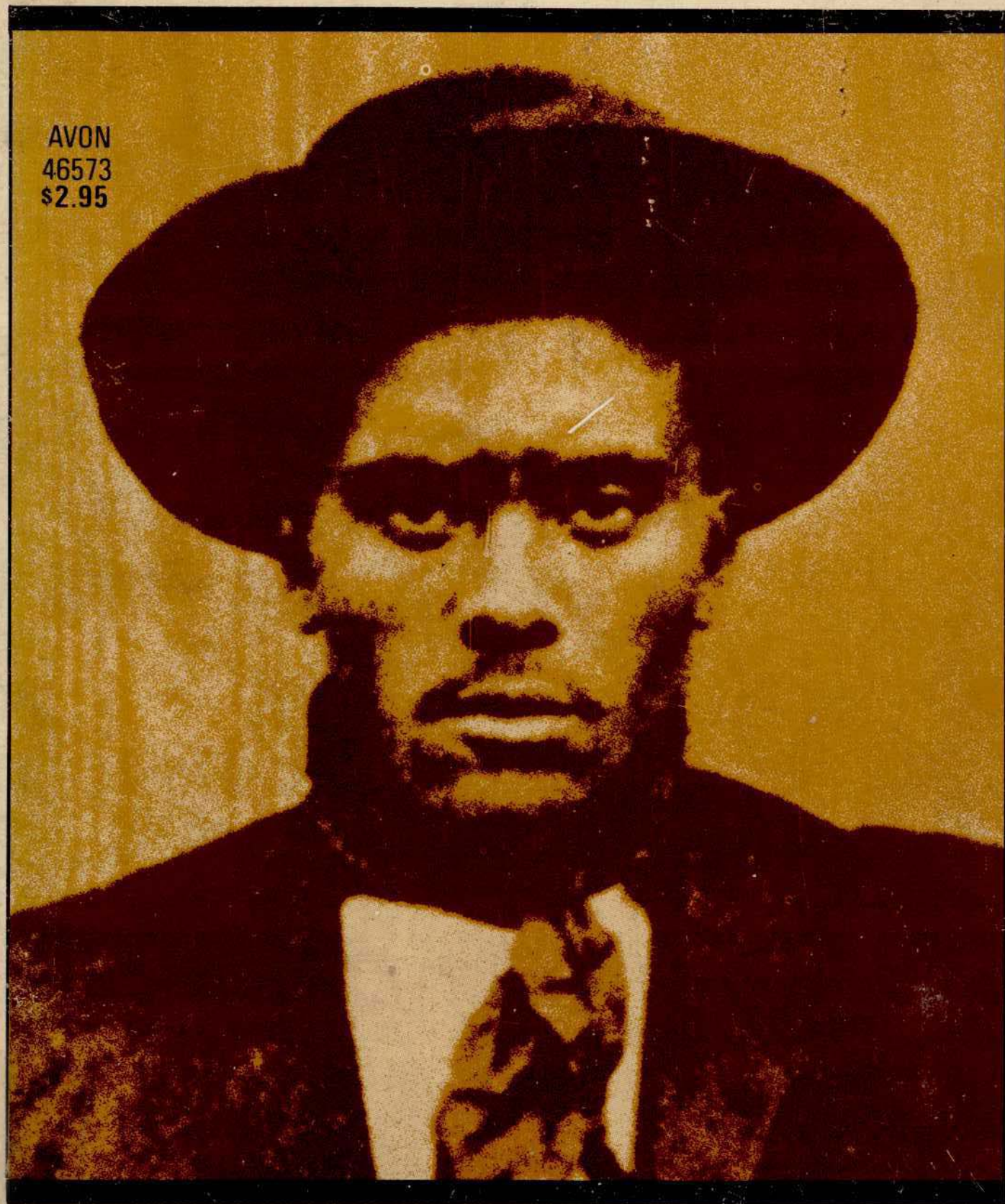


# **ALL GOD'S DANGERS**

## **THE LIFE OF NATE SHAW**

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THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER BY  
**THEODORE ROSENGARTEN**

"Nate Shaw spans our history from slavery to Selma.  
We stand amazed. ALL GOD'S DANGERS is not to be forgotten."

