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FAMILY BOOK SERIES

# Peace Like A River

by

LARRY GNAGEY



EARLY AMERICAN MUSEUM

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by  
LARRY GNAGEY

STORAGE

S. G 531 *q*

*S. Coll.  
(Educ.)*

*This book is dedicated to the members of the  
Champaign County African-American community with  
appreciation for the positive spirit that is evident in the quest  
for understanding, equality, and acceptance.*

*And also to the memory of Myrtle Foster, whose strength and  
compassion inspired the character of Aunt Nettie.*

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*Afro - American*

— *Foreword* —



Since the turn of the century, the African-American population in Champaign County has risen steadily. In the early years, the possibility of employment was a major factor for this immigration. Although a few families settled in outlying areas and worked small farms, most of these people made their homes within the city limits of Champaign and Urbana. The jobs usually open to them were janitorial, domestic, or associated with the railroad lines that crisscrossed the area. Low pay and long hours were the order of the day.

This story concerns the life of one such family. The historical setting has been designed to occur between the middle 1930s and the early 1940s. Though fictitious, it could be the story of many true life families.

Perhaps I should explain the name—*PEACE LIKE A RIVER*.

Among the wonderful contributions African-Americans have brought to our culture is the music that was first identified as “shouts,” later called slave songs and finally named Negro spirituals. These songs are often plaintive and sad, at other times happy and boisterous—but most express hope for better times. Filled with deep meaning and rich harmonies, this style became the basis of gospel music as well as the instrumental counterpart known as New Orleans jazz.

Our popular music evolved from this background beginning with the blues style—which, by the way, eventually made Elvis Presley a superstar. African-American performers continue to carry on the tradition.

“I’ve Got Peace Like a River in my Soul,” is a prime example of a hope spiritual. It is important to note that songs such as this were not

— *Acknowledgment* —



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composed by an individual—they simply evolved, reflecting the lives of those who would accept nothing less than the improvement of their conditions through a faith not allowed to falter.

— *Larry Gnagey*

— *Chapter 1* —



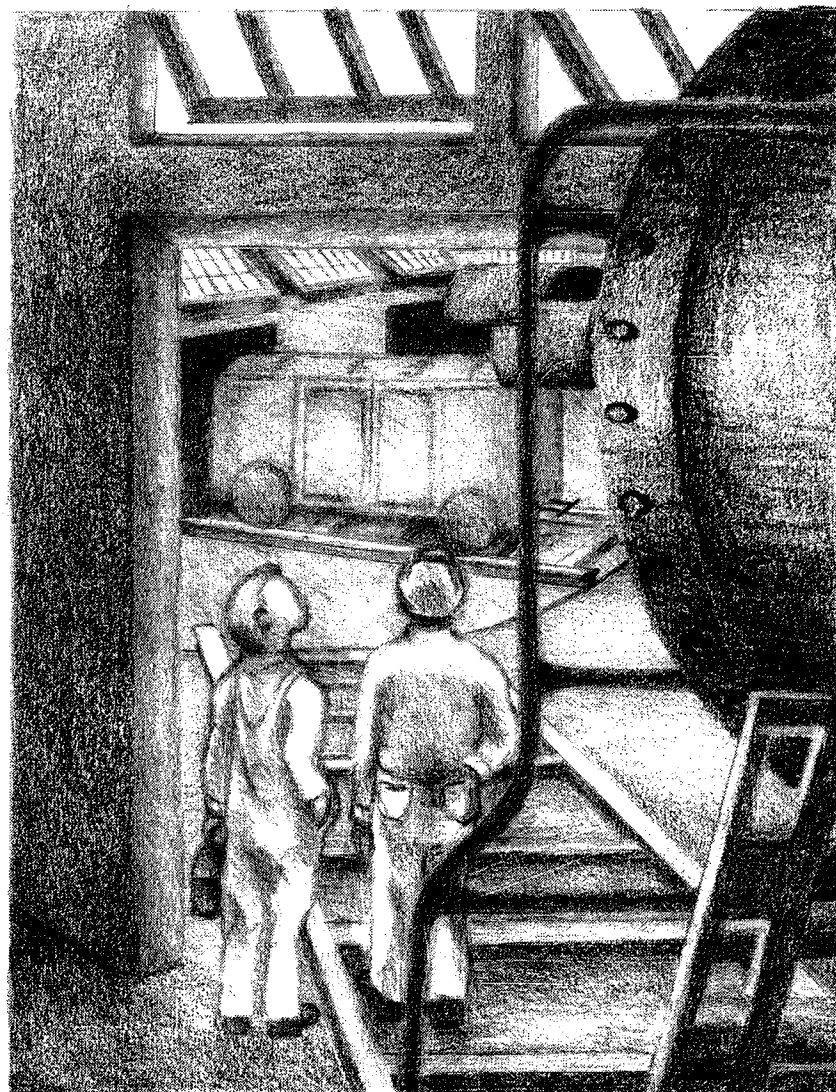
## EUGENE

ugene Harwood leaned back against the brick wall, wiped his mouth with his red bandanna, and carefully folded the brown paper bag that had held his lunch. As he placed it in his shirt pocket, he noted that it was still in good shape. If nothing was spilled on it, the sack might last one more week. He chuckled. That would please Faith. She thought a brown bag ought to last a month.

