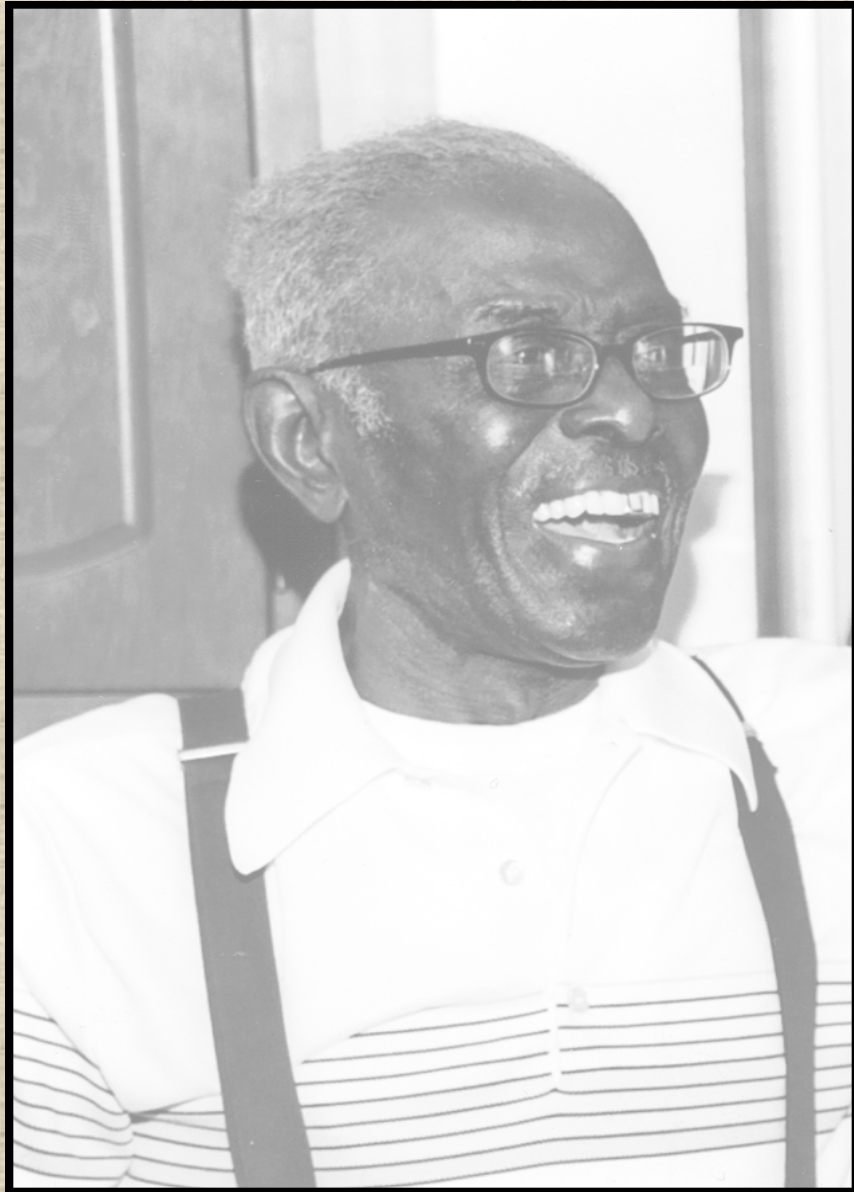


By the Way

by
Charles Henry Gray



as told to
Joan S. Williams



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Dedicated to My Daughters,

Elnita K. Gray Johnson

and

Juanita Gray McCoy



*Father,
Henry Gray,
(1885—1945)*

*Mother
Ida Banks
(1886—1925)*



I was born on August 2, 1910 in Red River, Oklahoma. There was nine chil'ren in my family—three boys and six girls. We were raised on the farm, and we was poor farmers, but we were on our own farm. We made out with what we earned from it.