Baltimore Sun



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**THEODORE ROSENGARTEN**



**AVON**

**PUBLISHERS OF BARD, CAMELOT AND DISCUS BOOKS**

*To Clyde and Anne*

**AVON BOOKS**

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**Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead.**

**JUDGES 7:3**

**The characters in this book are real. Their names, except for historical figures, are fictitious. The names of most places and landmarks have also been changed.**

**These changes were made to protect the privacy of the family of the principal character. Since the publication of the first edition, articles in various newspapers and magazines have identified the real Nate Shaw: he is Ned Cobb. The family of Ned Cobb, the publisher, and Theodore Rosengarten, join in proudly acknowledging that Nate Shaw is the fictitious name of Ned Cobb.**

## PREFACE

This big book is the autobiography of an illiterate man. It is the story of a black tenant farmer from east-central Alabama who grew up in the society of former slaves and slaveholders and reached maturity during the advent of segregation law. For years he labored "under many rulings, just like the other Negro, that I knowed was injurious to man and displeasin to God and still I had to fall back." One morning in December, 1932, Nate Shaw faced a crowd of deputy sheriffs sent to confiscate a neighbor's livestock. He knew they would be after his, next. Burdened by the indignities he had suffered in the past and awed by the prospect of overturning "this southern way of life," Shaw stood his ground.

I met Nate Shaw in January, 1969. He had just turned eighty-four years old. I had come to Tukabahchee County with a friend, Dale Rosen, who was investigating a defunct organization called the Alabama Sharecroppers Union. Earlier in her research, Dale had read "In Egypt Land," a powerful narrative poem written by John Beecher, in 1940, which tells one version of a Sharecroppers Union confrontation with the law. We visited Beecher and he told us that he had recently met a survivor of the union who was a character in his poem; that the man was living near Pottstown, some twenty miles from Beaufort, the Tukabahchee County seat. Dale and I spent a week in Beaufort sifting through trial dossiers and newspaper files in the courthouse basement. Then, one icy morning we set out to meet the man I came to call Nate Shaw.

The road from Beaufort to Pottstown rolls and winds through piney woods country. Nate Shaw lives just below the foothills where the lowlands begin. We hunted for his house along the asphalt byroads until we came across a

mailbox with the name Shaw in bold letters. A woman stepped out onto the porch of a tin-roofed cabin and, seeing us hesitate, called us to come in.

Her name is Winnie Shaw and she is the wife of Nate's half-brother TJ. She is a spare-built, walnut-colored woman with wide-set eyes and a girlish face. She said she was seventy-three years old but she looked much younger. We were already into the front room of her house before we introduced ourselves. We explained that we were students from Massachusetts and that we'd come to Alabama to study this union.

TJ walked in. He had been overhauling one of his machines—winter work—when he heard our car drive up in his yard. Winnie told him, "They want to see Nate." TJ walked out again and across the road to Nate's house. TJ completely filled the doorway walking in and out. He is six and a half feet tall when he stands straight. But sixty-five seasons of picking cotton have given him a stoop from the hips, so that standing still he resembles a man leaning on a long-handled hoe.

He came back with Nate, who had been feeding his mule—one of the last mules in the settlement. Nate is six inches shorter than TJ and a shade lighter, though both are dark men. He is trim and square-shouldered; he has a small, fine head and high Indian cheekbones and brow. We shook hands and he announced that he was always glad to welcome "his people." He knew why we had come by our appearance: young, white, polite, frightened, northern. People who looked like us had worked on voter registration drives, marched in Selma and Montgomery, rode those freedom buses across the Mason-Dixon line. He had seen "us" on television and it didn't surprise him to see us now because this was his movement and he knew a lot about it; he had been active in it before we were born. Raising his right hand to God, he swore there was no "get-back" in him: he was standing where he stood in '32.

Nate took off his hat and sat down with us by the fireplace. We asked him right off why he joined the union. He didn't respond directly; rather, he "interpreted" the question and began, "I was haulin a load of hay out of Apafalya one day—" and continued uninterrupted for eight hours. He recounted dealings with landlords, bankers, fertilizer agents, mule traders, gin operators, sheriffs, and

judges—stories of the social relations of the cotton system. By evening, the fire had risen and died and risen again and our question was answered.

TJ turned on the electric light, a single high-watt bulb suspended in the center of the room. We talked some more with the Shaws about how we planned to use the information Nate had just given us. They were glad to help us, they said, and if our "report" reached other people who found their lives instructive, they would be gratified. We thanked them for being so kind and for taking us into their confidence and, promising to return, we left.

