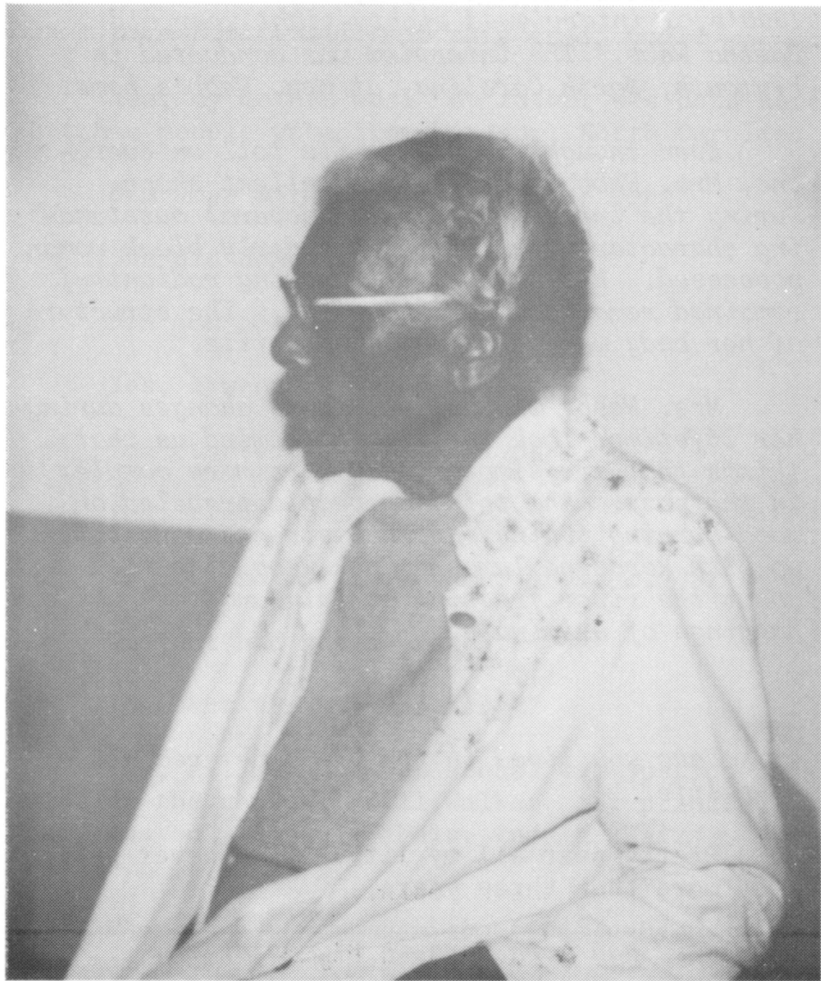


# Mrs. Bertha Webb of Plymouth



Mrs. Bertha Webb of Plymouth  
was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on  
the 12th of May, 1857. She was educated  
in the common schools of her native town,  
and attended the State Normal School at  
Boston, Massachusetts, where she received  
her diploma in 1881. She has since  
been engaged in teaching in various  
schools in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

*Article by Ginger Lilley*

*To determine the way of life in the early 1900's, I interviewed eighty-eight year old Bertha Webb. The interview was conducted in Plymouth, North Carolina, at Mrs. Webb's home.*

*Even though time takes its toll on everyone, Mrs. Webb is still in excellent shape. During the interview, I noted several outstanding characteristics that the elderly black woman possessed. Her skin, still glowing radiantly, remained remarkably wrinkle free. The structure of her body was very frail and petite.*

*Mrs. Webb, who has seen many changes during her lifetime, took the time to remind us that things that are simple today were more complex in the past. She told how people traveled on wood-burning trains, and how streets were lit up with kerosene lamps. Mrs. Webb also told about the river freezing solidly and the public hangings of criminals.*

*Have you lived in the Plymouth area all of your life?*

*Pretty near all my life. I've never stayed away more than three years.*

*Were you born here in Plymouth?*

*Yes, I was.*

*I'd like to ask about your past, about your family. Would you tell us about your family? What did your daddy do?*

My daddy, he worked in New Jersey. He'd leave her [mother] the last of May or the first of June and come back the last of October. He worked for a lady, Mrs. Richardson, for about 30 some years.

