

MY LIFE AS A BOY by CLAUDE JAMES BROOM

slightly edited by his grandson, Billy E. Broom, Jr.

I was born in the late 1800's (1897) in a three room house made of logs on a farm. My father (John Hampton Broom) was a farmer. When I was born, an old Negro woman brought me into this world. I never knew her, but I hope and pray that whatever success I have made in this world that God will divide with her.

When I was a baby, my mother (Mattie Anne True Broom) rocked me to sleep and laid me on a pallet in front of the open door. It was summertime and very hot . She was working in the kitchen when she heard a noise. She looked and a five foot long rattlesnake was crawling near my body, going out the door. Mom called Dad, who was plowing in a field near our home, and he killed the snake. God had something in life for me to do. It would have been sure death if I had moved as the snake crawled near me.

At that time, Dad had no way to travel except to walk. The stock belonged to the owner of the farm and you could only use it with permission from the owner. (In 1900, the average size farm worked by a tenant farmer was 90 acres.)

When I was four (1901) my father moved to Rion, S.C. and we lived in a better house. We moved what furniture we had into a four room house.

In those days, how it would rain and freeze. The home was built on pillars about two feet off the ground. The wind and cold would come in the house though the floor and around the doors and windows. Only two fireplaces in the house. One in the cook stove and the other in the fireplace in the bedroom. How I would get in that feather bed and Mom would cover me with four or five quilts that she had quilted. The toilet was one hundred yards from the house. To take a bath, the water was brought from a well and heated in a kettle on the stove, then poured in a large zinc tub. Try to imagine one taking a bath in front of the open fireplace and the others trying to keep warm. I was large enough (4-5 years old) to bring water from the well and bring in the

stove wood.

If you traveled, you rode in a wagon or buggy or on horse back. It was seven miles to the train station (Winnsboro). Daddy hired a buggy and a mule one weekend and we went to visit Granddad. It was very cold and I rode in the box on the back of the buggy. Dad, Mother and my baby brother were on the front seat. Before we left home, they heated two bricks just as hot as they could get them and place them near their feet to keep them warm. Some of the roads were so bad that a horse and buggy could hardly move over them. Another time, we drove to the train station to ride the train as far as we could. Granddad met us in a buggy and we traveled to reach his home. I will never forget the ride. The little steam engine used wood for fuel. The coaches

had long seats against the wall on both sides. A great big stove in the end of the car that they tried to keep a fire in so that the people could keep warm. It would run about 30 MPH. We did not ride the train home, but this was the first time I had ever seen or ridden on a train. The next day I was to see my first *tame plum*. All the plums I ever saw were *wild*.

Granddad owned a nice home with a great big fireplace about six feet wide and burned logs to heat the house. Before the ashes were moved from the fireplace, he would pull them to the front and bury sweet potatoes and peanuts and chestnuts in the hot ashes. The sweet potatoes would bake and the peanuts and chestnuts would parch. They were real good cooked this way.

We moved from Rion to Winnsboro (1902). There I entered school at the age of five. It was a one room school over the company store. The one teacher, Miss Mattie, did the best she could teaching ten grades in one room. I had to walk about two miles to it. Sometimes, I would catch a ride on the back of a wagon. I walked with the larger girls that lived above us on the same street. I don't remember ever going to church (up until this time).

We carried our lunch with us, one biscuit with "something" between it and a large cookie with "a" raisin in the center. We drank water from the well. Mom would make my shirts out of flour sacks. We didn't know the difference.

One day I turned around in my desk and when I turned back around, I saw stars. I met Miss Mattie's hand against my face. Another time, my uncle and I had a fight at the well. I gave him a beating and the teacher gave us both a good whipping. I studied one book, *The Johnson Primer*. It cost fifteen cents. We used a slate to write on, with a slate pencil. I erased the slate with a sponge. When I lost the sponge, I used my shirt sleeve. To be excused, there was a rock on the teacher's desk. I raised my hand and asked to be excused, took the rock with me. When I came in, I brought the rock back in and placed it on the desk. This same uncle caused me to get another whipping. He was going fishing with some of the boys and came by our home for me to go with them. When Mom wouldn't let me go and they made faces at me, I forgot and used some language I had learned that Mom didn't know about. When she got through with me, I didn't use that language where she could hear it anymore. In the first

In those days, there were no screens to keep the flies and mosquitoes out of the house. Mothers in those days never ate with the family. She would fan the flies away from the food until the first one finished the meal and would then fan until she ate. Someone made a machine that fastened to the ceiling and you paddled it with your foot. This machine would fan the flies from the food and Mom could eat with the family. We did not have mosquito netting to cover the beds that would keep the mosquitoes from getting to you, so we would burn an old piece of wool in a pan. This would keep the mosquitoes away.