Driving north, we felt something slipping out of our grasp. We could remember the details of Nate's stories but no reconstruction could capture the power of his performance. His stories built upon one another so that the sequence expressed the sense of a man "becoming." Although Nate Shaw and the Sharecroppers Union had intersected only for a moment, everything that came before had prepared him for it. Nate had apparently put his whole life into stories and what he told us was just one chapter.

We had come to study a union, and we had stumbled on a storyteller. Nate must have told his stories—at least the ones we heard—many times before. TJ and Winnie, who listened as closely as we did, would stir whenever he digressed and remind him where his story was going. Nate would roll his tongue over the lone yellow spearlike tooth at the corner of his mouth and say, "I'm comin to that, I just have to tell this first."

Over the next two years I visited the Shaws twice. Each time I met other members of the family who, if more wary of my intentions, were no less hospitable. In particular, I struck up a friendship with Vernon Shaw, Nate's second son. Vernon is the last of nine brothers and sisters still farming. He has a sixty-acre place of his own on which he raises beef cattle and corn to feed his hogs. In addition, he farms a big crop of cotton on rented land. It was he who stepped into his father's shoes when Nate went to prison and stuck by his mother and the younger children for twelve years until Nate returned. His brothers and sisters look to him as the immediate link with the old family and the soil.

Four of Nate's children live in Alabama, three within



shouting distance—Rachel, the second child and oldest girl, called “Sister”; Garvan, the eighth child and youngest boy; and Vernon. Calvin Thomas, the first child and oldest son, lives about twenty miles away. Five children live out of state—Francis, the third son, in Philadelphia; Mattie Jane, the second daughter, in Brooklyn, New York; Eugene, the fourth son, in Middletown, Ohio; Leah Ann, the third daughter, and Rosa Louise, the fourth daughter and youngest child, both in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Each time I visited Nate Shaw, he told me a little more about them: how they support themselves, how they hold their heads up in the world. Shaw prides himself on the social standing of his children. They are upright and industrious, following the education they received in his home. But his chief fascination is with their deeper “natures,” for which he doesn’t hold himself accountable. “There’s my Vernon,” he would say, or “There’s my Francis,” and leap into some childhood incident that showed their natures to him and distinguished them from their brothers and sisters.

Shaw revealed less about his first wife, Hannah. He praised her for her strengths and virtues and chided himself for not having acknowledged her sufficiently during her life. His remarks were brief and I had no cause to press him at the time. Later I learned from him and his children what a great-hearted woman she was.

Nothing so aroused Shaw as his recollections of his father. Shaw is still in conflict with a man who was a boy during President Lincoln’s administration. While it is not unusual for a child to have unresolved feelings about a parent, it is disarming to see a struggle so open and honest. Shaw demonstrates that a person is, at every moment, everything he always was; his current role can eclipse his past but not deny it. Shaw remains his father’s child though he is in his eighties and his father has been dead over forty years.

In March, 1971, I went back to Alabama with a proposal to record Shaw’s life. He agreed that the experience would be good for both of us and the results might prove useful to people interested in the history of his region, class, and race. To appreciate his part in that history it is helpful to know something about his setting.

East of the Black Belt and south of the Appalachians

the Alabama countryside descends slowly to a plain. Young piney woods stretch methodically between pastures and farms. Off both sides of the roads derelict chimneys stand like watchkeepers on the sites of tenant farmer shacks. These are the tangible signs of the tenant system's collapse.

Upland, the population is predominantly white and poor. Lumber camps and textile mills offer the steadiest employment in the region. Some small farms produce cotton for the mills, and fruit—mostly peaches—for roadside and out-of-state markets. But the soil is not particularly suited to cotton and the fruit is vulnerable to the great rains and late frosts that distress hill country agriculture.

The people of the lowlands still grow cotton, along with corn, sugar cane, peanuts, watermelons, and other table foods. The land is smooth and fit for extensive cultivation. This was plantation country and the population today is largely black. After the Civil War, owners of the plantations divided their lands into tenant plots. To their surprise and uneasiness, poor whites came down from the hills to compete with the freed slaves for land. For about twenty-five years, or until the 1890's, whites and blacks worked adjacent farms as sharecroppers and tenants. Then, hoping to counter falling cotton prices by exploiting a more submissive class, landlords pushed the poor whites back into the hills and filled their places with blacks.

