

Mississippi Harvest  
DJ Kane

It was a sunny day in Mississippi, when John Handley exited his house with a cooler of bottle water, to begin harvesting cotton on his 500-acre farm. Cotton had been in his family for over 300 years, surviving through its history, good and bad. Good because it had fed his family and others, and the bad being, it once held slaves. John was not all that familiar with the farm's slavery days, only some stories passed down through generations, and not knowing which were just folly or true.

It was time for harvesting; there was no time to waste. John had only a couple of months to finish the harvesting, which could have him working all day and night, if need be. Harvesting in Mississippi starts in the month of August, and is in full swing in September.

It was the beginning of August, and John wanted to get an early start, as the weather was ideal. John walked to his Cotton Harvester machine; put his cooler in place, set his radio to his favorite Country music station, put on his ear buds, turned on his Harvester, and his work day had officially begun.

It was the first day of the many in front of him; the sounds of Country music will be competing with the very loud unrelenting sounds, coming from the Harvester, continuing till late September, or weather permitting sometimes later.

It was about mid-afternoon, about 3pm, when John's radio seemed to change stations, or did it? He was hearing African American Spirituals. He checked his radio and it was still on his station, but even with his ear buds on, and the loud Harvester noise, the African American Spirituals seemed to be become louder and louder. Since the singing seemed to be coming from outside the Harvester he decided to investigate. John turned off the Harvester, and exited. To his surprise and amazement there were two African American girls about 12 years of age, dressed alike in plaid dresses, plaid socks, and white shoes, each carrying a bag of cotton, while singing loudly an African American Spirituals. As they picked cotton, where his Harvester hadn't gotten to, but dangerously close to his machine. The girls were putting the cotton into the large bags, which hung from their shoulder.

John confronted the girls, thinking they were from a local school, doing an assignment on cotton. "Where do you young ladies live, shouldn't you be in school, it's dangerous in the field, are you doing an assignment for school?" He was full of questions, hoping for some answers to this surprise encounter that rudely interrupted his workday.

"Down yonder master we live," one of the girls answered, as both girls pointed to the part of the farm that was just harvested. We don't go to school, master, just pick cotton."

"My name is John young ladies, and what's your names?"

“My name is Abigail, Master John,” she answered; as she put her last handful of cotton, which she had picked, in her bag and putting the bag on the ground. “This is my cousin Daisy”

“Girls, you don’t have to call me master, its just John, okay?”

“Okay, repeated Abigail, Master John, oh, I mean John.”

They all had a chuckle at her answer as John continued; “Abigail would you and Daisy like some cold water to drink, it is sure hot out here?”

“Yes John”, Abigail answered, after she hesitated a bit, looking back at Daisy, as if she was looking for some sort of resolve, as Daisy dropped her bag of cotton besides Abigail’s bag.

John opened the cooler, taking out two bottles and handed them to the girls. The girls held the bottles of water that was strange to them, inspecting them, before drinking. John feeling this was a strange encounter, to say the least, asked, “Abigail, where do you bring the bag of cotton you picked?”

“To the Planter,” she answered, “Who gives us another bag to fill,”

John even more confused himself, asked her,” Do you know what year it is, Abigail?”

“Don’t know John.”

John followed with another question, “Can you read Abigail?”

“Little, my Mom taught me from books from the Overseer.”

“You must have been a special little girl to the Overseer. I mean, for him to give you books to read.”

John turned around to get a bottle water from cooler for himself, and when he turned back around, there was an African American woman, maybe in her thirties, dressed exactly as the children, standing between the girls.

John somewhat startled again, asked,” Who are you?”

“Hello Johnny!” she said allowed as she moved in front of the girls, “Today is your lucky day, and I see you have met two generations of our family, I’m Abigail Handling grown up.”

“Did I hear Handling?” John just standing motionless and in shock, as the grown Abigail stepped forward towards the Harvester machine, retrieving a bottle of water from the

cooler, without asking John, and stepping back with the girls, telling John, “No need getting back to your cotton pick-in machine today John, lets all call it a day.”

At that moment the children, Abigail and Daisy disappeared, with their bags of cotton. John recovering a little asked Abigail, “Where did the girls go Abigail, and why do you have the same name as one of the girls and your last name Handling, my name?” John had so many questions again.

“John, little Abigail and me are the same girl. You have been privileged in seeing me as a child at work, and me as a woman. My Master’s last name was Handling, and my Mom was his mistress as well as his slave, his first name was John also.”

“That’s why you were given books. You were his daughter, and we may be somewhat related.”

“Somewhat related”, Abigail answered, “maybe.”

John then feeling better about the current events decided that he would invite Abigail in his home, but she refused explaining, “To many bad memories John, on this Plantation as it were in the day. I am at peace, seeing all has changed, and it is once more a farm,” Hugging John, with a motherly touch and kiss on his cheek, Abigail returned from whence she came, and John returned to his home, with a story to tell, to anyone who would listen or consider it just some more folly.