Chapter 1

Life

Born under the sign of Capricorn on January 7, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston was the sixth child and second daughter of John Hurston (1861–1918) and Lucy Ann Potts Hurston (1865–1904). Hurston's biographers tell us that her name was recorded in the family bible as Zora Neal Lee Hurston; at some point an "e" was added to "Neal" and "Lee" was dropped. Though she was born in Notasulga, Hurston always called Eatonville, Florida, home and even – though perhaps unwittingly, because her family relocated to Eatonville when Zora was quite young – named it as her birthplace in her autobiography. Eatonville has become famous for its long association with Hurston; since 1991 it has been the site of the annual multi-disciplinary Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities (ZORA! Festival), which lasts for several days. The festival's broad objective is to call attention to contributions that Africa-derived persons have made to world culture; however, its narrower objective is to celebrate Hurston's life and work along with Eatonville's unique cultural history.

Hurston's family moved to Eatonville in 1893. Her father, John Hurston, was the eldest of nine children in an impoverished sharecropper family near Notasulga; during his lifetime, he would achieve substantial influence in and around Eatonville as a minister, carpenter, successful family man, and local politician. His parents, Alfred and Amy Hurston, were, like wife Lucy's parents, Sarah and Richard Potts, formerly enslaved persons. According to Hurston and her biographers, the landowning Potts family looked down on the hand-to-mouth sharecropping Hurstons who lived across the creek.[1] By the time John spotted 14-year-old Lucy singing in her church choir, the class distinction between the landowning Potts family and the sharecropping Hurston family was well known; indeed, Potts family resistance to the marriage offers an interesting study in African American class dynamics of the time. Neither of Lucy's parents wanted her to marry John Hurston, who was – in addition to being dirt poor – rumored to be the bastard son of a white man; Hurston's biographer, Valerie Boyd, has suggested that John possibly owed his light skin to the fact that father Alfred was mulatto. Disdainful of Lucy's choice, Sarah Potts refused to

attend Lucy and John's wedding and barred her daughter from her childhood home.

John Hurston, a man imbued with not a small amount of wanderlust, first visited Eatonville, Florida, around 1890. By the time the family moved there in 1893, Lucy had given him six children. The oldest child was Hezekiah Robert (shortened to Bob), born November 1882. Isaac (1883), born after Bob, died very young. John Cornelius (1885), Richard William (1887), Sarah Emmeline (1889), and Zora (1891) followed. After the family moved to Eatonville, Lucy gave birth to Clifford Joel (1893), Benjamin Franklin (1895), and Everett Edward (1898). In Eatonville, the family prospered far beyond their humble roots in Notasulga, Alabama. No doubt, the same strength of character that led Lucy to defy her parents and marry the man of her choice also served her during the very lean early years of the marriage and her husband's many infidelities. She emerges in works about Hurston's life as the center of the Hurston household, the pillar of strength that served to shape her children's character and direct her husband toward his professional potential. John Hurston possessed substantial carpentry skills. After he moved to Eatonville, he became a minister and, ultimately, served three terms as Eatonville's mayor, authoring many of its laws. A former teacher, Lucy Potts Hurston routinely helped her young children with their schoolwork, making education a central aspect of their upbringing. She urged them to "jump at the sun," and she especially encouraged young Zora's creative impulses.

Zora excelled in the language arts and, early on, exhibited her talent as a storyteller and performer. While Lucy Potts Hurston applauded and (for the most part) encouraged the development of her daughter's vibrant individuality, John Hurston did not. Indeed, he and Zora were usually at odds with each other. According to Hurston and her biographers, John Hurston had welcomed one daughter, but saw having two as more of a liability than he was willing to take on. Zora was a female whose natural way of behaving in the world challenged and undermined gender role expectations; in addition she was strong-willed and often at odds with authority. Outgoing and tough, she could punch as hard as the boys with whom she played and fought. Despite the fact that Zora and her father seemed destined to be at odds from the day she was born a female rather than a male, she actually had much in common with John Hurston, including her capacity for hard work combined with a wanderlust and desire to seek out the horizon.

Hurston's home life changed dramatically after her mother died on September 18, 1904 and 44-year-old John Hurston remarried on February 12, 1905. The home that had been a nurturing and comparatively safe haven for the Hurston siblings became decidedly less so. Indeed, it became a site

of conflict once second wife, twenty-year-old Mattie Moge, took her place in the household. The marriage, so soon after Lucy Hurston's death, met with the resentment of the Hurston siblings and the black community of Eatonville. According to Zora, the household soon began to fall apart. John's favorite daughter, Sarah, married quickly and moved away, taking young Everett with her.

