

✓L.C. (8-13-79)

---

# *A Place of Springs*

---

VIOLA GOODE LIDDELL

---

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS  
UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA

---

ALA.  
976.1  
LIDDELL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the many friends and relatives who allowed me to use incidents about themselves or their families in order to paint a word picture of a peculiar people as they are driven by forces beyond their control and not of their choosing from a beleaguered position of self-reliant, and often defiant, isolation following the Civil War into the national and global maelstrom of twentieth-century life.

My gratitude extends also to my immediate family who graciously allowed me time from my domestic duties to do the work and to the faithful black hands that assumed many of those duties, thereby making the task a joyous and rewarding one.

Finally, I must thank Macmillan Inc. for permission to quote from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," *Collected Poems*, copyright © 1924 by Macmillan Publishing Company, copyright renewed 1952.

*Viola Goode Liddell*

---

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Liddell, Viola Goode, 1901-  
A place of springs.

1. Camden, Ala.—Social life and customs. 2. Liddell, Viola Goode, 1901- 3. Camden, Ala.—Biography.  
4. Afro-Americans—Alabama—Camden. I. Title.  
F334.C25L53 976.1'38 78-31572  
ISBN 0-8173-5318-6

---

Copyright © 1979 by  
The University of Alabama Press  
All rights reserved  
Manufactured in the United States of America

---

*A Journey Begun*

Occasional swirls of devil-dust danced down the red-graveled road and careened across the ashen hedgerows to settle on the scorched fields beyond. Corn, matured early, stood in parchment-colored patches like congregations of stringy-haired crones, whispering together. Pungent whiffs of a clothly odor hung in the air near the cotton fields, which stood drooping and yellowing from thirst.

Here a wagon, loaded with cotton, groaned wearily on its way to the gin, wobbly wheels making serpentine tracks in the dust; there another bounced and clattered emptily by, hurrying home to shade and water. Now and again an impatient car honked loudly from behind and, swooshing by as I pulled over, left miles of trailing dust hanging over the road ahead. When at length the dust drifted away, a shimmering haze of heat, making water-puddle mirages over the road, rose to meet the snowy islands of clouds hanging in the sky.

For days the clouds had come and gone, tantalizing, irritatingly near, and not delivering on a single promise of rain. But it was September. Dry and hot. And until the cotton was safely ginned, the farmers preferred it that way. Clean dry cotton upgraded to middling; dirty damp cotton downgraded to low-middling or low. No matter how mightily people of the Black Belt might suffer and complain about the heat and dust of late summer, nobody with the sense of a dusting doodle wanted it to rain from August to November. For, as cotton went, so went his livelihood. Thus it had been since time immemorial.

But in the fall of this particular year of 1933 there was little concern for whether it rained or not, for the scrappy crops were hardly worth harvesting. It seemed as if Nature herself, weary of producing more and more only to have it worth less and less, had at last decided that a bountiful crop was no longer worthwhile. Cotton five cents a pound, cows ten, corn fifty

cents a bushel. After years of pernicious anemia, the ultimate debilitation was finally descending like the plague on the whole area. Emaciated, beggared, paralyzed—once again a long-burdened people staggered helplessly and, what was worse, hopelessly, on the edge of a cataclysm reminiscent of Reconstruction days.

For years on end the Good Lord had seen fit to watch, apparently unmoved, his benighted likenesses in the Southland turning on the spit; but now at last since His long-pampered Up-Easterners were jumping out of windows and blowing their brains out because of the stock-market crash, and because his cross-country Westerners were hollering to high heaven about their land values' collapsing and their banks all closing, Southerners were beginning to hope that He would take notice and pass a miracle on the whole lot of us, seeing as how it had at last been pretty well proven that one part of a people could hardly keep on getting richer and richer while the other part was slowly starving to death.

True, instead of looking to heaven, some folks looked to Washington, where the great magician Franklin Delano Roosevelt had promised everybody, starting with the little man who had the least, a New Deal. But days had passed into weeks and weeks into months and this magical mover of men's minds and hearts had failed to get his legerdemain to working. With Congress his slow and clumsy assistant, coins pulled out of an empty hat in Washington had not trickled down to Podunk, U.S.A. To thousands with idle hands and empty bellies one thing seemed sure; unless some deal—old, new, or otherwise—began working some magic soon, there would be precious few left to work it on.

