

Florida Slave Narratives: Moore, Lindsey

Federal Writers' Project

1937

In a little blacksmith shop at 1114 Madison Street, Palatka, is a busy little horse-shoer who was born in slavery eighty-seven years ago. Lindsey Moore, blacksmith, leather-tanner ex-marble shooting champion and a number of other things, represents one of the most resourceful former slaves yet found in the state.

Moore was born in 1850 on the plantation of John B. Overtree, in Forsythe County, Georgia. He was one of the six children of Eliza Moore; all of them remained the property of Overtree until freed.

On the Overtree plantation the slave children were allowed considerable time for play until their tenth or twelfth years; Lindsey took full advantage of this opportunity and became very skillful at marble-shooting. It was here that he first learned to utilize his talents profitably. 'Massa Overtree' discovered the ability of Lindsey and another urchin to shoot marbles, and began taking them into town to compete with the little slaves of other owners. There would be betting on the winners.

Mr. Overtree won some money in this manner, Lindsey and his companion being consistent winners. But Lindsey saw possibilities other than the glory of his victories in this new game; with pennies that some of the spectators tossed him he began making small wagers of his own with his competitors, and soon had amassed quite a small pile of silver for those days.

Although shoes were unheard-of in Lindsey's youth, he used to watch carefully whenever a cow was skinned and its hide tanned to make shoes for the women and the 'folks in the big house'. Through his attention to the tanning operations he learned everything about tanning except one solution that he could not discover. It was not until years later that he learned that the jealously-guarded ingredient was plain salt and water. By the time he had learned it,

however, he had so mastered the tanning operations that he at once added it to his sources of livelihood.

Lindsey escaped much of the farm work on the Overtree place by learning to skillfully assist the women who made cloth out of the cotton from the fields. He grew very fast at cleaning 'rods', clearing the looms and other operations; when, at thirteen, it became time for him to pick cotton he had become so fast at helping with spinning and weighing the cotton that others had picked that he almost entirely escaped the picking himself.

Soap-making was another of the plantation arts that Lindsey mastered early. His ability to save every possible ounce of grease from the meats he cooked added many choice bits of pork to his otherwise meatless fare; he was able to spend many hours in the shade pouring water over oak ashes that other young slaves were passing picking cotton or hoeing potatoes in the burning sun.

Lindsey's first knowledge of the approach of freedom came when he heard a loud brass band coming down the road toward the plantation playing a strange, lively tune while a number of soldiers in blue uniforms marched behind. He ran to the front gate and was ordered to take charge of the horse of one of the officers in such an abrupt tone until he 'begin to shaking in my bare feet! There followed much talk between the officers and Lindsey's mistress, with the soldiers finally going into encampment a short distance away from the plantation.

The soldiers took command of the spring that was used for a water supply for the plantation, giving Lindsey another opportunity to make money. He would be sent from the plantation to the spring for water, and on the way back would pass through the camp of the soldiers. These would be happy to pay a few pennies for a cup of water rather than take the long hike to the Spring themselves; Lindsey would empty bucket after bucket before finally returning to the plantation. Out of his profits he bought his first pair of shoes—though nearly a grown man.

The soldiers finally departed, with all but five of the Overtree slaves joyously trooping behind them. Before leaving, however, they tore

up the railroad and its station, burning the ties and heating the rails until red then twisting them around tree-trunks. Wheat fields were trampled by their horses, and devastation left on all sides.

Lindsey and his mother were among those who stayed at the plantation. When freedom became general his father began farming on a tract that was later turned over to Lindsey. Lindsey operated the farm for a while, but later desired to learn horseshoeing, and apprenticed himself to a blacksmith. At the end of three years he had become so proficient that his former master rewarded him with a five-dollar bonus for shoeing one horse.

Possessing now the trades of blacksmithing, tanning and weaving-and-spinning, Lindsey was tempted to follow some of his former associates to the North, but was discouraged from doing so by a few who returned, complaining bitterly about the unaccustomed cold and the difficulty of making a living. He moved South instead and settled in the area around Palatka.

He is still in the section, being recognized as an excellent blacksmith despite his more than four-score years.

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