

## [John and Hannah Whitehead]

26100

Federal Writers' Project

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Whitehead, John & Hannah

307 [?]. [?] Street

Lakeland, Florida

### JOHN AND HANNAH WHITEHEAD - LAWN CUTTER

In most Florida Cities there is a type of colored man who earns their livelihood cutting lawns of the homes of the wealthy white home owners. They can be seen going through the streets with lawn mowers, pushing them, in small home made wagons, or in the back of old automobiles, going to their respective jobs; or soliciting a job in the white sections. This type of work only afford work for them during certain seasons of the year. Mostly during the early spring and extending through the late fall.

John was contacted for an interview due to his years in service cutting lawns. He stated that," he has been cutting lawns ever since he came to Lakeland in 1920."

John lived on a sandy street facing [?] Washington Park. The house in which he lives sets far back from the street, and was onced used for a garage. It is built out of galvanized tin,

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without windows. There is two doors entering from the front into two seperate rooms which comprizes the only two rooms in the building. Over the door there is a sign still visible " H & S Garage," and several faded " Coca Cola signs[. ?]

He has a large yard in the rear. Here he had been preparing the ground and opening up rows for planting collard seed.

His wife Hannah was busy ironing clothes in the room that was a combination kitchen and bed room. Clothes were on the bed. Hannah had just finished ironing them. The room was very dark, due to there was no windows in the room. The only light and ventilation comes through the kitchen door. C. ?????

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The gas form the hot stove hovered in the ceiling. A pile of cut wood was stacked near the stove, and on top of it was his lawn mower. A small table [was ?] extending out from the wall, on this she was ironing. Near the stove was another small table on which was pots and pans. The walls was covered with card [boards gathered from stores?]. The ceiling remained the original tin covering of the roof. It was very dirty from the soot coming from the stove. The floor was bare and [many ?] cracks were in them allowing the air to [penetrate?] through.

Entering the next room through [the backdoor?] in a room that is spacious, containing [???], [?] cot, two rockers, one old [delaplated?] dresser, and on the floor was a ragged brown colored rug. Too, this [rug was covered?] with discarded store card [board b?]. with the top ceiling [bare?]. [?] [the?] cot was a basket of clothes that Hannah [had completed?] and was ready for delivery. [Near?] the [bed?] was a round top old fashion trunk. It is in this setting that John and Hannah [apparently?] lives [happily?].

John is very small in statue, five feet and four inches in height, weight one hundred and sixty pounds, dark brown in complexion, with black hair mixed with grey. His teeth were all extracted, except two in the upper front of his mouth. Very cheerful [and ?]. His shoes

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were tennis shoes with holes cut in [the shoes ?]. His dirty felt hat was [cocked on?] the side of his head as he sat with his legs crossed.

Hannah, she is brown in complexion, medium built, wearing a gingham [colored?] dress over it was a dirty white apron. Hannah said, " I came from South Carolina two years ago. I gave my age back there as sixty in order to git' a pension. So I will have to 3 go for sixty right on." She shuffled around the kitchen back and forth from the stove to the table where she was busy [cooking?]

[John?], he had not very long returned from the Automobile License [Office?]. He said, " I just got my tag for my Chevrolet Car 1932 Model. It cost me Twelve dollars and fifty five cents. I had to cash one of em' goverment checks for it. I'se keep dem' and cash dem' when I want something. My boy [Ernest?] is in de' C C C Camp near Sarasota, Florida." He was informed that he should cash them so not to hold up the goverments records. He said, " Is that it, den' I will cash dem' and put dem' in the post office."

John further stated, "[that?] he was born in Cocaron, Georgia, [12-11-80?]. I was brought down dar' to [Dudly?], raised down dar' in [Dudly?], brought back and forth to both places so many times I can't tell the number. I moved to Lakeland in 1920. My parents Demp and Pollie, they have been dead some years, my mother she died when I was a baby. Then was me and [Hooey?], Joe, [Ab?], another [betwixne?] me dead, and John."

"My people were farmers, they ran from two t three plows. We generally have [30?] acres to the plow. Yes, goodness alive! I plowed, I don't know anything else but plowing. I started plowing when I was real small, I could hardly hold on to the plow handles."

