

## **Battling The Blessings** **by Terry Fulgham**

Battling the Blessings, Is an Autobiography of One man Struggle of Courage and Hope and His Personal Journey Through years of alcoholic/drug addiction, failed marriage, family life, illness, and finally self-discovery.

### **Excerpt**

#### Chapter 1 On the Porch

On a cool autumn day in 1956, I was 9 years old, sitting on the front porch, waiting for my grandfather, Papa Manchester, to come home from work. I couldn't help but wonder what I would say to him when I saw him. I was looking up and down the neighborhood, not for any real reason, but mostly trying to get my thoughts together.

The number one songs on the music charts that year were "Don't Be Cruel/Hound Dog" by Elvis Presley and "My Prayer" by The Platters. The President of the United States was Dwight David Eisenhower and the Vice President was Richard Millhouse Nixon.

While I was going through my process of thinking, I was remembering that just five minutes earlier, I had gotten a whipping from my grandmother, Big Mama. Why I got this whipping will come later in this chapter.

My mother's parents, Shawn Fred Manchester, who we all called "Papa Manchester" and Ellen Jane Manchester, who we all lovingly referred to as "Big Mama," were the greatest grandparents anyone could have.

My two sisters, Ranae and Sherrie, and I were truly blessed to have grandparents like them in our lives. I was the oldest. My sister Ranae was a year-and-a-half younger than I was and my youngest sister, Sherrie, was four years younger than me.

I also had two half-brothers, Tyron and Donte, and a half-sister, Debra, on my father's side. We had the same father, Daddy D.P., but different mothers. Tyron, Donte, Debra, Ranae and I were being raised by Big Mama and Papa Manchester. Sherrie, my youngest sister, was with my mother, Cara Ann and my stepfather, Daddy James.

My father's parents, Daddy Clack and Mama Clack, were raising Tyron, Donte and Debra.

Papa Manchester and Big Mama were from the South. Big Mama was from Kenneth, Missouri, and Papa Manchester was from Forest City, Arkansas. They came to Flint, Michigan back in the early '20s, when "colored people", as they were called back then, emigrated to the North for a better life, better jobs and greater opportunity.

My grandparents shared plenty of stories with us about what Flint was like in the '20s, '30s and '40s. Big Mama related these stories so many times, she said. Back then General Motors was recruiting and hiring people of all walks of life for employment. Colored people who had come here from all over the United State were living on Main Street and the surrounding area. This street was right off Industrial Avenue, which was on the North end of Flint. People back then believe that General Motors had set up entire neighborhoods for its workers.

A few blocks east of Main Street was another “colored” living area off St. John Street, which was also believed to be set up by General Motors to house mostly the “colored” employees. Just east of St. John Street., across the Flint River, was Flint’s East Side, which housed many white employees of General Motors who had also emigrated to Flint from the South.

The Flint River was like a great dividing line that separated the North End, which was mainly occupied by blacks, and the East Side, which was mainly a white neighborhood. At that time, it seemed that whatever color, size or shape you were, Flint, Michigan, was the place to come for a better life.

My grandparents weren’t the only ones who shared these stories of what Flint was like in the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s and how people of color were being treated. All my life, I have heard stories from the old-timers who were a part of that era (uncles, cousins and family friends) who loved to tell their stories about what Flint was like then and what it was like working for General Motors at that time.

The big difference between colored and white was just not the living arrangements, but how colored were treated on the job.

They worked separate jobs and often, the lower scale job like janitorial work was the main kind of job that colored were allowed to do for a long time. White men were allowed to work on the production line or do machine jobs.

There is a long history of colored family members sharing their personal stories about Flint with other family members.

There are a lot of stories to be told and shared about the history of Flint, Michigan, but for so long there has only been one story being told: that of the whites. Colored people have never been able to really share their stories about life in Flint, Michigan only with each other. My grandparents would say to us that Flint is rich with colored history. Big Mama said jobs, pay, housing and living conditions were better. However, life was still the same between colored and white as it had always been in the South.

