

Black Soil in the Mississippi Delta: Thriving on the Farm Against the Odds

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From the very first in nearly all the schools some attention had been given to training in handiwork, but now was this training first raised to a dignity that brought in direct touch with the South's magnificent industrial development, and given an emphasis which reminded black folk that before the Temple of Knowledge swing the Gates of Toil.

- W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Quite a few years ago now Mama Queen Bogues came and stayed a summer with my family in Indiana. My brothers and I were fairly young at the time, and during that visit, school was pretty far from our minds. And though she has long since passed, I vividly remember that summer—the last extended time we had with her in spite of several subsequent visits to her farm in Camden, North Carolina—and learning from the woman who had raised my grandmother, my mother, and one of my nine aunts and uncles in spite of never having birthed any children of her own. The thought of that farm in Camden where my mother grew up under the supervision of Mama Queen still makes me smile when I reminisce about the many mornings of pumping water; getting fresh eggs every day; and the smell of cheese grits, bacon, and biscuits. And the education we received from and through her was priceless. Our family was no different from the other Black folk in Camden in that my parents formed an integral part of a rural, tight-knit, African American community.¹ In fact we are related

¹ As I write these words, it is with the shadow of the execution of Andrew Brown, Jr., an unarmed Black man gunned down by police in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Elizabeth City is the closest town to Camden, and in just the two months prior to Mr.

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to almost everyone in town either by blood or marriage (or both).

Most of the Bogues family's land nevertheless has been sold away, with my mother and uncle each retaining about an acre of residential property. My father's family with his ten siblings were sharecroppers also originally from the same town—my parents claim they were “dating” since grammar school! And like my mother's people, the majority of the land my father's family worked now belongs to others. When some years ago my older brother introduced me to one of his friends he met through my aunt, Micheal Allen,² I could see my own roots in the histories he shared about his family and their connection to the land.³ I am the African American grandchild of farm workers whose children, my parents, did not think of themselves as poor. In hindsight, they would say that they lacked many of the niceties most people would consider standard (i.e., store-bought food, toys, and/or clothes). I thought about Mama Queen when

Brown's untimely death, my septuagenarian parents were followed and stopped by the police in Elizabeth City *on two consecutive nights*: once supposedly for failing to come to a complete stop at a stop sign and the next night for what was purportedly a random driver's license check. Though the autopsy revealed that unarmed Andrew Brown was shot in the back of the head, the officers who killed him were never indicted. Black lives matter.

² Micheal Allen owes the spelling of his name to the midwife who assisted in his home birth and who recorded it accordingly on his birth certificate. He said that it was not until his mid-teens that a teacher pointed out, much to his surprise, that the common spelling for his name is Michael.

³ My own family history has its roots in Camden County, the fifth smallest of North Carolina's 100 counties. It is located on northeastern coast of the state and reminds me in many ways of the world about which I would be asked to write with the Allen family farm.

I heard of the Allens, Black farmers in Mississippi who accomplished something my family was unable or unwilling to do, in that not only did they keep their land but grew their property exponentially. I recognized the wealth and value of the stories their family held.

The Allens' experiences also brought to mind W. E. B. Du Bois's words when he addressed the Meaning of Progress in his landmark work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1966). He spoke about his involvement in teaching in the South. He marveled at the will and resilience of the people whom he came to know and openly wondered how they would overcome the many challenges confronting them. Upon his return to where he once taught, he extrapolated on the meaning of progress in that as the town had become more modernized, some of his former students suffered economically and psychologically. Du Bois's descriptions are similar yet different to the way that Micheal Allen and his sister Mary Jean reminiscence about education in rural Mississippi. Though their story is not unique in certain ways, the Allen family farm and the experiences that arose in and around it further enrich the exemplary fabric of Black rural education.

Indeed, Black lives matter in rural America, too, and the lives associated with the Allen family farm help illustrate relevant and critical geography for understanding dominant ideologies of the state, political economy, race relations, social/racial survival, and education. Herbert Allen, Sr., and his wife Nomie Jean Dotson Allen were Black farmers living in Humphreys County, Mississippi, home of Silver City and located almost 70 miles due north of Jackson in the Delta flatlands. Their story and that of their family resembles that of many American small farmers today, except that they not only weathered economic and environmental storms but also social, political, and racial ones in maintaining the property, being successful, and ensuring the education and growth of their children. Their success could be measured by their ability to keep and grow the land in spite of daunting threats of dispossession and, secondly, because of the way the various generations used their education to better themselves and their community.

