

Whitney, Rene: So Many Blessings ^[1]

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Rene Whitney: So Many Blessings

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/18/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Rene Whitney at her home in Delta City, 20 miles northeast of little Washington. At 85 years old, she remembers when the community was not much more than a dusty, windswept field workers' camp. That was during the 1920s and '30s.

Slavery was not a distant memory then. Her grandparents were born into slavery, and she grew up around her great-great-great-great aunt Hack, who lived to be 115 years old and often told stories of her slave days. "I didn't come through that," Mrs. Whitney told me, "but I come through hard times and great tribulations."

As we talked, she often broke into the old gospel songs and patted her feet in time with them.



Rene Whitney. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. ~~This content is for informational purposes only and is not to be used for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.~~

When I was a little bitty girl, I used to get on my knees and pray with my daddy. He'd tell me how to pray. My nickname was Drib, and he'd say, "Drib, when you get to praying to the Father, tell him heaven is the best jewelry and he'll hear you. My mother stayed home raising us until my daddy got sick, then Mama got sick and I had to come out of school. At the age of 14, had to go to work, bring something into the house for my little sisters and brothers 'cause I loved them. I didn't. They just looked so pitiful. Come home and no meat, no flour, maybe two or three baked sweet potatoes laying up on the table.

That's all I'd see. I'd get out there and pick that cotton and I'd buy some beans, some meat, some peas. But I was still dealing with Jesus out there picking cotton. I was still praying. I'd say, Lord help me, and I'd strike up a little song. I got with

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found.
Was blind, but now I see.*

I went right on out there in the field with grown women and picked cotton and broke corn and did just like they did. I was just a little bitty body. Didn't weigh but a 100-something pounds. They'd always want those old women to bring that "little. All my young days I worked hard out in the fields. So hot. Whewww. Couldn't even feel no air. I was sticking corn for 40 cents a day. That bell say "bonggggg" three times, you got to be in that yard or they took a dime off that. You wouldn't get. And plenty of tobacco. All up around Greenville and Ayden and all around like that. We'd go to stay the six weeks out.

They'd have nice little houses to stay in. By the end of the month, I'd have enough money to send my children to school nice and decent.

Ain't God been good to me? It was Jesus give me that strength to work out there on that land like that.

*All my crying will be over
I won't have to cry no more.
I'm gonna sit down on the banks of the river
And I won't be back no more.*

My first child was 5 months old when my first husband got killed. Boy shot him right down at the end of this road. On a Saturday night. And I sure enough had to go out and work then.

The little happiness we would find would be going to church. We went to church all day long Sundays, and Wednesday night was prayer meeting. The way we had fun, they'd set a big program in the church and oh, we'd be glad of that! Always. And I'd be ready to sing that solo. I would. I was the solo girl. They'd have a quartet to sing this hour, then somebody else to sing the next hour, then after awhile they'd call me for the solo. They would like for me to sing. And whew, they were. By the time I was 6 years old, I was going around to churches with Rev. Lovett singing solos. It was a gift God give me. We'd go to Broad Creek, Old Field, Acre Station, right to these two churches here. Rev. Lovett would preach, my daddy v. After Mama and Daddy got sick, I had to stay home on Sundays. I didn't have a dress to wear to church. I couldn't do nothing but stand there and look out the window at the girls walking to church. They had family to help them, you know, but. Yes, it hurt. Hurt me to my heart. But I heard since then, and understood it, that if you serve God, he'll hike the windows in heaven and pour out you so many blessings you won't know where to put them. He did me just like that. He got me th

*I'm going home on the morning train.
Children, I'm going home on the morning train.
That evening train may be too late
I'm going home on the morning train.*

Sometime I'd be walking down the road, I'd say, Lord, maybe something better is going to come after awhile. And yes, it come. God knew one day he was going to fill that room up in there with church clothes. Now I can go to church when I g. I lost my education, so I always said if I ever had any children, I would work nights so they could get their education. All my children went through 12th grade, praise God. I wouldn't let them stay out a day. They had to go to school.

I got all my little brothers and sisters grown up. Raised all of them, and then turned around and raised another crop of children. And I'm still here patting my feet, thank you, Jesus."

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