

Family Folklore

The Festival overall is designed to make Americans aware of the beauty and value of the traditions which form so large a part of our national culture. Within this large structure, the Family Folklore program complements the other Festival areas by helping visitors discover and recognize their own particular traditions, the home-based folkways that decorate life and make it meaningful.

In this area, a group of folklorists will interview any interested festival goers about the customs, sayings and stories in their own families. Here you can also examine samples of the many traditional ways in which Americans preserve and remember their past—family photo albums, baby books, scrapbooks, family history quilts, charm bracelets and others. We will show our film that treats home movies as an American folk art, along with another on the ways members of a family relate to each other through folklore. Finally, we will display here our book in progress, a history of America through family stories, to which we hope many Festival goers will contribute their own memories.

Caddy Buffers: Legends of a Middle Class Black Family in Philadelphia

by Kathryn Morgan

Whenever my mother was exasperated with me she would say I was “just like Caddy.” I never let her know that as far as I was concerned this was a most desired compliment. For us, as Black American children, family legends centered around my great-grandmother affectionately known to us as “Caddy.” Caddy legends have served as “buffers” for the children in our family for four generations. From time immemorial, slaves and members of seriously oppressed groups have used such buffers to overcome fear, anxiety and anger. Although there are many similar narratives in folk histories dealing with the ordeals of slavery, they did not belong to us, as did the legends of Caddy. The other narratives finally belonged to the world, but

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Caddy was ours.

Caddy was among the first generation of freed mulatto slaves who, when emancipated, were decidedly underprivileged people. The struggle for survival in the remnants of a slave economy was difficult for her as she was the offspring of a master-slave relationship, illiterate and unskilled. She also had two very young children to care for who had been conceived by former masters. One of the children, Adeline, died at a very early age, but Albert, my grandfather, worked along with Caddy in Lynchburg, Virginia, until he met and married Kate, my grandmother, also the product of a master-slave relationship. Both Kate and Albert were unskilled and could not read but they worked along with Caddy to help buy property and save money so to enable the third generation to go to school. One of their seven children was my mother Marjorie.

My mother is the major tradition bearer in our family. She told me the legends before I was old enough to go to school. I have kept them alive by telling them to my daughter Susan, who in turn has told several of them to her younger cousins.

This was our folklore and it was functional. It was the antidote used by our parents and our grandparents and our great-grandparents to help counteract the poison of self-hate stirred up by contradictions found in the home of the brave and the land of the free.

I cannot truthfully say that I remember the exact circumstances surrounding the first telling of the legends. I know they were often repeated. They were usually told in the kitchen while my mother was performing some other chore. She never sat to tell them and sometimes we would have to follow her from room to room to hear the end of a story. They were never told as a series. I was the most avid listener, as I was the only

Kate and Albert: Kate—wife of Albert—born slave, daughter of slave and master. Tried to raise the children right.

girl. It was my life's ambition to be like Caddy when I was a little girl, as Caddy did all the daring things I secretly wanted to do. Frankly, Caddy comes to my rescue even now when some obstacle seems insurmountable to me. I cannot remember the first time I was told about Caddy being sold on the block when she was eight years old, but all during my childhood I remember having a sense of well-being in the knowledge that nobody could sell me.

