

BILL HEARD
475 Reese Street
Athens, Georgia

Written by: Miss Grace McCune
Athens —

Edited by: Mrs. Sarah H. Hall
Athens —

and

John N. Booth
District Supervisor
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BILL HEARD
Ex-Slave—Age 73.

Bill Heard's blacksmith shop, a sagging frame structure, in the forks of Oconee Street and Lexington Highway, is conveniently located for both local and traveling clientele.

An old voice singing Swing Low Sweet Chariot in a low tone but with a fervor known only to Negroes led the visitor through the shop, where there was no sight of the singer. Bill was eventually discovered seated on a cushion-covered nail keg beneath a large water-oak at the rear of the building. A large hymn book was placed across his knees, and the old Negro was happily singing away all by himself. His gray hair was partly covered by an old black cap, and his faded blue work skirt and pants showed evidence of long wear.

As the song ended Bill discovered that he was not alone. Off came his cap, and he scrambled to his feet with a smile. "Good evenin', Missy, how is you? Won't you have a seat and rest? Dese nail kegs makes a mighty good place to set when you is tired out, and it's powerful nice and cool under dis old tree." After his guest was comfortably seated on another cushioned keg, the aged smith resumed his perch. "I didn't hear you come into my shop, and I think[Pg 138] dat's about de fust time anybody ever did come in dar widout me hearin' 'em. I used to be in dar so busy all de time, I never had no

chance to rest up or practice my singin'. Times has changed in lots of ways since dem good old days. Some folks laughs when us calls 'em 'good old days,' and dey wants to know how come us thinks dey was good old days, when us had such hard wuk to do den. Course folks had to wuk hard and didn't have all dese new-fangled gadgets to wuk wid lak dey got now, but I still calls 'em de good old days 'cause folks was better off den; dey loved one another and was allus ready to lend a helpin' hand, 'specially in times of trouble.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout slavery times 'cept what my Mammy and Daddy told me. Daddy, he belonged to Marse Tom Heard down in Elbert County, 'bout 10 miles from Rucker place, nigh Ruckersville. Daddy said Marse Tom had about a hunnerd and twenty-five slaves on his place. Daddy was mighty little when Marse Tom got him, and he never bought none of Daddy's other kinfolks, so it was right hard for de little boy all by hisself, 'cause de other slaves on de plantation was awful mean to him. Dey wouldn't let him sleep in deir quarters, so he stayed up at de big house, and place to keep warm. Atter he got big enough to wuk, day treated him better.[Pg 139]

"Evvybody cooked on fireplaces dem days, 'cause dere warn't no sto'-bought stoves. Marse Tom fed all his slaves at de big house; he kept 'em so regular at wuk dere warn't no time for 'em to do deir own cookin'.

"Slaves lived in one-room log cabins dat had rock chimblies, and each cabin had one little window wid a wooden shutter dey fastened at night and in bad weather. Deir beds was made out of pine poles fastened to de sides of dem old beds 'teesters,' 'cause de posties was so high. Ropes or cords was criss-crossed to hold 'em together and to take de place of springs. Nobody hadn't ever saw no iron springs on beds dem days. Dem big old ticks was generally filled wid wheat straw, but sometimes slaves was 'lowed to pick up waste cotton and wash, dry, and card it to stuff deir bed-ticks wid. But Missy, dat was jus' too much trouble when a good old straw tick slept so fine. Cheers was made out of oak splits, and cane and rye plaits was used for de cheer-bottoms. Dem old cheers sot mighty good and lasted a lifetime.

"Folks sho 'nough did live at home den; dey raised all sorts of vegetables sich as corn, 'taters, wheat, rye, and oats, and what's more, dey raised de cotton and wool to make de cloth for deir clothes. Cows, hogs, goats, sheep, chickens, geese, and turkeys was runnin' all over dem pastures, and dere warn't no lack of good victuals and home-made clothes.[Pg 140] When hogs and cows was kilt to put meat in de smokehouse deir hides was tanned for leather to be used for harness and shoes, and a heap of times a piece of hide was used for a cheer-seat.

"Daddy said dey had a powerful hard time gittin' things lak soda, salt, sugar, and coffee durin' de war times. He said dat sometimes corn and okra seeds was parched right brown and ground up to be used for coffee, but it warn't nigh as good as sho 'nough coffee.

