Life and Times of a River Man

Richmond Wiley worked all his life on the rivers and creeks around Daufuskie Island. "A man got to be what he is," he used to say. "And I'm a river man."

By Frank O Smith

Hip-deep in the job of salvaging a bathroom floor that had rotted through in my house, I was having a miserable time prying loose a floor joist I thought needed replacing. My frustration at realizing I wouldn't finish the job in one day was boiling over into anger as I heaved against the crowbar. The tip had already slipped free several times, smashing my fingers and tearing a piece of flesh the size of a dime from one knuckle. I strained over the bar but nothing gave. I put some bounce behind it with my weight and the crowbar slipped again, sending me crashing against the wall. I exploded in rage and flung the crowbar across the room, spearing a giant hole in the plaster next to the door. I got up, left the bathroom before doing any more damage, and stomped into the kitchen, where I grabbed the last beer in the refrigerator. Then I went out on the back porch to simmer down.

Although it was mid-January and the weather had been freezing cold for several days, the sky was clear and a color of blue characteristic of late April. Sitting in the warmth of the sun, sipping on the beer, I felt my tension and frustration disappear, and I found myself ruminating on an old friend of mine named Richmond Wiley. He would have offered me an odd anecdote, I thought, laughing to myself. Seeing me fling the bar in frustration, Richmond would have assessed the scene in a single turn of phrase with both humor and insight. His wit at such moments was priceless, a commodity I was slow to value when I first met him ten years ago, but it was a trait that eventually won me over completely, endearing him to me for as long as I live.

The friendship between Richmond and me was an unexpected dividend of a trend in the curriculum of American universities during the 1960s, the notion that students – particularly those from the white middle class – had much to learn from experiences out in the "real world." Wearing my commitment like a badge, and sponsored by my university, I took a quarter off to live and work in an isolated black community on Daufuskie Island off the coast of South Carolina. I was not the first student to go to the island, nor was I the first to be charmed by the wiles of Richmond.

Richmond lived with his wife, Geneva, in a house he'd built as a young man when they were first married. Like

all the houses on the island, it was a simple clapboard structure, hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It was a mist-hung, rainy day the first time I climbed through the fence and went across the pasture to the back porch of his house, where I rapped several times on a homemade door. I had been on the island only two days and was making my rounds, introducing myself, taking an informal survey of tasks I would be able to do. It was my last stop for the day, and had I not seen the gray plume of smoke rising out of the tin stovepipe above the roofline, I would not have bothered to stop at all, as the house had a deserted look, the wooden shutters latched at the windows, the geometry of its lines listing severely to one side. It was Geneva who came to the door.

"Oh Lord! Dis white boy must be crazy," she cried, seeing me standing hunch-shouldered, sidestepping drizzles that leaked from the porch ceiling. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. "Richmond! Come see who come to see us," she yelled, closing the door behind me.

For an instant, I was frightened; the room was cast in near-total darkness except for a faint glint of light coming through a grease-smudged window above a stove. Thick smoke stung my eyes and burned my nose and I felt disoriented, like a blind man in an unfamiliar room.

"You must be *fool* being out in weather like dis," Geneva said, leading me by the arm to a chair next to the stove. "You hungry? Geneva fix you something, make you feel better." She paid no heed to my polite refusal and went about filling a plate with a mound of rice, fried okra, butter beans, and chicken. She handed me the plate and went back to the stove to stoke the fire. "You feel better in a minute," she said, stuffing three large chunks of wood through a stove lid.

"Richmond!" she yelled again. "Come now. See dis white boy who come to see us."

I heard a soft shuffling of feet in another part of the house. The curtain at the door leading into the kitchen parted, and a thin, gaunt, black man stepped into the room. The loose hang of his clothes accentuate his frailty.

"Dis white boy no fool," Richmond chuckled. "So wet out today the birds are walking. Nobody *but* a fool work on a day like dis. You eat 'Neva's cooking and go home and maybe you never come back to help ol' Richmond.

