

Gullah,
Geechees
and
Grits

And Other South Carolina
Sea Island Adventures

Douglas W. Hunter

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And lastly, to all the wonderful island folk for making life so very beautiful.

Preface

In defining the terms Gullah and Geechee, one might say that either is a people or a language. In this work, Gullah is the language that I was exposed to and while much of it has been watered down over the many years since it's creation, it is still evident in daily conversation although many who use some of the terms don't realize it. Gullah is derived from many African and Caribbean dialects along with English. Contrary to the popular belief that all plantations raised cotton, the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina were noted for rice. Many of the slaves were rice planters in their native lands and their experience in that field gave them better resistance to malaria and yellow fever. As a result, much of the Gullah traditions and practices remained as the plantation owners avoided the farms during rainy seasons and farm bosses were left to run the plantations.

Geechees, in my area, were the descendents of slaves from the Ogeechee River area just south of Savannah, Georgia. There have also been tales of Geechees coming from upstate South Carolina, but I have found no direct proof in that regard.

In reading this volume, please note that my use of the spoken Gullah is spelled phonetically so as to let the reader pronounce easier. The written Gullah may or may not be different, but this writing represents the way many of the islanders that I grew up with spoke. Additionally, many of the stories do not mention either Gullah or Geechees but you can bet that their wonderful influences affected the lives of all ethnicities who ever called the Sea Islands home.

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Indian Head Pennies

Aunt Winnie lived in the big house at the corner of John Smalls and River roads. The house was light green on the outside and had live oak trees all around it to help subdue the South Carolina heat. Her youngest son was my cousin Charley and he was the fastest talking kid I had ever seen in my entire eight years of life. I couldn't understand a word that boy said. It was like he had one great big word that was 5000 letters long. I tried to keep it simple with yes or no questions, but the boy just couldn't resist hearing himself talk. By the time he finally took a breath, you usually forgot what you had even asked him. As much as that boy loved to run his mouth, we figured that he'd grow up to be the Governor or something.

Oh, and that was one trifling, lazy child. Great day! I never saw anyone so lazy in my life, but I figured he burnt up all his energy talking. And eat? Man alive, you couldn't stomp enough food down his throat. He'd stuff a whole chicken leg in his mouth and, in one whack, that leg bone would come out as clean as a whistle. As a matter of fact, I don't think I ever saw him eat with a fork. He always used a tablespoon. And he wasn't very neat about it either. I remember Uncle John sloppin' the hogs and it got me to thinking that Charley could learn a lesson in manners from those muddy, smelly critters. But, he was my first cousin, my best friend, and he liked adventure.

River Road ran parallel to the Stono River around one side of the island, and it looked like you were going through a tunnel because the oak trees formed a canopy over the road. Every now and then, Charley and I would cut new cane poles, walk to the river and try to catch some bass, but we usually got catfish. We hated catfish. They were bottom-feeding scavengers, had barbs that would stick you and

cause infections; they even looked nasty. We'd cut the line before pulling one of those ugly varmints up on the river bank.

John Smalls Road was a one lane dirt road that led back to some old houses behind Uncle John's farm. It was lined with oak trees, too, but also had blackberry thickets growing all around. Sometimes, when the berries were just turning black, you'd see some white, gooey stuff stuck to the forks of the smaller branches. We always thought it was snake spit or spider eggs, so we never messed with it. We didn't want anything to do with that stuff because we were never sure if it was poisonous or not. We also thought, if it got in your hair and you didn't know it, thousands of baby spiders would hatch in your hair while you were sleeping.

Just a few hundred yards up the road, a gap between the trees led to the old chicken shack that Uncle John had converted to a house for Mom and the rest of us kids. It was just a shack, but it was the best place I ever lived. It had no lights or running water. There were no wooden doors on the inside, just a sheet hanging over the doorway, and kerosene lamps for light. You could see the stars through the roof at night and, by looking between the gaps in the floors, you could watch the field rats run around under the house. Since you could feel the wind blow right through the wood siding, Mama took some flour and water and had five of us kids paste newspaper to the walls. I'd never seen so much newspaper in my life. We worked on that mess for days on end until finally, it was finished and painted white. Uncle John and Cousin Boogie spread some thick black goo on the roof to keep the water from running in during those heavy South Carolina rains, and Mama threw some rugs on the floors. She made it a happy place to be and I loved it.