People moved to Flint for a better life, but they brought with them those same old ideas of whites and blacks living and working separate from one another. It was a must that they live separately, if not an actual law. At the time, there was no Equal Housing Law in Flint.

And even in the workplace where they were not only separate, but better jobs went to whites, while coloreds got the janitorial jobs at GM. This was no surprise because during that time, our United States Armed Forces saw fit to separate colored people from whites. Papa Manchester was employed at the Chevrolet Downtown Plant, which is now closed. My grandmother was employed at A.C. Spark Plug, another GM plant. They were one of the first groups of colored people to live in the Main Street area at that time.

Being colored in Flint was not easy. There were only a few places where colored people could live, move or purchase a house, even if they could afford to buy one. One place was on the South End of Flint and the other was on the North End; nowhere else was even an option. The suburbs of Flint, like Grand Blanc, Michigan, were mostly farm land then. And many small subdivisions were off limits anyway.

Most colored families moved to Mt. Morris Michigan area, which was all farm land, and reminded a few of their southern homes because of the rural setting.

My grandparents made a decision to stay in the city of Flint. In the ’30s, on the North End of Flint, houses became available for sale because the white, mostly Italian people,

who came from “the old country” (Italy) were moving out in what’s commonly called “white flight” . My grandparents found a house on Jamieson Street. All the homes on Jamieson Street were beautiful. They purchased a large home on East Jamieson. In the backyard, were two large cherry trees, two peach trees and a large grapevine (18 feet wide and 20 feet long) that was held up on four sides; a seven-foot-tall person could walk under it with no problem.

There was another small house also in the backyard. That little house had two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen and basement. On the side of the main house was a large cherry tree; in the front yard was another large grapevine, which was just as high as the one in the backyard except this grapevine covered the whole front yard and most of one side of the house. Theirs was the only house in the neighbor that had a grapevine in the front, which was very unique. It also was the only house on the block with a large front porch, plus two large bedrooms downstairs, a kitchen, bathroom and a basement. Upstairs, there were three larger bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen and a large upstairs porch that looked more like a sunroom. Later, my grandparents rented the rooms out for extra income.

The back house was also rented.

They purchased the house next door that had a store on the lower level and three apartments above, and they rented that out. They also purchased three more homes and two apartment buildings and rented them out.

My grandmother quit her job at A.C. Spark Plug and opened a grocery store next door to their new home. They named the store Manchester Grocery, which became the neighborhood store. My grandparents had the only colored store in the area.

My mother, Cara Ann Manchester, who we all called Madera, was born in the early '30s, in Flint, Michigan. She was their only child.

Dreams do come true.

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Neighborhood gossip was that Madera was adopted when she was only a few weeks old, which turned out to be true. My mother didn't really find out the truth about being adopted until she was grown. Gossip was that my Grandfather had an outside affair with my mother's real mother and because he and my grandmother didn't have any children of their own, he paid this woman to keep the baby and he and my grandmother would raise it as their own. Now this was only gossip, but it's very important to know that Mama and Big Daddy didn't have any children because my grandmother couldn't have children. I am only guessing that when my grandmother found out that my grandfather had been unfaithful to her and their marriage that she was very upset and unhappy, but knowing my grandmother as I did, I am sure that when she found out about my mother being my grandfather's daughter that she wanted to raise her as their own. What a blessing. It was said that this lady had other childre

n that she had given away, which would have been my mother's sister and brother. Some of the more revealing gossip about her was that she had mental problems, which was compounded with drinking and drugs.

My sisters and I didn't find any of this out until my grandmother died in 1976.

I still believe to this day that we are in denial because we never really talked about this subject as a family.

What's ironic about that situation is that everybody else talked about our family's business. My mom did share with me that when she was growing up, some of the kids used to make fun of her or tease her about being adopted. She just assumed that it was a cruel joke that kids play on each other. She would go home crying and ask Big Mama and Big Daddy about this and they would say it was all lies that these kids were saying. We found out later that Big Daddy or Big Mama would put a stop to these rumors.

