**Dark Days on a Mississippi Farm**

**Levi L. Redd** was a poor, struggling cotton farmer; borrowed the money to buy a 120-acre plot of ground in rural [Lincoln County](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_County%2C_Mississippi), rural Mississippi, and staked everything he had on that farm.

He made a bumper crop and thought he was on the way to financial success; he was going to become a ‘‘gentleman farmer.”

He even met a beautiful young woman when she came from [Bogue Chitto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bogue_Chitto%2C_Mississippi) to visit a sister, and, with a prosperous year of cotton farming behind him, he asked her to marry him; and she did. Then something happened he hadn’t expected, hadn’t planned for.

The [boll weevil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boll_weevil) hit the Mississippi cotton crop. The boll weevil came to Mississippi for the first time in 1907 and Levi Redd’s future as a cotton farmer was finished even though he hung on for another four years.

Levi Redd went under in 1911 and he lost everything he had—the farm, his livestock, and most of the household furnishings.

On a cloudy, dismal day in 1911 Levi Redd loaded everything he had in the world—his wife, a year-old-daughter, a three-year-old son, one bed, one table, and a rocking chair—into the bed of a wagon and moved into an abandoned [tenant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenant#:~:text=%3A%20one%20who%20has%20the%20occupation,by%20any%20kind%20of%20right) shack.

He didn’t even own the wagon; he borrowed it, and the horses, from an uncle.

It’s strange what you remember as a child.

J. C. Redd was the three-year-old in the back of the wagon. “*My father put a bed of hay in the back of the wagon and my sister and I sat back there. I watched the house disappear in the distance.*

*“We rode two to three miles until we reached my uncle’s farm, then we unloaded our bed, table, and chair into an abandoned tenant shack. It was just what you would expect a tenant shack to be—small, dark, smelly and dirty.*

*“Each night my mother would put my sister and me in our one bed, my head at one end and hers at the other.”*’

Levi Redd struggled as a [sharecropper](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sharecropper) and seemed to always fail. Fiercely independent, he even bought a blind horse at one time and tried to make it on his own rather than share crop; but he failed.

When the crops were laid by, he walked twelve miles to [Norfield](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norfield%2C_Mississippi) to work at the sawmill; earned ninety-nine cents per day. He spent his two-day weekends walking back and forth those twelve miles from home to Norfield; and during the week he walked four miles each evening to spend the night with his sister in Bogue Chitto.

The young son entered school at Johnson Grove in Lincoln County, then a one-room school with two and a half teachers—two full-time teachers and another half-time teacher. Students in all six grades—one through six—met in the same room. There were about forty students in the room, all ages, all shapes and all sizes, and all white, and J. C. Redd and nine others were first graders.

““I was afraid to start to school. I had heard stories from older children that every student was whipped every day. I tried hard to avoid the front row on my first day because I didn’t want to be first in line for the paddle.

“When I learned that I wouldn’t be punished, my attitude toward school improved immediately. I enjoyed it then and I just wish I could have been a student all my life. I enjoyed school that much.”

It’s easy to understand young J. C.’s fear of school; he was only four years old when he was enrolled. It wasn’t that he was wise beyond his young years; rather, his mother had two other children, was expecting a fourth, and it was just easier for her to 6 send him to school than it was for her to keep up with a four- year-old at home all day.

Although he started to school at four, he missed most of the year because of pneumonia. He tried again the following year, but there were other problems. The biggest problem was the birth of another child, and five-year-old J. C. was now old enough to help care for his younger brothers and sisters, so he was kept at home.

The third year brought a third enrollment but J.C.—now six years old—had to drop out again, this time because the family moved to another community. Young Redd didn’t get to school much over the next two years either; something always seemed to interfere. There were younger children to tend, wood to cut, and livestock to feed.

By the time he was seven he was sawing hardwood and performing other odd jobs for and with his father.

The family moved again in 1916, this time to the farm of another uncle, but still as sharecroppers. But now the family was just two miles from Norfield so Levi’s walk to the sawmill was considerably shorter. Levi tried again to farm, tried it with cotton and corn; but he knew little about advancing farm techniques and he had no fertilizer, so there were more poor crop years.

The Redds just kept struggling, doing the best they could. The extra work at the sawmill was the only thing that kept the family alive and warm. Twins were born and Levi couldn’t pay the doctor’s bill, so the older children picked up potatoes and found other odd jobs to help pay it.

