

Gary, Indiana

Michael Joseph Jackson was born in Gary, Indiana, on August 29, 1958. Gary is a poor industrial¹ city in the northwest corner of Indiana near Chicago, Illinois. Gary had, and still has, the same problems that many cities in the U.S.A. have: high unemployment², gangs³, drugs and crime. People in Gary were lucky to have jobs. Many worked in the steel mills⁴ along the southern shore of Lake Michigan. All day and all night, the smoke from the mills gave the air an awful smell. But nobody complained⁵ because it was the smell of jobs.

Gary's streets were lined with small single-family homes. The neighborhoods were quiet during the day but dangerous at night. After dark, the main streets of Gary came alive with nightlife. "Sin⁶ City" was what people called Gary. They gave it that name because it was where people from Chicago and other parts of Indiana went to do things they could not do at home. Not far from the bright lights of Sin City, at 2300 Jackson Street, lived Joe and Katherine Jackson.

Joe Jackson had not had an easy life. He was born in Arkansas. When his parents divorced⁷, he moved with his father to Oakland, California. His father was a school teacher who expected obedience⁸ from both his children and his pupils. Joe learned an important lesson from his father. He learned that survival⁹ depended on discipline¹⁰ and hard work. He became a strict, hard-working man.

When his father remarried, Joe moved to East Chicago to live with his mother. He dropped out¹¹ of high school and he became a boxer¹² for a short time. Not long after that, he met Katherine Scrusse. They were married six months later in November 1949.

Joe was strict, but Katherine was warm and loving. She had strong Christian beliefs. Michael later said that his mother taught him that the most important things in life were “kindness, love and consideration¹³ for other people.”

Joe was not interested in religion. He said it was “boring.” He and Katherine shared a strong love of music, however. In the 1950s, Joe had a job in a steel mill. In the evenings, he played the guitar in a band called The Falcons. The band had a little success in bars and nightclubs in Gary. Joe hoped to quit his job in the mill and become a full-time musician.

The Jacksons of Jackson Street already had a large family when Michael was born. Michael joined two sisters, Maureen (Rebbie) and La Toya, and four brothers, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine and Marlon. Another brother, Randy, and another sister, Janet, were born after Michael.

With nine children, the Jackson house was crowded. Michael later remembered that “our family’s house in Gary was tiny, only three rooms really, but at the time it seemed much larger to me. You could take five steps from the front door and you’d be out the back. It was no bigger than a garage, but when we lived there it seemed fine to us kids.”

Two bedrooms were not enough for a family of eleven. Joe and Katherine shared one bedroom. The boys slept in the other bedroom in a triple¹⁴ bunk bed¹⁵. Tito and Jermaine slept on top, Marlon and Michael slept in the middle and Jermaine slept on the bottom. The girls slept on a sofa in the living room. Later, when Randy was born, he slept on another sofa. In the winter, the family spent much of their time sitting around the kitchen stove to stay warm.

Raising a family in Gary in the 1960s was difficult. But raising a family of nine children on Joe’s small salary was even more difficult. Joe made only around sixty-five dollars a week. The family learned to be very careful with their money. Katherine bought clothes at the Salvation Army¹⁶ or made

them herself. Meals were simple—soup, bologna sandwiches, macaroni and cheese and spaghetti.

Joe's family grew faster than his musical career. He had to give up his dream of being a full-time professional musician. He kept his guitar, however, and still occasionally played with the band. Most of the music they played was by popular black performers¹⁷ of the time: Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Otis Redding and James Brown.

Joe's three oldest sons, Jackie, Tito and Jermaine, loved to watch The Falcons play. Sometimes, when Joe was not practicing with the band, he played his guitar while Katherine led the family in singing traditional¹⁸ songs. Katherine was pleased at how well her children could sing, and even when Michael was a child, she noticed that he moved beautifully. From their earliest days, the children were surrounded by music. Their success grew from this. "The Jackson 5 were born out of this tradition," Michael later said.

Joe made strict rules for his children. One of the most important rules was "Don't touch my guitar." But sometimes, when Katherine was busy in the kitchen, Tito took the guitar to his bedroom. There he practiced playing along with whatever song was on the radio. While he played, Jackie and Jermaine sang.

Sometimes Michael watched Tito, Jermaine and Jackie as they played and sang. One day, Katherine discovered her sons with their father's guitar. She said she would not tell Joe if they promised to be careful with it. She was happy that her children were interested in music and not outside getting into trouble. There was another reason that she let the boys continue playing with their father's guitar. "I didn't want to stop it," she later explained, "because I saw a lot of talent there."

One day, a string on the guitar broke while Tito was playing it. When Joe came home from work and saw the broken string, he asked his sons about it. At first, they said they did not know

anything about the broken string. Joe did not believe them. He knew the truth. He became so angry that Tito started to cry. Later Joe calmed down and came into the boys' room. Tito was still crying on the bed. He told his father, "You know, I can play that thing. I really can."

Joe handed the guitar to Tito. "OK, let me see what you can do," he said. Tito began to play. Jackie and Jermaine came and sang along. Joe was amazed. He did not know how much musical talent his sons had. On that day, Joe had an idea. He could never imagine where that idea would take him and his family.



The young Michael Jackson with musician Junior Walker, his brothers Randy and Jermaine and his parents Joe and Katherine