

# God's Chosen People

A Story by Lloyd L. Brown

IT WAS A FINE HILL for sliding down in the wintertime. Five blocks long, and steep.

*Fine hill for sliding: The Crispus Attucks Home was located on a hill near the corner of DeSoto and Collins (now Tedesco) Streets, just west of Payne Avenue and Swede Hollow.*

You didn't need a Blue Streak or a Flexible Flyer; a cardboard carton was just as good after the snow got icy. And when you found a big piece of tin—it was a beer sign that was going to fall off the fence pretty soon anyway—you curled up one end and went bellyflop, just like anybody else.

*Two little sisters: Lloyd Dight lived at Attucks with his older brother Ralph, older sister Dorothy, and younger sister Marguerite.<sup>11</sup>*

The big wooden house was on top of the hill and none of the other houses on

the street were as fine and fancy. That's where you lived. You and your two little sisters and Georgie and Doug and Jewell and Annie Mae and the rest of the kids and the old folks too and Mrs. Henderson. Your sisters and the other young ones were too little to go sliding, or to school either.

*Rest of the kids: In January 1920, the only time for which we have a complete list of residents, eight other children lived at Attucks: Uldine and Gaynell Younger, Olivia Vernon, John Daniels, and Virgil, Winifred, Robert, and Warren Breeding.<sup>12</sup>*

There was a low block of granite near the curb before you went up the steps to the front door. Carved on its street side was one word: SCHUSTER. It looked just like a graveyard stone and the kids across the street said maybe somebody was buried there, and they wouldn't ever step on it. Mrs. Hen-



derson said that the Schusters used to own the big house. That was a long time ago, long before the Society took the place over. Old Man Schuster owned half the timber in northern Minnesota at one time, she said, and when they lived here it was the only house on the hill. Richest folks in town. And now us—and she'd laugh.

Standing right next to the stone was a little black man in boots. That

was Jim. He looked real, but he wasn't; he was made out of iron. He stood there all the time with one hand up holding a big ring in it, and he was bowing toward the street. Sometimes after a hard snow, and after the snowplow went by, all you could see was his hand with the ring sticking up. In the summertime, when the waterwagon rolled down with the big gray horses holding back hard, their hoofs braced in the dusty road and their straw bonnets bobbing up and down as they tucked in their jaws, the sprinkler would get Jim all wet and he'd be shinier and blacker than ever. And when it stormed at night and the thunder rolled low and the rain slashed at the shingles you could look out of

*Mrs. Henderson: From founding in 1906 to closing in 1966, the home always had a matron. Brown remembers a Mrs. Lenoir and a Mrs. Jackson. The matron in January 1920 was Hattie Holt.<sup>13</sup>*

*Schusters: The Schusters are fictional. A residence once had stood at that location, but the Crispus Attucks building had in fact been built as a charity residence. It was the city's first Home for the Friendless, ancestor to the current Union Gospel Mission.<sup>14</sup>*

your window under the roof and see him way down below, a tiny little man standing under the gaslamp. All by himself, but he wasn't afraid.

*School: Lincoln School, a St. Paul public grade school, stood one block east of the Crispus Attucks Home on Collins Street.*

When you ran down in the morning you said, Goodbye, Jim, I'm going to school, and when you came home you said, Hi, Jim, here I am again.

Not all the time, though. Like that day you didn't want to talk to anybody—not even Jim. You ran all the way up the hill and up the steps and around to the back and into the carriage house where nobody could ever find you or ask you what's the matter. There weren't any carriages in the place—just a lot of broken chairs and beds and a cracked pisspot with roses on the lid and some rakes and a lawnmower and a horsecollar on the wall with straw sticking out of it.

Funny how it was. First it was just singing—all the kids in the auditorium singing I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles and Over There and Tipperary. That was after the pledge-allegiance part, with Mr. Olson standing on the stage in his khaki Home Guard uniform holding the American flag. He was the janitor. Then they

*Theresa Margiotti: This character is a composite of many Italian American girls who lived in the neighborhood and attended Lincoln School.<sup>15</sup>*

had to go and sing that Li'l Liza Jane song and they sang the words funny and looked at you funny and smiled to themselves—all of them. Every one of them. Even Theresa Margiotti who was your friend, she giggled too.

