

Mary Minus Biddie: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

Mary Minus Biddie, age one hundred five was born in Pensacola, Florida, 1833 and raised in Columbia County. She is married, and has several children. For her age she is exceptionally active, being able to wash and do her house work. With optimism she looks forward to many more years of life. Her health is excellent.

Having spent thirty-two years of her life as a slave she relates vividly some of her experiences.

Her master Lancaster Jamison was a very kind man and never mistreated his slaves. He was a man of mediocre means, and instead of having a large plantation as was usual in those days, he ran a boarding house, the revenue therefrom furnishing him substance for a livelihood. He had a small farm from which fresh produce was obtained to supply the needs of his lodgers. Mary's family were his only slaves. The family consisted of her mother, father, brother and a sister. The children called the old master "Fa" and their father "Pappy." The master never resented this appellation, and took it in good humor. Many travelers stopped at his boarding house. Mary's mother did the cooking, her father "tanded" the farm, and Mary, her brother and sister, did chores about the place. There was a large one-room house built in the yard in which the family lived. Her father had a separate garden in which he raised his own produce, also a smoke house where the family meats were kept. Meats were smoked in order to preserve them.

During the day Mary's father was kept so busy attending his master's farm that there was no time to attend to a little farm that he was allowed to have. He overcame this handicap, however, by setting up huge scaffolds in the field which he burned and from the flames that this fire emitted he could see well enough to do what was necessary to his farm.

The master's first wife was a very kind woman; at her death Mary's master moved from Pensacola to Columbia County.

Mary was very active with the plow, she could handle it with the agility of a man. This prowess gained her the title of "plow girl."

COOKING

Stoves were unknown and cooking was done in a fireplace that was built of clay, a large iron rod was built in across the opening of the fireplace on which were hung pots that had special handles that fitted about the rod holding them in place over the blazing fire as the food cooking was done in a moveable oven which was placed in the fireplace over hot coals or corn cobs. Potatoes were roasted in ashes. Oft'times Mary's father would sit in front of the fireplace until a late hour in the night and on arising in the morning the children would find in a corner a number of roasted potatoes which their father had thoughtfully roasted and which the children readily consumed.

LIGHTING SYSTEM

Matches were unknown; a flint rock and a file provided the fire. This occurred by striking a file against a flint rock which threw off sparks that fell into a wad of dry cotton used for the purpose. This cotton, as a rule, readily caught fire. This was fire and all the fire needed to start any blaze.

WEAVING

The white folk wove the cloth on regular looms which were made into dresses for the slaves. For various colors of cloth the thread was dyed. The dye was made by digging up red shank and wild indigo roots which were boiled: The substance obtained being some of the best dye to be found.

BEVERAGES & FOOD

Bread was made from flour and wheat. The meat used was pork, beef, mutton and goat. For preservation it was smoked and kept in the smokehouse. Coffee was used as a beverage and when this ran

out as oft' times happened, parched peanuts were used for the purpose.

Mary and family rose before day-break and prepared breakfast for the master and his family, after which they ate in the same dining room. When this was over the dishes were washed by Mary, her brother and sister. The children then played about until meals were served again.

WASHING & SOAP

Washing was done in home-made wooden tubs, and boiling in iron pots similar to those of today. Soap was made from fat and lye.

AMUSEMENTS

The only amusement to be had was a big candy pulling, or hog killing and chicken cooking. The slaves from the surrounding plantations were allowed to come together on these occasions. A big time was had.

CHURCH

The slaves went to the "white folks" church on Sundays. They were seated in the rear of the church. The white minister would arise and exhort the slaves to "mind your masters, you owe th em your respect." An old Christian slave who perceived things differently could sometimes be heard to mumble, "Yeah, wese jest as good as deys is only deys white and we's black, huh." She dare not let the whites hear this. At times meetin's were held in the slaves cabin where some "inspired" slave led services.