My research using archival work and via personal interviews with the Allen siblings started in 2015 and is for a book project tentatively titled *Black Soil: The Allen Family Farm Story*, which will be a more comprehensive family overview. With this current essay, I hope to provide illustrative evidence of how an African American household in the Mississippi Delta region used various types of education in their successful road to personal and professional survival, if not prosperity. Whereas Du Bois (1903/1966) in *The Souls of Black Folk* ventured to the South to understand the racial underpinnings of our nation at the turn of the 20th century, in my work I hope

to celebrate a less frequently depicted microcosm of Black lives while underscoring the collective memory of an ever-diminishing sector of our community: Black rural farmers. The Allens provide a rich, profound narrative of Black American perseverance, fortitude, and uplift—within and beyond the Veil.

Du Bois (1903/1966) employed the concept of the Veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* to describe how, in the South especially, a person of African descent sees the world and at the same time is seen through a colored lens. Thus, though translucent, the Veil distorts what that person observes while it also inhibits that same person from being seen just as they are: human. The Allens seldom portray their struggles and triumphs in starkly racial terms, but they are all keenly aware of how being Black exponentially increased the challenges the family confronted. While they may have pondered or even visited the warmth of other suns, like those described Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 work, the Allen family stayed and worked the land as they allowed the land to work for them.⁴ Similar to what Booker T. Washington would espouse in his "Atlanta Exposition Address" (1966/1901), the Allens cast down their buckets where they were, labored unflinching, sweat mercilessly, and created something out of next to nothing. The singlemindedness of the Allens in their undertakings in Mississippi depicts a family that, though rooted in the land, was never confined nor limited by their surroundings. We also observe how the Gates of Toil (Du Bois, 1903/1966) become a landmark rather than a destination. Black rural lives are intricately tied to the land—they survive, thrive, and achieve. And they matter.

* * *

The father of Herbert Allen, Sr., Nathan, acquired 40 acres of land in the 1940s, and later, under the son's ownership and with the help of his wife and nine children, the quantity of land eventually increased to 380 acres. Herbert Sr. met and married his future wife, Nomie Allen, when they were both quite young. The story goes that she was 16 and ready to head north with her family in an attempt to better her fortunes, when 19-year-old Herbert asked her parents for permission for Nomie to stay with him and marry. What they may have lacked in material possessions they more than compensated in their love of each other, their belief in their potential, and their faith in God. Neither had any formal education past the ninth grade, but they unflinchingly

⁴ I reference Isabel Wilkerson's (2010) phenomenal book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, because, among other reasons, I envision my work as one similar to hers, vividly chronicling Black migration from the South by sharing the stories of the people who endured those treks. In contrast, the Allens conscientiously choose to stay and live with the land.

stressed the importance of learning both in school and on the farm. As Micheal would attest: “The things that they knew about the soil and animals and things of that nature, on how to react and what to do,”⁵ still to this day amazes him:

To me, my parents, even though they had very limited formal education, they were the brightest people that I know, because they were educated in life. And that’s so important. You can’t buy that. And they knew exactly what they wanted to do. They wanted to make sure that all of their kids had an opportunity, not just to finish high school, but to go to the next level, too. And my daddy spared no expense in taking care of that.

Mary Jean agreed:

My dad and mom both had a ninth-grade education, so they wanted their children to be educated and well versed. My daddy would always quote parts of a poem that stuck with me throughout life, “Take a task great or small, do it well or not at all.” Daddy would say that his father and mother instilled strong values in him, and he made sure to pass the same values to me.

They possessed the qualities necessary to flourish as Black farmers in the South.