He cussed the government for taking the best he had and then putting him out to pasture like some swaybacked workhorse waiting to die.

Dem last two boys who come, dey spend all dey time working for somebody else. Hmmmp! Dey never want to work for ol' Richmond." His eyes studied me, a twist of amusement tucked into the corners of his mouth. He would not let me leave that day until I'd promised to come back to help him as soon as the weather cleared.

Fool or not, I ended up doing a heap of work for old Richmond in the three months I was on the island. In the process, I learned to appreciate his patience and determination to accomplish what he set out to do. On the

very first project I helped him with, patching the holes in the back porch roof, I discovered, however, that he and I had two distinctly different styles of working. At seventy-nine, he had already given the best yes of his life working on a river channel dredging crew for the Army Corps of Engineers. He had worked on the rivers and creeks around the island all his life before losing his health. When he was forced to retire from a hand-me-down job of cleaning litter from the river by rowboat, he came home with bitter regret that he was no longer able to earn a day's wage for a day's work. He cussed the government for taking the best he had and then putting him out to pasture like some swaybacked workhorse waiting to die. At an age when most men would feel

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glad just to get out of bed in the morning, Richmond arose each day to do some task around the house or yard or down at the little landing he maintained on a creek at the southern end of the island. He always had some project going, some scheme to occupy his day. What he wanted from me was not just my brawn, but my ear, which he filled with laughter and corny jokes an stories of the time when he was a young man working hard to earn his living on the river. He always had his own idea about how to do a job. At first it was a source of intense frustration to work as his helper, because he rarely permitted me to do a job my way.

"I got no edgey-cation," he would tell me, "but I got sense."

I was the one to haul the lumber up the rickety ladder to the roof where Richmond tapped the nails to patch the leaks. Every time he stopped to get down to fiddle with something else, I'd climb up and bang away to finish the job. He would yell at me to stop, complaining that as hard as I pounded I was likely to knock his whole house down. It took me several weeks to learn to appreciate that Richmond was not so much interested in finishing a job as in having something to do. After a fashion, I learned to satisfy my need to finish things working for other families on the island. Those days I spent with Richmond I came to look upon as something of a holiday from labor.

A few weeks before my time on the island was over, Richmond asked me to help him move an old boat he kept down at his landing. I came by early one morning and together the two of us walked the long, sandy road to the woods where a narrow trail cut off through the trees. Richmond led the way through the large stand of tall pines that came out on a deep creek at the southern tip of the island. Out across the flat marsh, I could make out the low skyline of Savannah and the humpback rise of the Eugene Talmadge Bridge. I followed Richmond down along an embankment of old oyster shells to the water's edge, where a dilapidated wooden shed stood, propped up by two stout poles. The assemblage of junk, the flotsam and jetsam of a lifetime of collecting, littered a half-acre rise at the edge of the creek.

"Neva tell me not to come down here no more. Say I'm too old,"

Richmond said, "but I tell her a man got to be what he is. I'm a *river man* and de river is all I know." We sat down on a stack of old boards next to the shed and watched a big white yacht float by in the next channel. A red-winged blackbird bobbed on its perch atop a stalk of marsh grass several feet away, its dry throaty call sounding like a rusty nail being pulled free of old wood.

Richmond and I spent most of that day down at the river, moving his boat out of the mud where it had been stranded on the last high spring tide; shuffling one stack of boards onto that of another; rolling several old metal drums up the bank where the next spring tide would not carry them off. It was an odd and eclectic assortment of material, most of it of little value other than to occupy Richmond's time and attention. Except for getting his boat out of the mud, we accomplished little in the way of improving the appearance of the landing. We walked back up the path through the woods to the road that led to his house. Richmond stopped at his gate to invite me in for a beer he said he had "put on ice" for me before we'd left that morning. I told him I had to get around to another neighbor's house first, as I'd promised to help put up a gate, but I'd come back as soon as I finished there. We said good-bye and I watched him amble across the pasture to the back of his house before I turned to walk up the road. I was after dark when I finished with the gate, so I decided to go on home rather than stop back by the Wileys' for my beer.

