

[A Riviera "Conch"]

26075

Wilbur Edward Roberts

Inlet Road and Oak Street

Riviera, Florida

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Veronica D. [Huss?]

[WILBUR EDWARD ROBERTS?] [A? RIVIERA? "CONCH"?]

Wilbur Edward Roberts is [84?] years old; cataracts have rendered him sightless, and he gropes his way cautiously with a red and white cane. I found him dressed in clean [khaki?] trousers and a faded green shirt, sitting under the shade of a [mango?] tree. His snow-white hair was covered with a broad-brim [Nassau?] straw hat, which his wife Mary Jane had made for him.

"Come here and set on this 'ere bench with me where we can talk. Haint them [mangos?] nice? I kaint see em but I can feel their shade. Lemme 'old your 'and; I can talk better that way. Nice soft 'and no 'ard [workin?] lady's 'and.

"Nice day haint it? Warm too, the sun is always good. No cold weather this year, no storms. I feels fine. I can't see the sun nor the water, nor nothin. But I knows it's there, and that 'elps. I'm sure glad you come.

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"I was borned over to the [Bahaymoes?], Great [Charter?] [?] Island, May 24, [1855?]. I'm most 84 now. I useter could see, but not no more, my eyes 'us done gone. The doctors says it's cataracts. But there haint no money fer a noperation. As soon as the welfare worker can get up a doctor, then I'll see again, and everything will be all right. Then I want to go back to the [?] for a visit, not to stay.

"Hey, Mary Jane! You make them younguns come in the 'ouse. Them kids is me grandchildren; Mary Jane she's my wife. They's all trouble, but I loves em anyways. The ony trouble is I haint give em the things they 2 needs most, on haccount of my eyes.

"The govermint, they won't give us no work neither, cause we is still subjects of the Crown Land, and we can't get no American citizenship papers cause we can't read nor write. It haint fair cause most of us offered to fight for America last war. The community station docs give us food and clothes. Say! Won't you please go see the relief office for us, so my gal Bernice can get in the sewin room? Tell them we sure is needin plenty.

"My son-in-law, Bernice's 'usband, 'e's sick; got ulcers of the stummick, can't [get?] well. ['E?] get that way in the war; 'e was gassed. 'e's American, borned in Indiana. That makes his kids Americans too, but Bernice, she's borned to-home, over in the [Bahaymaes?]. There was a law passed in 1922 sayin if you married an American citizen, that automatic made you a citizen too. But Bernice was married before 1922 so she can't get relief work.

"[Well?] gettin back to where I was borned and my ancestors, they was great folks. My folks on both sides was borned and raised in the [Bahaymees?]. My daddy, 'is name was James Frederick Roberts; my mother before she married 'im was named Russell, Ann Elizabeth Russell.

"I remember my grandparents, especially my grandpa on my daddy's side, yet I never seed 'im more than onct or twict. I dreamed of 'im [a? plenty?] — seen 'im in my [??]. 'E was a fine feller, so tall and straight. His name was Mr. Roberts [Duke?]. I can't remember

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his first name, but all the islanders called 'im Mr. Roberts [Duke?]. 'E come from England where 'e was a Duke. 'E was a Duke, and a good man too.

"I've got certain lands comin to me in the British Isles, if I could get to em, cause I'm one of 'is heirs. But I'm too poor to get a 3 lawyer so I can make my claim.

"After bein borned in Great [??] Island, my family stayed thore until I was beginnin to grow, then we moved to a island called `Luber's [Martors?].' In them days there wasn't many folks livin in the islands, and when we wanted to go visitin, we had to [row?] from one island to another. That's the way Labor's [?] was; they haint even got no school there. That's the reason I haint learned to read and write.

"After that we lived on first one island and then another. When I gots to be a man we moved to East Marsh [?] Island. That was where I finally met Mary Jane and married her. I didn't marry her when I first met her; it was a few years later.

"By the time I gets to {Marsh?Arbor?} I can [make?] sails — this I learned from my pa. I also knowed how to fish and turtle and sponge. Course there wasn't much to learn, bein I'd been brung up on it. I find my own skiff.

"After I lives in Marsh 'Arbor for a while, I packs meself off to [Key? West?], where I stayed for two years. I come back to Marsh 'Arbor then, and stayed fourteen months; then I went back to Key West and stayed another year. The last time I come back to Marsh 'Arbor I married Mary Jane Key. I was [?] then; we been married [48?] years now.

"Leavin Mary Jane after gettin her settled, I [?] most of my time on the sea. I'd come 'ome every few weeks to visit. I spent my time fishin and turtlin and spongin. I seen all the [Bahaymees?] and Cuba an Jamaica.

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"My younguns was all borned in Marsh 'Arbor. Mary Jane she 'ad four, three boys and one girl. Bernice, the youngest she's 'one now. Them's here kids you seen a minute ago. One of my boys got kilt at Niagara Falls.

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One of the others is in the North, and the other one is in Miami. We haint seed them for a long time. As for grandchildren, I got plenty of em eighteen grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

"We is glad to live 'ere in the United States, cause there haint much to live for in the islands; everybody's so poor and the work is so hard. We got no right talkin about our 'omeland like that, and I do love it, [cause?] that's where I was borned, but I can't help it even when I gets to [thinkin? about? the?] way them [Britishers?] treats us. They haint like Americans. [Americans?] [help?] their poor, but them Britishers they don't; they're always thinkin how much better they are than folks like us, and they haint got no time to help us.

