

## Bump Wednesday

by Charles Munroe, MSPE

*Editor's note:* This is a true story which Charles recalls from his childhood. In the story, he is identified as "Mikey" because that is the nickname he went by at the time.



Charles Munroe (center, front) at his grandfather's house, Thanksgiving Day, 1941

My brief fling with Bump Wednesday, or whatever day of the week it was, occurred just after I entered kindergarten and before I learned the names of the days of the week. Years later, as I was reminiscing with my father, he did confirm my recollections of Bump Wednesday but wasn't sure of the day of the week, either. Dad traveled frequently; but, when he was home, he would go over to my grandfather's house to mow the large front lawn. The house sat well back off a country road in the rural area of Dearborn outside of Detroit. There were tall trees in front and dense woods in the rear, extending to the Daley farm. It was during one of these visits that he had occasion to sit in the kitchen and drink gin with Alberta, Grandma's hired help. Alberta confided in my father a closely guarded secret within the black community: Bump Wednesday.

My recollection was of being sent over to stay with my grandparents for a few months, most likely because my mother was pregnant with my brother. The weather was balmy, not the oppressive muggy heat so typical of Detroit in summer; and, so, I presume it was the early summer of 1941. The first time I met Alberta, I was intimidated by her size; she was huge, muscular, and had a dour look about her. Alberta came from the Deep South and spoke with a gravelly voice and a very distinct southern accent. I wasn't sure what Alberta was, and I tried my best to avoid her; but when my grandparents were gone—and that was quite often—Alberta was in charge.

When we were alone, Alberta would take Grandpa's radio out of the kitchen, into the utility room, and tune it in to a gospel station. She

would turn the volume up, and I would hear shouting and hollering and clapping of hands. Alberta would sing along and stomp in rhythm while she ran the bed sheets through the mangle. The first few times this happened, not knowing what all the commotion was about, I would prudently relocate to some remote room. Eventually, curiosity drew me to the utility room door to peek around the corner. Alberta was using the mangle, ironing sheets, and, at the same time, stomping her feet and swaying her head back and forth. I thought, "This looks like fun!" So, just out of sight, I would silently mimic Alberta while occasionally peeking around the corner to pick up on any new moves. I must not have paid close attention to what I was doing and inadvertently moved to the entryway where Alberta finally noticed me. Suddenly, I heard this deep voice over the din, "Master Mikey, dat you? What you be doin'?" I froze in the embarrassment of being discovered; but rather than expressing anger, her voice turned soft, and she invited me into the utility room to join her. While she ironed, we sang and swayed to the music. After a while, I got the hang of it; and, every week when the others were gone, Alberta and I would turn on the gospel music and have our own sing-along.

While in Alberta's care, I could go outside unsupervised. I loved to climb the trees out front; but, one day, that all came to an end when Grandma caught me way up in the top of a tall tree, and she threw a fit. She left explicit orders with Alberta that I was not to climb trees again. That lasted about a week, and then I snuck out while Alberta was busy, and up I went. One day, Alberta looked out a window and caught me starting an ascent, and she came stomping out. She stood at the base of the tree and hollered up, "Master Mikey, you know your grandma don't want you be doin' dat. You come on down heah." Had Grandma caught me disobeying, she would have told my dad when he returned, and I probably would have gotten a switching. Alberta was different; I could reason with her.

As I neared the ground, I explained that I was "real good" at climbing and wasn't in any danger. To reinforce my position, I proceeded to show

her the art of climbing. "You don't put your foot on a limb. You bend your foot, put it against the trunk, and use the limb to keep your foot from sliding down the tree. You always test a limb before you use it to see if it will hold."

Alberta pondered this for a moment and then said, "Why you be likin' to climb trees?"

I responded, "It's nice up there. I can feel the breeze; and, on a clear day, I can see the gray outlines of the buildings in downtown Detroit where Grandpa works." What I didn't tell her was the feeling of freedom up there, a feeling of detachment, with no one to tell you what to do.

Alberta looked up into the top of the tree for a few moments and said, "When I was a young'n, I was the skinniest thing you ever did see. I always wanted to climb up a tree like them boys was a-doin'. Never got the chance." Then, half-heartedly, she said, "You mind what your grandma say," as she turned around and headed back to the house. In the future, when no one was around, she would refer to me as "Master Monkey," and that suited me just fine. I sure didn't want people calling me by my middle name, "Cady," because I thought it sounded like a girl's name.

