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Ethnography of the Hemphill family tree

In the day and age we live in, we seem preoccupied by the noisy hustle and bustle. The majority of us hardly ever have the time to tend to our own thoughts and personal affairs, let alone do ethnographic work on our own family history and lineage. The opportunity for me to do field work into my own family is an opportunity. Although this is a paper that covers the matrilineal history of my mother’s lineage, we will still be starting out with the history of the Hemphill name. This paper, however, will talk about the past, lost history of the Hemphill family. From there we will cover the present state of the Hemphill family and all close relatives. Lastly, we will close with solutions for the future of the Hemphill family. It is very important for me to learn these things and present them to my audience. It makes me happy to get to share this information.

My family history runs back to times prehistoric, this I am certain of. It would be a true treasure to unlock the past and be able to see and greet my distant ancestors. The great ones from thousands of years ago we hear talked about today. The civilizations that we see today in ruins and the forgotten technology it took to build them. This would be nice to trace my lineage back into that forgotten time. However, history as it is recorded has its ups and downs. It was the fate of a group of my more recent ancestors though, as tragic as it was, that started a new history, recorded here in these modern times. With new bloodlines established, this new history starts with a new name, “Hemphill”. Hemphill is not an indigenous name for my family.
Hemphill was simply the label applied in my family’s most recent naming event. The place where they took on the name was Hazel’s Plantation in Washington County, Mississippi. The tragic fate my recent ancestry encountered was an event in history we are all familiar with called slavery. My matrilineal roots were impacted by this event greatly. We will see later how much of an effect this history has had on the living relatives today and their lives. For now, it is time to go back and revisit some of the lost history of the Hazel plantation.

The plantation got its name “Hazel Plantation” from the owner Richard Hemphill who named the plantation after his wife Hazel Hemphill, whom later left it to their daughter who was also named Hazel. This all took place sometime in the 1800’s. Dates have not been preserved that well, but we do have a general time period this history took place in. I am not sure exactly how many generations had passed there at that plantation. The plantation may have had another name. However we can start tracing history with my Great-great grandfather Melvin Hemphill. There is not much history left behind about him, but we believe he was born a slave on the Hazel plantation.

The actual accounts of life on the plantation are lost. There is neither a diary nor letters from anyone associated with Hazel Plantation only the slave houses that describe the cruelty of existence are left standing. What history teaches us is that people that went through that experience were forever scared. From the little bit of information that I do have, I know that he was a field hand and his daily duties took place in the field at the plantation. Some of his other duties consisted of plowing other fields and hauling wagons pulled by mules to and from Leland, Mississippi and back to Greenville, Mississippi. I was not there, but as I vision the stories and take into account all that we have been exposed to in modern history about the treatment of slaves, I can come to the conclusion on their behalf, that this was truly a definition of hell on
earth. I can’t imagine being born into a nightmare, as we clearly see this to be the case for all of our African-American ancestors who suffered this painful experience. Being born into a world where you have no rights or freedom at all.

