

SPEAKER 1: I'm out here because, I mean, there's a lot of people that think that you wake up one morning and you think, I really want to live in the country. I really want to do that. And that gets to be important, and you start looking for land. You don't have any money, but you start looking for land because you've got to do this.

And then you find some, and then you do it. Now I couldn't afford it. I had to land about 13 years before I could afford to move here. But the point was always to move here. I wanted to be a poor farmer, and now I am.

[LAUGHTER]

SPEAKER 2: But what about the enormous leap that you take. You're not only making a leap from city to country, you're making a leap from cities with a community of color to a place in Minnesota where there is not a community of color.

SPEAKER 1: By and large, my neighbors really don't discuss race with me. By and large, we're fellow country folks. And so we talk. We really spend much more time talking about gardening than we do about-- race is unimportant here in the sense that it's worth discussing, we-- it's hard for me to explain this to you.

SPEAKER 2: I understand what you're saying.

SPEAKER 1: Now, now, now within myself-- I've got to say this, now within myself, there are certain things I miss but I brought them with me. For instance, I brought my blues records with me. I have quite a large black library, which I read in all the time.

I mean, I'm reading about Black history and the Black doings. I'm writing about Black things not per se Black things, I'm writing about pioneering things and the people happened to be Black. Well, again, hopefully people when they read my work don't think I'm trying to dodge the racial thing. I'm not.

These are pioneers. They happen to be Black. And as a Black person, I want to put them down on paper so people don't forget them.

SPEAKER 2: Describe to me a little bit where you grew up. I'm interested in hearing about the house when you were a little girl, you and mama. Do you remember?

SPEAKER 1: Any time I think of my neighborhood, the very first thing I think of are the vacant lots. I miss vacant lots. I really do. I think somehow kids love them.

We all played in vacant lots. Some of them-- there was one kiddie corner across the street from me that we called the woods because it was there were trees in it. And it was about, oh, just guessing, five, six lots wide and in some places across to the next street deep, not all the way across. But that was I-- for years, I mean, it entertained us for years summer and winter.

SPEAKER 2: What'd you do in there?

SPEAKER 1: We had adventures. There was a little hill in one place that we could slide in the winter, but you see when there's no-- when there's no structure, there's lots to do. I think the woods had a lot to do with me coming up here.

SPEAKER 2: And how were you raised? I mean, how were you-- how were mama and daddy in terms of raising you? Were you strictly raised?

SPEAKER 1: Very much, very much.

SPEAKER 2: Could you describe that for me?

SPEAKER 1: Start out with before mama died, I wasn't allowed to play with the other kids in the neighborhood.

SPEAKER 2: Why?

SPEAKER 1: Because they weren't saved. They didn't belong to the church. And so the other kids in the neighborhood would contaminate me. So I wasn't allowed to play with them.

I could only play with the children of her church who were about as contaminated as you can get. [LAUGHS] No, but we had-- that was one of her rules. So, OK.

Her other rules were probably the strictest that she was was manners. Manners were very important to mama. Presenting me to the large world was very important to her.

She was from Macon, Georgia. And she wanted to present me to the world in just the very best light. And so I remember the lessons on table manners and--

SPEAKER 2: Such as?

SPEAKER 1: That you hold your hand-- and I still don't-- I don't hold my hand in my lap anymore when I eat because it was so important to mama that I do that. I mean, I just kind of resentfully put my elbows on the table and eat now, but that was very important. The funny thing about mama, as much as she was integrating me into the neighborhood as a large, she didn't like me to say, yes, ma'am and yes, sir to my teachers because they were white.

I had to say yes, ma'am and yes, sir to her adult friends. But she just wanted me to say yes, Mrs. Collins to my teachers. She didn't like that.

SPEAKER 2: Because it was, too, servile?

SPEAKER 1: It was too servile for her.

SPEAKER 2: Now, mama was not your birth mother.

SPEAKER 1: No, no she wasn't, no she wasn't. Eva Mae was my birth mother. But Eva Mae couldn't handle it. I think she suffered a lot because of not raising me.

And then when I did go and see her at first, I didn't understand it until a woman a friend of mine who had given up her child explained to me that you cannot become a mother just like that. It takes, like the first time I saw her, I was 14. So you need those other 14 years in back of that. You can't just do it. And then, again, when I was in my 30s by that time, she had grandchildren. And I really wanted, but you can't do that either.

SPEAKER 2: I mean, you wanted to remake her relationship with her and it didn't work?

SPEAKER 1: It didn't work. It was hard for her to-- she couldn't do that. It's too bad, too. She missed out on that.

SPEAKER 2: You talk about it in the book, you write about it that you were a chosen child.

SPEAKER 1: Mm-hmm.

SPEAKER 2: Was that the phrase commonly used to describe someone who was a child that are formally adopted?

SPEAKER 1: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. But not just formally adopted, but raised by someone else.

SPEAKER 2: Mm-hmm.

SPEAKER 1: There was a lot of people raised by people that weren't formally adopted, a lot of them. Oh, gee, whiz, not only in the Blacks, but among Native Americans and Hispanics just everybody's raising somebody else's kids all the time. I mean, this is just who bothered with the government.

I don't mean that I never felt bad about my mother giving me up. Of course, I did especially after mama died. But I seem to have come up so normal and naturally that it wasn't like, oh, I didn't have a mother. Yeah, I did.

I had a mother and a daddy, you know? And then when-- then after they dies, then it was Aunt [? Goode ?] and her two sons. And you keep hearing about the single parents thing, that's-- a lot of us grew up in families that were not mom, dad, 2.3 kids, I mean a lot of us.

I mean, in all walks of life and you don't-- having fathers is wonderful. Having mothers is wonderful. But we manage those of us who don't have it.

SPEAKER 2: What was your school life like? Now we're in the period of with Aunt [? Goode ?] and Maurice and Oscar. Were all your schoolmate friends also Black? Or did you go to integrated schools and play with children of many different backgrounds?

SPEAKER 1: Everything I did was integrated, except going to church.

SPEAKER 2: Were there racial tensions in grade school?

SPEAKER 1: No, we just fought it out.

SPEAKER 2: How? I mean, just on the playground?

SPEAKER 1: Yeah.

SPEAKER 2: Name calling?

SPEAKER 1: Name calling. Fist fighting. We just fought it out. We did-- there were no tensions. You call somebody a bad name, they hit you, and that was the end of it.

Tensions come when people don't act on things, that's how they build up tensions. Now there weren't any tensions built up when I was in school. We knew how to resolve conflict. [LAUGHS]

SPEAKER 2: But were these conflicts basically racial?

SPEAKER 1: Not always. They were racial if it didn't make any difference whether we were, for instance, one time someone gave England some boots for me, and they were lace up to your knee. And the kids in school start teasing me and calling me Mammy Yokum from Li'l Abner cartoon. And that was tough.

I mean, so that's what they teased me about was my boots. So race really I don't-- race-- OK, I think that so many Black people have written about race-- am I going to be sorry I said this-- that white people think that's all we think about. We really don't think about it that much as much as people think we do.