"A-Course it's better in the islands than what it used to be, but it still can't [come?] up to what we got 'ere. You take them houses what we lived in the islands; they's covered [??] roofs made from our [????]. When a storm comes, [??] seas is [?] up, [???????]. The when the storm's over we [??????] of it.

[?????], but not much. They forbids us to [?????????]. They don't treat us right, that's the reason [?????].

Illegible paragraph 5 then resells em at high prices. It's terrible. We go hungry from it.

"But to get back to me story and the days when I was young man and 'ad left Mary Jane to 'ome in Marsh 'Arbor. At that time, as I said before, I owned my own boat and on [?] trip I took I went almost half way to South America and back, I covered 1400 miles. I 'ad a crew of [?] men and we rode this 'ere little schooner of mine. Believe me, in this day and time if a young man were to make a trip like that he would be rich! Even Lindbergh didn't

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face no danger like what I faced on that trip. I didn't have no navigation instruments, ony a compass, but I knowed all the time where I was and 'ow I was comin back. We was fishin.

“But turtlin and spongin, them's the sights. When spongin we put a dingy over the side of the schooner with two men in it. One man [?] while the other men hooks the sponges. Sponges is hooked with a pole anywhere from ten to forty-five feet long. To find the sponges they look through a home-made glass bottom [??] bucket.

“When the dingy is full up with sponges they go back to the schooner and get them aboard. Later they builds big pens in the shallows near shore and puts the sponges in to soak. The soakin loosens up the black skins of the sponges [?] it can be taken off. Sponges can't be allow to soak moren four or five days, else they'll rot from their own heat, even in the cool sea water. When they is done soakin they is taken and beaten with boards till all that skin and shells and worm [?] is [?] out. Then they're dried and ready for sale. There haint nothin like that for us to do 'ere.

“The turtlin use to bring us good money too. That was a sight — I mean turtlin. The kind we took was called a `[?]-bill' turtle. They have the shells what combs and the likes are made of. We used to [?] what we 6 called `bullys' to catch them in. It's kind of a cast net woven from 15 tread twine and fastened to a circle of wire and loaded with about 30 pounds of lead. First we spots the reptile with our glass-bottom bucket, and if he's restin on the ocean floor we lets the bully down behind 'im, then bring it up quick and right over 'im. Then afore 'e knows what 'appened, we get im all messed up in that twine and is haulin 'im aboard. We ketches turtles in water from ten to ninety feet deep.

“We make away with 'im, and clean the shell and dry it. Sometimes we can trade the meat for fresh vegetables. Sometimes we just give it away. If we's clost enough to a town maybe we sells it.

“Other ways for makin a livin was plentiful too. Besides our little gardens, the island was full of wild gums; and some 'ad 'ogs, others 'ad cattle, and so on. On some islands where

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not many folks lived, the birds nested by the thousands. You could walk along with a stick and kill all you wanted just by swinging the stick.

“I knowed one island where there was only one or two families livin; it was one of them barren islands where haint no soil — nothin but bare rocks. The birds nested there so thick there wasn't no place for them to build their nests. This here story sounds like I'm fibin, but it the truth. Them birds was so thick they had to lay their eggs anywhere. And the people livin there could open their back door in the mornin, and before they could get their fire built to cook breakfast, enuff of them birds comes through that door and laid eggs for a good breakfast.

“All them days is gone. We can't do nothin like all that 'ere. We haint got the boats, nor nets, nor gas, nor nothin. [?] if we had em I doubts if we could make much money.

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“We come to the United States in 1915. We come from the [Bahaymees?] in my own little boat, and it landed in Miami. I sold my boat there cause we had to have some money,. We come on north then, to Singer's Island in Lake Worth acrost from us 'ere. We already 'ad friends from the [Bahaymees?] there. My kids was pretty small then, but we built up on the old inlet, the real one about a mile and a half north of where the inlet is now.

“We stayed there a number of years till a feller from Lake Worth come and claimed 'e owned the land. 'E told us if we'd all pay 'im a dollar a piece for back rent, 'e'd let us stay. Well, that haint much money, so we paid 'im and 'e let us be. 'E come back in a month or two, and this time 'e 'ad papers showin that the land was his. 'E told us if we wanted to stay we'd have to pay 'im \$20 a month. That was too much for poor fisherfolk like us to pay, so we moved. “We moved right here to Riviera. We found out afterwards that 'e didn't own the land at first, but when we give 'im the dollar, that was givin 'im a legal claim.

“I bought my land right where I is now. I payed [\$600?] got it. The United States haint fair in a lot of ways though, after I had done paid \$600 for me lot, they went and charged me

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\$750 for a street assessment tax. Now [?]-'one in the [Bahaymees?] there haint no taxes. And when you buy land it's all yours and your childrens for generations on.

“A-course we haint got much of a ‘ouse ‘ere, but it's a shelter just the same. I'll be happy when the relief gets me eyes fixed to where I can see. then I wants to go back to the [Bahaymees?] for just one more trip. I haint never been able to get back sinst I com acrosst. I sure wish you could go with me.”