

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A HOLINESS PREACHER

Date of First Writing	January 20, 1939
Name of Person Interviewed	Leila Holmes (Negro)
Fictitious Name	Lily White
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Place	Columbia, S.C.
Occupation	Preacher of the Gospel
Name of Writer	Verner Lea
Name of Reviser	State Office

"This wind will blow you down, child. Let's get in the house. But its frame gets a little shaky, too, in weather such as this.

"We've had a sight of wet weather here lately. I'm late with the clothes washing, so I have to dry them indoors.

"I don't stay home long enough to get much done. I'm gone most all the time. My mission in life is to preach the Gospel. I carries God's word far and near.

"Some say that's a right heavy load for a hundred pounds to shoulder.

But, if the spirit's strong, the burden don't never get too heavy. If everybody lay down on the job soon as they lose their teeth and their hair turn gray, this world would be a wickedder place than we got now.

"I can't remember correct just how old I am, but I still gets about like a top. I was born in Kingsville, South Carolina. I don't remember my mother and father. Both died when I was young. Pa said we wouldn't be destituted, for the Lord would take care of us. What he said has come to pass for me. But I don't know about my two brothers. It's been many a year since I've seen 'em. I traveled 'round so much I lost track of 'em. The oldest one was a fireman on a train. My baby brother went to Birmingham. I can't say whether they are dead or live.

"My husband been dead sixteen years. I don't have anybody now but John, my only son. I had five children. Four died when they was babies. John ain't so strong hisself. He has double rupture. I took him to see Doctor Bunch, the finest operatin' doctor in the city. He said he needed a operation. But seem like I can't get enough money together to have it done. John can't do heavy work, so he goes on the market early every mornin' and buys a little stuff to sell. Step inside this room and I'll show you his place of business. It's really neat."

As we entered, she stroked the kinky head of a little Negro girl and said: "Take these oranges to the baby, and tell your Ma I'll be down after while to see how he's gettin' along.

"John's gone to take Carrie some stuff now. She's laid up with rheumatism and can't get about of late. He's got tangerines, apples, oranges, and a box of black walnuts. The chillun in the neighborhood loves to chew on this

here sugarcane. He sells a few vegetables and kindlin' wood, too.

"He picks up 'round five dollars a week, sometimes more. Everybody in the settlement trades with him. I live by my faith, and God heeds my prayers. We pay two dollars a week for this house, and I never have lacked for food, shelter, or raiment. I don't suffer from the cold, either. I wear high top shoes and long unions, and the unions stuff clear down in the top of my shoes. This thick skirt and heavy, woolen basque is plenty protection from the cold.

"When I don't have any work to do inside, I set there on the porch in the coldest kind of weather. It don't take much wood for me. But there won't be much lef' for anybody if they keep cuttin' down the trees. They cuttin' all the little pines in the State. Tell me they gonna make paper out of 'em. Last time I went to Orangeburg, it jus' grieved me to see all of the trees they'd cut. It's a terrible thing. First thing you know, there won't be a tree lef', and people will have a harder time keepin' warm than they have now. Our new Governor said: 'When you cut one tree, be sure to put another in its place.' I thought that was a wonderful statement.

"I saw the Governor and heard every word he said in his talk. He's a fine lookin' man and a young man. He made a grand speech. I think God had somethin' to do with him comin' to serve the people of South Carolina. He told the people he couldn't do anything by hisself. He needed help, and with their help he will build South Carolina up. He wants the people to stop lynchin', and he prays for the folks to turn to God. He said: 'Mens are the trees, don't cut a one down.'

"I thought that was wonderful. Every word he spoke was music to my ears. This Governor is sweet. If they jus' do like he say, people will live longer, and the undertaker won't have so much to do. I'm prayin' God

to take care of Governor Maybank, 'cause he's got plenty to keep him busy in this city. Columbia is a wicked place, jus' held together by a few. I look at people sometime and say: Great God! if you calls that religion, I sho' don't want it.