It was not quite time to return to work in the Roundhouse. Eugene closed his eyes. It had been nearly eight years since he, Faith, Aunt Nettie, and the children had arrived in Champaign. They had left Alabama upon the urging of his brother who had moved to the area earlier and had found work as a porter on the Illinois Central Railroad.

“The railroad has plenty of jobs for the man who isn’t afraid of honest, hard labor,” he had said. “The pay is low, but it’s regular—more than you are used to, EU-gene.” He emphasized the first syllable in the manner used by their parents, both of whom had now passed.

It had taken every cent Eugene and Faith could scrape together to make this move. If it hadn’t been for Aunt Nettie selling her house and



coming with them, he knew he might still be mired in his former life, trying to hire out every day, and feeling lucky if there were four days work in a row available.

He had come to the Roundhouse and applied for work on the very day of their arrival. Two days later, he was on the job. The family spent a week with his brother, then found a little house in northeast Champaign within walking distance of the Roundhouse which was located just off North Market Street. Aunt Nettie had provided rent money for the first three months.

"I'll let you do this," Eugene had told her, "but I will pay you back a little every week." It had taken two years, but he had fulfilled this obligation.

As a porter, his brother spent most of his time in passenger trains. Porters carried baggage, made up berths, shined the shoes that were set out at night, and took care of the passengers' other needs. The tips were usually meager, but he would occasionally "get lucky," and receive fifty cents.

Eugene's brother had moved to Kankakee recently, citing the opportunity for better wages. He hoped to eventually settle in Chicago.

Eugene had never considered being a porter. He was a big man who enjoyed working with his hands, and would have been willing to lay track, build roadways, or carry ties. It had been a stroke of luck that one of his brother's neighbors had steered him here to the Roundhouse.

The click of lunch boxes closing caused Eugene to open his eyes. He watched Jack and the other white workers prepare to return to work. Eugene stood up.

It had been Jack that had hired him. Jack had been honest about the pay and the hours. He hadn't made any reference to Eugene being Negro, and he had carefully explained and demonstrated the duties. He introduced the new man to the shop workers, those men who

repaired and replaced locomotive parts. Eugene would assist them when needed. Jack taught him how to operate the turntable, that section of track that could move in a circle and turn locomotives completely around, or into the correct shop area for needed work. Cleaning and polishing portions of these huge engines were also among the duties Eugene must accomplish.

Jack never expected a worker to know how to complete a task that was new to him. He did expect you to remember once you had been told. That was fair enough.

Eugene usually ate by himself, rarely joining the others of his race that worked both in and outside the Roundhouse. He did not dislike being with them, but simply did his best thinking and problem solving during the lunch break. They seemed to understand and welcomed him on those days when he chose to mingle. After work, he would walk with them as far as the little neighborhood Bar and Grill where they would take their leave. With long strides, Eugene would continue on.

Jack stood with his friends watching the torrential downpour that was forming muddy puddles between the tracks that led into the building. He turned and came toward Eugene.

"Raining cats and dogs out here," he said with a grin.

"Rainin' catfish, too," observed Eugene softly.

Jack paused. "Are you a fisherman?" he asked.

Eugene was somewhat taken aback by the question. Jack was not one to strike up a conversation. In fact, he had never done so before.

"Sure enough. I love to fish."

"Really? Where do you go?"

"Oh, I find a crick, sometimes hitch a ride to the river. Then again, I take Aunt Nettie to Crystal Lake once in a while." Eugene smiled.

Jack looked out at the rain, then said, "I like to fish, too. I've got a boat that I throw in the back of my old truck."

Eugene was impressed. "Where do you go with your boat?"

The other man shrugged. "Just about everywhere. There are a lot of good places if you have transportation."

In the moment that followed, only the sound of the rain was heard. Jack was thoughtful. Eugene was wishing he had a boat.

Suddenly, Jack turned to walk away. "Better clean that engine real well," he said pointing over his shoulder. "The cab needs cleaning before it leaves here this afternoon. When you're done, let me know. We've got several projects ahead of us. This cloudburst won't help." He stopped and looked back. "Some day we ought to take the boat and find a good fishing spot." Abruptly, he turned and rejoined his friends.

Eugene managed to call after him, "Yes. That'd be good." Somehow he could not bring himself to believe it would ever happen.

*— Chapter 2 —*

## FAITH

**F**aith Harwood set her iron on end and glanced at the window. The rain was drumming against the pane with such force that she suddenly found herself hoping the roof at home was not leaking.

She carefully placed a pair of trousers on the ironing board. She had about a half bushel of clothes left to finish. Perhaps the rain would let up soon. At least, the sun had been shining earlier. It infuriated her to arrive at work looking like a drowned rat, so, of the two possibilities, she would rather get wet going home, she guessed.

Faith worked quickly, happy that she had been able to find eight families that needed someone to do washing and ironing. She was proud to proclaim that six of her clients owned businesses in downtown Champaign, while two were well-known doctors. Though usually paid in cash, she sometimes received outgrown clothes for her children.