A mother in those days didn't have any help with her work. To laundry clothes, she had a big iron wash pot and a big zinc tub. She would rub the clothes after they had been

soaped with home made lye soap, between her hands, then beat them over a rock or against the chimney to get them clean. In those days, there were only two kinds of soap. Lye soap to wash the clothes and clean the floor and water buckets with, and Octagon soap for all other uses. Later, the wrinkle wash board came out. To iron clothes, Mom had three irons that set in front of the fire in the fireplace when she was ironing.

Mom must see that we had plenty to eat during the winter. She would can string beans in the old *Ball Glass Jars*. We would dry beans, peas and corn on the roof of the house. We would bank sweet potatoes. Mom would can all kinds of berries and tomatoes. We raised our own meat.

All the neighbors lived the same way. A large family, small income, very little education, just hard work. No Sunday clothes or shoes. Just enough money to make ends meet needs. As we children grew older and entered school, times got a little better. Mother would see that we went to Sunday School and that our clothes were cleaned and pressed.

When I was seven years old, my Dad got a job as a "fireman", stoking coal in a boiler at a granite mill in a small town (Rion), (The granite mill had its own mill village for its employees.) where his Daddy and brother were employed. We had a better house to live in. The first Christmas I remember in this place, Dad carried me, Mom and my brother, to the general store on what was known as Main Street, where all the stores were. There, for the first time, I saw the Christmas tree and decorations and toys. In the middle of the stores was a jail. He explained it all to us. I had never seen fireworks or as many toys before. The merchants had them out in front of the stores on tables. There were no automobiles. The streets were mud. The streets and stores were lit up with oil lamps. I saw my first policeman. We got home about nine o'clock that night, very excited. (The first mill village in S.C. was in Graniteville, around 1830 to 1860.)

When school opened, I started in the third grade. It was (another) one room school with one teacher. She was a good teacher but had a lot of trouble. One day, she expelled a girl in the tenth grade. In no time, the mother was there and a fight started. The teacher never gave in and the girl was still expelled. She never came back to school anymore.

As a boy, I would watch the men load large pieces of stone on flat cars down in what they called "the ledge". There were two cranes fastened with wire cables that would lift the granite. The cranes were wood poles about fifty feet high. After they loaded all the loose stone, they would blast more stone loose. The whole country around this place was one solid stone. When they would set off a blast, the officers would notify all the people in the houses to get out in the open. A piece of stone might come through the house top. One evening, they were blasting and a piece of stone weighing about fifty pounds fell between Mom and me. She was in the yard and I was in the road. Most of these people were stone cutters from the North. They were healthy. I never knew of a doctor in this place. (Poor white agriculturist were willing to work for low wages in developing mill

villages. Despite low wages, the jobs looked attractive to transplanted tenant farmers. Until the *66 Hour Rule* in 1892, mos

I was large enough to cut wood for the fireplace and cook stove. One day my Dad came home for lunch and it began to snow. Dad told me to cut plenty of wood enough to last several days. We had cord on top of cord of wood stacked in the back yard. We would cut the heart out of the wood to start fires with. And the worst part of it was I left the axe on the ground.

It was snowing heavy when Dad came home (that evening). He was covered with black grease. All the fires had burned out. The water in the kettle was cold and he could not find the ax to cut some wood to start the fires. Have you ever tried to find an ax with twelve to fifteen inches of snow and ice over it? He woke me up and told me to find the ax and where was the wood to start the fire. After so long, I found the ax in the dark and cut the wood to start the fire. After he got some warm water and washed the grease off his face and hands, he went in the yard to see if I had put any bedding for the hog and the two little goats we had. The goat was froze stiff and when he went to the hog pens, the hog was froze. I never thought of bedding. Dad didn't whip me, but gave me a good talking to.

