

A CHAT WITH CHAR #2

“Researching Your 1930s Family in Rural and Southern Areas”

By Char McCargo Bah

This chat will focus on my experience in researching rural and southern counties in the United States. This discussion will cover neglected areas of research for the pre-civil rights period (1930s).

Just like northern genealogical research, the Work Progress Administration (WPA) was in full swing in the rural areas as well. WPA started under President Roosevelt “New Deal” program. After recovering from the great-depression, President Roosevelt focus was to put citizens back to work. Many programs were started; one of them was the Writers Project (Slave Narratives). Interviews of former slaves and those who lived prior to the Civil War are included in the Writer’s Project. Most of the interviews and photographs of rural areas and workers took place in the late 1930s. Check with your State Archives or Library of Congress for these interviews in the State you are researching. How will these interviews help you in your genealogical research? Your ancestor might have been interviewed, or a neighbor might have been interviewed that lived near your ancestor. These interviews will give some ideas about the lives of people who had similar ways to your ancestors.

Other resources you can use in rural areas are:

- Church History/Church Anniversary Books
- Cemeteries
- Funeral Homes
- County History Books
- Interviews w/former employers of sharecroppers
- Descendants of Factory owners/Store owners
- Farming Neighborhoods

A good number of African American churches did not keep good records, but many churches have anniversary books. These books will give you some history of the church and list their members. By reviewing church anniversary books you would find the predecessor church and whether this church existed before the civil war; if that is the case, your ancestors might have been members of that church prior to the civil war. The anniversary book members’ list might reveal members who are still living. These members might have known your ancestor.

Public, private and church cemeteries sometimes reveal a lot about a family history. If headstones are present, the cemetery could reveal family ties. In addition, if a family member is buried in a public cemetery instead of a church cemetery that in it self says that the church did not have its own cemetery, or the person was no longer considered a member of the church. Family members of a deceased person usually maintain private cemeteries. If the cemetery is well maintained, it is a clue that family members are still living in close proximity to it.

In rural areas and small towns, usually there is only one or two African American Funeral Homes. Those funeral homes usually know their patrons and the families of the patrons. Do not overlook local funeral homes when researching your family.

County History books are a good research source. These County History books usually have narratives in the book that were submitted by individuals whose ancestors lived in the county at one time or another. These history books also include local histories, how towns developed in the county, histories of schools, church histories, local businesses and transportation histories.

If your relatives were sharecroppers, you might want to interview the landowner's descendants. The landowners' family might have kept records on their sharecroppers. In addition, the landowner would know a lot of personal information on the family, for example, how many children were in the family, where they migrated to, where they are buried, and, whether any of your relatives still live in the area.

If your family worked in a factory in a rural area, you might find someone in that County that is a descendant of the factory owner. Local museums or historical societies might know where the records of the factory owner concerning his factory and employees were deposited. In addition, county stores advanced credit to their local people, whether they were farmers or factory workers. Some of these storeowners have been in the business for several generations, and their descendants might still be in the county. In addition, you might find account books on patrons. Do not overlook this resource.

Not everyone migrated to the north. By using the 1930 census where your ancestor lived, you might visit the neighborhood they came from; and, see whether people with the same surnames of their neighbors in the 1930s still live in the area. Also, find the oldest living person that live in the old neighborhood and ask them if they know anything about your relatives.

On Wednesday, November 14, 2007 at 9 p.m., "A Chat with Char" will discuss "Researching Your 1930s Family in Rural and Southern Areas."

Note: You can contact Char McCargo Bah at chrlb200@aol.com