Cotton prices reached new highs during the First World War, but farmers at the bottom of the tenant system shared little in the profits; for the system that encumbered them with mandatory debts also deprived them of authority to sell their crops. Thus, poor black farmers lived under the twin yoke of race oppression and economic peonage. Taking advantage of new openings in wartime industry, many fled to the cities. This great movement north intensified during the early years of the boll weevil's devastation through about 1920, and again during the Great Depression and the Second World War. The migration continues at a regular pace today.

Nate Shaw stayed in Alabama because he believed his labor gave him a claim to the land. He watched his neighbors pick up and leave but "*that* never come in my mind." Though he loathed his situation, he thought, "Somehow, some way, I'd overcome it. . . . I was determined to try."

I was hoping Shaw's autobiography would be a first installment in an intensive study of the family. I had no idea what shape it would take, or if I would have the means to do it, or if the children would cooperate. I did know that the Shaw family's experience was typical of many southern black families: the voyage from farm to factory, from country to city, from south to north. These relocations had profound effects on family life, class situation, and consciousness. There was much here to lure the historian.

I returned in June with a hundred pages of questions to ask Shaw. It became clear during our first session that I'd never get to a fraction of them. It would have taken years; moreover, my prepared questions distracted Shaw from his course. Since it was my aim to preserve his stories, I learned how to listen and not to resist his method of withholding facts for the sake of suspense. Everything came out in time, everything.

We would sit under the eave of his tool shed and talk for two to six hours per session. Shaw would whittle or make baskets as he spoke. He would quarter and peel a six-foot section of a young trunk, weave the strips into the desired shape, then put a handle on it. A large laundry basket would take him half a day to make, working steadily with wood cut the day before.

When it rained we would move our chairs inside the shed. There, in near dark, cramped among baskets, broken-bottomed chairs, sacks of feed and fertilizer, worn harnesses and tools, Shaw enacted his most fiery stories. I am thankful for all the rain we had, for it moved us to a natural theater and pounded the tin roof like a delirious crowd inciting an actor to the peak of his energy.

To start, I asked Shaw if he knew how he got his name. This tapped an important source of his earliest knowledge—the stories of old people. Shaw announced a ground rule for himself: he would always distinguish between what was told for the truth and what was told to entertain, between direct experience and hearsay. He went on to recollect the content and flavor of his childhood. In sum, he described how a black boy growing up in rural Alabama at the turn of the century acquired a practical education. At the death of his mother and his first barefoot days behind a plow—events separated by two months—he learned what sort of hard life lay ahead.

Beginning with his recollections of the first time his father hired him out to work for a white man, in 1904, Shaw recalled events and relationships according to the year, as though he had kept a mental journal. Thus we would spend one session covering 1904 and 1905, pick up at 1906 and so on. Once he married and left his father's house and had his own crop, each harvest completed both his work cycle and the perimeter of his experiences for that year.

For each place he farmed I asked about the quality and extent of the land, changes in the technology of farming, the size of his crops and the prices they brought him, his contracts and relationships with white people at every stage of the crop, the growth of his family and the division of labor within it, and how he felt about all that. Shaw told me how he moved from farm to farm seeking good land and the freedom to work it to its potential. By raising all his foodstuffs and hauling lumber while his older boys worked the farm, he became self-sufficient. At every step along the way he faced a challenge to his independence. Landlords tried to swindle him, merchants turned him out, neighbors despised his success. In spite of their schemes and in spite of the perils inherent to cotton farming, he prevailed.

When we came up to the crucial events of the thirties the sessions turned into heated dialogues. I pressed Shaw for his motivations and challenged him to justify himself. Here, I want to make my sympathies clear. Nate Shaw was—and is—a hero to me. I think he did the right thing when he joined the Sharecroppers Union and fought off the deputy sheriffs, though, of course, I had nothing to lose by his actions. My questions must unavoidably have expressed this judgment but they did not, I believe, change the substance of his responses.

Our sessions dealing with the prison years were more even-tempered, just as Shaw had had to keep cool to live out his sentence. I asked him about conditions at each of the three prison camps in which he served. He answered with stories about his work life and his relations with prison officials and fellow convicts. During these years, his wife Hannah and son Vernon presided over his family and property. His mules died, his automobile ran down, but he forced himself not to think about it.

