

Ex-Slave

**DOSIA HARRIS
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**DOSIA HARRIS
Ex-Slave—Age 78**

Dosia lives in a red painted frame house. Her very black skin, thick lips, and broad nose are typical of her African ancestry. She is tall, thin, and a little stooped, and her wooly hair is fast fading from gray to almost white. When she greeted the interviewer, she was wearing a blue striped dress which displayed a large patch of blue print on the front of the skirt over her knees. Over her dress a black silk blouse, lavishly trimmed with black beads, was worn for a wrap, and a pair of men's brown shoes, sans laces, completed her costume. Due to illiteracy Dosia has retained the dialect of the old southern darky.

Asked to relate her experiences as a slave, she replied: "Oo, Miss! What does you want to know 'bout dat for? Well, anyhow I was borned in Greene County. Mary and Auss Downs was my Ma and Pa. I cain't tell you whar dey come from.

"I played 'round de yard wid de rest of de chillun and picked a little cotton up and down de rows. I was de onliest chile my Mammy had. My Pa was married two times, and I was his fust chile. I had four half sisters: Fannie, Clara, Daisy, and Martha Ann, but I never had no brothers.

"All de houses in de slave quarters was log cabins 'cept two. Dey was made of boards what was put on straight up and down. All de houses had chimblies made out of mud and sticks. De beds[Pg 105] had high posties and some of 'em was nailed to de wall of de cabin. Dey didn't know nothin' 'bout no wire springs den, and dey strung de beds wid heavy cords for springs. Dey made mattress ticks out of coarse home-wove cloth; some was striped and some was plain unbleached white. Atter de wheat was thrashed evvy year de 'omans tuk deir ticks and emptied out de old straw and went and filled 'em wid new wheat straw. Wisht I had a nice fresh made wheat straw mattress now. Us had plenty of good quilts for kivver.

"Some of de slave chillun slept on de flo', but me, I slept wid my grandma. She was Crecia Downs, and she done raised me, 'cause my Mammy died when I was three days old, or come to think of it, was I three weeks old when dat happened? I'se done got so old I forgits lots of things lak dat. Mammy died of some kind of fever dat was mighty catchin'. Twenty-five Niggers died on dat one plantation 'bout de same time, from dat fever. Atter grandma got too old to wuk in de field, she didn't do nothin' but piddle 'round de yard and bile slops for de hogs. Grandpa Joe Downs, he was de carpenter, but he done most any kind of wuk dat come up to be done; he wuked in de fields and driv cows, or jus' anything.

"Money! No Ma'am! All dey ever give slaves was a belly full of somepin t'eat, de clo'es dey wore, and de orders to keep on wukin'. Now come to think of it, I did see \$8,000 of Jeff Davis fodder what de white folks th'owed 'way atter de War. Us chillun picked it up and played wid it.

"What did us have t'eat? Oo-o! Dey give us plenty good victuals. Dere was bread and meat; peas, greens, and other vegetables; all de milk us wanted, and sometimes dere was good old ginger[Pg 106]cakes made wid sorghum syrup. As for me, I laked fried fat meat and cornbread cooked in de ashes better dan greens and sweet things any old time. All de cookin' was done in great big open fireplaces dat was plum full of ovens, skilletts and all sorts of long handled pans and things. Gentlemen! Dat pot would bile down wid dem peas in it 'fore you knowed it if you didn't watch it close. Dere never was no other bread good as what us baked in dem ovens and in de ashes.

"'Possums! You jus' makes my mouth water, talkin' 'bout 'possums. Folks thought so much of deir 'possum dogs dem days dey fed 'em 'til dey was jus' fat and lazy. Dey cotched de 'possums, singed and scraped de hair off of 'em, finished dressin' 'em and drapped 'em in de pot to bile 'til dey was tender. Den dey put 'em in bakin' pans and kivvered 'em over wid strips of fat meat and baked 'em jus' as nice and brown, and if dey had good sweet 'tatoes, dey roasted 'em in de ashes, peeled 'em, and put 'em on de big old platters wid de 'possums. Rabbits was plentiful too and I loves 'em 'til dis good day. Most of de young tender rabbits what dey cotched was fried, but if dey brung in some old tough ones dey was throwed in de pot wid a piece of fat meat and biled 'til

