



American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940

Item 1 of 100

**[The Clouds Beyond]**

{ [page image](#) }

*{Begin handwritten}*No. 1*{End handwritten}*

Approximately 2,800 words *{Begin handwritten}*[7 C?]*{End handwritten}* SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY *{Begin handwritten}*(Ex-slave)*{End handwritten}*

TITLE: THE CLOUDS BEYOND

Date of First Writing February 15, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Jim Kelley (Negro)

Fictitious Name Ham **Cloud**

Street Address None

Place Blythewood, S. C. (Rural Section)

Occupation Tenant Farmer

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Reviser State Office

Up and down, up and down an old walkway flanked with spicy-scented boxwood in front of an old farm house strode Ham **Cloud**, an old gray-haired copper-colored Negro. The place, the old Ben **Cloud** farm, is located on the old Blythewood-Camden Road, six miles east of Blythewood, South Carolina. It was August 18, 1918, and war time. "Uncle Ham," as most every one in Bear Creek community called him, had just the day before said good-bye to two of his sons, who had been drafted into the Army. He was worried.

"Good morning, Uncle Ham!" said a white lady, past middle age, *{Begin handwritten}*S. N. S. C. Box 2.  
*{End handwritten}*

Page 2 { [page image](#) }

who sat on the rear seat of a car that had just stopped at the end of the walkway and was unnoticed by the old Negro.

"Honk, honk!" the car horn sounded, as the driver's hand pounded on the button at the end of the steering shaft.

Pausing in the walkway, Ham **Cloud** stood for a moment with his blinking eyelids shaded with a trembling hand. He then slowly approached the car at the end of the lane.

"Don't you know me, Uncle Ham?" inquired the lady in the car.

"Bless my life, if it ain't Miss Alice done come back to de old house ergin!" They shook hands.

"Uncle Ham, is there anything to cause you trouble this morning?"

"Miss Alice, I was jes' thinkin' 'bout all de trouble dat am caused at dis place by de debil and he wars."

"You think this war is the work of the devil, Uncle Ham?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Alice, I 'lows dis war bizness am de work of de debil. It sho is, caze I members de time when Marse Ben hafter give up his three boys to go to war. He say then de war am de work of de debil. And when Gin'al Sherman and he sojers come through here, what dey couldn't carry off dey destroy. I's worried 'bout my two boys what lef' here yestiddy for de war, for dey tells me dem Germans ain't nebber seed a nigger."

"Uncle Ham, do you remember when General Sherman's army came through this country, and what they did on this place?"

"I members all about it, Miss Alice. When us heard through some of Gin'al Wade Hampton's sojers dat de Yankees had done burnt Columby and was marchin' on to de North, stealin' and burnin' as dey go, me and Marse Ben got busy. I hope him to hide de things on de place out in de woods and

Page 3 { [page image](#) }

fields." Ham then began to laugh.

"What happened then, Uncle Ham?"

"Lawd, hab mercy! Jes' a whole passel o' Yankees pass here. I was standin' in dis walk one day when a crowd of dem stop, and one axe me whar Marse Ben and all de folks. I say to him, 'I dunno; I jes' one o' de free niggers lef' to stay in our house and look after our things.'" Ham was then just a pickaninny twelve years old. But he was faithful, and he had diplomacy enough to save the **Cloud** family from loss.

Ham **Cloud** was born a slave in 1853, on the plantation of Benjamin **Cloud** in the Bear Creek section of old Fairfield District, South Carolina. His father is said to have had Arab blood in his veins and to have been a descendant of Oriental royalty. He was the plantation wheelwright and blacksmith. His wife, Ham's mother, was a servant in the **Cloud** home. Ham's early life was spent around the kitchen in the

"big house" and in the farm workshop. He, therefore, came in close contact with the members of the **Cloud** household. He was granted many privileges, and they say he learned rapidly through precept and example. The **Clouds** taught him to do a little reading and scribbling.

It is said that Benjamin **Cloud** was a very religious old gentleman and that he often read the Scriptures to Ham and to other slaves on the place on Sunday. He encouraged his slaves to fear God and to hate the devil. Mr. **Cloud**, too, was a believer in his preservation of the Union during the controversy concerning Kansas and slavery. In Ham's presence one day, he spoke of war as the work of the devil. For the remainder of his life, Ham hated war and believed it the work of the devil.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union in December, 1860, and

Page 4 { [page image](#) }

began to organize an army, Benjamin **Cloud's** three sons - Lafayette, Henry, and Oscar - enlisted in the State service. Later, they were sent to Virginia with General Johnson Hagood's brigade and were with the same when it made those famous charges which one historian spoke of as the most glorious chapter in South Carolina's military history. Henry **Cloud** fell at Weldon Field. Lafayette and Oscar received severe wounds, but they survived the war and returned home. None were gladder than Ham to see them return. They were his heroes and his idols, especially, "Marso Fayette," the oldest of the **Cloud** brothers.