The siblings are quick to remind everyone that the 40 acres Nathan Allen received from the government were not a gift. “It was a loan! They loaned you the money to be able to purchase that land. They didn’t just give it to you. You had to pay it back,” Mary Jean states. Her words remind us of Du Bois (1903/1966) in *Souls*: “The keynote of the Black Belt is debt; not commercial credit, but debt in the sense of the continued inability on the part of the mass of the population to make income cover expenses” (p. 303). The Allens too faced the daily challenges of garnering a living wage with farm earnings. As Chuck Andreas, farmer-educator and writer for Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service, noted, many Black farmers were unable to overcome the challenges they faced:

There has been a systematic removal of Black people from agricultural land since emancipation. Emancipated slaves never received their 40 acres and a mule. Despite that, by 1900, Black farmers owned around 15% of U.S. farmland. Today, that stands at less than 2%. The reason

that number has fallen so drastically is because of violence and discrimination. In U.S. law, racial discrimination can only be prosecuted if you can prove the offender had discriminatory intent. This is intentionally an almost- impossible legal standard to meet.

Likewise, Analea Hope Hassberg (2021) contextualized the harsh reality in her introduction to *We Are Each Other’s Harvest: Celebrating African American Farmers, Land and Legacy*: “Those who remained farmers in the rural South struggled to stay viable as the number of large and corporately owned farms grew and as agricultural technology and crop production became more advanced and expensive” (p. 9). Hassberg further explained that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the agency charged with aiding and assisting struggling farmers, among others, systematically turned a deaf ear to complaints of discrimination and economic hardship faced by Black farmers:

Over the course of several decades, tens of thousands of Black farmers sent hundreds of complaints *per week* [emphasis added] to the USDA’s Civil Rights office until it officially closed in 1983. In 1984 and 1985, the USDA *lent* [emphasis added] \$1.3 billion to farmers to buy land. Of the roughly sixteen thousand farmers who received loans, 209 of them were Black. (p. 9)

Nathan Allen was able to become the proprietor of his land and bequeathed it to Herbert Sr. in 1955 upon his demise.

The slow, meticulous, and methodical growth of that initial 40 acres into more than 380 acres took place over the course of many years. At times, Herbert Sr. would actively seek out land to purchase. Other times, mainly Black land owners and their families would offer him the first option on a tract they hoped to rid themselves of. Clarence, the third oldest son explained:

How my dad achieved success was because people in the area knew about him. He started with his father’s 40 acres. And he started farming. We had a lot of Black people in our area that farmed. And so when they got old, their kids were getting ready to go up North. They didn’t want that land any more. They didn’t really want to sell it to people who they didn’t know. See, my father had worked their land. He was renting it from them. It was like sharecropping. And they said, “Listen, we’ll sell it to you.” And that’s how he acquired it: 40 acres at a time. Every time some land became available—either they would pass

⁵ All quotations from the Allen family members derive from personal interviews with me that began in August 2015 and have continued intermittently to the present.

or the kids decided they wanted to sell it—they would call him first.

They grew the farm substantially, and they were also blessed to have nine children. First came the girls, three of them: Mary Jean, Charlene, and Grace, each about two years apart. They would be followed by six boys: Herbert, Albert, Clarence, Carl, Freddie, and Micheal. We say their names because their lives matter. All are currently alive and prospering, with the exception of Carl who passed in 2012 from heart failure. The siblings remain very close, calling and texting each other almost daily, and they remain connected to the land in many ways. Each of them, including Carl's son, has their own designated portion of the farm, and the land is worked primarily by Herbert, or it is rented out.

* * *

The family farm constitutes more than just a place to raise a family. In discussing the dynamics of the group, the Allens all mention that the way they were raised had a lot to do with things such as their birth order, the rural setting, and being farmers. The population of Silver City has never grown beyond 2,300 people. The county seat of Humphreys County, it lies near Yazoo City, Mississippi, and for many years held only two elementary schools.

The school for the Black children was called Wormack Hodge Elementary, which fed into what was then the segregated McNair High School. Mary Jean stated, "In 1967, I was transferred to the southern part of Humphreys County to attend another school by the name of Montgomery High School due to the federal government's decision to rezone. And in 1968, I graduated from Montgomery High School." However, with nine children attending the public schools during a 20-year span, the experiences of the siblings differed greatly. The oldest—the girls—attended the Wormack Hodge Elementary. "It was just a one-building school with all the grades," Mary Jean said. "They had the older kids on one side and the younger ones on the other. And of course, it was segregated. That's just the way things were back then," she continued. Mary Jean neither waxed poetic about the experience nor did she scorn it. "It was school, and it was where we went to learn," she said. Nevertheless, for the siblings who followed, the trajectory was more crooked than straight.

