

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
The Federal Writer's Project of
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For the State of Mississippi From the WPA Slave Narratives:
Charlie Davenport age 100

"I was named Charlie Davenport an' encordin'(according) to de way I figgers I ought to be nearly a hund'ed years old. Nobody knows my birthday, 'cause all my white folks is gone.

"I was born one night an' de very nex' mornin' my po' little mammy died. Her name was Lucindy. My pa was William Davenport.

"When I was a little mite dey turnt me over to de granny nurse on de plantation. She was de one dat 'tended to de little pickaninnies. She got a woman to nurse me what had a young baby, so I didn't know no dif'ence. Any woman what had a baby 'bout my age would wet nurse me, so I growed up in de quarters an' was as well an' as happy as any other chil'.

"When I could tote taters (sweet potatoes) dey'd let me pick 'em up in de fiel'. Us always hid a pile away where us could git 'em an' roast 'em at night.

"Old mammy nearly always made a heap o' dewberry an' 'simmon (persimmon) wine.

"Us little tykes would gather black walnuts in de woods an' store 'em under de cabins to dry.

"At night when de work was all done an' de can'les was out us'd set 'roun' de fire an' eat cracked nuts an' taters. Us picked out de nuts wid horse-shoe nails an' baked de taters in ashes. Den Mammy would pour herse'fan' her old man a cup o' wine. Us never got none o' dat *less'n us be's sick. Den she'd mess it up wid wild cherry bark. It was bad den, but us gulped it down, anyhow.

"Old Granny used to sing a song to us what went lak dis:

'Kinky head, whar-fore you skeered?

Old snake crawled off, 'cause he's afeared.

Pappy will smite 'im on de back

Wid a great big club - ker whack! Ker whack!

"Aventine, where I was born an' bred, was acrost Secon' Creek. It was a big plantation wid 'bout a hund'ed head o' folks a-livin' on it. It was only one o' de marster's places, 'cause he was one o' de riches' an' highes' quality gent'men in de whole country. I's tellin' you de trufe, us didn' b'long to no white trash. De marster was de Honorable Mister Gabriel Shields hisse'f. Ever'body knowed 'bout him. He married a Surget.

"Dem Surgets was pretty devilish; for all dey was de riches' fam'ly in de lan'. Dey was de out-fightin'es', out-cussin'es', fastes' ridin', hardes' drinkin', out-spendin'es' folks I ever seen. But Lawd! Lawd! Dey was gent'men even in dey cups. De ladies was beautiful wid big black eyes an' sof' white han's, but dey was high strung, too.

"De marster had a town mansion what's pictured in a lot o' books. It was called 'Montebella.' De big columns still stan' at de end o' Shields Lane. It burnt 'bout thirty years ago(1937).

"I's part Injun. I aint got no Nigger nose an' my hair is so long I has to keep it wropped. I'se often heard my mammy was reddih-lookin' wid long, straight, black hair. Her pa was a full blooded Choctaw an' mighty nigh as young as she was. I'se been tol' dat nobody dast meddle wid her. She didn' do much talkin', but she sho' was a good worker. My pappy had Injun blood, too, but his hair was kinky.

"De Choctaws lived all 'roun' Secon' Creek. Some of 'em had cabins lak settled folks. I can 'member dey las' chief. He was a tall pow'ful built man named 'Big Sam.' What he said was de law, 'cause he was de boss o' de whole tribe. One rainy night he was kilt in a saloon down in 'Natchez Under de Hill.' De Injuns went wild wid rage an' grief. Dey sung an' wailed an' done a heap o' low mutterin'. De sheriff kep' a steady watch on 'em, 'cause he was afeared dey would do somethin' rash. After a long time he kinda let up in his vig'lance. Den one night some o' de Choctaw mens slipped in town an' stabbed de man dey b'lieved had kilt Big Sam. I 'members dat well.

"As I said b'fore, I growed up in de quarters. De houses was clean an' snug. Us was better fed den dan I is now, an' warmer, too. Us had blankets an' quilts filled wid home raised wool an' I jus' loved layin' in de big fat feather bed a-hearin' de rain patter on de roof.