Faith hummed softly as she pressed the brown trousers. Eugene had found a job he liked, and she was content with her life.

The door opened. A little blonde girl nearly five years old popped into the room. She was sucking loudly on a peppermint stick.



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Faith smiled at her. "You be careful, young lady, not to get yourself all sticky and messy," she said.

The little girl answered quickly. "If I do, you will make my dress all clean again."

Faith attempted to appear stern, but failed. "Young ladies are supposed to have good manners. Getting your dress dirty is not good manners."

The child looked at her frilly dress, then changed the subject.

"Is Faith your real name?" she asked.

"It is indeed, child."

"How did you get that name? That's a church word."

Faith laughed out loud. She carefully placed the trousers on a hanger, then removed another piece from the wicker basket.

"You're right. It is a church word. You see, my father worked in the cotton fields, but he was also a preacher. His favorite Bible passage was 'Faith endureth forever.' When I was born, he named me Faith. Two years later, my sister Endureth came along. We both were happy that we didn't have another sister, because no one would want to be named Forever."

The humor was lost on the little girl who had decided to go to her playroom. She opened the door, then looked back at Faith.

"My friend Toby told me that you are a black person. Is that true?" she asked, pointing with her peppermint stick.

The woman replied in a tender voice. "That is true, child. Does it make a difference?"

The blonde child became very serious. "No. I guess I would never have known if someone hadn't told me." With a wave, she ran from the room slurping loudly on her candy.

Faith shook her head. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Children," she muttered, "you can't beat 'em for honesty."

The rain was still pelting the window. Faith was aware of the steady rhythm. "I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river in my soul," she sang accompanied by the beat of the thunderstorm.

## — Chapter 3 —



## AUNT NETTIE

**N**ettie made it up the porch steps just in time. As she turned and settled into the wooden chair by the front door, sheets of rain blocked the view of neighboring houses. She put her cane across her knees and took a deep breath. Even with her cane she could move pretty fast for an eighty year-old lady—when she had to. Thank heaven she didn't have to very often!

"A real frog strangler," is what her husband used to say about such downpours. Nettie leaned back with a satisfied smile. How glad he would be to know that she had come to Illinois with her favorite nephew and his family.

It had been a good decision, but not an easy one. When Eugene had first brought up the subject, she thought she might be a burden. Faith had persuaded her that she was both wanted and needed. Nathaniel had been six years old at the time, while the girls—Rose and Lily—were only two. Nettie would care for them while their parents were at work.

A fine spray blew across the porch. The woman stood and entered the house thankful for the cane she had originally despised a year past

when her leg had begun to pain her a bit. Rose and Lily would soon be home from school most likely soaked to the skin. Rose would come bounding in first with Lily behind. Lily was always behind, it seemed. She was as quiet as Rose was rambunctious.

In her room, Nettie took off her hat. It was the same white hat she had worn on her wedding day all those years ago. She still referred to it as her wedding hat and wore it for special occasions. Today, she had joined her friends at Salem Baptist Church for the weekly work day. In fact, she could be found at the church almost every weekday now that the girls were in school. Nettie and her companions did not let their serving the congregation get in the way of their socializing.

She carefully placed the hat in the round box she had recently purchased at the Five and Ten Cent Store downtown. She had spotted it while browsing after having bought a bottle of bright red fingernail polish. Nettie put the box on the shelf in the closet beside her cherished, but worn, volume of poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

As a young woman, Netaia (How Nettie disliked that name! She thought her parents must have made it up.) had been employed by a wealthy family to care for their children. She had taught herself to read, studying their books long after they were in bed and asleep.

Nettie had also decided that everyone should speak correctly, and to this day she would interrupt family members insisting upon exact pronunciation. She could see no reason why this family could not speak the English language properly.

Nettie lovingly caressed the book of poems. She was pleased that Nathaniel had memorized several of them—after she had explained to him about reading dialect. Nettie moved into the front room and peered out the window.

Rose was streaking up the sidewalk screeching, "Aunt Nettie!" at the top of her lungs. Her wet clothes were plastered to her body. A half block behind, Lily was trotting along hands cupped on either side of her eyes in an attempt to see through the rain. She was smiling. Lily never shouted. She always smiled.

A short time later, the girls had toweled off and appeared in dry garments. Their great aunt had already washed the wet clothes and had hung them on the back porch to drip.

Rose was surveying the kitchen. "Do we got any cookies?" she asked in a louder than necessary voice.

"Do we HAVE any cookies?" Aunt Nettie looked straight at her.

"I don't know. That's why I asked," said Rose with an impish grin. Lily giggled.

Aunt Nettie did not speak, but continued to stare into Rose's eyes.

"Do we HAVE any cookies?" Rose said politely.

Nettie placed her cane on a chair and moved toward the cupboard.

"No, but bread and honey should do just fine."

Rose cheered and sat down to wait for the treat. As the woman reached for the honey jar with her right hand, she felt small fingers slip into her left hand. She looked down into Lily's smiling face. Nettie squeezed her hand gently. The quiet child took her place beside her sister.