One Sunday morning the superintendent came to our home driving a thing that had four wheels but didn't look like a buggy. It would run and had no horses pulling it. My Dad said it was called an automobile, a *Brush* automobile. It had no top and was shaped somewhat like a buggy. (In the early 1900's a Brush automobile could be bought in South Carolina for \$485, almost half the cost of an Oldsmobile.)

One night my Dad came home from the store with some oranges, pineapples and grapefruits. We had never seen a grapefruit before and tried to peel it like an orange. After we peeled it, we tried to eat it without sugar. Later in the evening, I went over to my granddad's and a man gave me my first newspaper. It was made out of green paper and was two pages. I was eight years old then.

We lived near the plant cemetery where they buried the dead. One night in the summer, my brother and I were sitting on the back porch washing our feet when we saw a light move from the cemetery down under the hill. We told Dad and he and Mom saw the light too. Dad said he had heard that if you look at a cemetery at night, you could see a light moving about. The next morning, Mom went to our garden just below the cemetery and the people with the light had cleaned the garden of everything we had. The light we saw was the light the thieves used to carry corn, beans and tomatoes to the wagon they hauled it away in.

In those days there were plenty of wild birds and game in the woods. It was fun to hunt hen's nest in the woods. The nest would sometimes have thirty or forty eggs in it. Two or more hens laying in the same nest. There were plenty of wild plums in the summer, red and yellow ones that I would gather, then draw a bucket of cold water from the well and put the plums in the cold water so the plums would be cool for us to eat after supper.

There were peaches too, but most of them had worms in them. I am now eight years old and there is still no screen to keep out the flies and mosquitoes. This was a little city but had no sewer system. All the lamps were oil lamps. You had no bean beetles or insects that destroyed your garden. At this place we planted the *Ramshorn* running or pole beans, looked like the *Kentucky Wonder* bush beans, onions, turnips, tomatoes and potatoes. The sweet potatoes were named *Nancy Hall* and were yellow and very sweet. The red potatoes were good but not

Dad sent my brother to the well to get a bucket of cool water for supper. He went and stayed. Dad sent me to get the water. I found the bucket but my brother was playing with a bunch of girls and boys. When I didn't come home right home with the water, Dad came looking for both of us. He found us and we both felt his belt. It was the first whipping he gave me.

My Dad and I started across a field not too far from our home. He was going hunting for quail. He stopped at a small building with a front door and a window that opened on the porch. There was a shelf outside the windows. This house was known as the "*pest house*". Anyone with a contagious disease was put in there. The doctor would put on rubber clothes and gloves as he entered to examine the person. He would remove the rubber clothes when he came out. The family would place food on the shelf and leave. If the patient recovered or died, everything in the room was burned.

My Dad carried me to the company store one evening and with the groceries, he bought four soft drinks called strawberry. The bottle was small and the stopper was rubber, inside of the bottle, fastened with a piece of wire. To open the bottle, push the wire down. To close the bottle, pull the wire up.

On the 4th of July, I saw my first baseball game. The players had on suits something like they wear today (1965). They also had a greased pig for someone to catch. If you could catch the pig and hold them, he got the pig and a prize. They had a prize for anyone that could climb a greasy pole. After this was over, there was a barbecue of beef, pork and goat, prepared by my grandfather. We had some music that the people across the road from us, that came from up north, and brought a phonograph that played cylinder records and had a horn. The people would line up in the road to hear the music.

One Sunday morning some men came to our house and wanted Dad to go about three miles up the railroad track and help clear the track. A lone engine was coming south and met a freight train going north, killing eight men.

Later at this place (the Winnsboro County Court House), a (black) man was going on trial for his life. He had been kept in the penitentiary for safekeeping. When the trial was to start, the sheriff (Husband of Bessie Mae Broom Richardson) brought the man to the courthouse and started up the steps on the outside of the courthouse. The sheriff, the man charged and six deputies were killed. A total of eight. Over twenty injured. All but one was loaded in a baggage car and sent to the hospital thirty miles away (Columbia).

I reached the sixth grade and worked after school and on Saturdays at the company store. The pay was fifty cents a week. I pushed a two wheel cart to deliver groceries all over the town. At the end of the school year, I was ten years old. I went to work in the plant for seventy-five cents a day. I saved my money and bought a milk cow for my family. My Mother understood me to say that I would go back to school when school started (in the fall). This was my last of going to day school.