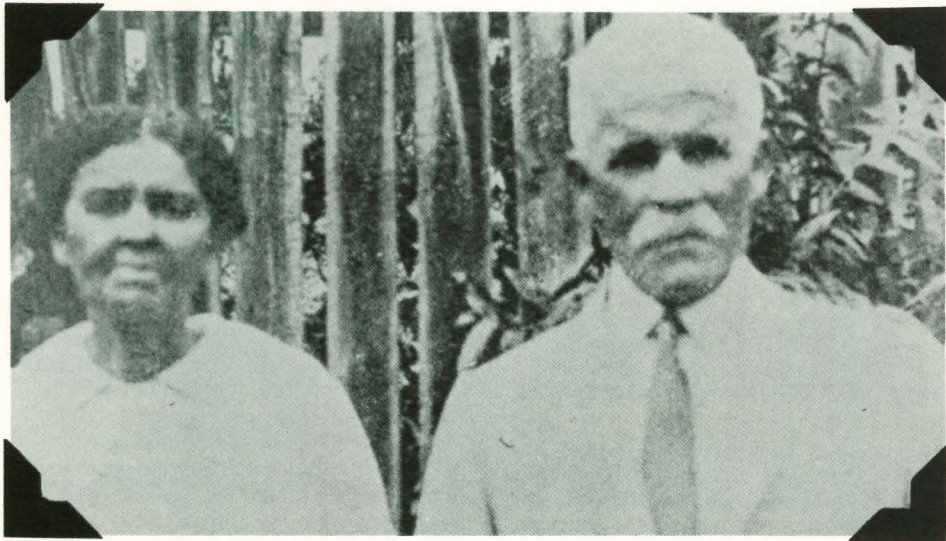
CADDY

Caddy was only eight years old when she was sold on the block. After that she was always being sold. She was sent from plantation to plantation but she would always run away. She grew to be a beautiful young girl and that made the white women hate her. The white men loved her and sometimes she was taken to live in the big houses. Big houses or not, Caddy didn't want to be a slave. She would run away. When she was caught, she was usually hung in the barn and whipped across the back with a cat-o-nine-tails. This didn't stop Caddy from running. She would run and she would be caught and she would be whipped. Do you think she'd cry when they whipped her with a cat-o-nine-tails? Not Caddy. It would take more than a cat-o-nine-tails to make Caddy cry.

Despite severe financial hardship brought about by the long illness of one of my brothers, my mother always managed to put “good shoes on our feet and good food in our stomachs,” and tell us how Caddy made her money and bought property in spite of adverse conditions.

HOW CADDY MADE HER MONEY AND BOUGHT HER PROPERTY

Caddy couldn't read or write but she sure could count money. She was never one penny short. Albert and Kate couldn't read or write either but Caddy taught them how





to work hard and count money too. She said that there was only one way children could learn how to read and write. The grownups had to work hard and save the money. Caddy had all kinds of ways to make money. She was a midwife for the poor whites and the Negroes. She would go around to all the restaurants and good houses on the other side of the tracks, pick out the spotted fruit that had been thrown in the garbage. Then she would come home, cut the spots off and make preserves and pies and go back and sell them to the same folks who had thrown the fruit away!

The next legend stresses the need for respectability and character.

WHY CADDY GOT MR. GORDON OUT OF JAIL

Caddy got married to a Mr. Gordon. Getting married in those days wasn't like getting married today. Caddy never bothered to go to a preacher or anything. It was enough for two people to want to be married. Anyway, Caddy wanted a last name for her children and Mr. Gordon was willing to give them his. It's important for children to have an honest last name. Now Mr. Gordon was not a very good man, but he did have an honest last name and he let Caddy have it for the children. So Caddy put up with his laziness and didn't say too much. Finally, though, he left Caddy and got himself another wife. Caddy got married to a Mr. Rucker. Now Mr. Rucker was a good man, hard working and all but he died early. Caddy worked hard and saved her money. One day she heard that Mr. Gordon had gotten himself in some kind of trouble and was going to be sent to jail. Caddy went to the bank. She marched herself right up to the courthouse, marched right up the middle aisle. Stood before that judge. She reached down under her skirt and put the money on the table. She said, "Judge, I don't want no man with my chil-

Caddy: Born slave—daughter of master and slave. Sold on the block when 8.

dren's name to go to jail so I'm here to bail him out." Now, everybody respected Caddy, even the judge, so he let Mr. Gordon go. Caddy was that kind of woman. Respectable. Caddy told Mr. Gordon that as long as he had *her* children's name she didn't want him laying around in jail. Then she gave him money and sent him home to his wife. Caddy was like that. Respected.

The last time Marjorie saw Caddy she was running for the trolley trying to make a train home. She was ninety-six and she said she "was a little bit tired." She wasn't sick a day in her life and she had a very easy death. Before she died she took time to tell Kate to get her in the ground quick. "Kate, don't let a lot of folks pray and speak in the 'unknown tongue' over me." Kate never talked much and she never cried, not even when Caddy died. But nobody questioned Kate. She just buried Caddy with no praying and that was that.

If we ask what is most distinctive in this small contribution to the study of folklore, we must first make clear that there cannot be anything absolutely unique in the experience of any race, any country or any individual. I am sure that Caddy had many counterparts throughout the land and, although I have attempted to relate the essence of the incidents as I remember them, I know that there is much implied wisdom learned and transmitted by the enslaved to their descendants which is missing. Further, to say that internal conflict, race hatred and contempt were destroyed by these accounts would be untrue. They served the purpose of diminishing feelings of racial inferiority imposed on us as children. Analysis of this family lore reveals that it is on the whole essentially impersonal, and it reflects emotion and experience which is deeper, wider and older than the emotion and wisdom of one individual. It is passionate without any loss of serenity and it is in the deepest sense—human.

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