

## JULY, 2004 in ALABAMA - A GENEALOGY ROAD TRIP

On Thursday July 22, 2004 I board a flight from BWI Airport bound for Alabama, ancestral home of my paternal grandparents Ada (GARTH) and Solomon Sharper SYKES.

Around 1999/2000, several events collide and I begin to embark on genealogical research...

- o Work-related travel had taken me through the section of Delaware County, PA where my Mom, Alice WEST Sykes (1903-1992) had grown up and I decided to search for the old stone farmhouse in which she was raised. Unable to locate it (it had undoubtedly been demolished), I went to the headquarters of WAWA Dairy Farms where her father had worked in the 1900-1910s. While no one was very forthcoming about the availability of company records, among the many vintage photos hanging in the lobby, I glimpsed an African American man holding the reins of two horses (glass bottles of milk were delivered in horse drawn carts in those days) - was this Julius WEST, the grandfather who died before I was born?
- o I stumbled on the notes I'd taken on a sheet of legal paper when I queried my father, Frank J. Sykes (1892-1986) born in Decatur, AL and a man of few words, about his parents' siblings. I suppose I was curious about the great aunts and uncles I hadn't known. I came along late in my family - Dad was 54 years of age and Mom, 43 when I was born - so there were even several of my Dad's brothers and sisters, aside from his uncles and aunts, who'd passed on before my arrival. I sent the hand written results to nieces and nephews and cousins' children thinking it would be a great thing to have. (Like most kids would be interested in genealogy at age 10!)
- o The defining moment - the interview transcript. My father had played baseball for the Negro Leagues in the teens and into the 1920s. A former sports reporter, turned Negro Leagues researcher, had interviewed him and was now sending the transcript to my brother to review for possible errors. I was completely astonished as I read the first lines "My parents were born slaves." WHY DID I NOT KNOW THIS? As I did the math, it was entirely possible; Solomon Sharper Sykes had been born in 1856; his wife, Ada GARTH Sykes in 1862. But why was I just finding this out at mid-life via the printed word rather than learning it from my father before he died?

At the point of reading the transcript, I begin to research the family tree in earnest. Sarah Robinson, wife of a family friend and member of the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California refers me to

AfriGeneas.com as the premier electronic resource of choice for African American researchers and to Dee Parmer Woodtor's book, Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity. To further charge my genealogical adrenalin, a search of the AfriGeneas surname boards puts me in contact with relatives on my WEST side about which I know little. Suddenly, I have previously unknown maternal great grandparents and a greater desire to find out more.

As I begin to acquire strategies for parting the tangled branches of the family tree, I explore resources on the Internet from the comfort of my home computer and pore over microfilmed records at the National Archives in the evenings. Finally in early 2004, I come to the conclusion that in order to delve deeper, I need to examine local records.

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My original fantasy is to devise the ultimate SYKES-GARTH-WEST-BAREFOOT (a maternal great grandmother) ROAD TRIP! The trip will consist of the following stops...

- o I drive to Raleigh NC and try to hurdle the WEST brick wall at the state archives. Silas WEST, a maternal great grandfather, is nowhere to be found prior to 1870. But Lloyd West, a local slaveholder in Sampson County, NC had reported a fugitive slave the color and approximate age of Silas in the 1860 slave census. Would an examination of local newspapers reveal an ad for a runaway by name?
- o After Raleigh, I go to Meharry Medical College in Nashville TN. I want to know more about great uncle Melvin SYKES, brother of Solomon, whose 1900 and 1910 census records confirm the family lore that he had indeed relocated to California and "passed". The interesting detail revealed in the census records was that he was a physician. Calls to Meharry, the closest medical school to Decatur, disclose that Melvin had been an 1893 graduate.
- o Finally, I cruise into Decatur, Moulton and Montgomery AL to pursue further GARTH/SYKES research at the county and state levels.

Was I crazy? A reality check reminds me that I can't drive much more than six hours a day - at that rate, the adventure will take three or four weeks of vacation, let alone money, I don't have. After pondering flight routes and driving mileage for the ultimate road trip, I narrow the focus of the expedition solely to Alabama.

And it does feel like an expedition. In addition to figuring out adequate clothing for nine days away from home, I need supplies - pencils, paper, copies

of research collected - I hurriedly assemble a binder of materials and decide at the last minute to include a copy of an almost century old photo of Solomon and Ada and their children taken in the family parlor. I need their "presence" for this mission.

