**INTERVIEW: GROWING UP BLACK IN THE 1930s IN McCULLEYS QUARTERS, ALABAMA**

**Introduction:**

Mrs. Peacolia Barge, born in 1923, lived as a small child in an area called McCulley's Quarters and grew up in Bessemer just outside Birmingham, Alabama. Mrs. Barge completed her college degree after her marriage and then began a long career in teaching. Her grandparents were slaves in Alabama, and her three children are college-educated, professional men and women. She defies all stereotypes, just as Calpurnia does in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The interview that follows was conducted in 1993 and is excerpted from Claudia Durt Johnson's Understanding *To Kill a Mockingbird* to to help support your understanding of stereotyping in the novel.

**Interviewer:** Tell me what you know of your background and ancestry, Mrs. Barge.

**Mrs. Barge:** My mother and father came from two different areas of Alabama. My mother grew up on the Morrisette Plantation in Alabama. We know that my grandmother was a servant there in 1880. My grandmother had more privileges than other servants because she worked in the house rather than in the fields. And she never lived in the slave quarters. When the overseer left the plantation, she and her family were allowed to move into his house. Her father was owned by one Alexander Bryant from Kentucky, and he willed his slaves to his children. From his will, we found that my family that found its way to Alabama was worth $385. All of my great-grandfather's and great-grandmother's children were born in slavery. The curious thing is that even though their children were born in slavery, they weren't married until 1867, after the Civil War. And researching the records, we found that there were a surge of marriages after the War, as if only then were they allowed to be married.

Anyway, the Morrisette Plantation was where my grandmother met my grandfather. They were married in 1884 at a time when we were led to believe few blacks ever married. When I was growing up, I knew nothing about all this. Anything related to slavery, we didn't want to hear it. I don't think any blacks wanted to hear anything about slavery. My mother grew up on the Morrisette Plantation and came to Birmingham when she was 21 years old. My father's people came from the area near Panola, Alabama. This may shock you, but the plantation owner had seven or eight children by two of his slave. One of those offspring, Lorenzo Dancy, was my father's father. We assume my father was illegitimate since there are no records of any marriages there.

**Interviewer:** How was town life near Birmingham different from rural life when you were young?

**Mrs. Barge:** My father seemed to think living near Birmingham was a great improvement over the country. He said he left the country because he hated to be told what to do and he could be more independent in the city. He always said that he would refuse to be treated like a boy. I've been trying to understand my father's rebelliousness. There were times when he would rebuke people who said certain things to him, because he thought everything had something to do with race. Nobody could ever tell him he couldn't have a thing or do a thing. He carried the Bessemer Housing Authority to court in 1954 to keep them from taking his property for a housing project. No black person had ever challenged the Authority. He didn't win, of course -he knew he wouldn't win. But my father would challenge anybody.

... Mother moved to the Birmingham area to get away from a bad personal situation. But lots of people moved off the land because of crop failures. The land was just worn out and the South was suffering from terrible droughts. People got deep into debt-debts that were kept on the books, even when they had actually been paid off. It was hard to challenge the records kept by the landowners. Through the twenties and thirties, many black people hoboed away from the South because they realized that on the farms the more you worked the more you owed. For myself, I was never taken to the country until I was quite a big girl.

**Interviewer:** So, you would describe yourself as a small-town girl, growing up just outside Birmingham?

**Mrs. Barge:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And you are writing a history of that area?

**Mrs. Barge:** Yes, McCulley's Quarters was a place where poor, working class black people, like my mother and father, lived until they could afford to move to a bigger house or could afford to buy their own house. Someone I have contacted wrote me that the area was once part of a plantations slave quarters. Even when we were there, three white families lived in McCulley's Quarters in large houses on the edge of the neighborhood and owned all the other houses. I remember that one white woman in particular, Mrs. Kate, kind of kept up with what was going on in the neighborhood and came around to help when there was sickness or a death in the black families.