When I was not working, we boys would go in the woods and gather wild cherries, *Blackhall*, *Little Redhalls*, *Mull Berries*, *Due Berries*, *Black Berries*, *Goose Berries* and *Hucker Berries*. They all grew wild in the woods. There were several big trees of *Sugar Berries*. The Robins would take over the sugar trees. There is a law in the state that you must not kill a Robin.

There is no fish pond around that the boys could go swimming in. We didn't have the money to buy a baseball and bat with. We could get thread from the plant and make our own balls with. (They would climb to the top of a selected tree, bend it over to the ground, cut off the top and use it for a bat.)

One Sunday, Dad carried us to see the passenger train stop at the station. We could see it every day pass our house and wave at the engineer, who was my uncle married to my mother's sister. We got there a little before the train and saw the wood piled up and down the track and on both sides as near the water tank as possible. The engine used wood for fuel. As they filled the engine tender with water, the fireman and the brakeman would fill the engine tender with wood. This would last to the next stop.

I was nine years old and still liked to visit my Granddad in the last house on the north end of town and we lived on the south end of town.

In 1906 my Dad worked night and day. He came home one morning just as greasy as could be. Mom told him that there was no food in the house. He didn't take time to bathe. He went out the front door. The depression was on and he was paid in paper scrip. The scrip would buy groceries (at the company store) and that was what we needed. He came home in about two hours in a one horse wagon with a load of groceries. This was the only time in the "good old days" that we didn't have food in the house.

That year someone let the news out that the President of the United States would pass through this little town. The people stood at the railway station all day without food or

water. No president came. Dad let my brother and I visit my two uncles at the capital (Columbia). We rode the train which was much faster and nicer in the coaches. The engine burned coal now. My "drinking uncle" met us and we stayed with him and my aunt and her two boys. We were in the country. After a week, he carried us to my uncle who was an engineer. We stayed a week with them. We visited main street, saw my first five and ten cents store, the state capital, opera house and a moving picture show that cost five cents to get in. We didn't go in. My uncle lived next door to his brother who also was an engineer. The water pump was on the porch of my uncle's. If his brother wanted water, it had to be pumped from my uncle's house. My uncle's brother would give me five cents to pump the water over to his house. After a week with them,

(During my research, I found out that many Broom men worked for the Southern Railroad in Columbia, as well as the husbands of many maiden Broom women. I have them on a separate family tree.)

The next year, my "drinking uncle" moved from the farm to town and got a job with the railroad. Mom and children visited them for a few days. I saw a wagon running without a mule or horse. My aunt said that they called it a truck. Outside toilets were all over the place. I got my ride on my first street car. Mom and Dad decided they would make a little extra money so they started to raise turkeys. As they got large enough to eat, you couldn't give them away. My father would not let me go back to school.

Two years later, we moved to Columbia, S.C. There, I got a job in a plant. The salary was twelve dollars a week. There was a night school in that city. I enrolled in it and had to start over in the second grade. But by the end of the year, I graduated and won a scholarship to a college. I remember the principal, who was the minister of the local Lutheran church and his assistant, came to the house one Sunday evening and pleaded with Dad for me to go to college. There were now five children and Dad would not let me go. (The Academy was the counter part of the modern day secondary or high school and often taught by ministers. Some were miscalled "colleges". They were what today would be classed as private or tuition schools, with the prevailing view that education was a private responsibility. Like other similar organizations, sponsors contributed scholarships for some who could not afford it.)

My Dad got a job with the railroad. Later, he got a job with a plumbing company that was installing sewer lines in the city and running water so each home could use it. The night we arrived, there was a string of red lights down the street just as far as I could see. I wanted to know what the lights were for. Dad said men were working. As we went to Main Street, I could see the electric lights for the first time.

One year *the chills and fever* spread all over the city. The cause was mosquitoes caused by the river overflowing in the city and poor drainage. One Sunday morning I had my first chill and hot fever. You would shake all over. I went to bed. My Dad went to the drug store and got a bottle of chill and fever medicine. He gave me a dose and I went to sleep. When I woke up, my mother was in bed by me with chills and fever. Later, Dad

was in the bed with it. He did not get a doctor, just used the medicine he bought at the drug store.