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Thus, I board a flight for Birmingham where I rent a car for the abbreviated road trip. The itinerary is 2 days in Montgomery at the state archives, a weekend in Atlanta, GA with friends for Black Arts Festival then northwest to Morgan and Lawrence counties, AL for a week of research. I have corresponded with Valencia King Nelson, AfriGeneas fairy godmother and Webmaster, about the 1866 AL state census, which contains a colored section, and she has kindly invited me by if I was in her part of the state. The Internet driving directions will take me within a few miles of her place on the trip from Atlanta to northern Alabama so a VKN drive-by is anticipated.

Montgomery seems like an apparition of a town. Like so many other small cities whose economic lifeblood had seeped away in the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the original city center had an abundance of vacant commercial space for lease and seemed to be empty of activity once the workday was over. Dexter Avenue, the broad street that confronts the state capitol and whose expanse is so familiar from the '60s news footage, filled with civil rights protesters, was now just an exceptionally wide street with little activity. On the edge of the Alabama River is a magnificent turn-of-the-century train station, a reminder of Montgomery's former role as a center of commerce.

At the AL state archives, I am searching for my great grandmothers, Laura Sykes and Rebecca Garth, residents of Morgan County according to the 1870 census. The Morgan County 1866 colored census didn't yield either name; however, the 1866 for Lawrence County, home to slaveholding brothers, Francis W. and Andrew J. Sykes, showed both a Laura Sykes and a Becca Garth. Laura, while the approximate age of my great grandmother, had no children listed with her - the 1870 census listed her with five children, all of whom were born by 1866. Becca's age and children's ages did not correspond to those of my Rebecca.

A helpful archivist locates a copy of the will of Jesse W. Garth, a large landowner in northern AL and MS but the will was devised post-war and, thus, I am unable to identify any of his property, i.e., names of slaves.

My other mission in Montgomery is to attempt to find the alleged family portrait that hung in the capitol. Many years ago, I had heard that there was a portrait of Solomon's father, Francis (Frank) Sykes but no one can confirm this. While I questioned why it would be there, my research shows that "F.W." (in the great southern tradition of initial usage), had earned a medical degree but

had become a planter, rather than physician, and ultimately sought and won a seat in the state legislature. So the family tale now has some credence to it! I look at all the portraits hanging in the archives building and then set out for the capitol, directly across the street. There, I meet a most helpful young woman on assignment from the Alabama Historical Commission who gives me at least an hour of her time at the end of the work day, attempting to find the elusive portrait. While we are unsuccessful at the quest, we have a great time chatting, discovering at the end of our conversation that we are sorority sisters.

The actual "road trip" aspect of my adventure - where you see a potential point of interest and spontaneously take a detour? - happens on the way to Atlanta. I see the sign for Tuskegee and I am on the exit ramp. While remote, Tuskegee University ([www.tuskegee.edu](http://www.tuskegee.edu)) has a beautiful and extensive campus. One is welcomed by the larger-than-life size sculpture of Booker T. Washington "Lifting the Veil"; there's the jet that General Chappie James flew; there are structures both antebellum and ultra modern; there's the George Washington Carver Museum, a gem housed in a building made from bricks created by early Tuskegee students. Further down the road, I stop at Moton Field, home of the Airmen, and the temporary facility on a bluff that will hopefully one day become the site of a Museum overlooking the airfield where the Airmen trained. The impulsive "drive by" is inspiring and well worth the time spent...

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Monday, July 26. En route to Decatur AL from Atlanta, I attempt to follow my Internet directions to the home of Valencia King Nelson. After missing a turn and calling her to report that I have crossed the railroad tracks ("What tracks?" I was asked), VKN advises me to retreat to the parking lot of the Wal-Mart and she will fetch me there. I follow her into a lovely wooded residential area to her home. There, we greet each other like old friends and she asks me to tell her about my elusive ancestors and how I have fared in Montgomery. She demonstrates the resources available through [www.godfrey.org](http://www.godfrey.org) of which I was not aware (I am now a subscriber) and we take off for the library and a bite to eat. When we return, I insist on hitting the road for Decatur since I begin to feel my vacation time slipping away, although VKN graciously invites me to stay the night. I hate to leave my new friend who has enveloped me in her warmth and generosity but I don't know when I'll be in this part of the country again and I have brick walls to demolish. Somehow, I feel that the visit with Valencia has gotten my full week of research off to most appropriate start. We bid adieu and I arrive, exhausted, in Decatur at my \$55/night suite with kitchenette, having driven the 70-or-so miles through a torrential rainstorm.

