

A Western Kentucky Shantyboat Baby

Gregg Andrews

On June 6, 1898, Josie May Carman came into the world aboard a shantyboat where the Mississippi and Ohio rivers merge near the far western Kentucky town of Wickliffe in Ballard County, just a few miles downriver from Cairo, Illinois. Her multiethnic parents left their farm shack for a shantyboat shortly before she was born. "He [William Carman] was a Cherokee Indian and my mother [Mary Cavitt Carman] was half-Seminole and half-black," Josie later recounted. Soon after her birth, her father moved the family upstream to a shantyboat colony on the Cairo riverfront. As she explained, "From the shack he and mother moved to the shanty boat, so that he could make a living fishing."¹



Josie M. Black, photo, courtesy, *The Paducah Sun*, Feb. 7, 1969.

Due to Josie's multiethnic background, she endured a hard childhood in a troubled time of deep racism, racial segregation, and limited opportunities. After her mother and grandmother died within a short time of each other, six-year-old Josie went to live with Emily Hayes, a great-aunt who raised her and her siblings in Fulton, Kentucky on the Tennessee state line. Like her mother, great-aunt, and many women in shantyboat and other poor communities at the time, Carman later became a midwife.

After graduating from Fulton's county-run, segregated Milton School in 1916, Carman joined the Great Migration to northern cities such as Chicago, where she received vocational and nursing training. She paid her way by working as a chambermaid during the day and attending classes at night. "It was rough," she

¹ Quoted in *The Paducah Sun*, April 6, 1979, 7, and February 7, 1969, 14.



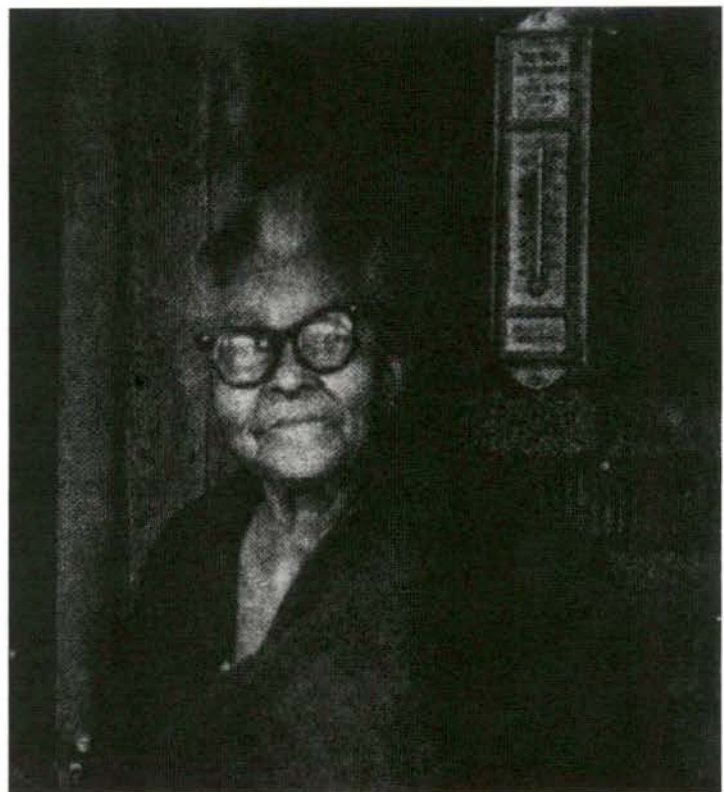
Josie Black
1898 - 1982

Josie M. Carman, undated photo, courtesy of the Fulton County Genealogical Society.

remembered, "but that's the only way I could have made enough money to go to school."² For nurses who were defined by society as Black, it was hard to get jobs at the time. In 1923, Carman returned to Fulton as a private duty nurse and delivered her first baby. Her longest assignment in those years as a private nurse was in the home of Dr. George Major, a white physician whose four children were stricken with typhoid fever. "He couldn't get a white nurse to go," she recalled, "so he called on me as I already had typhoid fever."³

Her fee to deliver a baby was about \$5 in the 1920s and 1930s, but as she later reflected, "Lots of times I didn't get a nickel, everybody was awful poor then." In 1941, she became a licensed practical nurse and worked in the segregated health care

system in Fulton. Still delivering babies at age 80, she outlived all of her children (5 of her own; 2 foster children, and 14 welfare children), as well as her husband, Carter Black, a longtime dining car cook on the Illinois Central Railroad. A member of Christ Church Holiness, Josie became an ordained minister at age 64. By 1979, she had slapped the rumps of an estimated 900 newborn babies along the Kentucky/Tennessee border in the Fulton/South Fulton (Obion County) area. Most, but not all of them, were



Josie M. Black, photo, courtesy, The Paducah Sun, April 6, 1979.

² Quoted in *The Paducah Sun*, April 6, 1979, 7.

³ Quoted in *The Paducah Sun*, February 7, 1969, 14.

Black. "People have come to get me in buggies and wagons and taken me everywhere day or night, good weather or bad. . . I have never lost a mother and have had only three stillborn babies." The secret, she told a newspaper reporter three years before she died on November 23, 1982: "Know what you're doing; keep everything sterile, and if you don't know something, call a doctor."⁴

⁴ Quoted in *The Paducah Sun*, April 6, 1979, 7. She was buried in Fulton's Fairview Cemetery. See U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s to Current. See also the Fulton County Genealogical Society's "A Walk Through the Past," September 15, 2006, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~kyfulcgs/walk2006/walk2006.html>.