"The younger generation in Columbia is just ruined. The songs they sing are plumb outlandish. They dance somethin' scandalous, day and night, by these nickelos (nickelodeons). Instead of being in school tryin' to learn how to be decent, they out cuttin' the buck day in and day out, step-pin' in every trap the devils got set for 'em. Plenty chillun runnin' 'round don't have no idea who their pa is. Midwife go 'round and catch one baby after another. Then go on 'bout her business. She ain't botherin' her head whether its got the right or the wrong name. All she's after is the business.

"One of the first steps I hope the Governor takes, is to take ever one of these nickelos and dump 'em in the river. Another thing, liquor is all over the city, and they made it lawful to sell it. What I'm talkin' 'bout, they advertise it, coax 'em to buy it, and sell it to 'em to get 'em drunk, then lock 'em up for drinkin' it. Don't just make 'em pay one way, but sometime two, and sometime a half dozen ways. Amen! They sets traps for men jus' like birds. Take a dog, they treat it good; take humanity and treat it brutal.

"I want to go up and welcome the Governor to our city and wish him well on his way. I always go up and shake hands with all of the new governors. In generally, I make a little talk. When I went to the State House to greet Governor Blackwood, I said: 'Let every governor in the United States take care of every man in the penitentiary, reformatory and ever'where. You are gonna have need of 'em.'

"I love everybody, 'cause I love God. I go out to Waverly and to the

penitentiary once a month to speak. I pray to see the people turn to God. He say: 'You turn to me and I'll turn to you.' I carries His word ever' where I go.

"One morning two of my members went out to the penitentiary with me. They wanted to see the 'lectric chair. I asked the guard to let us see it. And he said, 'Sho, which one of you gonna set in it next?' I shook my hand at him and said, 'Not a one of us, and it's a dying sin that the first one ever set in it.' Plenty of innocent people have been strapped in that very chair. Plenty innocent ones locked up for stealin'. But people ain't started stealin' yet. Just' you wait. When the wicked reap, then the poor mourn. Amen! Sister, they gonna do some mournin'. Satan walks up and down the earth, to and fro, temptin' people to sin. He sets regular traps for 'em to get caught in. But, at the comin' of Christ, this same devil shall be bound in chains and cast into the bottomless pit and tormented for ever and ever. That same 'lectric chair ain't nothin' but a trap set up by the devil.

"One day I was up on the street preachin' to a small crowd. A white man come up and say, 'When is the end coming?' I say, 'Long as you see anybody here, end ain't coming. Long as you see a biscuit in the plate, that ain't the end.' 'Nother man say, 'Well, Preacher, you know so much 'bout the Bible, was the hen before the egg, or egg before the hen?' I say, 'Hen was in creation.'

"Lady say the other day she's tryin' ever day to get closer to the Lord. I tell her long as she stay outdoors she can't get close. She out in the rain; have to come in the house."

"I use to be outdoors, but I been in the house for many years now.

Christ said, 'I am the truth and the light.' Everybody has to pass through that door. Christ is the door. But people don't want to pass through that door. I hear 'em say they're a Christian. But they cuss, drink liquor, and carry on scandalous. Think they can sin a little in the week and go to church on Sunday and be forgive.

"People all want to see me and hear me talk 'bout God. People always askin' me why is it preachers won't preach 'less you pay 'em money. It's 'cause they are hired by the people and not by the Lord. That's the reason that some don't go to church that want to go. They too poor, and don't have nothin' to give. I hear 'em say heap of times, 'She ain't no good to the church, she don't never give nothin.'"

"Somebody say, 'That man over yonder the biggest bootlegger in the city.' Then them in the runnin' say, 'He the finest member we got in the church. He give us ten and twenty dollars one shot out the box.' But God say, 'Woe be unto the ship that scatters my sheep.'"

"The church is the ship, and it does a sight of scatterin' 'mongst the black and the white sheep. Sister, I'm tellin' you, these are wicked times 'mongst the people. The Lord come on earth to save sinners. Look like He got more than He can do by Hissself. That's the reason I'm trying to help all I can. I don't charge nobody for carryin' His word ever'where I go. If they want to give me anything, I receive it with humble gratitude. But I love them that don't give, just as much as them that do. All is a part of the flock.