Grace, the youngest of the daughters, had to deal with the winds of change in terms of desegregation. "Grace had it worst. She had to switch schools a couple times when the county decided to redistrict the schools," said Mary Jean. "The rest of us for the most part got to attend the same school the whole time, whether it was Humphreys

County or Montgomery," she stated.⁶ The boys were able to attend the redistricted school. In their discussions with me, "redistricting" was the word they used to describe the new school situation. However, in describing what actually happened, they were quite aware of the desegregation that took place.

And in typical fashion, the Black kids and the poor White kids were those who were redistricted for the most part. The White segregationists who could afford to went to the newly opened private schools. Still, in recounting their experience, the siblings were rather matter-of-fact about the whole endeavor.

Life at the school would not detract from the responsibilities of the farm, however, and they all had a significant part to play. Hard work became a part of their daily life, and having a large family greatly benefited the demands of the farm. Mary Jean's comments provide context:

Daddy told me that we (the family) could make a greater dent in the numbers by working together. I learned how to pick cotton working beside my daddy, and at the end of the work day, my daddy would total the amount of pounds the family accumulated during the work day. Daddy would always pick 500 pounds or more, and I would pick 200 pounds or more using a 9-foot cotton sack on our backs. I had to make my daddy proud of me in every way, and I knew picking 200 pounds or more of cotton would make him proud. My mother taught me how to chop cotton, and because I was learning this skill, I was able make additional money for the family by chopping crops alone with my mother for other farmers in the area as needed.⁷ Other farmers would pay us \$3.00 per person a day, totaling \$15.00 per person a week, working 12-hour days to aid in the financials for the family.

The reality for the older siblings differed somewhat from that of the younger ones. That same redistricting meant that the other siblings' elementary education and beyond were mostly integrated. Though as Micheal pointed out:

⁶ Mary Jean also added: "What they did was they brought it all back to the fold. It was McNair area, but they couldn't leave it as McNair, because you brought the White school and the Black school together. So the White school didn't want to take on the Black school's name and the Black school didn't want to take on the White school's name, so they had to come up with a name that would be acceptable for all of them. That's where they got the Humphreys County School District from."

⁷ Chopping cotton refers to pulling the weeds that tended to grow among the cotton plants.

We're talking about Mississippi, and I'm quite sure this is happening throughout all the Southern states. There was segregation throughout. The White parents or the White people in that area, they created their own schools. They called them academies. And it was a private academy. In every county you go to in the state of Mississippi, there's an academy somewhere along the line that only caters to White kids. Now, as time went on, when they started playing each other in football, they started integrating the football teams. Even when I was there, it was like a total separation between the kids that could afford to go to that school and the ones they gave scholarships to. We did have poor White people that couldn't afford the school nor scholarships that actually went to our schools, but there wasn't many of them.

The views of these academies differ somewhat in that according to Micheal: "There were no Black folks in that academy when I was in high school. Not one. And I can attest to that. When I graduated, there were no Black folks at Humphrey County Academy. None. Not even the Brown ones—the ones that were mixed [race]." He added, "We knew everybody! All the cotton pickers, all the people that came and worked for us on the farm, we knew everybody. And I don't remember [Black folks at that school]." Micheal and his siblings emphasized their awareness of racial realities of Mississippi and the unwritten—and sometimes written—rules governing separation of the Black and White people.

Grace stated, "Racism and segregation were very prevalent in the Delta. That was another thing. You had to go in with your hat off and your head bowed to get some of the things that you needed. And you were not too proud to bow your head and take off your hat because you knew your family had to survive." The Allens' focus concerned the well-being of the family, and for the family to prosper the farm had to prosper. In fact, each of them during their school-age years would be absent for two days a week to help during harvest season. The teachers knew and understood why they would not be in class, and though they were excused, the siblings were still responsible for any work that had been assigned. Grace made it clear:

When it was time to harvest the cotton, we would miss two days out of the week from school to pick cotton. But everybody in the community did the same thing. And my dad, he hired those people to help him get his crops out, until we got a cotton picker. We didn't pick cotton after the cotton picker. We only picked the end of the row as the

machine was hard to turn around, so we picked the end the row. My mom used that extra money picking the end of the row to purchase our school supplies for the year.