We raised corn, cotton, and we raised peas and sugar cane. Out of the sugar cane, my dad and a couple of more men made syrup from the sugar cane. We didn't sell any of the syrup. Our neighbors that had sugar cane brought it in and we worked it out; we made syrup for them. We made syrup for our friends. We made it with the people that lived in the community.

I went to a school called Antioch School at that particular time. Then pretty soon, they built a school and they called it, oh, I can't think of the name of the school now...

My mother was named Ida Gray. Her maiden name was Ida Banks. She was born in Oklahoma in 1886 and died at the tender age of 39 in 1925. She had two brothers, Frank and Edward Banks, and one sister, Annie, and a half sister, Florence Cole. Annie had only one child. Frank and Edward were homesteaders in Oklahoma. Each was given their own farms around 20 acres. Their homesteads were right together.

My father, Henry Gray, was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas in 1885 and moved to Idabel, Oklahoma when he was young. He died at the age of 60 in 1945.

He met my mother there and they got married. I don't know if my grandparents were livin' or dead. I don't think they were livin' at that particular time. Only I know two of my father's three brothers. The other brothers was Willie,

Lewis, and Charley Gray. I didn't ever get a chance to meet Charley, but I got to know Lewis and Willie. Charlie drowned in the Red River as a young man.

Willie Gray was a minister. and lived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. As far as I know, he had no children.

Lewis, his younger brother was just a farm man, just as my dad, and he was with us for quite awhile until he was grown. He came to my mother and my dad when he was young. He wasn't married when he came to stay, livin' with us. He left and went to Clarksville, Texas. He got married to a women with five children, and that's where he made his home for quite a few years. They went their separate ways. Later, he met another lady, married, and had a boy and a girl. When he left there, he came back to Oklahoma, and then he went back to his other brother in Arkansas. That's where he lived until he passed away.

My brothers and I, and another friend of ours organized a ball team. I end up being the pitcher of the team. My older brother was one of the catchers. I did the pitchin' and he did the catchin'.

In all teams, you'll find that people like to steal bases, but they wasn't able to steal many bases on my brother. One reason is, when lots of people try to throw an individual out, they throw wide or throw high, but my brother was different. He was a pretty fast thrower. As long as we was playin', they didn't steal a base on him.

At a time when we was workin' together, we was a real perfect team, until we got stringed out with different people that wanted to run the team. They runned it out. That was after we got different people in on it, then we just faded out. We just didn't do any good anymore.

James Caldwell was one of the teachers. My favorite teacher was a woman who seemed closer to me and to the chil'ren than

the rest of the teachers were. They were good teachers and good people, but she seemed to take more time with us. There were quite a few chil'ren—about 80 to 100 students at our school at that particular time.

In the beginning, it was two-room school. Actually it was practically that all the way, until they built a new school, which was three rooms. We was divided up in to different stages in those three rooms.

My best buddy, I thought, was Tony Boyd, my uncle's nephew. I liked him very well, but it seemed like when he would get with some of the other boys, he would kind of slight me. He would take up with them, but when they wasn't there, I was the thing. But



Jimmy, Willie, Clover, Charles, and Tommy

nevertheless, he was the individual that I mostly liked. I liked quite a few of 'em, but he was the best.

I went to the sixth grade in school. My dad didn't let my older brother and myself go to school—we only went to school when the weather was bad. If we couldn't work because it was rainin' or cold, then we would go to school. We did whatever come to hand. Actually, we did the farmin'. Workin' as early as I did start to work, I was one of Lewis' smart guys that tried to show him that I could do this or do that. I was workin' even

before I was even supposed to. I was around 13 or 14 years old. Then after he seen I could do the work, then he put it on me. I had to do it. From then on, I just had to do the work.

Back then, in the country, we had no outlet like dances or socials or church gatherings. No social life, more or less, to go to because we didn't have 'em.

When I was around 13 or 14 years old, my mother passed. My father seemed like he just moved his hand from over us to let us do as we could do to carry on things. He was there part of the time, but I don't know where he would go.

After we had kept things going for a long time, my dad married again, and they didn't get along. Pretty soon they was separated and divorced. Then, he would come home sometimes to check.