When de salt had to be used if folks and critters was to keep well. Dey dug up de dirt under old smokehouses and biled it to git out de salt. Nobody didn't waste none of dat salt. No Surree! It was too hard to git. When it got so dey couldn't buy no soda, dey saved nice clean corncobs and burned dem into a fine powder what dey used for soda. Was it fit for bread-makin'? Why, Missy, dem biscuits made out of corncob soda and baked in dem old dutch ovens was fit for anybody to eat and enjoy. De onliest trouble 'bout it was gittin' 'em to bake enough of it.

"Slaves clothes was all made at home. Gals spun de thread and old 'omens wove de cloth on home-made looms; my Mammy was one of dem weavin' 'omans. Clothes for summer was jus' thin cotton, but cotton and wool was mixed for cold weather, and don't think dem wool and cotton clothes didn't[Pg 141] keep out de cold; dey sho did. Deir clothes was dyed wid barks from trees, ink balls, walnut hulls, and red bud. Most evry plantation had its own shoemaker man dat tanned all de leather and made up all de shoes. Leather for slaves' shoes warn't allus tanned and shoes made out of untanned leather looked lak dey had done been dyed red.

"Dey had special mens on de plantation for all de special wuk. One carpenter man done all de fixin' of things lak wagons and plows, holped wid all de buildin' wuk, and made all de coffins.

"No, Missy, dere warn't no undertakers back in dem days, and folks had to pervide evvything at home. Corpses was measured and coffins made to fit de bodies. All de neighbors, fur and nigh, gathered 'round to set up wid de fambly.

"Funerals warn't so common den as now 'cause folks didn't die out so fast dem days. Dey tuk better keer of deyselves, et right, wuked hard, and went to bed at night 'stid of folks runs 'round now; deir mammies and daddies never knows whar dey is. Folks don't teach chillun right, and dey don't make dem go to church lak dey should oughta.

"Folks didn't even git married back in dem days lak dey does now, leastwise slaves didn't. If a slave wanted to marry up wid a gal he knocked on his Marster's door and[Pg 142] told him 'bout it. If his Marstar laked de idea he told him to go on and take de gal and to treat her right; dat was all dere was to slaves gittin' married.

"My Daddy said slaves went to de white folks' church 'til dey got some churches for colored folks. Church days was big days wid folks den 'cause dey didn't have meetin' evvy Sunday. Slave 'omans had percale or calico dresses, brogan shoes, and big home-made bonnets wid slats in de brims for Sunday-go-to-meetin' wear, and if it was cold dey wropt up in shawls. Menfolks wore cotton shirts and pants. Dey had grand preachin' dem days and folks got honest-to-goodness 'ligion.

"Folks wuked mighty hard dem days, 'specially durin' plantin' and harvest time, 'til atter de corn was gathered and fetched out of de fields in dem old two-wheel carts dat was

used to haul up all de craps. When de cornshuckin's started evvywhar dey tuk time about at de diffunt plantations. De fust thing dey done atter dey got together was to 'lect a general; he led de singin', and de faster he sung de faster de shucks flew. Plenty of corn liquor was passed 'round and you know dat stuff is sho to make a Nigger hustle. Evvy time a red ear of corn was found dat meant a extra drink of liquor for de Nigger dat found it. Atter de last ear of corn was shucked a big supper was served and dey danced and sung de rest of de night.[Pg 143]

"When dey needed some new ground cleared up, dey had a logrollin'. Evvybody tried to out wuk de others, and if de job hadn't been finished 'fore night, dey kept right on at it by moonlight. One man wuked so hard tryin' to beat de others dat when he went to de spring for some water, he tuk one drink, raised his haid quick lak, and died right dar. He was plumb daid when dey picked him up!

