

Stories of nine Black girls growing up in rural Virginia.

Nine Girls, No Boys: Stories Of Life In Rural Virginia

by Daphne Harris Dews

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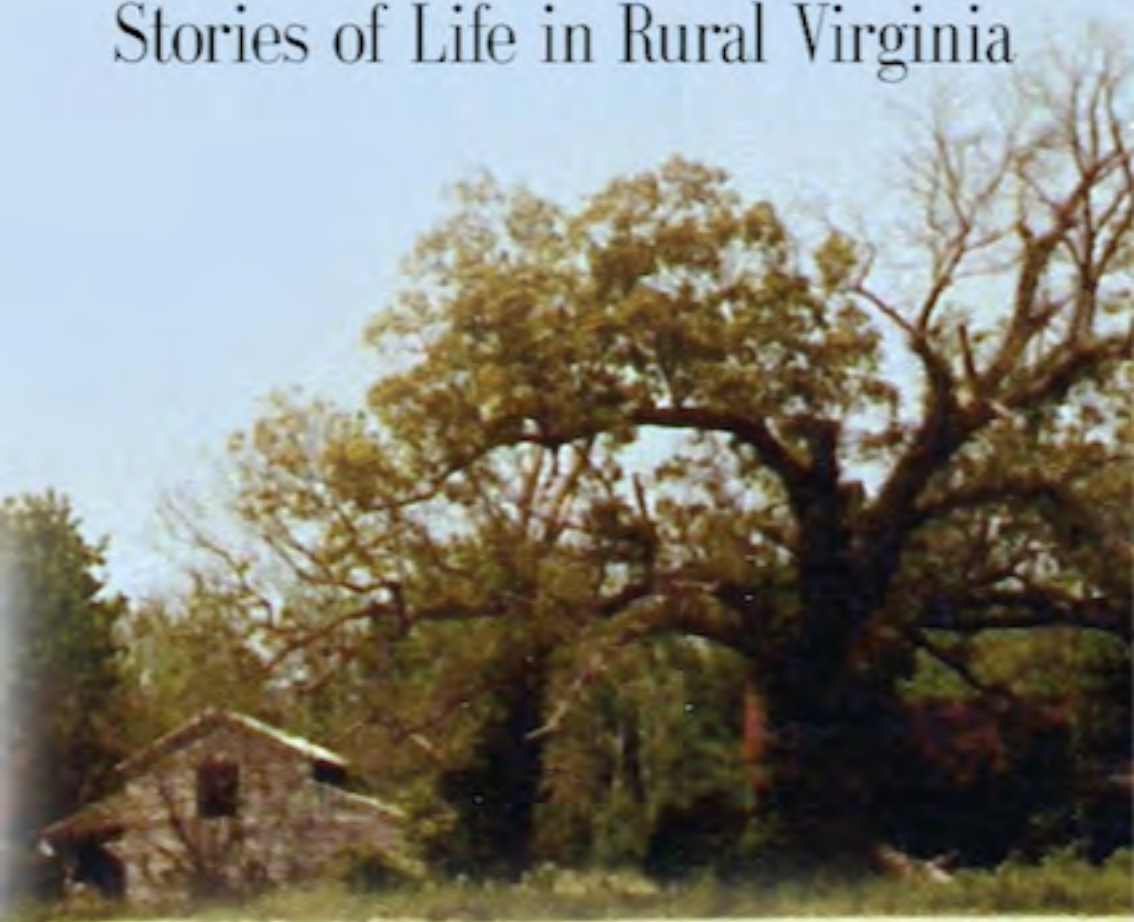
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Stories of Life in Rural Virginia



Daphne Harris Dews

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his
wife and the two are united into one.

Ephesians 5:31

The walk up the lane and steep steps to our grandparents' house seemed to take forever. Daddy's parents lived in a huge farmhouse with a large porch, which stretched across the front of the house. I had swallowed a penny that day, and Mama and Daddy took my sisters and me to their house to get advice on whether or not I should see a doctor.

"Go in the house and talk to your grandma," Mama said, as I approached the front door. "Tell her what you did."

By the time I got to the door and barely inside to greet my grandmother, she knew exactly what had happened. Daddy had already told her. She let him know that since I wasn't having complications, the penny would probably pass through my digestive system in a few days, and I'd be just fine.

