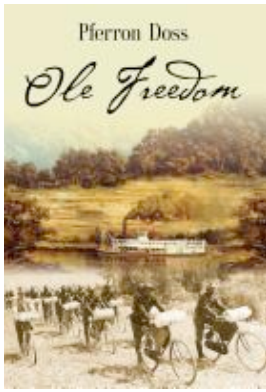


Pferron Doss

Ole Freedom





***Ole Freedom** tells the tale of young Odom Hawkins, who goes fishing to help feed his church congregation only to be accused of murder and find himself facing a lynching. After stowing away on a St. Louis riverboat, he forges a new life as a farmer, a mule skinner and, finally, a Spanish-American war hero in an inspiring tale of unrequited love, courage and faith in an era of primitive racial attitudes, behaviors and beliefs.*

Ole Freedom

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7892.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

OLE FREEDOM

Pferron Doss

Copyright © 2015 Pferron Doss

HARDCOVER 978-1-63490-217-5

PAPERBACK 978-1-63490-218-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2015

First Edition

PROLOGUE

The brass nameplate sat firmly affixed to a solid oak door at eye level of a standing man. It said "James A. Moss." The young reporter eyed it carefully, with more than a little trepidation, knowing that his two years of field experience with the *Poughkeepsie Journal* hardly qualified him to interview this distinguished writer and decorated soldier. He reflected on the man's title again: what was it, "Professor of the History of the Military Arts" or...

The door opened and there stood a man of absolute military bearing. Lean, and despite his age, still standing well over six feet, the man smiled thinly, extending his hand to the hesitant young reporter.

"You must be Stanley Mitchell, no?"

"Yes, yes, Sir. I was about to knock." The young man absently took Moss's hand as he surveyed his acquaintance, noticing his lined face, close-cropped, silver hair and sky-blue eyes.

"Well, no need now, is there." The author grasped the young man's hand. "Come in. May I offer you some refreshment?" He gestured first toward a fresh pitcher of water perched next to a solitary glass at the edge of his mahogany desk, then toward an overstuffed, dark red leather chair facing a massive window centered in the east wall. "I hope you will be comfortable here."

"Yes, yes, thank you, Sir."

The colonel closed the office door, then filled the young man's glass and offered it as he moved to his own chair, its back to the window, noticing all the while that the Manhattan view had astounded the young man.

"Quite the sight, eh?" Moss drank it in, himself.

"Indeed." Moss, unaccustomed to small talk, seated himself and gestured for his guest to do the same. "Now, refresh my memory, Young Man, and tell me a little about what it is you would like to know." Then, he reached for the cherry wood pipe he kept close at hand and turned it upside down, tapping the bowl against the side of a glass ashtray.

"Well, Sir," the young man began, reaching for his breast pocket and removing a small notebook. "My paper is doing a series on the rapid advancement in European military technology, some call it 'mechanization,' and..."

"You mean German advancement."

"I guess so, yes, Sir. Anyway, research revealed an interesting role you played early in your career, prior to the Spanish-American war. We might not have thought much of it, but your mission involved Negroes, and we consider this particularly interesting in light of the ongoing question about the effectiveness, or wisdom, if you will, of using people of color in combat roles."

Moss gazed thoughtfully on the young man, then frowned.

"And we wondered how," Mitchell plowed on, "it was that such an important issue as mechanization, even if it involved something as simple as bicycles, could have been entrusted..."

The author sighed.

"Sir? Have I done....?"

"No, you've done nothing wrong, Young Man. I suppose you have a list of questions hastily dreamt up by your editor that will focus on just about everything but what is important."

"Well, I do have..."

"Yes, just as I thought." Moss waved him off. "Let me put your questions to rest. First, as far as the bicycles go, they have become incidental in light of the rapid development of the internal combustion engine, something we could not have anticipated; so there is little more to say in that regard."

Mitchell nervously reached for a drink of water, still clutching his notebook and list of questions.

"When it comes to the role of Negroes in war," the author continued. "It is necessary to understand them as people, first, which is what I am willing to help you with provided you are willing to put your questions aside and listen. And you'd better have some time; after all, I am a story teller, and it will be a fairly detailed story."

"I do, Sir," the young man nodded. Then he laid the notebook aside.

Ole Freedom

"It is a story that begins on the banks of the Mississippi, just north of St. Louis, back when that city was only a fraction the size it is today, a story that begins with a young Negro boy and his mother..."

PART

I

The Boy

I

It was late spring, 1877.

