

The Unsung Brigade of Palmer's Crossing

by

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It was the last stretch of my journey from Memphis to Gulfport. Considering it was the day before Thanksgiving, the traffic wasn't too bad. The forced detour near the Beverly Drive-In Theatre was an inconvenience though. I was only somewhat accustomed to that part of Hattiesburg and needed help to get back to Highway 49.

Not long after I turned onto Old Airport Road, I noticed a black man walking. He carried a manila folder and headed towards the front door of the Hi-Hat Club. I had attended a B.B. King show at the venue once, so I knew about it.

I pulled over and rolled the window down. "Excuse me, sir!"

The man stopped and turned around. He walked up to my maroon 1974 Pontiac Catalina station wagon.

"Hey, young man," he said. "What can I do for you?"

The guy looked and sounded familiar. I figured he probably reminded me of a relative though.

I sighed. "They got construction on 49 so I had to take a detour. I've been to the Hi-Hat before, but that was years ago. I reckon you can say I'm lost."

The man smiled. "You're in Palmer's Crossing. You ain't lost, son. Keep going on this road, and you'll get back to the highway."

I nodded my head. "Thanks, sir. I appreciate it. I'm Jeremiah Turpentine."

The man smiled. "Nice to meet you. Just call me Mike."

"Nice to meet you, Mike. What's going on in the Hi-Hat?"

"I'm going in here to visit with some friends. We're about to eat Thanksgiving lunch."

"Thanksgiving is tomorrow."

"That's true. It is just a tradition we do. You ought to join us."

"Nah, I need to hurry and get to a conference down in Gulfport."

"The day before Thanksgiving?"

I nodded my head. “Yes, sir. I’m presenting a paper about the advancement of black Mississippians. The research relates to the Civil Rights Movement. I’ll stay in a hotel tonight and head back to Memphis in the morning.”

“It’s a shame you’ll be traveling on Thanksgiving. You need to be with family and friends on that day.”

I nodded my head. “Yeah, I know.”

“Maybe you can have Thanksgiving lunch today with my friends and me.”

I glanced at my watch. “Nah, I have to hurry and get to Gulfport. I don’t want to be late.”

“You have plenty of time, son. You won’t be late. Come with me. You might even learn a thing or two from my friends. They are experts on the movement.”

After we entered the Hi-Hat Club, we walked inside a back room. Distorted lyrics from Thomas A. Dorsey’s “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” blared from the speakers. Several black people were sitting around a dining room table full of food. There was turkey, peas, ham, grated carrots, rolls, pumpkin pie, and coffee. Most of the people wore a combination of overalls and plaid. Despite their hardened faces and scarred bodies, they all seemed happy.

Mike cleared his throat. “Y’all, we have a visitor with us. This is Jeremiah Turpentine. I invited him to lunch.”

I waved at the smiling people. “It is a pleasure to meet y’all.”

Mike pointed to an empty chair. “Jeremiah, you can sit there. These are my friends. This is Pearl Trotter, Emma Mae Evans, Champion Corley, George Nelson, and Jimmy Brown.”

I cleared my throat. “Nice to meet everyone. Mike mentioned y’all are experts on the Civil Rights Movement. I’m headed to a conference in Gulfport to discuss my research on the subject. I want to hear what y’all got to say though.”

Emma Mae laughed. “We gather here all the time to talk about the progress but there’s still more work. We all fought in the movement, but you don’t want to hear from us. Mike has better stories.”

Mike shook his head. “Your roles were significant and important too. Others and I couldn’t have done what we did without folks like y’all. Tell him everything. He needs to hear it.”

Emma Mae smiled. “I worked with some of the most well-known Civil Rights leaders. I was always a shy person and didn’t like attention at all. I wanted to help with the movement though. My Aunt Julia suggested I write speeches and proofread documents for the leaders. I did that for several years.”