Grandma Nora didn't want to hear anything I was about to tell her. I don't know everything that happened before she saw me, but she seemed upset. Her harsh response has stuck with me all my life.

"Don't even come to me. Go in there, sit on that pot, and let it out right now," she yelled. "You need to learn how to keep things out of your mouth."

When I think about Grandma Nora's response, I can still picture her standing with her hands on her hips and hear the frustration in her voice. I now believe she was more upset with our parents having so many children than my swallowing a penny.

I must have been about four years old. We already had five or six girls in the family. We were like stair steps—about a year apart in ages. I can imagine what Grandma thought.

All these babies 'bout to drive me crazy. Every time I look up, somethin' done happen to one of 'em. Annie Mae and Herbert

are just too young to be having all them children. I don't see how they gonna take care of 'em. Every year they have another one. And they don't seem to be able to have nothing but girls. Herbert needs to have some boys to help him on that farm.

My feelings were crushed. I remember leaving the room that day, but I don't know what happened to the penny. I don't recall seeing it again, having any difficulties, or my parents mentioning it.

That was the only time I remember seeing my grandparents. My parents told us both of them passed when we were young. I imagine we visited them often because we lived on a nearby farm.

That day was my earliest memory of what would be a family of nine girls growing up on farms in Virginia. It was also my first realization of being involved in a journey that would involve my family's moving from one farm to another. For young parents trying to rear a large family during the late 30s through the 60s, times were tough with years of struggle. In spite of all of the hardships, our family experienced joy and triumphs.

Herbert Lee Harris and Annie Mae DeLoatch, our parents, met when they were young. Their families lived in Southeastern Virginia.

Mama, the second daughter of Reddick and Queen Esther Deloatch, was born May 28, 1920 in Isle of Wight County. She had two sisters, St. Clara and Rosa. She also had three brothers, Ollie, James, and Edward. Her father lost his life from injuries that he received when he fell off a boxcar as he worked for the railroad. Sometime after his death, the family moved to Southampton County and settled in the farming community of Unity.

Born in Southampton County October 20, 1917, Daddy was the youngest son of Eddie and Nora Whitney Harris. He had one sister, Ora, and one brother, Charlie. They also lived on a farm in Unity.

As young children, our parents attended school together. When they were in their teens, they married. Daddy was 18 and Mama was just 15. Shortly thereafter, they began to increase their family. Their first child, a boy, was born in 1936. He lived only a few days after birth. Every one to two years for the next twenty years, another child was born. All girls. Ten girls. The last girl, born in 1953, passed shortly after birth, which left the family with nine girls.

We never knew when Mama was expecting another child except for the last sister. They didn't talk about having a baby, and friends didn't give baby showers. Early the next morning after a new baby was born, we heard cries, and one of our parents said, "Y'all come and see your new sister."

The first sister I remember seeing shortly after birth was Ernell. Her skin was quite red, and she was crying as most newborns do.

All of us, except the last girl, were born at home with the assistance of Cousin Sarah or Cousin Lou, midwives from nearby communities. Sometime during the night, they came and assisted Mama with the birth of the babies. Of course, we thought they brought the babies with them.

We never heard Daddy leave to get the ladies and didn't hear the babies crying or any other sounds to indicate a child was being born until the morning after. The midwife was gone by that time. Gone after another girl was added to the family.

With Mama's last pregnancy, some of us were in our teens and knew she was having another baby. I don't remember being told, but somehow we knew. The pregnancy was difficult. Mama became ill, was hospitalized, and gave birth in the hospital.

All of us were born near the small town of Zuni and the Black Creek community—farming areas in the southeastern part of Southampton County, one of Virginia's largest counties.

Historically, Southampton County is where the Nat Turner Rebellion, also known as the Southampton Insurrection, took place in 1831. The uprising, led by Turner, a slave, attempted to free Negro slaves in the South. Many Whites were killed, but the rebellion ended after a few days.

A religious man, Turner had many visions, which he believed were spirits guiding him. After witnessing a solar eclipse on February 12, 1831, he became convinced that it had been a sign from God and began preparing for the rebellion. On August 12, 1831 the sun's bluish-green appearance was believed to be the final signal. A week later, he and more than 70 men began the rebellion.