He eventually met another lady, who had a husband. My father liked her. They fooled around, got together, and got married. That was the time that I found out the man that he was after he married her. He let her rule him and us. I'll have to tell you like it is. They got rough on my older brother, and he left home. They didn't bother him then.

My father would let his wife set three tables for us to eat. There was my four sisters and myself at home. She had two daughters. Her and my dad ate in the kitchen. At one end of the table, she'd fixed a place for her daughters, and then she would put ours on the other end of the table. She would give her daughters as much as she would give the five of us. Eventually I got fed up with it. I couldn't stand it, and I told them that I couldn't go any further with that.

We would work all day and into the evenin', We had hogs to feed, water to pump for the horses and the hogs, and ever'thing. I told her daughters and my three sisters, "You girls, y'all get the weeds. Pull some weeds and what not for the hogs

in the evening.” Y’all carry some weeds to the house, and when I come in, I’ll go right on and feed the hogs and water ‘em. I’ll pump water and ever’thing.”

The older girl said, “I’m not going to do it.” When they didn’t, it made me very angry. When we got back to the house, I got me some good long, big switches, and I whupped them all. I whupped them until I put welts on ‘em. I whupped the blood out of ‘em. My dad and them come in that evening, and the girls showed them where they had been bleedin’. The older girl went to cryin’ just as though I had just got through beatin’ her. She told my dad, “You gotta do somethin’ about that.”

I stood right in the middle of the door. I told ‘em, “There’s nobody gonna put their hand on me tonight—nobody! They all walked around me—nobody bothered me.

I left home, and I wasn’t grown. I was pickin’ cotton, and my dad’d come and collect my money every Friday, so I still didn’t have nothin’ to go on, and I had to go back home. I left again after the season was out. I tried to stay out of his sight as much as I could. When I did see him, he faced me and said, “You left again.”

I said, “Yes.”

He asked, “Do you think you can make it? If you think you can make it on your own, you can still work. ”

I said, “Yes,” and I’ve been on my own ever since. I was 19 years old. After leaving his home, I went to live with my auntie and uncle. My aunt’s name was Annie. Her husband was Houston. I lived with



Marjorie Gentry Gray

them up a ways before I got married. I went sharecroppin' with a man and his wife, the Elmo Williams family for one year.

As soon as I got married, I moved into a place of my own, but I was still sharecroppin' with them. My wife and I had one daughter at that particular time, and her name was Elnita.

Soon after the harvest in the fall, my wife conceived another baby, which was a daughter we named Juanita.

My wife passed. She had a convulsion and didn't live. I sent word to her parents that she was sick. I kept my older daughter for awhile. My sister didn't ever have any chil'ren and was livin' with me. She wasn't very good on takin' care of chil'ren, so I let her go.

Then I took my daughters back to her



Elnita and Juanita



*Marjorie and baby,
Elnita
December, 1939*

grandmother, Sedalia Gentry, and her family raised them, although I was in and out.

Soon afterward, I attempt to sharecrop with my father-in-law's uncle, Henry Crawford, and for some reason, I didn't complete the year there with him. Something come up, and I left there and went to Arizona.

I lived in Arizona for quite a little

while tryin' to get work. but there wasn't no work goin' on there. The only work was in the fall of the year, when they had compress. They would redo them over and make little small fields out of big fields. That lasted 'bout three months. Then that was all over with, and then there was nothing else. I tried my best to get work in Arizona.

I left Arizona and went to Topeka, Kansas. My brother-in-law lived there, so I lived there with him for a little while. We were doing construction work there in housin'—buildin' homes. We worked there until that was out, which was around a month or two. Then, there was nothin' goin' on.

We stayed at each place, maybe a month or two, or as long as we could stay there without having to be put out. We moved on from one place to the other. From Douglas to Hutchinson, from Hutchinson to Salina. C.W. had a old Buick, and we traveled in that old Buick from place to place.

