

AUNT TISH: BELOVED GOURMET of the BITTER ROOT

by GLENN CHAFFIN

This is the story of a Missouri mulatto slave girl who, in freedom, migrated to Hamilton, Montana, to become a fabulous cook of international reputation and a personality legend in her time. Noted personages paid her homage, her boarding house guests varied in background from mill hands to scientists, bankers, educators and statesmen.

Tish Nevins was born on a farm in Monroe county near Paris, Missouri, June 2, 1862. Her mother was a slave in the household of the "Preacher" Nevins family. She never knew her white father. Tish was her only given name. Her mother, freed at the end of the war, remained with her former master and, following the custom of many slaves, adopted the Nevins name for herself and her child. Neither Tish nor her adopted family and a multitude of friends could remember when the "Aunt" became attached to her name, but those who knew her say it suited her nature perfectly. She accepted it with pride and bore the cognomen for forty or fifty years until her death in 1942.

The saga of Aunt Tish begins in an act of mercy and continues with deeds of charity and generosity remembered with fondness by many to this day. Reared in an atmosphere of semi-culture—for the slave-owning minister and his wife were educated people—Tish grew up with an appreciation of proper language and literature, although she never learned to write and could read only a few words in a family Bible of large print. She remained almost illiterate all her life. Mr. Nevins read aloud to her from her earliest childhood from his Bible and other works. She was an apt student and learned to speak well. But even as a free child she was never sent to school.

On a farm near the hamlet of Strother, a few miles from Paris, lived the family of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Smithey and their nine children. Mrs. Smithey was pregnant with her tenth child in 1890 and during the early summer of that year Tish, then a woman of twenty-eight, went to work for her. The baby, a girl, was born August 19 and was named Mattie Moss.



A few days after the birth of the child, Mrs. Smithey became desperately ill and realized that she was going to die. "Tish," she told her young housekeeper, "I want you to take my baby and raise her as your own for as long as she needs you." Tish accepted the responsibility without question and the Smithey family accepted her as Mattie's foster mother with gratitude. Mrs. Smithey died when her baby was eleven days old.

Tish immediately loved the infant with all her heart, say members of the family, and reared her on milk, sorghum molasses and a gruel made from corn meal. The baby thrived under the watchful care of her adopted mother and until her death revered her as Mama Tish and Tish referred to her always as "my baby."

In 1899 seven of the surviving members of the Smithey family moved to Hamilton, settling on a Bitter Root valley farm. Two of the children had died and one son had left home. During the intervening nine years, Tish had not only adopted Mattie as her own, she had, in a sense, adopted the whole family, with the permission and appreciation of the father, Robert. Thomas and Clarence (Pete, as he has been known for many years by both family and friends), still live in Hamilton and recall many adventures of their boyhood when Tish was a loving mother but a stern disciplinarian.

Tish mixed tender and loving care with a hickory switch in her raising of the Smithey brood on the Missouri farm, Tom and Pete and their sister Nell (Mrs. Blaine Reimel) all remember. But she so balanced care and discipline that she earned and held the love of the children from their earliest remembrance. In addition to the three mentioned above, who live in Hamilton, Herbert is still living, a resident of Spokane. The four Smitheys reflect the wondrous treatment and enormous affection bestowed upon them through the more than half century that Tish was a part of their family. Their ages range from 84 to 89 and as this is written, in the spring of 1971, all say they are "able to sit up and take nourishment."

Aunt Tish, of course, accompanied her adopted family to the Bitter Root valley. Mattie was then nine years old and still Tish's pride and joy. The oldest of the Smithey children was Nora, then a young lady in her twenties, a teacher's school graduate. She was immediately in demand by half a dozen schools and was my first grade teacher in Corvallis. The younger Smithey youngsters, Pete, Nell and Hattie, attended the Hamilton schools.

