



Stories from the Heart: Missouri's African American Heritage (MISSOURI HERITAGE READERS)

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All along the river, from the front porches of Hannibal to the neighborhoods of St. Louis to the cotton fields of the Bootheel and west to Kansas City, stories are being told.

This collection of family stories and traditional tales brings to print down-home stories about all walks of African American life. Passed down from grandparents and great-grandparents, they have been lovingly gathered by Gladys Caines Coggsell as she visited Missouri communities and participated in storytelling events over the last two decades. These stories bring to life characters with uncommon courage, strength, will, and wit as they offer insight into African American experiences throughout the state's history.

Often profound, always entertaining, some of these stories hark back to times barely remembered. Many tell of ordinary folks who achieved victories in the face of overwhelming odds. They range from recollections of KKK activities—recalling a Klan leader who owned property on which a black family lived as “the man who was always so nice to us”—to remembered differences between country and city schools and black schoolchildren introduced to Dick and Jane and Little Black Sambo. Stories from the Bootheel shed light on family life, sharecropping, and the mechanization of cotton culture, which in one instance led to a massive migration of rats as the first mechanical cotton pickers came in.

As memorable as the stories are the people who tell them, such as the author's own “Uncle Pete” reporting on a duck epidemic or Evelyn Pulliam of Kennett telling of her resourceful neighbors in North Lilburn. Loretta Washington remembers sitting on her little wooden stool beside her great-grandmother's rocking chair on the front porch in Wardell, mesmerized by stories—and the time when rocking chair and little wooden stool were moved inside and the stories stopped. Marlene Rhodes writes of her mother's hero, Odie, St. Louis “Entrepreneur and English gentleman.”

Whether sharing previously unknown stories from St. Louis or betraying the secret of “Why Dogs Chase Cats,” this book is a rich repository of African American life. And if some of these tales seem unusual, the people remembering them will be the first to tell you: that's the way it was. Coggsell preserves them for posterity and along with them an important slice of Missouri history.

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