Shaw was fifty-nine years old when he came home from

prison. The years following his release were the most painful for him to talk about. For in his struggle to reclaim a portion of his former status he faced insuperable barriers—his age, poverty, and obsolete skills. Again, my questions pursued him from farm to farm. I asked about the issues foremost in his mind—his new relationships with his children and, after the death of Hannah, with his second wife, Josie; the social and economic changes that directly affected him, his family, and his race; and still, his stand that morning in December, 1932, against the forces of injustice.

After sixty hours spread over sixteen sessions we completed the first round. Shaw had given me the outlines of his life and many representative stories. I hadn't asked the questions I'd come with and I had to choose between doing that and going over the same ground with a finer-toothed comb. Shaw wanted to add details and whole stories he had remembered after we passed their places in the narrative. Taking his lead and working from notes I had written while playing back the tapes, we began again. We lasted fifteen more sessions and another sixty hours. As our talks drew to a close the sessions grew longer. The initiative was his. Our work strengthened him and sustained his belief that his struggles had been worth the effort, although he had only his recollections to show for them. These filled his days with a reality more powerful than the present.

After working with Shaw I began making the rounds of his children. They had, of course, their own views of what he had done. They knew I had been attracted to him because of his connection with the Sharecroppers Union, and while they acknowledged his courage they were invariably critical of his stand. For they had lost their father for twelve years and watched the task of raising a large family during hard times take its physical toll on their mother.

The ambition that drove Shaw to prosperity also led him to his "trouble." Rosa Louise, his youngest daughter, calls his drive "the white man in him." She means that her father demanded as much for himself and his family as the white man demanded for his own, and when he got it he wouldn't let it go without a fight.

Shaw was, without question, a hard worker and a great provider, unrivaled in his settlement. One could be guilty,



however, in the eyes of the settlement and before God, of excessive zeal in the pursuit of a good life and excessive pride in attaining it. Righteousness consisted in not having so much that it hurt to lose it. This notion appears to cater to landlords, merchants, bankers, and furnishing agents by discouraging resistance or ambition on the part of their farmer-debtors. But people who lived by it achieved a measure of autonomy. Shaw describes his brother Peter as a man with just this spirit in him: "He made up his mind that he weren't goin to have anything and after that, why, nothin could hurt him." Two of Peter's sons who migrated to Detroit after the Second World War say that their father decided he never would own an automobile, an electric stove, or other trappings. He could have raised larger crops than he did, on larger debts, but he chose to live plainly, avoid commercial contact with white people, and not work himself to death. Under a system that deprived farmers of sovereignty over their crops and severely limited their social and political liberties, such self-restraint was one way a man could control the course of his own life.

Nate Shaw's spirit led him on a different course. To his children he felt obliged to leave an inheritance—mules, tools, wagons, etc.—that they could use to earn a living. And to his race he wanted to set an example. He was, for instance, one of the first black farmers to buy an automobile. "There's a heap of my race," he says, "didn't believe their color should have a car, believed what the white man wanted em to believe." Shaw's defiance peaked in the face of imminent foreclosure. When he walked out on his "mission" he had no definite plan for a new world; he just couldn't endure the old order.

Was this an impulsive act of bravery? Did Shaw miscalculate the support his union could deliver? Did he know that organizers of the union belonged to the Communist Party? And if he did know, did it matter to him? There are no easy answers. Shaw admits he learned little about the origins of the union. He was less concerned with where it came from than with its spirit, which he recognized as his own. Nor were the details of its program essential, for he knew that even the most meager demand black tenant farmers could make undermined the white man's prerogative upon which the whole system rested.

While Shaw occupies the foreground of his stage he makes no claim for the uniqueness of his struggle. On the contrary, he is careful to stress the social position each actor represents. The opposition between him and his landlord, for example, which culminates in the confrontation with the deputies, is historically significant because it is common.

When Shaw came home from prison many people he had known were gone. Some were living in the north, some in nearby counties, and some had died. There were other important changes. The federal government had stepped into agriculture and guaranteed small farmers, even sharecroppers, the right to sell their own cotton. Local textile mills had begun hiring blacks for the most menial jobs, thereby opening an alternative to the farm. Farming itself had become more complex and prohibitive to an uneducated man: you had to fill out forms and participate in government programs; to ensure an adequate yield you had to buy imported seeds, new fertilizers, insect poisons, and weed killers; tractors, too, were coming into style.