The sound of the rain on the roof was pleasant. As the twins ate, Rose stuck her finger through her bread and wiggled it at Lily, then quickly swallowed her last few bites. Lily giggled and continued eating her piece slowly and carefully. Finally, she succumbed to the steady gaze and shared the remainder of her bread and honey with Rose.

Their great aunt watched quietly. How she loved these children! How she loved this family!

"I've got joy like a fountain in my soul."

"What did you say, Aunt Nettie?" Rose wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking out loud."

"Can I get up?"

"May I be excused."

"May I be excused."

"You may."

"Thank you." Rose leaped up and hurried away.

Lily finished her last bit of crust and wiped the crumbs from the table. She smiled at Nettie.

"You may be excused," said the elderly lady.

Lily rose and disposed of the crumbs. She started to leave the room, then paused and returned. She threw her arms around Great Aunt Nettie and gave her a sticky kiss. She trotted off in search of her sister.

— Chapter 4 —



## NATHANIEL

The rain was pounding against the windows in the school library. Nathaniel Harwood sat by himself in the darkest corner of the room. The location matched his mood. Closing the English literature book, he leaned back clasping his hands behind his head.

Earlier, while eating lunch, he and his friends had been discussing their respective futures. It was then that his mood changed, first to anger, then to discouragement. Several of the boys planned to drop out of school as soon as possible, hoping to find work. Others wished to graduate from high school, then seek employment at Joseph Kuhn and Company, Lewis' Department Store, or Robeson's as stockroom workers, janitors, or elevator operators. Nathaniel had not laughed when Cecil said that last job would sure have its "ups and downs." A few fellows were looking at options that included mechanics, railroad, or menial labor at the University of Illinois.

When finally pressed for his statement, Nathaniel had informed the group of his desire to be a teacher. Responses like, "Man, are you

crazy? You'll never get into no college!" rang in his mind. He did recall almost shouting, "You'll never get into ANY college!" Aunt Nettie had taught him well.

Slumping forward, Nathaniel leaned on the table. Were they right? Maybe he couldn't be a teacher. Why was he supposed to want to be a laborer? The jeering laughter still hurt. His history teacher had proclaimed America the land of opportunity. Nathaniel hoped that was true for everyone.

Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson, famous singers, had fought great odds to follow their calling. Both were well respected. Paul Laurence Dunbar had written about his people in poetic form. Nathaniel wondered how many people—students and teachers—in this school knew who Paul Laurence Dunbar was?

How many knew anything about black history? It had taken him two months to gather enough information to finish a report. His instructor had assisted him, allowing the extra time for completion. Many of the facts were new to this teacher, and he had made a copy for use in future classes.

"So why do you look so mean?" whispered a familiar voice.

He looked up. "Hi, Ruthie, maybe it's the rain," he whispered back.

The girl sat down, noted that the librarian was working elsewhere, then turned toward him. "Come on, what's bothering you?"

Ruthie was a good friend. She lived with her grandmother a block or two from his house.

"Don't laugh. We were talking about jobs at lunch. I told them I planned to be a..." Nathaniel paused, not sure whether to speak the fateful word.

"Go on."

"I want to teach." He looked straight at the girl. He knew she would make fun of him. She didn't.

Instead she said, "I think that's a great idea. You will make a fine teacher."

"They say I'll never get into college."

"What do they know." It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't know anyone who has ever gone."

"Neither do I. You'll be the first!" Ruthie stood up. "Have you talked to your folks about it?"

"No."

"Then that's where I would begin." She grinned and disappeared into the aisle marked, "FICTION."

His mood a bit lighter, Nathaniel gathered his study materials. The rain was still rat-tat-tatting on the window. At least Ruthie thought he could do it. Would his parents think he was foolish? Nathaniel brushed away the thought. If they did, he'd get Aunt Nettie after them!

The bell rang. There was more spring in his step as he headed for his locker.



## — Chapter 5 —



## ROUNDHOUSE, SQUARE HOUSE

The rain had ceased when Eugene left the Roundhouse. The setting sun peeked through drifting grey clouds and turned the drops hanging from leaves into tiny prisms. Little muddy streams swirled through the gutters carrying candy wrappers and twigs to unknown destinations. Rejoicing robins swooped down upon earthworms wriggling on the sidewalk in an effort to return to the soil.

When his house came into view, Eugene slowed his pace. He often joked about spending so much time in his two houses—one round, one square. He leaned against a large maple tree. The white paint that had once covered the structure was flaking off revealing bare grey boards. Eugene had promised himself that he would paint the house for Faith's birthday. That had been two birthdays past. One year, the money went for Nathaniel's glasses, while a new kitchen table was needed for the following year. This year, however, the paint had been bought and was hidden under a tarpaulin in the basement.

Eugene entered his yard and followed the homemade brick walk to the porch.

"Here's Papa!" Rose rushed out the door and leaped from the top step into her father's arms.

Eugene laughed and hugged her. He noted Lily standing by the door, eyes sparkling.

"All right, Miss Lily, aren't you going to jump on me too?" he called.