John Hurston had sent Zora away to attend school at Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville, Florida, immediately following her mother's death. With her natural bookishness and her exuberant spirit, Zora fared well during her year at Florida Baptist Academy – though her arrival in Jacksonville meant being cast against an unwelcoming white backdrop. One of the central objectives for faculty and administrators at Florida Baptist Academy was to teach its charges about their proper place in American society. For someone like Hurston, such conditioning was almost impossible. Still the white backdrop in Jacksonville signified her difference, that she was colored and therefore not standard.

At the end of the school year, Zora found herself *abandoned* when her father (who had failed to pay her room and board) refused to send money for her trip home. A school administrator advanced Zora the fare and, back in Eatonville, she observed the neglectful way that her father and stepmother regarded her younger siblings. The older children were being driven away one after another as John Hurston buckled under his own weaknesses and the will of his young second wife. As might be expected, Zora was soon at odds with Mattie Moge, and she left her family home later in 1905 feeling "orphaned and lonesome."[2] Had she been male, her father might simply have borne the expense of schooling as he did for his sons.

Hurston wrote of this time that she was "shifted from house to house of relatives and friends and found comfort nowhere."[3] Schooling was irregular and she missed her books. She recalled that she had actually foreseen her homelessness in one of a series of prescient visions she began having when she was 7. By the time Hurston was 15, she was working intermittently serving as home care nurse to elderly whites, or serving in a purely domestic capacity to others. Her autobiography provides interesting details about some of her experiences during this period, including being fired from one plum babysitting job because the older black housekeeper saw her as a threat, and losing another position after making the mistake of telling the woman of the house about her husband's unwelcome advances. Essentially, she failed at housekeeping jobs because she was simply not the subservient type and because she was more interested in her employers' books than in cleaning their homes.

In 1911 Hurston returned to the family home briefly and quickly found the situation unbearable. After a physical confrontation with her stepmother,

she left again to look for work in a nearby town. She recalls finding a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) in a pile of rubbish and reading it because she "liked it," luxuriating in "Milton's syllables and rhythms without ever having heard that Milton was one of the greatest poets of the world."[4] Looking for work took on secondary importance to reading and understanding Milton; nevertheless, she soon found a temporary and somewhat satisfying job at a doctor's office that might have turned into a permanent position had oldest brother Hezekiah Robert not lured her with the promise of further schooling to come and live with his family.

Thrilled at the thought of living among relatives again – with the promise of further schooling – Hurston left her job and went to live with her brother, his wife, and their children; the family relocated to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1913. After three years of unpaid housework and babysitting, with no schooling on the horizon, Hurston moved on to her next adventure. Valerie Boyd points out in *Wrapped in Rainbows* that though Hurston wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that she left her brother Bob's house in Memphis to take a position as a lady's maid with a theatrical group, that job actually came after she had lived with brother John and his wife Blanche in Jacksonville and subsequently endured a painful personal common-law relationship with someone she loved deeply but who treated her horribly, an experience she foresaw in one of her childhood visions.[5] We can attribute much of the silence surrounding this relationship to Hurston's desire to keep her most intimate matters away from the prying eyes of the world.

Hurston's next life-changing experience included her service as lady's maid to the lead singer of a Gilbert and Sullivan troupe. The position promised a good salary but, more important, it helped her to develop a degree of sophistication about the world. Her employer, of whom Hurston became very fond, even paid for a manicure course; the training would later serve Hurston well while she attended Howard University in Washington, DC. Most importantly, her time with the Gilbert and Sullivan troupe satisfied (at least temporarily) the wanderlust she had inherited from her father, John. During the time that Hurston lived away from her family home, her father was elected to three terms as Eatonville's mayor. In 1918, he died in Memphis after his car was struck by a train. Hurston did not attend the funeral. Traveling with the troupe, she lived among a diverse group of human beings, read books borrowed from a Harvard-trained troupe member, and acquired knowledge about music and theatrical production. A natural born performer, Hurston reveled in this atmosphere. She recalled the period as generally good, as a time when she learned about negotiating space for herself, and when she developed survival strategies for the times ahead. By the time her stint with the company ended in 1917 in Baltimore, Maryland,

she had traveled extensively; however, she longed for more formal education and resolved to return to school.

