LOCATED in north-central Florida, not too far from Orlando, is Eatonville, an all-Negro town that was the birthplace on January 7, 1901; of Zora Neale Hurston, author and folklorist. Her hometown has been described as a "city of five lakes, three croquet courts, 300 brown skins, 300 good swimmers, plenty gauvas, two schools, and no jailhouse." She was one of eight children born to John and Lucy (Potts) Hurston. Her father was a semi-literate tenant farmer and a Baptist "jackleg" preacher whose colorful sermons significantly influenced the content and style of most of her literary works. Announcing at an early age her desire to become a poetess, she was discouraged by her father who was a fundamentalist in his religious orientation and who held the opinion that poets and poetesses were "low-living creatures with no Bible in their hands and no God in their hearts."

Early Education in Florida

Miss Hurston’s early education was gained in the public school at Eatonville, Florida; however after her mother’s death when Zora was nine years old, she attended school irregularly. At this point in her life she was forced to remain at home to care for an older brother’s children. But, at sixteen, she rebelled and took work as a lady’s maid in an effort to earn money to further her education for she never forgot her mother’s sage admonition to “jump for the sun.” Later being employed as a lady’s maid in a traveling Gilbert and Sullivan Company, she attracted wide interest of the members of the company with her skillful reading style. Her intense desire for an education led her employer to arrange for her to enter the high school department of Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland. Upon completion of high school, she entered, in 1919, Howard University.

Attended Howard and Barnard

While a student at Howard University, she wrote her first story which appeared in “Stylus”, a creative writing magazine published on the campus, Transferring to Barnard College from Howard University after completing her freshman and sophomore years, she received the A.B. degree in anthropology in 1929. While at Barnard, she studied under Franz Boas, eminent anthropologist, who later aided her in obtaining a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first awarded to a Negro woman, which provided for a six-months research period in the South. This fellowship was extended for a year and thus she was able to gather material in the West Indies.

Upon being asked by Doctor Boas, who supervised directly her study, where she wanted to carry out her research in folklore, Miss Hurston readily answered Florida and gives the following reason:

Florida is a place that draws people from all over the world, and Negroes from every Southern state surely, and some from the North and West. So I knew that it was possible for me to get a cross-section of Negro life in that one state. The first place I aimed to collect material was Eatonville. Why? Because I knew the town was full of it, and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger.

Folklore material is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source: where there are the least outside influences, and there people being usually under-privileged, are shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Git out of here." We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he does not know what he is missing.

Resistance to Probing

The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a featherbed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll put something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he can’t read my mind, I’ll put this play toy into his hands, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.
This material which Miss Hurston gathered in the South and the West Indies furnished copy for two articles, "The Bahama Islands," and "Voodoo in America," which appeared consecutively in two issues of the American Folklore Society Magazine. Miss Hurston was now well on her way to national recognition.

After the publication of her first two research articles on folklore, Miss Hurston was successful in having other articles and short stories published in widely-read national magazines such as Journal of American Folklore, Story, The World Tomorrow, Surrey-Graphic, and John O'London's Weekly. With the publication, in 1939, in Story of "The Gilded Six Bits," Miss Hurston gained national fame and leading publishing companies vied with one another to publish her works. She chose Lippincott which paid her handsome royalties for the privilege of publishing her works.

Achieves National Recognition

With national recognition and a highly promising future as an author successfully launched, Miss Hurston settled easily into the producing end of her chosen career. Consequently works in three categories began to emerge from her pen. The first to make its appearance on the national and international scene in 1934 was Jonah's Gourd Vine and it contained a combination of biblical allegory and folkways; in 1935 Mules and Men appeared and it depicted the folkways of the unsophisticated Negroes in the backwoods of Florida; in 1937 Their Eyes Were Watching God reflect the traditional habits and behavior patterns of a peasant group. Another folk novel, in 1938 Tell My Horse, a book of non-fiction, is the result of her two Guggenheim Fellowships, and shows a curious mixture of reminiscences, travelogue, sensationalism, and an account of voodoo gods, native myths and magic of British West Indies, Jamaica, and Haiti; and in 1939 Moses, Man of the Mountain, was published and it is a story of the Moses legend—the emancipation of the Hebrews told in modern colloquial terms and emphasizing those aspects of the Moses legend which have appealed to Negroes—Moses the great magician and voodoo man.

Noah's Gourd Vine is a novel which points up the influence of one's environment on his personal habits. It also depicts the individual who is so lacking in strength of character that he allows poor hereditary factors to rob him of the desire to pursue worthwhile endeavors. John Buddy Pearson, the chief character, drops from one degree of degradation to another until he reaches the very lowest level of existence carrying those who are close to him along. Miss Hurston does not redeem her main character as is expected in most novels.

Mules and Men, a study of the folklore in Louisiana and Florida, is divided into two parts: (1) an account of the folk tales of Florida, Negroes, and (2) a description of the formulae and paraphernalia of Louisiana hoodoo practitioners. It is both humorous and informative and contains everything from the hushed folk conversation on the porch at early evening to the minister's weekly Sunlight morning sermon. The competitive joke-telling, Saturday night celebrations, or discussions of the behavior of local characters are all trivial and unimportant but dressed up in colorful and emphatic dialect of folk character, these incidents are instantly transformed into something captivating and intriguing.