In the course of years Mr. Jamison married again. His second wife was a veritable terror. She was always read and anxious to whip a slave for the least misdemeanor. The master told Mary and her mother that before he would take a chance of them running away on account of her meanness he would leave her. As soon as he would leave the house this was a signal for his wife to start on a slave. One day, with a kettle of hot water in her hand, she chased

Mary, who ran to another plantation and hid there until the good master returned. She then poured out her troubles on him. He was very indignant and remonstrated his wife for being so cruel. She met her fate in later years; her son-in-law becoming very angry at some of her doings in regard to his shot her, which resulted in her death. Instead of mourning, everybody seemed to rejoice, for the menace to well being had been removed. Twice a year Mary's father and master went to Cedar Keys, Florida to get salt. Ocean water was obtained and boiled, salt resulting. They always returned with about three barrels of salt.

The greatest event in the life of a slave was about to occur, and the most sorrowful in the life of a master, FREEDOM was at hand. A Negro was seen coming in the distance, mounted upon a mule, approaching Mr. Jamison who stood upon the porch. He told him of the liberation of the slaves. Mr. Jamison had never before been heard to curse, but this was the one day that he let go a torrent of words that are unworthy to appear in print. He then broke down and cried like a slave who was being bashed by his cruel master. He called Mary's mother and father, Phyliss and Sandy, "I ain't go no more to do with you, you are free," he said, "if you want o stay with me you may and I'll give you one-third of what you mise." They decided to stay. When the crop was harvested the master did not do as he promised. He gave them nothing. Mary slipped away, mounted the mule "Mustang" and galloped away at the mules snail speed to Newnansville where she related what happened to a Union captain. He gave her a letter to give to Mr. Jamison. In it he reminded him that if he didn't give Mary's family what he had promised he would be put in jail. Without hesitation the old master complied with these pungent orders.

After this incident Mary and her family left the good old boss to seek a new abode in other parts. This was the first time that the master had in any way displayed any kind of unfairness toward them, perhaps it was a reaction to having to liberate them.

MARRIAGE

There was no marriage during slavery according to civil or religious

custom among the slaves. If a slave saw a woman whom he desired he told his master. If the women in question belong on another plantation, the master would consult her master: "one of my boys wants to marry one of your gals," he would say. As a rule it was agreeable that they should live together as man and wife. This was encouraged for it increased the slave population by new borns, hence, being an asset to the masters. The two slaves thus joined were allowed to see one another at intervals upon special permission from the master. He must have a pass to leave the plantation. Any slave caught without one while off the plantation was subject to be caught by the "puderollers" (a low class of white who roved the country to molest a slave at the least opportunity. Some of them were hired by the masters to guard against slaves running away or to apprehend them in the event that they did) who would beat them unmercifully, and send them back to the plantation from whence they came.

As a result of this form of matrimony at emancipation there were no slaves lawfully married. Orders were given that if they preferred to live together as man and wife they must marry according to law. They were given nine months to decide this question, after which if they continued to live together they were arrested for adultery. A Mr. Pryer, Justice of the Peace at Gainesville, was assigned to deal with the situation around the plantation where Mary and her family lived. A big supper was given, it was early, about twenty-five slave couples attended. There was gaiety and laughter. A barrel of lemonade was served. A big time was had by all, then those couples who desired to remain together were joined in wedlock according to civil custom. The party broke up in the early hours of the morning.

Marry Biddie, cognizant of the progress that science and invention has made in the intervening years from Emancipation and the present time, could not help but remark of the vast improvement of the lighting system of today and that of slavery. There were no lamps or kerosene. The first thread that she ever spun was for a wick to be used in a candle, the only means of light. Beef tallow was used to make the candle, this was placed in a candle mould while hot. The wick was then placed in the center of the tallow as it rest in

the mould; this was allowed to cool. When this chemical process occurred there was a regular sized candle to be used for lighting.

Mary now past the century mark, her lean bronze body resting in a rocker, her head wrapped in a white kerchief, and puffing slowly on her clay pipe, expressed herself in regard to the presidents: "Roosevelt has done more than any other president, why you know ever since freedom they been talkin' 'bout dis pension, talkin' 'bout it that's all, but you see Mr. Roosevelt he don't come and give it to us. What? I'll say he's a good righteous man, and um sho' go' vote for him."

Residing in her little cabin in Eatonville, Florida, she is able to smile because she has some means of security, the Old Age Pension.

Source:

American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
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[Back](#)

[Home](#) > [Floripedia](#) > [Florida Slave Narratives](#) > Mary Minus Biddie [Site Map](#)

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