

John Henry Kemp: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

A long grey beard, a pair of piercing owl-like eyes and large bare feet, mark "Prophet" Kemp among the citizenry of Daytona Beach, Florida. The "Prophet", christened John Henry- as nearly as he can remember- is an 80 year old ex-slave whose reminiscences of the past, delight all those who can prevail upon him to talk of his early life on the plantation of the section.

" Prophet" Kemp does not talk only of the past, however, his conversation turns to the future; he believes himself to be equally competent to talk of the future, and talks more of the latter if permitted.

Oketibbeha County, Mississippi was the birthplace of the "Prophet". The first master he can remember was John Gay, owner of a plantation of some 2,700 acres and over 100 slaves and a heavy drinker. The "Prophet" calls Gay "fahter", and becomes very vague when asked if this title is a blood tie or a name of which he is generally known.

According to Kemp- Gay was one of the meanest plantation owners in the entire section, and frequently voices his pride in being able to employ the cruelest overseers that could be found in all Mississippi. Among these were such men as G.T. Turner, Nels T. Thompson, Billy Hole, Andrew Winston and other men with statewide reputations for brutality. When all of the cruelties of one overseer had been felt by the slaves on the Gay plantation and another meaner man's reputation was heard of on the Gay plantation, the master would delight in telling his slaves that if they did not behave, he would send for this man. "Behaving"- the Prophet says, meant living on less food than one should have; mating only at his command and for purposes purely of breeding more and stronger slaves on his plantation for sale. In some cases with women- subjecting to his every demand if they would escape hanging by the wrists for half a day or being beaten with a cowhide whip.

About these whippings, the "Prophet" tells many a blood-curdling tale.

" One day when an old woman was plowing in the field, an overseer came by and reprimanded her for being so slow- one gave him some back talk; he took out a long closely woven whip and leashed her severely. The woman became sore and he took her hoe and chopped him right across his head, and child you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death."

" Prophet" Kemp will tell you that he hates to tell these things to any investigator, because he hates for people to know just how mean his "fahter" really was.

So great was the fear in which Gay was held that when Kemp's mother, Arnette Young, complained to Mrs. Gay, that her husband was constantly seeking her for a mistress and threatening her with death if she did not submit, even Mrs. Gay had to advise the slaves to do as Gay demanded, saying- "My husband is a dirty man and will find some reason to kill you if you don't." "I can't do a thing with him." Since Arnette worked at the "big house" there was no alternative, and it was believed that out of the union with her master, Henry was born. A young slave by the name of Broxton Kemp was given to the woman as husband at the time John Kemp was born; it is from this man that "Prophet" took his name.

Life on the plantation held nothing but misery for the slaves of John Gay. A week's allowance of groceries for the average small family consisted of a package of about ten pounds containing crudely ground meal, a slab of bacon- called side-meat and from a pint to a quart of syrup made from sorghum, depending on the season.

All slaves reported for work at 5 o'clock in the morning, except those who cared for the overseer, who began their work an hour earlier to enable the overseer to be present at the morning checkup. This checkup determined which slaves were late or who had committed some offense late on the day before or during the night. These were signed out and before the rest of the slaves began their work they were treated to the sight of these delinquents being

stripped and beaten until blood flowed; women were no exception to the rule.

The possible loss of his slaves upon the declaration of freedom on January 1, 1866 caused Gay considerable concern. His liquor-ridden mind was not long in finding a solution, however, he barred all visitors from his plantation and insisted that his overseers see to carrying out of this detail. They did, with such efficiency that it was not until May 8, when the government finally learned of the condition and sent a marshal to the plantation, that freedom came to Gay's slaves. May 8 is still celebrated in this section of Mississippi as the official emancipation day.

Relief for the hundreds of slaves of Gay came at last with the declaration of freedom for them. The government officials divided the grown and growing crops; and some land was parceled out to the former slaves.

Kemp may have gained the name "Prophet" from his constant reference to the future and to his religion. He says he believes on one faith, one Lord and one religion, and preaches this belief constantly. He claims to have turned his back on all religions that "do not do as the Lord says."

In keeping this belief he says he presents the "True Primitive Baptist Church", but does not have any connection with that church, because he believes it has not lived exactly up to what the Lord expects of him.

Kemp claims the ability to read the future with ease; even to help determine what it will bring in some cases. He reads it in the palms of those who will believe in him; he determines the good and bad luck; freedom from sickness; success in love and other benefits it will bring from the use of charms, roots, herbs and magical incantations and formulae. He has recently celebrated what he believes to be his 80th birthday, and says he expects to live at least another quarter of a century.

Source:

American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
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