

Emma Knight: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

Emma Knight, living at 924 North Street, Hannibal Missouri was born in slavery on the farm of Will and Emily Ely, near Florida, Monroe County. The following is her story as she told it:

"We lived on a Creek near Florida. We belonged to Will Ely. He had only five slaves, my father and mother and three of us girls. I was only eight or nine years old. De Elys had eight children. Dere was Paula, Ann, Sarah, Becky, Emily, Lizzie, Will, Ike, and Frank. Lizzie was de oldest girl and I was to belong to her when she was married.

"De master of de house was better to us dan de mistress. We didn't have to work none too hard, 'cause we was so young, I guess. We cut weeds along de fences, pulled weeds in de garden and helped de mistress with de hoeing. We had to feed de stock, sheep, hogs, and calves, because de young masters wouldn't do de work. In de evenings we was made to knit a finger width and if we missed a stitch we would have to pull all the yarn out and do it over. De master's girls learned us to read and write. We didn't have hardly no clothes and most of de time dey was just rags. We went barefoot until it got real cold. Our feet would crack open from de cold and bleed. We would sit down and bawl and cry because it hurt so. Mother made moccasins for our feet from old pants. Late in de fall master would go to Hannibal or Palmyra and bring us shoes and clothes. We got dem things only once a year. I had to wear de young master's overalls for underwear and linseys for a dress.

"My father was took away. My mother said he was put on a block and sold 'cause de master wanted money to buy something for de house. My told me she come from Virginia or down south some place. Dey brought her in a box care with lots of other colored people. Dere was several cars full, with men in one car, women in another, and de younger ones in another, and de babies in another with some of the women to care for dem. Dey bought dem to Palmyra and sold dem. Master Kly bought my mother. I don't know where my father come from.

"Mistress always told us dat if we run away somebody would catch us and kill us. We was always scared when somebody strange come. De first we knew der was a war was when some soldiers come through. We was sure scared den. Once a man come and we thought he was a patroller but he asked for something to eat. Mother took him to de mistress. She gave him something to eat wrapped in a paper and told him to get off de place.

"Some Union soldiers come and told us that we was free like dey was and told us not to be afraid, dey wouldn't hurt us. Day told us de war was over. De master told mother not to go away, dat if she stayed for a while he would give her a couple hundred dollars. We stayed a while but she never got no money.

"We come to Hannibal in an ox wagon. We put up at de barracks and den mother wen to live with Hiram Titchner. He lived right where de post office is now. I hired out Mrs. James across de street for my clothes and schooling. Mrs. James had two girls. One of dem learned me not to be such a tomboy and not to be so rough. I tell you I was a bad girl when I was young. I could climb every tree on de master's farm and my clothes was always in rags from being so rough. My mother used to whip me most every day with a broomstick and even hit me with chairs. I guess I was bad. If I had a dollar for every broom handle that was laid across my back I would have lots of money. I tell yo we was raised plenty tuff dem days.

"De young folks can't stand such raising dese days. Dey just couldn't go through what we was through. The young folks now just couldn't do it all. We never was 'lowed on the street after nine o'clock. We sure run for home when the church bell done rung on de hill and nine o'clock. Now-a-days de young folks stay out half de night and dey steal and even kill each over over triflin' things. I know it 'cause I see them do dese things. I 'spose dere parents are a lot to blame.

"I was married when I was young, less dan twenty I reckon. I had one girl but she is dead now. Her boy lives with me. I gets a

pension, seven dollars a month, for about a year now. This little old shack belongs to me. I go to de Baptist Church over on Center Street whenever I can. We used to go to church on de corner 'cross from de post office. Dere is a big store dere now."

Source:

American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

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