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Racism puzzles descendant of plantation slaves

Name: Mae Bell Bledsoe.

Age: 72.

Ancestry: Descendant of slaves who worked on plantations in the South. She grew up as Mae Bell Witherspoon in Arkansas. She believes her family got the name Witherspoon from a slave owner.

Many enslaved Africans gave up their African names when they came to the United States and took the names of their owners.

How slavery affected her family: Bledsoe says her great-great grandfather came to the United States from Africa on a slave ship. She grew up hearing that he was trapped in Africa, tied up and placed on the ship. Her great-grandfather was her last relative to be born into slavery.

But the effects of slavery lingered, she says, in the form of racism she grew up with, having to go to a different school from white children.

When someone in her family died, he or she couldn't go to the local mortuary and could not be buried in the same cemetery as whites.

During the 1940s, Bledsoe's mother worked as a housekeeper for a white family seven days per week for \$7 a week.

"My mom was treated awful," she said. "As a little girl, I could never figure out why we were disliked so much."

Bledsoe, one of 10 children, recalls accompanying her mother to work on one occasion. The family at the house where her mother worked had a little girl the same age as she. But Bledsoe was not allowed to play with her because of the color of her skin.

Bledsoe's father worked as a sharecropper and earned 50 cents a day. Bledsoe herself grew up working in the fields, in Arkansas, Coolidge and Yuma. She moved to Tucson in 1958.

On racism today: Bledsoe believes racism still exists, and much of it stems from what people tell their children.

It would help, she said, if white people would tell their children that it was wrong that white people once owned blacks as slaves.

Black children need to know the truth, too, but it probably doesn't help their self-esteem, knowing how their ancestors were treated, she said.

"White people need to tell the real history to their kids, maybe then discrimination would have ended a long time ago," she said.

"We didn't come over by choice; we were brought here by the white man. Don't hate us. I never did figure out why people hated us. We cooked their food, braided their hair, made their quilts, worked in their fields."

On the concept of the DeWolf family documentary, "Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North," which she hasn't seen:

"It's not something I'd leave the house to see. Maybe I'd look at it if it was on TV, but I already know about

that. I know my great-great grandfather was roped like a dog and put on a ship."

● *Compiled by Stephanie Innes*

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