

# 'From Liberty to Magnolia'

*African-American woman recalls Amite upbringing in new book*

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From a certain point of view, Janice S. Ellis had a rather idyllic upbringing in rural Amite County. She came of age in a time when folks lived on rustic farms, got their water from a well, their heat from a fireplace and their food from garden and livestock.

But for Ellis and other African-Americans during that period, there was a key difference:

"A cross was burned on my father's lawn by the Ku Klux Klan. A classmate's father was castrated and left in a ditch. Another classmate's father was shot and left for dead," Ellis writes her new book "From Liberty to Magnolia: In Search of the American Dream."

The 400-page book tells what it was like to grow up in rural Amite County in the 1950s and '60s, good and bad, as well as her subsequent career in Milwaukee and Kansas City.

Ellis, now in her late 60s, endured racial and gender discrimination throughout her life, though she went on to achieve career and academic heights and never succumbed to bitterness.

She grew up on Europe Bates Road halfway between Liberty and Magnolia. Her parents were the late Stafford and Mable Scott. Her mother died last year at age 101.

Ellis' paternal grandparents were Holdens. She grew up in Tickfaw Baptist Church and still has many relatives in southwest Mississippi.

In many respects, Ellis' childhood was not unlike that of many people of a certain age in rural Mississippi. She lived in a house with few amenities. Her father worked at a box company and raised cotton for cash and a garden for food. His \$40 per week check had to support a family of nine, so they raised virtually everything they ate.

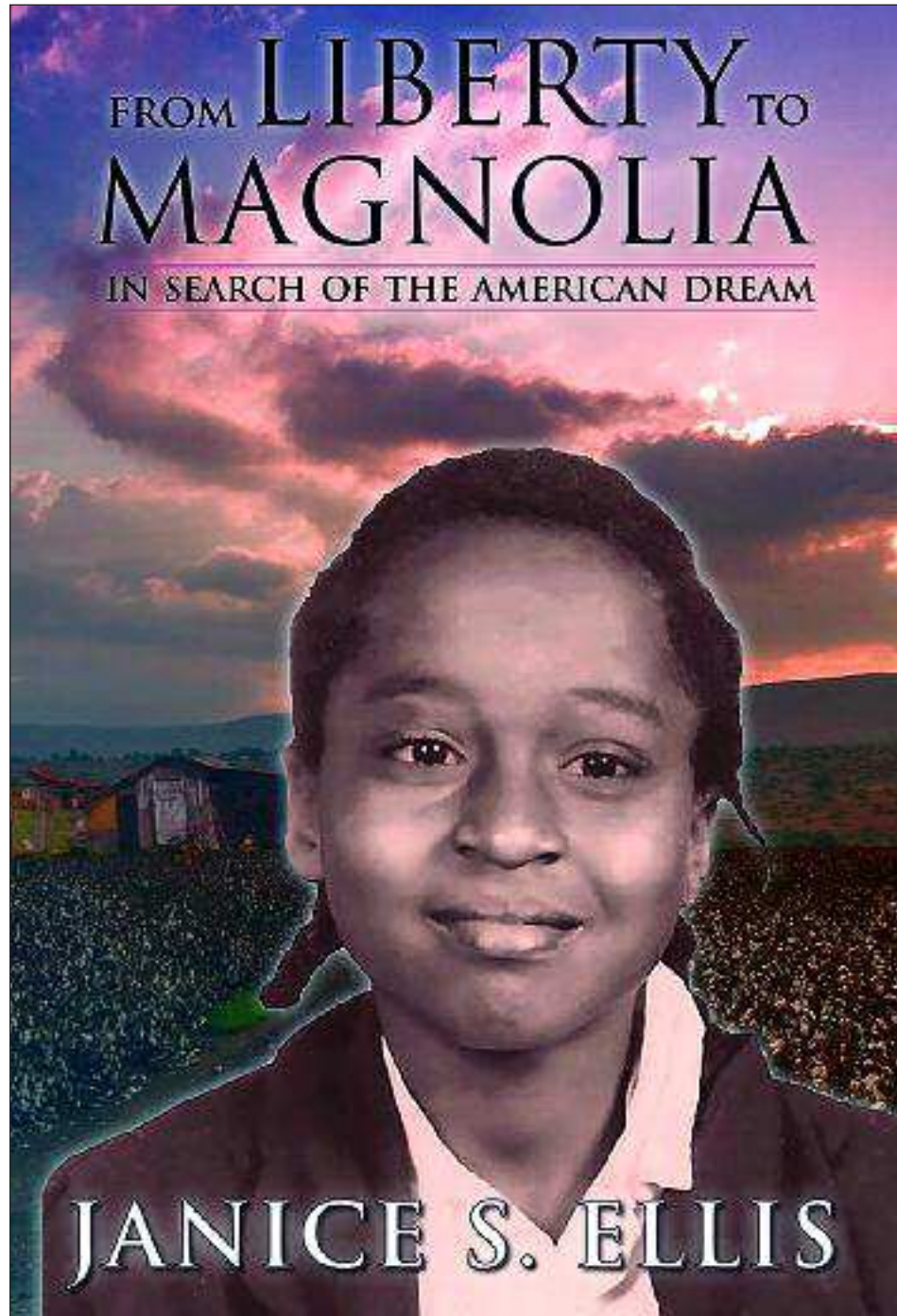
At times, Ellis sounds almost wistful in recalling her upbringing.