At the town's northern edge, on a patch of high ground just a whisper from the mighty Mississippi, sat a weather worn shack salvaged from the burned out hull of the ill-fated riverboat, *Aleonia*. A precariously perched steel flue graced the hut's sagging roof, gray-black smoke wafting into a bluing sky.

No sign of gray could be found in the strand of sable hair gracing Sister Hawkins' brow. She swept it back from her careworn face as she stood at the cast iron stove, stirring a bubbling pot of grits. Then she cut a small pat of butter and watched it happily melt into a puddle of fat as she moved the battered pot aside to cool. With a sigh, she glanced at her slumbering son, his not quite sixteen-year-old face bathed in the narrow beam of morning sunlight slicing the well-kept room at sharp angles.

"Get up, Boy."

No response.

"We's got work." She walked over, reached down and wiped a stray speck of dirt from the boy's burnished cheek.

He barely stirred.

It irritated her when he pretended to sleep. "You can't be late today, Odom. Get up now, I said!"

"Alright, Momma, stop your yellin'," he mumbled.

"Yellin'?" She hoisted her hands to her hips. "You call that yellin'?"

"Sorry, Momma. I'm gettin' up."

His mother took a harder look at the boy, then placed the back of her hand on his forehead. "You comin' down with somethin'?" She cradled his face in her palms, searching his eyes. "Ain't got no fever." Her gaze lingered, then softened as she kissed his cheek.

"What time you reckon it is?"

"Late," his mother frowned, raising herself once again to full height. Sister Hawkins was a tall, proud woman; perhaps five feet ten inches and as broad across the shoulders as she was narrow at the hips.

"I thought you was gonna get me up 'fore now." The boy rolled over, glanced out the window and brightened at the sight of dew-laden leaves glistening in the morning sun.

"Time you learned to get your own self up." His mother sighed and turned back toward the kitchen, her hands now busied with her apron.

"Where my clothes?"

"Boy, ain't nobody been in that bed but you. Maybe it's time you cleaned that mess up and then you'd be able to find your things," she called over her shoulder.

"Here they is." He scrambled to pull on a ragged pair of cuffless jeans, a white rope for a belt, before grabbing a tattered and threadbare blue shirt.

"Before you come for somethin' to eat, you make sure you wash your face, too." She shook her head as she scraped his breakfast into his bowl. "The older you get, the more you act just like your daddy."

Odom strode to the kitchen, gingerly fingered the lye soap brick by the washbasin, then pretended to wash his hands before doing the same with his face.

"Now eat this and be off." Sister Hawkins scraped the spoon clean.

As her man-child gulped heaping spoonfuls of grits, Sister Hawkins sat across from the boy, her tender eyes resting on his face. Then she flattened her palm on her breast, closed her eyes and listened to the songbirds' morning serenade backed by the river's rushing current. The natural harmony offered the only real peace the young mother had known in over a year. Her face mellowed.

"Momma, you think them fish'll be jumpin' today?"

"I hope so," she sighed.

"Yes'm," the boy nodded with a sly smile. "Lord knows we got mouths to feed."

Sister Hawkins frowned in consternation at this sudden show of maturity, at her son's awareness of responsibility of the fact that it was their turn to help feed the church congregation despite their poverty, like everyone else.

"Where's my pole and worms? I put them in the corner yesterday," he added.

"How many times I told you to leave them slimy things outdoors?" she groaned, nodding at the door. "Ain't this house smellin' enough already?"

"Yes'm. I forgot. Guess I ain't been thinkin' much lately." He opened the door, spied the pole and rusty can, then scooped them up on a dead run for the river.

"You be careful out there today...don't you go drownin' yourself!" she cried after him, hurrying to the door.

But he was gone, his trail marked only by small puffs of dust.

"Just like your daddy," she nodded, leaning on the wall. "Just like your daddy," she whispered. Then she folded to the floor, her face in her hands. "Oh, I loved Moses so."

A stern taskmaster, grief had taught Sister Hawkins the art of surrender; so tears still flowed freely in recollection of that day barely a year before. It, too, was a Sunday, just like any other...until the morning light shifted. At the time, Sister Hawkins barely noticed. Nor did she feel the chill in the air, how God had suddenly seen fit to have the sun sculpt the fog at odd angles, blurring her view of her two men. At the time, she thought little of it and said nothing, knowing Moses was his own man, anyway. She simply struggled to see as they walked into the fading mist, side by side, with Odom stretching to match his daddy's stride.

It hadn't been twenty minutes when the boy breathlessly crashed through the door.