Melvin’s son, Pervis Hemphill, would share a similar fate even though slavery had come to an official end. The spirit and the mind set of slavery continued to define the world of Washington County, Mississippi. I could not find any records on the mother of Pervis. We do not know who my Great-great grandfather was with to bring about Pervis. Unfortunately, the history of the materilineage is unknown prior to the marriage of Pervis Hemphill and Maggie Poole. Not much is known about my Great Grandmother Maggie or who her family was either. These times, for most families in the South that have this history in their roots, is choppy and unclear the further you try to go back and reclaim it. This is the case with the Hemphill family and any links to more distant relatives. Purvis was my Great Grand Father and Maggie was my Great Grand Mother. Dates on their births are not known either. We do know that Maggie was a cook on the old Hazel Plantation. Although they may not have been recognized as a plantation, the tasks of the field and house still needed to be done. Purvis and Maggie were still living at that residence all the way up to the birth of my grandfather James Hemphill. Lots of Blacks that had been slaves continued to reside on the farm doing similar tasks to those that were done by slaves. My Grandfather James was born on the farm, but not technically considered a slave. James was the son of Purvis and Maggie, and also the Father of my Mother. He lived at that farm all the way up till nearly the 1940’s. This is at least three generations of male patriarchs born to work the lands of this farm. Shortly after he left the farm he met my Grandmother, Gladys Johnson, a southern Black girl with a similar story in her roots.
These are the parents of my Mother (above picture). My “Grandma Gladys” (as we used to call her when we were kids) had a similar story to my Grandfather James. Her family roots go back to New Orleans. There is less history preserved on my mother’s matrilineal side than the very few patriarchs we have recorded. Albert Johnson Sr. is my Grandmother’s Grandfather (my Great-great grandfather), he too was also a slave. He was the property of a sugar plantation. We do not have hardly any information on my Great-great grandmother other than her name was Kate. It is very sad that the elder’s in my mother’s lineage have so little family history preserved. My Great-great grandmother Kate was a house slave. She cooked for the plantation and her owners. We know they had a son Albert Jr. He married a Native American woman by the name of Elma. I am not sure if they were in the same situation as the Hemphill’s back at the Hazel plantation (born into generational slavery). Not much can be said about her maiden name or any of her family. We do know that her Mother was called Grandma “Gurt”. As I got the information from the elders in my family, it was made clear that both of
their parents were slaves as well. As we can see this is far too common when you dig into my Mother’s roots. This is just some of the burdens that come along with the long term consequences of an event like slavery. We will shortly return to a fuller discussion of the deeper psychological issues created by slavery’s family scrambling process. Albert and Elma went on to have nine children, my Grandma Gladys being the oldest. As you can put together from following the Hemphill line, James and Gladys “hooked up”. They produced a total of 14 children. These are my Mother’s siblings. Some of the children were born in the same house you see my Grandma standing in front of in the above picture. Below you can see the picture of my Great Grandmother and Great Grandfather.

With all of this oppression, exploitation and unknowable family history, you would think the people in my family would be crazy. In fact that is just the case when it comes to my family today as we will see. When you do the field work and ethnography, you see that the survivors are still greatly affected. We see their being affected manifested in many different
ways. For example, we see an overall, but not total, lack of love amongst each other. Different from what you see in families that do not share a slave's history. We have examined a family history where the members and their progeny were bred like livestock. People were not viewed as humans, but commodities for labor, sex and reproduction. Even though the act of slavery is no more, the effects of this act are very much alive. This brings us to the section of this paper where we discuss the present state of the Hemphill family.

This is my Mother's lineage and I love them dearly. I took my time when coming up with a proper analysis that best fits them. I often wonder what type of lives the 14 children of my Grandma Gladys would have had, if there was no history, of slavery ever having happened. The family values that you see in a strong family that has its roots embedded in closeness and love differ greatly. We see for example an "every man themselves" type of approach taken by members of the family, rater than a caring and compassionate approach. This becomes more evident as the generations progress. Survival of the meanest is seen at work here, when doing an analytical breakdown. When we look into it, we see that the whole concept of family and personal identity has been jaded to a strong degree. We study the functions of the family in the classroom. The manifest functions that are identified in class are not the qualities common to the members of the Hemphill family. There are some family members who are compassionate and want nothing but the best for the family as they recognize the condition too. I would not be able to present these fragments of forgotten history if everyone was unconcerned. My Aunt Minnie Hemphill-Pearson (as seen in the picture below seated in the middle), provided me with all of the lovely pictures that I have included. My Mother is seated to the left of her in the green blouse.
The image above includes all of Grandmother Gladys’ and Grandfather James’ daughters (plus one of their granddaughters). There were seven girls and seven boys. Since we are following the matrilineal side, we will cover the women. The oldest girl is my Aunt Minnie.

