

TAR BABY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Los Angeles, California
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(Updated from a 2008 blog)

Q: What's in a name? Depends on who is doing the naming. Here is a Hodel Family anecdote that takes one of my "warm fuzzy" childhood memories and sixty years later, reveals it for what it really was. The truth being the cold, hard double entendre of a psychopath.

For those of you who have read BDA, you know that my childhood memories of life with my father in the Franklin House were good ones. My brothers, Michael and Kelvin and I were like three little princes. The Franklin House was our castle. People came to our home as if dad was holding court and all of them (at least to my child's eyes) seemed to show father great respect and homage, as if he were a real king. People laughed, danced and partied. It was all great fun..

In January, 1947, as a child of six years, I knew nothing of the gruesome daily headlines, which continued to focus on the murder and terrible torture death of Elizabeth Short, which the newspapers had dubbed, "The Black Dahlia." In fact, quite the opposite. *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*, was playing at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre just a stone's throw from the castle, to be replaced in one week with the premiere of, *SONG OF THE SOUTH*, Walt Disney's animation film adaptation of author, Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Tales* which detailed the adventures of: Brer Fox, Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit.

L.A. TIMES DISPLAY AD. JANUARY 24, 1947



SONG OF THE SOUTH JAN. 30

Harris' stories, penned in the 1870s, had become "a national phenomenon." I quote from the below historical link:

"Harris originally heard the stories recited by slaves as a young boy working on a nearby plantation and then converted them into written narratives, firstly in the local newspaper, and then as the stories became known throughout the world, Harris would go on to write books. By the time Harris had died in 1908 he had written ten volumes of his work on Uncle Remus, and his stories had been translated into twenty-seven different languages."

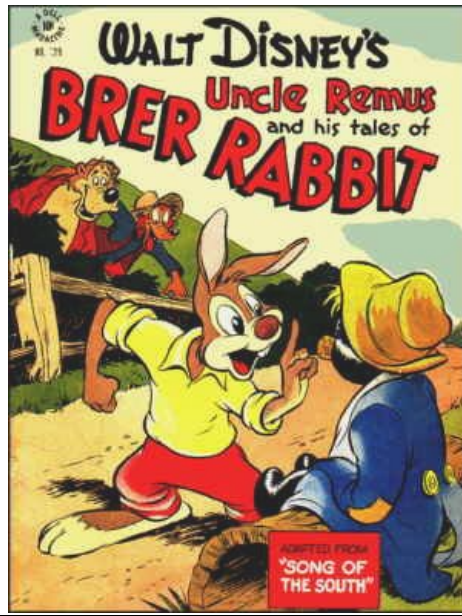
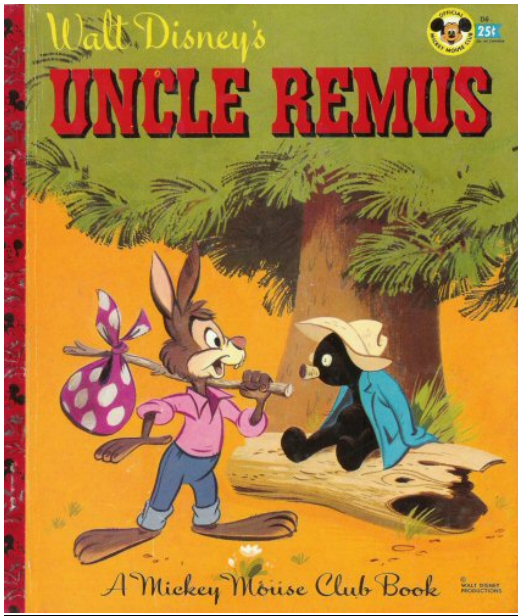
(Click on link for a fuller history):

[Author Joel Chandler Harris and *Uncle Remus Tales* 'TAR BABY](#)



Br'er Rabbit and the Tar-Baby, drawing by E.W. Kemble from the Tar-Baby by Joel Chandler Harris 1904