Lily smiled, but shook her head from side to side. Her father knew she would not follow her sister's lead, but he always asked.

Faith and Aunt Nettie were bustling about the kitchen. Nathaniel sat with one leg draped over a chair arm. As usual, he was reading.

Eugene greeted everyone fondly, and placed his brown lunch bag on the table. Faith examined it, looked at him approvingly, and put it in the cabinet.

"You really need a lunch bucket," she said while scooping steaming potatoes onto a large plate.

Her husband sank into a chair. "Maybe some day, but there are other things more important right now."

"Such as?" Faith placed the potato dish in the center of the table.

"Oh, just things," he answered with a wink.

Aunt Nettie announced to the family that supper was on the table. After the usual hand washing discussion, all found their places. Nathaniel and Lily ate quietly, while the others visited among themselves.

Later, the family was gathered in the living room. The girls were playing in a corner. Faith was darning socks, while Aunt Nettie and Eugene were engrossed in a game of checkers. Nathaniel sat on the edge of the couch fidgeting with his fingers.

"Is there anything wrong?" Faith was aware that her son seemed nervous.

"Not really, Mamma," he answered, none too convincingly.

His mother laid her darning aside. "Best get it off your chest," she said softly. Nettie and Eugene turned their attention to the teenage boy.

Nathaniel looked at his hands, then blurted out, "I've decided something really important." He jerked his head up and looked from face to face. "I know what I want to do with my life."

"That's good," said his father. "You know Jack said you could work at the Roundhouse, but maybe you have other ideas."

"Let the boy speak," whispered Aunt Nettie.

Nathaniel cleared his throat. "I've decided to be a teacher."

Eugene broke the silence that followed. "A teacher? You want to be a teacher? You have to go to college to be a teacher. You can't go to college."

Faith noted the forlorn look on her son's face. She looked at Eugene.

"Who says he can't go to college, if that is his choice? We'll find a way to send him."

"That's not what I mean." Eugene's tone softened as his eyes met those of his wife. "I mean, where can he go?"

"He can go right here!" Aunt Nettie spoke with authority.

"Are you sure?" Eugene sounded doubtful.

"I am sure" came the firm reply. "I will talk to the preacher tomorrow. He'll tell us what to do."

Eugene looked at his son. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes, Papa."

"It won't be easy."

"I know."

"What if it doesn't work out?"



"I have to try."

Faith smiled and touched her husband's arm. "Nathaniel, that is exactly how your father answered when he told folks that he was coming to Champaign to work with the railroad. Do you remember, Eugene?"

The man at her side shook his head, then reached over and patted Nathaniel. "She's right. Well, well, imagine a teacher in this family." He turned to resume the game of checkers.

The room was quiet. Nathaniel took a deep breath and opened his book. Faith resumed darning. Aunt Nettie examined the board, then made her move.

"I win!" she chortled exultantly.

— Chapter 6 —



## ALBERT R. LEE

The next morning, Nettie put on her flowered dress and her wedding hat. Her polished cane tapped the sidewalk as she made her way to Salem Baptist Church. She wished to seek advice from a trusted friend.

The preacher was not yet present when Nettie arrived. Rather than waste her time sitting, the elderly lady found items to dust and rearrange, even though she and her friends had accomplished the same purpose the day before.

As he entered the building, the preacher was not surprised to see Nettie. He expected that she would be there. He was, however, surprised that she requested a private visit. Usually, the women all came together to bombard him with "suggestions for improvement."

He made her comfortable in a chair by his desk. "What can I do for you this fine day?" He closed the door.

Later, in the presence of the entire family, Aunt Nettie proudly made her announcement. All, except for Rose, listened carefully.



Waving a paper, she began, "The signature on this paper belongs to Mr. Albert R. Lee. He is on the staff at the University of Illinois. Mr. Lee began as a messenger, but has advanced to the place where he can help Negroes become students. Preacher is a friend of his, and we went to see him." She paused for the expected reaction of amazement. She was not disappointed.

She continued by stating that Mr. Lee said he could indeed assist Nathaniel when the time came, but everyone should know that it would not be an easy task to complete his education. Nathaniel would need to live at home, as there would be no housing available on campus. He must also be aware of discrimination in transportation, recreation, and food service.

"I'll pack your lunch," Faith interjected.

"That doesn't seem fair!" Nathaniel smacked his hands together.

"No one said life is fair," said Aunt Nettie firmly.

"We take the cards we are dealt and play them the best we can," added Eugene. "A good player can win with a poor to fair hand if he really concentrates on the game."

Nathaniel scowled. "It doesn't seem like it ought to be this way." He was surprised by his father's response.

"Why do you want to teach?"

The boy thought for a moment, then replied, "I want to open up a whole new world for children."

"Then you can, and you will make a difference. You can change this whole attitude."

"Not by myself."

"You're never by yourself. You'll find others who are searching for change," said Aunt Nettie.

Faith had been silent throughout the conversation. Now she spoke. "That is why we are here—to keep improving our lives as well as the lives of others. People are afraid of what they don't understand. Understanding comes with discussion, not arguing."