A few years after the close of the War Between the States, Benjamin **Cloud** passed away, leaving Lafayette in charge of the old **Cloud** home. Lafayette in the meantime had married and taken over the management of the farm. Oscar **Cloud** was of a more restless nature and he traveled for a number of years before marrying. Ham **Cloud** remained with his young hero, "Marse Fayette," and helped him to look after "our cows, our hogs, our sheep, our land, and our business."

During the reconstruction period and the Hampton campaign in South Carolina, in 1876, Ham **Cloud** was a member of the Democratic Party. He took great pride in donning his red shirt and at sping his hero, "Marse Fayette," as an enthusiastic supporter of General Hampton and white supremacy. His activity in this connection brought down on his head the wrath of many of his race, especially the females of the species. It caused him a lover's quarrel, they say, with his best girl, who's parents were staunch Republicans. They later buried the political hatchet, however, and were married.

Prior to Ham's marriage, his main job on the **Cloud** farm was to attend to the needs of the livestock on the place. Sheep, in addition to

Page 5 { [page image](#) }

other domestic animals, were kept. Ham was very fond of a large ram in the flock which he named Sledgehammer. He was also the family coachman. On each Sunday, he accompanied the **Clouds** to Zion, a nearby Methodist Church, as driver of the carriage horses. He could have attended the religious services had he so desired, but Ham usually elected to spend the hours for worship in sleep in the family carriage or on the ground out in the grove in front of the Church.

The **Cloud** sheep would sometimes break away from their fold and ramble off to Zion Church grounds, and elsewhere, to graze and to get into mischief. They sometimes caused real embarrassment to their owner. At any rate, Ham's pet, Sledgehammer, came to Zion once, to his discomfort. The late Rev. William Barber, a kinsman of the **Cloud** family, told about this years later in a sermon entitled, "Why

Should You Question My Right To Be Here?" His comparison and narrative ran as follows:

"It was in midsummer and the weather was clear and warm that Sunday. It was so warm in the church that it was necessary to the comfort of all present to have all of the windows and doors open. The wide front entrance to the church was directly in front of the pulpit, and I could see out into the grove beyond the front lawn. In fact, I was the only one in the building who could very well have this view and be in a position to note the things that happened out there during the hour of my message. In the midst of my sermon, I saw Brother Lafayette **Cloud's** Negro driver, Ham, walk to a large pine tree and place himself on the ground by the side of that pine. His head soon began to nod in sleep. Just then a flock of sheep came bounding into view. Among them was a large vicious looking ram. He saw the young Negro, and evidently mistook his nodding head for a challenge to

Page 6 { [page image](#) }

to physical combat. The ram backed away a few yards to the front of the sleeping Negro and then, for a few moments, he stood facing him. For every nod of Ham's head, the large sheep would give a nod of his head in return, in such a way that his brute mind may have prompted him to ask: 'Why should you question my right to be here?' They nodded until the ram could stand it no longer. He lowered his head, dug his rear hoofs into the ground, and charged. Even though Ham was not physically damaged, he was awakened by the compact to the danger of sleep at such a place and at such an hour."

While it may have required a sledgehammer blow from a huge ram's head to arouse Ham **Cloud** to his senses of duty on the Sabbath day, he did soon after the heady encounter begin to think and plan for the future. He was not too old to dream dreams, and he was not too young to see visions.

As the story goes, Ham's best girl, Corrie Perry, refused to marry him until he joined the church and became more religious minded. He complied with the demand by joining at Shady Grove, the colored Methodist Church, in 1878. Corrie married him soon thereafter. During the summer of this same year, after Ham's and Corrie's wedding, the colored Methodists held a big revival meeting at Shady Grove. They had a lot of preaching about the devil and damnation. They shouted. Ham, too, saw visions and shouted on the crowded floor. In one of his hallelujah moods one day, he bounced too high. He butted his head against a low slung joist. Even though no damage was done either head or joist, this ended Ham's shouting and cost him a part of his religion, to boot. He is said to have cursed the deacons for having such a dangerous object so near the heads of converted sinners.

At the beginning of 1879, Mr. Lafayette **Cloud** sold to Ham, on credit,

Page 7 { [page image](#) }

a good plow mule. He also set aside one of his best tenant farms to Ham's and Corrie's use, as renters. In a further desire to assist Ham, Mr. **Cloud** gave him and Corrie, as a wedding present, one of his best grade Jersey milch cows, named Crump. Ham and Corrie were young and strong, and they started to farming with a vim. Ham's hopes for his future success were high. He would visualize himself the proud owner of broad acres and fine fat cattle. He wanted cattle and other livestock to help in the realization of his dreams, and it was his wish that Crump find heifer calves for him in order that he might expand his dairy herd.

While Ham and Corrie had good luck with their planting operations during their first few years as renters, Ham was doomed to disappointment in two of his ambitions. Corrie's first born was a daughter,

which they name Mary. Crump, at about the same time, presented him with a bull calf. A year later, Corrie presented him with another daughter, and Crump found him another bull calf. Ham's luck then took a turn for the better. One morning, in 1882, a son shined upon him. When he went out to his barnyard that morning to look after the needs of his livestock, he found a new-born heifer calf tugging away at Crump's udder. Ham's cup of joy was so full that he could think of nothing other than to run and report his good fortune to his friend [??], "Marse Fayette." The following was his report, and the conversation that took place.:

"Marse Fayette, does you member 'bout de rabbit us kilt in de graveyard year befo' las'?"

