THE ROAD TO FREEDOM
PRICE DAVIS' JOURNEY LEADS TO NEW YORK...AND BACK AGAIN

By Valca Valentine, Staff Writer
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Every week, 5-year-old Price Davis watched the Trailways bus flash past the family's four-room house on Providence Road in Mecklenburg County. Destination: New York City.

It was the late 1920s, during the Great Migration when thousands of blacks moved north in search of education, jobs and social equality. The route north came to be known as the "Chicken Bone Express," because most train travelers carried a boxed chicken lunch and tossed their bones from the windows, leaving a trail along the tracks. Some took buses. Others took cars. But only the direction mattered. For many Southern blacks, north was synonymous with freedom.

Young Price's parents, the Rev. A.W. and Alice Davis, had moved to Providence Road after years of taking their eight children from town to town, teaching in one-room schools. Price Davis remembers it as the lowest point of his life, describing the house they rented as "unfit for human habitation."

In a few months the Davis family moved to Cherry, a black neighborhood near uptown Charlotte where doctors and teachers, domestics and farmers and hustlers and preachers lived.

But one day Davis would be on that bus, leaving this "miserable and brutal city" in search of "the promised land."

Davis, now 66, recently sat at the dining room table in his Clanton Park home in west Charlotte and shared his memories with staff writer Valca Valentine. He shared the pain that forced him to head for Harlem and the ties that brought him back.

As he talked, the daylight from a picture window made him appear as if he were on a stage. He lost himself in the memories, speaking with theatrical gestures and, often, teary eyes.

My mother and father scraped up about a hundred dollars and bought a house at 705 S. Torrence St. in Cherry. Bought it from a Dr. Carter for $1,800. They paid a hundred dollars down and $5.29 per month. And that's where we were raised up.

Cherry was almost like the country. People kept horses and mules, chickens, cows and what not. Where you find the old Charlottetown Mall (Midtown Square) now, that was the pasture. . . . And we used to walk through that pasture to get to Second Ward High. That old school is gone now.

Now Charlotte was a very racist - I have to say it because that's what caused me to leave. Charlotte was a very racist and brutal city. It was your policemen that were the most racist and the most brutal. It gave the whites who were lower on the socioeconomic ladder the right to do to blacks whatever they felt like doing, because most of them were policemen.

Police would ride up - you didn't have to be in a white neighborhood for them to do it - they would ride up, "Nigger, where you going?"

And yet in school, as a little boy I would sit there as a red nappy-headed boy and they would tell me that police are your friends. . . .

Once, when I was 17, I was with a real light-skinned girl. This was just before I went to New York. . . . I was out on Central Avenue. This is in a white neighborhood, but a poor, low-class neighborhood out near The Plaza. We were walking down the street when the police rode up beside us.

"Nigger what you doing with this white girl?"

And instead of me saying she's black, as a young boy, I'm frightened and I say, "She's my girlfriend." What did I say that for? She ran home. . . . They put me in the car, went to a dead-end street and beat me. It was terrible.

Davis came home that night, afraid to tell his parents about the incident. They had warned him. But, Davis was in love. "I look back now and my father was just as right as can be," says Davis. "I couldn't stay away from this young girl 'cause I was in love! Thought I was anyway. It's that little itching around the heart and you just can't stand it!"

Davis worked at Colonial Yarn Links for a "decent" white man. While black workers at other companies were making $20 a week, Davis and co-workers were making $30. Every summer, his employer paid a man named William to drive black workers in his four-door 1939 Ford to Atlantic Beach, S.C., for a week or two. Still, Davis wanted more.

Charlotte was a beautiful place, a nice place. You had a lot of black doctors, preachers and teachers. But we had no voice.

I remember when blacks could go and use the courthouse, meaning they could vote. My father used to go around telling people, "Please let's go use the courthouse."

And people would tell my father, "Aw, Rev. Davis, ain't no need of me going up there and trying to figure out how to vote. They gonna do what they want to do anyway."

One of Davis' brothers had already run away from home. His name was Guy, but everyone called him Frenchy. The summer of 1940, Frenchy came home for a visit. He was driving a fine car, wearing nice clothes and flashing a wad of money. His stories of Harlem increased Price's yearning to leave.

