

***EMMA HURLEY OF
WASHINGTON-WILKES***

***MINNIE BRANHAM
STONESTREET***

JOHN N. BOOTH

MISS VELMA BELL

W.P.A. NO. 1

MARCH 22, 1937

EMMA HURLEY OF WASHINGTON-WILKES

With snow white hair peeping from underneath a spotless "head rag" and wearing a big white apron, Emma Hurley reminds one of the plantation days of the long ago. She is eighty-odd years old, but does not know her exact age. From all she remembers she is sure she was at least 7 or 8 at the beginning of the war for she clearly recalls the talk of war and all the excitement of those anxious days.

Unfortunately, Aunt Emma was born of parents belonging to a family that bought and sold slaves as they did cattle and thought of them only in terms of dollars and cents. The story she tells of her childhood would make a Simon Legree turn pale with envy. She is not resentful, but is honest in telling of those early years of her life, years of suffering and great hardship.

Although she has never been to school, she uses very little dialect: "No mam, honey, the folks I belonged to said it wouldn't do fer niggers to learn out'n books; that schools warn't fer them. They said learnin' would git us so they couldn't do nothin' wid us. After freedom I wuz nussin' here in Washin'ton. The mother of the chillun was a good lady an' she let me look on the books when she read to them an' larned me the lessons 'long with her chillun. She said it wuz a pity I couldn't ov went to school, cause I wuz a apt pupil. I larned easy, yassum, that's what she said." [Pg 275]

"My Ma wuz name Margaret an' she had thirteen chillun, six of 'em twins. I wuz the oldest one, but I ain't a twin. I wuz born on a plantation in Wilkes County right on the line of Oglethorpe. In the white family I belonged to there wuz a mother, four boys, an' two girls, all grown. They come to Wilkes County from Maryland. All four of the men went to the war an' three of 'em died of sickness caught in the war."

Aunt Emma told of how the slaves had to live on the plantation and an unpleasant story it was. There were no neat cabins all in a row making up the "quarters" where the slaves lived. Instead they were made to live around in any old hut they could find shelter in. Her mother and three other women stayed in one room of the house the white family lived in.

The little slaves were fed pig-fashion in the kitchen, but they were given just so much food and no more. They were allotted two garments at the time, summer and winter: "Why, honey, I never had no shoes 'til after freedom come. I've walked on snow many a time barefooted with my feet so cold my toes wuz stickin' straight up with no feelin' in 'em. The white folks had a trained shoe-maker slave an' he made shoes fer them, but us little niggers didn't have none. The first shoes I ever remembers had wooden bottoms an' sich a sound as they made when the folks walked 'round with 'em on." [Pg 276]

The slaves did plenty of hard work done on the plantation. The women labored all day in the fields and then spun at night. Each one was given the task of spinning six broaches a week. On Saturday "a white lady" reeled off the spinning and if one of the women had failed in her task she was severely beaten. The men worked all day and until ten o'clock at night shucking corn or doing other chores by lamp light.

Every Wednesday night the slaves had to go to the spring and wash their clothes by torch light. They did have all day Sunday as a resting period, but they were not allowed to go to church and no religious services were held for them. There was one day holiday at Christmas, "but I never heard of a Santa Claus when I wuz a child," said Emma.

When a slave died on the place he was wrapped in a sheet, put into a pine box, and taken to a "burying ground" where he was put in the ground without any services, and with only the immediate family attending. All other slaves on the place had to keep on working just as though nothing had happened.

There were no marriages. The slaves being told to "step over the broom stick." Many families were separated by sale. "I recollects good when Mr. Seaborn Callaway come over to the place an' bought my Grandma an' some other slaves an' took 'em away. We jest cried an' cried an' Grandma did too. Them white folks bought an' sold slaves that way all the time."

"Honey, there wuz one time when them white folks wuz good to us slaves," said Aunt Emma, "an' that wuz when we wuz sick.[Pg 277] They would give us homemade remedies like tansy tea, comfort root tea, life everlasting tea, boneset tea, garlic water an' sich, 'cordin' ter what ailed us. Then if we didn't git better they sont fer the doctor. If we had a misery anywhere they would make poultices of tansy leaves scalded, or beat up garlic an' put on us. Them folks wuz sho' 'cerned 'bout us when we wuz sick, 'cause they didn't want us ter die."

