

Memories of Old Bessie

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From the nineteen thirties through the nineteen fifties my late grandfather owned a successful grocery supply business near Delta and Strader Avenue in Cincinnati's East End. The area today is undergoing a rapid gentrification from Delta west to Eggleston Avenue with pricey condos and town houses. The family business catered to residents in the area in addition to supplying marine towboat companies on the river and yacht clubs. In my childhood and youth, locals were employed by the railroads, machine shops, printing concerns, Cincinnati Water Works, Coney Island and River Downs Race Track. Decidedly honest, hard working blue collar people. Later, as a youth, I spent summer vacations and weekends clerking, cleaning, and doing odd jobs for my grandfather.

The pungent fragrance of clean sawdust filled the store as meat cutters in blood spattered white aprons dismembered huge carcasses of beef, pork and lamb. Out back wood pens contained live chickens and turkeys to be slaughtered and scalded for plucking and packing in ice. Eggs and vegetables in season were supplied by truck farmers sporting bib overalls, flannel shirts, straw hats and dusty work boots. My grandfather would talk with these men as they chewed Mail Pouch Tobacco and spit in a nearby 'Steamboat Coffee' can on the floor. Scenes I recall now with quaint nostalgia filled with sights, sounds and odors of slaughtering, fresh fruits and vegetables blended with herbs and spices. River towboat cooks loaded supplies needed to feed hungry crews bound for Pittsburgh, Louisville, St. Louis and New Orleans.

In the rear hung a vintage oak wall telephone with the black mouth piece and receiver you held to your ear with a long cord. Grandfather, or one of the employees, would write orders on brown butcher paper to fill and load in one of the vintage trucks with wide running boards.

One day the wall phone rang and my grandfather wrote a home order down on brown paper. I was about eight or nine and the proud owner of a red 'American Flyer' wagon with rubber wheels. "I have an order I'll put in your wagon to take down the street to Miss Bessie Moore's house. You stay on the sidewalk going down and back. You help Bessie if she asks," he said.

I proudly pulled my laden wagon down Eastern Avenue several blocks and entered the gate of an old wood frame house with a picket fence. At the door I saw an ancient,

thin, wizened black lady. Her white hair was tucked in a bun and she wore a long, pristine flowered cotton house dress, high 'granny shoes' and rimless eye glasses. She was a warm brown color still possessing most of her teeth. "Baby, you jus' tug that wagon 'round to the back kitchen door fo' me, you heah?" "Yes, Miss Moore," I piped up in my little voice. I went around where she met me standing on a rickety porch by the kitchen. The porch held a few old wood chairs, a swing suspended on chains that squeaked along with old pots and metal cans filled with various summer flowers and herbs only the ancient ones knew the names of or could cultivate with any success.

I lifted the cans, bottles and bags up one at a time and carried inside. Her arms were thin and bony with gnarled hands stronger than one would suspect. She invited me in and my eyes roamed all around the austere little abode clean as a whistle with the smell of Ivory soap and scoured pine plank floors. Bright calico curtains fluttered at the windows as fresh bread and cookies were cooling on a big old coal range. If she had electricity I never noticed but did see several old glass coal oil lamps here and there. There were old photos in simple frames along with a picture of Jesus holding the baby lamb in his arms on the wall over the fireplace. "Heeee, heeee, boy, you good to help old Bessie and God bless you."

She slowly handed me five shiny pennies and a chocolate cookie before we returned to the porch where I sat on the swing talking and looking in her bright brown eyes. Bessie had me hooked and I knew it. She would have made a wonderful subject for a Normal Rockwell painting. Grandfather later told me Bessie was old—really old—having been born under slavery in Louisiana. Her age then was around 102. She had come to Cincinnati when her husband was employed as a fireman for the Southern Railroad. There was either a daughter or niece living several blocks down who was ancient in her own right. There were several grandsons or great-grandsons with one or two she referred to as "sportin' boys" who would hit her up for money now and then. Bessie attended the nearby AME church down near the old Cincinnati Gas Works. She had known my grandfather for years and had entrusted money and other papers to lock in his big black office safe with the scene of Henry Hudson's ships sailing into New York painted on the door. "Mistah' Russell, you my best white friend around here and I wan' you to keep my things safe. Don' let my boys get any of it. I'll get what I need when I need it and you knows what to do. Lawd above gonna' take me one of these days."

Bessie had worked as a cook and house keeper in several of the mansions that then

marked Walnut Hills and later Hyde Park until her early eighties. She was frugal and had worked hard longer than most people had lived. I came to love old Bessie and would beg my grandfather to let me pull my wagon with groceries when needed. She'd chuckle when my grandfather would tell her he had a shipment of cat fish or pigs feet. There were always the five bright pennies and a cookie.

I missed old Bessie when school started but would always ask my grandfather about her. "Bessie asks how you're doing in school and what you are learning," he would say.

One winter night in the New Year my grandfather came home in the old black Hudson, shut the garage doors and walked slowly over to our house entering the big Victorian dining room. He talked to my mother quietly in the kitchen and then looked down as I sat eating at the table. There was a pause. "Old Bessie died today," he murmured softly. My lip went out, eyes filled with tears. I jumped up from the table, darted to the living room and threw myself on the sofa sobbing. "I know.. .I know," he said patting my head. My parents stood quietly aside. "Bessie was an old, old lady. She lived a long time and worked hard. She was a good lady and thought you were her best little friend in the world."

I've never forgotten old Bessie Moore. Now, driving Eastern Avenue by habit, I pass the vacant site of that old, rickety, unpainted row house now long gone. I remember five bright pennies and a cookie.