I'm looking at my brother, and he's looking fine. He says, "If you come to New York, I'll get you a good job." This excited me.

I saved up $50. I think it cost about $12 bus fare to New York. But I messed around and the war started. A friend and I went down to Fort Bragg. . . . I could not enter the Army . . . something about hernia ruptures.

They said I could join the Navy, but I said no. I'm going back home because I don't care who wins the war. Now I hate to say that. But I couldn't do any better or worse under the Gestapo than I could under these white policemen.

A few days after I was home from Fort Bragg, something happened that broke the camel's back.

I was riding the bus up 4th Street when this white man got on the bus. He and this black woman exchanged some words and this black woman was pregnant. I mean real pregnant.

He drug her off of the bus and beat her down to the ground. I'm a young man now, but it just did something to me. Other white people on the bus wouldn't raise a hand. In other words, they might as well have asked him if he needed any help to beat this woman.

And I said, "Let me get out of here."

In December 1941, Davis' parents agreed he could leave on the condition that if he met bad times in Harlem, he would return home.

The night I left, my mother fixed the shoe-box special. Fried chicken, sweet potato pie and coconut cake and biscuits and roast. My older sister cried. "I don't think you can make it. Don't go, please don't go."

But they all came up there to see me get on the bus.

And I remember my mother walking away.

"I don't want to see you get on that bus and leave."

"Mama, if things don't go good I'm coming back home."

We got on the bus and left and I think the farthest I'd ever been in my life was back to Morganton, N.C., where we used to live.

It was raining and storming like I don't know what. You talking about dark, because it's wartime, it's black out. Somewhere on the other side of Danville, (Va.) the bus driver stops the bus, comes back and snatches this black guy up.

"You ain't give me a ticket."

"Yes I did give you a ticket, sir."

"No you didn't give me a ticket. I smell liquor on ya, get off."

And the bus driver threw him off in the middle of the night. I'm sitting there scared to death.

When the bus driver had gone 10 to 15 miles, he got up and he said, "You know that man did give me a ticket. Well, there ain't nothing I can do about it now."

When I got in the bus terminal in Richmond, Va., I began to smell tobacco. We got off the bus and went around to the back door where the colored sign was and got a hot dog apiece. We were the last ones waited on, so we almost missed the bus.

Then we got to Washington, D.C. Oh, it was beautiful!

We changed buses and a woman told me, "Now son, from here up north, you can ride anywhere on the bus you want." That was my first taste of freedom. I didn't sit on the front mind you, but I sat in the middle.

When Davis arrived in New York, he took a cab to Harlem. Frenchy had instructed him to go to a boarding house on St. Nicholas Avenue. He walked up the steep stairs to the sixth floor where the landlady greeted him and directed him toward his room. In the parlor, Davis saw a man who looked "white . . . Greek or something."

He was eating a slice of cake and drinking a glass of wine. He asked me:

"Would you like some cake, young man?"

"No, but I'd like some of that wine."

"Does your father know you drink?"

"Yes."

So he gave me a glass. Come to find out, the man was Adam Clayton Powell. He was a city councilman then and he had a church in Harlem.

Well, the landlady showed me to my room. It had a bed and dresser in it. Now down South, I was used to walking all around a house. But in New York, you got a room and that's where you stayed.

My brother Frenchy gave me two days to fool around and learn the city. So I called up a girlfriend of mine who had moved there from North Carolina. A pretty thing she was. But she had just married a soldier and he had gone off to war.

So we went to the Savoy. The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. You ever heard that song "Stomping At The Savoy?" Now if you didn't go and stomp at the Savoy, you hadn't been to New York. So we went and stomped at the Savoy all night long.

There was live music. God, there were so many musicians. Lionel Hampton, you name 'em. Lucky Mellon and his band . . . Duke Ellington! Honey, it was the promised land!

Now we done found this freedom. . . . Go where you want to go. I don't have a policeman riding up asking me where I'm going or jumping out and beating me because I'm black.

