

I



THE WELL

SOUTH BOSTON'S RUSTIC ENVIRONS are intoxicating belying the history of its confederate past. Quaint shops selling antiques populate the downtown. Frame and brick antebellum houses line both sides of the main avenues. The rough calloused tobacco stained hands of field workers with straw hats meet you as you walk about the streets. The side streets are hilly and green. Horses harnessed with plows being pulled by farmers preparing their fields for planting are a common sight. Memories that come to mind are of white and brown chickens having their heads cutoff, their torsos soaked in scalding water to loosen their feathers for picking.

Everything appears to be within walking distance. A sense of nostalgia and of the yesteryear overtakes me when I visit South Boston. The pastel pink hospital on Main Street where I was born exudes a peaceful plantation like aura—tranquil, serene and lazy.

Before indoor plumbing was installed in my grandparents' home, wide grey metal wash tubs were used for bathing. Tall wooden outhouses served as toilets, wood burning cast iron cook stoves cooperated with my grandmother and resulted in scrumptious mouth-watering meals. Manual water pumps in the shape of a backward "f" affixed on top of water wells provided our water. White metal buckets with lids trimmed in red known as "slop jars"—now referred to as "chamber pots"—would be placed in each bedroom at night and emptied each morning to rid the house of human excrement accumulated during the night. All the stuff of country life in the late forties and early fifties in South Boston, Virginia. I remember these artifacts as a chorus of song, a tapestry of hand woven fabric, an unrehearsed cacophony of the rural life made real by my maternal grandmother and grandfather as they fought to make a life out of the hard times in which they lived.

In 1795 Patrick Moon, the eldest of record, my great-great-grandfather was born somewhere near Bannister, Halifax, Virginia, now known as South Boston, Virginia in Halifax County. It is reasonably assumed based upon an examination of census records taken before 1865 that he was owned by Parham Moon, the putative slave owner, who was born in 1806 and who died in 1866 in Halifax County,

Virginia. During his lifetime Parham Moon owned 38 slaves, one of whom was a male age 26 prior to 1870. In the 1870 Census, Patrick Moon was noted to be 35 years of age. Parham Moon was one of the largest slave owners in the county at this time. Parham Moon died leaving three sons: James A., Thomas A., and Edward B. Moon. At his death in July of 1866 he left a will which recited the following, “as the slaves given to the older sons have been liberated by law.”^[1]

Patrick Henry Moon built the family house on College Street with his own hands. The house sat on a half-acre of land. His family lived on the tract of land before title to it was conveyed by deed to Patrick Moon’s mother Elizabeth Johnson Moon on March 15, 1902, from the trustees of the South Boston Mutual Aid Society. The white frame house sat on a hill. It had a wide front porch with narrow decorative columns standing perpendicular to the porch that supported the porch roof. The front yard was small but well maintained. He kept the yards, front and right side neatly cut, using an old iron push mower with rubber tires around the wheels. There was no back yard because in the back of the house there was only land for farming. On the left side there was little grass, just black dirt and bare spots. The west side of the house bordered the Poindexter House. He painted the white wood frames on the exterior every three or four years. The red tin metal roof looked as though it had been painted even if it hadn’t. The front yard had no natural boundary but simply meandered into the adjoining yard on the eastern side of the property on which another house sat that my grandfather also owned, all cut to blend in with a few shrubs and a small dwarf tree at the edge of the front yard between the two houses.



Great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth Johnson Moon, circa 1869

South Boston is a small unincorporated agricultural country town on the south side of Virginia in Halifax County, located 31 miles north of Danville, Virginia not far from the northern border of North Carolina. It is a poor town—and still is by most accounts.

I remember the warm fire my grandmother “Helen,” as she was known to me during my childhood, would make in the fire place in the living room which was off to the left as you entered the house from the front porch. She would plop down with a sigh of exhaustion, dead tired in the upholstered end chair which sat on the left as you entered the living room and fall dead to sleep after a day that began around the house at 5:00 am. In a few moments she would be snoring as we watched *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

My maternal grandmother Helen was hard working: she was always busy washing clothes, cooking or cleaning. A slender thread of a woman, she was fair skinned and was born in 1893 in Halifax County. She was a serious Christian.

