

A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

I waited for everyone to leave before I went in. It was easy to tell who the bride was - she had that look on her face as if she wanted to tell everyone that she had no worries in the world and nothing but great hopes for the future. It's funny. If someone had compared me to her at the exact moment in which she handed me the door and she walked out of the restaurant, I would have been the exact opposite. While she was moving on to her future with her husband, I was getting closer and closer to my past.

The large air-conditioned restaurant rescued me from the Southern heat; I never thought I'd be so happy to be in a place called "Alabama's Best." The large wedding party left quite a mess behind, so I had to wait for the guy to clear a table. My friends had warned me about the lingering racism throughout Alabama, even in 1996, so I was a bit wary of how I would be treated in this restaurant as a Black woman. Since I had just arrived on the bus that morning, it would be my first time coming in direct contact with native Southerners. When a Black man came out of the kitchen with a comforting smile on his face, I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. I thought he might be willing to help me find the town of Dixon, which, up until this point, got me nothing but a blank stare or an "I can't help you" from people whom I had asked directions. This Dixon place seemed so difficult to find, and I was becoming quite frustrated; but I had already come so far so I could not turn back now. "It must be here somewhere; a town doesn't just disappear," is what I kept telling myself.

"Good afternoon!" said the waiter, whom I had already become best friends with in my mind. There was no 'please wait to be seated' sign, so I felt a bit silly when he had to point out a cleared table to me. I had been so distracted and preoccupied recently that I failed to notice the way the place was run. My table had no trace of the wedding party that had just left, except for a single red carnation which had been left on the chair. It was beautiful; I decided to keep it as a memento from

this restaurant that had already made me feel so comfortable. I placed it in the book that I had read on the bus so that I would not forget it, as its previous owner had.

"What can I get for you today?" As he stood there poised, his pen and pad in hand, I wanted to tell him everything about my journey. I wanted him to know that it took four years of conversation with my family and research to discover that I have roots in Dixon, Alabama. I wanted to shake him and tell him that there was no time to eat because I was so anxious to get to that town. But instead, I heard myself say, "I'll have a lemonade while I decide."

Shortly after that, he came back with my drink. I ordered some type of sandwich and made a feeble attempt to start a conversation with him. I felt desperate for him to understand and relate to me. I hoped that he would commend me for my efforts to trace my ancestry and encourage me to keep going until I found myself in Africa, mumbling the names of my African ancestors. I just wanted someone to tell me that this was possible, because I was losing the determination which I began with.

"Are you familiar with Dixon?" I asked.

"Dixon? It does sound familiar."

"I have a general idea of where it is, but I was wondering if you could tell me exactly or tell me a bit about the town."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I don't know. I just faintly remember my grandmother talking about it with her friends."

"I'm hoping to get some information about my family there. I've been doing research, and I discovered that my third great-grandfather was sold in Dixon, Alabama." I waited for him to pull out the other chair at my table to continue the conversation. He just stood there smiling. "I'm hoping to be able to trace my ancestry back to Africa."

"Hm. It sounds like you've come a long way. That's very admirable. I hope Dixon is of help to you."

"Thanks," I said. "I know it's a long shot, but I thought I might be able to get a hold of some documents or speak to