentists or principals or preachers within the black community.

*Interviewer:* What about your father?

*Mrs. Barge:* My father worked first in the mines, then in the mills in the area making pipes. It was extremely hard work. The heat was so intense that few people could

endure pouring the hot metal to shape the pipes. There were, of course, no black foremen. My father said that the white owners and managers assumed that all black men had inexhaustible physical strength. They were ordered to do physically back-breaking jobs over and over and over again. Work in the mills broke the health of many men long before they could retire. My father finally quit because he said that the foremen couldn't get it through their heads that black men didn't have endless strength.

*Interviewer:* What were the legal barriers that African-Americans faced?

*Mrs. Barge:* Well, of course, we weren't allowed to register to vote. Even though I was a schoolteacher for twenty years, I didn't register to vote until the late sixties. There were a few black attorneys who would take on cases, but at least in Birmingham in the thirties and forties, black attorneys couldn't practice in the courthouse. Their very presence in the courtroom was bitterly resented by many people.

*Interviewer:* What was the feeling in the black community about Autherine Lucy's attempt to enter the University of Alabama?

*Mrs. Barge:* They didn't know exactly what to think. But it was horrifying for us. Terrifying. I thought I would have just given up. Everyone was very scared for her life. The older people were especially scared for her. They thought that the people would kill Autherine. There were other cases of black people trying to enter the state universities, in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, at the time. Nobody thought they had much of a chance because every excuse in the world would be brought up. I knew one young woman who was told that she would be accepted, but when her mortgage company heard about it, they threatened to cancel her mortgage. They said if their white customers found out that their company was providing a mortgage for a black person who was trying to go to white schools, they would take their business elsewhere. So they couldn't afford to continue mortgaging her home if she kept trying to go to the university.

*Interviewer:* What about the Montgomery bus boycott?

*Mrs. Barge:* We were always given the same treatment on buses throughout the South that Rosa Parks received. Most of us had to ride the buses. We bought our tickets at the front of the bus and then went around to the back door to get in. A sign marked where the white section ended and the black section began. If the white section was filled and more white people got on, you were ordered out of your seats and the driver would move the sign back to make the white section bigger. It was a terrible humiliation as well as being terribly uncomfortable. We would be jammed together *in* the back like sardines.

Even worse was when some of the whites would get off and some drivers would refuse to move the sign back up so that we could have more room and a few black people could sit down.

*Interviewer:* Mrs. Barge, despite the difficulties and humiliations you have lived with *in* the South, you don't seem to put all white people into the same category.

*Mrs. Barge:* No, you shouldn't put people into categories. Many of those bus drivers treated us badly. We disliked them and made fun of them behind their backs. But some of them were good men who were polite and considerate and would even hold the bus for us when they knew we were late. No, not all black people are the same and not all white people are the same.