

# LIFE IN MISSISSIPPI: NEGRO MOTHERHOOD

by Rita Walker

(25 years old)

In 1963 I was going to have a baby. My husband worked at Southern Brick and Tile. He had insurance on the whole family at the Azashian hospital, so the hospital superintendant and the doctor did not have to worry about the money. But I was still black--that's what counted in their book.

The doctor that waited on me all through my pregnancy told me that when I got in labor to come to the hospital at once. I went the day I got in labor which was on a Sunday at about 2 p.m. The nurse called him about 30 minutes after I was there, and he came over--his house was only a block away from the hospital.

So he came over and he checked me, and he said, "Your water has broke."

And I said, "Yes, sir, it broke yesterday."

And he said, "You are not ready to come up here."

And I said, "Sir, but you told me to come when I got in labor and that's what I did."

He said, "Yes, but you go back home and if you continue to hurt, you can come back and I will put you to bed."

About 10 p.m. that night I was hurting so badly I couldn't sit or lie still. So I asked the next door neighbor to take me to the hospital. She carried me up, and the nurses ignored me. A friend of mine named Lillie Smith was with me, and so was my husband.

My husband asked the nurse Mrs. King if she would call the doctor, and she said, "Sit her in the sitting room until her pains get five minutes apart, and then call me if I'm still on duty."

Lillie spoke and said, "Nurse, this girl is really hurting. She needs to be put to bed right away so she can get some rest."

The nurse looked me up and down again and again and she said, "Were you here once today?"

I said I was. She walked off.

At 12 o'clock another nurse came down the hall, and she gave me one of those dirty looks and said, "Are you sick?" And I told her yes, and she looked me over three or four times.

And my husband said, "Would you please call the doctor?"

She said, "He is asleep. What time do you think people go to bed?"

My husband then said, "Will you just call him? Maybe he will get up after all. My wife went to him every week before now."

At exactly 1:45 a.m. she decided to call him, and he told her to give me some kind of pills, and if the pains were false, the pills would stop them, and she should send me home. They would not put me to bed. I sat in a hard chair from 10 o'clock until 2 a.m., when my husband called George Clark's taxi and he carried me home.

There was a white lady that lived not far away, and my mother said maybe if Mrs. Bessie carried me down, they would accept me. So she carried me on up at 5 o'clock in the morning. The pills had not done me any good. She carried me in and told them to bring a wheel chair out and get me. They did and she left.

My husband asked the nurse to call the doctor, and she said, "There's the phone. You call."

So he did, and the doctor wanted to talk to the nurse. He told her to give me two hyperdermic shots and put me to bed. They did, and I got dizzy and went to sleep.

I woke up at 7 a.m. and the baby was coming, and there was nobody in my room with me but Lillie. Never did they take me to the delivery room, and Lillie was calling, "Nurse, nurse, come here. The baby is coming!" Finally one of the nurses' aides came and said to me, "Hold it. You can't have the baby in here. It's against the law." And she yelled back for a nurse who came in with the same thing like hold it. I was in great pain and could not hold it and the baby came. So they called the doctor and he came 30 minutes later and said, "I know you are going to get me fired." And he went on to tell me that the nurses should have called him.

I said, "My husband called and you didn't bother to come."

He said, "Well, the nurse knew better than to have him call me. They knew it was their place to call."

He didn't do anything but charge me \$50.

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After I left the hospital, Dr. Edward didn't ask me back for a six week checkup. And when I left the hospital, I had to carry my baby out to the car while my husband carried my baggage. They didn't once tell the nurses' aide to carry the baby. He was two days old.

When my baby was two months old, he got sick with the flu and a sore throat. I called Dr. Edward, and he told me to bring the baby to the office. The secretary told me that the doctor was out on a house call and that he would be back in a little while. Then she added, "But it's better for you to bring the baby on up." I told her I had four more children at home and it was winter and it was about a half a mile to the office. So I called back later and spoke to the doctor, and he told me to bring the baby on up and he would wait for me, because if he came to my house, it would be seven dollars for a house call. So I wrapped up my baby real good and left my eight year-old with the other three and went to the office.

When I got there, the doctor and his secretary were having a conversation. I asked him if he would check my baby because he was mighty sick.

He looked up and said, "Why, Rita, I didn't know it was your baby."

I said, "You didn't know when I told you and told the secretary who I was and what I wanted over the phone?"

And he replied, "Well, if I had known it was you, I would have crawled to you, because you didn't think I did you fair in the hospital." He went on to say, "Anyway, a little baby like this you could just pick up and carry better than I could come to you."

And I said, "Yes, sir, what you mean is that I can walk faster than you can drive."

And he said, "No, it's not that. It's just that you would have had to pay the doctorbill plus the house call and as poor as you are, that money you would pay for a house call you could use for meat and a loaf of bread."

I felt so badly. What could I do? What could I say? My child was sick, really sick. I didn't have any choice. You see, it's not bad to be a Negro--it's bad to be treated as a Negro in the South. Sometimes my burdens get so heavy I can't hardly make it, but I take them to the Lord and leave them there. I was born and raised in Mississippi, but to show you what I really think about it, I would rather be in the North hungry than to be in Mississippi full.