*Your family was from this area, too?*

Yes, my mother was. My father was born here, but his people were from Windsor, North Carolina.

*Did your mother do any type of work?*

She did domestic work.

*Did you go to school here?*

Yes, I went to school here.

*You started in first grade?*

Yes, right here in Plymouth.

*How was school back then, around 1903?*

We just had seven grades.

*You went through all seven?*

Yes, all seven. The school was just on this side of the church. Will Walker, our principal, was on a [wheel] chair, rode a chair around.

*What do you remember about the subjects you took? What did you study?*

Well, we took reading, spelling, arithmetic, English, sanitation, geography, history. History was my best subject. I liked history, and I liked reading.

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*You said you went through seven grades?*

Yes, seven. I went to Edenton to ENI [Edenton Normal Institute] for a while. I didn't stay; I got sick and had to come home. I had typhoid fever. I didn't finish.

*Did you get married young?*

Well, I was between 19 and 20 when I got married. I was married in 1918.

*What kind of work did your husband do?*

My husband was a porter [on a train]. He rode from Norfolk to New Bern on one and from Norfolk to Raleigh on the night train.

*How did he like it?*

He liked it, but he liked to change around. He worked on Seaboard. That train left here seven every morning, got back seven every night. We had four trains in here a day.

*What were his duties as a porter?*

Well, he'd take luggage and sometimes get tickets when the conductor was busy. 'Course, I didn't have to pay nothing.

*Did you ride much on the train?*

Yes, that's 'bout all I did. I was a seamstress for about 20 years.

*After you were married?*

After I was married. But I sewed some before I was married; but after I was married, I sewed steady for 20 years.

*Did you have any children?*

No, no children. I was married 57 years. For four years I lived in Virginia.

*Getting back to the trains, did you enjoy riding on the train?*

Oh, my gracious, yes!

*Describe to us what it was like riding on the train.*

It was more comfortable than buses.

*Had good food on it then?*

Yes, they had a Pullman where you could eat.

When we were first married, my husband worked on a steamer up and down the river. Along then all kinds of boats came through here. My husband, after we stopped going north, became the first colored chauffeur for Key-keffer, the manager of the mill before Weyerhaeuser came in.

*What were his duties as chauffeur?*

He did all the driving. He went all the time. He'd pick up the men and carry them different places--Raleigh, Charlotte.

*Did he have to take care of the car?*

Yes.

*Did he have to wash it and wax it?*

Yes, he took care of the car he drove.

*What kind of car was it?*

I can't really say. A big car. A nice car.

*He had to wear a uniform and a cap?*

Yes.

*Could you tell us about the time the river froze over and people rode buggies across it?*

That was [a story of] my uncle. I don't remember what year it was. They carried the mail from here to Edenton. He had two children, and his wife he carried in a carriage across the river. That was before I was born. He told me about it.

*Mrs. Webb remembered more about the trains of yore.*

The trains were woodburners. You would see the wood piled up all along the way. My grandmother lived in Pinetown. My step-grandfather worked with Mr. Surry Parker there. [See "Vernon Waters of Pinetown," Life on the Pamlico, Spring, 1984, for more about Pinetown.] He owned everything. I even rode the [engine] cab of the New Bern freight. I also rode in the boxcar. It had little seats on it.

*Do you remember the bank and the shoe store in Pinetown?*

No, but I remember the store and the old hotel. We didn't get things like we do now. The drummers would come in, and you had to give your order.

*Do you remember the big hotel on the water-*

*front in Plymouth?*

Yes, yes! The Riverview Hotel. There was another on Washington Street. It was a big, beautiful hotel with a big lobby and we kids would go peep through the window.

There was a five-and-dime store, too. Someone built a store that had running baskets. People took your money and put it in a basket and sent it up to people up high in a booth. They'd send your stuff on back to you. It was fun for us children.

*The basket ran down a wire?*

That's right.

*When you were growing up as a girl, I don't guess anybody had electricity?*



*Ginger and her mother listen intently to Mrs. Webb.*

No, no electricity.

*Some of the things we take for granted today, like electric lights and all that, what did you do for those?*

Well, most people had fireplaces and used coal and wood.