" I married my first wife [Louber Edmond?] in 1903, she died 3-17-1912. We married in Georgia, down dar' to Joe Edmond's place- located down dar' to [Wh oper's Crossing?], Lawrence County. My children, Leola, about 35; Lottie, about 30; Lazarus, about 31; 4 and Lola Mae, about 18, two died at child birth. That's the crop from my first marriage."

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Lazerus and Leola Belle are in Chicago, Illinois. Leola, is in New Jersey, Cora Bell, is in Georgia, out dar' to Joe Edmond's place."

"I married my second wife Lilla Butler at Charlie Butler, [right?] side the Creek in Dudley, Georgia. Children born: [Adeline?], about 24; James, about 22; Earnest, about 20; Willie Lee, about [14?]; Aaron, gwine [on 13?]; and Moses, gwine [on?] 12; two died at child birth. Ten living now goodness alive."

"I don't get no help from but two of them, Earnest, is in the C C C Camp at Sarasota, Florida. I bought the tag for dat' old car. I payed thirty five dollars for that car. When I asked the man about it, he cranked up a big car and came out to the house. I gave him the cash money." You see [I saved?] up the checks that came from Earnest."

"Now my other children, Adeline is married and living down dar' on Fifth Street in dem' yellow houses. James is in South Carolina, working. Willie Lee is fourteen miles from Dudley, Georgia, farming, Aaron is right dar' wid' him. Moses is up dar' with Fannie in [Aposta?], Florida."

" The good Lord has spared me to live here for somethings to tell the folk about [southern?] suffering. I am careful now because I know death has got to come. I don't know the minute or the hour."

" Now my third wife Hannah Burke, I married her the [Wensday?] before Christmas two years ago here in Lakeland. I courted her abut seven or eight months, dat's long 'nough."

[????????????] 5 said, I was born in Greenwood, South Carolina, my parents were Frank and Emma Thomas. There was ten in our family, five are still living.: Elsie Blocker, Daisy Carter, Bob Thomas, and Betsy [Oliphant?] my oldest sister lives in [Greenmond?], S.C. Johnson Thomas lives in Lakeland. He works for Mr. Joe Jefferson- Lake Morten Drive. He [sweeps?] out there on the premises."

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“ When I lived back there in South Carolina, my people they sharecropped, sometime we would come out behind. We raised [?], cotton, [peas?], potatoes, and vegetables. The landlord would take half of it like corn and cotton. If we did not make enough to pay way he would take it all, but the vegetables. Some time if you [?] out you could have [a?] of cotton left for your part.”

“ During the year he would furnish you so much a month, that would run to the size of your family. They just figu’ out how much it takes to do you month.”

“ Since coming to Lakeland I cook for Mr. Hill, Lake [Hollingsworth?] Drive. I did get three and half dollars [to cook?], now I may get two dollars for three days work. It is [worth?] more than that. They come and git’ me, and bring me back, fine white folks.

“ My health is not so good. I suffer with my [?] at times and gas and stomach trouble. Sometime I have to sleep on the right side. Some night I can't sleep at all, just’ roll and toss all night long. I asked my husband to put some windows in the [rooms?]. The smoke and gas from that old stove keep me feeling [bad all?] the time.”

“ John said, “I feel good all the time, if I put windows in too much air may make you worse, catch cold and have other complaints, but if it helps matters then[,] I ‘spose I better 6 put one or two in, not to many. I usually keep well with out any windows. I try not let any air hit me. Some time people let to much air hit them and die.”

Hannah said, “I did'nt go to school very much. I can read a little, but I know enough that fresh air is good for any one.”

John spoke up, “I went to Bird hill Baptist School. I went as far as the fifth grade. After my people died I quit school. Yes sir, if I had an education I would b a much better man than I am today. All of my children went pretty far in the grades, [?] they all can read and figure.”