Her mother was Margaret Sue Penick born in 1861. Margaret married a “Johnson” but the date of the marriage is unknown. Her maternal grandfather, Armistead Penick, was born a slave of record in Halifax County in 1820.^[2] Armistead married “Susan” who was born in 1825. Armistead was the son of Peter and Milly

Penick. By the will of Nathan Penick, his owner, probated in Halifax County Court on August 22, 1853, Armistead was bequeathed to Nathan Penick's son William Penick. William Penick in settlement of his father's estate purchased Armistead for \$875.00. Armistead's brother Burwell married Isabella Johnson, the sister of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Johnson Moon, Patrick Moon's mother. The Penicks and the Moons were known to each other before their marriage 1924.



Helen Moon, maternal grandmother, circa 1965

Grandmother did a lot of walking to get to her job as a housekeeper. She walked from College Street where the family home was to Main Street near downtown, a distance of at least three miles, possibly more. This was all the way downtown every day. Grandmother was paid \$5.00 a week to keep house and cook for Mr. McKinney, the local Commonwealth's Attorney. Her day began before his kids went to school, and she worked until 7:00 pm each evening. After she finished working in the house, my mother and her brother walked to meet her on most nights. They did this so that she would not have to walk from his home near downtown to hers alone at night.

She suffered from a heart condition. The family was concerned that she might be attacked by derelicts or other unseemly characters. Her slight build and small frame would not enable her to put up much resistance. My mother says it was a "horrible experience" trying to meet her each night to prevent her from walking home alone at night. "It was dark," Mother recalls, "anything could have happened."

During their youth, my mother and her sisters did their share of "days work" as it is called in the Black community. Mother worked for White folks in their homes as an adolescent before she went to college. One White woman in particular, Mary Poindexter, a spinster, lived next door by herself in a large white painted frame house. The house was more than she needed for herself, but she had apparently inherited the house from her family. She had a sister Sally who tried to stay with her on many occasions, but as Mother relates, "you never heard such quarrelling and fighting as between those two, they could not live together." Mary also had a brother Henry who owned a small farm across the street, "you could see the white framed house from the front steps," said mother. The Moons got their milk and butter from Henry Poindexter.

Mary Poindexter taught Mother and her sisters the fundamentals of “good old house” cleaning. “If you wanted to learn how to clean a house, go work for that White woman” the talk was, as recited by mother. “Ms. Mary,” as she was called by the local Blacks, required that my mother and her sister Louise get on their knees to scrub her floors. She made them get into those crevices around the corners and edges of walls and doorways to get the dust that was not visible at first sight, the dust that was trying to hide. Mary was frail, thin and prickly. She owned an old black Buick automobile which she drove with reckless abandon up and down College Street and back and forth from Main Street as though there was no tomorrow. Mother was asked to stay with her at night because the old White woman did not want to be left alone in her old spacious house at night. Since Mary was good enough to let them use the water she paid Mother 50 cents a night each time she stayed with her. Mother and her sisters worked for Mary Poindexter and did many chores around her house for fifty cents an hour until they left home to go to work or to college.

The Moons lived among and around White folks. At this time housing was not, in this locality, segregated by race: Mary lived on the left and Henry in front across the street from grandmother Helen’s house. Before Mary had the well dug, all of the families got their water from a spring not far from the house about a block down the road toward downtown. All of them carried buckets to carry the water from the spring to their houses for cooking and bathing and drinking. After the well was dug, both families, the Poindexters and Moons, shared the well. The well was located on Mary Poindexter’s property. The well was the life blood of their existence on College Street. The role it played in their lives can be better understood by a poem I have written to memorialize it:

The Well

I am the well on the lot adjoining your grandfather’s house in South Boston, Virginia. The waters within me are deep, dark, life giving, sonorous in tone, nourishing and sustaining. I am reflective of many passers-by with stories of division, thirst quenching in my reprieves, my possibilities are endless. The well is my repository. I am confined by my structure but escape is not my purpose.

That which I hold is vital to your life, try living without me.

My primordial essence, my source and my life are as far and as wide as the Nile, the Niger, the Neva, the Mississippi, and the Indus rivers. I was here before any of you, before history, before the Egyptians, the Nubians, the Bubi and the Ewe. I am what you want me to be, intrepid, elastic, impervious, and the genesis.