**Interviewer:** What were the houses like? the living conditions?

**Mrs. Barge:** They were all shotgun houses, mostly two-room places. No electricity, of course. Even after TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] came to the Birmingham area, we had no electricity until my father, who could be very stubborn and hot-tempered, fought and fought until he managed to get electricity run to our house. The thing we hated most about not having electricity was that we couldn't use a radio. It wasn't until about 1940 that we got a radio.

**Interviewer:** About how large was McCulley's Quarters?

**Mrs. Barge:** It was only about a one-block area, but it had everything we needed-a grocery store and a barber shop and a blacksmith shop.

**Interviewer:** How did a typical little girl spend the day when you were about six years old?

**Mrs. Barge:** Oh, I led a sheltered life. Mother always kept me dressed in the dresses she made and I was kept close around the house. I visited neighbors and played house and read. I never wore slacks or jeans. And I never took part in the boys' rough games. Boys picked berries in the summer and sold scrap iron.

**Interviewer:** As a child, did you have contacts with white people? That is, did you have a sense of yourself as black and without certain opportunities?

**Mrs. Barge:** Except for the few white people who lived in the Quarters, as a child I didn't know many white people or have a sense of being discriminated against. My Friends were right there in the Quarters. There were very, very few children there, so I remember primarily being with the adults. It wasn't until after I started to school that I because aware at we couldn't go to certain parks, couldn't swim in certain places.

During the thirties my mother had to begin taking in washing and ironing for white people, so I began to see the white people she worked for. Then later I came to realize other differences. For example, there were no hospitals for black people. The one or two hospitals that would take black people put them in the based of course the black doctor, who had been taking care of you not be allowed to practice-to attend you in the white

**Interviewer:** Did your family have any contact with white people who were in an economic situation similar to yours-people whom we would call "poor whites"?

**Mrs. Barge:** My mother and I didn't, but my father did at his work. I remember him talking particularly about the woman who worked as a nurse at the factory who always abused any black workers she had to treat who were injured on the job. Many workers would just try to treat their own wounds rather than go to her to help them. Some would pull their own bad teeth for the same reason, rather than be badly treated by some white dentist....

**Interviewer:** Were conditions rougher in the 1930s during the Depression, or was it more or less more of the same?

**Mrs. Barge:** We were always poor, but the Depression was definitely worse. People who had had jobs lost them or, like my father, were laid off for periods of time. And if you worked, the pay was often something like 3 or 4 dollars a week. What my mother always said that people used the old plantation skiffs to survive: growing gardens, canning, making absolutely everything and buying almost nothing.

**Interviewer:** What was education like for African-Americans in Alabama at that time?

**Mrs. Barge:** My mother, growing up on what had been the Morrisette Plantation, was well educated. Churches maintained schools in the country, and children who showed promise as good students were sought out and sent to these schools, if their parents would pay. My mother was sent for a time to Snow Hill Institute. Her parents scraped and picked cotton so that she could attend, but she didn't finish. The last year the crops were too bad, and she couldn't go. Most, of course, were not educated. My father attended school through the third grade only. in my generation, most children I knew attended school, though many left at an early age to go to work. I believe that compulsory schooling to the age of 16 did not come about until about 1941.

**Interviewer:** What occupations were open to African-Americans as you were growing up?

**Mrs. Barge:** For women, aside from domestic work and labor like laundering, the only professions or trades were nursing and teaching. Of course, you only nursed or taught black people. Many women worked as cooks in private homes or restaurants, as maids in private homes or businesses. There were no black sales clerks in stores. Men worked in the mines, in factories, as delivery boys, carpenters, and bricklayers. They could operate elevators, but they couldn't become firemen or policemen or salesmen. Some black men worked as tailors. Those who went into professions became doctors or dentists or principals or preachers within the black community.

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**Interviewer:** What were the legal barriers that African-Americans faced?