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“ The good Lord has spared me to live here for something. I say again cause it is the Lord's power that gives me strength. When I go to church I'se ask the Lord to help me. I belong to the St Luke Missionary Baptist Church, over on Fourth St and Texas Avenue. We have a good preacher over there. Rev. Williams, he can preach the living gospel. I believe in de' baptist faith. I follow it 'cause I believe in de' word of Jesus Christ. I believe Jesus was baptized. He who don't believe in it will go down below. I just rec'kon that's de' way it is. you believe in the Lord and he will make [a way?] for you. I would'nt be able to get lawns to cut if it was not for the Lord.”

“ You know times are different now. When I was in Georgia, I made five dollars a month. I make more money since I have been in Florida. Long in the [boom?] times I use to make four or five dollars a day. Boom time done over with now, and do you rec'kon any more times coming like the boom.”

“I have cut lawns ever since I have been in Lakeland. I started cutting lawns when I lost my job some years ago. I found out dat' I could make more at dat' You can't cut eber' body's 7 lawn alike. Some people wants their lawn cut close, other just want the top grass off of it. I haff to haul black dirt to some of the lawns, dat' give the soil new life. I'se pretty good at cutting hedge and trimming around flowers. Of course I don't know the name of all dem' flowers. Some of the white folks call dem' funny names. I could'nt 'nounce dem' if I tried, I just say yessum and nosir, dat' the way I do. Dey' tell me somethin' bout calling the flower doctor, bless goodness if [dey'?] don't have all kinds of doctors. I cut one lawn this week, and I made one dollar, but I ain't got dat' one yet. When work pick up I make from five to six dollars a week. I charge from seventy five cents to one dollar, depends on the size of the yard and the bushes around them. It is very seldom I git' over dat' Some times I am over yonder in the white folks section before the sun is up. I go wid' out my breakfast, no time for eatin when you are trying to get on a job. Oh some time I wrap up a piece of meat in a paper bag and [highball?].”

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“ We don't have much to eat at times, food is so high. I only pay fifty cents for dat' shack, and the rest goes for food. Most de' time we eat nothin' but meat and bread, eat a little pork chops, corn bread, grits, collard greens, mustards, cabbages, and plenty of fat bacon. I git' lots of fruit, lot of de' men around me pick fruit, and every night dey' bring home some in their sacks. We only eat two meals a day, dat's enough for any body. Look at me don't I look like a man who don't eat to much. I have been thin all my life. It's somethin' to be proud of, fifty eight yours old, and a father of all dem grown children. I still can do a good days work any time. You see eatin is what kill lots of people. I like cold drinks, strawberry is my favorite drink, I like it.

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But I don't like liker' No sir, I don't like it; liker take it away from me. Gambling is somthin' else you can take away from me, none of my children gamble ' cause I tried to raise dem' right. I teaches 'em to work for an honest living. None of dem' have shamed we so far. All dem' dat' married don't quit their husbands like dese' odder girls do. Its the way you bring dem' up. I would'nt give a snap of my finger for some these here folks children I see running up and down de' street. Dey don't have no rasin' and manners.”

John's mind went back to his tag and said, “Just look all I got was a piece of tin with white and red on it for my money. In fact I studied a long time 'fore I baught dat' tag. I needed the money for eats. It is coming time now dat' our lawn work will start up, the sap is running now and dis' warm weather will make the grass grow much faster. The Lord works in some people's favor, and I think he is working in mine. That old car I only need it to carry my tools back and forth from my work. It's a long way out to the white folk [section?] where they have money. The quicker I get on the job the more I make, and you have to hustle to beat the odder fellows out dar' It's look like dar' is ten men to de job when work pick up. There is not many cutting now, but just you wait when this fruit business slow down, boy you see them start getting out de' old lawn mower and start to sharpening it.”

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“Yes sir, relief business is good in places, but I make more doing this than I would on it. The relief dat’ I get from my son in camp is some portion of it, and I am thankful for it, but I don't stop working. A man brought up on the farm like me, could'nt set down and do nothin' man I would melt away to nothin' dar is not much of me no how. I just don't sit down on dat money, no sir.

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When I was young I would take all of dem’ kid to the bean field and we would pick beans all day long. And today des’ devils can do a days work. To many lazy people, all dey’ want to do is to sit out yonder on dem’ benches in the park all day long and speck ‘somethin’ to come ‘long.”

