

Scuffling in Jacksonville

There were lots of sounds around Jacksonville in 1945 and 1946, and I heard 'em all. It was the first big city I ever lived in. I was pretty close to the center of things, staying with Fred and Lena Mae Thompson at 752 West Church Street, right near downtown.

Lena Mae's sister, Louise—we called her Big Sister—was Mary Jane's close friend, and that was how I was introduced to the family. They were kind, considerate people who took me into their home like I was one of their own.

Something inside me wanted to call Fred "Mr. Thompson" and Lena Mae "Miss Lena Mae." I was still used to saying "yes, ma'am" and "yes, sir." But they wouldn't hear of it. They knew I was a country boy who minded his manners, but they also wanted me to start thinking of myself as a little man.

Whatever the Thompsons had, they shared with me. I even slept in my own small room off the kitchen. It was an upstairs apartment, nice and comfortable, and there were two radios in the house—Lena Mae had one and Big Sister had another.

They also made sure I had something to eat, and they even would have bought me clothes if I had let them. I

tried my best to stay independent. Whenever I made some money, I stopped by the grocery store, got some goodies, and left them on the kitchen table. That was the only way they accepted anything from me.

They were the type folk who wouldn't take payment of any kind. Thinking back, I can see how they helped to make my change of life—from the country to the city, from school to the real world—easier than it might have been.

They treated me like a son, and I had to come home at a certain hour each night—either that or tell them where I was. They were firm with me, making sure I didn't go hog wild with my new freedom.

In spite of some rebelliousness in me, I still had respect for my elders. You learned that in the country. It was something Mama had drummed into my brain. Besides, as a kid I found that most older people were good to me. Maybe that's 'cause I played piano and sang for them, or maybe 'cause I was blind and they thought, Good God, the child can do all that and he can't even see! Don't know, but to this day I have a good feeling about older people—people like the Thompsons—and I try to treat 'em right.

Funny, but there were also times in my life when I felt like older folk were being too good to me.

For example, just before I left Greenville for Jacksonville, a group of white people wanted to buy me a Seeing Eye dog. I said no without blinking an eye. It was nice of them, I appreciated the kind thought, but there was no way I was gonna have some animal lead me around.

As I've said, that was one of the three big NOs—no dog, no cane, no guitar. I'd rather stumble a little and maybe bang my knee once or twice—just the way sighted people do—than be dependent on a four-legged canine. Besides, it wasn't something I needed. Contrary to what most folk would say, it wasn't essential.

I was lucky in Jacksonville 'cause we lived close to the musicians' union. Fred took me there once or twice and, in my usual manner, I memorized the route. I paid attention to little things like drainage pipes, sewers, or cracks in

A statue of Ray at a keyboard, life-size, has been installed in a small concrete circle, at the end of which is a plaque explaining that Ray grew up in Greenville, FL from about 2 months old until he was sent to St. Augustine around age 7 to a school for deaf and blind kids.

Monument in Greenville, Florida

<https://www.t1dwanderer.com/travelogues/ray-charles-road-trip-in-florida-and-georgia-plus-a-speeding-ticket/>





RAY CHARLES CHILDHOOD HOME

This house is a reconstruction of the home where musician Ray Charles (1930-2004) lived with his mother, Aretha Williams, and adopted grandmother, Margaret "Muh" Robinson, shortly after his birth in 1930, until about the age of five. "RC," as Ray was known by his friends, received his first piano instruction from Wiley Pitman, owner of the nearby Red Wing Cafe. Ray and his mother later moved into a small house behind the cafe. At age seven, Ray's sight failed and he was sent to the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. The modest wood frame vernacular house he grew up in was probably constructed in the 1920s. It had no electricity or indoor plumbing. Meals were prepared on a wood-burning stove. A hand-primed-pump supplied water from a well next to the house. A fireplace in one of the four small rooms provided warmth, and open windows and doors allowed breezes to cool the house. Because of advanced deterioration, the abandoned house was scheduled for demolition. In 2006, the Town of Greenville purchased the structure to preserve the memory of Ray Charles. With a grant from the Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation, the Town completed the reconstruction of the house in 2008.

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