dey was done. Squirrels was cooked jus' lak rabbits. Dere was plenty of fish down dar in Greene County whar us lived, but I never did eat 'em. Slaves would wuk all day and fish all night, but you never did ketch Dosia foolin' 'round no fish ponds. Slave famblies was 'lowed to have little gyarden patches if dey wanted 'em. I ricollect how I used to go to de gyarden in de winter and cut down collards atter frost had done hit 'em and fetched 'em to de house to be biled down for dinner.[Pg 107]

"What us wore in summer? Well, it was lak dis—little Nigger chillun didn't stay out of de branch long 'nough to need much clothes in hot weather, but in de winter dey give us dresses made out of coarse cloth wove on de loom right dar on de plantation. Some of dem dresses was red and some was blue. De cloth was dyed wid red oak bark and copperas, and dey used indigo what dey raised on de place to dye de blue cloth. De waisties was close fittin' and sorter skimpy skirts was gathered on to 'em. De undershirts was unbleached white cloth made jus' lak de dresses only some skimpier. Old Marster raised plenty of cattle and saved de hides what he sont to de tannery to be got ready for my uncle, Moses Downs, to make our brogan shoes. Dem shoes had brass toes to keep 'em from wearing out too quick. Uncle Mose was sho' a smart shoemaker. He had to make shoes for all de slaves on de whole plantation.

"Marster Sam Downs owned us, and his wife, Miss Mary, was a mighty good somebody to belong to—"Old Mist'ess" us called her. I don't 'member nothin' 'tall 'bout Old Marster, 'cause he died 'fore I was knee high to a duck. Old Marster and Old Mist'ess had five chillun. Dey was: Miss Ellen, Marse Sam, Marse James Kelsey, Marse Tom, and Marse William. Old Miss sho' was good to us Niggers, 'cause she was raisin' us to wuk for her.

"When Marse William went to de War, he tuk my pappy wid him. Dey come back home on one of dem flyloughs, (furloughs) or somepin lak dat, end you jus' ought to have seed de way us chillun crowded 'round pappy when he got dar. One of his fingers had done got[Pg 108] shot off in de fightin', and us chillun thought it was one of de funniest lookin' things us had ever seed, a man wid a short finger. He said dem yankees had done shot it off.

"Atter Old Marster died Old Mist'ess moved to a town called Woodstock, or was it Woodville? It was Wood-somepin' or nother. She hired old man John Akins to oversee de plantation, and she evermore did oversee him and de plantation too. She had a fine pacing mule what wouldn't throw her for nothin'. Evvy mornin' she got on dat mule and rid out to her plantation. She allus fetched us somepin' t'eat; most of de time it was a gingercake apiece.

"I couldn't rightly say how big dat plantation of hers was. Oo-o! But it sho' was one more big place, and Niggers was scattered all 'round dar lak blackbirds. Dat old overseer, he sho' was mean to de slaves. He whupped 'em and he kept on whuppin' 'em,

'til sometimes it seemed lak he jus' beat on 'em to hear 'em holler. It warn't long atter midnight when he got 'em up to go to wuk and he kept 'em at hard labor 'til way atter sundown. De biggest things he whupped Niggers for was for runnin' 'way and for not doin' deir wuk right.

"Jails! Did you say jails? Yessum, dey had jails. You know slaves warn't civilized folks den—all dey knowed was to fuss end fight and kill one 'nother. Dey put de Niggers in dem jails 'til dey hung 'em.

"Grandma was sold on de block to Marse Sam's Pa, Marse Kelsey Downs, soon atter she was brung over to dis country from de homeland of de black folks. She never did larn to talk dis language[Pg 109] right plain. Us used to git her to tell us 'bout when she was sold. De sale was in December but it was so far off dat corn was in tassel 'fore my pore grandmammy got to Greene County. She said dey camped at night and got up long 'fore day and was driv lak cows, a man in front and 'nother one back of 'em to keep 'em from branchin' out and runnin'.