“No sir, I don't vote, long ago I voted, but since my wife died five years ago I have been so worried I did'nt pay no mind to any thing. I think a man should understand how to vote and pick out the right man to stand for him. It needed more than ever now. Lucky we have folks to took out for us, if we did'nt we would be lost in dis’ old world. I don't know what colored folk would do if dey’ cut out 'dis relief business, ‘cause dey’ have nothin’ to fall back on. I don't read de’ paper, but I work round de’ white folk and hear dem’ talking ‘bout it. I pay no 'tention to what dey ‘ are saying, you know make out; but I understand sometings dey ‘ say. Dat's dey’ rek'on I don't bother with politics I would'nt understand it. Folks should'nt bother with things dey’ don't know nothin’ ‘bout.”

“ When I git’ through with my work, I just come home and sit around and look at my old lady, she is a pretty good ole soul. Ha! Ha!. yes sir, she is a good worker too, that little bit she brings in helps out a lot. I piddle ‘round in the garden some. Outside of that I just sit around when not working. I go to my church regular when I can. I like to watch de’ boys bat dem’ ball over yonder on dat’ tennis court. I am lucky to be living near de’ park I see all de’ fun go on.”



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“ I hooked up wid’ y [ole?] lady, ‘cause I got tired of cooking for myself. She is a pretty good cook- pleases de’ white folks.”

“ You ask me if I knew how to transplant flowers, you mean to 10 move dem’ from one place to another. Mister you know if I knew more ‘bout flowers I could make more money. Lots of places I go and dey’ ask me things about the best soil to use. All I know is to get the old [uck?] down dar’ by Lake Parker. But I find dat’ is to strong, so I mix a little sand wid it, and dat’ is better. Dey’ have some expensive plants and you have to be careful how you handle dem’ everybody can’t mess wid’ lawns and flowers. Ain’t dar’ some books dat’ shows you how to do. If I had one I would git my daughter to explain things to me. I can make out wid’ de’ grass, but dem’ flowers dey’ puzzle me.”

“ Dat’s what a fellow git’ for’ comin’ to town, when I was up dar’ in Georgia, I did’nt have to worry ‘bout all dis’ high type work. We knew how to plow and when to plant, sit ‘round for a few week after de’ planting and keep de’ birds from picking all the seeds out. Hoe dem’ after dey come up and dat’s all. No, you have to be something like a doctor at everything you do. I sometimes wish I had a little farm, I believe I could make a go of it. Course it is hard to git’ a place ‘round here, just five acres would be ‘nough fer’ me.”

“ Yes sir, I think colored people should have a section of their own as long as dey’ have good houses to live in. Now you just look at dat’ barn I am living in. You know I want to do better. Since you have been coming around I see things better. You can’t find a decent place to live ‘round here. Houses are scare in Lakeland. We have to use de’ toilet dat’ is used by three odder families. We use de’ wash tub to bathe in on Saturday, so we will be fresh for Sunday. Now I know dat’s not right. Maybe if some of us had better places we would do better.

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You take our streets, when eber’ I take my car down de’ street I may be lucky if I don’t pick up glass or a nail. We could have better streets. All dese’ things would make it better for

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us colored folks. I don't think it is good to mix up, but we could have better things in our section. When I go into de' white folks section and see how smooth theirs is, and I come back to our section and see how rough it is, then I begin to wonder. Maybe some day God will change things.”

“ I have seen lots of changes around this town, there is so many strange people you hardly know them when you walk down the street. It use to be a time when you knew everybody in town. Times has changed thing now. Well I guess dat' the way it goes. I had two wives and now getting use to the third one. So I guess times has changed wid' me.”

“Before you leave, what about us going to war. Do you think we will have to fight those people across the water? Well I know they won't use and old man like me. I would be to scared to carry water more less fight. I hear the white folks talking about some trouble across the water. I don't believe folks should kill each other up. I don't even carry a knife myself, that's dangerous.”

“Mister in your gitting around, if you see any one who want their lawns out, please remember me, Old John. I will give them a good job. When you come back I will have your windows cut in the house. Your visit has open up my eyes. Come again any time.”