

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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37. Mom Rose

Melvina Lathan

I am a Philly girl. And yet the longer I live, the more I continue to learn about who I really am. Throughout the history of our people, we have been faced with constant adversity. We have been plagued with the misfortunes of displacement, involuntary migration, and the agonizing separation of families. And yet my life growing up in this diverse, post-war group has been like what Zora Neil Hurston describes as “flower dust and springtime sprinkled all over it”!

I was pampered and coddled, loved and protected, inspired and introduced to fine music and fine arts and treated as the young princess who could do no wrong. I had the absolute, divine pleasure of knowing my grandparents and my great-grandparents. While there is much to say about the men of the family, especially my great-grandfather, ‘Pop’ Foreman, who fought in the Spanish American War, I was more impressed and influenced by the women; the great aunts, my mother’s sisters, and the GRANDmamas of our family. I remember when Pop Foreman passed on at a ripe old 100 years. Or was it 102? Who knew? Most of the records of Black men born during the 1800s can’t be verified.... what’s a birth certificate anyway? Pop Foreman was a big man, strong, proud, and strict and he signed his name with an X while his wife, Catherine, was well educated, and charged with teaching the children of the slave master for whom they worked. Pop Foreman worked long and hard laying tracks for the railroad to take care of his large brood... sixteen of ‘em to be exact... At the time of his transition, there were only three Spanish-American-War Vets left alive in this country and joined by the bonds of war, and the other two traveled to Philadelphia to join the family in mourning. Both were way up in age and very frail. One was in a wheelchair while the other steadied himself precariously on a

walker as he made his way down to the casket to offer that final salute. Both Soldiers were proud and bound in spirit and, like Pop, peacefully awaiting their death. Both were White...

My grandmothers were different kinds of heroes. Family Heroes. They were businesswomen, artists, jewelry makers, chefs, quilters, dressmakers, gardeners... all while caring for their household, their children and their husbands. We were heavily influenced and surrounded by their warmth, tenacity, and ingenuity. For the sake of this story, I'd like to focus on one particularly colorful grandmother, Mom Rose, born in Tillman, South Carolina, 1900. She was born to Kitsy and John Frost. Kitsy, a native American, possibly Catawba, and John, the son of the Englishman and owner of the cotton plantation.

As a child living on the plantation, she was not allowed to work in the fields like the other children. Both she and her mother were given special treatment by her father, who lavished her with gifts, fancy clothes, and food. For her thirteenth birthday she was gifted with her very own pony, and was even photographed with it to commemorate the occasion! As a child, I vividly recall her sharing that photo with me. "I was so proud of that pony", she told me. She learned to care for her pony and ultimately ride. Sadly, that photo was lost somewhere along life's road once she died at age eighty-six.

When John Frost died a young man, Kitsy migrated, finding work in the cotton fields of Savannah, GA. Among their belongings was her most prized possession; her sewing machine. Rose learned survival from Kitsy... how to sew, grow vegetables, can, make quilts, make corn liquor and bootleg whiskey. Rose found work in one of the many shrimp packing houses popping up along the Savannah River. From that point on, they had shrimp, crab, and/or oysters nightly. Feisty Rose eventually married my grandfather, Lee Benson, an Inuit and Naval Officer, and had five sons of her own. A bit of a rebel, she owned the first Model T Ford ever seen in Savannah, GA and smoked cigarettes on an ivory, rhinestone-studded cigarette holder and worked non-stop. She designed and made clothing for the locals, even as she continued to work the shrimp packing job and was later employed by the US Army as a transport truck driver.

As a private bootlegger, she used the army transport vehicle to make her early morning 'deliveries' and made hundreds of extra dollars per

week from her very own preparation of corn liquor or moonshine, and a variety of wines. Her husband, Lee, was a very 'proper' gentleman and as a Naval Officer, was away a great deal of the time. He disapproved of her 'extra work', but with five sons and a sick mother to care for Rose welcomed the additional income, secretly stashing away whatever she could, whenever she could. She bought a full-length mink coat and began to painstakingly sew her stashed thousands in one-hundred-dollar bills into the lining. During the late 1920s her beloved mother, Kitsy, passed on and shortly thereafter she left town with her fur coat, Model T, and five boys in tow, leaving her husband and all else behind. Making her move to New York, she lived in Harlem when Harlem was in vogue and taught herself to make silver jewelry. Some of her pieces were sold while many were gifted to special people in her life. She found steady employment in the kitchen of the Savoy Hilton Hotel. There, being a light skinned, pretty Negro, she moved about freely, catering to the finicky eating habits and whims of many of the early movie stars and entertainers. Among the many who stayed at the Savoy Hilton, she would mention encounters with Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr.