"Dey give us our freedom in April and Daddy left Old Marster in May. He moved here nigh de old Pittner place whar I was borned. Daddy farmed for a-while and wuked at blacksmithin' for de white folks too, 'cause dat was de wuk he had been doin' for his Old Marster. De fust ricollections I've got is 'bout de days on dat old place. I ain't never gwine to forgit 'bout dem old cottonpickin's dey had when I was a youngster. Dey said dey was jus' lak dem cottonpickin's dey had 'fore de war. Dey would git up big crowds and pick cotton by de light of de harvest moon, and dat's 'most as bright as daylight. Evvybody holped and, fast as dey picked all de cotton on one farm and et a big supper, dey hustled on to de next place whar plenty of cotton, white in de fields and liquor, and good barbecue, and sich lak kept 'em happy and hustlin' 'most all night. When dey had done all de cottonpickin' dey could for one night dey stopped for dancin' and all sorts of frolickin'. Plenty of liquor in dem little brown jugs holped to make things 'most too lively sometimes. De few fights dey had when dey was drinkin' heavy didn't 'mount to much.[Pg 144]

"Chillun loved hogkillin' times. Five or six mens would jine up and go from place to place in de community whar dere was lots of hogs to be kilt. When dem hogs was all butchered de folks would git together and sich a supper as dey would have! De mostest fresh meat sich as chit'lin's, haslets, pig foets, and sausage, wid good old collard greens, cracklin' bread, and hot coffee. I'm a-tellin' you, Lady, dat was good eatin', and atter you had done been wukin' in de hogkillin' dem cold days you was ready for victuals dat would stay by you.

"De fust place I ever went to school was in a little house on de old Bert Benyard place nigh Winterville, Georgy, and let me tell you, Missy, schoolin' warn't nothin' lak what it is now. Dem what lived nigh went home to dinner, but chillun dat lived a fur piece off fotch deir dinner to school in a tin bucket. Us was still livin' dar when Mr. John McCune moved from Whitfield County to dat old Pittner place. My Daddy wuked for him and I played 'round wid his boys.

"Daddy moved closer to town and opened up a blacksmith shop on Broad Street at what was called Wood's corner den. I helped him in de shop and went to school some. Folks had to wuk so hard to make enough to keep alive dat dey didn't git to go to school much. Athens was a heap diffunt den to what it is now; it was mostly woods, and de roads was awful. Dere warn't no paved streets, no street-lights, and no streetcars den. I 'members dem fust street-lights. Lawsey, Missy, folks was sho proud of dem lights and, when dey got dem[Pg 145] little streetcars what was pulled by little mules, Athens folks felt lak dey lived in a real city. Dey had a big old town hall whar dey had all sorts of shows and big 'tainments.

"Times has changed, folks has changed, and nothin' ain't lak it used to be. When I was little it warn't no sight a t'all to see traders wid big droves of hogs, horses, cows, sheep, and goats, bringin' 'em to town to sell or trade for somepin dey needed. Daddy said dat durin' slavery time dey drove slaves 'long de road de same way and sold 'em jus' lak dey sold deir cattle.

"It was mostly woods and fields 'round here when I opened dis little shop 'bout 40 years ago. Johnson's store was sot up whar de Carither's Wagon Yard used to be, and soon paved streets was laid, and den fillin' stations, other stores, and de lak, sprung up in a hurry 'long here. Soon dere won't be no need of a blacksmith shop here, but I wants to stay on at wuk in my shop jus' as long as I kin, here in dis world of trouble whar I has had good times and hard times jus' lak de others. No other place wouldn't seem right.

"Me and my wife jus' runned away and got married widout havin' no big weddin' and atter us has done wuked together dese long years, us hopes to go to de heavenly home together. Our oldest gal is all us has left of our five chillun; she lives off somewhar in Washington, and us don't never hear from her no more. Us still has de boy us 'dopted long years ago; him and his wife lives wid us and dey keeps us from bein' too lonesome.[Pg 146]

"I has made a good livin' right here in dis old shop, wuked hard, and saved my money, and now us is got a right nice little home out on Reese Street. De Good Lord has been wid us in all our troubles as well as in our good times, and I knows He is gwine to stay wid us de rest of de time and den He will take us home to Glory.

"I'se mighty glad you hunted me up, for I 'members dem old days, playin' wid your Daddy, down on de Pittner place. Atter us had all moved to Athens, he was still my friend. Come back to see me again, and just trust in de Good Lord; He will take keer of you."

As the visitor went down the street Bill's quavering voice was heard again. He was singin' Lord I'se Comin' Home.