

Kingsberry-Burt, Sheila: The Undercrust Of Living Dust ^[1]

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Sheila Kingsberry-Burt: The Undercrust Of Living Dust

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/8/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Sheila Kingsberry-Burt made me laugh, broke my heart and lifted my spirits. She told me about wrenching hardships of growing up in a sharecropping family in Warren County, and then said that she'd rather live there than any place else on earth. "Here I can feel the spirit of my grandmother," she told me, "and I love the countryside, the sky and the color of the dirt and the hills."

Kingsberry-Burt is a survivor of poverty, child abuse and teen pregnancy. She is a community activist, a minister, a poet, and she fixed me the best fried chicken I've ever eaten. She is also a single parent who beams like the noonday sun when she talks about her two sons, one an Air Force officer, the other a Morehead Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I interviewed her at her home in Hecks Grove, the little country place where she grew up. Sharecropping and tenant farming were still a way of life for nearly half of all North Carolina farmers when she was a girl in the 1950s. This is how she remembers that life.

In **Sheila Kingsberry-Burt's** words:



Sheila Kingsberry-Burt. Photo by Chris Seward, 2001. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

My grandmother, Carrie Judkins, was strong. She had to be strong, because her and her husband, my grandfather, they were sharecroppers. The life of sharecroppers was a hard life. You worked sunup to sundown. She had to be strong to c
Before my first birthday, my parents, who had married and gone to New York, separated. I remember my grandmother telling me about my mother bringing me and putting me in the bed with her and telling her to take care of me, which is wh
My grandparents were one of probably five or six families who worked this farm. Everybody had so many acres of tobacco. You worked this tobacco today, you worked that tomorrow, and everybody worked in everybody else's field for the mc
We weren't afraid of white people. We knew what our place was. And I have to say that of the white people that my grandparents farmed for, they weren't the meanest white people in the world. I played with their children. If we suffered, we st
Nobody told us different, not even in school. And even if somebody told you different, reality would prove it wrong. Like, the books that we had always had somebody's name in them -- white people's names in them -- before we got them. Lik
The truth is, you missed almost as much time out of school as you did going to school because you had to stay out and work the farm. My grandfather never learned to read or write. I remember teaching him to write his name when I was in fi
It was a life that you could never get ahead in. There was no getting ahead. You got a crop, and the resources for the crop were provided by the farm owner. You worked his farm and your crop. When the harvest time came, you ended up wit
If I recall any time my grandparents being dissatisfied, then it was after harvest, after tobacco had been gotten in and sold, and they had so little because they owed so much. There were times when they would be angry and disappointed. I d
When your money ran out from the sale of that year, you go right back to getting the credit from the farmer till the next year. Always in debt. Always owing. My mother recalls a time that they didn't have anything to eat except the corn that was
Even anything that you got outside of the community, you got in the landowner's name. Sharecroppers didn't have credit. The person they farmed with "stood for" the car. If you went and got a TV, he stood for the television. If my grandmothe
The bottom line is, if my grandparents hadn't survived the hand that was dealt them, then I wouldn't be here. If they didn't have hope. My generation aborted babies in droves, but not my grandparents. They had their children, and it was brave
Even though they didn't have education, even though they didn't own land, even though they were sharecroppers, they believed in God and raised their children up to believe. There is a knowing that I have inside myself that that is one of the
Our government -- the one that governs how fast you go down the highway, and what kind of home you live in, and how much money you can make -- it all comes out of this other unfair, unreal, false system. My grandparents believed that th

David Cecelski explores North Carolina's history, one person at a time.

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Origin - location:

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From:

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8 April 2001 | Cecelski, David S.

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