



Video Story Transcript

The Brownlee's Migration

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Link to YouTube Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P45-aReLS_A

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Kucha Brownlee.

When I was younger, we spent our summers in the South. When we were there, my father's brother and sister-in-law, uncle Phil and Aunt Viola Brownlee, they would pick us up and they would take us to visit all of the aunts and uncles on the Brownlee side. My father was from a **big** family. Seventeen children to be exact. Well, I knew that the Brownlee family had all been born in Senatobia, Mississippi. We lived in Chicago. But all of my father's siblings lived in Tennessee. None of them had moved to Chicago. and I was thinking about that and I was curious, so I asked. How it happened if all of the Brownlee's were born in Mississippi, they all live in Tennessee now? And this was answer.

My grandpa was born in 1862. That was a few years before the end of the Civil War. Now Mr. Brownlee, he thought he owned people, so he had purchased some people to work his fields. And one of them was Susie...Susie, and by default, her children. And one of those children was my grandfather, Richard, or as we affectionately called him Paw Brownlee.

This is the story. See, the Brownlee's were renters, not sharecroppers. Now at the end of the Civil War, many, many of the workers who were now newly freed, ended up working at this, on the same plantation. I mean, they had nowhere to go, nothing to do. They needed a job. They knew farming. And so, they took the chance and worked on this plantation. In Mr. Brownlee's case, he encouraged his children to stay, when in fact, he was not allowing them to be taken away. Now, he did teach his black children to read. But unlike his white

children, they did have to work the fields. Good thing was he taught my grandfather carpentry. So, my grandfather had a marketable skill.

Once he was grown, and he moved out, he became a renter, because he had a marketable skill. Having this skill was great because he could rent. He also was the head carpenter building the black church that he went to. And because he could read, he used to teach reading in that church while the watchers from the church pretended to work in the fields. This is important to me. Because, you see, the reason, he had, they had to have watchers, even though slavery was over, the Jim Crow laws had set in. And so, it became dangerous to teach reading. So, the watchers would watch and if anyone white was coming, they would make it back to the church and that reading class would become a Bible study. So, my grandfather, (the teacher), met Ella McKinney, (the watcher), and they became husband and wife.

Anyway, they were renters. And they rented a huge, huge farm. And as the children got to be adults, they would give them a big sus... section of the farm to work. Well, there's a difference between renters and sharecroppers. Renters own everything. They just rent. So, their livestock they bought. Their seeds they bought, their clothes, their furniture. They own everything. On the other hand, if you're sharecropper, you have purchased everything on credit. And you don't own any of it. The way you find out what you can own, is at the end of the harvest, there's a reckoning. And they tally up everything you've made and put it against everything you owe. Now if during that season while you working that land, you have a cow that is, um, has a calf. The owner still owns that cow, so he can come and take that calf.

So, here's what happened. Brownlees are renters. Their cow babed a calf and this white man, not a Brownlee, that they were renting from, came and tried to take that cow. Like Paw was a sharecropper.

Paw said, "Na, no! You're not going to take that cow."

And he said, "Watch me."

Paw said, "Boys!" There were plenty of grown Brownlee men living on that farm. And they start appearing from everywhere. And all that man heard was *chee, chee*, the sound of shotguns. He froze.

And Paw said, "Now you can take calf if you want to but I don't think you're gonna too far."

So, he let that calf alone, and he backed out, and left the farm empty handed. Yes. But later Paw and his sons, they had a talk about this. And they decided that before he had a chance to round up the white sheets, they better leave. You see, the KKK was still active in Mississippi. And that's what they did. They packed up everything and they moved to Tennessee. Because in Tennessee, it was a little bit better for black families then it was in Mississippi. Then my father moved north to Chicago.

But that's a different story.