

## Frank Childress age 84



*Photograph courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History.*

Frank Childress, left, age 84, and [Nathan Best](#), age 92, ex-slaves in Harrison County, sit on the steps of their housing at Beauvoir, Confederate Soldiers' Home.

Mississippi Narratives

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We next turned to Uncle Frank Childress, who was born 84 years ago in Memphis Tennessee. His mother had Indian blood, and lived to be 105 years old, and his father lived to be 97. His mother was housekeeper for Colonel Mark Childress, who served under General Forrest. Frank lived there until 12 years old. Uncle Frank told us a war story too.

He said "During the war I went to Richmond with my Marse Mark Childress, carrying him whiskey and tobacco, wen I was a little over 12 years old. I was captured by Grant at Clayton Mississippi wen I was 14, and to keep fum feein' us He was goin' ter kill us, but Sherman said No, dont kill him. He served de south, now let him serve de north, den he sed to me "Load dat cannon or I kill you." an' I loaded it. I put four buckets of powder, put de flap back, den put de ball in, and pull de crank, it rolled right on back and nearly jarred me ter death."

Frank also told of how they were left with stolen money, As the yanks had wagon loads piled high requiring 8 horses to pull the wagons, and of how he was sent to Helena Arkansaw and put in a corral

there, where he stayed until after the close of the war. Frank spoke of having 14 children, now all dead, saying they had worked themselves to death on plantations making 50 and 60 bales of cotton a year. He said preaching had always run in his mind and he tried to be a preacher, and was sent to school for ten years in Nashville Tennessee, to study to preach, as a methodist, but down here I goes ter de catholic church --- all churches come out de catholic church, it was de starting place, and a person must obey de Lord. I preached at Memphis, Friars Point, Clarksdale, and Little Rock Arkansas, and dey took me fum my church and sent me down here ter live, en dey ought not to er done it, I ought to go preachin' ergin. But dey treats me mighty good here. But de callin' is stronger. I wanter go home."

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Frank Childress Newspaper clipping, THE GUIDE, November 13, 1936 from Box 128J, folder "Racial Groups" - W.P.A. Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History"

One day a soldier fighting for the South and the next a soldier, but firing cannon for the North! A strange sounding record, but it's altogether true. If the tale told by Frank Childress, 85-year old negro, who is spending his last years at the Confederate veterans' home at Beauvoir.

"Yassuh, I'se the one what fought on both sides," he claims proudly, "but I neber fought for de Yankees till dey captured me and put me in a corral and said, 'Nigger, you fought for de South; now you can fight for de North."

And confirming every word that Frank says is Nathan Best, the other remaining negro veteran, who accompanied "massah" to the war only to return minus one arm.

Perhaps Nathan doesn't know whether Frank fought on both sides or not, for he is nearing 92. At any rate state officials who checked back on the records believe that the white-headed old darkey is telling the truth.

Frank Childress will tell you at one time that he was born in St. Louis and the next time with just as much conviction will declare that he is a "Memphis nigger, yassuh." He is firm throughout in the belief that his master was one Colonel Mark Childress and himself lays claim to the title of "nigger colonel," adopting his master's title.

The truth about it all is that old Frank did not fight for the South, but like so many other faithful slaves accompanied his master to the War Between the States, acting as body servant and dispatch carrier.

Captured at Richmond, he managed to get back to his master and accompanied the colonel to Helena, Arkansas. It was at Helena that while carrying a dispatch he was captured by Yankee forces, and at the express command of General U. S. Grant, he says, began firing cannon at Southern forces. For two and a half years he served with the Yankees.

Released at the end of the war, he made his way back to Clover Hill, Mississippi, remaining there as a farmer until about two years ago, when his "jints begin aching somethin awful" and he was admitted into Beauvoir, under the provision which allows negro slaves who served with their masters to be cared for.

Both Nathan and Frank live in the past, dreaming of the days when the old South was at the height of its glory. They wouldn't take a million dollars of those dreams. They know they haven't many more years here and they are waiting to join their old "massahs."

Frank Childress from SOURCE MATERIAL FOR MISSISSIPPI HISTORY, Harrison County, from microfilm"