When the rain fell lightly on John Smalls Road, an amazing thing happened. The dirt was higher in the middle than on the sides so that the water would run off faster, and not make ruts when the cars, trucks, and tractors rode down

it. Whenever a light, steady rain fell all day long, the dust would wash off really easily and leave the hard road clean. Every time that happened, Charley and I would walk down the middle and find Indian Head Pennies scattered everywhere. Sometimes there would be a handful and other times there would be a pocketful, but we never had a rain that didn't make those pennies appear. We never found dimes or nickels, but we found enough pennies to turn them into dimes and nickels. I bet we found thousands of pennies that summer.

We liked those pennies because our Mr. Sydney owned the only store for miles around and we could go in and buy coconut macaroons at two for one cent. Now, our Mr. Sydney had a run down concrete block building that was small, and it had been painted so many times that the newest coat always peeled away by the end of the summer. His son, Jophus, would paint it every year after the last frost. There was one big window in front and a screen door with a Merita Bread sign on the cross buck. The wooden door was full of thumbtack holes from people hanging posters of wrestling and boxing matches that were coming to County Hall. You could always find notices from the Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church posted in the window on bright yellow paper. The shelves were never completely full, but people on the island usually found what they needed.

Our Mr. Sydney was a very, very large man who's skin was as black as a coal miner's fingernails. His teeth were pearl white and his eyes were the prettiest shade of blue-green that there ever was. He was so large that he sat on a piano stool at the cash drawer, and he'd swing back and forth to put your groceries in a bag. We always wondered if he ever went home because we had never seen him stand up. He had a voice that was as large as he was, and a smile twice as big as that. When he laughed, the plate glass window would rattle. The first time we heard him laugh, it scared us so badly that we ran all the way home. It wasn't long before

we worked up the courage to go back because we just had to have more of those cookies.

Just inside the door, there was an old wooden bench where people would rest a while, socialize a little and drink a cool soda. It was so worn from the many years of folks sitting there that the boards were bowed. Charley and I would linger there, eat cookies, and drink an RC Cola. Our Mr. Sydney would tell us about his great grandfather being a Blackfoot Indian, and how proud he was of his heritage. Charley asked him it that was why he was so dark, and he bellowed so loudly that the Tom's Cookie Jar vibrated on the glass counter. Each time we went to see him, he would take one penny, put it safely in his watch pocket and tell us a story about Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Osceola, or other great Indian Chiefs. We sat, mesmerized, holding those RC bottles until they got warm, and we'd watch intently at his facial expressions because he would scrunch his face up and make deep growling noises when he told stories about bears and wolves. Other times, he'd tell funny tales of Blackfoot children pretending to be deer and other animals, and his smile would light up the darkest night. When the story was over, he'd shuffle us out the door, and have Jophus watch as we walked home.

The last day of summer in 1959 was a dreary, rainy day, and was perfect for finding pennies. After the rain ended, we walked up and down that road a dozen or more times, but didn't find a single penny. We couldn't believe it: not one cent to be had anywhere. We ran as fast as we could to tell Our Mr. Sydney that the pennies weren't there anymore. But, when we got to the store, the door was shut and locked, the blind was pulled down over the window, and a sign said that services for Mr. Sydney would be held tomorrow at Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church.

We sat on those well-worn brick steps, and realized that our beloved Mr. Sydney was gone forever. We'd never hear that grand laugh again, and tears rolled down both our faces.

As darkness fell, the light came on over the store sign, and we saw Jophus coming out of the house with a box under his arm. He walked us home for the last time, sat down on Aunt Winnie's porch, and gave us the box to open. Inside was that Tom's Cookie Jar filled with every Indian Head Penny we had ever found, and a note saying: To my little Indian Braves.

The Headless Snake

It was a typical, boiling hot, 100 degree day on John's Island and the humidity was so high that it felt as if you were in a sauna. Stepping outside would often take your breath away and, if it weren't for the live oaks surrounding the shack, there would have been no defense from the sweltering misery of summer in the Deep South. Still, we managed to sort out the cool places from the hot ones and have a whole bunch of fun in the process.