**Mrs. Barge:** Well, of course, we weren't allowed to register to vote. Even though I was a schoolteacher for twenty years, I didn't register to vote until the late sixties. There were a few black attorneys who would take on cases, but at least in Birmingham in the thirties and forties, black attorneys couldn't practice in the courthouse. Their very presence in the courtroom was bitterly resented by many people.

**Interviewer:** What was the feeling in the black community about Autherine Lucy's attempt to enter the University of Alabama?

**Mrs. Barge:** They didn't know exactly what to think. But it was horrifying for us. Terrifying. I thought I would have just given up. Everyone was very scared for her life. The older people were especially scared for her. They thought that the people would kill Autherine. There were other cases of black people trying to enter the state universities, in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, at the time. Nobody thought they had much of a chance because every excuse in the world would be brought up. I knew one young woman who was told that she would be accepted, but when her mortgage company heard about it, they threatened to cancel her mortgage. They said if their white customers found out that their company was providing a mortgage for a black person who was trying to go to white schools, they would take their business elsewhere. So they couldn't afford to continue mortgaging her home if she kept trying to go to the university.

**Interviewer:** What about the Montgomery bus boycott?

**Mrs. Barge:** We were always given the same treatment on buses throughout the South that Rosa Parks received. Most of us had to ride the buses. We bought our tickets at the front of the bus and then went around to the back door to get in. A sign marked where the white section ended and the black, section began. if the white section was filled and more white people got on, you were ordered out of your seats and the driver would move the sign back to make the white section bigger. It was a terrible humiliation as well as being terribly uncomfortable. We would be jammed together in the back like sardines. Even worse was when some of the whites would get off and some drivers would refuse to move the sign back up so that we could have more room and a few black people could sit down.

**Interviewer:** Mrs. Barge, despite the difficulties and humiliations you have lived with in the South, you don't seem to put all white people into the same category.

**Mrs. Barge:** No, you shouldn't put people into categories. Many of those bus drivers treated us badly. We disliked them and made fun of them behind their backs. But some of them were good men who were polite and considerate and would even hold the bus for us when they knew we were late. No, not all black people are the same and not all white people are the same.

**Focus Questions:**

1. What does Mrs. Barge know about her ancestry? How does she talk about her family?

2. What were her and her family's living conditions like?

3. When was the first time she noticed a difference between the lives of black people and the lives of white people? From Mrs. Barge's account, what do you think is the most astounding difference?

4. What was school like for Mrs. Barge?

5. What kind of jobs were available to black people in the South?

6. Were black people allowed to vote?

7. Mrs. Barge clearly has a different opinion of white people than her father does. What does she say that proves this? How does her perception of white people differ from her father's? Why do you think that is?

**INTERVIEW: GROWING UP WHITE IN THE SOUTH IN THE 1930s**

**Introduction:**

Like Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the three women in this interview (excerpted from Understanding *To Kill a Mockingbird*) grew up in the deep South of the 1930s. All three were members of what could be described as prominent souther families. .... The three women discuss many of the issues raised in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: how they defined a "good family" (so dear to Aunt Alexandra's heart and so baffling to Scout and Jem); poor whites in Alabama and Florida (very like the Cunninghams); their relationship with African-Americans; and the expectations and realities of those who would grow up to be proper southern "belles."

After reading the interviews, consider the questions below.

**Interviewer:**  In historical fictional stories about the South in the time in which we're interested - the 1930s - one hears frequent reference to what were called "good families" or "old families." What is your understanding of that term?

**Mary Ann:** Gee, I never really thought about it.

**Camille:**  Nobody had very much money. In the Depression years. If your father had a job, you had a good family.

**Mary Ann:** Yes, if your father was gainfully employed.

**Cecil:** Yes, if your mother stayed at home and everyone had a maid or two.

**Camille:**  And a cook.

**Mary Ann:** And a nurse and a yard man.

**Cecil:** But that did not mean you were a wealthy family.

**Mary Ann:** Good families were all good church members.

**Camille:**  We considered ourselves a "good" family, but we were land poor. We owned a great deal of land but it wasn't bringing in any income in the thirties. There was just no cash flow. On the other hand, there was not much tax on land.

