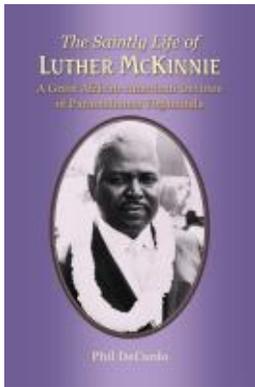


The Saintly Life of
LUTHER MCKINNIE

*A Great African-American Devotee
of Paramahansa Yogananda*



Phil DeCardo



This inspirational biography tells the remarkable story of Luther McKinnie - a man ahead of his time spiritually. He worked his way up from the fields of North Carolina to New York, and finally to Los Angeles, where he dedicated his life to meditation and followed the teachings of the great Hindu yogi Paramahansa Yogananda - whom he never met in person but knew in Spirit.

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LUTHER MCKINNIE
(1907 – 2002)

Shown at a Self-Realization Fellowship Convocation in the 1950s

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Phil DeCardo

with editing by Richard Kahn

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—CHAPTER 1—

GROWING UP IN NORTH CAROLINA

Luther McKinnie was born on June 25th, 1907 in the town of Holly Springs, North Carolina. His mother was the daughter of a former slave. He could remember back to the age of two, because that was when he was taken away to live with his aunt and uncle. He knew something was wrong that day because his older sister and brother were trying to hide him so that he could not be found; but of course it didn't take long for his aunt and uncle to discover where he was hiding. Luther said, "I still can remember being put inside my aunt and uncle's buggy and taken away. After that day I never saw my mother again."

His early years were full of many unhappy memories. From a very early age he soon discovered that his aunt and uncle did not bring him into their home to nurture and care for him, but to use him as their own personal slave. Luther was forced to do most of the hard work on the farm -- planting, picking cotton and tobacco, caring for food crops, tending to the animals, cleaning up around the property, and chopping wood. Many times, while his cousins went to school, Luther would

have to stay home and chop wood for the old-fashioned stove and for the fireplace. His uncle would laze around during the summer months instead of working, because he knew Luther would chop the wood in the winter whenever it was needed. Luther endured many forms of abuse while living with these people who were supposed to be his guardians.

I always wondered why he didn't care too much for the forest or for country settings. He always preferred to be in the city. But one day, after he related the following story to me, I totally understood why.

“At the young age of four, my uncle would wake me up at four o'clock in the morning,” Luther explained. “He would send me by myself on a five-mile trek, there and back, through the forest to my grandmother's house to bring back butter for his breakfast. While walking through the woods I could hear all kinds of animal noises, and because it was dark, it scared me even more. I would cry all the way there and back. This went on for a few years.”

On another occasion Luther told me: “When I was eight years old, there was a poisonous snake that went into the family woodpile, and because of my uncle's fear of snakes, he ordered me to go and find the snake and kill it; and I was not to come back until I did.

“My uncle had a terrible temper, and would take out his anger and frustrations on me. He would say to me, ‘You are going to wind up in jail you're no good.’ On occasion he would walk by and hit me just to be mean; and when he really wanted to hurt me, he would take a switch from a nearby tree and beat me with it. I would be screaming and crying to no avail, as he wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of the switch. It didn't take long for my cousins to also learn how to use me for their own advantage. Anytime they did something wrong, they would blame me, and then I would get the beating.

The Saintly Life of Luther McKinnie

“Abuse didn't come only from my relatives but also from neighbors, as they all knew I didn't have a father and mother to stick up for me. At times I would be playing with some of the kids in the area and when it came time for them to eat dinner, their parents would say to their kids, ‘Tell the little bastard to go home, that he is not welcome.’

“One time my aunt and uncle invited the local preacher over for dinner to have fried chicken. Upon hearing this I was excited with the thought of having fried chicken because my normal diet consisted of cornmeal and sometimes a few vegetables. When I sat at the table I was served the same meal, cornmeal and a few vegetables, while in front of me on the table was a big plate of fried chicken. I sat quietly at the table watching the preacher eat piece after piece of fried chicken and when he ate the last piece, I blurted out, ‘He ate the last piece of chicken!’ As soon as I said this, my uncle grabbed me in front of everybody, got a switch and beat me until there was nothing left of it.”

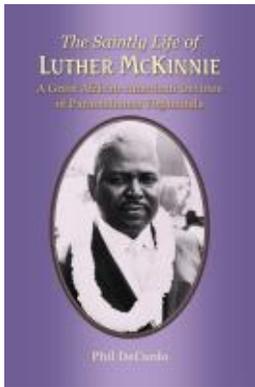
Luther only had an eighth grade education. While his cousins attended school and had the best clothes and shoes that his uncle and aunt could afford, Luther would be given second-hand clothes and shoes, and they were usually too big for him. On the days when he was able to attend school, he said the soles of his shoes would have holes in them, and he would have to put paper in them to keep the cold and dampness out. Sometimes, when there would be snow on the ground, his feet would be so cold he could hardly take it.

One time I asked him to come with my wife and I to the mountains to see the snow, and he replied, looking off into the distance towards the mountains, “This is the closest I want to come to the snow.” In spite of all the hardships Luther endured, he always had a way of telling me

these stories in a very amusing fashion. That was Luther. I never saw him where he didn't emanate that inner joy.

On occasion he would ask his uncle about his mother and father, and his uncle would say, "What do you want to know about them for?" and then he would change the subject. One day, upon hearing of his mother's passing from another relative, Luther asked his uncle if he could attend the funeral. His uncle said, "No." And I could tell by Luther's tone of voice that he had been deeply hurt as a child for not being able to attend his own mother's funeral.

When he reached the age of thirteen, and after enduring many years of abuse, Luther knew he had to get away from his aunt and uncle. He felt that if he stayed and his uncle tried to beat him one more time, that he might do something to hurt him. So the next day Luther said, "I built up enough courage and left with only the clothes on my back. When I began walking from the house, my uncle ordered me to return but I refused, and picked up a rock and threw it. It hit him squarely on the head, and I ran and never came back. It was starting to get dark when, all of a sudden, I heard a loud soothing voice coming as if from nowhere, saying to me, 'Go, and I will always be with you.' It wasn't until many years later, after hearing Master's (Paramahansa Yogananda's) voice on a recording, that I recognized that his was the same voice I heard so many years before as a child."



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