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(Confederate.)

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James L. Roseborough

Pvt., { Capt. Hayne McMeekin's Co., Dunovant's Reg't South Carolina Volunteers.*

Age ..... years.

Appears on

Company Muster Roll

of the organization named above,

for Sept. 6. 1861 to ....., 186 .
Roll not dated

Joined for duty and enrolled:

When Sept. 6, 186 .

Where Ridgeway, SC

By whom Capt. Davis

Period the war

Remarks: .....

*This company subsequently became Company F, 12th Regiment South Carolina Infantry.

Book mark: .....

A. W. Fisher

(642) Copyist.

5918 N.W. 45th street,
Oklahoma City 12, Okla.
September 2, 1958

First Person Editor,
The Reader's Digest,
Pleasantville, N.Y.

Dear sir:

I am sending herewith a true and hitherto unpublished article under the pen name of "Shirley Randolph" which I hope you will consider acceptable for publication in your current series of First Person articles.

Postage for the return trip, if necessary, is enclosed.

Very truly yours,

Shirley Randolph Blatt

(Mrs.) Shirley Randolph Blatt

PRINCESS PETE

I was five years old when I was sent to live with my father's parents in Windsor, Florida. Mother had just died, leaving my griefstricken father with two little girls and Windsor seemed the ideal place for us to grow up.

Grandfather had just retired from the United States Senate and, after many years in Washington, was settling down for a happy time with Grandmother and three of his twelve children who remained at home: a maiden daughter, a bachelor son and a married daughter who couldn't bear to leave Windsor and continued to live there in a wing which Grandfather added to the house especially for her family.

It was a big house, the biggest in Windsor; but then, Windsor wasn't a very big place. The wide veranda wound all the way around the house which was completely surrounded by orange trees except in the front. The front yard was a riot of color with every kind of tropical flower that would grow there while, near the street, huge live oak trees stood guard, dripping their long beards of grey Spanish moss.

more

I remember many Negroes about the place to do the work, and that's how I met Pete. She came to work for Grandmother just after I arrived there. We met her at the train station when she arrived from South Carolina late one night. She spoke a Geechee dialect which was completely foreign to the family, but it take long for me to understand everything she said. We were friends from the very beginning.

Pete was a tall woman with a protruding rear on which you could set a plate. She had a flat nose with wide nostrils and thick lips which most Negroes have. She wore a colored handkerchief on her head all the time and I never once saw her without something tied around her black kinky hair. Two things I remember most vividly about her were her laughter and her singing. Both made you glad to be alive.

She had no education, could neither read nor write, but was as delighted as a child to be taught to spell a few simple words, and would spend hours spelling them over and over again.

She loved children, and that was really important when I was five years old.

Grandmother taught Pete to cook all the wonderful things we were accustomed to eat at Windsor and, before long, she was a better cook than Grandmother ever dared be. We had a big dining room with a long table that seated about twenty without adding any leaves and it was almost always filled three times a day. Pete cooked

for all those people and never once complained.

One of the things I never quite understood was the power she had over all of us kids. When she wanted us to do something, first she would ask us and then, if we refused or made excuses, she would say, "All right! If wonna don't do'em, I'll put my mark on the wall, and wonna aint gwine on no picnic!"

We'd laugh at her and then, sure enough, she'd go over to the wall, make a big "X" in a dramatic, flourishing manner and before long it would start raining cats and dogs and the picnic would be off, just like Pete had threatened.

At first we thought it was coincidence, but it happened too many times to be mere coincidence. So, after a while, all Pete had to do was threaten to put her mack on the wall and she would have us right in the palms of her big, black, wonderful hands.

I remember her childish delight in the presents we would bring her every time we returned home. She loved perfumes and highly scented soaps. It didn't matter what kind they were so long as they smelled good to Pete. A bottle of Hoyt's from the 5-and-10 was as acceptable as though it were expansive, French perfume. And we would spend out last penny to buy it for her.

To Pete, all people, white and black, were either "Aristocracks" or "Crackers." Crackers were the poor white backwoods people who lived in ignorance and poverty all their lives. Pete considered herself an

aristocratic Negro, and I firmly believe that she was. There was something about her that made you respect her. As a child, and even now, I always felt that in her own right she was from a long line of African royalty, that she might have been a princess because there was an innate, prevailing air of dignity about her.

I remember some wonderful nights, sitting on the porch of Pete's little house in back of the big one, with moonlight sifting through the trees and the scent of orange blossoms everywhere, listening to her tell all kinds of stories while she puffed away on her old clay pipe. It seemed as though she were from another world as she talked in her soft, queer dialect. There was always the plaintive sound of the Whippoorwill in the background. And, even as children, we were aware of strange, wonderful things that were never spoken.

Christmas at Windsor meant a house overflowing with cousins, aunts and uncles. Fireplaces were lighted in every room. The smell of turkey and Christmas goodies permiated the whole house. And Pete was there in the kitchen, responsible for all those glorious odors. The entire family was gathered in the parlor around the Christmas tree and you knew that, any minute, Pete would appear to join in the singing and laughter. The fun of watching Pete open her gifts with the delight of a child showing on her black face really made the giving at Christmas what it should be.

We never knew how old she was although we asked her many times. The truth was: even she didn't know. Her reply was always the same: "I's sweet sixteen ... I's born 'long about corn-plantin' time." However, she never waited until corn-planting time to have a birthday. It was whenever Pete wanted something. And we loved her so much that we bought presents for many birthdays during the year.

We knew little about Pete's life before coming to Windsor. We suspected she had two sons, but we never saw them. It was not unusual then for Negroes to have illegitimate families, thinking there was nothing wrong with it. They didn't bother getting a marriage license; it seemed so pointless to put a lot of things on paper which they couldn't even read or understand. But Pete kept sending packages and presents to two "nephews" in South Carolina which we would wrap, tie and address for her. We found out later that the "nephews" called her "Ma."

After I married and moved away from Windsor, it was many years before I could return home. Thinking of home meant Pete. Seeing her again was more important to me than seeing anyone.

I returned to Windsor for the first time when my daughter, Betsy, was three years old. Grandmother and Grandfather had died. Only one widowed uncle and his five children remained, but Pete had stayed to cook and care for them as she had from the first day she arrived.

Everything was so changed, but not Pete. After hugging me tight in her arms, she looked at betsy and said, "And dis wonna's baby? She aint no Cracker. She quality folks!" And that meant more to me than anything she could have said, because I knw she meant it. It was the highest compliment she was capable of giving to anyone.

As the years went by and Pete was no longer "sixteen," she longed to go back to South Carolina to be with her boys. She had visited them every few years during her life at Windsor, but each time she could hardly wait to get back to her own little house in Windsor. But the day finally came when she was no longer able to do the things she had always done. So, with much sadness, she was taken back to her beloved South Carolina where she lived with her boys until her tragic death.

And tragic, indeed, it was. One Sunday morning when all the others had gone to church, Pete fell asleep with her clay pipe in her hand. The whole house went up in flames before anyone could save her.

I still think of Pete and I'll always remember her tenderness and love which were so much a part of my childhood. She came along when I needed her most. She was always there, giving me warmth and love in her own simple-hearted way.

Wherever she is, she knows that I love her and miss her. Yes, to me, anyway, Pete was a Princess, and she was an Aristocrat, not a "Cracker."

End.