Samuel Crawford, a blind man, lived in Topeka, but he came down to Salina on the train. For some reason, the police picked Samuel Crawford up in Salina and put him in jail. So he called down for several of us who hung around together. We went from the house down to the station to get him out. When his lawyer saw us, he said, " I guess you're gonna get him then. There's 'bout 7 or 9 of you all. We gonna have to let you have him." So they turned Samuel loose, and they didn't charge him with anything. They just kept him overnight. He didn't pay to ride the train back to Topeka. I don't know how he did it, but he went on down there on the tracks, and when the train got started, he just hung on to it somehow.

Every night that he came down from Topeka, we had to wake up in time enough to get up to walk down to the station to get him situated to catch his ride out. They'd call me to get them wherever they wanted to go—and in time. I don't care if I just

had went to bed for one hour, I could wake up and so that's the way we got Samuel back on his train to go back to Topeka.

There wasn't nothing really going on; no work. So I bundled up and I went back to Arizona again. I just jobbed around there. Whatever I could find to do, I did that.



I was drafted into the Army in January of 1944. My basic training was at Ft. Louis, Washington. My unit left San Francisco for Japan. I was honorably discharged in 1946 with a skin rash I had gotten in Japan. There were so many diseases there.

Then I went to San Diego. Near there, I got a job . I worked there from '51 until I retired. They was hirin' people at that particular time, so my aunt's sister-in-law'd taken me and we both signed up. I was hired, and she wasn't hired. She said that she had filled in two or three applications and still didn't get hired.

I started workin' there, doin' cleaning work and whatever was supposed to have been done. From there, I went to buffing and polishing. I made good in that, and so they gave me the job buffing and polishing. Later, another man who was doin' sandblastin' retired. He quit work there and went to work for the city. So they give me both jobs: sandblasting and buffing.

I tried to get a better job. My foreman wouldn't give God a prayer. He just held me down. "You the best buffin' man."

I said, "Make any difference? Just like I've learned to buff, somebody else can do the same thing." They been doin' this before I came. They could still learn to do it." But he just wouldn't let me out.

I didn't get a chance to move from those two places. There

was a union, but they couldn't make him do it unless he wanted to, him bein' one of the top men. He'd say, "We will see about it." And never did. Never did give me a raise or a changin' of job.

It was just like practically any other place, they pick the people. If two individuals, both Black and White, would come in for the job, why then they would say, "Well, we'll check on it." But the White would get the job.

After retiring there, I met my wife, and we got married. Her name was Rose Blackmon. In 1951, at a bus stop, I met Rose. We was both at the bus stop, so we talked, talked, and talked. I bought me an old car, and so we'd go to church, back and forth. I was on my way home, and she was on her way home, so when I stopped, I hollered, "Taxi!" So she came and got in the car.

When I seen that she was kinda likin' me, I kinda started lettin' my feathers down. We got pretty serious, and we got to talkin' about marriage. She had a divorce to get. I told her I'd send her to Las Vegas and she could get a divorce there. She had some people she knew there, and so did I.

After she was back a month or two, we made up plans to get married and ever'thing. Rose and I dated for about seven or eight years or longer. Her sister, Alberta, in L.A. knew that we was going get married, and she wanted to give us a reception there, so we married in Los Angeles.

We sharecropped for a year,



Rose Blackmon Gray

then after I'd worked there, we bought us a home together. We were doing very, very good there. Although we wasn't makin' no top money, I was still workin'.

After we were married about three years, we separated, but we just couldn't stay apart, so we went back together again. We would have our ups and downs, although we just toughened it out. I knew that we gonna have ups and downs, and she knew the same. But we're still together today.

Maybe one of the reasons why our separation would come about, she was an individual. I was single 15 or 20 years and she was single almost 'bout the same length of time, I reckon. We both were just runnin' the street 'til we bumped into one another, and then, we kinda haltered up to one another. We got in contact one with the other, and somehow we made a friendship and ever'thing. We went together on and on and on. It seemed like we couldn't break that friendship. We would break it, and we'd mend it back up. Break it and mend it back up. We just went on and got married. We broke up a time or so, but it didn't last any length of time.