Aunt Nettie waved her paper. "We can finish that discussion another time, but all you need to know right now is this. Eugene, Faith, and Nathaniel are to meet with Mr. Albert R. Lee at the University of Illinois this Saturday morning at ten o'clock."

"Does I get to go?" Rose's face appeared from behind the couch.

"DO I get to go?" corrected Aunt Nettie.

"Heaven forbid!" laughed Faith.

— Chapter 7 —



## ROSE AND LILY

Eugene shut his black lunch box. Faith had presented it to him on his birthday, and Nathaniel had painstakingly printed EUGENE across one end. He had borrowed some of Aunt Nettie's red fingernail polish for the project.

Nathaniel! It didn't seem possible that he was 18 and had graduated from high school. Mr. Albert R. Lee had helped him find after-school odd jobs to save money for college. He had steady work for the summer and would begin his studies in the fall. Aunt Nettie had told the boy that she had enough in her tin box to pay for his first semester. The whole family had attempted to argue her out of it, but nobody ever changed that lady's mind.

"Did that boy of yours graduate from high school?"

Eugene looked up. Jack was standing near him. Eugene scrambled to his feet and grinned.

"He did."

"Still think he wants to teach?"

"I don't think anything could change his mind. He made that decision when he was a freshman."

Jack leaned against the wall. "Does he know what's ahead of him?"

Eugene set his lunch box on the ground. "He's young and thinks he can whip the world."

Jack started to move away, then turned to face the other man. "If he's half the person you are, he'll be fine."

A wave of embarrassment passed through Eugene. He searched for an answer. Jack didn't give compliments, and it had caught him off guard.

Jack again turned to leave. "I've got a new boat—same old truck, but a new boat. We'll go fishing some day."

Eugene found his tongue. "Never fished from a boat. I'd like that."

He turned his attention to the work at hand. An engine stood on the turntable ready to move into the shop area for some minor repair. Eugene crossed the tracks and proceeded to the area where he was needed.

The locomotive click clacked into position. The rhythmic sound reminded him of the girls jumping rope in days gone by. Teenagers themselves, they no longer followed this pastime. However, Eugene could still hear Rose making up verses as the two, pigtails flying, wore out their ropes.

Rose of Sharon, Lily of the Valley,  
Jump in the street, Jump in the alley.

Lily, Lily, Rose, Rose, Rose,  
Jump on your heels, Jump on your toes.

As he worked, a song filled Eugene's soul.

\* \* \*

"Come on Lily, Mama won't care if we ride in the back of Willie's truck. He said he'd drive slow and take us all the way home. Come on!" Rose held out her hand. She was already in the back of the truck.

Lily backed away. She shook her head from side to side.

"Oh, come on! Don't be a scaredy cat! Willie! Help Lily up, will you?" Rose looked exasperated.

The tall young man walked around the side of the rusty old truck. "Let me help you Lily," he pleaded.

It was obvious to Lily that her sister was going to ride home. Lily couldn't let her go by herself. She sighed and allowed Willie to boost her onto the truck bed.

"Let'er go," called Rose. "Let's see what this old bucket can do."

Willie started slowly enough, but as Rose kept urging him to go faster, he complied. Lily began to cry. The old truck was moving at its top speed. Rose looked at her sister and saw how frightened she appeared.

"Slow down, Willie! You're scaring Lily!" she screeched.

Willie stomped the brake. Nothing happened. His father had warned him about the brakes not working well, but in his desire to impress Rose, Willie had forgotten.

"Hang on, I can't stop!" he shouted out the open window.

Lily was filled with panic. She scrambled to her feet and held tightly to the wooden sideboard.

Willie tried to control the vehicle, but suddenly was aware of children playing in the street one block ahead. He had no choice, but must turn at this cross street. He pulled on the steering wheel with all his might. The truck careened around the corner. He heard Rose scream, followed by a sickening thud. The truck lurched and jerked as the right rear wheel

passed over an object near the curb. Willie hoped it was the curb!

Rose was screaming, "Lily! Lily!" She leaped from the moving truck and raced back to the place where her sister lay motionless and bleeding. She gathered Lily in her arms and rocked back and forth uttering tortuous moans of grief. People appeared from every direction running at top speed.

Two blocks away, Willie purposely ran the truck into a tree jumping to safety prior to the impact. Without a look back, he raced toward the knot of people surrounding Rose and Lily.

\* \* \*

"Eugene! Eugene!" Jack was running toward him waving his arms.

"What is it?"

"It's your daughter Lily. She's been run over by a truck!"

"Oh no! Not my Lily! Is she dead?" Eugene felt the strength drain from his legs. Jack reached out to support him.

"No, but she's hurt real bad. Her legs were crushed."

"Is she home?"

"They took her to Burnham Hospital. Faith and Nathaniel are with her."

Eugene wasn't certain why he asked the next question. "Who told you?"

"Willie—I didn't get his last name—the boy who was driving the truck. He ran all the way here to let you know, then took off again. You come with me. I'll drive you to the hospital."

Eugene felt as if he were moving in slow motion. He was able to follow Jack out of the building. He wondered later if he had remembered to thank Jack after he had been delivered to his destination.