You told Jim the next day you were sorry you didn't say hello but you didn't tell him why. You didn't tell Mrs. Henderson either. One time when she saw you running home like that and you told her about how Terry O'Brien called you chocolate drop and the girls all started singing it like a song—like that song they

*Choc'lit drop: Lloyd Brown remembers children calling him this and other names at school, although his skin color was much fairer than chocolate brown.<sup>16</sup>*

sing when they're jumping rope: *choc'lit drop, choc'lit drop, hi ho a leary ho, choc'lit drop.* . . she washed your face and said next time you just call them po' white trash, that's all, you just call them that—po' white trash! Then she held you close like she did the little

ones and you felt worse than ever and wished you were back in your secret place where no one could see you.

**IT WAS A BIG, FANCY HOUSE** all right. Three stories tall and there was an attic and on top there was a little tower that looked like the wedding cake at the Bon Ton Bakery. And on top of that there was a weathervane. The horse's head was broken off. Sometimes at night when you were in bed you could hear him squeaking when he turned around in the wind. Because you were big you had a room all by yourself in the attic. It was a little room but it was very nice and Mrs. Henderson had pasted up a picture of Black Beauty on the sloping wall. There was an iron bed, painted white, with tin cans filled with kerosene under each leg. That was to keep the bedbugs from crawling up. There were a lot of them and the wallpaper was streaked where you squashed them. Like shooting stars.

In front of the house there was a wide porch; it had railings with a lot of little knobs on them like the ones on the big brass bed that Mrs. Henderson slept in. All the way down in the street you could see the sign over the porch: PETER SALEM HOME FOR THE AGED. It was gold lettering and even though some of the words were faded you could read them all. And you knew who Peter Salem was, too—the black man who fought at Bunker Hill; Mrs. Henderson told you. She knew a lot of things the teacher didn't know. Miss Regan didn't know about Peter Salem for one thing.

You were seven—nearly eight—and you had started going to school the same year they brought you to the Home. It was funny at first, you and your sisters being in this place with all the real old people. But after a while some more children came, but they were little kids and you wished the Charities would bring some that were big. Mrs. Henderson said it ought to be just for old folks and they ought to start a home for colored orphans, too. But she was glad to have you just the same.

*Big fancy house: The house was certainly big, but not fancy by today's standards. It had, however, a distinguished origin, being a very early commission of Clarence H. Johnston. The St. Paul architect later designed many truly fancy homes on and near St. Paul's Summit Avenue, as well as numerous churches and public buildings.<sup>17</sup>*

*Bedbugs: "The worst part of my life in poverty were the bedbugs in that place," Brown says. They did not bother his brother, but "I was a choice target."<sup>18</sup>*

*You were seven: In fact Brown was between four and five years old when he came to Crispus Attucks, and seven when he left.<sup>19</sup>*

She was a nice lady, the matron, and when you had the whooping cough she made onion tea and brought it all the way up to your room even though she said the steps were killing her and it's high time they were giving her some help. She was round and fat and laughed a lot. Sometimes she would laugh so hard she'd sit down in her rocking chair and shake all over and the tears would roll down on her apron and she'd say, Law, chile, what won't you be thinkin' 'bout next—you'll be the death of me sure! And she'd give you a piece of bread smeared with lard, sometimes with sugar sprinkled on it.

*Bread smeared with lard: Brown recalls being given precisely this treat at Attucks.<sup>20</sup>*

But mostly she was too busy cleaning and cooking and taking care of the sick ones like Mr.

