

In Jasper, Florida, George McQuay took his third wife, Idella Taylor. Although George had other children from his previous marriages, he and Idella would have four. They were Ruby, their first born, George, Idella and Ned.

This story is about their daughter, Ruby. On a seasonably warm day in October, Idella went into labor and the mid-wife was called. After hours of labor, Ruby McQuay came into the world on October 6, 1990.

Jasper, Florida was Ruby's birthplace but sometime when she was young, her family moved. It was in Live Oak, Florida where she lived most of her formative years.

At a young age, Ruby loved reading the Bible, following God's word. Ruby liked school but it was common place in many facilities where education was secondary. In many cases, the children had to quit school to work. After the eighth grade, Ruby quit and did not obtain her high school diploma.

It wasn't until the early forties, Ruby found a salaried job. She was fortunate the Alamo Coffee Shop hired her because this was the South and segregation ruled the day. This was still the time when signs hung over fountains and bathrooms reading, *White only and Colored Only*. These were the times when blacks could not eat inside of restaurants. They had to order their food from the back of the establishment and eat outside.

Not only was she going to work in the restaurant, but she would be a waitress. It was unusual for a black woman to wait on tables, taking orders in a white establishment. It was a mystery to her and probably to the people in town why Mr. George, the owner hired Ruby. Maybe it was her bubbly personality and cheerfulness or perhaps, Mr. George was from the North and didn't care about her being black. In many places in the South people would have been offended having a black woman waiting on them even though many of the cooks were black.

Ruby had no idea Mr. George gave her the job because Live Oak's history dates back to and before the Civil War. According to her parents, during the 1840's and 1850's Live Oak was a town popular for railroad workers. During lunch breaks, the workers found comfort sitting under the large oak shade trees and sipping on the taste of fresh, cool, spring water.

After the Civil War, Live Oak's population soared and by 1880 the town was within the top five largest cities in the entire state of Florida. However, when nearby Lake City began to grow, Live Oak's businesses and population collapsed.

Regardless of Live Oak's history and its once booming business, it was nothing but a one-horse town to Ruby. On a daily basis, all she could think about was how she could escape.

Most of the time, she enjoyed working at the restaurant but she constantly had to find a balancing act between being black and serving the customers. It was challenging at best. For the most part, the customers treated her well and seemed to overlook her caramel complexion. People might not have said anything but Ruby could tell from some people's snide remarks or disgusted looks they didn't like she was waiting on them and taking their money.

It was like an unspoken work, no one was vocal about her working at the Alamo except for this one particular day. Ruby would never forget it. One of the regular male customers sat at one of the tables assigned to her. She was surprised he sat at the restaurant's counter since he was a regular, eating once or twice a week. Until that day, he had never sat in her station. It made her believe he didn't want anyone like her taking his order.

He sat at the counter and when she approached him and with a smile and before she could say, "Good morning, sir," he leaned forward and said loudly, "I don't want Niggers to wait on me!"

Red faced, Mr. George rushed over to Ruby and the man. "What's going on over here?"

With Ruby's eyes downcast, she murmured, "Nothing sir. It's okay."

"No, it's not okay." Mr. George directed his comment to the man. "You might be a regular paying customer but you'll apologize now!" He paused and added, "In fact, you don't have to eat here again."

Ruby stood wide-eyed. She never expected Mr. George to come to her defense. Maybe the man obeyed Mr. George because of his six feet tall stature and his estimated 200 pound weight.

What was even more puzzling is what happened after that naming calling altercation with the man. Every time he came into the Alamo which was three meals daily and seven days weekly, he made it a point to sit in her section. If her

station was full, he would wait, wanting only Ruby to serve him. In addition to that, he never failed to leave her a generous tip, fifty cents at breakfast, one dollar at lunch and two dollars at dinner. In the 1940's that was a substantial amount of money to leave a waitress or a waiter.

After working at the restaurant for about three years, Ruby like many of the families mentioned in the book, "Warmth of Other Sun," Ruby was planning and dreaming about escaping the small southern town for a better life. Her parents and siblings couldn't understand her need to leave.

In 1943, Ruby received the most incredible news. She had a dear friend, Hattie whose husband, H.L. moved to Middletown, Connecticut. He had been working, saving his money to send for his wife and sister.

One evening Hattie told Ruby her news. "We're leaving, Live Oak."

Saddened, Ruby couldn't bear her friend leaving. Her tears glistening, she wished her friend well.

"Ruby, I couldn't leave you. This is what we've talked and dreamt about. I said, 'we're leaving Live Oak.' You, me and H.L.'s sister, Gladys are going to Middletown."

"But Hattie, I don't have the money."

"Don't worry about it. I've been saving every dime H.L. has been sending me and I have enough for you too. So pack your bags and we're leaving."

Ruby didn't know what to say. Through sobs, she said, "How can I repay you?"

Ruby could hardly believe she was leaving Live Oak to never return. She told her parents who never questioned how she had enough money to go. In addition, her parents, and siblings did not try and convince her to stay.

That night she could hardly sleep thinking about moving to Connecticut. She didn't know much about it, but what was there to know? She was leaving Live Oak, Florida and she would never have to deal with the hot, muggy, dry Florida weather again.