"All de little darkeys he'ped bring in wood. Den us swept de yards wid brush brooms. Den sometimes us played together in de street what run de length o' de quarters. Us th'owed horse-shoes, jumped poles, walked on stilts, an' played marbles. Sometimes us made bows an' arrows. Us could shoot 'em, too, jus lak de little Injuns.

"A heap o' times old Granny would brush us hide wid a peach tree limb, but us need it. Us stole aigs an' roasted 'em. She sho' wouldn' stan' for no stealin' if she knowed it.

medium

"Us wore lowell-cloth shirts. It was a coarse tow-sackin'. In winter us had linsey-woolsey pants an' heavy cow-hide shoes. Dey was made in three sizes - big, little, an' mejum (medium). Twant no right or lef'. Dey was sorts club-shaped so us could wear 'em on either foot.

"I was a teasin', mis-che-vious chil' an' de overseer's little gal got it in for me. He was a big, hard fisted Dutchman bent on gittin' riches. He trained his pasty-faced gal to tattle on us Niggers. She got a heap o' folks whipped. I knowed it, but I was hasty; One day she hit me wid a stick an' I th'owed it back at her. 'Bout dat time up walked her pa. He seen what I done, but he didn' see what she done to me. But it wouldn' a-made no dif'ence, if he had.

"He snatched me in de air an' toted me to a stump an' laid me 'crosst it. I didn' have but one thickness 'twixt me an' daylight. Cent'man! He laid it on me wid dat stick. I thought I'd die. All de time his mean little gal was a-gloatin' in my misery. I yelled an' prayed to de Lawd 'til he quit.

"Den he say to me, 'From now on you works in de fiel'. I aint gwine a-have no vicious boy lak you 'roun de lady folks.' I was too little for fiel' work, but de nex' mornin' I went to choppin' cotton. After dat I made a reg'lar fiel' han'. When I growed up I was a ploughman. I could sho' lay off a pretty cotton row, too.

"Us slaves was fed good plain grub. 'Fore us went to de fiel' us had a big braskfas' o' hot bread, 'lasses, fried salt meat dipped in corn meal, an' fried taters. Sometimes us had fish an' rabbit meat. When us was in de fiel', two women 'ud come at dinner-time wid basket's filled wid hot pone, baked taters, corn roasted in de shucks, onion, fried squash, an' b'iled pork. Sometimes dey brought buckets o' cold butter-milk. It sho' was good to a hongry man. At supper-time us had hoecake an' cold vi'tals. Sometimes dey was sweetmilk an' collards.

"Mos' ever' slave had his own little garden patch an' was 'lowed to cook out o' it.

"Mos' ever' plantation kep' a man busy huntin' an' fishin' all de time. (If dey shot a big buck, us had deer meat roasted on a spit.)

"On Sundays us always had meat pie or fish or fresh game an' roasted taters an' coffee. On Chris'mus de marster 'ud give us chicken an' barrels o' apples an' oranges. 'Course, ever' marster warnt as free handed as our'n was. (He was sho' 'nough quality.) I'se hear'd dat a heap o' cullud people never had nothin' good t'eat.

"I warnt learnt nothin' in no book. Don't think I'd a-took to it, nowhow. Dey learnt de house servants to read. Us fiel' han's never knowed nothin' 'cept weather an' dirt an' to weigh cotton. Us was learnt to figger a little, but dat's all.

"I reckon I was 'bout fifteen when hones' Abe Lincoln what called hisse'f a rail-splitter come here to talk wid us. He want all th'ough de country jus' a-rantin' an' a-preachin' 'bout us bein' his black brothers. De

marster didn' know nothin' 'bout it, 'cause it was sorta secret-lak. It sho' riled de Niggers up an' lots of 'em run sway. I sho' hear'd him, but I didn' pay 'im no min'.