"For me, farm life was provocative, with its wide-open spaces, while at the same time it was stifling with its sheltered existence," Ellis writes. "Adventure always awaited the curious and rebellious in the woods nearby with its inviting plants, wild animals, and secret places to explore."

She noted that many black people did not own land and had to sharecrop. She deeply appreciated the fact that her father owned his own property.

"My father's farm provided me something of immeasurable value. Freedom. Freedom of mind and spirit," Ellis writes. "I was free. Free to think, free to dream, free to build, often only 'air castles,' as my mother warned so ominously."

Many white people can tell a similar tale—but racial discrimination made the difference. Even the smaller incidents of racism were oppressive, like being called



Ellis

the n-word, spat on or denied access to certain businesses in town.

"While no real physical harm came to my father for the role he played (in the NAACP), we had our share of threats and our moments of terror when the KKK burned a cross, in three separate instances, on our lawn and on the dark dirt road that led to our house," Ellis writes.

"The KKK also burned a cross at Tickfaw Baptist Church, just a quarter mile from our farmhouse, at the end of the path that we walked to Sunday school every Sunday. The KKK was angry that voter registration meetings were held there."

Things were worse for the fathers of two of her classmates.

"One was caught in the middle of the night by the KKK, castrated, and left on the side of the road to die, and another was murdered in broad daylight on his

way to deliver a bale of cotton to the Westbrook Cotton Gin in Liberty," Ellis writes. "His name was Herbert Lee. He was murdered in September 1961 by a white member of the Mississippi state legislature because he was a black man working to register people to vote—to exercise their right to vote for or against people who represented them in the legislature. Mr. Lee got into a heated argument with his assailant and was shot as he sat in his truck. No charges were ever brought against the legislator."

Ellis later dated Mr. Lee's son, Herbert Lee Jr.

When she went off to college, she continued to encounter racism.

At Millsaps, white students "got off the sidewalk as we changed classes" or "left the table and did not finish their meal if my roommate and I chose to sit down next to them."

Racism wasn't her only obstacle. Her first husband turned out to be physically abusive, and as Ellis tried to climb academic and career ladders, she encountered gender discrimination as well.

Nevertheless, as she moved on to Milwaukee and Kansas City, Mo., she earned a Ph.D and became president and CEO of a marketing firm and a child advocacy agency. She wrote columns for newspapers including The Kansas City Star and The Milwaukee Business Journal, among other publications. She even ran for mayor. The book details the ups and downs of a remarkable career.

Ellis credits her perseverance in large part to her religious upbringing.

"The faith and belief in God that was instilled in me back then has been with me throughout this journey," she writes.

"I have tried, like Jesus Christ, to 'forgive them, for they know not what they do.' ... Also, forgive them even when they know what they do. More importantly, I have not allowed any of the things done to me, some of which were very hurtful and detrimental, to make me bitter."

Ellis, who with her husband Frank now has her own idyllic farm in Missouri, frequently returns to Amite County. The difference between her childhood days and now is remarkable, she writes.

There are no more "whites only" and "colored" signs. Schools are integrated. A historical marker commemorates Herbert Lee at the Liberty cotton gin where he was slain.

"What is important is that the atmosphere has changed," Ellis writes. "Mutual greetings and respect for each other are exchanged everywhere in and around Liberty and Magnolia—in restaurants, stores, in doctors' offices, along the streets and sidewalks, the country lanes and roadsides—among the old and young alike."

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"FROM LIBERTY TO MAGNOLIA: In Search of the American Dream," 414 pages, illustrated with black and white photos, Christian Faith Publishers. See [janicesellis.com](http://janicesellis.com) for details.