After the rebellion, many slaves thought to have been part of the uprising were executed. Across the South, state legislatures passed laws prohibiting the education of slaves and restricting rights of assembly and other civil rights of free Negroes.

Nat Turner survived by hiding for several months. He was eventually captured, tried, convicted, and hanged.

Except for that bit of history, the county is probably not noted for much more than its small farms with rich soil where corn, cotton, peanuts, and soybeans have been grown as long as I can remember. Although the area where our family's journey began long ago has changed with the times, some parts are pretty

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much like they were during our childhood. We look forward to visiting the county and have many memories of the people and events that impacted our lives and made us who we became.

HOW WE GOT OUR NAMES

Then the people began to multiply on earth,
and daughters were born to them.

Genesis 6:1

Being young and having to choose appropriate names for us was probably not an easy task for Mama. So, our relatives and some of the older white ladies in the community assisted in the selection of our names. Mama had ideas about how she wanted to name us but probably compromised far too often. The older ladies undoubtedly had good intentions, but some of us were given names that caused a lot of grief and ridicule.

Most of us had nicknames, probably used because of difficulty in pronouncing our given names. It's not clear why others were chosen.

The first child, Herbert Lee Harris Jr., named after our father, lived only a few days. I don't imagine our parents ever dreamed the rest of their children would all be girls.

Grandmother, Queen Esther, wanted the first girl to be named after her. For unknown reasons, she was named Queen Elizabeth. What a name—probably perfect for the Queen of England or some other royal, but not a name that boosted our sister's self-esteem. She hated it and was always teased about it. She dropped the name Queen after she left the county. Then the family called her Elizabeth.

Her nickname, Bootjack, was just as far-fetched. No one seems to know the exact reason why she was given that name. Only family members used the name, so it wasn't too much of a problem for her.

Ruby Mae and Rebie Mae were the second and third girls. Since Ruby was born in July, Mamma named her after the gemstone for that month. We called her Sissy.

Rebie was the name of Daddy's first cousin. Mama's middle name was Mae—a name that many people in the community used as middle names for their children. We had Edith Mae and Shirley Mae, along with cousins, Hazel Mae and Ora Mae. Ruby and Rebie

had little trouble with their names. Many people just didn't know how to pronounce the name Rebie. She was sometimes called Rah Rah.

When I was born, the ladies in the community began to take an active role in naming us. It seems as though they assumed Mama would give birth to another girl, so she said they were anxious to name one of us.

I am the fourth girl and was named Daphne Louise by Esther Womble, the owner of the farm where we lived. As I grew older and could recognize my name in print, we found an old Greek Mythology book that Mrs. Womble left in the farmhouse. For a long time, I could only recognize the word Daphne in it. While looking through it, I tried to see how many times I could find my name. After learning to read, I discovered that the book was the story of Daphne and the Greek God, Apollo.

So that's where Mrs. Womble got my name. For years, I believed I was the only Daphne in the world. I met another girl with the same name when I was about eighteen years old.

The biggest problem with my name was in the schools and the community; no one knew how to pronounce and spell it, not even my teachers. When seeing my name for the first time, they always hesitated, and I had to say it for them. I was called Daphine, Dalphine, Daffadene, Dalphony, Daffy, and Dafhonie, just to list a few. Most of them continue to call me Daphine. One of the senior members of our church simply called me Daffodil. The family called me Dap.

Before graduating from high school, I was determined to set the record straight on the legal spelling of my name. I wanted so badly to have my name written correctly on my diploma that I went to the school secretary and requested to have corrections made.

“Please make sure that my name is written correctly,” I insisted. “The correct spelling is D-A-P-H-N-E, not D-A-P-H-I-N-E.” On graduation day, I proudly received my diploma awarded to Daphne Louise Harris.

Minnie Pearl was the fifth girl. She was the second to be named by the ladies in the community. Mrs. Rosa Powell and her sister Laura had the honor of naming her.

“Can we name her Minnie Virginia?” one of them asked.

No one seems to know why Minnie Pearl was the name selected other than it was the name of a popular country music singer at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee at the time.