*Mr. Thigpen: The oldest residents at the time of the 1920 census were John Reves, 84, an Ohio native, and William Singleton, also 84, born in South Carolina.<sup>21</sup>*

Thigpen to talk to you or the young ones much. Mr. Thigpen must have been the oldest one in the Home. His hair was white and frizzy like the top of a dandelion and he never got out of bed. He just lay there all day and never moved except to spit into the slop jar by the bed after a coughing spell. But he liked to have you come in and tell what you learned at school. And when you told him he'd want you to tell him more things. He hated everybody else and when the matron came in he'd close his eyes and pretend to be asleep. She said he was the evilest old man she ever laid eyes on—wouldn't even let Reverend Bixby come into his room when he came to call. Cuss him out something awful.

One day after school he wasn't there—he went away to his father's house. Doug—he was only five—said that Mr. Thigpen's father must be older than anybody in the world and Mrs. Henderson said that he was. Older than anybody.

**THE OLD PEOPLE** didn't go out much. Mostly they sat around in the parlor where the children weren't allowed. But you could go in to take out the ashes from the big coal stove in the middle of the room and to fill up the scuttle. It had a different smell from the rest of the house, a dry brown smell like old people and old wallpaper and moldy carpets and curtains and old tobacco pipes. Sometimes they talked, but Miss Rose

never talked to anybody. Just sat in a rocking chair by the stained-glass bay window and rocked back and forth and hummed. She chewed snuff. Then there was Miss Redpath and Miss Rainey and little Miss Fowler and Mr. Rixey and Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cherry and some more too. Mr. Campbell wasn't like the others.

He had whiskers like one of the prophets and liked to sit outside whenever it was nice. He could go to sleep sitting on the porch in the summertime and not wake up when a fly walked on his nose. Mr. Campbell carried a potato in his hip pocket for the rheumatism and he could tell you stories about working on the riverboats that used to come all the way up from N'Awlins. There's no more boats nowadays, he'd say, but one of these days, son, I'm going to pack up and take a railroad train all the way back. All the way back to Hannibal and to St. Louis and to Cairo and Memphis, and to Greenville and Vicksburg and Natchez, all the way down—plumb into N'Awlins. He'd say those names over and over like it was a song and pat his carpet slipper keeping time. And he'd blow through his hands like a train whistle: *Whoo-oo-who!* Hannibal and St. Louis, Cairo and Memphis, Greenville and Vicksburg, Natchez and N'Awlins—*whoo-oo!* Yes, Miss Lindy, yes, Miss Lou, *I'm a-comin' through. . . .*

I warn't one of them roustabouts neither, son, he'd say, a riverboat pilot I was—or same as one. Me 'n Cap'n Bob could take you anywheres you wanted to go and didn't need much water neither. Mind the time we went clean up to Fletcher's Landing 'fore we found out that the old river'd doubled back and cut a brand-new channel five miles on the other side! Yessiree, and that's the gospel truth. That was *something*, let me tell you.

Mr. Campbell was a good singer and could sing louder than anybody those nights in the parlor. Sunday nights they were.

*Miss Rose, Miss Redpath, et al.: A "Miss Rice" [Elizabeth Wright, perhaps?] from Brown's era spent every day sitting by a window awaiting a visit from her son—who never came. "She reeked of tobacco," he recalls. The adult female residents in early 1920 were Elizabeth Wright, 70, from Missouri; Mary Brown, 60, from New York; Julia Henson, around 70, from Tennessee; Mattie Block, 60, from Alabama; and Mary Johnson, 64, from Maryland.<sup>22</sup>*

*Mr. Rixey, et al.: The other elderly men were W. M. Johnson, 65, from Missouri; Septimus Smith, 57, from Alabama, and Herbert Camel, around 70, from Kentucky.<sup>23</sup>*

*You liked the stories: As Brown remembers things, the elderly residents were illiterate but knew the Bible well. Often the Bible served as a takeoff point for their own stories.<sup>24</sup>*

The singing was nice but you liked the stories better. They would open the Bible on the little round table first, but nobody would do much reading from it. Mostly they told the stories, a whole lot better ones than those Miss Regan told or the ones in Elson's Second Reader. At first the matron used to make you go upstairs to bed like the little ones, but after a while you found out that if you sat over on the corner stairs where it was dark Mrs. Henderson wouldn't notice you. Or at least she wouldn't say anything.

