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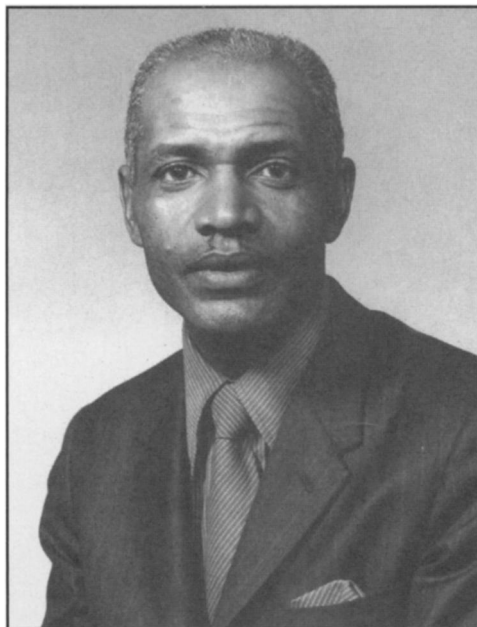
Southern planters ended Reconstruction through violence and expanded sharecropping to push freedpeople "Back Toward Slavery," quoting W. E. B. Du Bois. But cropper families struggled against planter controls. Through painful sacrifice, parents protected their children and used meager earnings for their education. Born in rural Coffee County, Georgia in 1919 (and interviewed by the Behind the Veil project in 1994), Thomas Chatmon was the second of eight children. He was forced to quit school for several years to help support his family following the death of his mother in 1936: "I was a part slave. I have worked many a day on the farm sunup to sundown for 40 cents a day, \$2 a week," Chatmon recalled. While the local school system did not offer African American children an education beyond the seventh grade, Chatmon's parents desperately wanted the young man to have the opportunity to attend college. Among other things, the chance to receive a college education represented the difference between a future life of backbreaking labor and the ability to earn a better living. The odds were not in Chatmon's favor.

As I said, I was a part slave. I have worked many a day on the farm sunup to sundown for 40 cents a day or \$2 a week. That was the going salary for blacks. I don't know about whites, but that's what we made during those times, and of course my father was making 75 cents a day and I was making 40 cents, me and my sister; they paid the adults a little more than they paid the kids. A lot of my kids now wonder how did my father feed eight or ten people with that money. We made it because we raised our food, always had a garden, had our hogs, had our cows and our chickens.

[M]y father learned to be a tobacco specialist. We lived on a man's place. His name was Currin, R. E. Currin. He was from the Carolinas. He was the largest tobacco grower in that county. He raised at that time 50 acres of tobacco. That's all he farmed with, tobacco, no cotton, no corn, no peanuts, just tobacco. My father was a supervisor of that farm of 50 acres of tobacco. Of course, now we didn't spend all our time with him. My father moved from there to another man's place. He was the biggest white man that I knew of in that country. He owned more land than anybody. Of course, we worked tobacco, cotton, corn, peanuts and everything on his farm. But [if] there was one thing unique about my family [it] was this: My mother insisted that we own our own home so that we could be a little bit independent. What we did, we had some

cows, so she sold all the cows to buy a home. Therefore, the white man couldn't come around and demand that we be pulled out of school and work because we lived in our house, and not his house.

[T]he last year [I was] at home with my father. That was the year I was supposed to go back to school. I had been out of school until that year, and I worked the farm and my father worked turpentine so we could clear all the crops. My father would work turpentine to generate enough money to pay for everything until we gathered the crop, and we were going to clear all the crops, and I would have money to go back to school with. My father would have money to buy the kids clothes. So we did, and when we had gathered our crops and sold all the money crops like tobacco, peanuts, and cotton, my father told me that Saturday, "Let's go and settle up so you can get ready to go to school." I said, "Okay." And so we went up to Mr. Thomas's house, to the backyard as usual, and he came out onto the back porch. "Well John, I guess you and Bud came to settle up today." He said, "Yes sir." He got his book out. I had kept a record myself of everything we had gotten from that man that year and I know we didn't owe him, and we were supposed to clear good money. So he came out on the porch and he started thumbing through his book. Finally he looked up at my father and said, "John, you don't have any money com-



Thomas Christopher Columbus Chatmon (1919-2003)

ing, but you cleared your corn." Well, when he said that I reached for my book and my daddy stepped on my foot because he knew them crackers would kill you if you'd dispute their word. The first thing that went through my mind was "how could this man take *all our* money when my father had *six* other children down there, *raggedy*, no *money*, *winter* was coming and he's going to take it *all*." So my father said, "Mr. Thomas, we don't have any money coming?" He said, "No, John, you don't have any money coming, but you're going to clear all your corn." So we said, "Okay," and we started back to the house.

We lived about four or five blocks from him on a country road. This was the second time I'd ever seen my father cry. He started dropping tears, so I told him, "Papa, don't worry about it. I'll make it. I'll go back to school. I'll make it somehow." But anyway, I had ordered me a suit of clothes and the suit was in the post office there in Ocilla. That's where I went to school. That was the county seat. And the suit was \$17.25 to get out, and my father told me, he insisted that I take a load of corn. I had a friend of mine to come out there and pick up and take a load of corn and that's how I got my suit out. But when I left that farm I never did go back. My father would come to town every Saturday and bring the kids and I would see them, and I would give them money. I got a job working in a dry goods store, department store in fact you call it now. We called it a dry goods store. And I had a job picking up at the cleaners. I had three jobs and went to school every day and I was able to still help my father while going to high school. And every week he'd come I'd give him a little money.

When me and my father got back to the house I went in and pulled a pillowcase off my pillow, the little clothing I had, I put in that pillowcase. I looked at my mother's children and I hated to leave them. I was just like a second father to them, and I started walking. It was 12 miles from where we lived to Ocilla. This man [Thomas Harper] passed me walking to town in a new Ford he just had bought with some of the money he took from my father. You know he wouldn't stop to pick me up and ride me to town. And when he came



Thomas Christopher Columbus Chatmon (far right), with his son, Thomas C. Chatmon Jr., age 2, eventually became a successful southwest Georgia businessman. This photograph was taken in front of his beautician supply business in the Harlem section of Albany, Georgia, in January 1956. His son is still connected with the family beauty business and is president of Albany Tomorrow, Inc. (Image courtesy of Thomas C. Chatmon, Jr.)

back from town that night he stopped by the house and blew his horn, my daddy came out and he asked my dad, "Well where's Bud?" My daddy said, "That boy's gone." "Well, tell Bud when he comes back, come on, and I'll let him have some money." My dad told him, "He ain't coming back." And I was a good plow hand, see, because I love farming. "Is he really ain't coming, John?" "No that boy ain't coming back." "Well I bet if I let him have some money . . ." "Naw, he ain't coming back." My daddy told me about it when he came to town. Ain't been back until this day.

Questions for Classroom Discussion

1. What does Chatmon's account indicate about the place of black farmers in the rural economy?
2. What does it reveal about the survival strategies adopted by black families (economic, psychic, and physical survival)?
3. Chatmon compares his condition to that of slaves. In what ways does Chatmon believe he was partially enslaved? How appropriate is this comparison?
4. What kinds of resources and strategies could the family use to improve its economic circumstances? □

Thomas Chatmon's narrative is included in Remembering Jim Crow: African American Tell about Life in the Segregated South (New York: The New Press, 2001), 223-7. An excerpt from the audiotape of his interview can be heard on the Behind the Veil website <<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/btv/workred.html>>