At this period in her life, Tish Nevins was a slender, good-looking woman of thirty-seven, who, according to old timers who knew her well, was a splendid dresser and always neat as a pin. Although her features reflected her Negro heritage, her skin was a creamy tan. All of her life, say her intimates, she was irrepressibly gay. Laughter came naturally and easily to her and Jeanette Johnson, an old friend and neighbor in Hamilton, says she fairly bubbled with good humor.

Despite her lack of education, she used good grammar, which she had learned instinctively from the Reverend Nevins. Warm hearted, with a loving nature, she immediately made a host of friends. She loved children and they adored her. In her early years in Hamilton, since she devoted most of her time to the Smithey family and guests, it is doubtful that little if any thought was given to her culinary accomplishments. Most midwest women were good cooks and such gifts were taken for granted.

Tish began taking in a few boarders to augment the family income before the father of the Smithey family died. It was soon after Mattie left home in 1908, as the first of the children to marry, that Aunt Tish decided, with the blessings of the rest of the family, to expand her business into a full-scale boarding house. She rented a two-story house that had originally been built as a brothel. Two large ground floor rooms, one used as a "parlor," the other as the resident madam's private living room, were both converted into dining rooms. One was used for private parties and organizational meetings.

Aunt Tish loved fun and had a natural sense of humor. And the "house" became the subject of some of her best stories. "This old house," she often said, "has seen great times." But old timers say it lost little in the way of merriment under the management of Aunt Tish. Just having a meal at her table was a joyous occasion.

Yet, Aunt Tish had a secret sorrow. Her mixed blood was a source of unhappiness, according to veteran newspaperwoman Bessie K. Monroe, who was one of her closest friends. It was a mental scar that she nurtured through most of her lifetime, Bessie said. In a measure there was no real reason for it. Her associates were whites and she was never made to feel that her social status was less than theirs. During her years in Hamilton, the only Negroes living there were a vegetable grower, with whom Tish had business contact, and Mammy Smith, who operated a house of questionable reputation near Tish's boarding house. A near moral purist, Tish would have no part of her.

One of the things that endeared Tish to the community, says Mrs. Monroe, was her concern for young

people and her helpfulness to those from broken homes or indigent families. She employed as many of such youngsters as she could, bought them clothes and insisted that they attend school. Through her encouragement and financial and moral help, some of "her children" were graduated from Hamilton High School with honors and continued on to distinguished careers.

In her inherent zest for knowledge, Aunt Tish was quick to recognize educational and cultural natures among her steady and transient boarders. Several young scientists from the Public Health Laboratory in Hamilton patronized her establishment regularly and though their daily tasks were miles over her head, Tish waited on them with rapt attention to their supper conversation. She became especially friendly with the wife of one of the men, Mrs. William (Gretchen) Jellison, and asked the girl to read to her. "I read passages from Shakespeare to her and she loved it," Gretchen told me.

Tish's wry humor contained a bit of native guile when it served the purpose for a personal joke, Gretchen said. "She received an extensive amount of praise mail from around the country and even from foreign cities such as London, Paris and Tokyo. She also received letters from her old home in Missouri. These were especially dear to her and sometimes became the subject of innocent bragging. She would remark casually that she had received another letter from a former guest in Paris. Her tongue-in-cheek intent was clear. She wanted to create the impression that the letter was from Paris, France, though in reality it was mailed in Paris, Missouri."

Aunt Tish cherished the undernourished and accepted it as a sacred trust to "put a little meat on their ribs." And she had real compassion for the unhappy. The food dabbler aroused quick sympathy, for she honestly believed such a person was ill. She knew from long experience that her pies were a special delicacy and if a guest failed to ask for a second helping he was, in her mind, practically a hospital case.

Tish was intensely loyal to all her customers, poor and rich alike, say her old friends and neighbors. But she loved "class" and was quick to recognize it among cultured guests. Her silverware, linen tablecloths and napkins, which she always used, seemed to shine with exceptional brightness when she was entertaining the governor and his lady or a university president and his wife. Her instinctive deference to such guests could have indicated a certain snobbishness, but this was not the case, her intimates believe. Rather, it reflected an inferiority complex stemming from the acceptance of her own shortcomings in the matter of education. Many times she expressed her intense regret that she could not read or write.