When asked about the war and what she remembered of those terrible times, Aunt Emma slowly shook her head and said: "I never wants to live through sich sad times no more. Them wuz the hardest an' the saddest days I ever knowed. Everybody went 'round like this: (here she took up her apron and buried her face in it)—they kivered their face with what-somever they had in their hands that would ketch the tears. Sorrow an' sadness wuz on every side. The men all went off to fight an' left the women an' chillun an' niggers behind to do the best they could."

"Times wuz so hard, why, honey, in them times folks couldn't git so much as some plain salt to use on their victuals. The white folks had the dirt dug up from out'n their smokehouses an' hauled it up to Mr. Sisson's an' he run it an' got what salt he could out'n it. I 'members one day I went over there fer sumpthin' an' the dirt what he had run wuz piled way up high like sawdust these days. There warn't no soda neither, so the white folks took watermelon rinds, fixed 'em keerful like we does fer preserves, burned 'em an' took the ashes an' sifted 'em an' used 'em fer soda. Coffee giv' out an[Pg 278] none could be bought so they took okra seeds an' parched 'em good an' brown an' ground 'em an' made coffee out'n 'em. Some folks made coffee out'n parched ground wheat too. Everybody had to do the best they could in them times."

"Durin' the war," continued Aunt Emma, "the mother died an' all her property wuz divided 'mongst the chillun. My Ma an' all her chillun fell to Miss Mary what had married an' wuz livin' in Lexington, over in Oglethorpe County. She moved us all up there an' we wuz there 'til freedom, then we moved down to Washington where we have lived ever since. Miss Mary's husband's Ma had over two hundred slaves an' she sho' did take on when they wuz all freed. I 'members how she couldn't stay in the house, she jest walked up an' down out in the yard a-carrin'-on, talkin' an' a-ravin'.

"Word come one day that the Yankee soldiers wuz comin' an' all us niggers went down to the road to watch 'em go by. It wuz a sight. They all marched by singin'. 'Fore they come, though, the white folks had all the niggers busy hidin' everything they could. Stock wuz tied out way down in thick woods, an' silver, money, an' good clothes wuz buried deep in the ground an' leaves put all over the earth so they couldn't see where it had been dug. When the Yankees did come they called all the slaves up an' went into smokehouses an' throwed out the meat to the niggers an' said: 'Here, take all this, we knows it's yours anyhow, you worked fer it.' But most of the niggers give it all back to the white folks it belonged to. The Yankees poured out all the syrup an' 'stroyed[Pg 279] everything they could. I tell you, honey, them wuz bad times an' us all wuz skeered 'most to death."

Aunt Emma had only one sign: "No mam, I ain't 'tall superstitious, I never thinks of things like that. But I does know when it's goin' to rain hard, an' that's when my haid itches an' itches up under my haid rag."

When asked about the amusements of her day Aunt Emma said: "I ain't never danced a step nor sung a reel in my life. My Ma allus said we shouldn't do them things an' we didn't. She said if we went to the devil it wouldn't be 'cause she give us her 'mission!"

"How come I done lived so long? I dunno, only I allus been truthful an' honest an' tried hard to treat people good as I want them to treat me. Once I wuz so sick they all thought I wuz goin' to die. I thought so too. But I lay there sufferin' an' the Spirit seemed to come 'round an' reasoned that I would be spared days longer in this low ground of sorrow. That's been long ago an' here I is livin' yet."

Not even the faintest smile crossed Aunt Emma's wrinkled face while she was talking. Although she lived to marry and have a home of her own with good children, she is sad when she thinks of her childhood with all its injustice and suffering. "I'se glad my race don't have to suffer now what we did on that plantation. Some of my old friends tells me they had good homes an' wuz took keer of an' all that, but from my own 'sperience, I'se glad my chillun never knowed slavery." [Pg 280]

CONSULTANT:
Emma Hurley