Charlene and Mary Jean pointed out that even when they were away at college, they arranged their schedule so that during harvest season, they went home to help chop cotton, pick peas, or assist with whatever help needed to be done. These activities included driving the tractors and managing heavy farm equipment. Indeed, all the siblings made time to help even when they left home, as Micheal said, "As time went on and Mary Jean and them had started their families and some of us were away at college at that time, and the alarm goes off that we need to help out on the farm. I remember everybody coming home to help." He continued,

I even had my girlfriend—my future wife—coming down to help us out. "I'm chopping cotton. You coming with me, you gotta work girl!" They had her picking peas and everything else. When I went away to train for the Army, she used to come to Charlene's house to spend the weekend and work on the farm. And she spent a couple nights with Mary Jean and them too.

Mary Jean replied, "We were trying to train her to see whether or not she was spoiled like Micheal. But it wasn't hard for her to learn. She was willing to take it all on to see what was going on." Hard work and determination formed the foundation of their lives, and having a solid education undisputedly fortified that foundation.

* * *

The educational setting described here reflects well what bell hooks (1994) depicted in *Teaching to Transgress*. The entire community was involved in the education of these young Black lives, and the very act of teaching constituted an act of transgression: "For Black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in anti-racist struggle. Indeed, my all-Black school became the location where I experienced learning as revolution" (hooks, 1994, p. 84). The Allen children epitomized what Theresa Perry (2003) called the African American philosophy of education: "You pursued learning so you could work for the racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people" (p. 11). For the Allens, the family involvement took various forms. There was constant learning that took place around that house. Every Sunday afternoon, Herbert Sr. would take some of the children for

a ride with him.⁸ He would show them various aspects of the farm and talk to them about life, living things, important matters to keep in mind as they grew. They could ask questions and be educated about any topics on their minds.

Even their Uncle CV (Charles Van Allen, Sr.), a World War II veteran, served as the Boy Scout leader, worked in the school cafeteria, and drove the school bus. He would be very influential through his various interactions in the siblings' lives. Charlene, too, would be extremely active in the anti-racist struggle in that for 37.5 years she was a teacher in Humphreys County. She taught biology, botany-zoology, chemistry, physical science, and physics—all with a creativity and imagination that captivated her students. And she was willing to find innovative ways to ensure the students received the tools they needed when resources were scarce. For example, when faced with the choice between obtaining microscopes or frog specimens for her lab, she told the school to purchase the microscopes and had the boys go out and capture the frogs that they would later study. Additionally, Charlene occupied leadership and mentor roles in the school district such as the assistant girls' basketball coach, the 20-year sponsor of a service-learning group, Science Fair organizer, and 15-year organizer of blood drives. Charlene talked about her passion for education:

I did chemistry, biology, botany, physics, environmental science. Everything you could imagine... That's my passion. I love it. I do it right now. I farm all day, on a low scale: farming, environmental science. I taught it. All the trees around the school, I planted them... I love science. I'm the science teacher of the family.

Because of their age difference, Charlene and Mary Jean's careers as teachers coincided with Micheal's run as a student. At various points the two taught their youngest brother in grade school and secondary school. As Mary Jean pointed out, the situation presented its own unique challenges for all those involved:

This is the way it went down. Micheal always thought he could have his way. He was man-ish. He would come into school every day without his tools to work with. So, the first day—you know children are watching and paying attention to see if you give somebody some leeway. They didn't know he was my brother, because number one: my [married] name was Nutall and his name was Allen. So I told him, "Don't you come back in here

another day without your tools to work with, your pencils." Our parents would make sure that he had everything that he needed before he got home, so he didn't really have to look for anything. He'd come into the classroom because he liked these little girls, and he'd give all his tools away. So the next day that he came in like that—I said, "I'm not going to put up with this, and I'm not going to do this every day." Daddy said, "If he comes into the room and doesn't have what he needs, why don't you give me a call." And that's what I did. "Daddy, come deal with this."