On his second day in New York, Davis toured the neighborhood. He recognized some people from home. Some were jobless and drunk. These were people who met hard times, but were too ashamed to return home. That evening, Frenchy told Davis he had found a job for him at Hayman Marketing Service, a fresh and frozen food transportation company.

I was surprised to go on my job and find my brother Frenchy in charge. He was the foreman and dispatcher. And he was hiring and firing. And I couldn't understand how could my brother be in charge of all these white men? It was wonderful!

There were all blacks in there putting these orders together. But none of them were driving the trucks.

After I worked there for about three months or so, Adam Clayton Powell came by the boarding house again. Adam asked me, "Are you making good money?" I guess when everybody else was making $110 a week, I was making big money, $200, you know. Well they had to pay union scale.

So anyway, Adam Clayton Powell says, "I'm gonna start a class-action suit and get you black boys driving them trucks." So he came down there and talked to my boss, scared me to death. I said, "Oh my God, I'm gonna lose my job." But I didn't know I couldn't lose my job, I'm union.

Powell never filed the suit. Instead, Davis' boss agreed to allow blacks to drive trucks. Like many workers, Davis found that union membership offered economic protections he never realized in the South.

One night when a white driver arrived at work intoxicated, a dispatcher placed the truck keys in Davis' hand.

After a year in the boarding house, Davis moved to a prestigious Harlem neighborhood where he boarded with a friend's mother.

Five years later Davis bought a home on Long Island and a streamlined 1947 Chevrolet. His bank book showed savings of more than $1,000. He had a wad of money in his pocket.

It was time to go home. The way he had dreamed of long ago.

As soon as I bought the car, I drove straight to Charlotte. I was here for about an hour and I went uptown on College Street and found me a place to park and a white lady walked up to me and said, "John, can I get you to go to my house and do some work for me?" And I said, "No, ma'am, I'm on vacation."

She said, "Niggers don't take vacations. They take a little time off." Now this is the truth. I knew I was back in Charlotte.

It was Christmastime, and I got home that night about 1 o'clock. My father heated the food. He had chitlins and greens and corn bread and what not. I went back and slept with my brother in the back room. I got up at 5 o'clock.

It was time for Santa Claus to come. . . . My mother had put this shoe box in there with that tangerine, that orange and a stick of peppermint. That's what we used to get all of our lives.

That Christmas, Davis gave his mother leather boots and bedroom slippers, his father, an overcoat. Later he bought them their first television, refrigerator and stove. Davis never married, he said, because his work as a truck driver didn't lend itself to family life.

When his mother's health began to fail in the early 1970s, Davis made more frequent trips home. In 1969, he bought a house for her in Clanton Park.

At the same time, Davis noticed a change in the place he once called the land of freedom. Crime, despair and drugs. Often he remembered how people in Charlotte took their problems to the church and somehow found relief. But in New York, he realized that church was not the center of life.

It was time to return home for good.

Davis retired at 51 years old. His employer gave him a gold Bulova watch engraved with his name and a handwritten letter of gratitude. A month ago, someone broke into his home and stole the watch. He cared for his mother until she died in 1980. He also returned to Myers Tabernacle AME Zion in Cherry where he chairs the board of trustees.

New York had become the Mississippi, the North Carolina - just like Howard Beach today. For me, it became the racist city. I wanted to come back to Charlotte. I wanted to go back to the church where I could feel as if I were really serving God.

I knew I was always going to come to Charlotte. Because I have been raised up in the church and I knew that a change was going to come. I said God will not stand by and let these people in the South be as brutal as they are. There's got to be a change.

Now, I'm looking at Charlotte as the land of freedom.

My brother, God rest his soul now. He had built New York up to be God's gift to the world. But I found out they were all renting these cars to come down, renting clothes, borrowing money, taking all these ones and wrapping twenties around it. It was a phony. It was all a phony.

But now when I came home, I was not putting on airs. What you saw me with, I had earned it and earned it the hard way. I had cried, worked in the snow, went to work sick because I was determined that I was going to make it.

My life in New York was always great. I never lost my values. Well, I wasted some of my money, but I never was a street person, you know, a hustler. And down South, I knew the church and religion still mattered. That wasn't the center of life up north. Ultimately, I realized this. And that's one thing that made me want to come home.