"When de war broke out dat old Yankee Dutch overseer o' our'n went back up North, where he b'longed. Us was pow'ful glad an' hoped he'd git his neck broke.

"After dat de Yankees come a-swoopin' down on us. My own pappy took off wid 'em. He j'ined a comp'ny what *fit at Vicksburg. I was plenty big 'nough to fight, but I didn' hanker to tote no gun. I stayed on de plantation an' put in a crop.

"It was pow'ful oneasy times after dat. But what I care 'bout freedom? Folks what was free was in misery firs' one way an' den de other.

"I was on de plantation closer to town, den. It was called 'Fish Pond Plantation.' De white folks come an' tol' us we mus' burn all de cotton so de enemy couldn' git it.

"Us piled it high in de fiel's lak great mountains. It made my innards hurt to see fire 'tached to somethin' dat had cost us Niggers so much labor an' honess' sweat. If I could a-hid some o' it in de barn I'd a-done it, but de boss searched ever'where.

"De little Niggers thought it was fun. Dey laughed an' brung out big armfuls from de cotton house. One little black gal clapped her han's an' jumped in a big heap. She sunk down an' down 'til she was buried deep. Den de wind picked up do flame an' spread it lak lightenin'. It spread so fas' dat 'fore us could bat de eye, she was in a mountain o' fiah. She struggled up all covered wid flames, a-screamin', 'Lawdy, he'p me!' Us snatched her out an' rolled her on de groun', but twant no use. She died in a few minutes.

"De marster's some went to war. De one what us loved bes' never come back no more. Us mourned him a-plenty, 'cause he was so jolly an' happy-lak, an' free wid his change. Us all felt cheered when he come 'roun'.

"Us Niggers didn' know nothin' 'bout what was gwine on in de outside worl'. All us knowed was dat a war was bein' fit. Pussonally, I b'lieve in what Marse Jefferson Davis done. He done de only thing a gent'man could a-done. He tol' Marse Abe Lincoln to 'tend to his own bus'ness an' he'd 'tend to his'n. But Marse Lincoln was a fightin' man an' he come down here an' tried to run other folks' plantations. Dat made Marse Davis so all fired mad dat he spit hard 'twixt his teeth an' say, 'I'll whip de socks off den dam Yankees.'

"Dat's how it all come 'bout.

"My white folks los' money, cattle, slaves, an' cotton in de war, but dey was till better off dan mos' folks.

"Lak all de fool Niggers o' dat time I was right smart bit by de freedom bug for awhile. It sounded pow'ful nice to be tol':

'You don't have to chop cotton no more. You can th'ow dat hoe down an' go fishin' whensoever de notion strikes you. An' you can roam 'roun' at night an' court gals jus' as late as you please. Aint no marster gwine a-say to you, "Charlie, you's got to be back when de clock strikes nine."

"I was fool 'nough to b'lieve all dat kin' o' stuff. But to tell de hones' truf, mos' o' us didn' know ourse'fs no better off. Freedom meant us could leave where us'd been born an' bred, but it meant, too, dat us had to scratch for us ownse'fs. Dem what lef' de old plantation seamed so all fired glad to git back dat I made up my min' to stay put. I stayed right wid my white folks as long as I could.

"My white folks talked plain to me. Dey say real sad-lak, 'Charlie, you's been a dependence, but now you can go if you is so desirous. But if you wants to stay wid us you can share-crop. Dey's a house for you an' wood to keep you warm an' a mule to work. We aint got much cash, but dey's de lan' an' you can count on havin' plenty o' vit'als. Do jus' as you please.' When I looked at my marster an' knowed he needed me, I pleased to stay. My marster never forced me to do nary thing 'bout it. Didn' nobody make me work after de war, but dem Yankees sho' made my daddy work. Dey put a pick in his han' stid o' a gun. Dey made 'im dig a big ditch in front o' Vicksburg. He worked a heap harder for his Uncle Sam dan he'd ever done for de marster.