*How about your light?*

Well, we had lights on the streets and stoves. We had little lights; I reckon you've seen pictures of them. Well, a lady would come by every evening with her husband and fill those lamps with kerosene and light the wicks.

*How did you keep your food refrigerated?*

There wasn't but one way to keep that. Some people put it outside high in a tree, and that's where they'd keep it cool.

*Did you have an ice wagon come around here?*

Yes. We had an ice house here. The first electricity we had to come here was the ice house who furnished their own electricity.

*And the wagons would come around and people would buy ice?*

That's right. You could buy a big piece for five cents. Would last you all day.

*Do you remember the first time you saw a car?*

The first time I saw a car I didn't like them. The doctor was the first one to have a car around here. He'd go through here flying, and chickens, hogs, and cows were scattering,

'cause along then they were allowed to keep the stock out, you know. They were gettin' out the way for the doctor.

*Mrs. Webb remembered that shopping habits were different.*

Of course, when you bought your groceries, you'd go to one store, and to get your cosmetics and things you'd have to go to another. You didn't buy everything in one store.

*When was the first time you saw a radio?*

Oh, a long time ago. I was in Baltimore.

*What was your favorite program on radio?*

Amos and Andy, Fred Allen, and the midget [Johnny] on Phillip Morris, and, especially, Lum and Abner, the two old men who had a store.

*Do you remember the silent movies?*

Yes.

*Did you like those?*

I liked them pretty good then. I've seen some good ones.

*How would they have the music for them?*

Somebody played.

*Local person?*

I imagine they were. You wouldn't see them unless they came up on stage to sing.

*Do you remember the first time you saw an airplane?*

The first time was in 1914. It used to come over here and advertise different things.

*Don't you remember the E. C. Blimp, the thing like a big balloon?*

Yes, one used to come from Norfolk to Wilmington. Everybody had to go out and look at it.

*What type of medical care did you get? Did you have hospitals?*

Lord, no! The nearest one was Washington.

*What would you do when somebody got hurt or sick?*

They transported them by train.

*Do you remember hangings?*

I remember one. I can see it now. Right on the scaffold.

*They used to hang people out in public?*

Yes, in public.

*Was there a big crowd?*

The whole county was up here.

*I bet it was awful, wasn't it?*

I didn't see it; I ran all the way back home. I didn't see it when they killed him, but I saw the preacher go up to talk to him. I couldn't watch it; I was too nervous.

*What do you consider to be the biggest difference between Plymouth now and the way it*

*used to be when you were young?*

It's like another place. We didn't have any big buildings. And all downtown was a brick sidewalk. We had to do everything by hand: wash, iron, sew. To iron you used the stoves or fireplaces to heat the irons. You'd fire up the wood and then set the irons real close. That's how you'd iron.

*Wash clothes by hand?*

Yes.

*You used a scrubboard?*

A washboard.

*What type of games did you play?*

Checkers, bobjacks, dominoes, and Old Maid cards.

*You had more family activities than people have now?*

Yes, you would have house parties and dinner parties. We had to make our entertainment. It was a little different.

*At parties would you all sing together and things like that?*

Yes. We would sing, play piano, and pedal organs.

*Did you sit out on the porches a lot because of the heat?*

Yes, in the summer. But the mosquitoes were so bad that the people would make smokes to drive the mosquitoes away. We used screens

from Norfolk. We also had a great big thing that went all above your bed to keep mosquitoes out. It was called mosquito netting.

*Did neighbors visit a lot back then?*

Yes, they were much closer then. If anything happened to you, they would come in and take care of you. They'd do everything--night or day. You didn't have to worry about help, like now.

*Was the church stronger then?*

Yes, I think so. We had Sunday school, morning church, evening church. Then on Thursday we had prayer meetings. It would be a crowd there. It was much fun, very pleasant. I was a Methodist, and we had a lot of conference meetings.

*Did you have bakeries?*

Oh, yes! You could get a whole loaf of bread for a nickel. Or you could get a pan of buns for a nickel. They were the best buns! They also had good cakes and pies.

*Did they have preserves?*

Yes, they had this jelly that was real red and came in tubs. You could buy a pound of it for 10 or 15 cents.

*Did you sew a lot of your own clothes?*

Yes, I made all my clothes. I had a Singer Pedaler.