"Niggers never had no chance to larn to read and write dem days. Dey went to meetin' at Shiloh—dat was de white folks church nigh Penfield—and Bethesda was 'nother of de white folks churches whar slaves was brought to listen to de preachin'. One thing sho', Niggers couldn't read de Bible, but dey jus' lumbered down 'bout de Lord from deir heads.

"Slaves didn't run off to no North dat I ever knowed 'bout. I heard tell 'bout one man named Si what run 'way wid dem yankees when dey come through and dey made a black yankee soldier out of him atter he jined up wid 'em. I heard tell of patterollers what cotched Niggers 'way from home 'thout no pass. Folks said dey brushed you off and sont you home if dey cotched you.

"All I knowed Niggers to do at night atter dey come in from de fields, was to eat supper and fling deirselves on de beds and go right off to sleep, 'cept when dey wanted to hunt and fish, and most of dat sort of thing was done atter de crops was laid by or atter dey had done been gathered into de barns. On Saddy nights, de older womans ironed and fixed up for Sunday whilst de men was busy gittin' de harness and tools and things ready for de next week's wuk. Young folks never had nothin' but good times on deir minds. Dey danced, frolicked, and cut de buck in gen'ral. Dey didn't have no sho' 'nough music, but dey sho' could sing it down. One of de dance songs[Pg 110] went somepin' lak dis:

'Oh!	Miss	Liza,	Miss	Liza	Jane!
Axed	Miss	Liza	to	marry	me
Guess		what		she	said?
She		wouldn't		marry	me,

If de last Nigger was dead.'

"Christmas was sho' one grand time. Der warn't no big heap of good things lak dey has now. Old Mist'ess give de Niggers a little flour and syrup for to make sweet cake. Dere was plenty of fresh hog meat and chickens and all sorts of dried fruits. I was allus plum crazy 'bout de rag doll grandma would make for my Christmas present. Come New Year's Day, it was time to go back to wuk and evvy slave was made to do a heap of wuk on dat day to start de year off right.

"Slaves had a big old time at cornshuckin's. Dey didn't care so much 'bout de somepin' t'eat jus' so dey got plenty of whiskey to drink, and when dey got all het up on dat you could hear 'em a mile away a'whoopin' and hollerin'. Sometimes dey kilt a cow and throwed it in a pot and biled it down wid dumplin's, seasoned hot wid red pepper."

Asked what games she played as a child, Dosia replied: "Gentlemen! What de giver'ment don't want to know, ain't wuth knowin' no how. What I played? Well, now, let me see: Mollie, Mollie Bright was one of our games; Hiding de Switch was de one whar you counted 'em out; dat countin' run lak dis: 'Ten, ten, double-ten, forty-five, fifteen.' Gentlemen! I could run lak a snake.[Pg 111]

"Ha'nts? Why, I kin see dem things anytime. Dis hyar place whar I lives is full of ha'nts, but dese folks would git mad wid me if I told 'bout 'em. Now, back in Greene County, I kin talk 'bout dem ha'nts all right. Back dar Mrs. Babe Thaxton had a mighty pretty flower yard. She used to tell me dat if I let anybody git any flowers from her yard atter she was daid, she would sho' ha'nt me. She had done been daid a good while when I was gittin' some flowers from her yard and a gal come along and axed me to give her some. I started cuttin' flowers for her. At dat Miss Babe, she riz up over me lak she was gwine to burn me up. She looked at me hard and went off and sot in a tree whar she could look right down on me. I ain't never cut no flowers out of dat yard no more. Now 'bout Raw Head and Bloody Bones, Honey, don't you know dat ain't nothin' but a cows head what's done been skint? Old folks used to ax us: 'Has you seed Raw Head and Bloody Bones?' Us would run over one 'nother tryin' to git dar fust to see him, and it allus turned out to be jus' a old skint up cow head. Den in de nighttime us would have wild dreams 'bout dem old skint cow heads.