What I do not know does it matter? I knew it all at one time. I know things beyond your comprehension. Some say it matters not, I think it matters greatly.

I am a well just across the line from your grandmother's yard. Deep, foreboding, resplendent, refreshing, urgent, boiling, helpful and inviting, subject to drying up like a twig or a limb from a dying root.

I am a well, I sit just across the boundary line of your grandmother's house. I require some effort to get to. When you come you must bring something worthwhile that will retain what I have to give. I sit at the end of a trodden path.

To get to me you must pass a wood shed on the right side of the beaten path, my nearest neighbor and friend. We share nature's wisdom of creation.

This shed is full of chopped wood, kindling, wood chips and sawdust, stored there by Patrick Henry Moon. The smell of the wood is refreshing, rustic and awakening to the senses. Here you will find the wood of maple, tulip, oak and pine.

An old ax is posited in the center of the chopping block in the center of the floor it awaits your efforts in the storehouse.

I am constructed in cylindrical shape, made of moss covered granite, sandstone and clay. I extend above the ground and below the surface to an unknown depth.

You come to me for what you need. I provide you with water the substance of life, embodied in my experiences and interred in the bones of the mortar that binds my wounds. I can heal your sores and your soul. I am the perennial elixir of life. My element flows in the blood of man, but I cannot change his heart, his beliefs, or his karma.

I am your well. Your fountain, your rock of ages, that which saves you from aridity and barrenness. I am the well of history. Drink deep, absorb thoroughly and remember.

I am green , I am blue, I am black, I am brown. I am distant yet close. I am what you make of me. What you are embodies me. We are inseparable, indistinguishable from one another. I am more of you than you are.

You are what you are and I am that which I am. Drawn from the elements of the earth and to the elements we shall return. But my existence is eternity.

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Patrick Moon, my grandfather, was a carpenter by trade. He built “hogsheads,” tobacco barrels. He traveled throughout the South selling and making his barrels. He earned a living sufficient to support his family from barrel making and farming. And he was a member of the Masons and the Grand United Order of Oddfellows, national Black fraternal organizations. Patrick and Helen belonged to and attended different churches. He belonged to Mt. Olive Baptist Church and she to First Baptist Church near downtown. Mt. Olive was closer to the home place.

I remember Patrick Moon sitting on his porch rolling his tobacco making his cigarettes and clearing his throat with a double “...ummm ummm.” As young kids, my cousins and I would tease the old man and play hide and seek with him, except he really was not playing.

My grandfather slept in a single bed in the bedroom on the right at the end of the hallway which extended from the front of the house to the dining room in the back. He would go to bed each night about the same time in his bed by the window. The room was dark and smelled of his presence, a musty antique smell, a combination of chopped wood, split logs and old books. The bed was the equivalent of a twin bed, narrow and long, and made of metal with metal springs, with a brown metallic finish which served as a box spring, supporting the single slab of mattress. The bed was unadorned satisfying only the essentials. After years of sleeping in this bed the mattress had automatically adjusted to the contours of his frame.

My grandfather enjoyed a drink of whisky now and then as one of his delights. But his favorite drink was tea. That man loved his tea, hot and cold.

He worked hard and he drank hard. He owned a team of horses that he used to plow his fields and plant his crops. The team was located in the rear of the land in back of the house. He was the first to own an automobile in his community, a black Buick. He drank moonshine as well as standard spirits. The moonshine was distilled over in “Bloodfield,” the Bowery of South Boston. Mother says that “everything went on in Bloodfield.” This area was located not too far from mother’s elementary school. While in his fifties and when Mother was a teenager, after drinking good whisky and moonshine for some time, Patrick Moon experienced a life changing event—what that life changing event was no one knows—one that came close to ending his life, one that almost killed him. He stopped all drinking after that and never drank again. Whatever happened, it was powerful enough to have changed his behavior, but anyone with a substance abuse problem can imagine this consequence.

Mother says she remembers her dad bringing her and her brother candy, “Baby Ruths,” when he returned from town. And she remembered enjoying eating the sweet cherries known as “black hearts” that he grew on the land back of the house. She says “they were so sweet and good,” she smiled when reminiscing about them. Mother also remembered the team of horses her father kept in a barn in the rear of the land they lived on.