What a disaster! That name brought fame and notoriety to the renowned singer, but it was certainly not the best name for a young black girl growing up in Southampton County, Virginia at that time. I’m sure those ladies had no clue how much anguish Minnie would suffer because of it.

A walk through the halls at school drew taunts of “Minnie Pearl, Minnie Pearl, where are your pearls? Or “Minnie Pearl, Minnie Pearl, where’s your straw hat?”

Minnie grew lean and tall, so the children also called her Skinny Minnie. The family called her Minnie or Minnie Poo.

“I hated to say my full name,” Minnie recalled. “There were times when I had to state it, and people laughed at me. So, I unofficially dropped the name Pearl. I now sign my name Minnie P. Harris.”

Years ago, it was evident that Minnie had put the name Pearl out of sight, but not completely out of mind. I imagine she had done whatever she could to make it work. Rather than continue to detest it, she felt it was okay to make light of it. At our family reunion as the nine of us introduced ourselves, Minnie stood with a wide straw hat on her head and hands on her hips.

Echoing the voice of the Grand Ole Opry star, she said loudly, “How-w-w dee-e-e. My name is Minnie Pearl. I’m just so proud to be here.”

Her gesture received laughs from the group, and that was exactly what she expected.

The sixth girl, Ernell was named after Dr. Ernell Harris, the only African American medical doctor in the city of Franklin, Virginia at that time. Mama didn’t rely on anyone to help her with that name. Ernell liked her name and had no problems with it. She accepted being named after someone well known in the area. When she was born, her complexion was quite red, so the family called her Red for many years.

When Eileen Beatrice, the seventh sister, was born, the ladies in the community named her. We don’t remember which one had the honor and where she got the name, but it was just not one we were accustomed to hearing. It was also difficult for us to pronounce. So for many years, we called her Argie, short for Audrey, and the name Mama wanted to give her—one with which we were familiar. In school, she was called E-leen or Elaine. She never used her middle name.

No one seems to know how Yvonne, the eighth girl got her name. It was probably just a name that Mama liked. Yvonne liked her name but always said, “I wonder why I was not given a middle name. I guess Mama had just run out of middle names.”

We sometimes called her Von or Evon.

When Ruth Ann, the ninth girl was born, we were attending church more often, and religion impacted our family. She was named after the book of Ruth in the Bible. We also lived near the Bowers’ family who had given many of their children biblical names—Joseph, Mary, Isaac Paul, and Martha.

Ruth was sometimes called Rutabaga, a type of turnip grown in the area.

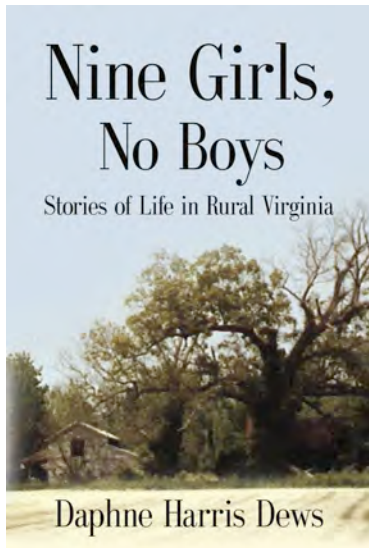
Annie, the tenth girl, who was named after our mother, lived only a few days after birth. Mama was hospitalized, so Daddy had a private burial for Annie.

It may sound cruel, but when Annie was born, we were not looking forward to having another girl in the family. We didn't like the responses we heard from grownups when Mama and Daddy told them they had nine children, all girls. We remember the old folks making comments like, "Annie Mae, is that another girl? How many churen you got now? Nine? All girls? No boys? You have all them girls and no boys? My, my, you got enough girls for a softball team. Lord, I know y'all wanted some boys, but you just have to take what God give you."

I remember Aunt Gertie said, "Lord, look at all them little chilluns," as we walked out on the porch to greet her when she came to visit us one day.

We were tired of hearing such comments. Having another sister meant there would be ten girls. What remarks will people make then? Will they say something else that will embarrass us?

We didn't want any more sisters. As far as we were concerned, nine girls in the family were enough. We would have been happy to have brothers, but no more sisters.



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