They'd turn the gaslight down low and when the stove was going good they'd turn it off altogether. The light came through the little isinglass windows and jumped up and down on their old brown faces and their eyes would shine and their shadows on the walls nodded and moved back and forth. Every once in a while Mr. Campbell would chunk up the stove with the poker and when nobody was looking he'd spit into the scuttle. Chewing wasn't allowed at prayer meeting time but he always did except when Reverend Bixby came around. He knew you were back there in the dark on the stairs and sometimes he'd look around and wink at you.

**THE STORIES WERE MOSTLY** about the old times when there was slavery and the children of Israel were in Egypt. Some of the words were

*When there was slavery: Based upon their reported ages (some of which were marked with a "?" in the census), it is likely that Attucks inmates Camel, Singleton, both Johnsons, Wright, and Henson had been slaves and old enough at emancipation to recall slave days. Of course the roster at Attucks often changed, so Brown likely knew other former slaves as well.<sup>25</sup>*

hard to understand. Like "begat." Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob and Jacob begat twelve sons. There were other things that were hard to figure out, too. If they weren't really children—and some of them were old men like Abraham—why were they called the children of Israel? And why were the colored people in those days called Israelites?

Some of the stories were about children and they were good ones, too. Except the one about the little boys who laughed at the old prophet Elisha and called him an old bald-head and God sent two bears out of the woods and the bears ate them up. But there was the

one about little King David who took his sling-shot and killed the giant. In those days the old people weren't always telling you that you couldn't have a slingshot, you might put somebody's eye out with it.

Then there was Joshua—he was a *fighting* man—and Moses and Aaron and how they ran away from Old Pharaoh and got across the river just in time and the white men and all their hound dogs were drowned when the waters rolled down. And God showed them the way to go with a cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. Except for Harriet Tubman. Then there was nothing but a star that they followed and they didn't go by day at all. But they got away just the same.

That Harriet Tubman. Black as night and tall as a pine and strong as Samson and her eyes were like lightning and no man living could stare her down. Yessir, and she carried a pistol as long as that poker and when you looked down the barrel you could see Kingdom Come. But she didn't need no weapons. If a man got scared and wanted to turn back, all she had to do was ball up her fist, r'ar back and *wham!*—they'd throw him in the wagon like he was dead. Never knowed when she was comin' but when she said *git*, brother, you *got!* Never been nobody like her.

But even when they ran away from Old Pharaoh there was always somebody else to fight. There was always some old king and the Babylonians and Philistines and Assyrians and Persians who put the children of Israel back into bondage. Then there was another lady—not Harriet Tubman but another one—who set the people free by killing the general who was leading the soldiers after them. She took the general into her tent and gave him buttermilk to drink. (You didn't like buttermilk but Mr. Campbell did.) Anyway, when the general went to sleep the lady took a hammer and a nail and hammered the nail plumb through his head and killed him and all the Israelites got away—across the river. There was always a river: the Jordan and the Ohio and some more.

But they didn't all live in tents like in that story. Those that lived in the desert—before

they got to Canaan—lived in tents and ate manna that God dropped down. But the others lived in little cabins and ate hoecake, and fat-back when they were issued it. Sometimes they would find a hog that got lost and it wasn't in a desert because they'd go off in the woods to bar-

**Told about the cabins:** *The old folks' stories from slavery played a part in Lloyd Brown's later political radicalization. Slavery had "torn the hearts out" of these people he had come to love, he recalls. John Brown, who led a violent insurrection against slavery, became Lloyd Brown's hero and namesake.<sup>26</sup>*

becue it over a fire. And they used to snare wild turkeys in the woods and eat them, too. And 'possums. (Like Mr. Campbell said, folks down there will eat a 'possum quicker'n a goose will go barefoot.)