One reason that they could stop people from talking to my mother or us about being adopted is because of the respect that they had in the community. My grandparents had helped many people, by giving them money, housing, a room to stay in and, in some cases, giving them a job working in the store or as a handyman working on some of the houses they owned.

My mother would say to my sisters and me later that we were raised as a proud family; we were raised as Manchesters, this is all we know. I believe that the hardest thing in my life is that I didn't know my true grandparents or cousins. But truly, as I have come to realize, if gossip or rumor are true, that my grandfather had my mother out of an affair and he was a Manchester, so I would say we were blood. But, of course, this is only a rumor too. We know who we are and we will always be family. This is something that my mother, sisters and myself will live with all our lives. Not taking our blessings from us, Big Mama and Big Daddy were great and loving grandparents and we will forever love them and all the Manchesters. This is our true blessing.

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Over the years, Flint was the place for colored and white people to find work and make a good living. Big Mama, whose maiden name was Little, and Papa Manchester sent for and housed a lot of their relatives from the South, so they could enjoy the good living the North had to offer. In the time between the 1930s through the 1960s, Flint and some of the surrounding areas were where Manchester, Little and Miller families had settled for a new life.

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My mother grew up on Jamieson Street. My father, Donald Pallor, who we called "Daddy D.P.," grew up on McClellan Street, which was the next block over from Jamieson. My father and mother went to school together. When I say together, I mean that they went to grade school, middle school and then dropped out of high school to marry each other. Madera and Daddy D.P. started dating in high school. From what I heard and found out later, my dad had been a ladies' man all through school and even through most of his adult life, until he died in 2001. While growing up, I really didn't see much of him, and only heard things about him. After I grew up, I was able to spend time with my dad and I'm grateful for that.

Daddy D.P. was a good-looking man by anyone's standards. He would be considered handsome. He was a great dresser. And I guess you would say he had the package that women love in a man: a black dark-skinned man with white teeth and a smile that could put you in a trance. His hair was coarse, thick and curly, and he knew how and when to talk. He was a very smooth talker.

My mother was also beautiful, and still is. She is light-skinned, reddish-brown in color, with high cheekbones, so she could easily be mistaken for an Indian woman. Her hair is coarse and very wavy. She has a smile that anyone would envy. My mother and dad were married in 1945. My half-brother Tyron is six months older than me. My dad was married to my mother when my brother was born. My dad's parents, Granddad and Grandma Clack, took in my older brother Tyron and adopted him as their own son. That caused the interesting arrangement that my brother was now our father's brother and our uncle. What broke my parent's marriage up was that Daddy D.P. loved the street life: not married life. They were divorced two years later and me and my sister Ranae were left without a father.

My mother, Ranae and I all moved in with my mother's parents in the little house in back.

Four years later, my mother married Daddy James and Sherrie was born. Now this was all new to me: a new Daddy and a beautiful little sister. The little house in the back was getting a little crowded, so Ranae and I moved into the front house with Big Mama and Papa Manchester. Ranae was going on 3 and I was 4-and-a-half.

The only difference with staying with our grandparents was that they were stricter with us than Madera and Daddy James were with my younger sister Sherrie. Sherrie had her way, a fact not lost on Ranae and me. I wanted to go back and move in with Madera and Daddy James. Yes, I wanted to be spoiled too and have my way just like my little baby sister. But it was too late. I had already moved in and had a home.

Daddy James loved his daughter Sherrie and he was good to Ranae and me. We loved him very much. He was a great father. Daddy James passed away in 1957 from cancer. Sherrie was 7 years old; she was very hurt, so were Ranae and I. My mother had to go to work and support us. Being a young single mother with three kids was hard. She got a job working at St. Joseph Hospital in Flint in the laundry room.

The pay was not very good, but it was a job. Ranae and I continued to stay with Big Mama and Papa Manchester. Madera moved into a house on Carton Street in Flint, about a mile-and-a-half away. We still would see Madera and Sherrie every day, since Big Mama babysat Sherrie. We spent every weekend with Madera and Sherrie.

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