*What was Christmas like when you were young?*

It was so wonderful. We exchanged cakes

and turkeys with neighbors. If you got a box of handkerchiefs or a novelty, you were really lucky. We also got candy, oranges, coconuts, and apples, also, firecrackers. We also had parties where we'd serve eggnog and homemade wine.

*Shortly after the turn of the century, one aspect of social life was quite different from the way it is now, Mrs. Webb recollects.*

I remember when they had three open bars, right here in Plymouth! We'd walk by, but women just didn't go in. Men could go in and buy whiskey [by the drink].

*Do you remember the first World War?*

Yes. My husband Charlie was in it. We were married while he was in the service. He came home and wanted to get married; I didn't want to; Papa was away, and I told him he'd have to ask Mama. I didn't think he'd ask Mama. We were married September 21, 1918; then he went on back to camp. He was stationed at Camp Lee in Virginia. He would come home every weekend.

*Do you hope to live a lot longer?*

I had a severe heart attack. They didn't have much hope for me, but the Lord wasn't ready for me.

*What do you think has caused you to have a happy life?*

Well, I had a good husband. He had his ways, and I had mine. We grew up together. He was my first boyfriend. He was nice to me; he took me everywhere he went. I loved traveling.



My husband was a man who liked to be his own boss. When he quit at the pulp mill, he went into business for himself.

*What kind of business did he do?*

He fished on the river. He loved fishing and hunting.

*So he became a fisherman?*

Yes. He caught all kinds of game. He sold muskrat, mink, raccoons, and bear at the market. A local doctor bought 25 or 50 from Charlie to make his wife a coat. He was a good hunter. I loved wild deer and muskrat, but he wouldn't eat it.

*Did you like bear meat?*

Not so much. It's coarse.

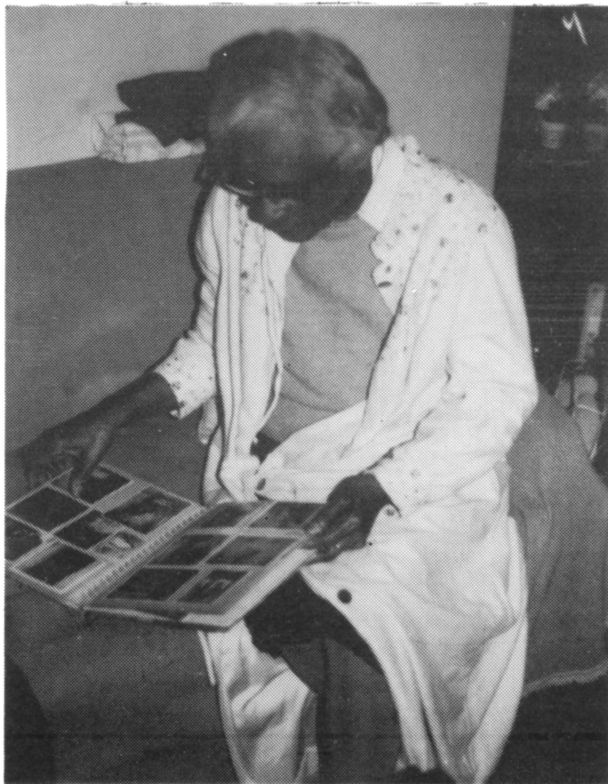
*Mrs. Webb remembers eyewitness accounts from her relatives of Civil War days.*

When the troops during the Civil War came in here, the soldiers destroyed everything. My grandmother and her three children had to hide in a cellar of an old store. Her owner, 'cause she was a slave, hid them there. This was when the Ram Albermarle came through and sank so many ships.

*This concluded our conversation with Mrs. Bertha Webb. Someday people will remember her eyewitness account of the early 20th century around Plymouth as she remembers her relatives' remembrances of the Civil War.*

*Mrs. Webb's strength and willingness to*

*accept life the way it is encourages me to look forward to my life as an older person. I'm interested in seeing how much things will change from the life Mrs. Webb explained to me to the time I'm her age. Talking to Mrs. Webb taught me how people used to live in my hometown, Plymouth. Her endurance, dignity, and graciousness led her to live a fulfilling life and, also, made her a very pleasant person to talk to.*



*Mrs. Bertha Webb remembers the old times.*