Dad carried the family to a Punch & Judy show one night at the passenger station. They gave you a ticket with a number and when they called the number, that won the first prize, a gold watch. It was the number on my ticket. I carried it to the man and he said there had been a mistake, that he had the same number. Dad talked to him but I did not get the watch. This man was to leave the next morning on the train. He stepped around the stacks of wood right in front of the train. The train ran over his body. (I do hope that this was an accident, as the Broom men of that age were known to have a quick temper and stood aside for no one.)

One evening, some boys older than I took me with them to the river to what was called in those days, "going in washing". We all undressed and waded out into the (Congaree) river. They had used this place many times to go swimming. The river was rising and nearly ready to move over the banks. They had a boat. Four of us got in and pushed out into the river about twenty feet. We were all diving off the boat into the water.

I dived and the water was not as deep as I expected and my head buried in the soft mud. It knocked me blind for sometime. As I came out of the water, I had my mind back and as I started under the second time, I got a new breath and the current was taking me into the channel. As I went under the third time, I felt someone catch my hand and pull me back. They put me in the boat. My swimming days were over. God was not ready for me. We all dressed and started to leave for home when we heard a man calling for help, "please save me". It was a man fully dressed swimming down the river. The boys told him to grab hold of one of the big rocks and hold on until he could get to him. The same boy that saved me, saved this man, the same day. I have forgotten the boy's names, as it has been nearly sixty years.

In 1910, I looked through the crack in the fence and saw my first football game. I was not by myself looking through the cracks. The fence was lined with boys. At the ball park, I belonged to the "knot hole gang". The owner of the team would let us all in the bleachers after the seventh inning, free.

Dad carried me to see my first circus and the ticket seller cheated him out of five dollars. He gave the man twenty dollars and he only got fourteen back in the place of nineteen. The ticket seller doubled a five dollar bill and counted both ends. He counted the ends of the money so my dad could see. But Dad didn't unfold it until the next morning and the circus was gone.

Main Street was several blocks long and the street was paved with wood blocks. When a carnival came to town, the city would block off the city streets and the carnival would put their tents up facing Main Street. Everybody had a good time.

I played baseball in the boys league and played left field. I saw the first diesel engine placed in the plant to replace the old steam engine. The first five hundred mile automobile race was held at the fair grounds and I saw it through a hole in the fence. Car number ninety-nine won the race. The cars were making about forty miles per hour. About a month later, the first airplane came to the fair ground. The owner charged adults twenty-five cents and children ten cents to see it and walk close to it. He would start the motor and race it. It was wonderful. I saw an airplane.

I was now fourteen years of age. My uncle that was an engineer asked me if I didn't want to fire his engine. If I did, he would get me the job. While he was getting me a job, my dad got one for me with him out in the shop. I was six feet tall (at the age of 14) and weighed one hundred and fifty-nine pounds. The salary was sixteen cents an hour, nine hours per day. I saw the last of the old link and pin couplings for freight cars removed and automatic couples applied. Then air brakes were required on all cars. Next was the Unity States Safety Appliance for all railroad equipment.

The second year I was assigned to a mechanic. We were both under a car applying some bolts to the running gear. My father was above us on the track working on a car when the cars started moving. Before I could get out from under the car, it was rolling and I was caught under the axle as they stopped the car from rolling. My dad thought the wheel ran over me, but it was the axle that I was under. My back was injured.

One Sunday I went back to visit my granddad. He was telling me about the shooting spree they had at the courthouse. He was on the grand jury. He said that thirty-five men testified that they saw the shooting. Eight men were killed. They were all behind a tree.

I made my first trip to Washington, D.C. The hotel had gas lights. When I was ready to go to bed, I tried to blow out the gas light, but it wouldn't blow out. I then saw the valve to turn the light out. I had never seen a gas light turned out. The Lord for sure was not ready for me that night. (Out of order. This happened when he was an adult and worked for the railroad.)