Miss Fowler told about the cabins. When she was a little girl, a long time ago when there was slavery, she lived in one of them with her mother. It wasn't much of a place to live, without any floor or a fine big stove like this one. They made a fire on the floor and the smoke went up through a hole in the roof. You

could see the stars through there, too, and Miss Fowler's mother told her that maybe someday they would see the star you could follow clear through to Freedom.

But it was a long time a-coming and when it did and the others went away Miss Fowler's mother couldn't go—she was in the family way. Colonel Alcorn and the other white men went after the slaves on horseback and with their dogs. They caught some of them. Frederick was killed out in the swamp and they cut off the ears of Ephraim—that was Miss Fowler's uncle. The rest of the ones they caught just got beat. But most of the runaways never were found, and Miss Fowler said praise the Lord for that and Miss Redpath said Amen.

One night after the old people had talked about how the children of Israel were put into bondage again, this time by the Babylonians, Mrs. Henderson said God's chosen people sure had a hard way to go, didn't they? And Mr. Campbell said yes, and it's still a hard road, a long hard road. Miss Redpath said Amen and everybody else nodded and said it's the truth, Lord knows it's the truth. □

## NOTES

1. Paul D. Nelson, "Orphans and Old Folks, St. Paul's Crispus Attucks Home," *Minnesota History* 56 (Fall 1998): 102–19.

2. Lloyd Brown to author, June 26, July 17, 2001.

3. "Orphans and Old Folks," 108; Lloyd L. Brown, interview by David V. Taylor, Minneapolis, May 18, 2000, copy in author's possession.

4. Here and two paragraphs below, Brown interview; Brown to author, June 26, Oct. 11, 2000.

5. Brown to author, July 14, 2000.

6. Here and six paragraphs below, Brown interview; Brown to author, Oct. 22, 2000; Brown, telephone conversation with author, Mar. 26, 2001.

In preparation for a 1937 labor dispute, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Steel Company was found to have amassed an arsenal of eight machine guns and hundreds of pistols, rifles, and shotguns; Melvin Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America, A History* (Wheeling, WV: Harlan Davidson, 1999), 263, 292; *Youngstown Daily Vindicator*, Mar. 7, 1930, p. 8; Alan Wald, Foreword, in Lloyd Brown, *Iron City, a Novel* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), xv–xvii.

7. Brown to author, July 27, Oct. 11, 2000; Brown interview; Wald, Foreword, xv–xvii; press release, Aug. 1998, from *Multicultural Review*.

8. Lloyd Brown, "Jericho, USA," *New Masses*, Oct. 29, 1946, p. 15–16; "Battle in Canaan," *Mainstream*, 1 (Fall 1947): 414–21.

9. Lloyd L. Brown, "God's Chosen People," *Masses and Mainstream* 1 (April 1948): 57–63.

10. Brown to author, Oct. 18, 2000.

11. United States, manuscript census, 1920, Population, St. Paul, Ward 1, Precinct 2, enumeration district 6, sheet 25A, microfilm, roll 852, vol. 61, MHS Library (hereinafter, 1920 census).

12. 1920 census.

13. 1920 census; Brown to author, Oct. 11, 2000.

14. Brown to author, July 27, 2000; *Quarter Century Report of the Home for the Friendless Association* (St. Paul: H. M. Smyth Printing Co., 1892).

15. Brown to author, Nov. 3, 2000.

16. Brown interview.

17. Paul Clifford Larson, *The Life of Clarence H. Johnston, Minnesota Architect* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1996), 33.

18. Brown to author, June 26, 2000.

19. Brown interview.

20. Brown interview.

21. Brown interview; 1920 census.

22. Brown interview; 1920 census.

23. Brown interview; 1920 census.

24. Brown interview.

25. 1920 census.

26. Brown interview; Brown to author, July 27, 2000.

*The photos on p. 373 (bottom) and 374 are courtesy Lloyd Brown. The other images, including the 1920 census detail from microfilm roll 852, vol. 61, e. d. 6, p. 25A, are from the MHS collections.*



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