Once a week, Grandma would bake a cake and leave it up to Alberta to do the icing. I would make it a practice to hang around just outside the kitchen until Grandma left and then stand around until Alberta let me use my fingers to scrape up what frosting was left in the bowl. One day, I heard my dad and Alberta in the kitchen together and could smell the cake baking. It was better when my dad was there, as he was likely to cut off a piece of cake and not wait until after dinner. But this time, they were concerned not with the cake but with listening to Grandpa's radio. Someone was speaking, but I couldn't understand a word of what was being said; besides, I was more interested in fiddling with the dials. A stern rebuke from Dad put a stop to that notion. I looked over to Alberta for some sort of sympathy, and she was staring straight at Dad with a look of concern on her face. Whoever it was on the radio

was speaking in a very forceful voice that would rise to a crescendo, and then the audience would roar several times in great waves. Dad turned off the radio, and I thought, *Now, we get to the cake.* But, no, Dad just turned his head, stared out the window for a while, and then turned to Alberta and said, “We’re going to have a war.”

*War?* I wondered, *What is a war?*

I looked over at Alberta, and she muttered something like, “Oh, Lordy.”

Days later, Alberta and I were having our gospel sing-along when she suddenly reached over and turned the radio off and glared at me. I couldn’t understand why she was looking at me that way. What had I done? Then she said, “Master Mikey! You don’t be singin’ to da Lord and speakin’ them words. Them words is evil.” I just stood there totally bewildered by the sudden change in Alberta. I was just repeating what I had heard on the radio. After a while, things calmed down, and we got back to our sing-along. It would be a few more years before I would become aware of the warped mentality behind the words, “*Sieg Heil.*”

Market day was a weekday. I know it was a weekday, since everyone except Grandma and Alberta were at work. Grandma would back the Packard out of the garage, and she and Alberta would be off to the market. I was sent across the street to one of the only other houses in our area that had any children my age. Unfortunately, they were both girls. Boring. Absolutely boring. They not only didn’t know how to climb trees, they had no interest in learning. I had to spend hours watching them play with their stupid dolls. At the time, I couldn’t conceive of anything more useless and boring than a girl.

Finally, one day, a reprieve: I was to join Grandma and Alberta on the market run. Grandma drove down Gulley Road past the farm where they raised horses, over the Little Rouge River to Michigan Avenue and on to West Dearborn and the Dearborn Public Market. Grandma gave me 15 cents to spend and told me she was going to leave Alberta and me there and

would pick us up out front in about an hour. I was to stick to Alberta and not run around the store. If I did, I wouldn’t be allowed to go again.

What to spend the 15 cents on? It wouldn’t be candy right away, as Alberta was leading me over to the vegetable section. Boring! The floor was covered with sawdust; and, at a nearby counter, along the edge where the bare floor was showing through, was a nickel. Now, I had 20 cents—not that I could count, but I knew I had more than when I came in. My attention was riveted on the floor. Under all that sawdust must be scads of dropped change just waiting for me to find. Maybe I would find some paper money.

My concentration was momentarily interrupted by Alberta apologizing to a lady next to us; then, my attention turned back to the fortune on the floor. Moments later, as we moved on, the same apology to another lady. I noted that Alberta had bumped into her, too. Less than a minute later, the same thing. This time, I was looking right at Alberta and saw her look at the lady and then turn her head and purposely move sideways so as to bump into her. By now, I had found two pennies and was going to ask Alberta how much extra candy I could buy with my newfound wealth, but her activities now had my full attention. I thought that this must be some kind of game they play here in the market.

Alberta bumped into another lady as we rounded a corner, and I decided I would give it a try. My first attempt generated no reaction. Harder: I’ll have to bump harder. Still, no reaction; the lady just moved away. On my next try, I discovered that stepping on their feet and bumping at the same time got a reaction. Then, I realized that Alberta had taken notice of my behavior. To impress her, I went overboard with the next lady, slipped, and stepped directly on her toes; and that elicited a loud “Jeez,” a grimace, and a not-too-friendly, “Little boy, watch where you are going!” Alberta, noting that things were getting out of hand, admonished me with, “Master Mikey, you be watchin’ where you be steppin’.” The look on Alberta’s face and the way she said it had about the same conviction as, “Don’t you be

climbin' no tree." Thereafter, I was careful to engage in bumping only; and, with each act, I detected a slight sign of satisfaction from Alberta.