In Baltimore, Hurston lied about her date of birth to qualify for free schooling, and this accounts in part for early discrepancies about her actual date of birth. She simply told officials she had been born ten years later and became sixteen again. Taking a job as a waitress, she first attended school at night. Later, she enrolled at the elite Morgan Academy, the high-school division of what would become Morgan State University. Hurston's entrance examination scores revealed her promise as a scholar, and good fortune shone on her, for the school's dean helped her secure work that allowed her to attend the academy. Hurston performed well in everything except mathematics, while interacting with classmates from Baltimore's "best" black families. Her lucky stars continued to shine at Morgan because it was there that she met a visiting Howard University student named May Miller, who suggested that she try her luck at Howard, another historically black institution of higher education. The daughter of a Howard sociologist, Miller went on to become a well-known playwright and poet. Following her suggestion and her Morgan friends' prodding, Hurston moved to Washington, found a job as a waitress, and settled down to earn money to pay her college expenses. In the interim, she enrolled in preparatory courses at Howard Academy.

At Howard University, she would meet a number of influential persons, perhaps chief among them philosophy professor Alain Locke, who would edit the collection whose title became synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance: *The New Negro* (1925).[6] Hurston wrote bad poetry, joined the Zeta Phi Beta sorority, and met fellow student Herbert Sheen, the man who became her first husband some years later. She also joined the staff of Howard's literary club journal, *The Stylus*, where her first published short story, the somewhat autobiographical "John Redding Goes to Sea," appeared in May 1921.[7] In addition, Hurston's affiliation with *Stylus* permitted her to attend poet Georgia Douglas Johnson's famous literary salons and rub elbows with poets, playwrights, novelists, and critics who have since become associated with the Harlem Renaissance / New Negro Movement. Though Hurston never completed the four-year degree program at Howard, her presence there in the early 1920s resulted in Alain Locke's bringing Hurston's promise as a writer to the attention of Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity Magazine*.

Upon Johnson's invitation, Hurston submitted "Drenched in Light" to *Opportunity*.[8] The short story, which was even more autobiographical than "John Redding Goes to Sea," appeared in the December 1924 issue. The next month, as she turned 34, Hurston moved to New York City. Her timing could not have been better because 1925 ended as a banner year for the budding

author and other artists associated with the New Negro Movement. On May 1, 1925, she won two cash prizes and two honorable mentions at the *Opportunity* literary contest awards dinner. She also met and formed fruitful associations with three influential white Americans at that dinner. The first of these was Annie Nathan Meyer (1867–1951), a prolific author and a founder of Barnard College, who offered Hurston a chance to attend the college beginning in the fall of 1925. As Barnard's only black student, Hurston would eventually come under the influence and mentorship of eminent Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942). Through her association with Boas, she began her groundbreaking research in southern and (ultimately) Caribbean folk culture that would culminate in *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*.[9] She also met Fannie Hurst (1889–1968), a prolific novelist and short-story writer, whose list of publications ultimately spanned five full decades. Hurston served a brief time as Hurst's personal secretary, actually living with her for a month. The position allowed Hurston the flexible work schedule she needed in order to focus on her Barnard studies, but Hurst soon fired Hurston and the two became traveling companions and developed an interesting relationship that was friendly but not exactly a friendship. Rounding out the trio of influential people Hurston met at the May 1, 1925 *Opportunity* dinner was the well-connected Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964), a journalist, photographer, author, and patron of the Harlem Renaissance.

Two months after the *Opportunity* awards dinner, the *Spokesman* published Hurston's short story, "Magnolia Flower," and in September *The Messenger* published her essay "The Hue and Cry about Howard University." Hurston's coming-out year culminated in the November release of Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, which included her short story "Spunk" along with works by Jean Toomer, Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimke, and other authors whose names would become associated with the New Negro Movement. Hurston had indeed *arrived*. Finally, in December, she published "Under the Bridge" – a short story whose themes she would repeat in "Sweat" (1926) – in *The X-Ray: The Official Publication of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority*. While she attended classes at Barnard, she joined Hughes, Wallace Thurman and several other younger artists in the publication of the short-lived *FIRE!!*, a literary journal that saw only one issue, in November 1926, and to which Hurston contributed a revised version of her play, "Color Struck," and the short story, "Sweat."[10]

The Harlem Renaissance thus served as the backdrop for a number of Hurston's early achievements in fiction, drama, and poetry, while it was actually during the decade following the 1929 Stock market Crash (which brought

on the Great Depression) that she would publish five of her seven longer works: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934); *Mules and Men* (1935); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); *Tell My Horse* (1938); and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). She produced almost all of her work against the backdrop of Jim Crow segregation and the concomitant racialized social and political issues that prevailed in America during her life. She was highly productive during her travels, producing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while studying religion and folklore in the Caribbean and collecting materials for *Tell My Horse*. Her work on African religious practices detailed in *Tell My Horse* provides insight into the politics, sociology, and anthropology of Haiti and Jamaica and also (along with *Mules and Men* and her work with the Florida Writers' Project) serves as important source material for her works of fiction.

