



# That First Year the Business Was Wood

Caledonia/Acorn, Alabama, c. 1830s

Granny Celia and Grandpa Joseph were among those original hundred of what the Kimbroughs called the workforce. They arrived by boats on the Muskogee River. The old ones, in their own time between chaws or pipe sucks, took turns telling it. That is, they told what they could or would tell of it. All of it could not be told. Some of it was by then too distant, some of it was too cold in its cruelty, too bottomless in its ugliness to be remembered, or if remembered, told.

As to the exact year they arrived on Caledonia, they were not sure. They had no reason to know one year from another, because they were outside the significance of numbers such as those. Seasons and work—building, maintaining, plowing, seeding, weeding, plucking, and personal caring for—were measurements, by their reckonings, without value.

An event was remembered not by a date, but for itself: the time when such and such happened. The time the overseer was thrown by his horse, the time the mill caught fire, the time the barn caught fire, the time a Kimbrough had a heart attack. Births and deaths and selling offs had meaning, or when someone went into the swamp; these were occurrences worth noting and so were memorable.

The year Alabama had become a state, or Mardalwil had become a county, or Caledonia a plantation, or the town of Acorn was incorporated from Caledonia land—these meant less than two dead flies to them.

Of some, but minimal, import was what part there was about the Indians, who had been there long before them, and who were all gone but for their bones and blood in the ground and their spirits in the air,

and only the last one of them, Red Stick, a Creek, who came and went at his will, was still there. Red Stick knew the part about his family and ancestors, but most of what he knew was too distant or deep or ugly for him to recall for telling.

The year the coffle of us of over 150 were bought and set out from a Charleston auction block and shipped south by sea down to near Savannah, then north and west up a meandering series of rivers, about ten fewer arrived than had begun the trek on some 2500 acres of woods and thick timberland and rich black Alabama dirt.

In the lead in the first wagon with Charlton P. Kimbrough was Missus Sarah Katherine Whitmore Kimbrough, the Old Man's wife. She was Missus Sarah. He never wanted to be called Master. Goodsire was what he said. Behind his back we had various names for him. Cloud Head. The Old Man, though he was no more than thirty at that time, still had a head full of wild cotton-white hair with a little tam 'o shanter, his blue bonnet, sitting on top.

Next in the line of Kimbrough brothers was Clay Monroe. He was in his late twenties at best guess. And then skipping behind like colts in clover came Thurso and Wick. They were twins, in their late teens or early twenties or so; neither of them or their doings is worth the telling. They were less than half a man, the two of them put together. They knew no more about business than a chinch on a chicken's ass. Neither one of them had sense enough to take his hand out of hot grease, nor did they have as much pride as crab grass.

That first year, wood was the business. The land was surveyed and we commenced clearing. Pines and maples and oaks we topped and toppled for shelter and for shipping and selling.

The trees whined like the axe blades had when we sharpened them on the trundled grindstones, and then again as we, teams of two axe men, whacked out wedges, and then we, teams of two sawyers, sawed through the timber's core before the splintering shriek and toppling crash, and we measured and bucked and limbed and hitched and skidded the trunks by harnessed mules to Kimbrough's Mill, that we had built first,

about a half mile distant, at Kimbrough's Landing that we had also built, and then we scaled, sawed, edged, dried, planed, stacked, and bundled raw wood that was then transported by boat and train to market up or down the river.

We did that as we planted and farmed vegetables, and we built rough log shelters to house them and us as we tended the pigs and cows and sheep and chickens, and we built the grain mill, and we harvested more than enough to feed them and some for us, and we cured the wood and hauled it up to build the big houses for each of them, and we framed and we sided and we laid floors and we raised roofs: Highland House being Goodsire and his woman's; Pictland being Clay's; and Twin Oaks for Thurso and Wick, the twins, jointly.

Some of us ran off to the swamp after setting a fire or other mischief those first years and some of us got sickly and bled and died from consumption and cholera and pneumonia and pellagra and diarrhea and influenza and fevers and measles and mumps and all the animal poxes: cow, goat, horse, squirrel, and fowl, and we died from overwork.

Missus Sarah Katherine, Cloud Head's woman, who each Christmas called us all out and read poetry-rime stories from Scot-land, about wars between Vikings and all, and at times she called herself nursing us until she caught something and died.

Cotton was the second year's work: we uprooted stumps, cleared what had been forestland, and by March tilled and toiled, and we got the first cottonseed in the ground.

Next big thing was when the rail-road was finished up. Goodsire was big in that whole business, too. Like in every-thing.

Over that same time Clay Kimbrough, the one with the second-most sense, shut down the mill. It was a deal between him and the Old Man before they even got to Mardalwil County. He closed up his house and sold his acres for a profit to the Old Man and moved on off to New Orleans. He became a Negro Broker down there. But before then the Old Man quit, giving the twins credit and soon buying them out, four cents an acre. The fools were happy to get it, and to get from round him,

and from Caledonia. They took the Northeast Alabama Railroad Company train, of which they had been at one time minority stockholders. Off up east they went. One later on turned out to be Esme's daddy. They say Wick, the other one, after troubled marriages died in a crazy house.

But all of that and all we did for them meant a heap less than what we had brought with us, which was our pride at having worked the soil of Carolina to death before it wore us out and killed us all. Knowing that even the ground out of which their cotton, that gave them all their power over us, could be defeated and depleted—that fueled everything we did.

It was inside of us. It was in our minds, *our minds*, out of sight of them even when we were in full view. The way we touched our children, our language of looks and nods, our rituals of no, the ways we supported each other with silence, a grin, or a lie.

It was the tellings of our surviving, and of our outwitting of them and their business, by not being who they took us to be, that occupied our notion of what was important for our marking of time.

It was in our ways of doing, in front of them—our walking, our wearing, our working, that sprouted from the seeds of our need to air our common yearnings and have them recognized and welcomingly accepted and understood as useful—whether any or all of those things were through strength; or by being sullen, daring, surly, dragging; or through shared wisdom or charms; it gave us confidence in ourselves and became storied examples in our ability to have an inside self, and therefore a belief in our spirit to continue.

It was in our singings, self-made or in chorus, and the rhythms (claps and pats and stomps) in our dances, and in little ditty-tunes that we put from the first suck as sustenance and anointment for our babies. Our offspring were given melodies to hum, little rhythms to repeat and remember. They were pacifiers and prompts and signifiers. If by hellish chance our ways parted, the children took with them airs to hum or whistle or think. And if by chance our paths recrossed or the broken arcs of our circle reconnected miles or years hence, and our names or

our appearances were changed by time or lack of sight or circumstance, we would have a tuneful keepsake to certify our connection.

That larder or storehouse of instances, a collection of tellings stacked up like a vault of vittles, so we could continue to struggle up before light each day and face it, inspired by our being as much trouble as we could while having the gumption and grit to keep on until the world reversed its course or somersaulted, and snakes walked and mules flew and water turned to fire and wood to wind and then re-ordered itself again, and was back to some order we understood and understood us, so we could hold again without grasping, breathe again without panting, and get, grow, laugh unquestioned, wander, leave, have privacy, choose, be.