Pearl sipped her coffee. “I’m from Montgomery. I used to run a kitchen there to help fund the Civil Rights Movement. My sisters and I used to cook all kinds of food, mostly fried pork chop and chicken sandwiches. When the bus boycott was happening, we would get out there and sell our food. We used the profits to help fund different activities in the movement. That was our way of fighting for the cause.”

Champion wiped crumbs from the corner of his mouth. “I was a businessman for many years. I owned a country store. When black folks couldn’t afford the things they needed, I gave it to them on credit. Whenever the movement needed anything, I provided it. I paid the poll taxes for several black folks who couldn’t afford the fee. That was when I met George. He and I worked together some.”

George looked at me. “Yeah, Champion and I go way back. He did a lot to help black folks during the movement, especially with those poll taxes. I helped them register to vote. Those people beat me and shot at me plenty of times, but I had to keep fighting. That was important. Jimmy, over there, has an interesting story too.”

Jimmy chuckled. “I was the personal driver for a few ministers. I drove them and their families anywhere they needed to go. They paid me a little something, but it wasn’t about the money for me. I did it because I believed in the movement and wanted to see it succeed.”

All their stories impressed me. I never imagined the hidden work that made the Civil Rights Movement a success.

After dessert, Mike walked me to my car, and I headed south. I made it to Gulfport in time to present my research.

Early the next morning, I was desperate to get back to Memphis. I had to drop off Thomas, an old classmate, in Jackson first. He presented his research at the conference too. He had car issues though.

Thomas put his luggage in the back seat. “Jeremiah, where do you want me to put this folder?”

I walked over to him. “What folder?”

He handed me a dusty manila folder. “This is what I’m talking about.”

I immediately recognized it. “Mike must have left this in here.”

“Who is Mike?”

“He’s a guy I met in Palmer’s Crossing, near Hattiesburg. I had Thanksgiving lunch with him and his friends in the Hi-Hat Club.”

Thomas nodded his head. “Yeah, I know where Palmer’s Crossing is. That’s also where the Black Sox play. I’ve been to some of their games. What’s in the folder?”

I opened the folder. “It’s a bunch of letters.”

“What are they about?”

I glanced at a few. “They are handwritten accounts of their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.”

“What kind of work did they do?”

“A lot of it was behind the scenes. They were like the unsung heroes of the movement.”

“That’s interesting, man. What else is in there?”

I removed a picture from the folder and turned it towards Thomas. “That’s Mike, Pearl, Emma Mae, Champion, George, and Jimmy.”

Thomas took the picture from me and examined the front and back. He looked at me and rolled his eyes.

“What is it, man?” I asked him.

“Look at this.” Thomas pointed at Mike’s face. “You know who that is. His name is even on the back.”

I snatched the picture and looked at it. I turned it over. Next to Mike’s name were the initials, MLK. That was when I realized why Mike looked and sounded so familiar. It made little sense though.

I looked at Thomas. “Really? Martin? That can’t be.”

He nodded his head. “Yeah, that’s him, and he’s dead. His nickname was Mike. Some of his close friends called him that. That’s him, man. He has a ton of facial hair on that picture though.”

I removed the pick from my hair. “Well, that explains—”

Thomas cut me off. “That looks like Pearl Trotter on there too. She helped cook meals for workers and protestors during the movement. She died in 1970, a few years after they killed him

in Memphis. What's going on, Jeremiah? Are you okay? The people on this picture have been dead for years. How in the hell did you have lunch with them yesterday?"

After I dropped Thomas off in Jackson, I continued on to Memphis. My ghostly encounter at the Hi-Hat Club in Palmer's Crossing still shook me though. I thought about that unsung brigade of heroes I met and broke bread with at the historic venue. The history books said little about folks like them. The Civil Rights Movement felt their impact though. They pursued equality and fairness as their oppressors bruised, battered, and beat them. Their battles played out in the background. Their efforts were necessary to ensure the success of the movement and its leaders. I figured I would forever give thanks to them for the sacrifices they made. Just as I crossed the Tennessee line, I made a vow to share their stories, and others, to the world.