Charles and Rose

Whatever our trouble were, it was a hindrance to her on her job, so she got where she just couldn't hold a job 'cause she was just nervous. Rose did the domestic work, what you call day work, and takin' care of sick people.

I retired first—and then she began to retire. Her sickness or whatever she had, slowed her down; had her worryin'. She couldn't stand. She was a nervous type person. She got where she couldn't stand to hear a clock tick; she was so nervous. We

had about seven clocks in the house. I had to take 'em all and put 'em in one room so she couldn't even hear them tick. Eventually, she worked out of that.

At times, I had to take her to emergency for quite a few times. They would check her out and check her out, but they couldn't find nothin'. After I retired to take care of her, she got down where she had to have the operation and everything. They'd taken a bunch of tumors out of her breast. She asked me my imagination on what to do; she wouldn't have but one breast. I told her to have it cut off, take it away, take it off. She said, "No. No. No." So they cut it, and taken out those tumors. She's doin' very good. She got well with that and ever'thing.

Her left leg was givin' her trouble before she even had the operation, but you know, she could work and do ever'thing with it, but it was still hurtin'. After the operation, she was there for so long. Then they discharged her from there to send her to a rest home. I'd taken her to the rest home, and so she remained for a month or so. From there, I'd taken her home, and she was walkin' with the walker.

I got a part time job just before she had the operation. I worked for about seven years or eight years for a boat builder, where people build boats and repaired boats and so on. It was a family outfit: the father, the son, and the daughters, and ever'body ran this business. One of the daughters, the older girl, was the secretary there. When they lay you off or anything of that sort, you suppose to draw unemployment compensation or whatever you call it, for four or five months. She fixed it where I couldn't get it. She said that I left the job, and hadn't returned back to work. That's what she put on the form. I wrote the letter and just let them know what happened. I had to do this because my wife was sick for a year and I had to take care of her. But she fixed that so I couldn't get my unemployment. And I didn't get

it.

There was one thing that Rose did, I admired her so much for. She said, "I don't need no walker. I can walk." And she'd just get up and walk. She did that a time or two. One day I was out and she called me. I heard her call me and I didn't like the call. It seemed like it was something, which it was. I went on in there, and she was layin' down on the floor.

I said, "What's wrong?"

She said, "I don't know. I broke my ankle."

I picked her feet up, and I could turn her ankle, her foot, all the way around.

I said, "It hurts?"

"No. It don't hurt."

She had broke it three places. She had broke her ankle three places. She said, "Oh, my God." She'd just come out of the hospital. Now she had to go back.

They got her leg all fixed up, her ankle all fixed up, and just 'bout the time it got well, they give her x-ray. They found that something in the operation that they didn't do. They had to go back and do it all over again. She was walkin' with a walker a little bit after that come about, but then she got worse. She just didn't want to walk, and didn't walk anymore. Her therapy was out, and she wouldn't let me walk her. And so I made mention to her, I said, "If you walk now, it may hurt you now, but later, you will wanna walk and you can't walk." But, she just wouldn't do it. That's why she isn't walkin' today. She wouldn't walk.

Baby and them, they visit me a couple of times. They come to San Diego. She said, "Daddy, you oughta have you a home. Your health's not good and your wife is down. We can't help you here, because we can't come back and forth here to help do the little ends and odds that would help you. Why don't you all sell your home and move to Wichita where we can be of a help to

you. We can help you in a lots of things that we can't do now, not here."

So I talked with Rose about it. She never did agree to sell, but I had to do the next best thing. I said, "We don't have no people here. You don't have any here. The only survivors that we gonna have to depend on to kinda help us in these little ends and odds would be my daughter. They want us to sell and go move there. I don't wanna do it, but under the circumstances, I'm



My daughters and I

gonna have to do somethin'. I've been payin' people to do ever' little thing that should be done. I gotta have somethin' done. I need the aid of somebody to help run errands or what not."