"Alright now, best you stop this foolishness," she'd said. "You and your daddy playin' those tricks again? 'Tain't funny!"

But Odom, panting and shaking, seemed dazed.

"Stop this nonsense, Boy. Where's your daddy?"

Odom just trembled and pointed towards the river. Then he ran, hollering for Moses.

"Odom, wait a minute!" She gathered her skirt, running after the boy with only sporadic glimpses of his backside to guide her. "Wait

for me!" she cried. "Odom, Odom, where are you?" Now breathless, she finally burst through a line of trees to see the boy sitting in waist deep water, sobbing.

"Stop your jokin'!" She scanned the swirling waters, her hands to her cheeks. "This ain't funny 'tall!"

"Momma, Momma, it wasn't my fault. His line got tangled on that logjam!" Odom howled. "I told him to let the fish go."

"Moses!"

"I yelled for him to stop and come back, Momma."

"Moses?" she implored, her eyes scouring the eddy.

"I tried, Momma!" Odom took a deep breath, then listened, but the only sounds were his thundering heart and the high, roaring river smashing against logs and rocks.

"Where are you, Moses!" Sister Hawkins wailed. Now half-crazed, she ran both hands through her hair, then waded into the swift, brown water. She snatched Odom to his feet with one hand and dragged him to the bank. Then she collapsed in the dirt beside him.

"He's gone. Mama, he's gone." The boy was hysterical now.

"Oh, Jesus, Lord, please don't take my man away from me!" she gasped. But somehow, she knew, like every sweet dream she'd ever had, this one, too, was gone. Her hands rent her tightly curled hair, pulling strands out by the roots as she wept.

Sister Hawkins blinked, realizing she sat on her own floor. She dabbed her eyes with the hem of her skirt, then stood. "They's work. Best get to it," she murmured. Sister Watson, Sister Blaine, all the older church widows said the same: stay busy and dwell on happier times; think about how nice it was and remember what God gave you, not what he took away.

So that's where her thoughts traveled. Everything had been going so well: the fine piece of bottomland, purchased at a good price, with more farming and even a little more building planned, too. They had talked only the night before his death, seated by the river and hoping someday to travel out West. His wife recalled his animated face as Moses told stories of wide-open land, opportunity, even mountains

so tall they were covered with snow all year long. Without a doubt, he'd said: "There's so much land that you need a horse just to get within shoutin' distance of your neighbor."

Older and taller than his wife, Moses was a good man with a smart, chiseled face and sturdy frame. He was wise beyond his years, but he had settled down here, with her, and they were happy. Sister Hawkins smiled. Their conversations had been so simple:

"It would be so fine to get away from these parts and start over," she'd said. "They's too much reminder of slaves and plantations and such, even here."

Unspoken was her reference to the lynching of the Simon's boy, Wilford, for horse thieving only the week before. The sheriff had hung the boy without trial for trying to fetch help for his own foaling mare. The horse's owners would not have pressed charges, but the sheriff said it made no difference; the law had been broken.

"Moses, I love this place, but sometimes I wonder if we really is all that free, if that damned war was for nothin'."

"Shush, now, Sister," he'd murmured.

As they happily strolled back to the cabin, arm in arm, Sister Hawkins recalled her childhood and her then newly freed mother's voice. She hummed her mother's favorite song, recalling the treasured lyrics by heart:

*"Oh freedom,
Oh freedom over me,
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free."*

Moses had said nothing as he bathed in the resonance of his wife's alto voice. By the distant look in his eyes, his wife assumed his thoughts had turned to his own folk.

"Yep, my ol' Momma, I sure do miss her," she sighed.

II

Young Odom was less than a mile from home when he untangled his fishing line and baited the hook with a half-worm. The hook dangled three feet from a wooden bobber at the end of a 12-foot string. The string was tied to a five-foot willow barely an inch thick at the narrow end. Odom stood on the bank, where the river angled into a shallow cove, and expertly flipped the bobber and hook out into a deeper spot where the current lingered. Then he settled back to relax in the shade of a Green Ash grove as he watched the bobber, periodically twitching it to give the bait movement.

When the bobber moved, Odom jumped to life, jerking the line to set the hook. The next strong pull landed a large striped bass on the bank. The fish flopped and jumped desperately, but Odom picked up a smooth, round rock, and with a well-practiced stroke, put a stop to that nonsense. He then pushed a small branch through the fish head and gills and set it back into the water to stay cool. He re-baited his hook and soon enough a second fish obliged him, then a third, then more.

