

Man's 1903 book details hard life in 1830s Chester

Autobiography reveals a mother's love through many years of poverty

In his old age, Joshua Hilary Hudson, one of South Carolina's most respected circuit judges, wrote his autobiography, which was published in 1903.

The book was titled "Sketches and Reminiscences." The section on Hudson's

poverty-stricken boyhood in the town of Chester gives us a remarkable insight into the nature of village life in the 1830s.

Joshua's father, Dabney Hudson, was taught the tailor's trade by an uncle in Yorkville. After marriage to Narcissa Cook, Dabney opened a shop in Chester with his brother. A few years later, he abandoned tailoring to be the jail keeper. Soon he was drinking too much and squandering his income. He then died, leaving a widow with seven children, the oldest one only 12 years old.

The widow had no family in Chester. There was no government agency to give assistance except the poor house, and this the mother refused to accept.

The kind-hearted sheriff allowed the family to live in the jail, and Narcissa Hudson filled the role of jailer until the end of the year, when she had to be replaced. The law did not allow women to hold office.

People in the town suggested

that she scatter the children among various families who could take in one more child. The mother would not consider breaking up her family. Finally, the clerk of court offered a small, two-room building next to the courthouse for the family to live in rent-free for a year.

As the wife of a tailor, Narcissa knew how to sew and she had frequently padded the shoulders of coats. Sympathetic tailors in town now sent her their spare work. She got enough money to send her two oldest to school, but lost use of the rent-free cabin. (Joshua was fifth in the birth order.)

Another resident, Maj. John Kennedy, donated a half-acre of land to Narcissa for use in her lifetime. Friends erected a log cabin, which was nothing but logs and loose-fitting boards. The cabin did not even have a chimney. Hudson recalled that some of the cracks were wide enough to allow "chickens, cats and small dogs to enter."

It wasn't too bad in the summer, when the family could use a crude outdoor oven. In the winter, without a chimney, the family suffered immensely. Narcissa Hudson's solution was to bring inside the stones of the outside fireplace and construct an oven in the middle of the floor. Around this oven she hung the family's few bed quilts on a rude frame. Oak chips were burned and, fortunately, since there was no ceiling or loft, most of the smoke escaped.

The children studied their lessons using homemade candles made of bacon grease and cording. Soon the two oldest girls were skilled with the needle, and the oldest boy apprenticed to a

tailor. In a few years, the mother earned enough to construct a chimney and have the cracks daubed with clay. The apprenticed eldest son shared his earnings and weatherboarded the cabin. Years later, he added rooms.

The three oldest children worked so that the four younger would not have to drop out of the "free school." (It was not until after the Civil War that schooling was tuition-free for all children in South Carolina.) Even though the family's poverty entitled the children to free schooling, Narcissa Hudson would not charge for the sewing she did for their teachers.

By the time Joshua Hudson was 16, he had proven himself an impressive scholar, but as much as he preferred being a student, he knew the family could not afford to support him. He had to join the work force. But he lacked manual skills. Several apprenticeships failed.

Then a very discouraged young Hudson got unexpected encouragement to continue his schooling. With a \$100 loan from Richard Kennedy, a free ride in a classmate's carriage, and the promise of work for his room and board, the poor boy got the opportunity he needed.

Joshua Hudson became the top honor graduate of the class of 1852 of S.C. College (now USC). Sixty years later, at the end of his highly successful career as a lawyer and judge, Hudson wrote about the town of Chester: "I retain an undying love for the town and its people."

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