"De onliest song I ever heard de Niggers sing in de fields run somepin lak dis: 'Tarrypin, Tarrypin, (terrapin) when you comin' over, For to see your wife and fam-i-lee.' Dey must a been wantin' to eat turkle (turtle), when dey was a-singin' dat song.

"Old Mist'ess was mighty special good to her slaves when dey was sick. Fust thing she done was send for de doctor. I kin[Pg 112] see him now. He rid horseback and carried his medicine in saddlebags. He used to put some kind of powders in a glass of water and give it to de sick ones. Dere was three old 'omans what Old Mist'ess kept to look atter sick slave 'omans. Dem old granny nurses knowed a heap about yarbs (herbs). May apple and blacksnake roots, king of de meadow, (meadow rue) wild asthma (aster) and

red shank, dese was biled and deir tea give to de slaves for diffunt ailments." Asked to describe king of the meadow, she continued: "Honey, ain't you never seed none? Well, it's such a hard tough weed dat you have to use a axe to chop it up, and its so strong and pow'ful dat nothin' else kin grow nigh 'round it. Back in dem days folks wore tare (tar) sacks 'round deir necks and rubbed turpentine under deir noses. When deir ailments got too hot, lak when Mammy died, dey made 'em swallow two or three draps of turpentine.

"I ricollects dat when de news come dat dem yankees was on de way towards our plantation, Old Mist'ess tuk her old pacin' mule and all her money and made Uncle Moses go down on de river wid her to help hide 'em. I told her I was gwine tell dem yankees she had done stole my uncle and hid him so he wouldn't hear 'bout freedom. And when dem yankees finally did git dar, dey was singin' some sort of a song 'bout freedom. I lit out to runnin', and it was way atter midnight 'fore Old Mist'ess found me. I was pretty nigh skeered to death. Dey called all de slaves together and told 'em dey was free as jack rabbits, and 'deed dat was de truth. Us stayed dar for[Pg 113] years. It looked lak us warn't never gwine to leave.

"Grandma started out to wuk for herself as a granny 'oman, and Old Mist'ess give her a mule to ride on to make her trips from one farm to another. It was a long time 'fore Niggers could git 'nough money together for to buy land of deir own, and it seems lak it was a long time 'fore schools for Niggers was sot up.

"When me and Oscar Harris got married, us had a big weddin' wid evvything good to eat what us could git, and plenty of wine to drink. De dancin' and good time went on most all night. I had a reg'lar weddin' dress made out of pretty white swiss trimmed wid lots of lace and it had a long train. I wore long white gloves. Tucks went 'round my petticoat from de knees to de lace what aided de bottom, and my draw's was white cambric, gathered at de knee wid a wide ruffle what was tucked and trimmed up pretty. I married on Saddy night and dat called for a second day dress, 'cause I jus' had to go to church next day and show dat man off. Anyhow, my second day dress was blue cotton wid white lace on it, and I wore a big white plumed hat draped down over one eye. Wid de second day dress I wore dem same draw's, petticoat, and gloves what I was married in. Me and Oscar's five chillun was Mary, Annie Belle, Daniel, Cleveland, and Austin.

"My old man and all my chillun is daid 'cept Daniel, and I don't know whar he is. I wants to git married again, but dese hyar jealous Niggers 'round hyar says if I does de giver'ment is gwine[Pg 114] to cut off my old age pension, and I sho' don't want to loose dat money. No Sir!

"I didn't take in nothin' 'bout Lincoln, Davis or dat man Washington. Dem days chillun had to take a back seat. When old folks wanted to talk, dey jus' sent chillun on 'bout dey business. One thing I does know: I'd sho' ruther have times lak dey is now. Yessum, I sho' had.

"I jined Randolph Baptist Church in Greene County 'cause I felt de urge and knowed it had done got to be my duty to jine up. I'se been a Baptist ever since, and will be one 'til I die; so was all my folks 'fore me. Folks when dey jine de church ought to live right so dey kin see de good Lord and have a restin' place atter dey is done wid dis sinful world. Yessum, I jined dat Randolph Baptist Church way down in Greene County a long time ago."