Later, my granddad died. There were very few automobiles at that city. People still used horses and buggies. To drive him to the country cemetery (Hormah Baptist) the undertaker gave me a horse that would run away if we met an automobile or train. I saw one automobile coming and jumped out of the buggy and held the horse. We made it to the cemetery alright. On the way back, two girls wanted to ride in the one seated buggy with me. One girl to sit in my lap and the other one would drive. She said she was a good driver. We did not meet an automobile, but just as we got in town by the railroad, a train was going by and blew the whistle. The horse and girl got scared and before I could get the reins, she jerked the horse around and turned the buggy upside down, turning the horse on his back. I got out of the buggy as fast as I could but the horse was up first and the shaves came loose from the buggy. The last I saw of the horse, he was going in the wrong direction just as fast as he could. So fast, the shave

Back home, I worked first one job and then another, all with the same company (Southern Railroad). (The Southern Railroad was established in 1894.) If I didn't know the job, I got books and studied until I did know it. On September the ninth, nineteen hundred eighteen, I married my wife (Grettie "Grace" M. Frazee) .

Hard work did not hurt me. I missed the teenage good times, but as I look back, I would like to enjoy life as a teenager. When I should have been enjoying myself as a young man, I was busy working, helping to support my mother and six children. I worked twelve hours a day, or if I worked at night, it was still twelve hours a night, seven days or nights a week. I don't know how I could improve helping my parents as I gave my mother my paycheck each payday until I married. I never caused them any worry, as I had no bad habits. My father was sick for two years when he passed on (Dec. 14, 1917) and I continued to keep the family together. I was just twenty years old and married at twenty-one, to one of the sweetest girls I knew, and she turned out to be almost a perfect mother. My mother died ten months to the day after my died (Oct. 14, 1918) My wife took five of my brothers and sisters as her children and did the best for them and our children as she could. I would liked for my parents to have lived so tha

God saw that we had something to eat and clothes to wear and a roof over our heads. Our children began to come along, nine of them. They were healthy and did not give us much trouble. The older ones helped the younger ones and they all helped their mother. My wife could take a small amount of money and make it go a long way. I was transferred to another state (Knoxville, TN) and the twins were born there. I worked long hours and seven days a week. We lived well. As the children got old enough, they started school. Four of our children went to college, the other four finished high school, one died. Later, one finished junior college.

(According to my great-grandfather's death certificate, located in the state archives in Columbia, John Hampton Broom died from some sort of petroleum related complications. I cannot help but believe that those years of breathing granite dust in the quarry and especially being coated with grease and solvents while with the railroad, caused his illness. We now know that this does happen and measurers are now taken to prevent grease, oils, etc. from coming in contact with the skin. My great grandmother, Mattie Ann True Broom's death certificate says that she died of influenza. In 1918-1919, the Influenza Holocaust hit the state killing 4-5,000 people, or 1 in 10. Both certificates were signed by their son, Claude James Broom. At that time, they all lived at 2231 Lee St. in Columbia. To this day, eighty years later, in 1998, that house still stands. Both John Hampton and Mattie Ann died in the Baptist Hospital and are buried in the Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia, on the left side, just beyond the Confederate

Personal Note:

(Rhonda and I have been to Fairfield county several times, finding many different grave sites for relatives. What was difficult was finding Rion, SC. With a county map, it's off

the beaten path. Then when you find the sign on the side of the highway, there's nothing there. We drove down a farm- to- market road, turning onto an even smaller, 1&1/2 lane road. Halfway down was an old rusted water tower, with "Rion" barely visible. At the end of the road, believe it or not, was an abandoned rail road loading site for granite from the quarry. I had to think of my great grandfather, John Hampton Broom, walking up and down that road to get to work each day and of my grand father, Claude James Broom, searching the surrounding woods for food. We are truly, truly blessed. With the Grace of God and the hard work, suffering and sacrifice of our ancestors, we can never thank God and them enough. I also know that my Grandmother Lucia Meetze Frazee, worked to rear her children alone.

She made clothes for the patients at the SC State Hospital in Columbia. My grandmother Grettie Frazee Broom often told us how difficult it was. The Brooms, Meetzes and Frazees were well off before the Civil War, but with the devastation that the South endured and with what followed, our family had to start all over again.

I know it was all in God's plan, and one day when we all meet again, I just want to tell them that I love them and thank them for what they endured for me.)

(Written by Claude James Broom Sr. around 1965, after his retirement. Found and edited by his grandson, Billy E. Broom, Jr. in 1998.)