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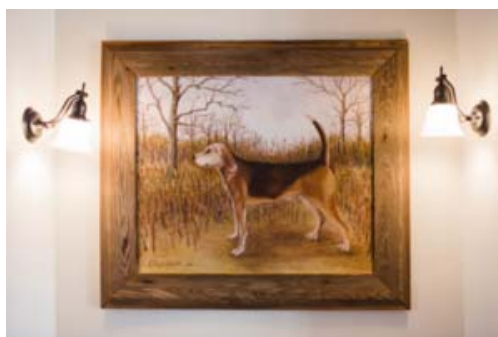


Story by Sandra Davidson    Archival Photographs courtesy of Jordan & Josh Finch

Percy Flowers had big plans for his grandsons. An avid outdoorsman and hunter, Flowers intended to teach

them how to hunt and fish as soon as he could. On October 22, 1982, Jordan and Joshua Finch, Flowers' identical twin grandsons were born. Two weeks later, death came early for Flowers, and like so many times before, Howard Creech, Flowers right-hand man stepped in to carry out his wishes.

Flowers was a decorated hunter. He raised and trained his own foxhound bloodlines and he commissioned paintings of his most decorated dogs. Creech helped remodel all Flowers' truck tailgates to make them easier for the dogs to jump into their hunting boxes. He knew what hunting meant to Flowers and understood what he wanted it to mean to Jordan and Josh.



“Howard always followed up on a promise, and made sure he did that with us,” remembers Josh, now 33.

“He raised us rabbit hunting,” says his brother Jordan.

For as long as they can remember, the boys spent Saturday mornings hunting with Creech. They'd meet at his apartment above their grandmother's garage where they'd start the day with a breakfast of cheese biscuits and coffee.

“We were way too young to be drinking coffee,” laughs Josh.

“[We were] seven, eight years old drinking coffee!” says Jordan.

Josh adds, “Howard would say, ‘Y’all boys need to get used to this.’”

After breakfast, they'd pack Creech's old pickup truck with snacks and the dogs and travel to the family's 200-acre peach orchard, where they'd meet several of his friends and begin. “It was Howard and a few older



white gentlemen,” remembers Josh. “They would all pick on us and tell us that we couldn’t kill a rabbit unless it had a heart attack,” adds Jordan.

Throughout the day, Creech and the boys would take periodic breaks on the tailgate of his truck. “He’d bring out drinks and Vienna sausages and Swiss cake rolls and we would just enjoy it,” says Josh.

Those are some of their favorite memories.



David Howard Creech was born on July 10, 1917, outside of Smithfield, North Carolina, and he worked for the Flowers family for 80 years. The family refers to him as “The Man Behind The Legend.”

His story is, on one hand, common and, on another, exceptional. He was an African-American man raised in a vast rural county, once home to an active branch of the Klu Klux Klan. Like many southern African-Americans in the early 20th century, he went to work for a white family. He never left them, and they never left him.

When Creech was a teenager, Flowers — “The Legend” — hired him to sweep floors at The Flowers Tavern, this family’s restaurant. Flowers, who would eventually be dubbed “The King of the Moonshiners” by The Saturday Evening Post in 1958, needed someone dependable. Creech quickly proved to be reliable and became

Flowers' most trusted employee and confidant.

In the heyday of moonshine, Creech's nickname was "Spider," a reference to pint jars with diamond shaped webbing, locally called "Spider Pints." One winter, a delivery trip up north nearly cost him everything. So the story goes, a state trooper happened upon Creech while he was working on a flat tire of a fully packed truck along Interstate 95. Terrified, Creech didn't know whether to run or stay, but the lawman offered to help him change the tire because he "knew how hard truck drivers worked."

This wasn't Creech's only fabled close encounter. He once told Jordan and Josh about a time he was chased on an extremely cold winter night. Legend has it that he swam across an icy cold lake to escape his pursuers. When he reached the other side safely, he turned around and mocked the law. He was always proud he never got caught.

Creech's work and friendship with Flowers' earned him respect and privilege many African American peers didn't have at the time. "Messin" with Creech meant "messin" with Flowers. The boys say, years ago, Creech was drafted to serve in the Army. Gone a week, he spent what he described as the longest days of his life in army training at Fort Bragg. One afternoon, Creech saw Flowers' big Chrysler drive onto the training camp. He knew instantly he was going home. Flowers helped secure his release with a II-C Agricultural Deferment.