The day's heat was rising, and with it the flies and mosquitoes, so he decided not to push his luck. He tied off his hook, pulled eight fish from the riverbank and put the worm can in his back pocket. He set off for the house, sure his mama would be proud.

The trail, dark and cool, kept him in good spirits until an inner voice told him to stop and listen. He frowned at first, unable to tell if what he heard was simply the sound of his own heart. Sure enough, it was the drumbeat of pounding feet on the trail coming toward him, a sound accompanied by heavy breathing and the desperately repeated "Lordy, Lordy!"

Young Loretta from church, head down and laboring to make speed, nearly bowled him over. He caught her in his young arms. Half-naked, her dress torn and smooth brown skin showing from places it wasn't supposed to, she wrestled with him, crazy with fear. Then, just as she began to settle down, a young girl screamed.

"It's Jaimie," said Loretta, between pants, pointing behind her.

"But what's wrong, Girl?"

"A white man. He's got 'er," she rasped.

Odom frowned, then whispered, "Go home."

Frantic, she nodded, then scrambled back down the trail.

Odom turned and crept toward sounds of what he soon realized was a vicious struggle Jaime was losing. He cornered the river trail, then froze, dropping his pole and fish.

The girl howled again.

"Damn you, li'l nigger." She was pinned on the ground by an older white man Odom couldn't recognize.

Odom spotted a small stack of rocks to his right and moved slowly to grab one. He stumbled, then caught himself and froze, certain he'd been heard.

But Jaime had spotted Odom and kicked harder. Then she screamed, and the man pressed one hand to her mouth, the other beneath her skirt, tearing at her underwear.

"Li'l nigger girl got shpunk," the man slurred, spewing the stink of whisky. Then he slapped her...hard.

She strained with all her might, but he was bigger, heavier, stronger. He finished tearing her underwear off, then managed to stuff it in her mouth, muffling her screams. Her eyes locked on Odom even as she tried to wriggle free.

"Give it up," her assailant grunted. "And things'll go easier, Little Girl!" Then he punched her, a dull thud splitting her lower lip and loosening two teeth.

Jaime limped, trying to breathe through the bloody mucous now bubbling from her nose.

"Atta girl!" Her rapist shifted to a sitting position, then used both hands to sweep the sweat from his brow before pinning her arms with his knees. He yanked at his suit coat, then reached for a short piece of rope as Jamie resumed the fight, her eyes wild, hysterical, pleading with the frozen Odom.

Odom finally bristled at the snap of slapping leather as the man slid his belt from his slacks. "Hey, get off 'er, you ol' drunk!" he finally screamed, approaching the man from behind.

The startled man turned, narrowing his eyes as he again sleeved his brow. Then, he labored halfway to his feet and backhanded the

boy, belt in hand, sending him sprawling before dropping back to his knees and once again pinning the struggling Jaime down as he unbuckled his pants.

Odom's heart pounded as he raised himself on one elbow, warm blood filling his mouth, then flowing down his chin. He glanced at his chest where it slowly pooled, and his rage grew. It grew at the image of the lynched Wilford Simon; it grew at the memory of the whipping scars on his grandmother's back; and it crescendoed at the sight of his own red blood. He reached to retrieve the rock, and in two steps jumped over to the white man, slamming it against his head with a practiced stroke...as if he was a large striped bass.

The drunk sagged and collapsed on his side with a heavy sigh, freeing the girl as his skull slapped another large rock embedded in the soil. Eyes wide with fright, she leaped up and gathered her dress as she looked down at her attacker, his battered head resting in the growing blood pool blackening the dusty ground.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," she stammered, backing away from Odom. "You're in trouble now, I reckon."

"Don't you never mind." Odom pulled his eyes from the man and flung the rock aside.

"Sissy," Jaime called out. "Sissy, where you at, girl?" She struggled to pull on her underwear as she stared down the trail. Then, she looked back at Odom, uncertain how to see him...as a hero or a fool.

"Git on home, Girl, quick," he growled. "Don't you say nothin'. Just run!"

"Mama! Sissy! Mama!" she screamed, her bare feet thumping into the distance.

Odom barely noticed the faint baying of a hound dog as he turned and took off at a lightning pace, in search of his own precious mother.

"Mama, come quick!" Odom cried as he neared the shack.

"What is it, Boy?" Sister Hawkins stepped outside, drying her hands on her apron. "Where's your pole?"

"Mama, this white man in the woods, he was takin' his pants off and layin' on that poor Tracey gal, and she was fightin' back and screamin'."