As Eugene walked through the entrance, he saw Faith and Nathaniel with their arms around Rose. All three were weeping.

— Chapter 8 —



## CHANGES

Eugene paused by the maple tree and looked toward the square white house. Lily was sitting on the porch. Her wheelchair had been bought with the tuition money Aunt Nettie had set aside for Nathaniel. It was Nathaniel, himself, who had made that decision stating that he had saved enough for this first year, and it was important for Lily to have a comfortable chair.

Lily would never walk again. She had never complained about her fate, and she still smiled as she sat in the high-wheeled wooden monster. More than that, she had pulled Rose from the depths of guilt. No one knew just how, that was personal between the girls. Now it was Lily who did the talking and planning, and it was Rose who sat quietly. The twin bond had finally overcome the sorrow to a great extent. Eugene noted that Rose had appeared, and the two were holding hands.

Aunt Nettie was stalwart as ever. She recalled hearing Nathaniel ranting and raving at her one evening as she was on the subject of peace of mind.

STORAGE

“What do you mean, peace?” he had nearly shouted. “Lily can’t walk, and I can’t swim in Crystal Lake Pool. How can anyone feel peace when life is like this?”

The wise woman had smoothed out her skirt, then answered in her firm voice. “Peace doesn’t mean that everything is perfect, or even the way you wish it to be. Peace, Nathaniel, is feeling confident that you are doing the right thing, following the right path, respecting others and your Maker.”

The young man had become more calm and stated, “Sometimes I’m not sure what is right.”

Aunt Nettie had leaned right into his face and whispered, “Listen to your conscience, and follow your heart.”

Lily had spotted Eugene. She pointed and waved. Rose hurried to meet him. They walked arm in arm toward the porch.

“Lily said she’d like a guitar. Can we get her one?” Rose squinted up at her father.

“Maybe. The next time I go to Van’s for a haircut, I’ll ask the boys.” Eugene chuckled. “There’s always somebody who needs some cash and might sell one cheap.”

— Chapter 9 —



# GRADUATION

The Salem Baptist Church was decked out in balloons and crepe paper. Parishioners milled about the decorated tables awaiting the guest of honor. They had been joined by friends from Bethel A.M.E. Church for this festive occasion. Good humor and laughter abounded.

“Here they are!” called one of the children who were acting as lookouts. Everyone gathered to greet the new arrivals.

Nathaniel had graduated from the University of Illinois two hours earlier. Now he led the way to the church, Aunt Nettie on his arm. She had attached a white ribbon to the crook of her cane for this event. Of course, she wore her wedding hat and the latest in red fingernail polish. Rose was pushing Lily’s chair, while the proud parents brought up the rear.

Indeed, a sense of pride was evident among all present. Each person congratulated Nathaniel while feeling that it was also a personal milestone for the community.

The preacher tapped on a glass. “Before we have our blessing and eat, let us hear from our friend and UNIVERSITY GRADUATE, Nathaniel Harwood!”



When the loud applause had subsided, Nathaniel stepped forward. He took a deep breath, looked at his family, and began to speak.

"This is a great day for me, for my family, and for all gathered here. I wish Mr. Albert R. Lee could have joined us, for he has a big part in this." He paused briefly.

"I learned teaching skills in college, and that is good, but more than that, I have learned many other things. From my parents, I have learned that hard, honest work is a reward in itself. From my sisters, Rose and Lily, I have learned that love and compassion transcend all that fate might put in our way. Mr. Lee showed me that positive determination leads to positive results."

Nathaniel looked squarely at Aunt Nettie. "And from my Great Aunt Nettie, I have learned to rely on my conscience and to follow my heart." His eyes twinkled, "And also, how to talk good! Thank you."

"How to SPEAK WELL!" came the familiar voice from the front table. The laughter and applause were long and loud.

"Let us open our baskets for this joyous meal," called the preacher.





## — Chapter 10 —



## PEACE LIKE A RIVER

The young teacher stood in front of his desk. The children had filed in quietly, perhaps because it was the first day of school. Twenty-nine sets of eyes were upon him. As he smiled into each child's face, he pronounced their name. The quiver he had felt earlier in the pit of his stomach took flight leaving a feeling of exhilaration in its place. He would open whole new worlds for these wonderful little people. He would make them proud of their African-American heritage while encouraging their entrance into society.

A hand went up.

"Yes?"

The tiny third grade girl whispered, "Do you got a name?"

"Do you HAVE a name," he repeated gently. "I am Mr. Harwood. I will write my name on the chalkboard for you."

As he turned to do so, he found himself humming, "I have joy like a fountain in my soul."



\* \* \*

Lily was strumming her guitar as Rose walked from the kitchen holding two glasses of iced tea. She set them on a table. Tomorrow at this time, she would be starting her new job in a downtown restaurant. She had told Lily that after she learned the ropes, she just might open her own place. Lily could perform on Saturday nights. They had both laughed.

Lily took a sip of tea. "Let's sing," she said.

Rose sat on the floor beside her sister, looked into her eyes, and took her cue.

"I've got love like an ocean in my soul," they sang.