He was more than an employee. He was family. Ella Pete, Creech's sister says Flowers and his wife were like parents to Creech, "He always referred to them as family." She felt the same warmth. In 2012, when she traveled back to North Carolina for her brother's funeral, she says, "I couldn't have had a better time at a funeral. I was recognized 100% and made welcome to their home. They were like family to him, and to me."

Yet, Creech was a man of his time, and he didn't escape racial slurs and injustices, though he rarely talked about them. Jordan and Josh have early memories of Howard joking with men in the community about Klan rallies. He'd laugh and say, "I was a Grand Dragon, I always had my gloves and cloak on. They just never knew it."

"There's no telling how bad it made him feel," says Josh. "That's just the way he was."

The twins say he never complained.

When Flowers died, his business died with him, but Creech stayed on with the family. From the '80s forward, he maintained the farm and helped the family build one of the state's largest planned communities.



The stories Creech shared gave Jordan and Josh a window into a man, a life and an era they never knew.

“We did not see or think of color when we looked at him. We just thought of him as being Howard,” says Josh. And Howard meant family.

“When we weren’t in school, we were with Howard,” he adds. “He was with us all the time while mom and dad were working. He’d pick us up in the morning and drop us off at night.” Their father used to joke, “They’ll run over 10 of me to get to him. They loved Howard!”

The boys called him “Creech” or “Mr. Breeze,” because he was always easygoing. He got them zip-up hoodies with the words “Howard’s Boys” embroidered across the back, and people around the town referred to them as that.

Jordan and Josh had their own bedroom at his apartment where they’d spend weekends when their parents traveled for work. Those weekends consisted of hunting, watching baseball and the professional basketball. “We’d sit in his living room and watch the Bulls play when Michael Jordan was there,” remembers Josh. Creech would talk about how he and Flowers often watched games together.

The arrangement, to an outsider, may seem unusual. But to the Flowers family, it was anything but. Creech helped raise Jordan and Josh’s mother and uncle, Rebecca Flowers and Percy Flowers, Jr., and he’d cared for

Delma “Mama Dell” Flowers —Flowers’ widow — until she died. If anyone was to be trusted with the twins, it was Howard.

The boys lived in Johnston County until they left for high school and college. Even then, “We always had him to call on,” says Josh. “You could ask Howard anything,” adds Jordan.

Weekly phone calls to Creech kept them up to date on the hunting dogs, their parents and their grandmother. After a day’s work, Creech would return to his apartment and sit in his La-Z-Boy recliner — where he often slept — and talk on the phone with friends. Sometimes the boys would call him and he’d answer. Other times, they’d dial him up to hear a busy signal. “He knew everybody around here. He talked to everybody. He was always on the phone,” says Josh.

A conversation with Creech guaranteed a laugh. “He’d always figure out how to make you laugh, and it didn’t take long,” says Jordan. Whenever the boys had a problem, they could count on him. He kept their conversations in confidence, but made sure to pick on them when they were home for the holidays. “That’s the kind of relationship we had,” explains Josh.

He was a library of poetry, quick-witted quotes and poignant holiday blessings. Holiday prayers were always reserved for him.







“The man was very selfless. [As children] all we knew was he lived here, and he didn’t have a wife... and his parents had passed when he was young,” says Josh.

He spoke little of his past, but his body bore evidence of a tough but resilient life.

“Every inch of his body told a story,” says Josh. The boys remember him softly whistling through missing teeth. Large in height but small in frame, Howard always wore long johns, no matter the season. Accidents with unruly barrels left his fingers gnarled and crooked. A reconstructed pelvis, the result of an accident that involved Howard riding a colt that sprinted out the second floor of a barn, caused him trouble later in life. A hernia the size of a soccer ball, left untreated for 35 years, nearly took his life in the 90s.

Josh discovered Creech in his apartment the day the hernia ruptured. A teenager at the time, he remembers

finding Creech sick and crumpled in his recliner. Because he'd seen many friends go to the hospital and never return, Creech had notoriously avoided the doctor at all cost. Josh remembers saying, "Howard I don't care what you say or what you do, but the ambulance is coming." Brought to tears by the memory he continues, "They said he had an hour to live. [But they] fixed it, and he was like a new man. That was a long time ago."

An avid joke-teller, talker, reader and friend, Creech shaped Jordan and Josh into the men they've become. "This man put everybody before himself," says Josh.

"Selflessness," is the word that comes to mind when Jordan thinks of him.

Josh adds, "Just a refinement of a person."