"You see that Standard Cotton Warehouse across there? That place jus' packed and jammed full with bale after bale of cotton. Some of it been there for years. When people could get a good price they wouldn't sell.

Keep payin' storage on it, and holdin' it to get more. Now it ain't sellin' for nothin'. People jus' hogs, waitin' for profit and more profit. Ain't never satisfied, and live all for self. Bible say, 'He that's got two coats, give one to somebody else that don't have one. He that hath meat, divide with them that got none.' But they sho' don't do it. They cuss 'cause they don't have three coats and the whole hog. The further people travel away from God the harder the times.

"I lived in Jacksonville, Florida, for eight years. I cooked for a family that moved there from Georgia. In 1922, I received my first summons to carry God's word 'mongst the people. 'Bout twelve o'clock one day I was standin' in the kitchen makin' biscuits. All of a sudden somethin' whisper in my ear, 'Now you are here in the city, I have sent you to save people. You shall be the Prophet of God.' I remember another time, too, when I got His message. I woke up one night in the middle of the night, right sudden. I saw gold glitter all over the room. I lay there and looked. Then I got up and went out. I walked all 'round the house to see if it was car lights or such. I come back and lay down. And I still saw that gold glitter ever' where. I say, 'Lord, what is this?' He put me in a quick sleep. You know he does everything quick. When I woke up, a brand new song come to me, 'Carry the word of God wherever you go.' I still hear the voice of the Lord ever now and then. Ever since that day in Jacksonville, I been carryin' His message.

"I made heap of friends there. The mayor of the town was jus' crazy 'bout me and didn't want me to leave. He didn't b'lieve I was a South Carolinian. But I sho' stuck up for our State. It turns out some good people. That was before Columbia got so wicked. But we still got plenty of fine folks here.

"I was standin' there on Bay Street in Jacksonville one day. I see a big sign that say, Justice of the Peace Office. A man come along and asked another man, 'Is this the Justice of Peace?' He say, 'Brother, that's what they call it, but if that's what you lookin' for, you won't find it in there. There ain't no justice, and you sho' won't find no peace in that place.' I near 'bout split my sides laughlin' at that man. I really did bus' one of the staves loose in my corset. For I know he was tellin' the truth and nothin' but the truth.

"The night before I left Jacksonville for Columbia, I went to see my rent man. I say, 'Mr. Stephens, I'm goin' on back to Columbia tomorrow. How much I owe you?'

"'Why, Lily, you could of jus' slipped on back without payin' me anything. That's the way heap of folks do.'

"'Well, I like for folks to deal fair with me, and I try to deal fair with them. Besides, I might want to come back sometime and rent another house from you.' He begged me not to leave. Said people in Jacksonville loved me. When I told him good-bye, he said any time that I take a notion to come back he'd have a house waitin' for me. Treat people right, and they'll sho' treat you right.

"I come on back to Columbia in 1924. All of my friends was so glad to see me. Mr. Reed hollered 'cross from Motor Freight Lines where he works, 'Hey, Lily, time you was comin' back to a good town. I'm plannin' to take a little trip to Florida myself.' Three nights later, God give me a message, 'Tell the people to stay out of Florida. The battle-ax is comin' through.'

"Next mornin' I carry His word to Mr. Reed. I say, 'Keep your ears open and read your paper. Stay 'way from Florida. The Battle-ax is comin' through.'

"God warned me and said, 'Now when it come, pray for the people.'
 I lay down and went to sleep and forgot. Next mornin' the wind was blowin' plumb bad. Whistlin' up the alley like a freight train. I thought sho' these shacks would be wrecked. I went out on the street and hear ever'body talkin' 'bout the terrible hurricane and the lives that was lost in Florida. Mr. Reed say right now that he reckon I saved his life when I give him that message.