There was a pump stand about 100 yards from the shack and, since there was no indoor plumbing, Uncle John put a large galvanized tub there for my family to bathe in. It was large enough for about six children to sit in and cool off from the heat of the day so we'd take turns pumping water to keep it as full as a bunch of rambunctious kids would allow it to be. We'd strip down to our drawers and have a grand old time just enjoying laughs and splashing around. Coming in from the fields, we were always covered in that rich black soil that grew the best tomatoes and collards anyone could ever imagine tasting. Needless to say, the bottom of that tub was covered in what appeared to be that fine black dirt that treasure hunters look for when panning for gold. Our drawers were almost as black as the tub when we got out but, washing them was a small price to pay for that much fun. Most late afternoons, you'd find six shiny hineys lined up at the stand with a corn cob and a bar of Octagon soap, scrubbing the black stains from their drawers and giggling as the mud oozed between their toes.

As the sun went down, Mom would build a fire to cook on. She had stacked some old Charleston bricks on three sides and found some sort of grate to lie across the top to put the pots and pans on. It must have been really hard for her to feed six children from a campfire, but you could always

smell those wonderful aromas wafting through the thick evening air. It was the only time I recall all six of us being quiet for any length of time and you'd never see a more cooperative group of children. Fried chicken and butter beans with rice were always a favorite and cracklin' corn bread topped off the best nights. The fire usually burned out through the night but the embers stayed hot long enough to rekindle a fire to make grits and eggs for breakfast. When we finally got electricity and a two-burner hotplate it took me forever to get used to eating eggs without grit and ash from the fire.

One particular night, Daddy, Uncle John, and cousins Boogie and Wendell came home from a day of fishing. They had a nice string of Channel Bass ready for cleaning and we were all excited because it usually meant we could eat as much as we could hold. Whatever fresh food we had had to be cooked immediately and, if there was ever anything that my Dad was really good at, it was catching fish. I think he could stand by the Stono River and the fish would jump in the bucket for him. It was uncanny. Charley and I never could figure out how he managed to catch all those good fish and not once, catch any of those nasty, disgusting, revolting, stinking catfish.

Mom heard that old 1948 Chevy lumbering up the dirt road because the engine always sounded like it was sucking air and you could see the dust cloud trailing as Uncle John's truck headlights followed in behind the boat. When they pulled up in the yard, Uncle John flipped on the spotlight that was mounted on the roof of his truck so they could see to park the boat and clean the fish. It was usually my job to have a small pit dug to bury the blood and guts after every fishing day but I was surprised to see just how many fish they had caught that day. Boogie had even caught a small sand shark. It was too large to fit in the buckets with the fish, so Wendell put water in the bottom of the boat and let it stay there until they got home. It was just a short drive to the

river, so the shark was still alive when they arrived and it wasn't very happy about being there. Daddy had to gig it and tie its mouth shut before he could clean it and he didn't like cleaning sharks because they always dulled the knives. There was enough fish to feed an army that night and Uncle John sent Charley to Mr. Fludd's house to ask them over. It was never very hard to find folks willing to eat, especially free fish and hush-puppies.

It was still 95 degrees when they pulled the boat from the river and the car and truck were probably 20 degrees hotter inside from baking in the sun. As they pulled up to put the boat on the trailer, a cottonmouth moccasin dropped from a tree and landed right at Boogie's feet. Neither the snake nor Boogie moved an inch and Uncle John took one lucky shot at smacking its head with the sharp edge of an oar. It stunned the snake and gave Uncle John the chance to trap its head and cut it off with one of those floating fishing knives. Wendell said that Boogie looked like The Grey Man (a ghost who used to warn beach dwellers of impending hurricanes along the South Carolina coast) when that snake dropped and that he was the one who had a cottonmouth. He said he couldn't even spit for an hour.

Cousin Wendell wanted to keep the snake and make a belt from the skin so he grabbed it up and threw it in the back of that old Chevy. He closed the lid and forgot about it, not thinking about what happens when you put a dying snake in a car trunk. The snake was still moving quite vigorously when tossed in the trunk and it coiled up into the smallest mass it could make. By the time they thought about it again, the temperature had dropped significantly but the trunk of that car was still quite warm.

Daddy was sitting on the ground with his legs stretched out and Mom was stoking the fire with part of a small tree branch. The branch was solid, and she had used it many times because it was oak and wouldn't catch fire like a pine branch would. Dad thought it would be funny if he asked

Mom to open the trunk without telling her about the snake. He knew all too well that that snake was in a very hot trunk and that the cool air from the night and the change in the air pressure from the trunk to the outside would cause the snake to react to the instant change. He had seen it happen many times before.