Levi Redd was a hard-working, driven man who never made more than ninety-nine cents per day and his income never exceeded more than $300 to $400 per year.

He was as honest as any man could be. He believed in paying his bills, even when his children had to work to help pay them.

He was impetuous, demanding, strong-willed. He knew what he believed, stood by his convictions, and was impatient with anyone who disagreed with him in those convictions.

His name was **Levi L. Redd**. The middle initial was just that, an initial. The ‘‘L’’ didn’t stand for anything. And he never did spell the name, ‘‘Redd,”” with two d’s. He said he could get more Redd it than he could afford with one ‘“d,’’ so he left the second ““d’’ off when he signed his name.

Levi’s oldest son was named for his two grandfathers. Hi grandfather on his father’s side was ‘‘Jabus,’’ and his grand- father on his mother’s side was ‘‘Constantine.”” So, he became ““Jabus Constantine.’

That, says J. C. Redd, ‘‘is why I have always used the name, HL

Levi was patient with his son’s interest in school, but he was never convinced that an education was needed. He willing to accept the value of a high school diploma but Levi thought that was sufficient education for any of his children.

“You don’t need to go beyond high school,’’ Levi advised his son.

“I’ll help you get a job at the sawmill and you can learn a trade. You can make a good living like that.”

And Levi always encouraged J. C. to buy land next to his. “My father was a hard worker, always trying to improve living conditions for his family. He never gave up; worked fourteen to eighteen hours every day and kept his eyes on the future. He never lost hope.

“I have seen him come in after an eighteen-hour work day, drop to the cold, wood floor and be asleep from exhaustion within a matter of minutes.

“I learned a lot from my father. My own philosophy of life began to evolve in those days when he and I worked closely together, even when I was six or seven years old. I was his constant companion. He worked hard and he expected me to work hard. “He was always working, leading the way, calling to me, ‘Come on. . .come on. . .come on.’ ’’

Levi’s wife was different. She was quiet, unassuming, made few decisions on her own. Perhaps she was that way because he was so strong.

Yet, strangely enough, the father was the affectionate parent. The mother showed little affection. There was no question about

it; she dearly loved her children, she probably just didn’t find time to show it with all her children.

She was an excellent musician; played the piano and had a beautiful voice. Her sisters, all teachers, encouraged her to continue her music education; they even offered to send her to a conservatory, but she chose marriage instead.

J. C.’s interest in education, his natural curiosity, his desire to learn probably came from his mother even through her formal education was limited to high school.

All her brothers and sisters were well educated. One brother was a lawyer and another, a physician. Another brother and two sisters were teachers. Another brother was slightly retarded but he seemed to have as much knowledge as any of the others. He was well read, almost a walking encyclopedia. He read constantly and J. C. enjoyed visiting him because he liked to read his books. Education was a driving force in the young life of J. C. Redd.

“*For as long as I can remember, I wanted to get an education. My mother wanted all her children educated; she was much more concerned about this than was my father.*

*“But I missed a lot of school. All my brothers and sisters were sick and I was out of school often, helping to care for them. One year we had four cases of diphtheria. In those years few people survived such illnesses.*

*‘But we were fortunate; God spared us all. The year after we had the cases of diphtheria, we had four cases of scarlet fever. In that same year, one brother suffered Bright’s disease, my father broke his leg, and my mother had surgery.*

*‘“‘Someone had to care for the family through all of this and, since I was the oldest of the eight children, I had to do it. And, all the while, I was in and out of school and working with my father.*

*“So, in my early school years, I was looking after the family, working as often as I could to bring in extra money, and going to school a few days at a time. By some miracle I escaped all the illnesses and diseases that struck my brothers and sisters.*

*“My boyhood days were dismal. We had three creeks and a river running through our land, and I don’t ever remember having time to swim or to fish. There was always work to be done during the week and on Saturdays, and my father didn’t believe in fishing on Sunday.*

*“I never did hunt either, never had the time. I had almost no recreation as a boy. I did have a chance to play basketball in high school, but that was ‘about it.*

*“I never did learn to play and I miss that even today. “All this sounds like a hard-luck story, and the Redds did have hard times.*

*“But I wouldn’t trade those days for anything in the world. I learned some things through those experiences I couldn’t have learned any other way*.”’