**Mary Ann:**  That describes our situation as well at that time.

**Cecil:** I guess I was a city child. Land ownership didn't enter the picture much, though I suppose ours was considered a good family. My father was a lawyer. We had some land in the county that my father went hunting on. But I never thought about land. It just wasn't part of my life.

**Camille:** I think "good" families were differentiated by a certain accent, too.

**Mary Ann:**  It was the way people talked.

**Camille:**  It was the pronunciation of "I." Didn't say "niiice" and "whiiite," dragging the "I" sound out.

**Cecil:**  I think yours and Mary Ann's background are different from mine, growing up in a larger town.

**Interviewer:** In that your father was a lawyer, perhaps your experience is much closer to Scout's in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

**Cecil:**  That's true. Yes, I think so. My father was of the old school. integrity was the byword. They looked down very much on those who cheated and stole, especially from the poor. And I remember him talking about one well-off family who did just that and became very prominent later. It was an attitude. You never cheated anybody, and especially anybody lesser than you. And you never said a cross word or spoke badly to someone who couldn't speak back to you.

**Camille:**  Yes, I think "good" families had a strong sense of responsibility to the people whose lives they could affect. I know when the Depression came and my family's bank failed, their main concern was to see that other people got their money back even if they lost out themselves.

**Mary Ann:** This is interesting, I think. I had a grandfather who was on farmed on our land. She couldn't read. And do you know that her great-grandfather was headmaster of an academy before the Civil War?

**Cecil:** Good gracious!

**Mary Ann:** Then she came from educated people.

**Camille:**  Yet by the thirties her family was sharecropping on my grandmother's farm.

**Interviewer:**  What happened? Was it the war?

**Camille:** My husband always said it was the Civil War. They just went back to the dirt. And they had fought in the Civil War even though they never owned slaves. Many of these men died in the Civil War.

There were lots of widows left with absolutely nothing except a houseful of children to rear. And do you know it was the blacks who took care of these poor white families. They cut wood for them and shared with them and looked in on them. I had experience with another class of poor white people in the thirties in that we lived so close to the railroad station. I remember seeing the bums coming up the street from the railroad station. And I remember seeing our backyard filled with these poor men, eating what my grandmother had given them. They never asked for a handout. They would only ask for work - if they could chop wood, for example.

**Mary Ann:** Our mothers belonged to an organization called the Junior Welfare, a precursor of the Junior League. They helped take care of children whose mothers had to work and helped get food and clothes to the needy. And there was such need.

**Cecil:** Yes, I always thought it was funny that my mother went to help take care of children whose mothers had to work and left her own child to be taken care of by a nurse!

**Interviewer:**  Were you allowed to play with the children of poor whites?

**Cecil:** I don't remember any prohibitions about it. It just didn't come up.

**Camille:** I brought a lot of little children home with me from Stafford School, but I was never allowed to go to their homes. Maybe I was never invited. I did spend one night with the little girl whose father was on the police force. I remember his collection of weapons, including some bloody knives, put a scare into me.

**Mary Ann:** I don't remember playing with what you call poor white children. I do remember two little girls who lived in town whose family had a very tough time. They lived just behind my father's business and I think they resented my better situation. They threatened to beat me up. I was terrified of them.

**Interviewer:** As members of prominent families, what was your relationship with black people when you were little girls of Scout Finch's age?

**Mary Ann:** Your first experience with a black person was with your nurse. And the black people that took care of these little white children instilled in us the most wonderful traits. They stood for everything that was honest and Christian.

**Cecil:**  I remember complaining to my nurse Lessie that a little boy had hit me. And she said, "Well, go hit him back." Part of your character came from your nurses.

