**The Family Moved Twice for Their Children’s Education.**

When Katherine Johnson was born, her name was Katherine Coleman. She later married Colonel Jim Johnson. In her memoir, *My Remarkable Journey*, she wrote:  "My parents never wavered on their commitment to education, even when it required great personal sacrifice."  p. 30.

Katherine Coleman had two older siblings, Sister and Charlie. When she was born, Katherine’s father owned a farm in rural West Virginia.  However, the only grade school for "colored" children in the area was in the nearest town, White Sulphur Springs, a resort where rich white people would come to regain their health through the mineral waters at the springs in the area. The trip to school was seven miles each way.   The family didn't own a car, so, when Katherine was about two years old, her father moved the family to town to make it easier for her older sister and brother to go to school. p. 21. This made it much more difficult to farm and her father had to take jobs in the town to support the family. He was able to build the family a spacious and comfortable home. They called it “the Big House,” and everyone settled in to their new life away from the farm.

That was the first move. Then . . .

… [A]s we grew older, [my parents] faced another education decision and another huge sacrifice. There was no high school for colored children in White Sulphur Springs or even nearby. Most of the students had to end their formal education . . . after seventh grade. But not the Coleman children. Our parents were determined to do all within their power to give us the best possible education. Maybe we could become teachers, they imagined, because that was as high as they could see. The path to that dream was education. Education was their hope. p. 31.

So, in the mid-1920s, my parents knew their prayers had been answered when they heard about a school, the West Virginia Collegiate Institute, in Institute, West Virginia, that was offering colored children the chance to get a high school education and a college degree. Sister, a star student, was finishing grade school, so Daddy and Mama arranged to send her more than 122 miles from home to attend the institute. . . .” pp.31 & 32.

Mrs. Johnson explains that:

Born in the late 1800s, my parents were just a generation removed from slavery, a time when it was illegal for our people to learn how to read, and breaking the rules for a slave could result in a severe beating or even death. Dred Scott wasn't a name in the history books to them. Their parents were alive when Scott, a Virginia slave, had the courage to challenge the laws of slavery for his freedom in a case that made its way to the US Supreme Court.  The devastating 1857 ruling, known as the “Dred Scott decision,” said that people who have been brought to this country from Africa were not considered American citizens and had no rights under the Constitution, whether they were enslaved or free. The decision added further insult, saying the nation's Founding Fathers believed colored people to be "a subordinate and inferior class of beings" and that white people were "the dominant race." This view remained prevalent among white southerners long after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery it was often used to justify segregation and the mistreatment of colored people.

Nevertheless, my people hung onto their own self–worth and kept pushing to be educated…. p. 32

…

It must’ve been difficult for my parents, providing for Sister so far away, while maintaining our family at home [in White Sulfur Springs]. But somehow they made it work for the next two years. Then Charlie finished grade school, and once again my parents made a life–altering decision for the sake of their children’s education. They agreed to leave behind the comfortable life we’d known in White Sulphur Springs and move our entire family to the town of Institute so that all of their children could attend the school. At about this time, Daddy also sold the farm. For a man whose life and history had been so connected to that land, giving it up must have been a tough decision. But there was something else just as important to him: education. When Daddy was in school, colored children could go only as high as the sixth grade. He wanted to be sure that his children got the education he had been denied. Our family didn’t have a home in Institute. Nor did Daddy have a waiting job. But my parents had what mattered most: lots of determination, dreams, and hope. With an education, just maybe their children’s lives wouldn’t have to be limited to cleaning, cooking, and serving the rich white guests at the Greenbrier [a resort in White Sulphur Springs]. Maybe we could have something better. So in September 1928, the six of us piled our belongings into a truck with the driver Daddy had hired for the trip, climbed inside, and waved goodbye to the Big House and our old life.” pp. 34 & 35.

Unfortunately, Katherine Coleman’s father couldn’t find a job in or around Institute, West Virginia. So, he traveled the 122 miles back to White Sulphur Springs where he could find work. He took on extra jobs to earn enough to maintain two households. p. 36. The family reunited every summer.

Katherine Coleman flourished in her new school. She wrote in her memoir, “I had never before seen so many educated colored men and women, as well as students pursuing high school diplomas and college degrees, all in one place. There were other students like me, who were carrying the dreams of parents whose own education had been stunted, and there were children of privilege whose parents were middle-class teachers, scholars, and business owners. We were on this journey together.” p. 37.