Although I had not yet joined the hungry, I could not help but wonder and worry as I bumped along the rutty road, wonder what I would do without money until my promised school teacher's pay of eighty-five dollars a month would come due a month hence, worry for fear my salary would be paid in warrants, as it had been the previous year, and that school would not last until Christmas. Fortunately, the past year my

landlady had accepted teachers' warrants for room and board, as the groceryman accepted them from her for food. But no one else, not even the banks, would cash them. Sure, they were as sound as the great state of Alabama, but the great state of Alabama wasn't worth the paper its great seal was stamped on. Not now. Had the Indians returned to Alabama in 1933 they might have bought back the whole state for a string of wampum. And where, people asked, had all the money gone that had floated around so freely in the late twenties? For sure, no one I knew well enough to ask for a loan had any.

3

But with a Macawberlike faith I could still believe that this beg-and-barter sort of existence would not last forever and that somehow for me the future would be better than the past. Hoping that I had acquired a modicum of hard sense going up fool's hill, I resolved that, come what might, I would commit my efforts to hastening any possible improvement in my far from enviable condition.

## TWO

---

### *The River Road—Long Past*

Suddenly the road topped a winding hill and below, near the abandoned crossing known as Miller's Ferry, arched the graceful Lee Long Bridge, spanning a serpentine, green-fringed ribbon of glass—the Alabama River. Draining the red hills of North Georgia, source waters of this stream converge into the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers of North East Alabama; these unite in the central part of the state to form the Alabama, which in turn joins the Tombigbee-Warrior system of West Alabama, all at last gathering their waters into the Mobile River and thence flowing into Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Once a highway for Indian pirogues and canoes, later for pioneer rafts and keelboats, the Alabama became in the early 1800s a red carpet for the River Queens that churned lan-

as barren in these postwar days began to appreciate the accomplishments of these Yankee women, and the Yankee women were equally happy to find a response to their accomplishments and acceptance by the Southern women. They soon found rapport through their mutual efforts in music, art, writing, teaching, and handiwork. And they followed it up with much visiting and working together in Missions, in W.C.T.U., and in playing flinch and charades, and putting on concerts, Chatauquas, minstrels, and ice-cream suppers.

Though the political portion of the wall was more difficult to breach, it was inevitable from the start that eventually this would crumble also. At first, naturally, the Republican Party of these Abolitionist Scots was beyond the pale to Southern Democrats, now made uncompromisingly bitter by the war and its aftermath. These Jacksonian Democrats now became known as Yellow-Dog Democrats—that is, they would vote for a yellow dog before voting Republican. But time brought its termites. Some had already been at work in the Democratic edifice when Franklin Roosevelt let loose a swarm of them that so infuriated the faithful that they began to desert their party in droves. But because they could not as yet accept shelter under the Republican roof, they began to spin off into tangents like the Dixiecrats, a group that they felt better reflected their feelings.

At the same time that these red-blooded Southerners were infuriated by doles, hand-outs, and federal interference with local government, the hard-working, careful-spending Republicans were equally incensed. Here, at long last, they were able to join hands and hearts with the Southern landowners and the “old rebel” families who had become Dixiecrats, Independents, or quiet and uncommitted Republicans. The dyed-in-the-hide conservatives of both groups, starting from opposite poles, had finally found a common meeting ground in their political thinking. Thus another arch in the wall collapsed.

But perhaps the span that most bitterly and vehemently divided the groups at first was that of racial matters, mixed or unmixed with politics. And the strangest thing of all is the way

these Yankees personally dynamited this span in the wall and came over, comfortably reconciling themselves with the most stubborn and die-hard segregationists. But this, like their politics, was not so strange as it might seem. These Scotsmen deplored what they perceived as the Negro's light-hearted attitude toward life—the lassitude, the lack of initiative, the improvidence—whatever their ultimate causes.

(Seeing the Negro's need of help and enlightenment, Judge Henderson was instrumental in getting the Northern Presbyterian Church to promote the building and operation of four mission schools in Wilcox County, which taught not only the three Rs, but sewing, cooking, nursing, and manual skills. In addition the judge taught the Bible to his farm hands each Sunday afternoon, and in the field he taught them better methods of farming than they had learned as slaves.)