In Their Eyes Are Watching God, Miss Hurston makes some of her best character creations. Janie, a well-defined character and heroine, is a woman of strong courage. She felt compelled to live her life according to the dictates of her once enslaved grandmother who had been disappointed in her own life many times and now wanted to shelter Janie. Janie herself experiences disappointment, particularly in her first marriage, but after her grandmother's death, she began to live her life as she wished. This called for disregard of many social conditions, but Janie had courage and eventually found happiness with Tea Cake, another well-drawn character, as a result. This is her one novel that has a happy domestic ending.

Carl Garner, writing in the Herald Tribune Books remarked that Zora Hurston has come back from her visit to the islands with a harvest unbelievably rich. Her book, Tell My Horse, is full of kech social comment relieved with constant humor; it is packed with good stories, accounts of folk religion, songs with music and words, as all songs should be reported." Miss Hurston was privileged to observe while in Haiti many kinds of native rites, among them the initiation for voodoo priesthood and the instruction of young females in the arts of love. She was permitted to touch an "authentic zombie, listen to broken noises in its throat, and then to photograph it.

Treated Biblical Theme

Miss Hurston's fifth book, Moses, Man of the Mountain, appeared in 1939. This book presents a vivid pictorial picture of the liberator of the Hebrews, and has clearly a biblical theme. Moses is presented as the appointed leader of an enslaved and oppressed people who both worshipped and feared him—not as a man of God, but as a great hoodoo expert. The idea is based upon the Mosaic Legend, which is put plainly by Miss Hurston in the introduction to Moses: Man of the Mountain:

So all across Africa, America, and the West Indies, there are tales of the power of Moses and great worship of him and his powers. But it does not flow from the Ten Commandments. It is his rod of power, the terror that he showed before Israel and to Pharaoh and that Mighty Hand.

Miss Hurston's last novel, Seraph on the Suwannee, which was published in 1948, is a moving story of Arvay, a mulatto, and Jim, the son of an aristocratic family, who began their lives together in a sawmill country along the Suwannee, transferred to the citrus belt, and later found good fortune in the shrimping boats on the coast of Florida. With this work, Miss Hurston exemplified the ability to portray objectively folk characters of the opposite racial group. So understandable and clear are the motives and actions of Arvay and Jim that one finds himself intrigued with their handling of their misfortunes arising from class consciousness among poor whites.

Next to come from Miss Hurston's pen was her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road in which one learns that she absorbed many of the smallest details of the Ne-

(continued on page 165)
Zora Hurston . . . .

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gro people, their social customs, their attitudes, their behavior, and their thinking. Being often in the employ of whites, she had excellent opportunities to see, hear, and study them as they really were.

That Miss Hurston was a most versatile writer may be seen in the fact that in addition to her novels, definitive studies in ethnology, and autobiography, she wrote a number of short stories, a one-act play, two librettos, and many magazine articles. In fact, her earliest recognition in the literary field came as a result of the publication in 1925, in Opportunity, her short story "Spunk," "Spunk" and "The Gilded Six-Bits" are good examples of her fidelity and keenness of character portrayal of the use of local color and dialect.

As successful as Miss Hurston was in her writing, she was equally as unsuccessful in love and in her later personal life. Her marriage to Herbert Sheen in 1927 ended four years later in divorce. Several other attempts to find love and happiness brought only frustration and heartaches. Occasionally during the 1930's she was able to sell an article to the Saturday Evening Post or to others for ample financial remuneration. During the last years of her life she earned a precarious living as a substitute teacher at Lincoln Park Academy in Fort Pierce, Florida. She contributed to the local Negro paper, The Chronicle, and began work on a new novel which she never completed. This last literary effort was halted in 1959 when she had a stroke which led ultimately to her death on February 3, 1960.

Expenses for her funeral, which was held in a tiny chapel in Fort Pierce and attended by little more than 100 people, were paid by contributions, some from persons who never knew her and were completely unaware of her contribution to the literary world. Most of those who did know her remember her as a careless woman, bordering on depravity and dereliction. It is true that she neglected herself physically; however she always saw great worth and dignity in the human race. An editorial in The Chronicle the week following her death concluded: "Zora Neale went about and didn't care too much how she looked. Or what she said. Maybe people didn't think much of that, But Zora Neale, every time she went about, had something to offer. She didn't come to you empty."

Miss Hurston's writings indicate that she had "something to offer" which will live throughout the ages — unbiased literary compositions concerning southern whites and Negroes presented in the idiom and dialect which they used. Her intimate knowledge of the people convinced her of the essential oneness of mankind. Thus she contended that she felt neither colored nor white, but simply like a person. Perhaps this attitude is best summed up in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, released in 1942:

"I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people. . . . I began to laugh at both white and black who claimed special blessings on the basis of race. Therefore, I saw no curse in being black, no extra favor in being white. I have no race prejudice of any kind. . . . I give you all my right hand of fellowship and love. In my eyesight, you lose nothing by looking just like me. . . . You who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust. . . And you who walk in humble places, think kindly, too, of others. . . . Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demns may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so.

Thus spoke Zora Neale Hurston, one who loved people, their folklore, their culture, and recorded both for posterity.

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