She added, "I hated to do that. Daddy came up there with that long switch in his back pocket and he tightened him up. And anyway, after that, he didn't give his tools away any more."

Micheal's take on the situation was somewhat different, as he stated half-jokingly:

Her name was Mrs. Nutall through the week and Mary Jean on Sundays and Saturdays. She was my third-grade teacher and I think I saw her again at some point... But it was back with Mrs. Nutall who wanted to spank me for no reason. She tried to make an example of me. One of the girls in class needed pencils because her mama wasn't giving them to her. [Mary Jean interrupted: He thought she was pretty.] Yeah, she was. I got two spankings on the same day! ... Then I couldn't do anything at school wrong, because if not, I had a snitch at school and she would call Mama and tell her what I was doing wrong... Can you imagine. Just think about this. After a while, everybody was putting this together. "Mrs. Nutall is your sister!?" And then I'm getting all these jokes later on about Nutall, so I'm fighting every day for her and she doesn't even know it. And Mrs. [Charlene] Anderson, they think she's a mad scientist, and that she's going to burn up the place with those tubes in there. I'm fighting with them too! So, I'm fighting everybody, because I'm protecting my sisters and they don't even know it. They should be ashamed. Do you know how many times I was in the office because I was fighting to defend my sisters, especially Charlene? They'd say, "I hate her! I hate her! She's a mad, crazy lady!" Stop talking about my sister man! And then boom, boom, boom, there it is and now I'm in the office.

Micheal added that even having his uncle as the bus driver had its issues because his uncle would make sure to save the first two rows of seats for the siblings—Freddie, Carl, and

⁸ I found out too that Herbert Sr.'s mother also taught Sunday school during her later years. I hope to learn more about her very fascinating story and her role in educating the community.

Micheal—during his route. However, Micheal explained, “what it did was make all those kids hate us so bad. They said we were getting special treatment. At the time, I thought it was great. I didn’t have to go back there and sit with anybody! I had my own seat.” And with one K–12 bus for their section of town, all the kids knew who the Allens were and formed their opinions.

After serving in the Army, Micheal would eventually join the police force where he worked for five years. He pointed out that it was a police officer and fireman who were the two professionals who came to the school for Career Day, and he knew that he did not want to fight fires.

Assessing the learning environment from today’s perspective, however, we might be further reminded of bell hooks’s (1994) words about that learning community. Though hooks talked about her own educational experience, she could just as well have been describing that of the Allens:

Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission. To fulfill that mission my teachers made sure that they “knew” us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshiped, what our homes were like and how we were treated by our families. (p. 84)

The teachers in Humphreys County schools truly did know their students. Similar to other parts of the South, the schools would experience an identity change during integration. The board’s efforts went through a few different renditions—busing the Black kids across town to a different school, for example—before settling on a new high school and new name, Humphreys County High School, ostensibly with the idea of having a new beginning that was neither historically Black nor White. Though many Black teachers lost their jobs with integration, some of them also moved to work at the new schools, thus enabling some continuity of these learning communities.⁹

Furthermore, to return to hooks’s (1994) quote, another element that must be mentioned in the educational building blocks for the family was the church. Their parents instilled the importance of religion in all of them. For one period of time Charlene taught Sunday school. Micheal stated,

We would walk over a mile to get to Sunday school, and you had to get there on time, according to Uncle CV’s schedule. And sometimes he would

drive right by us. “Pick us up, man!” And let me tell you our Sundays were long. We started at 9 a.m., and we didn’t get home until something like 3 p.m. Especially on Second Sunday. It was so long.

Mary Jean replied, “Micheal needed all that he got! We were reared up in the church. The doors of the church would open, and we would be there.” To this day, church is something that Clarence encourages in the young people whom he mentors using his business: “The only rule I have is that you must go to church on Sunday morning. Now, we can party all night Saturday night. I don’t care what time we get home, but Sunday morning, we’re going to church.” He added, “And they respected that. And they still keep in touch. I had one guy call me just yesterday, ‘Hey Dad, I’m in town. I’m going to stop by and holla at ya.’ ... And every time they come home; they’re going to say something to me.”