"Why, yes, Ham! But why do you ask?"

"Hit like dis, Marse Fayette. I been carryin' de left front foot off dat rabbit in my right-hand-pants pocket ever since, and my luck done

Page 8 { [page image](#) }

change around."

"What has happened now, Ham?"

"I is gone to havin' boy babies and gal calves to come to my house."

"I'm glad to hear of your good fortune, Ham. What are you going to name your son?"

"Well, Marse Fayette, I names my first chile Mary, and my nex' chile Martha. So I reckon I hafter call dis one Lazarus."

With Mr. **Cloud** aiding and abetting, Ham and Corrie made progress with their farming operations and became highly respected in the Bear Creek community. He worked hard during those years. It was along about 1886 that Ham, in all probability, did the hardest day's work of his life. He bound into bundles seven acres of high-yielding oats, which was cut that same day with a grain cradle by his brother-in-law, Major Perry. He told later that he was so tired when night came that the witches rode him in his sleep that night to Camden, fifteen miles from his home. Quite incidentally, on this same night, \*Major Perry preached in his sleep. And for the remainder of his life he was a somnambulist preacher. A few years after the oat-cutting experience, Major Perry moved to Saluda County. He was later with a traveling show, and became widely know for his habit, or affliction. The most remarkable part of it was that he outlined his text verbatim and preached in perfect English, despite his inability to read or write.

The tie of friendship that had developed between Ham and "Marse Fayette" in their younger life followed them through the years. Ham, they say, always depended on Mr. **Cloud** in the time of his troubles, and he was seldom denied. On the other hand, it was always Ham who Mr. **Cloud**

\*The State: Dec. 9, 10, 12, 1906.

Page 9 { [page image](#) }

wanted during his later years to accompany him when he traveled from home on business or other missions. They were at Ridgeway one day during an exciting political rally. It was in the early days of the Tillman campaign, and the lines were strongly drawn between the pro's and the con's. Mr. **Cloud** became involved in a friendly argument with one not sharing his view of the situation. When the argument became a little heated, Ham butted in as follows:

"White folks, if you finds you can't settle de argumentation widout havin' to use your fists, please don't hit Marse Fayette; hit dis nigger."

The long companionship between Lafayette and Ham **Cloud** came to an end a few months after Ham's demonstration at Ridgeway. The friendship and Ham's loyalty, however, lasted to the end. In the fall of 1894, Lafayette **Cloud** accidentally lost his balance and fell from a wagon piled high with new-mown hay. Ham it was who reached him first. And it was Ham who picked up his broken body and bore him to his deathbed. Mr. **Cloud** passed away two weeks later and was buried in Zion churchyard.

Soon after the death of Lafayette **Cloud**, his family began to drift away from the Bear Creek community in search of their fortunes in other fields. A few years later, Mrs. **Cloud**, his wife, passed away. The old home ties being then broken, the remainder of the **Cloud** children left the community. Ham and his family, however, remained on the **Cloud** farm and were later given permission to occupy the "big house."

After an absence of many years from Bear Creek, a daughter of the late Lafayette **Cloud** visited her old home. This was on August 18, 1918, during the World War. She found Ham walking up and down the old walkway in front of her old home. He was in grief over the loss, as he felt,

Page 10 { [page image](#) }

of his two sons, Lazarus and Mood, who had just the day before been drafted into the United States Army. When he recognized "Miss Alice," as she was always known to him, his cup of joy once more was filled. But he did not allow himself the luxury of tears; he fought them back determinedly till he could laugh again.

According to information furnished by "Miss Alice," who is now nearly eighty years old, and living in Columbia, South Carolina, Ham **Cloud** raised eight children, and sent them to school as much as his income would permit. All of them are married and are proving themselves useful citizens in their chosen fields. Several went North, where they received college educations. One of his sons owns and operates a splendid farm in Richland County. Another son, Mood **Cloud**, while still a tenant, is considered one of the best farmers in Bear Creek.

In 1932, at the age of seventy-nine years, Ham **Cloud** passed away at the old **Cloud** home. His many friends, both white and black, came from far and near to attend his funeral. He was buried at Shady Grove, only a short distance from Zion, where sleeps "Marse Ben and Marse Fayette." An old broken lamp was put on his grave by one of his children. They say it was once used by Lafayette **Cloud** as a reading lamp, and sometimes they put flowers in it. Perchance it, through a friendly spirit, enabled Ham to see the light on the Bible's teachings of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. However that might be, the old lamp now gives light on the **Clouds** beyond.

[Information about SGML version of this document.](#)

 AMERICAN MEMORY	PREVIOUS	NEXT	ITEM LIST	NEW SEARCH	BEST MATCH
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