During the years of their childhood, the Smithey brothers told me, Tish brought up the matter of schooling many times. "You kids get to studying so you will get good grades," she would say. "Do you want to grow up into an ignoramus like me?" Yet, in later years her dignified bearing and ease of manner among those she considered above her in knowledge reflected cul-



The Smithey family in Hamilton, about 1908, the year Aunt Tish began "taking in" culinary customers. Left to right, standing: Herbert, Nora, Thomas, and Clarence, known as Pete. Seated: Mattie, the father, Robert H., and Nell.

tural growth. In researching material for this treatise I have been unable to learn why Tish didn't make an effort to advance her schooling, since she evidently was gifted with native intelligence. I can only assume that the matter of learning to read and write seemed to be too much of a stumbling block to hurdle.

William Jennings Bryan, on a Chautauqua tour, visited Hamilton and ate at Tish's bountiful table with such relish that he later wrote her a note saying that the meal was one of the delights of his life. Tish kept his letter for years, open and pasted on her dining room wall.

A hearty eater, Aunt Tish eventually became a victim of her own cuisine. Across a period of years the mulatto girl's slender figure "grew and grew" in her own words until she was as "plump as a pumpkin."

In the latter years of her life she weighed almost three hundred pounds and became quite sedentary, spending much of her time in an armless kitchen chair. From this vantage point she operated a kind of amateur cooking school, teaching both girls and women among her kitchen help her artistry with skillet, baking dish and seasoning. Her watchword was patience and her method of getting just the right flavor was tasting. Her excellent mind served her well in the collection and use of cooking. They were all in her head. So, although she was generous in confiding to others the secrets of her skill, very few recipes from her famous kitchen were preserved and so are lost to posterity. But those who knew her well say that her teaching paid off for other households, for she developed many excellent cooks.

Miles Romney, editor-publisher of *The Western News* in Hamilton, and Mrs. Romney were frequent guests of Aunt Tish and Miles recalls an incident that exemplifies her rare sense of humor and appreciation of a practical joke, even at her own expense. Miles and his wife, Ruth, along with an uncle, Kenneth Romney, and Mrs. Romney from Washington, D.C., were having dinner one evening when Kenneth, a trifle in his cups, Miles said, decided to pay a visit to Aunt Tish,

who had retired from her role as dining room hostess to preside over the kitchen. He came back in high glee.

Aunt Tish was sitting down, and to pay his affectionate respects, for he was an old friend, Kenneth bent over to kiss her on the cheek. Then, on a sudden impulse to further express his appreciation of a wonderful dinner, he stuffed a five-dollar bill into the cleavage of her copious bosom.

Without even attempting to retrieve the gift, Aunt Tish burst out laughing. "You rascal, you," she said, "whatever it is, the undertaker will get it. I'll never find it."

Tish had no real sense of the value of money, Pete Smithey says. "Money never meant a thing to her and sometimes her charge accounts got out of hand. She was a natural born spendthrift, right off the golden wheel."

Yet, she left a wonderful heritage, a host of friends who never remembered anything but good about her, and legendary tales of dining room greatness that seem certain to live on. Since she had taken such good care of them, her Smithey "children" saw to it that her boarding house was kept solvent when her grocery accounts went beyond the resources of her kitchen money bowl. And they gave her back, in kind, love and kindness and care when illness and old age finally stilled her culinary reign.

GLENN CHAFFIN, who several years ago returned to his boyhood home in the Bitter Root Valley after a long career as a comic strip writer and motion picture reporter, appears in these columns for the second time in an informal article of reminiscence. His "Winter Ice Harvest in the Bitter Root" was published in our Winter issue, 1971, and is included, among many other segments, in his book of reminiscences, entitled "The Last Horizon," recently published, and available, as we go to press, from The Montana Historical Society and other book dealers.