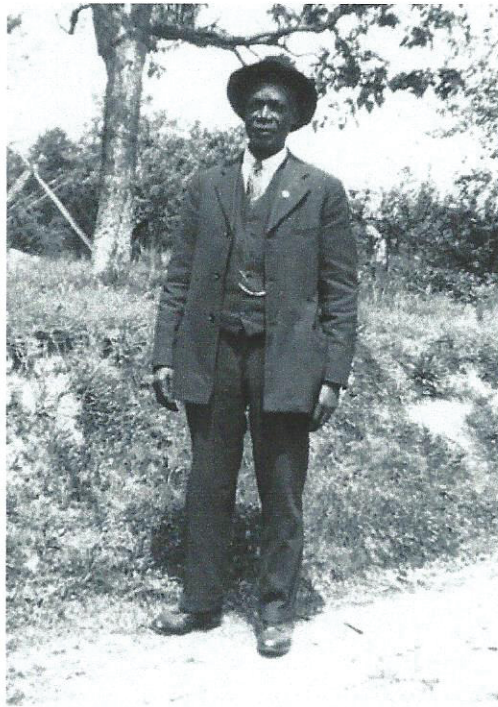
Mother also recounts that she was named for father’s sister who died before she was born. This sister was named “Rose,” and she was blind when she died.

Between late 1962 and 1965, my grandparents moved in with us in Charlottesville. They stayed in my room which had twin beds, and I moved to the bedroom on the other end near the alley. When I arrived home from school, granddad would be gone. I would be curious and concerned figuring that he would wander his way

back home. But when my mother and father came in, they would be frantic and start searching for him around the neighborhood me included. We usually found him near the graveyard, Oakwood Cemetery, in back of the house. My grandfather stayed with us until he passed on October 29, 1963 at 9:15 am at the University of Virginia Hospital. He was 80 years old. At long last his heart had given out.

When I would come home after school after grandfather died, grandmother would be ironing clothes and she would speak about the judgment day coming. She was convinced judgment day was close at hand. Was this because of the recent death of her husband, my grandfather, or was it a premonition about her own death that was not that far away? Grandmother moved away not long after granddad's death. She went to live with her oldest daughter Margaret in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was there that she finally succumbed to a heart condition in February of 1969. She was 76 years old. Though both of my grandparents are buried in South Boston, neither one died there.

When my grandfather died, my father remarked "there was nothing wrong with him, he died of dehydration."



Patrick Moon, maternal grandfather, in South Boston, circa 1953

Patrick Moon, senior, never quit. He and my grandmother, who was twenty years younger than he when they married, raised four children: two sisters of the "half-blood" that my grandmother had before her marriage to Patrick Moon and two children products of their union, Patrick Moon, Jr. born in 1927, and my mother, Rosa Belle Moon born in 1925. Both grandparents had been married before they married each other. The record is in conflict because both Helen and Patrick were recorded in the public record as having been widowed, but Patrick is known to have been divorced before marrying Helen. The genealogical records reveal that the Black families in South Boston after 1865 probably were familiar to each other. It was not unusual for these families to marry within their small community of friends and

neighbors. The Moons, Penicks and Johnsons knew each other and married between the families. My grandfather and grandmother formed a successful union, because they knew what they were getting into and knew what each expected from the other and their past histories.

My mother's oldest sister, Margaret, greatly influenced mother's pursuit of higher education. Margaret taught school in South Boston during Mother's youth at the M. H. Coleman Elementary School, the same grammar school Mother at-

tended. Coleman was within walking distance from the family home on College Street. The white frame College Street house was set on an elevated plot of land, making it a belvedere for the scene beyond. The sun having risen earlier, still shone of its variegated hues, Mother stood looking out over the plowed fields from the front porch of the house on many mornings, dressed in a sky blue jumper, dotted with vertical and horizontal plaid swatches of brown, green and yellow. Her white blouse crisply ironed by a mother who rose before dawn each week day to see that her family was cared for before she went to care for a family not of her own. With her books tucked neatly under her left arm; shoes worn and scuffed but speckled with the remnants of what remained of the polish she rubbed on them a few days earlier; her brown socks, given to her from the McKinney family, crumpled at the top, half up and half down, she could see her grammar school from her front steps. There, even at her young age she knew that her future was not in South Boston. Its circumference was too limited even for her limited vision at that stage of her life. Something inside of her beckoned her toward the horizon, like Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to find the "great white whale" out there somewhere, but not in South Boston.