"I hear'd tell 'bout some Nigger sojers a-plunderin' some houses: Out at Pine Ridge dey kilt a white man named Rogillio. But de head Yankee sojers in Natchez tried 'em for somethin' or nother an' hung 'em on a tree out near de Charity Horspital. Dey strung up de ones dat went to Mr. Sargent's door one night an' shot him down, too. All dat hangin' seemed to squelch a heap o' lousy goin's-on.

"Lawd! Lawd! I knows 'bout de Kloo Kluxes. I knows a-plenty. Dey was sho' 'nough devils a-walkin' de earth a-seekin' what dey could devour. Dey larruped de hide of'n de uppity Niggers an' driv de white trash back where dey b'longed.

"Us Niggers didn' have no secret meetin's. All us had was church meetin's in arbors out in de woods. De preachers 'ud exhort us dat us was de chillun o' Israel in de wilderness an' de Lawd done sont us to take dis lan' o' milk an' honey. But how us gwine a-take lan' what's already been took?

"I sho' aint never hear'd 'bout no plantations bein' 'vided up, neither. I hear'd a lot o' yaller Niggers spoutin' off how dey was gwine a-take over de white folks' lan' for back wages. Dem bucks jus' took all dey wages out in talk. 'Cause I aint never seen no lan' 'vided up yet.

"In dem days nobody but Niggers an' shawl-strop (carpet Baggers) folks voted. Quality folks didn' have nothin' to do wid such truck. If dey had a-wanted to de Yankees wouldn' a-let 'em. My old marster didn' vote an' if anybody knowed what was what he did. Sense didn' count in dem days. It was pow'ful ticklish times an' I let votin' alone.

"De shawl-strop folks what come in to take over de country tol' us dat us had a right to go to all de balls, church meetin's, an' 'tainments de white folks give. But one night a bunch o' uppity Niggers went to a 'tainment in Memorial Hall. Dey dressed deyself's fit to kill an' walked down de aisle an' took seats in de very front. But jus' 'bout time dey got good set down, de curtain drapped an' de white folks riz up

widout a-sayin' airy word. Dey marched out de buildin' wid dey chins up an' lef' dem Niggers a-settin' in a empty hall.

"Dat's de way it happen ever' time a Nigger tried to git too uppity. Dat night after do breakin' up o' dat 'tainment, de Kloo Kluxes rid th'ough de lan'. I hear'd dey grabbed ever' Nigger what walked down dat aisle, but I aint hear'd yet what dey done wid 'em.

"Dat same thing happened ever' time a Nigger tried to act lak he was white.

"A heap o' Niggers voted for a little while. Dey was a black man what had office. He was named Lynch. He out a big figger up in Washington. Us had a sheriff named Winston. He was a ginger oaks Nigger an' pow'ful mean when he got riled. Sheriff Winston was a slave an', if my mem'ry aint failed me, so was Lynch.

"My granny tol' me 'bout a slave uprisin' what took place when I was a little boy. None o' de marster's Niggers 'ud have nothin' to do wid it. A Nigger tried to git 'em to kill dey white folks an' take dey lan'. But what us want to kill old Marster an' take do lan' when dey was de bes' frien's us had? Dey caught de Nigger an' hung 'im to a limb.

"Plenty folks b'lieved in charms, but I didn' take no stook in such truck. But I don't lak for de moon to shine on me when I's a-sleepin'.

"De young Niggers is headed straight for hell. All dey think 'bout is drinkin' hard likker, goin' to dance halls, an' a-ridin' in a old rattle trap car. It beats all how dey brags an' wastes things. Dey aint one whit happier dan folks was in my dey. I was as proud to git a apple as dey is to git a pint o' likker. Course, schools he'p some, but looks lak all mos' o' de young'n's is studyin' 'bout is how to git out o' hones' labor.

"I'se seen a heap o' fools what thinks 'cause they is wise in books, they is wise in all things.

"Mos' all my white folks is gone, now. Marse Randolph Shields is a doctor 'way off in China. I wish I could git word to 'im, 'cause I know he'd look after me if he knowed I was on charity. I prays de Lawd to see 'em all when I die."