

Douglas Dorsey: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

In South Jacksonville, on the Spring Glen Road lives Douglas Dorsey, an ex-slave, born in Suwannee County, Florida in 1851, fourteen years prior to freedom. His parents Charlie and Anna Dorsey were natives of Maryland and free people. In those days, Dorsey relates there were people known as "Nigger Tenders" who used any subterfuge to catch Negroes and sell them into slavery. There was one Jeff Davis who was known as a professional "Nigger Trader," his slave boat docked in the slip at Maryland and Jeff Davis and his henchmen went out looking for their victims. Unfortunately, his mother Anna and his father were caught one night and were bound and gagged and taken to Jeff Davis' boat which was waiting in the harbor, and there they were put into stocks. The boat stayed in port until it was loaded with Negroes, then sailed for Florida where Davis disposed of his human cargo.

Douglas Dorsey's parents were sold to Colonel Louis Matair, who had a large plantation that was cultivated by 85 slaves. Colonel Matair's house was of the pretentious southern colonial type which was quite prevalent during that period. The colonel had won his title because of his participation in the Indian War in Florida. He was the typical wealthy southern gentleman, and was very kind to his slaves. His wife, however was just the opposite. She was exceedingly mean and could easily be termed a tyrant.

There were several children in the Matair family and their home and plantation were located in Suwannee County, Florida.

Douglas' parents were assigned to their tasks, his mother was housemaid and his father was the mechanic, having learned this trade in Maryland as a free man. Charlie and Anna had several children and Douglas was among them. When he became large enough he was kept in the Matair home to build fires, assist in serving meals and other chores.

Mrs. Matair being a very cruel woman, would whip the slaves herself for any misdemeanor. Dorsey recalls an incident that is hard to obliterate from his mind, it is as follows: Dorsey's mother was called by Mrs. Matair, not hearing her, she continued with her duties, suddenly Mrs. Matair burst out in a frenzy of anger over the woman not answering. Anna explained that she did not hear her call, thereupon Mrs. Matair seized a large butcher knife and struck at Anna, attempting to ward off the blow, Anna received a long gash on the arm that laid her up for some time. Young Douglas was a witness to this brutal treatment of his mother and he at that moment made up his mind to kill his mistress. He intended to put strychnine that was used to kill rats into her coffee that he usually served her. Fortunately freedom came and saved him of this act which would have resulted in his death.

He relates another incident in regard to his mistress as follows: To his mother and father was born a little baby boy, whose complexion was rather light. Mrs. Matair at once began accusing Colonel Matair as being the father of the child. Naturally the colonel denied, but Mrs. Matair kept harassing him about it until he finally agreed to his wife's desire and sold the child. It was taken from its mother's breasts at the age of eight months and auctioned off on the first day of January to the highest bidder. The child was bought by a Captain Ross and taken across the Suwannee River into Hamilton County. Twenty years later he was located by his family, he was a grown man, married and farming.

Young Douglas had the task each morning of carrying the Matair children's books to school. Willie, a boy of eight would teach Douglas what he learned in school; finally Douglas learned the alphabet and numbers. In some way Mrs. Matair learned that Douglas was learning to read and write. One morning after breakfast she called her son Willie to the dining room where she was seated and then sent for Douglas to come there too. She then took a quill pen the kind used at that time, and began writing the alphabet and numerals as far as ten. Holding the paper up to Douglas, she asked him if he knew what they were; he proudly answered in the affirmative, not suspecting anything. She then

asked him to name the letters and numerals, which he did, she then asked him to write them, which he did. When he reached the number ten, very proud of his learning, she struck him a heavy blow across the face, saying to him "If I ever catch you making another figure anywhere I'll cut off your right arm." Naturally Douglas and also her son Willie were much surprised as each thought what had been done was quite an achievement. She then called Mariah, the cook to bring a rope and tying the two of them to the old colonial post on the front porch, she took a chair and sat between the two, whipping them on their naked backs for such a time, that for two weeks their clothes stuck to their backs on the lacerated flesh.

To ease the soreness, Willie would steal grease from the house and together they would slip into the barn and grease each other's backs.

As to plantation life, Dorsey said that the slaves lived in quarters especially built for them on the plantation. They would leave for the fields at "sun up" and remain until "sundown," stopping only for a meal which they took along with them.

Instead of having an overseer they had what was called a "driver" by the name of January. His duties were to get the slaves together in the morning and see that they went to the fields and assigned them to their tasks. He worked as the other slaves though he had more privileges. He would stop work at any time he pleased and go around to inspect the work of the others, and thus rest himself. Most of the orders from the master were issued to him. The crops consisted of cotton, corn, cane and peas, which were raised in abundance.

When the slaves left the fields, they returned to their cabins and after preparing and eating of their evening meal they gathered around a cabin to sing and moan songs seasoned with African melody. Then to the tune of an old fiddle they danced a dance called the "Green Corn Dance" and "Cut the Pigeon Wing." Sometimes the young men on the plantation would slip away to visit a girl on another plantation. If they were caught by the "Patrols"

while on these visits they would be lashed on the bare backs as a penalty for this offense.

A whipping post was used for this purpose. As soon as one slave was whipped, he was given the whip to whip his brother slave. Very often the lashes would bring blood very soon from the already lacerated skin, but this did not stop the lashing until one had received their due number of lashes.

Occasionally the slaves were ordered to church to hear a white minister; they were seated in the front pew of the master's church, while the whites sat in the rear. The minister's admonition to them to honor their masters and mistresses, and to have no other God but them, as "we cannot see the other God, but you can see your master and mistress." After the services the driver's wife who could read and write a little would tell them that what the minister said "was all lies."

Douglas says that he will never forget when he was a lad of 14 years of age, when one evening he was told to go and tell the driver to have all the slaves come up to the house; soon the entire host of about 85 slaves was gathered there all sitting around on stumps, some standing. The colonel's son was visibly moved as he told them they were free. Saying they could go anywhere they wanted to for he had no more to do with them, or that they could remain with him and have half of what was raised on the plantation.

The slaves were happy at this news, as they had hardly been aware that there had been a war going on. None of them accepted the offer of the colonel to remain, as they were only too glad to leave the cruelties of the Matar plantation.

Dorsey's father got a job with Judge Carraway of Suwannee where he worked for one year. He later homesteaded for 40 acres of land that he received from the government and began farming.

Dorsey's father died in Suwannee County, Florida when Douglas was a young man and then he and his mother moved to Arlington, Florida. His mother died several years ago at a ripe old age.

Douglas Dorsey, aged but with a clear mind lives with his daughter in Spring Glen.

Source:

American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
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