Mother relates that in 1943 she enrolled at Fort Valley State College because Margaret was there with her husband Robert L. Wynn, who was working on the campus at that time. When Mother first arrived at Fort Valley, she stayed off campus with Margaret and Wynn who were renting an apartment at the time. Mother kept Lorraine, their oldest and only daughter at the time, taking her to and from the baby sitter in between her classes. After her last class she picked up Lorraine and took her home waiting there until Margaret and Wynn came home for the evening. During her second year, Mother moved on campus and Margaret and Wynn moved to North Carolina.

Mother and Dad worked their way through college; they had to. They worked in the college dining room as waitress and waiter. It was there that they met and formed a relationship that would culminate in marriage in 1946. Mother often, upon reflection, says "Lee waited on the faculty in the faculty dining room, and I waited on the students in the student dining hall. Lee got to eat the best of the food." She says that she used her relationship with him to get him to share his good fortune with her from time to time.

During the summer of those years, Mother worked in New York in Westchester County, in Pelham, doing maid's work. She worked for a white family named Baker. Mother related that "Mrs. Baker was a nice lady. Nobody made me do this. I was self-motivated. I had to earn money for my tuition." She says she never got \$10.00 from her parents to support her college education. Helen went to New York and worked at Mrs. Baker's during the time Mother was in school. To save money, she stayed with Margaret in Greensboro, North Carolina one year during her breaks before finishing college. She paid no rent because in exchange for her room and board she babysat Margaret Lorraine. She would hitch a ride home to visit her parents when Margaret drove there, and she made occasional trips by bus paid for from the money she earned working at the college.

In Greensboro, Margaret taught school and Wynn worked as a professional in Agriculture at North Carolina A&T State College. Ironically, Margaret and Mother both ended up marrying men from Georgia. Of the two half sisters, Margaret and

Louise, Margaret went to college and became a teacher; the other, Louise, became a professional caterer. Margaret owned her own home, but Louise never acquired real property. But both of them owned automobiles. Louise was the professional cook of the family and Margaret the least endowed cook in the family.

This was the life that my mother knew as she grew up. She once said of herself that, "I'm just a quiet, conservative country girl."

Hers was not a harsh life, though it was limited in its horizons, but she grew up strong nevertheless: secure in the knowledge of knowing who her father was, having his care and knowing who her mother was and having her love. She was well fed and clothed. Poverty was not her next door neighbor. When she came of age, she left these environs to get an education. Leaving behind the world known as South Boston, for southern Georgia and Richmond, Virginia and later Charlottesville.

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Mother was raised in South Boston, Virginia, in Halifax County. Her father was Patrick Henry Moon and her mother was Helen Wilson Penick. Patrick Henry Moon, was a reticent, taciturn, and austere man with a Willie Stroud, Gary Cooperesque demeanor. Patrick Moon was a tall, lean and balding American of African descent. He was the third generation of Patrick Moons whose past ancestors can be traced to slavery. A man of few words, he was dour, sullen, but also determined, and my youngest son is his namesake.

Patrick Henry Moon, my great-great-grandfather married Judah or Judy who was born in 1805. Both were born somewhere between Roanoke, Halifax County in Virginia. Patrick and Judah had three children William, Fannie and my great grandfather Patrick Moon. My great grandfather was born between 1835 and 1839 in Bannister Township, Halifax County and married Elizabeth "Lizzie" Johnson who was born in 1843. They were married in 1867. From this union, my grandfather Patrick Henry Moon was born between 1862 and 1879. Six other children were born of this union: Mary J., Madison, Rollin, Emely, James T., and Robert.