Tuesday (day 6 of 9) - I'm in Decatur. Flat tire. Hostess at the Visitor's Center informs me that a stop at Big Bob Gibson's BBQ (winner of multitudinous BBQ

cook offs) is a must. And I can testify, as a novice mind you, that it was great BBQ. Tire gets fixed. I'm at the Morgan County archives, which is in a wonderful old converted bank. The vault door is left open so one can see the archival material filed therein. I am seeking tax records. I'm informed that the infamous fire/flood/other natural disaster that one hears about so frequently has destroyed records prior to the 1890s. I do locate a copy of my grandfather Solomon's will, which has sentimental value because it contains the signatures of all my aunts and uncles. I do locate a copy of my grandmother Ada's will, which indicates that these were people of means (shares of Alabama Power Company?). I do locate a document that serves to clarify why great uncle C.P. Sykes had a wife and daughter whose age difference was 11 years (second wife, daughter by first marriage). No slaveholder records - I have been denied. I return to my hotel in time to hear Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention that evening - my spirits are lifted.

On Wednesday, I decide to venture into Lawrence County, which abuts Morgan to the west. F.W. Sykes of Lawrence is not only my great grandfather according to family history but he is listed in Tom Blake's Large Slaveholders of 1860 and African American Surname Matches from 1870 as well. Upon entering the archives, I'm greeted by a cheerful volunteer who apologizes for the absence of the two staff members, both away due to family illnesses. She hopes she can assist me. I show her the copy of the family portrait of Solomon, in his moiré smoking jacket with his wife, all adult children and first grandchild. The volunteer is elated - do I know when this was taken? Can I identify all the people? Could they have a copy for the SYKES family file? She knows a reporter for the Decatur Daily - would I consent to an interview? I reply with hesitation "Of course". She informs me the reporter will come by when the archives reopen at 1 P.M.

As I peruse the SYKES family file, I find a number of references to F.W. and his family including a 1909 newspaper article about presentation of his portrait at the capitol in Montgomery. This is almost as gratifying as seeing it first hand! I collect numerous photocopies of documents to be more closely scrutinized later and assemble my materials in preparation for the archives' lunchtime closure.

When I return, I meet Deangelo McDaniel, a lifelong resident of the area, a member of the Board of Directors of the Lawrence County Historical Commission and soon to become my genealogy angel. I show him the portrait and tell my story again. He immediately directs me to tax assessments from 1848 and 1849 where F.W.'s slaves are listed by name; Laura is there in both years. He also shares an index of the Lawrence County 1866 AL census - I had missed an entry for Rebecca Garth in reviewing the microfilm in Montgomery.

On Thursday, my next-to-last day, I return to Moulton for the interview. Deangelo and I had spent so much time talking the previous day that it had to

be re-scheduled. He took notes as I talked about my family's oral history and discoveries to date. Deangelo has been conducting research on African American Civil War veterans in the North Alabama and hopes to publish his findings.

On Friday, my final day in Alabama, I have an invitation to breakfast with Ms. Athelyne Banks, age 96, a family friend, community activist and bridesmaid in my Aunt Estelle's (b.1894) wedding. When I arrive, the table is set with the best silverware and china and we dine on an exquisite Southern breakfast of fried pork chops, fried apples, grits and sliced tomatoes. She tells me how my Uncle Newman had reset her previously broken arm as a young girl, allowing her to bend it normally again. (My cousin had told me the identical story a few weeks earlier but didn't know Ms. Banks was the patient).

After our visit, I decide to search for the church mentioned in Grandfather Solomon's obituary. When I reach First Missionary Baptist Church, a gentleman is repairing a lock. I ask if the name Solomon Sykes was familiar to him. "Could I mean S.S.Sykes?" he asks. Inside the church are luminous Art Moderne-type windows that virtually glow as the light shines through. At the bottom of each window are the names of the congregants who'd sponsored them. Two are attributed respectively to "N. M. Sykes, MD S. S. Sykes Family" and "Club A, S. S. Sykes Capt". Outside the church, I find a an Alabama Historical Commission plaque that reads in part "...At this time Dr. Sterrs, S. S. Sykes, and G. F. Oliver secured a \$1460 loan to purchase the present property where St. Ann's Catholic Church was once located. The present church was designed by prominent African American architect W. A. Rayfield in 1921 and constructed for \$1250. " Further, the cornerstone reveals S. S. as a church trustee. I agree to send a copy of the family portrait to Mr. Leonard Raybon, the deacon who had been repairing the lock, for their archives. Once again, the ancestors' spirits are with me. I could have just as easily found an empty parking lot at the church. This spur-of-the-moment pursuit has been so rewarding...

Once I return home, I send thank you notes to those who had been so helpful in my search. I bask in the information I've uncovered. This adventure has spoiled me - would I ever be able to find as much information on future trips? I console myself with one of my research mantras - the joy isn't in the records, it's in the journey.

Indebted to all who lent assistance,  
Alice M. Sykes  
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