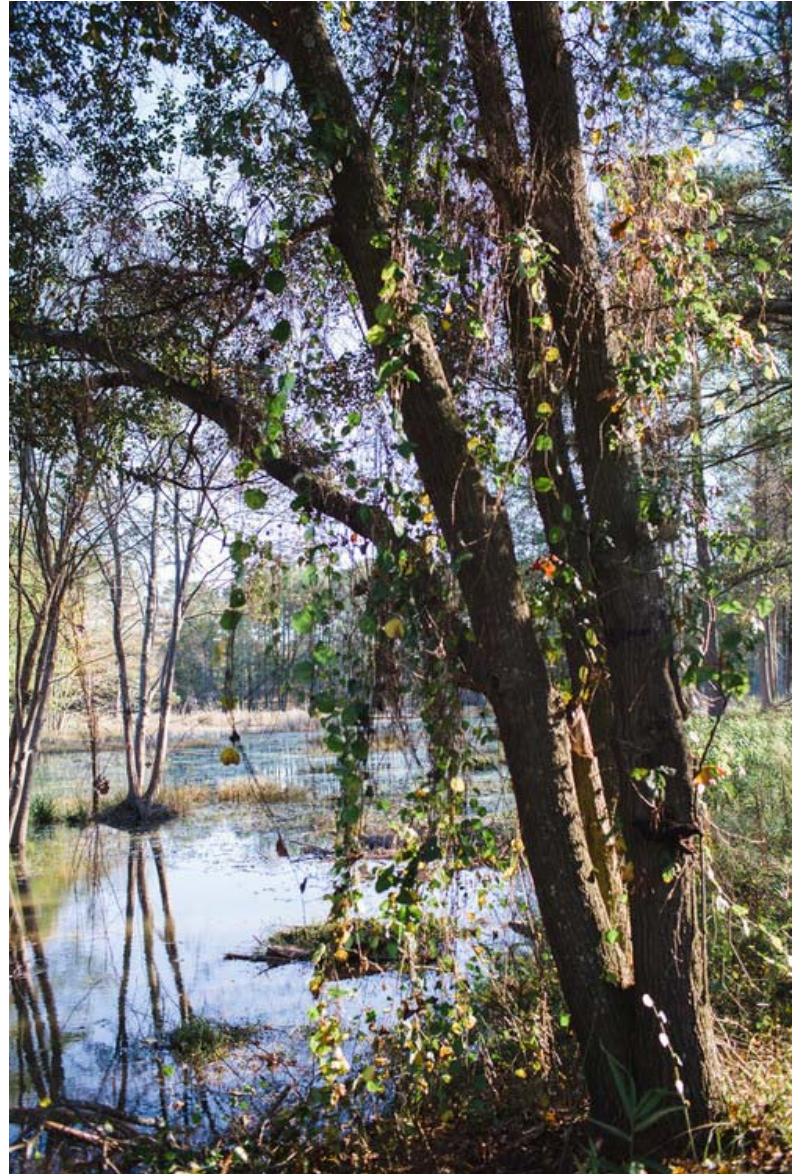


Howard lived in the apartment above Delma Flowers' garage until he died at the age of 95. By then, in their late 20s, the twins had circled back to Johnston County and Creech. They moved home to join the family business and started caring for Creech as he aged.

The summer vegetable garden he once tended became the summer vegetable garden he would instruct the boys to tend from his truck. In the weeks leading up to his death, Jordan and Josh often helped feed, clothe and bathe Howard.



On December 16, 2012, the twins' mother, Rebecca, suspected something was wrong. She was at Howard's apartment, but fearing the worst, she didn't go in. After Jordan arrived, he found Creech in his recliner. He remembers saying, "He's gone."



In Johnston County, dozens of back roads wind along the Neuse River through woodlands and tobacco fields. At the intersection of Highway 42 and Buffalo Road, a family cemetery sits beneath a wooded grove across from Flowers Crossroads and the Flowers Store, now home to Jordan and Josh's office. Beneath a large gazebo, a circle of raised concrete tombs hold the remains of the Flowers family. There, Percy, Mama Dell and Percy Jr. rest in peace beside David Howard Creech.



Sometimes you can find Jordan and Josh hunting near the cemetery in coats with the dates of Howard's birth and death, 1917-2012, embroidered on the back beside the phrase, "Driven by Tradition."



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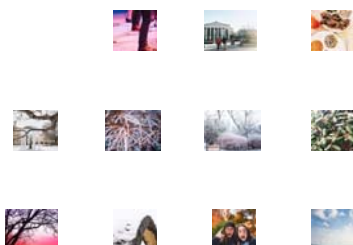
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