The yard was full of people eating fish, laughing and having a good time and Daddy had nudged a couple of the men to have them watch as Mom opened that trunk lid. The men had had a few Falstaff's with the fish and were all in playful moods so they sat there as she lifted the lid. The very minute that that lid locked in the up position, the cool air and pressure change caused that snake to strike just like it was going for the kill. When it struck out, it landed on the ground near Daddy's legs and I thought Mom was going to die of a heart attack. She didn't know it didn't have a head and she grabbed that oak branch and started swinging as hard as she could. Daddy was laughing so hard and loud that I thought the ground was going to shake, and then, 'it' happened. I've never heard what utter agony sounded like outside of a dentist's office until Mom missed with that pole and smacked the living daylights out of Daddy's left leg.

That Falstaff can he was holding looked like tin foil as he bellowed out in a guttural moan that still resonates in my ears today. The pole hit his shin and all I remember seeing was his foot turn sideways and fall over like it wasn't even attached. Mom didn't realize that his leg was broken at that moment, but she did realize that the snake had no head and then, she got mad. I think if Mr. Fludd hadn't grabbed that pole she might have gone for the other leg too.

Boogie picked Daddy up and sat him in the back of the truck and took him to the hospital and although I don't know how he explained that leg to the doctor, I can tell you that he never put another snake in the trunk of a car and Wendell never did get to make that belt he wanted.

Gone Fishin'

(Or so we thought)

The John P. Grace Memorial Bridge, a landmark on the Charleston skyline, was constructed from a cantilevered truss design and spanned the Cooper River, Drum Island and Town Creek, connecting Charleston to Mt. Pleasant. Completed in 1929, it stood proudly above the waters that ran below it. The lanes were quite narrow at ten feet wide and, when vehicles passed each other, it always seemed as though they would collide. Following behind the endless line of cars that were creeping along in fear of an impending accident with each oncoming vehicle, it looked as if you couldn't squeeze a sheet of notebook paper between them. Adults were afraid to drive across it for that reason and many Charlestonians refused to even attempt it, either as a driver or a passenger. Since the bridge was erected during the Model A era, the cars of the forties and fifties, being so much larger, often had accidents and traffic would be tied up for hours at a time. Children were deathly afraid of its height and most refused to look out of the car windows for fear that they would fall over the edges.

On February 24, 1946, a freighter dubbed the Nicaragua Victory struck the bridge on the Mount Pleasant end and collapsed a 240 foot section of the deck and roadway, taking the lives of five people whose bodies were still in their Oldsmobile when it was recovered a month later. A husband and his wife, their two young children and the husband's mother perished on that fateful day and many of the local people thought the bridge was jinxed. Needless to say, people were very concerned about the bridge's safety and it's frightful reputation only grew as the bridge aged and it was learned that it was slowly sinking.

Traveling up the river was always a challenge in a small boat as the winds made it quite choppy for such a light craft.

Grandpa was getting up in age and not able to navigate the waters as well as he once had, but he knew the area well and, if we found ourselves in peril, he knew where to go for safety. The boat was typical of those built in the backyards of the island folk. Of wooden construction, it had a vee shaped hull, an open bow with fore, aft and center benches. A 40 horse Johnson provided all the power Grandpa needed to haul himself and two 8 year old boys, a half dozen rods and reels, a cooler, bait and a tackle box out on the river for a good day of fishing. The gas tank sat on the right, the battery on the left, and Grandpa sat on the seat and controlled the engine from the center. I was always afraid we might sink because the stern had been repaired at one point in the past because, someone that Grandpa called “the Goober” put an outboard motor on it that was too powerful for it and it cracked the transom. As one might guess, it was an adventure each time it was put in the water.

On this particular day, we had to go under the bridge and all I could think of were those three damaged spans and wonder, in my ignorance, if other sections would collapse and fall down upon us as we tried to go upstream. At the time of our fishing trip, I didn’t truly know which spans had been damaged, nor did I know whether that damage was on the Cooper River or on Town Creek. All I knew was that we were 8 years old and that bridge was the biggest, scariest thing I had ever seen. I just kept thinking about the two children who had died as a result of the shipping accident and I didn’t want to be next.

Cousin Charley was much less concerned about the bridge and much more concerned about getting to shore because he was feeling the effects of eating too much breakfast. He was told not to overeat before heading out to go fishing but, as usual, the boy just shoveled the groceries down his gullet. Not long after being on the river, the little glutton started feeling seasick and, in typical Charley fashion, didn’t shut that fast talking mouth of his for at least