Nate Shaw was a mule farmer in a tractor world. The most meaningful and exciting episode of his life was behind him. It had given him a standard to judge human conduct; it put all of his skirmishes in perspective. But history seemed to have made a great leap over the twelve years he spent in prison. His recollections of his heroism and the events that led up to it belonged to a vanished reality. When he spoke about the past, his own sons shied away from the implications: "Some of em that don't like the standard I proved in these union affairs tells me I talk too much."

Seeking a better judgment from God and his race, and aiming to leave his trace on the world, Shaw proceeded to narrate the "life" of a black tenant farmer. The result is an intimate portrait that reproduces the tempo of a life unfolding. Shaw has the storyteller's gift to suspend his age while reciting. Thus his childhood stories ring with the astonishment and romance of a boy discovering the universe. Similarly, stories of his old age are tinged by the bitter-sweet feelings of a passionate man who has lost his illusions.

Nate Shaw belongs to the tradition of farmer-story-

tellers. These people appear in all civilizations and are only beginning to disappear in the most advanced ones. Their survival is bound up with the fate of communities of small farmers. When these communities disperse and farms become larger, fewer in number, and owned more and more by absentee investors, the sources of story material and audiences dry up.

But the decline of storytelling is more complicated than this. It has to do with the passing of craft activities, like basketmaking, which generate the rhythms at which stories flow; with the appeal of competing voices of culture, such as television; and with the unfortunate popular assumption that history is something that takes place in books and books are to be read in school.

What happens to the history of a people not accustomed to writing things down? To whom poverty and illiteracy make wills, diaries, and letters superfluous? Birth and death certificates, tax receipts—these occasional records punctuate but do not describe everyday life. In this setting, Nate Shaw is a precious resource. For his stories are grounded in the ordinary occurrences of the tenant farmer's world. Furthermore, they display as few records could an awesome intellectual life.

Shaw's working years span approximately the same years as the Snopes family odyssey in William Faulkner's trilogy. I mention Shaw and Faulkner in the same sentence not to invite comparison—each man's work ought to be appreciated within its own narrative tradition—but because they tell complementary stories. Both focus on the impact of history on the family. Faulkner, heir to a line of southern statesmen, pursues the decay and decline of white landed families and the rise of their former tenants. Nate Shaw records the progress of a black tenant family through three generations.

Both are steeped in genealogies. With the rigor of an Old Testament scribe, Shaw names the parents and foreparents of many of his characters. In fact, he names over four hundred people. Shaw creates a human topography through which he travels with the assurance of a man who knows the forest because he witnessed the planting of the trees. The act of recalling names is also a demonstration of how long he has been living in one place. Thus, his family

chronicles express both the bonds among people and a man's attachment to the land.

In editing the transcripts of our recordings I sometimes had to choose among multiple versions of the same story; other times, I combined parts of one version with another for the sake of clarity and completeness. Stories that seemed remote from Shaw's personal development I left out entirely. By giving precedence to stories with historical interest or literary merit I trust I haven't misrepresented him.

Besides this hazardous selection process, my editing consisted of arranging Shaw's stories in a way that does justice both to their occurrence in time and his sequence of recollection. I tried, within the limits of a general chronology, to preserve the affinities between stories. For memory recalls kindred events and people and is not constrained by the calendar.

I have not reproduced a southern or black dialect because I did not hear it. I did hear the English language as I know it, spoken with regional inflection and grammar. In the case of present participles and other words ending in "ing," the common idiom usually drops the "g," such as in "meetin" for meeting, "haulin" for hauling, etc. Where the "g" is pronounced, often for exclamatory effect, I have kept it.

Shaw's vocabulary is remarkably broad and inventive, enriched here and there by words not found in the dictionary. The meanings of these words are usually clear from their contexts. In some cases I have offered definitions.

As a measure of protection and privacy I have had to change the names of all the people and most of the places in the narrative. In devising aliases I tried to be faithful to the sources, sounds, and meanings of the original names. Generally, where blacks and whites shared the same surnames or first names, they share aliases here.

There is something lost and something gained in the transformation of these oral stories to written literature. Their publication marks the end of a long process of creation and re-creation and removes them from the orbit of the storyteller. His gestures, mimicries, and intonations—all the devices of his performance—are lost. No exclamation point can take the place of a thunderous slap on