"Breathe. Boy. Breathe." Sister Hawkins stared, her eyes wide with stark uncertainty.

Odom took several deep breaths, then continued, "I yelled but he wouldn't stop. I had to do somethin', so I knocked that ol' white drunk off'n that poor girl."

"What you mean, you knocked him off'n her?" Sister Hawkins' gaze withered to a deep, hard stare.

"I grabbed a rock and I hit him," Odom wheezed, still trying to catch his breath. "He just kinda fell sideways and didn't move. I tol' that girl to go home, to just to tell her Mama what happened."

"You...You can't get in a white man's business. Are you crazy, Boy?"

"All I did was push 'im off'n Ms. Tracey's daughter. We got to tell the sheriff, Mama," Odom cried out.

"You crazy? Sheriff ain't gonna believe no colored boy."

"But...but you believe me." He could see his mother's jaw muscles tighten as his own slackened. "Don't you, Momma?"

"Of course I do, but I ain't the law. Did anyone see you besides that Tracey girl?"

"Just Loretta, Mama." Then he groaned and slapped his forehead.

"What is it, Boy?"

"I left the string of fish and my pole on the trail."

"Then you put a rope 'round your neck for sure."

"What?"

"You left your fishin' pole back there! Boy, have you forgotten your name was carved on that pole?"

"But..."

"There ain't no safe place 'round here that the sheriff an' 'is dogs ain't gonna find you. You got to go!"

"But go where?" Odom threw up his arms. "I ain't never been away from home. Please don't make me go. I can't! I won't! I'm the man now, Mama. I can't leave you."

"Shut up! Shut up! I gotta think. Oh Jesus, sweet Jesus, what am I to do?" She cried, her face contorted with pain. "I got to get you out of here!" she finally wailed.

"I ain't goin' nowhere! You can't make me."

"Nobody in this here earth loved their chil' the way I love you." Tears now stained his mother's face. "But Odom, we got to make you disappear."

The boy squirmed.

"Odom, it's for your own good. You gotta go now."

Odom begged more, crying louder.

She slapped him, then held his collar in an iron-fisted grip.

He froze, his wild eyes resting on a figure behind her.

"Let that poor boy loose!" It was the booming voice of their neighbor, Nathan. A middle-aged man, he stood ten feet behind Sister Hawkins, barefoot, bare-chested and gripping the straps of his bib overalls.

The boy's mother loosened her grip and turned.

"Lord, what a racket!" Nathan exclaimed. He stepped forward and pulled Sister Hawkins back. "Don't kill that poor boy."

"Odom done killed a white man, Nathan!"

"All right, but let him go." Nathan pried her fingers from the boy's shirt, and Odom staggered to the stump by the front door, grasping his throat.

"Odom, buck up." He turned to the boy's mother. "Get us some water and a chair, eh, Sister?" He turned back to the boy. "Catch your breath and tell me what happened...from the start, Odom."

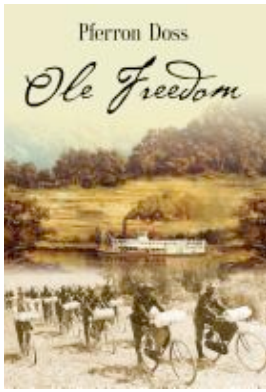
Nathan eased into the chair, straddling its back directly in front of the boy as his mother handed Odom some water. The boy drank deeply. Then Nathan listened to Odom recount his morning, from the encounter with Loretta, through the attempted rape of Jaime, to his frantic return to the house.

"You know, if it's true, your mama's right." Nathan sighed. "If that's what you done, you gotta git ready to leave now whether that

man's dead or not. You can't hide here. God ain't mad at you, but the law surely is. And your mama can't bear the brunt of it for you, willin' as she might be."

"Oh, I wish Moses was alive." Sister Hawkins moaned. "We'd a left this place long ago."

"We gotta find a way to git you far, far away," Nathan continued. "Put you on a big boat and scoot you up the river. But we gotta hurry. You git your clothes now, right quick!"



***Ole Freedom** tells the tale of young Odom Hawkins, who goes fishing to help feed his church congregation only to be accused of murder and find himself facing a lynching. After stowing away on a St. Louis riverboat, he forges a new life as a farmer, a mule skinner and, finally, a Spanish-American war hero in an inspiring tale of unrequited love, courage and faith in an era of primitive racial attitudes, behaviors and beliefs.*

Ole Freedom

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7892.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**