\* \* \*

Faith glanced out the window as she ironed. The doctor's children were sitting on a bench near the garden. The yard man was mowing the green carpet of grass which had never seen a dandelion. Faith felt sorry that these children had never put a dandelion under the other's chin to see if they liked butter. That was a game her girls had played over and over.

Her thoughts turned to Nathaniel. She knew he was teaching his heart out. He would do well. Rose and Lily were special too. Twins were a blessing in many ways.

She wiped the perspiration from her brow. She was certain that life would turn out well for her children. She had faith like a mountain in her soul.

\* \* \*

"Eugene!" It was Jack calling.

"Yes."

"Just wondered what you were up to tomorrow."

"Well, just regular Saturday stuff, I guess."

"Want to go fishing?"

"Are you serious?" Eugene sounded surprised.

Jack grinned. "Sure am. Thought I'd throw the boat on tonight. Why don't I drop by around seven in the morning? Tell your wife we'll be home by dark, and to have the frying pan ready."

Eugene laughed. "I'll tell her, and I'll be waiting."

"Seven in the morning then." Jack hurried out the door.

Eugene could hardly wait to tell Faith. Striding home, he offered his own rendition of, "I've Got Peace Like a River in my Soul."

\* \* \*

Aunt Nettie slipped off her shoes and stretched out on her bed. Lately, her legs had been bothering her more than usual. Short naps were often helpful.

She folded her hands across her stomach, as was her habit, and closed her eyes. The afternoon sun peeked through the window and warmed her body. It was comforting.

She heard the girls singing in the living room. That, too, was comforting. As she drifted off, the words peace, joy, faith, and love wandered through her thoughts. As the sun warmed her body, these words warmed her heart.

Aunt Nettie fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

— *Afterword* —



Dear Friends,

Albert R. Lee was a real person, one of great importance to African-Americans who were searching for opportunities in higher education. Others dedicated their lives to the education of younger children. A few names that stand out in my mind are Odelia Wesley, Taylor Thomas, Quentin Bowles, Willie Summerville—space does not allow me to continue!

The Roundhouse that Eugene worked in is gone now. The Burnham Hospital buildings still stand, but no longer serve as a hospital. The Joseph Kuhn and Company store is still located on Main Street in Champaign. Of course, the University of Illinois is still very much a part of Champaign-Urbana, although the campus is constantly growing and changing. Can you discover any more information about the other places that are mentioned in the book? Are they still to be found in Champaign-Urbana? Are they gone? Have they changed? And what of the railroad? Can you find any old photographs of the railroad? (Hint: You might try the Urbana Archives at the Urbana Free Library.) Have the buildings and jobs associated with the railroad changed over time?

Readers might also enjoy researching the history of African-American music. How did the spirituals begin? What are some other spirituals that the Harwood family might have known and enjoyed?

I hope you will enjoy learning more about Champaign County's past along with the rich African-American culture that is part of our county's heritage. The selected readings that follow will provide exciting information in several areas.

Peace, Joy, Faith, and Love,

— Larry Gnagey

— Recommended Reading —



*African American Breakthroughs: 500 Years of Black Firsts*, U X L, 1995.

Altman, Susan. *Extraordinary Black Americans*. Childrens Press, 1989.

Beller, Susan Provost. *Roots for Kids: A Genealogy Guide for Young People*. Betterway Publications, 1989.

Fisher, Leonard Everett. *Tracks Across America: The Story of the American Railroad 1825-1900*. Holiday House, 1992.

Haskins, James. *Black Music in America: A History Through Its People*. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1987.

McKissack, Patricia and Frederick McKissack. *The Civil Rights Movement in America: From 1865 to the Present*. Childrens Press, 1994.

Medearis, Angela Shelf. *Picking Peas for a Penny*. State House Press, 1990.

Stein, R. Conrad. *The Great Depression*. Childrens Press, 1993.

Waterfall, Milde. *Where's the Me in Museum: Going to Museums with Children*. Vandamere Press, 1989.

Weitzman, David. *My Backyard History Book*. Little, Brown and Company, 1975.

Wormser, Richard. *The Iron Horse: How Railroads Changed America*. Walker and Company, 1993.

— *About the Author* —



Born in 1930, Larry Gnagey grew up in small Illinois villages where his father was employed as superintendent of schools. At an early age, he developed a deep religious faith, and decided that his life would be dedicated to working in some manner with children. During this time, he became an avid reader, and soon discovered that he had been given the ability to create original stories. This avocation remains an important part of his life.

During thirty-five years in public school education, Larry was a music teacher and finally, an elementary principal. He used stories to teach, enrich, and entertain those children in his care. As a principal, he told stories in the lunch room nearly every day as the children ate their meals.

Upon his retirement, he has continued to present stories to school children, churches, clubs, and teacher seminars. He has worked closely with the Champaign County Forest Preserve Early American Museum in order to assist in heritage enrichment. This series of books for children is an extension of this commitment.

Larry has had stories accepted by children's Christian magazines, and continues to put his tales on paper. He lives with his wife, Regina, in Mahomet, Illinois, and often creates special stories for each of his grandchildren — Andy, Emily, and Sarah — who, themselves, are special creations.