**Mary Ann:**  And they were really religious.

**Cecil:** And you minded your nurse.

**Camille:** I remember the black sharecroppers who worked for my grandmother. She supported them all year long and paid all their medical bills. Then when the farming was done, they split the proceeds. She got half and they got half, with the understanding that their medical costs would come out of their half. And they trusted her implicitly. I loved to go down to Hale County on settlin'- up day when they were paid because I could spend the day with the little black children. And that's where I learned to love to dance.

**Mary Ann:**  We were incredibly attached to the black people we knew well.

**Cecil:** But I read somewhere in a book on the South that while the white people felt very attached to the black people back then, the black people didn't feel that way about us.

**Mary Ann:** Still, we were taught to be respectful of black people.

**Camille:** Heavens yes. I would have had my mouth washed out with soap so fast if I had ever referred to a black person with any word other than colored!

**Cecil:**  My parents always used the respectful term "colored."

**Camille:** My main playmates for most of my childhood were black boys. Black families lived on the street behind us and my two best friends came over from there to play football with me. Their names were Josie and Jessie and they were part black, part Indian, and part white. We played football every day. We thought their mother was mean as a snake and we never knew who their father was. Jessie is now president of a black college and Josie owns a highly successful catering business. And I used to pick cotton with a black man and his children.

**Cecil:**  I played with black children, too, but in my own house. I remember when I was a little girl, I begged Mama to let our cook's little girl come play with me. And Mama invited her over and told me not to let her out of the yard because, you know, someone might hurt her feelings.

**Mary Ann:**  I had black playmates, too. I remember a wonderful black girl who played with my sister and me. She was so much fun.

**Camille:** Still, you never went to the houses of black people as a guest.

**Interviewer:** Were you proper, dainty little southern girls?

***A perfect picture of the proper little girl and the ideal family in the South in the 1930s. photo courtesy of Mary Ann Norton Meredith***

**Mary Ann:** I was very fond of dolls. I was kind of a girl-girl. But I also climbed trees. I remember mother saying one day, "Don't you think you're getting too big to be doing tumble-saults on the floor?" But obviously Camille was the real tomboy.

**Camille:** I only played with boys. I played tackle football with boys until I was about twelve or thirteen. One day when I was tackled, I got the wind knocked out of me, and I went home and put on a dress and never played football again.

**Cecil:** I played boys' games too, and my best friend was a boy. We had a club and we initiated new members by feeding them leaves of the elephant-ear plant. We'd give them nose drops with mustard in it. It's a wonder we didn't kill somebody with our initiations.

**Camille:**  I remember hating getting dolls and things for Christmas. I wanted trains and trucks and things that the boys got. We ended up using my dolls to re-enact kidnapping. We'd just throw them out the window.

**Cecil:** I also played jump-rope and jacks, and I skated.

**Camille:**  I remember stopping everywhere on my way home from school. And mother never had to worry about me.

**Interviewer:**  In *To Kill a Mockingbird* , Atticus is reprimanded by Aunt Alexandra and Mrs. Dubose for not dressing Scout properly. Do you remember a special dress code for little girls?

**Cecil:**  I don't remember any taboo against little girls wearing trousers, but we were usually dressed in dresses because I remember my mother saying that little girls should always wear pretty because they spent so much time on their heads.

**Mary Ann:**  We definitely weren't allowed to wear pants to school. It was unladylike to be sunburned. But nobody ever bugged me about it.

**Camille:**  Oh, no.

**Mary Ann:**  Never.

**Cecil:** in those days, blue jeans were really tacky.

**Mary Ann:**  As my husband says, he struggled very hard so as not to have to work in bluejeans.

**Cecil:** Little girls got dressed up in the afternoons and you went to the park. We usually wore little dresses, except in the summer when you wore sunsuits.

**Mary Ann:**  We were dressed up in the afternoon and taken to town, or we would ride to the end of the trolley line and back.

**Camille:** You remember our Sunday School dresses? What I hated was when they got a little too small or a little too shabby, they were converted into everyday dresses.