The idea of constantly giving back and helping to uplift the community appears throughout all the siblings’ interviews and testimonies. Freddie talked about it fondly:

We had herds of cows and we had hogs, chicken, geese. The kindergartens in our community used to come to my parents’ house, and they used to think it was a zoo! The kindergartens would schedule field trips to our parents’ house. And on those days, the farm was shut down until the children left. My daddy, he would get out there. We had to move all of the equipment out of the way. We had hogs, we had pigs, we had cows, we had goats, we had geese, we had chickens, we had hens, we had guineas, we had ducks. There might be two or three school buses of kids. They would cook hotdogs for them, that Daddy would buy and little juice boxes. And the people really enjoyed it. Sometimes we would get groups or friends that would come all the way from Jackson. It was fascinating for the children to see a chicken sitting on its nest.

The generosity of giving back would also be evidenced in how they maintained and shared their crops.

During the time when the siblings lived on the farm, the family maintained a small patch of land, perhaps a quarter of an acre, in which they would grow produce for people in the area to come and harvest for free. Called a “truck patch,” the only expectation was that you only took what you and your family would consume and not sell it at market. Grace stated,

⁹ J. B. Mayo, Jr., (2007) provided powerful examples of the sometimes devastating effects of integration on Black teachers in his article, “Quiet Warriors: Black Teachers’ Memories of Integration in Two Virginia Localities.”

We'd leave the cotton field at 7 o'clock, and then we'd go to the truck patch... It was a huge garden. We'd pick that, then we'd get home and take baths and start over the next day. And that was May to mid-August. We worked hard, but we were happy little hard workers.

The Allens maintained the truck patch, and folks in their area could come and pick what they wanted when the crops were ready. The same type of philanthropy occurred during a hog killing: All the families in the area were welcome and encouraged to take part in the festivities. The Allen parents instilled in all their children these values of generosity, compassion, and kindness, as well as a very strong work ethic and the importance of an education.

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Though Herbert Sr. and Nomie Allen only attended school through the ninth grade, as Micheal likes to say, they had master's degrees in life. All nine of their children pursued postsecondary education—primarily at historically Black colleges in Mississippi—with the majority achieving graduate degrees. And all of them were successful: Mary Jean Hawkins (1950) taught elementary education for 36.5 years in Humphreys County; Charlene Anderson (1952) taught high school sciences in Humphreys County for 37.5 years; Grace Allen Younger (1953) was a computer analyst for the Mississippi Department of Health; Herbert Allen, Jr., (1956) is a farmer and head proprietor of the Allen family farm; Albert Allen (1957) is the founder and CEO of Allen Heating and Cooling; Clarence Allen (1959) is the founder and CEO of Allen's Recycling LLC and the first African American in Mississippi to earn the state's Environmental Hero Award; Carl Allen (1961–2006) was a farmer and master welder whose creations can still be found throughout northern Mississippi; Freddie Allen (1962) had a 23-year career with the Mississippi Department of Corrections while also working on the Allen Family Farm, which he does full-time now; and Micheal Allen (1965) is a U.S. Army veteran of a foreign war (Desert Storm), was a 20-plus-year cloud engineer with Cisco Systems, and is currently teaching courses at Gwinnett Technical College.

Collectively and individually, living and growing up in rural Mississippi, the Allens were leaders in their community, and many people came to depend on and admire them for their hard work, dedication, and love. Theirs was a conscious decision to keep and even grow the land in spite of debt, racism, and systematic oppression prevalent in—though not exclusive to—the Mississippi Delta region. They were not affluent, yet they made sure that the needs of the family were always met, and the right hand of fellowship was perpetually extended. Today, the old schools no longer

exist, and if the buildings are still standing, most have been repurposed. Nevertheless, the education and the growth never stopped. The Allen family made and continues to make a difference, and each and every one of their Black lives matter. Mama Queen would have known this, as seen from the way she taught my mother, as seen by the way my mother taught me, and hopefully visible in the way I teach our children.

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