She was a fabulous cook and was always in the kitchen throwing together simple yet luscious country meals. I never saw her use a recipe. Ever. I have two recipes to share, both indicative of her Native American and Southern heritage.

SHRIMP n GRITS

We ate grits for both breakfast and dinner, savoring the varieties of gravies and sauces. It was either grits or rice... Hot sauce is important too. Ours was always homemade. I never saw a store-bought bottle of hot sauce in our home. The sauces varied in color depending on the type of peppers and spices available at any given time (yellow, red, green) but all were tangy, delicious, and h o t, spooned out of a jar. This was one of my favorite dishes ever and Mom Rose would happily make it for me whenever I asked. My mom called me spoiled but Mom Rose paid her no mind. I was special, and I knew it.

I don't include salt in the recipe of ingredients. The ham, sausage, butter, shrimp and bacon grease all have a fair amount of salt, so use sparingly to maintain the integrity of the fresh combination of flavors.

Ingredients

Grits

(Use chicken broth instead of salted water). Follow directions, using a whisk, and cook the desired amount. Once cooked, add some butter and about 4 oz of cream cheese (just do it!). Stir until melted and creamy, cover and set aside.

Shrimp

Mom Rose always used small to medium shrimp for this dish. Bypass the giant varieties. The smaller ones are sweeter and allow you to get a forkful without using a knife. (she liked to eat with a spoon)

Ham (best use for leftover ham or may use kielbasa, or andouille sausage cut in small pieces)

Garlic (minced)

Red bell pepper (finely chopped)

Onion (chopped)

Parsley (chopped)

Butter

Method

1. Heat oil (butter, olive oil or bacon grease) Sauté ham or meat choice until cooked through
2. Add chopped bell pepper and chopped onion, cook until translucent, then add garlic (do not allow garlic to brown)
3. Turn heat up to high, thoroughly toss in shrimp, cover tightly and immediately remove from heat source. Allow shrimp to 'cook' (up to two minutes) while preparing the grits. Toss in the parsley just before serving. Top with fresh ground black pepper. (cheese optional)

YUM!

SWEET POTATO BREAD

This recipe can be as simple or as elaborate as you would like it to be. It can be used for dinner rolls and loaf as is or turned into cinnamon-raisin swirl loaves. This is a multi-purpose dough only limited by your imagination. This is super easy dough.

Ingredients

- 1 cup warm milk + 1 package of active dry yeast
- ½ cup light brown sugar
- ¾ cup mashed sweet potatoes
- ¼ cup softened butter
- 1 egg
- ½ tsp salt
- 4-4 ½ cup flour
- Melted butter

Method

1. Dissolve the yeast in the warm milk
2. Add sugar, salt, softened butter and mashed sweet potatoes.
Mix well
3. Add egg. Mix well
4. Add flour ½ c at a time, blending thoroughly until you have a stable sticky dough. Oil your bowl, cover, and let rise in a warm space for 1 hour or until double in bulk.
5. Punch down and turn dough out onto floured surface. With floured hands knead dough until smooth and easy to handle. Here you can get creative, making dinner rolls, etc. For our purposes, divide dough into two balls.
6. Roll each ball of dough to fit into a well-oiled loaf pan, brush with melted butter and let rise for another hour. Pre-heat oven to 475.
7. Lower temperature to 375 and bake approximately thirty minutes or until browned.



Fig. 1 Rose Mae Benson (Mom Rose), 1955. Image author's own.



Fig. 2 L-R: Rose Mae Benson, Melvin Dewayne (Mom Rose, baby brother aged 2 yrs), 1950. Image author's own.



Fig. 3 L-R: Rose Mae Benson, Melvina, Lillian Holman (Mom Rose, Melvina, Grandma Lil), 1986. Image author's own.