Next we have my aunt Barbra in the leopard print standing behind Minnie. We have my Mother Delores to the right of Minnie in the green. Shirley is my next Aunt in line wearing the purple and black plaid dress to the rear of Minnie. Linda is the fifth one down from the top. She is the one wearing the sunglasses. Deborah is the second to last. She can be found standing behind her Daughter Marsha. Marsha is a granddaughter to Gladys and James. Last but not least we have my Aunt Gail. She is in the far left side in the rear wearing the green blazer. As I said before, Gladys and James had a total of 14 children. A complete list of them are: Minnie Hemphill-Pearson, she lives here in Champaign and is a retired teacher from Dr. Howard Elementary School. She is married and has two children. The next child in line is Johnny Hemphill. He is not married and still lives in Greenville. Barbra Hemphill is the next child down in the order of
all the children. She still lives in Greenville as well. She has been a manager of the local Pizza Inn for many years. She is not married either. Robert Hemphill is up next, he lives in Greenville as well. He has managed to own and operated a successful trucking business and he is not married. Willie Hemphill is the next one, he is deceased. He had a total of 22 children that we know of but more of them continue to surface as the years progress. Even after his death. We move on to Albert Hemphill, he too is deceased. He worked for the Greenville City Council for many years before his death. Next is my mother Delores Hemphill- Hendricks. She lives here in Champaign and has recently been remarried following her divorce from my father. She has worked in the surgery department of Provena Hospital for over 30 years. Shirley Hemphill is the next in line. She lives in Greenville and has been a widow for nearly 10 years. We come now to Charles Hemphill. He is not married and has been living in Denver for the last few years. He has no plans on moving back to Greenville. Linda Hemphill is my next in line working our way down from the top. She is a still living in Greenville and is not married. We move on now to Deborah Hemphill. She still lives in Greenville and has no plans in leaving. Jimmy Hemphill is a sibling with whom we have lost contact. I am not sure where he is living or his marital status. Second to last we have my Aunt Gail Hemphill. She is still living in the house next door to my Grandmother’s and has no plans on moving out of Greenville. Last but not least we have the youngest of Gladys’ and James’ children, James Hemphill Jr. He is deceased. He was gunned down by people he knew right around the corner from my Grandma’s house, in Greenville, Mississippi. This completes the list of children begat by Gladys and James. There are a couple hundred grandchildren, great grandchildren and great-great grandchildren in all stemming from this one couple. You would think that a family of that size would have their roots traceable a lot
further than just a couple generations. This was to me a clear sign in itself, of a people not concerned with their roots.

Before we can look into the future of the Hemphill family with optimism, we must see what it is in the present that is tearing them apart. I noticed the ones that broke free of that geographical region of Greenville, Mississippi, and traveled elsewhere, have been able to achieve a mental state seemingly impossible to achieve in Greenville. The history that my family has in those southern regions still plays out in the subconscious minds of the members of the Hemphill family. When you know that your family has a legacy of being a slave, then you somehow feel like a part of that legacy. That coupled with the fact that you still are living, in close vicinity to the place where it all happened, creates a strong force to battle. This is also the case when I look at my generation. The cousins of mine that have stayed seem to be falling into the same patterns. Mentally and emotionally they feel less than human and ready to take on abuse as if it was a necessary part of life. My brother, sister and I were all raised up here in Champaign. We were able to create a totally different perception from the cousins my age who were raised in Mississippi. I also see this to be the case when I see other cousins from the same Gladys and James lineage that were not raised in Greenville. The effects of slavery can be broken when the individuals can be exposed to a higher consciousness that transcends the slave mind. Other members of the family that have been exposed to that higher level agree. Even though the actual act of slavery has been over for some time. Vibrations from that lingering consciousness still impregnate the minds of the Hemphill survivors. The results I have identified all lead in the direction of a migration from out of the Southern region for the younger generation. The South was indeed a place where we got our last names and our families have history. It was also a place where a terrible history took place. A migration from Greenville for
the younger generation would be the best bet for a better survival and movement of the family in a positive direction. This is going to take help from other family members who have made that successful migration. Individuals that did not have my family’s best interest at heart, continued a legacy from our more distant ancestry. The world that that energy was a part of is dead. This is a new day and a new energy field to play on. It is going to take the hard work of the elders and strong ones in the family to bring this curse around to manifest as a dream.

We can conclude with saying, the work is just starting. The information that was presented is just to prepare the mind for the battle. Living here in the North has given my family and I the chance to have a fertile mental ground for planting and growing a new perception. The past is the past and we must move on from it. Sometimes it takes individuals who can see the madness to come and rescue others from it. We are all born with a purpose and hurdles in life sometimes stop us from achieving that purpose. Life is hard enough to deal with, who needs to be carrying a bogus perception on top of that. This ethnographical work has opened my eyes and been a real treat for me on my path. I hope you enjoyed!