Of Patrick Henry Moon's two sisters, Louise Boykin or "Aunt Lou," (possibly Mary J.) stayed in the bedroom on the right as you entered the home on College Street. She stayed there until she died. I remember seeing her there when we visited. Emely, his oldest sister, who migrated to Hartford, Connecticut from Social Circle in Atlanta, Georgia, died in Hartford. The Moon family owned the land and the homestead before Patrick and Helen married. It was Emely that Dad did business with to safe guard mother's interest in the College Street homestead, a tale to be discussed further on. There is some confusion in the record about "Aunt Tee Ida," whether she was a sister of my grandfather. I remember this woman as a thin tall dark skinned woman. I remember her coming to the house in South Boston on occasion. She married Bernard, who Mother remembered as one of Helen Moon's cousins. Little is known about the lives of Patrick's brothers.

Patrick and Helen Moon were married on July 16, 1924 in South Boston, Virginia. Two children were born of this union, my mother Rosa Belle born in 1925 and her brother Patrick Henry Moon, Jr., in 1928. Together they raised four children, two from the union of their marriage and two children not born of that



Patrick Moon Sr. and Helen Moon, circa 1956

union, but close siblings nonetheless. Ten to twelve years separated the children of the whole-blood from those of the half-blood.

As a young child visiting South Boston from time to time during the summer and at family gatherings, I seldom interacted with my grandfather. He was present and accounted for, but not integrated into the fabric of the frolic and fun these family gatherings normally entailed. His taciturnity was emblematic of his life style. You could usually find him sitting alone smoking his self-rolled cigarettes on the front porch away from everybody else. Yet, he was responsible for the well-being and the physical facilities within which these gatherings took place. It was as though

Patrick Moon was a picture on the wall, seen but silent, communicating a presence but not a focal point.

His was a life of opaqueness, stolid, productive but not completely understood. As I turn the pages of my nascent memory to recollect my thoughts about this man, I am struck by the paucity of real contacts, the lack of real time spent getting to know my grandfather. I never kissed him or hugged him or got close enough to know his smell. Not to mention getting to know what he thought about his world or the people in it. What a loss. There was no “bonding” with him that we talk about today, the expected connection between children and grandparents.

Perhaps it was not easy for older people of that generation to talk with young folks, to reach out to them. Especially if their personalities did not embrace that sort of thing. Their lives had experienced so much that the younger generation could not relate to, not to mention “bear up under.” The experiences that made up his world included some of the worst of times for Black people. Maybe their world was so absorbed with the troubles they had seen and experienced that silence and introspection were their only true friends.



RESPECT THE WATER

ON ONE OF THE DAYS during my last summer visit with my first cousin, Edwin and his close friend Al, the three of us went to the neighborhood pool, Wilson Woods Pool not far from Edwin's apartment. Edwin and Al had been to summer camps and knew how to swim, but I didn't. The pools in New York were integrated and Whites and Blacks swam together—color did not matter. It was a bright sunny day, the weather was perfect. Edwin and Al got on the diving board in the deep end and dived in. They had been used to doing this because the pool was accessible to them and because they had swimming experience. Like a babe out of water literally, I followed them without hesitation, and I too jumped off of the diving board and into the deep water with no idea about what to do next.

My exposure to swimming was next to nil. I remember going to our segregated swimming pool in Richmond, Virginia and just belly flopping in the shallow water, but nothing resembling swimming. I remember my father who had taken me to the pool, in Richmond, standing outside of the fence and watching me for a few moments before he left. I had not had any swimming lessons or instruction on water safety and that ignorance almost cost me my life. Swimming was not in the family culture, so no emphasis was placed on this essential skill. Benign neglect carries a price. Even well intentioned misjudgments carry a price. Now in the deep water without a clue as to what to do next, panic set in—a swimmer's worst enemy. Survival was at stake. I fought the water, splashing and whirling—all to no avail. The water, ever present, consumed my taut body, and won all battles to displace it in this unequal war. In the nanoseconds of this episode, my life spread across my mind in a collage of pictures. I could see everything that I had done in my short life. I was oblivious to what was going on around me. It was as though I was encased in a time warp viewing a motion picture of my life story being played for my sole attentive benefit, while the world around me was evolving, possibly observing my panic fight for life. The noises of other kids playing in the water and having fun was deaf to my ears. I forgot about Edwin and Al, Mom and Dad, and Aunt Louise, everything was in slow motion. The next thing I remember was being pulled out of the pool by a young White lifeguard. With his right forearm taut around my