Furthermore, these Yankees strongly believed that intermingling of the races would lead to miscegenation and eventually to that estate contemptuously referred to as "mongrelization." This is what most white Southerners believed, hence both felt that segregation of the races was not only right but necessary. It was not strange, then, that these Yankees and the Black Belt Southerners should fight side by side in the long battle against integration.

It was not easy for the Yankee men to enter into the social life of the southern menfolk. About everything the male Southerner did for fun, these Scotsmen felt was either sinful or foolish. They had no time for hunting or fishing or frolicking around; they had no money to throw away on drinking, gambling, or horseracing, not even on smoking or high living. Consequently, they had, at first, small meeting ground with Southern men in their social life. But time mended this gap. As the older Scots became more affluent, their sons cracked the thrifty family mold and now their grandchildren have completely broken free of the old puritanical inhibitions against spending money for pleasure, playing around, and having more fun in life. Now they "do their own things," which happen to be the same things their Old-South family friends

farm as a sort of hobby, but the power business required most of his time and energy. Since he was the outside man of the firm, he called himself the "pole-cat." He recalls with some pride that he hung the first transformer ever hung in Wilcox County. For many years the poles were cedars cut from the woods, limbed and brought in on lumber trucks, manually installed by "huff and heft." One of his "grunters," as the ground helpers were called, remarked that Mister Will's "sperit" was sometimes too fast, but that he never asked anybody to do anything he wouldn't tackle himself. His favorite expression was, "If you can lift your end, I can lift mine."

He often laughed about some of his experiences. On one occasion he was planning to cut in the home of an elderly gentlewoman whose past glory may have faded but whose pride was by no means diminished. Observing the work crew preparing to come into her place from the front, which was the shortest and customary way of entering, she came out and demanded that the line be brought in to her house from the rear. "Electricity," she remonstrated, "is a servant, and servants enter my house from the rear." Although more work and poles were required to do the job, her wishes were deferred to.

Another time he needed to "guy" a pole that stood on the premises of a new customer—in this case a stranger. A slab of concrete, onto which the guy-wire must be fastened, was called by the construction crew a "dead man" and was buried a few feet from the base of the pole. Not wishing to dig on a person's property without asking permission, Will went to the man's house and called to see him. Never dreaming that he might be misunderstood, Will matter-of-factly asked if he might bury a dead man on his front lawn. The man staggered back as if hit by a sledge hammer. "My God, man!" he gulped. "Have you killed somebody?"

In those days ice was delivered by ice-wagon, drawn by old Mamie, an educated mule if there ever was one. She made her rounds so often that she knew the route and her routine by heart, stopping where she was supposed to stop and starting

when she heard the ice-hooks dropped into the wagon. "Coote" Dexter was the iceman, and though old Mamie was a jewel, Coote had his problems with her. When a customer would move or trade in his wooden icebox for an electric refrigerator, old Mamie would persist in stopping as usual and refuse to leave until Coote got out, went around to the back of the wagon, and after a few moments, noisily dropped his hooks into the wagon as if completing a delivery. Only then would Mamie resume her duties. For a new customer, Coote carried a heavy iron weight for hitching Mamie until she learned to stop there also.

Besides Mamie, Coote had problems with his customers. Some who had huge, dilapidated boxes would buy only a dime's worth of ice daily and then fume and complain about its being porous or milky or just not cold, because it melted so rapidly. Others complained of short weights for the same reason; widows wanted cats helped down out of trees, drunks wanted Coote to fetch them more liquor, and small fry followed the wagon to get ice shavings or just a chunk of ice to suck through a rag or handkerchief. But Coote never argued with anyone and never refused a favor even if it took all day instead of a half day to make his rounds.

But the time came, as the old iceboxes wore out and were thrown on the garbage dump or relegated to attics and barns, that electric refrigerators came into their own, and then it was that old Mamie lost her job and Coote was transferred to another. Years have passed, and now, in this fantastic day of flying to the moon, young people are resurrecting these old relics, remodeling them, and calling them antiques. Thus it is that yesterday's rubbish becomes tomorrow's treasure.

But to return to Will Liddell. Quite naturally, he did not drink. Drinking was an expensive habit for a Scotsman; and had it been free, it would have been outlawed in his family with as much horror as the use of hard drugs is frowned on in a respectable family today. For their abstinence, Will and his brothers were often considered daft. On one occasion, preparing to go deep-sea fishing off the Gulf Coast, they hired a boat,