Learning To Talk "Southern"

Article by Gloria Woolard

This article is different from all others in Life on the Pamlico because it does not involve an interview with a subject. But, rather, it is the observations of a student, Gloria Woolard. Gloria is a native of New York State, who has lived in eastern North Carolina for 14 years. In a paper originally written for a composition class, Gloria stated that the most difficult thing about moving from New York to North Carolina was the breakdown in communication. In short, in order to understand and to be understood, she had to learn to "talk Southern." Her account of this sometimes difficult process follows.

How many Southerners realize how difficult it is to be a "Yankee" living in the South? It has taken this "Yankee" fourteen years to perfect the art of speaking "Southern."

I had only been a resident of the South for a year when I moved to Washington, N. C., with my newly acquired husband, Charles. Charles is a "born and raised" Washingtonian, so this town is home to him.

As the new Mrs. Charles W. Woolard, Jr.,
I had no choice but to be involved with his family. Conversations with Charles' family—especially "Graddaddy, Grandmama, Daddy, and Mama"—were utterly ridiculous! We spent most of our time trying to figure out what each other was saying! We usually ended our conversations with a puzzled facial expression and a polite grin.

Not only did I have bad experiences with Charles' family; I also had some difficulty with some of our local merchants. I walked into a children's clothing store and was greeted by a saleslady. She asked if she could help me. I answered "yes" and told her I was looking for some socks. (I pronounced "socks" as "sacks" at that time.) She pulled out every sack she could find! I just kept repeating the word "sack" and nodding my head "no." As a last effort, I spelled the word "sock."

After two years of these unpleasant conversations, I decided that, if I were going to survive, I would have to learn to speak "Southern." Learning the vocabulary of the Southern dialect is similar to learning a foreign language. The most important word and the most difficult word to pronounce is "yawl" (you all). In fact, there are times that I catch myself pronouncing "yawl" incorrectly. But I must have some Yankee blood remaining in my veins because there are some Southern pronunciations and words that I refuse to adopt. Some of these words are "arn" (iron), "bad off" (sick), "bawl" (boil), "costes" (costs), "onlyest" (only), "fur" (fire), "tar" (tire), "youngins" (children), "ever how much" (what).

My conclusion is that to be a true Southerner, one must be born and raised in the South.