“I Wish They’d Bring the Farms Back”

Betty Lou Woods

Betty Lou Woods leaned over the interview table with a sparkle in her eyes and an easy laugh in her voice. She told me her stories with two or three repetitions for clarification. And every so often, she reached into her large black purse for a tissue to gag up phlegm.

She knows how to bag carrots, and now I do, too, after her detailed step-by-step instructions that start in the field and end with a million bags on a pallet.

“I won a trophy once,” she said, laughing and gagging. “They called me Miss Bright Eyes and I won a trophy.” At the end of one year, it seems, the grower had a big picnic and asked everybody to bring a homemade dessert, not only for consumption, but for a contest as well. Betty Lou, of course, used carrots as her main ingredient—grated carrots, whipped cream, walnuts, and fruit cocktail. The memory has brought Betty pride for at least twenty years.

Betty Lou sings in her church, but not—unlike her twin sister, Betty Doe—on YouTube. Betty Lou wasn’t satisfied until I googled her sister on my smartphone. We watched the video together. Betty laughed into a tissue, pointed at her sister’s antics, and together we shared a moment of camaraderie.¹
Betty Lou Woods. Photo by Gaye Kozanli.
Betty passed away in 2013. I wish the farms didn’t get destroyed. I wish they would bring them back so the young people could get off the street and go to work every day, have something to do. A lot of generations hang on the street corner and sell drugs. But if they had fast money, that’d be great. Some people at the farms pay you every day. I’m telling you, that was a good help in my day. People need it now; they bein’ laid off from jobs. That would help our community if they brought the farms back.

True, you hurt later. You’ve got aches and pains on your legs and on your back workin’ on the farm. But I thank God cuz it was a lot of help to the family. Farm work helped us to live, to be independent. I knew my mama to make $200, $400 a week, but they didn’t take out Social Security. My mama didn’t put her money in the bank. She kept her money home in a secret place.

My mama had sixteen living children. She lost two twins. I’m a twin. I got a identical twin sister, Betty Jean Doe. I’m Betty Lou and my twin sister Betty Jean. We had twin brothers born before me and my sister that died. We all got the same mama and daddy. Now all of them dead except eight of us. Half dead and half living. Four brothers and four sisters.

Our original home was in Jacksonville, Florida. When I was five years old, we lived down south in Belle Glade and Pahokee, another town called Bean City. We were down that end towards Miami. I remember my brother shook the trees, and we would pick up the limes and put them in the bucket.

I remember pickin’ beans down in Belle Glade. I had about three classmates die. A lot of families used to take their children out of school and bring them to the fields workin’ to help make fast money. If they not in school so many days, the truant officer’s gonna come and check the fields. When the truant officer comin’, my mama say, “Lay down.” But other mothers tell their childrens to run.

The bean field, the string beans, is next to the sugarcane patch. They run into the sugarcane field, and the stalks is tall. Taller than you and I. They about twelve feet tall, and by you runnin’ in the cane, you can’t see nothin’. And on the other side of the field, they burnin’. They used to burn the cane before they cut it. If you in the center of the field, you don’t know where you at. Like the cornfield. That corn and sugarcane
is real thick. It’s so thick you can’t even see through it. You can’t see nothin’ and nobody know you in there. Take a helicopter to find you!

At the end of day, when the truant officer leave, the mama say, “Y’all come out, come out, come out.” The tractor makin’ all that noise, the trucks makin’ all that noise, so the parents can’t hear the child. They don’t know where the child is. Later, people who owned the fields or one of the workers would find them. They lost their lives. They suffocated from the smoke and got burned. Not ashes burned, not crispy.

In the field they have a canal. A lot of the classmates jump in the canal runnin’ from the truant officer. They be runnin’ and jumpin’ in and get drowned. It not that wide, but if you can’t swim, muck is soft, you can get stuck in the muck and that child gonna drown. I seen one child drown. They tried to save him when he went under the water. They called somebody who could swim. Before the truant officer or somebody get to them, he’s gone, because the muck—the black muck—be in the bottom of the canal and they sink down.

My goal was to try to finish school, but I never made it because of workin’. My grade level was third or fourth grade. When I was in my forties, I took a test. They say I was the sixth grade level. I started to take classes for my GED, but I never did get it. I can read and write, though.


Up north, we lived in camps. I remember a camp in Virginia. The contractor be so mean to the people. He brought the men and women up north to work, and he worked them so hard. He work ‘em. They have to pay for eatin’. They borrow money to eat. The contractor would sell a loaf of bread for $2 at the time when bread was nothin’ but a quarter or 50¢. A can of Spam lunchmeat, he charge $3 when the store sell it for 25¢ or 50¢.

If you workin’ for a contractor, the head man over the whole camp, they got a big old kitchen, and that contractor and his wife, they run the kitchen. The people come there to eat, they going to charge you $5 for that plate. If you eat lunch, that’s $5. If you eat supper, that’s $5. That’s how they used to do people. When you get your check—your cash money, they didn’t have no checks—you might make $200–$300 that week, but you wind up with $50. So when that person workin’, they