Years later, I would learn from my father what Alberta had confided in him. She, being a very religious person, didn't approve of "bumpin'," but she felt it was expected of her to do something for her people, and this is what others were doing. It was a way of relieving the frustration of the injustices imposed upon them by an unjust society. I think she was pleased to have me along to do what had to be done. I noted that she ceased "bumpin'" soon after I took over. After several more trips to the market, "bumpin'" came to an abrupt end. Grandma got a call from the market manager who said he was delighted to have Grandma for a customer, but there had been complaints, and would it be possible to leave little Mikey home?

The weather changed from balmy to chilly, and leaves began to turn color. To entertain me, Grandmother gave me a record of "Little Black Sambo and His Jungle Band." I must have nearly worn that record out, I played it so much. I was intensely jealous of Little Black Sambo, who was running around barefoot in the jungle with lions, elephants, and monkeys; and all I had to play with was Grandma's cocker spaniel.

One day, Alberta mentioned that her son had come with her and was outside. As I stepped out the back door, there, standing in front of me, was a boy about my age. I stood there for a while staring at him. Could this really be Little Black Sambo? But where were all his animal friends? As I stared at him, I couldn't figure out why he was so dark. My impression was he was covered from head to toe with shoe polish. Once, I had tried to use shoe polish on my shoes and got a bawling out because I got the stuff all over my hands and clothes. Looking at him, I figured he must have rolled around in the stuff to get so much on him. It was out of curiosity that I asked him why he had shoe polish all over him. He responded flippantly, "It's not shoe polish; I'm a chocolate boy."

Minutes later, he regretted his explanation when the "chocolate boy" ran bursting into the utility room, crying and nursing his hand. It was hot that day, and I figured I had better take a bite before he melted. I apologized to the chocolate boy; and, as I did, for the first time, it dawned on me that Alberta was also chocolate brown. How many times had I looked at her and it never registered in my mind that there was a difference between her and the rest of the family? Over the next few weeks, Alberta brought her son to the house, and he and I would spend the days climbing trees and looking for snakes and frogs. It was great to have someone around that appreciated a tree and wasn't afraid of snakes like the stupid girls across the street.

Early one morning, I was awoken by Grandma and told to get dressed immediately. Half asleep, I complied; and, as we drove south toward Inkster, Grandma told me we were going to Alberta's house to take her son to the hospital. Many weeks had passed since I had tried to take a bite out of his hand, and I hoped that I wasn't the cause of his sickness. We pulled up in front of a small clapboard house with gray paint. Grandma told me to stay in the car. She went in and soon reappeared with Alberta, who had her son in her arms. Alberta was sobbing, and her son looked like he was asleep. Grandma had me move over, and Alberta laid her son out on the back seat with his head in my lap. As soon as his head touched me, I could feel the heat from his body; he was burning with fever. Alberta was lamenting that she had been unable to rouse him and was terrified that he was dying. Dying! I remember older people talking about it, but I really didn't understand what it was all about, something like closing your eyes and never seeing things around you ever again.

We drove for a long while; and, once in a while, Alberta's son would move a bit. This relieved me, as I didn't think I liked this dying thing. Finally, we drove into the parking lot of the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, and Grandma told me to stay in the car. Then she changed her mind, and I accompanied Grandma and Alberta as they carried her son into the hospital. As soon

as we were in the door, I knew I didn't like this place; it was too much like the doctor's office where I got shots. I hoped that fixing this dying thing didn't take long, as I wanted to leave.

Grandma was busy talking to someone behind a counter while Alberta and I sat with her son on a row of chairs. On a table nearby were some magazines with lots of pictures. I was about to get up and investigate when I heard Grandma's voice grow louder. She was arguing with the nurse behind the counter; and, from what I could hear, we weren't supposed to be here. Grandma's voice became louder, and it became apparent that it wasn't us but Alberta and her son who were not supposed to be here. After a few more exchanges, the nurse left to get someone and returned with a man who looked into the room and saw us sitting there. He shook his head, and Grandma's voice became very angry. Then it happened; I heard the "God----" word she had bawled my dad out for using.