The next afternoon I was out visiting folk, making my rounds, when, coming back from the far end of the island, I passed by the house of Richmond's son. His eight-year-old grandson came running out of the house, wide-eyed, his voice breathless.

"Hurry to grandma's! Hurry! Richmond drown."

"What!?"

"Richmond drown."

I ran the rest of the way to Richmond's and my worst fear was confirmed by the crowd of island people gathered in the yard outside the house; others were walking up the road toward the house from the opposite direction. A quiet, sullen mood spread outward from the house like ripples across water.

"Hurry to grandma's! Hurry! Richmond drown."

Geneva came down off the porch when she saw me coming across the pasture. Her body was tense but she seemed strangely composed, as though the truth of this moment had somehow escaped her heart. She reached out and took my hands in hers in a tight, firm clasp, and began the story of Richmond's death.

"I tell Richmond, 'Don't go to de river,' and he say he won't go. Den, dis morning he say, 'Geneva, I have to go,' and I say all right, but don't be done long.' He left early, seven o'clock dis morning."

I stared hard into her eyes, wanting her to tell me Richmond was alive – that this was just another corny joke of his – but she avoided my eyes, looking off at some middle distance over my shoulder as she talked.

The night before, Geneva said, Richmond had stayed up late waiting for me to come for my beer. "He stand at de window and look out at de road and keep

saying, 'I wonder when he come? I wonder what keep him so long?'"

"And I tell him, 'Richmond, it's late, come to bed. He probably get busy and couldn't come. He'll come in de morning to see you.'

"And den he come to bed. But he come into my room and want to sleep with me. Richmond like de covers and sleep in de other room, and I like de window open and to throw the covers off. He lay down with me and talk all night, and I couldn't sleep for his talking. I hear a rat running in de walls and I say, 'I wonder what dat mean?"

"Dis morning when we get up, he say, 'Geneva, if you don't want me to go to de river, I won't go.' And I tell him, 'Richmond, you know I don't want you to go.'

"Den, after a while, he say, 'Geneva, I got to go.'"

Geneva told the story as though retelling the plot of a frightful drama she'd seen on television. She was agitated, but not yet fully able to comprehend that it was Richmond she was speaking about. She had started to worry about him in the afternoon and went down to the river to check on him. She found him at the water's edge, next to his boat, face down in the mud.

"'Richmond. Richmond.' I cry. Don't give me trials now. I got too many.' He didn't answer and I know he was dead. And den I say, 'Richmond, your long journey is over.'"

I stood squeezing Geneva's hands in mine, trying to understand that Richmond was dead.

"Richmond talk about you last night," Geneva said "He call you 'his boy' and say how strong you are. How hard you work for him."

I strained to hold back the tears, but they came anyway, bursting through my determination not to cry in front of her.

Over the next few days, I was zealously attentive to Geneva and her family. On the morning of the funeral, I went with her son and two grandsons to the old cemetery, where we first cut away some overgrowth, then set to digging a grave. Later that afternoon, at the funeral, I helped shovel the sandy loam back in on the casket that had been lowered into the ground. During the service, as the island people sang in spontaneous chorus, "When we Gather at the River," hot tears streamed down my face as I clenched my jaw, trying not to cry out.

It is odd the way memory works. Sitting in the late afternoon sun in Atlanta, ten years later, I can still recall the smallest detail about the last time Richmond and I worked together. It is not the only time in the passage of those years that I've thought about him. I cried my eyes out the day we buried Richmond, but to think of him now no longer makes me cry. It usually brings a smile. I can see him standing behind me, his hands sunk in the pockets of his faded overalls, watching me curse and struggle in the bathroom, heaving against the crowbar, straining to pry the well-worn floor joist free of its place. No doubt he would cackle and make fun of my stubbornness. I can hear him now: "Dis old timber break a young man's back before giving up de ghost."