**Mary Ann:**  Most of our dresses were handmade, smocked. We all wanted to look like Shirley Temple.

**Cecil:**  One exception to handmade dresses were what were called Natalie dresses brought down by these people from New York. They would have special showings, and Mama would buy me one or two Natalie dresses, which you would only wear on very special occasions.

**Mary Ann:** You never went anywhere barefoot.

**Cecil:**  That's quite true. If you saw someone at school barefoot, that was pitiful. The family never appeared around the house half-dressed. And you were always dressed up for dinner. Of course, it was easy when you had someone else serving you dinner.

**Interviewer:**  Was there a special code of behavior for little girls who were expected to grow up to be southern ladies?

**Camille:** Well, it was alright for boys to fight, but girls weren't supposed to. It was perfectly alright for my brother to fight, but I was not allowed to. Of course, I did it anyway.

**Cecil:** Yes, we weren't supposed to, but I did beat up a little boy once. I remember his mother called to complain to Mama, and for once Mama stood up for me. I remember her saying, "Well, he started it and he's two years older than she is and she is a girl."

**Mary Ann:**  Normally, little girls didn't resort to violence. I only had one fight.

**Cecil:** Speech was a biggie, really. There were just certain things you didn't say. You were corrected a lot.

**Mary Ann:**  Correct grammar was extremely important.

**Camille:** We weren't to talk like the black children we played with.

**Mary Ann:**  I can tell you, cuss words were certainly not prevalent. I never heard them.

**Camille:**  I don't remember Mamma and Daddy ever saying a bad word.

**Cecil:**  There were certain coarse words you hear today that I never heard until I was an adult. You were brought up to be a lady, which meant you were not allowed to be coarse.

**Camille:**  Little girls were never allowed to raise their voices.

**Mary Ann:** That's an important point. Ladies and gentlemen never raised their voices.

**Camille:** I was never allowed to say "shut up."

**Mary Ann:**  Mainly what you were taught good manners.

**Cecil:**  And you were never allowed to brag or be sarcastic One word we could never say was "pregnant."

**Mary Ann:**  I knew the word, of course, but I believe I was grown before I ever heard that word spoken aloud. You always said "expecting."

**Cecil:**  There was a certain code of behavior expected on Sundays. We could go down to the beach and get snacks and a coke, but we couldn't drink cokes on Sunday. Many years afterwards I asked my mother why we couldn't drink cokes on Sunday, and she couldn't remember why.

**Mary Ann:** Of course, we didn't play cards or go to the movies on Sunday.

**Interviewer:**  Movie theaters back then weren't even open on Sundays, were they?

**Camille:**  I think that changed with air-conditioning. People would go to the movies on Sunday to get out of the heat.

**Cecil:**  I don't know that we can say that the three of us were typical of little southern girls.

**Mary Ann:** It was a carefree time for us. We certainly seemed to live in a kinder, gentler world.

**Focus Questions:**

1. What do these three ladies have in common about their ancestry? How do they talk about their families?

2. What were the three ladies living conditions like?

3. What were these ladies' first experiences with black people?

4. Did these white ladies ever play with their black peers?

**Questions for Comparative Analysis:**

1. Please compare the three ladies' backgrounds from "Growing up White in the 1930s." How do their backgrounds differ from Mrs. Barge's background from "Growing up Black in the 1930s"?

2. The ladies in "Growing up White in the 1930s" talk about what made a "good family" in the South. What do they say makes a "good family"? How do you think Mrs. Barge would describe a "good family"? Compare and contrast the three ladies' families to Mrs. Barges family, explain the similarities and differences. Based on your explanation, would Mrs. Barge's family be considered a "good family"? Why or why not?

3. List the occupations available to black women in the South in the 1930s according to Mrs. Barge's interview. How did these occupations influence Mrs. Barge's perception of white people? How did these occupations influence the perception of black people according to the three ladies' accounts from "Growing up White in the 1930s"?

4. Mrs. Barge ends her interview on a positive note by saying "you shouldn't put people into categories." Make a prediction based on these interviews about how Calpurnia might feel about the Finches. Why?