In 1927, with a research fellowship arranged by Franz Boas, Hurston traveled south to collect folk songs and folk tales. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she characterizes research as "formalized curiosity," as "poking and prying with a purpose."[11] She used part of her first formal research period to reconnect with family members and to marry Herbert Sheen on May 19, 1927 in St. Augustine, Florida. Her affair with Sheen had continued from their Howard years together – the affair lasting longer than the marriage, which ended in divorce in July 1931. Sheen, a medical student in Chicago, Illinois, at the time of the wedding, returned to his studies only a few days after the ceremony, and Hurston turned again to her travels through the south. Near Mobile, Alabama, she interviewed Cudjo Lewis, who was then believed to be the last surviving member of a group of Africans from the last slave ship to land in the United States. Langston Hughes traveled with Hurston through the south during part of the summer of 1927, and they became closer friends. Occasionally, they stopped to lecture at schools along the way.

Hurston recalled in her autobiography that her first attempts to collect folk tales and folk songs among people with whom she should have been very familiar were not particularly fruitful. The sophistication she had acquired and learned to exude in the north only served to distance her from her richest potential sources of information: rural black southerners. The result was a disappointing research experience. She fared much better during subsequent trips when she realized that people would be more forthcoming if she gained their trust by becoming part of the community, an insider. The approach became the hallmark of her subsequent research experiences, but it occasionally placed her in life-threatening situations – including one incident described in *Mules and Men* when she narrowly avoided being knifed by a jealous woman.

Like her fellow artists, Hurston needed two things in order to produce her work: a means of support and time to work. During her travels with Langston

Hughes in the summer of 1927, Hughes shared information with Hurston about Charlotte Osgood Mason (1854–1946), a wealthy widow and patron of the arts who lived at 399 Park Avenue in Manhattan. Alain Locke served at the time as Mason's paid adviser on matters related to Negro art and artists. An introduction was arranged, and Hurston first met Mason – who insisted that her beneficiaries call her Godmother – on September 20, 1927. The two signed a contract in December 1927. In her seventies at the time, Mason would support Hurston's research and writing for several years to come. Her initial investment was $200 a month for a two-year period, along with an automobile and a motion-picture camera. Essentially, the contract between the two women meant that Hurston would collect materials that could only be published with Mason's consent. Mason would later attempt to assert her authority over all of Hurston's work. While Hurston tried in her autobiography to put the best face on what now seems like her indentured status, the amount of control Mason exerted over Hurston has been well documented in Hurston's biographies and collected letters. Regardless, when 36-year-old Hurston returned south in December 1927, she had developed a methodology for collecting the folk tales and songs that would ultimately serve as the source material for *Mules and Men*.

Meanwhile, she continued to publish in a variety of venues and to maintain her status as a member of the black literary world. In October 1927, along with her first piece on Cudjo Lewis, she had published an article about a black settlement at St. Augustine, Florida, in the *Journal of Negro History*.[12] The following year in May, she published the often-anthologized essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *The World Tomorrow*. Wallace Thurman satirized her as Sweetie Mae Carr in *Infants of the Spring* (1928) – a satirical novel about the black literati in Harlem – and that same year she received her BA from Barnard. Between 1930 and 1932, she worked at organizing her research notes for *Mules and Men*. In 1931 and 1933, respectively, she published "Hoodoo in America" in the *Journal of American Folklore* and "The Gilded Six-Bits" in *Story*. Hurston had a stellar year in 1934: she contributed six essays to Nancy Cunard's anthology, *Negro*, and published both *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (based on the relationship between her mother and father) and "The Fire and the Cloud" (the seed story for *Moses, Man of the Mountain*) in *Challenge*.[13]

