



The book *Tobe* showed how everyone pitched in on the hard work of the farm. From the Charles Anderson Farrell Papers, 1938–1977 (#4452), courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Picturing African American Rural Life

by Dr. Benjamin Filene*

“Why does no one in my books look like me?”

Around 1935 an African American boy named Clay McCauley asked that of his neighbor, a white schoolteacher. He was on to something: almost all children’s books at that time showed only white characters. When blacks did appear, most authors relied on gross stereotypes. Black characters were shown as lazy, violent, or clownish, not like real people.

After Clay asked that question, the schoolteacher, Stella Sharpe, decided to write a book about him and his

family. It would tell their story—of life on a North Carolina farm—and it would use photographs to show them as they really were. In 1939 the University of North Carolina Press published *Tobe*, the story of a six-year-old farmer.

Seventy-six years later, the book *Tobe* gives us a rare glimpse of everyday life in rural North Carolina. But it also can help us understand how important—and complicated—young Clay McCauley’s question really was. The people who created *Tobe* were trying to use a children’s book to change how whites saw blacks and how blacks saw themselves.

Can a children’s book really do all that? If books have that kind of power, what stories should they tell, and who gets to tell them?

Showing Life on the Farm

At first the book *Tobe* looks like a straightforward account of Clay McCauley’s daily life. Stella Sharpe and the McCauleys lived in rural Orange County. For decades Sharpe taught elementary school in nearby Hillsborough. Clay’s father farmed on land owned by Sharpe’s husband. The book tells the story of Clay and his seven brothers and sisters, who pitch in on farmwork and play games outside—fishing, making their own merry-go-round, and catching a possum (by mistake) in a rabbit trap. Each of these little stories is accompanied by a black-and-white photograph, more than 60 of them in all.

One of the main themes that comes up over and over again in the book is the importance of hard work. For instance, *Tobe* shows what it takes to grow tobacco or make molasses. With only a few machines to help, almost every step is done by people lifting, bending, pulling, hefting. At one point in the book, the children ask their mother about a superstition that hanging horseshoes in

Above: The photo of Tobe’s encounter with a snake in the road, as it appeared in the book. Right: A photo showing the snake handler who helped set up the shot. From the Charles Anderson Farrell Papers, 1938–1977 (#4452), courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

apple tree branches helps the fruit grow. The mother is clear: “The horseshoes did not make the apples grow. Work made them grow.” At another point she tells them, “There’s no such thing as luck.”

In the book the reward for all this hard work is that the family is well fed, clean, and happy. Even as the children help out on the farm, they have plenty of time (and space) for playing by themselves. Unlike the way African Americans were shown in other children’s books of that time, no one in *Tobe* is lazy or meant to be laughed at.

Is *Tobe* True?

The photos make *Tobe* look like a documentary—as if it’s capturing real life as it happened. Most of the people in the book have the real names of Clay and his family (the

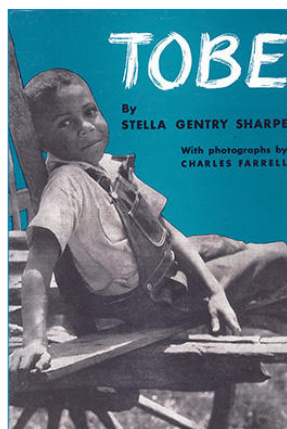
book says that Clay goes by “Tobe” as a nickname). But the story behind the book is more complicated and interesting. In the late 1930s, when UNC Press agreed to publish *Tobe*, it decided not to use photographs of Clay and his family, since the McCauley children had grown too big by then. Instead, UNC Press hired Charles Farrell, a photographer from Greensboro, and asked him to take photographs to illustrate the book.

Farrell went to a rural African American community next to Greensboro, known as Goshen, and found children of the right ages to match the characters in *Tobe*. He posed them in the scenes that Sharpe had written about. If the story needed a snake, he found a snake handler to bring one in. And Farrell worked hard to make sure that the pictures gave the same messages as the story—that these were dignified, happy, hard-working people. Photos of dirty faces or bored or sad children didn’t get used in the book.

Looking Back on *Tobe*

So the author and the photographer made a series of decisions to make sure that *Tobe* told the kind of story they wanted told. Does that make the book false? Is *Tobe* still a good way for us to learn about rural life? How did the people whose lives were shown in the book feel about it?

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Cover of the original book *TOBE* by Stella Gentry Sharpe. Copyright © 1939, renewed 1967 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher.





Left: Charles Garner portraying Tobe for the photographer, ca. 1938–1939. Above: Charles Garner at his home in 2011, being interviewed by Dr. Benjamin Filene. Image left, from the Charles Anderson Farrell Papers, 1938–1977 (#4452), courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Image right, courtesy of Dr. Benjamin Filene.

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To get new perspectives on *Tobe*, I've been tracking down and interviewing as many people connected to the book as I can. When people don't make headlines, they don't usually leave behind as many materials from which historians can learn about their lives. But I managed to find many of the people connected to *Tobe* by using research techniques that historians—including junior historians!—can turn to when they are looking for people who seem “hidden” in history. I searched through census records and birth and death records. I read letters saved by UNC Press in the North Carolina Collection archives. And I talked to people who knew people, who knew other people in the Goshen and Hillsborough communities.

So in 2011, through good luck and generosity, I was able to meet with a man named Charles Garner at his home in Albany, Georgia. Seventy-six years before, he had been photographed as “Tobe.” In Maryland I met with his cousin, Ernestine Herbin Gray, who as a little girl had also appeared in the book. Garner and Gray recall that the scenes of *Tobe* were staged, but the overall impression the book gives of their childhood community, Goshen, still rings true to them—as a place of strong family connections, hard work, and good friends. “It was actual,” Ernestine Gray told me when I asked about the book. “It centers around truth; it's not a fabrication.”

At the same time, the people I interviewed also remember parts of their life that don't show up in *Tobe*—that farmwork was so relentless that most of the children were determined *not* to be farmers when they grew up; that North Carolina was completely segregated at the time and certain jobs and opportunities were closed to

them as black people; that some of their parents owned their land, but others didn't, making it hard for parents to pass on much inheritance to their children.

To the people I talked to, though, what stands out most about *Tobe* are not the details of daily life but the faces and attitudes the book shows. It was rare for rural people to have cameras in the 1930s and 1940s, so *Tobe* serves almost as a family photo album for the Goshen community today. And given the prejudices that the people of *Tobe* have faced in their lives, they appreciate the dignity with which the book depicts the black families. As Goshen resident Mary Shoffner Booker reflected in an interview with me, to see a book about African Americans “made you know that somebody was paying attention, and it made you know that you were somebody, too.”

In that sense the legacy of *Tobe* is about the power of representation—of seeing people like yourself in your books and having your story told. That issue remains alive today. In the article “Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?” (March 15, 2014), the *New York Times* reported that only 93 of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013 featured black characters. Distorted depictions in hip-hop songs and movies just make it harder for people of all races to get realistic understandings of each other. For all the progress our country has made in civil rights and race relations, we still have to ask how far have we come from the question that young Clay McCauley asked three-quarters of a century ago: “Why does no one in my books look like me?” 🌸

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