So I put the place up for sale, and when Rose got sick, and went in the hospital, I'd taken it off the market. It was off for a week or so, and I put it back on the market again. I said, "I can't do this alone. You're not cooperatin' with me. I just have to go ahead on and let it go as it is."

So we had lots of good stuff I give away. We sold some. I left a lot of stuff there I could have sold, had I had the time to be there to do it. I had bought out here in Wichita in September 1996, and I wanted to get in before the weather set in bad. I brought Rose in September and put her in the rest home. Then I



House in San Diego

When it was finished, I think I was about the third person that moved in here, in this area. So we moved here ** and we been here ever since.

Someone asked, “Is you gonna like Kansas?”

I told ‘em, “Well, this is what I had made my mind up to—anywhere I can be happy. So I think I can make it. If I can be happy in Wichita, and things is goin’ very well with me, I think I can live here.”

I did my best to keep my wife out of the rest home, but under the circumstances, the way things worked out, I wasn’t able. I helped her as long as I was able to, and I got where I wasn’t able to continue to lift her. That was the whole thing. That is why I had to place her in a rest home. The state will not allow you, unless you have the right kind of help in your home, to keep them. And I didn’t have it. In fact, I wasn’t able to do that, to hire someone to continue to help with her. Although, I did my best up until this present time.

At the rest home, some of them are very nice. You going to find in every organization some contrary people. You gonna find people that is not as nice to you or to the people whom

went back.

When we got here, we lived with Elnita and Walter, and they just told us that we could stay with them.

We had put in for this place here where I’m now livin’ before it was even finished.

They was workin’ on it.



Elnita and Walter

they have to deal with, as they should be. Nevertheless, if we are in that state, then we have to endure. Rose is in the hands of those people. Some of them is doin' a very nice job, and then there's some that's not very good.

I have two daughters here in Wichita, Elnita Johnson and Juanita McCoy. Now Elnita has been very, very, very good to me. She has been like a father, or mother, or sister or brother. She has helped me in ever' way since I been here, and I appreciate it.

My wife passed away in the rest home on May 26, 2003. I have been living alone here in the Plaza North Senior Residences for more than a year. I've connected myself with

Chisholm Trail Church of Christ, and I've made quite a few friends at the church. The people seem to be very, very nice people to know and to learn to know.

I've taken a few trips since I've been here. I went to Oklahoma; fact that's my home state, I went back there to Idabel, Oklahoma once with one of my friends, and we really enjoyed being there. I had been gone from the place about 30 or



35 years, and it seemed like a different place altogether.

Also, I went to Chicago. Somehow we got together at the church, and chartered a bus.



Teenagers in Wichita



Charles Gray





*Gentry
Family*

*Berneice,
Arnett,
Charles,
and
Wilma*



*Charles
and
Cynthia*

We enjoyed a church service there and have enjoyed ever'thing that we attempt to do.

It seems like I've made quite a few friends in Wichita. One day, a man named Floyd Sanders was talkin' to me, and he said, "I love you." That sounds funny to me, to listen to some man say, "I love you." That did somethin' to me. It seemed like he kinda made me think when he said he loved me. It made me feel like I was holdin' back somethin'. But, I have that feelin' for him as well as I seem to have the care of people that I never had before. I pray God that He would continue to give me that feelin' and fix my heart. He said love ever'one. God is Love. And if God is Love, I ask Him for His love. I asked Him that He would place His Love in my heart, and that I might be able to love everybody. I asked Him to give me the love that I've never had before. Only He can do that.

I seem to begin to feel closer to people than before. It is not me; it's of God that works within. I feel that God is workin' with me. I hope that He will continue to bless and keep us. He has brought me a long ways. It wasn't the good that I did, or that I lived so perfect that He has spared me to live as long as He has. I've reached the age of 93 years old, and I appreciate it. I thank God that He has something for me to do, but it hasn't been revealed to me yet, but God knows, and He will show me.

*“Let’s see,
I got twelve cards!”*



*Charles Gray
93rd birthday
August 2, 2003*