Hurston also had her first formal theater experiences during the early 1930s. Valerie Boyd's characterization of Hurston as having been bitten by the theater bug around that time is an understatement considering the fact that Hurston demonstrated a predilection for drama and performance from the time of her childhood; even her birth was unusually dramatic, having come at a time when the only available "midwife" was a white male neighbor who happened

to stop by the house where her mother was alone and in the throes of labor. Hurston made her way out of the womb unassisted, and some months later she took her first steps on her own after sensing a threat from a pig that had entered the house. Equally inclined toward performance art as a young girl, she constructed miniature figures from the materials available to her and helped them to perform as characters in stories she made up about them. Hurston has also detailed in several writings, including her autobiography and "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," her childhood habit of performing for whites who traveled on the road just outside the Eatonville gate. The young female protagonist of her autobiographical short story, "Drenched in Light," displays a similar proclivity. Clearly, these early events revealed her penchant for drama, but, again, her rugged individualism and keen intellect often did not serve her well in the collaborative work required for producing and staging plays. In 1930 she tried to collaborate on *Mule Bone* (a play) with Langston Hughes;[14] the attempted collaboration would end up driving a wedge between the two friends. In 1931 she wrote skits for a doomed theatrical review called *Fast and Furious*. In January of 1932 she wrote and staged another theatrical review, *The Great Day*, which premiered on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre on January 10. She also worked to produce a concert program under the auspices of the Creative Literature Department at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and she staged *From Sun to Sun* (a version of *Great Day*) there in 1933. In 1934 she traveled to Bethune-Cookman College in Florida to establish a school of dramatic arts; she also saw the production of *Singing Steel* (another version of *Great Day*) in Chicago. In 1935 she joined the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project as a drama coach; she traveled to North Carolina in 1939 to work as a drama instructor at North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central) at Durham. During this time, Hurston met famed University of North Carolina professor of drama, Paul Green.

Original scripts for ten Hurston plays deposited in the United States Copyright Office between 1925 and 1944 – all but one previously unproduced and unpublished before they appeared in *The Copyright Drama Deposit Collection* (1977) – are housed at the Library of Congress's Manuscript, Music, and Rare Books and Special Collections Division. Titles include "Cold Keener: A Review," "De Turkey and de Law: A Comedy in Three Acts," "Forty Yards," "Lawing and Jawing," "Meet the Mamma: A Musical Play in Three Acts," "The Mule-Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts," "Poker!," "Polk County: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with Authentic Negro Music in Three Acts," "Spunk" (also the title of the short story she published in *The New Negro*), and "Woofing."[15] Thus, we have abundant evidence of Hurston's strong, but perhaps unfulfilled, penchant for drama.

Hurston's busy teaching, research, production, and publishing schedule continued through the decade of the Great Depression. She even had time for a love affair with the man she called the love of her life, Percival Punter. Guggenheim Fellowships sponsored her travels to Jamaica and Haiti during 1936 and 1937 to collect folk materials that would result in *Tell My Horse* (1938). During her first trip to Haiti in 1936, Hurston wrote her best-known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) over a seven-week period. By April of 1938, she had joined a Federal Writers' Project in Florida to work on *The Florida Negro*. In 1939, she published "Now Take Noses" in *Cordially Yours*, received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Morgan State College, and published her third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.[16] Hurston's formal studies suffered as a result of all her other activities, and she failed to fulfill the requirements for the PhD in anthropology at Columbia. She simply did not have time to attend classes. She did, however, earn distinction as the most published black woman writer to emerge from that era, and she took the time for a second marriage – this time to the much younger Albert Price, III, on June 27, 1939, in Fernandina, Florida. They were divorced four years later on November 9, 1943.

Hurston traveled to South Carolina in the summer of 1940 to collect folklore; the following year she worked on her manuscript for *Dust Tracks on a Road*, published a short story in *Southern Literary Messenger*, and began a stint (October 1941 – January 1942) as a story consultant for Paramount Pictures. Her 1942 publications include *Dust Tracks on a Road*, "Story in Harlem Slang" in the *American Mercury*, and a profile of Lawrence Silas in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The following year *American Mercury* included "The 'Pet Negro' System" in its May issue, and *Negro Digest* published "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience" in its June 1944 issue. According to Valerie Boyd, Hurston married again on January 18, 1944, this time to Cleveland businessman James Howell Pitts. The couple divorced eight months later on October 31, 1944. Meanwhile, Hurston continued to write. She wrote another novel, *Mrs. Doctor*, which dealt with upper-class blacks; however, her publisher, Bertram Lippincott, rejected it. She continued to have success with smaller pieces, including, "The Rise of the Begging Joints" in the March 1945 issue of *American Mercury*, "Crazy for This Democracy" in the December 1945 issue of *Negro Digest*, and a 1947 review of Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* in the *Journal of American Folklore*. October 1948 brought publication of her fourth novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*.[17]

September 1948 began a devastating period for Hurston when she was arrested after being falsely accused of molesting a 10-year-old boy; the case was dismissed six months later, but the damage had been done. Though Hurston had endured race, gender, and other forms of prejudice for much of her life,