One of the dozen or so adventures told the story of ***-Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby***. Uncle Remus narrates how on one occasion, Brer Fox and Brer Bear (who were always attempting to catch Brer Rabbit and cook him for dinner) set out a trap. They fashioned sticky black tar into what looked like a small baby. Then they dressed it up in clothes and put it at the side of the road, where Brer Rabbit was sure to pass in his daily travels. Sure enough, one day Brer Rabbit comes hopping down the road and stops to talk with the Tar-Baby. He tries and tries to get the baby to talk to him, but no response. Finally, angered he grabs hold of the baby and his hands get stuck in the tar. Just like a fly to flypaper. The harder he struggles to free himself, the more stuck he gets. Brer Fox and Brer Bear's trap has worked, and they capture Brer Rabbit. This story of the Tar Baby is one retold in Disney's 1946 animation. (See film and still clips below)



DISNEY "SONG OF THE SOUTH" 1946 CLIPS SHOWING BRER RABBIT TRAPPED BY "TAR BABY"



As small children, our parents took us to see SONG OF THE SOUTH, WE LOVED IT. Much to our surprise, so did our father! So much so, that he named his shiny black Packard after this very same animated character- TAR BABY. After that naming, we loved his car more than ever, and were incessantly nagging him with, "Dad, can we go for a ride in Tar Baby?" The car had become alive -- made real. To our young minds, Tar-Baby was one of the family.

A 1936 Packard identical in appearance to Dr. George Hodel's,

"TAR BABY"



For sixty years, the name brought a smile to my face. A warm family memory. Whenever, I saw a re-showing of Disney's, SONG OF THE SOUTH, or when, as adults my brothers and I would get together and reflect on "the good old days" we would inevitably think of Tar-Baby, and the happy times at the Franklin House -- our Magic Castle.

But, sadly, in recent years, that has all changed. With the discovery of my father's many crimes, I have also discovered what I believe to be the truth about- ---TAR BABY.

Here is that truth:

Tar-Baby - n. A situation or problem from which it is virtually impossible to disentangle oneself. [After "Bre'r Rabbit and the Tar Baby," an Uncle Remus story by Joel Chandler Harris. (Answers.com)

Tar-Baby- noun. Something from which it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

I now believe that George Hodel didn't name his car Tar-Baby to amuse and entertain his children. He christened it Tar-Baby because it functioned as his own black shiny trap! How many abductees became "entangled and unable to free themselves" from its locked doors-- we will never know. But. We do know some of them. In 1947, Elizabeth Short's body was most probably transported in a black 1936-7 sedan fitting the description of Tar-Baby. The car was seen leaving the vacant lot just hours before her body was discovered. Jeanne French, the Red Lipstick Murder victim, was also last seen in a Tar Baby vehicle. Witnesses

describe seeing her leaving a restaurant in the early morning hours with a man and watched as she entered a "1936 dark-colored or Black Sedan." In 1949, just days after George Hodel bailed out of jail on the felony arrest for incest, and just a few hours before her disappearance, actress and murder victim, Jean Spangler "was seen talking to a dapper looking man" fitting George Hodel's description. The witnesses saw them seated in a Tar-Baby-like black sedan talking in the parking lot of the Hollywood Ranch Market, a mile from the Franklin House. (Her purse would be recovered just a half mile from our home.) My now, eight-year investigation mentions other crimes and other black sedans, but my point is made.

George Hill Hodel christened his car Tar-Baby because, to his twisted mind, it was perfect! And it was! Tar-Baby was the perfect trap. Once his designated victim was snared off the roadway, or had willingly touched its shiny black doors, there would be no escape. How his sadistic mind must have quietly reveled at hearing his three young sons use the name with excitement and delight, as we pleaded, "Dad, can we take a ride in Tar-Baby tonight?"

(SKH Note- As to my father's car being the actual suspect vehicle in many of these kidnap/murders. A number of e-mails have been received arguing the point that "there had to have been thousands of 'black sedans' on the streets of Los Angeles in the 1940s." Very true. I agree. A very generic description. But, what is not so common is the description of the year. In 1947, my father's Packard was nearly twelve-years-old, which made the description as "a 1936 black sedan"-- much more distinct.)