Grandma was red in the face and left the counter and called my dad at his office. Grandma was speaking very loudly now, and several people were peering out of doorways. After a brief conversation, Grandma stormed back to where we were sitting and just glared straight ahead. After a few moments, she got up and soaked her handkerchief in the drinking fountain and laid the wet cloth on the boy's head. I picked up a magazine and went to a chair in a far corner and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. I had thumbed through one magazine and was well into looking at the pictures of another when a tall man in a white coat came out of the elevator and headed straight for Grandma. Grandma began speaking loudly, and then her voice began to drop off. She and the man in white went over to the counter, and then Grandma came back, and we left. I thought, "Well, that's that; they really don't like him." I couldn't understand why. Alberta was always talking about what a good boy he was. Why wouldn't anyone like him? Why would they want him to leave?

Instead of returning to the car, we walked a long way to the back of the building to an area that

looked like an alley. Grandma stopped in front of a door that was slightly ajar, and it opened up as we approached. There was the tall man in the white coat. He ushered us into a room full of cabinets and then took Alberta and her son into another room. I sure didn't like this place; it smelled just like the doctor's office where I got the shot after stepping on a board with a nail. After a long, boring time, the tall man came out; and, after some talk, Alberta, Grandma, and I left. On the way home, Grandma was still fuming. It would be years before I heard the whole story from my dad.

Dad explained that the hospital had a policy of not admitting black people. Grandma had called Dad, and Dad had called his friend—the tall man in the white coat. Before the Great Depression, my dad had been sent to work on development of Fordlândia, the Ford rubber plantation on the Tapajós River in Brazil. The tall man in the white coat had been the company doctor, and Dad had worked with him. The tall man in white was now the chief physician for the hospital, and he asked Grandma to take the boy around to the rear entrance where he, in contravention to hospital policy, tended to the boy himself. Dad wasn't sure what had afflicted him but mentioned that someone had said that he had drunk some water from the ditch running along Gulley Road. Whatever it was, it took some time for him to recover.

Shortly before Halloween, mother gave birth to my brother; and there was no longer a need for Alberta or Grandma to babysit me. That winter, Dad had rented a house, and I saw less and less of Alberta; but I did hear that her son recovered. Years later, I was passing through from California, and I stopped in front of the house on Gulley Road. Grandpa had retired, finding the house too much for him and Grandma to take care of. They had moved to an apartment. As I stood there, I thought of the events of years ago and resolved to make an effort to find Alberta. With a vague memory of the route, I finally located the little house with the gray paint. An elderly black woman answered the door. She didn't look anything like Alberta, but I explained

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whom I was looking for, and she stared at me with a puzzled look. I mentioned that Alberta had worked for my grandmother, and she seemed to recognize the name. As I began to tell her where Grandma's house was, she invited me in. Before she could speak, I knew the answer to my search. On a small stand against the wall was a picture of Alberta—as I knew her—and flowers and religious knick-knacks surrounded it. I knew that Alberta was no longer with us.

Presently, a man about my age came into the room and introduced himself as Alberta's son. He told me that Alberta had passed away a number of years ago. We talked for a while, and I mentioned Bump Wednesday and how I had hoped to tease Alberta by asking her if she needed my help at the market come Wednesday. Turning serious, I said I was very sad that she wasn't alive to witness the changes that were

taking place: the Civil Rights marches, the involvement of white people in the movement, the increasing coming-to-terms with the injustices done to black people. As I rose to leave, we shook hands; and I held his hand for a moment and commented, "Well, I guess I didn't leave any scars." He looked puzzled at first, and then broke into a smile of recognition and replied, "Oh, I just cover it up with shoe polish." We both laughed, and I departed.

On the way home, I once again stopped off in front of the house on Gulley Road. For a long while, I stood and thought about a time long past. I thought of a place where there were tall trees... and in the very top of one of the tallest was a skinny, young black girl swaying in the warm breeze—that feeling of complete freedom, that feeling of oneness, up there where she can see forever. Ω

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*“The truth is,  
no one of us can be free  
until everybody is free.”  
—Maya Angelou*