

Alston, Clarence: It was 1919 ^[1]

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Clarence Alston: It was 1919

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News and Observer*. Published 9/11/2005. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited 95-year-old Clarence Alston at his home in Navassa, a town a few miles from Wilmington. Today Navassa is a quiet, mainly African-American community fringed by rivers and marshes. Alston told me that, before the Civil War, it was a land of rice plantations and slavery. But in 1869, the Navassa Guano Co. located there and began manufacturing fertilizer out of phosphate rock, fish meal and bird droppings, or guano.

The town of Navassa grew up around the company. The company's name -- and the town's name -- came from a tiny limestone crag between Jamaica and Haiti, the source of the company's phosphate rock. Later, several other fertilizer companies located in Navassa and made it capital of the state's fertilizer industry.

The fertilizer industry is gone now, but Alston recalls its glory days after the First World War as if they were yesterday. He worked in fertilizer plants for half a century and remembers when Navassa was a booming, wide-open town where former slaves, hobos and renegades all found a home.

In Clarence Alston's words:

I was 9 years old when I moved down here. It was 1919, the year after the World War I closed. Navassa was a big place back then. It had a big fertilizer factory and we lived right outside the gate. People called it Bluff Hill -- the Bluff. The Bluff there was nothing to do around here but fertilizer. People left the farm and came to work in the fertilizer mill. And Virginia-Carolina used to have a boat running back and forth to Wilmington to bring hands up here. The boat was named the Ki there used to be a lot of hobos coming through here, catching freight trains, going different places. They'd stop off down there and get a job to the fertilizer plant, and then they'd send back and get the family. They came from everywhere, all I was 11 years old when I first started to work at the factory. See, back then they could work boys, and women, too. Me and my buddy Taft, we would roll wheelbarrows full of fish scrap. Sometimes we used to have 300 pounds on a wheelbarrow. The ships used to come in and bring sulfur. They'd unload the sulfur and carry it over to the place they call the "chamber." In the chamber, they used to burn sulfur and make acid. The acid would be in a big old vat, bigger than this house. They would run the phosphate rocks through the mill and make a dust like flour. Then they'd mix that phosphate rock and the acid together. That would be the base for the batch. That would always be in it. Then they start to putting in the ammonia solution, nitrate of soda, cottonseed oil, fish scrap, tobacco stems, stuff like that. They used to put all that stuff in fertilizer. They used to send half-raw fish there in boxcars. We call it fish scrap. We used to unload it with pitchforks. It used to have maggots in it when we opened the door. It would smell terrible! To tell you the truth, what we used to do, after I started to going out in the evenings, I used to get pine needles, pine brushes, and set them on fire out there. I'd stand up in the smoke to kill the scent off of the fish scrap. Then I could take my I Navassa didn't have anything but a little country store, and the churches, Mount Calvary and Davis Chapel, but we used to have little house parties, people playing guitars and things like that. Later, the piccolo came out. They'd take one of them. They also had a place they called the Cook Shop. A lady named Miss Vick Fields used to run that, and later on, my mother used to run it. It was right inside the factory yard. They served country food. Soul food. Around here, they still talk about a man who came on Navassa right after the war. He wasn't over hardly 5 feet tall, I imagine 140 pounds. Used to wear silk shirts, John B. Stetson box-back suits. His name was Robert Williams, but they give him he had just got out of the Army, and he carried two .45 automatics. White people were scared of him -- that's who he was after. But around here, he was a kind of Robin Hood: Take from the rich, give to the poor. They put him in jail two or three times. Back then, these country stores used to ship stuff in freight cars. He'd break into the boxcars, take stuff and throw it out of the boxcars so people could get it. There'd be cheese, candy, clothes, household items, different things like that. A lot of people met him personal. Back then, the guy that run the Cook Shop was a man named Benjamin Blaney. He used to have gangs up there on Sunday, see? And my mother would cook something to eat for them. She'd be cooking and they'd be drinking. Will Shoot a Pistol used to come there. He'd go there and kiss Mama, and then go in there with the rest of them, drinking and things. Sometimes he had those two .45 automatics in his coat pocket. See, I'd be around the Cook Shop shining shoes for a nickel. He's the first man that gave me a lead dollar for a shoe shine. Had on a pair of black Stacy Adams shoes. He was nice to everybody -- black. This is a joke, but it's true. See, Will Shoot a Pistol used to go to Bo West's house on the Bluff and get whiskey. Now, Bo West had a lady staying next door named Amanda Hooper, and she used always to be talking about Will Shoot a Pistol. But that night, Bo didn't have any liquor, so he sent him right next door to Amanda Hooper. He said, "You go right next door to that lady there, tell her what you want. Tell her I sent you." He went around there, and he told her. She went and gave him the liquor, and he paid her good. She told him come again. And she asked him, "Who might you be, a nice young man dressed so nice?" He said, "My name is Robert Williams, but the people call me Will Shoot a Pistol." And the woman fell right out for dead.

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