"The last storm they had, I was settin' here alone. I hear somethin' say, 'Devil on behind coming.' I got up and looked up and down the alley and 'round the house. I say, 'Jesus! what is that?' I hear it say again, 'Devil on behind coming.' I didn't know what to make of that. I set down and pray. I say, 'Dear Lord, spare me, and spare my people.'

"But there was a many one drowned, and hundreds of houses and hotels just washed plumb away in that storm. Palm Beach and Miami was near 'bout plumb destroyed. People had jus' got so wicked, God had to lift his hand and show 'em who was the Power and the Glory. He said, 'If you walk as I demand you, and cleave unto me, you shall be saved.'

"When Jonah disobeyed God and the crew found him on board ship, they threw him overboard in the middle of the sea. That's when the whale swallowed him. But God showed mercy to Jonah and give him another chance. The whale brought him ashore. People been breakin' God's command ever since the time of Adam and Eve. God made Adam holy. Then he put him to sleep. I don't know how long he sleep while he was makin' Eve. Eve might of been messin' 'round that garden a long time before Adam woke up. But if Adam had kept God's promise, the world would of been heap better today. When Adam sinned, God stripped off ever' thing he had put on him and left him naked.

If it hadn't been for curious women like Eve and Lot's wife, this would be a better world to live in.

"Look like even the little chillun got curious and suspicious when the Lord commanded Moses to lead the chillun out of Egypt. While they was rambling 'round in the wilderness and Moses was talkin' to them, they say, 'Moses, we tired hearin' you talk, we want to hear God talk awhile. Moses was God's beloved son, and he wanted the chillun to obey him. But there was wranglin' in those days same as there is now.

"I travel round a lots. Been about pretty good. I've preached in Augusta and Savannah, Georgia. The people in Swans^aes, South Carolina, and Savannah, begging me to come back now. I hope to get there this spring. I preach faith and prayer. The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up. I've helped hundreds of people. I come across a woman once that was low in spirits. She say she was prayin' to die. I talked to her, and prayed for her, and she say I done her good. A white man I know stopped out there in front of the warehouse one day. He didn't look jus' right to me. I went out and spoke to him, 'What ails you this morning, Mr. Jackson?' He say, 'Lily, I'm nearly crazy. I'm gonna commit suicide. I've los' two thousand dollars.' He had his gun in his hand, fixin' to drive to the river. I talked and talked to that man. I give him God's message. I told him he never brought no money with him when he come into the world, and he sho' couldn't take none away. He set there and study awhile. After while he shook my hand and say, 'You done me good. You saved my life this day.'

"I put a old Negro woman on her feet, too. She had been sick a long time and couldn't walk. I went to see her and prayed. I told her to have faith. Today she can walk as good as you.

"One of my neighbors had a very sick baby. They had jus' give the child up to die. One Sunday mornin' I was fixin' to go to service. Somethin' say, 'Go see that baby.' I went over 'bout twelve o'clock. I prayed and asked the Lord to save that weepin' mother's child. I went back in 'bout a half hour, and he was lots better. Today he's a big tall boy seventeen years old. I use to be a sinner, but I never had any peace till I went right back where I left off doin' wrong and started doin' right. I got converted, and I never have had a worry since then.

"John said, 'I baptize you with water; but one mightier than I is comin', and I'm not good enough to unloose his shoes. He's gonna baptize you with the Holy Ghost and fire. The baptism of repentance.' He didn't mean duckin' in a pond or a river. He didn't care if you never saw the water. Water done made more drunkards, sin, and ever'thing else. When He come, He will gather the wheat in his hand, but the chaff He will burn with unsquenchable fire. Amen! This world is chocked plumb full of chaff.

"I don't have no pleasure, if you mean drinkin', cussin', and cuttin' up like. I don't go to no picture shows or the like. Let the devil have his own work. I have my pleasure in the Lord. I read my Bible and Sunday School lesson and mind my own business. We here to build, and not to tear down.

"There is a clear and crystal river flowin' by the throne of God. People must come sanctified by faith in Christ if they hope to see that river or enter His house. Amen! Sister, I'm tellin' you what God knows."
