

HELEN B. STAFFORD

It has been said that one should not be judged by the heights, which he or she has reached, but by the depths from which he or she has sprung. With this in mind, I would like to share with you a brief description of my upbringing, in an effort to show what it has meant to be a Negro growing up in America, long before civil rights legislation/ My name is Helen Stafford, and I am a widow with one daughter, and four grandchildren. I was born in a small Kansas town, the 10th of eleven children, three of whom died in infancy. My father had been born a slave, but my mother had had the dubious good fortune to have been born to the mulatto daughter of the owner of the plantation, so she was given her freedom.

My father had tried to enlist in the Union army, when the Civil War broke out, but when it was discovered that he was only 16, he was summarily returned to his master. After the war ended, my father met and married my mother, and following the birth of their first child, they decided to move west. They came up the Mississippi river, by steamboat, as far as St. Louis, Missouri, then overland to the small Kansas town, where the remaining ten children were born.

My father was taught to read and write by my mother, after they were married, and he had a great respect for education. After seeing the production of "Roots", I can understand the reason for this. He constantly reminded his children that if they did not wish to be condemned to a life of menial labor, they had best get all the education they could. And he worked long, hard hours so that this could be accomplished. Consequently, all the girls completed college, but the boys fell by the wayside. As I look back upon things as they were at that time, I can see the reason for this, for unless a young Negro male wished to train for the medical or dental profession, or for the ministry, there was simply no other profession open to them. Many a young, black college graduate worked all his adult life, as a pullman car porter, or a dining car waiter. |

I never attended an all Negro school, but I knew without being told, that upon graduation from college, I would have to teach in one. Following my graduation from Kansas State University, I secured a teaching position at Virginia State College, a land-grant institution for Negroes in Petersburg, Virginia. It was my first time away from home, and it was a long way to Virginia. In those days, all travel was done by train, and Negroes had a special car,