

[HW: Robert Henry Ex-slave]

**FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT  
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**Attention:  
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Uncle Robert Henry, an active 82, now lives with his daughter on Billups Street in Athens. At the time of our visit he was immaculate in dark trousers, a tweed sack coat, and a gayly striped tie. Naturally the question came to mind as to whether he found life more pleasant in his daughter's neat little cottage, with its well kept yards, or in the quarters on "Ole Marster's plantation." He seemed delighted to have an opportunity to talk about "slave'y days"; and although he could not have been more than 11 years old at the time, he has a very vivid recollection of the "year de war broke and freedom came."

His parents, Robert and Martha Henry, were born in Oglethorpe County and were later purchased by P.W. Sayles, who owned a 1,000-acre plantation about 18 miles from Washington, in Wilkes County. Ga. "Marster didn't have many niggers, not more'n 70," he stated.

Uncle Robert was the oldest of 8 children, 5 boys and 3 girls. "Pa wuz de butler at de big house," he declared with pride in his voice; and he went on to tell how his mother had been the head seamstress on the plantation and how, at the tender age of 8, his father had begun training him to "wait on[Pg 196] Marster's table".

The picture of "Old Marster's" household, as the old man unfolds it to his listeners, is one of almost idyllic beauty. There was the white-pillared "big house" in a grove of white oaks on the brow of a hill with a commanding view of the whole countryside. A

gravelled driveway led down to the dusty public road where an occasional stagecoach rattled by and which later echoed with the hoofbeats of Confederate Cavalry.

The master's house contained twelve rooms, each about 16 x 16 feet. The kitchen was in the back yard and food was carried to the dining room in the high basement to the big house by means of an underground passage. Two servants stood guard over the table with huge fans made of peacock feathers which they kept in continuous motion during meals to "shoo de flies away."

The slave quarters were on the banks of a creek down the hill behind the big house. Nearby were the overseer's cottage, the stables, and the carriage houses.

In the family were: "Marster, Mistis, Mis' Fannie, Mis' Sally, Mars' Thomas, Mars' Hickey, and Mars' Wyatt. Dey all 'tended a school on de plantation." Two of the boys went to the war but only one of them came back.

After the war the "Yanks" came by and took nearly all the stock that the servants hadn't hidden in the swamps and all the silver that "Ole Mistis" hadn't buried under the currant bushes.

Yes, in spite of the hard work required, life was very pleasant on the plantations. The field hands were at work at sun-up and were not allowed to quit until dark. Each slave had[Pg 197] an acre or two of land which he was allowed to farm for himself. He used Saturday morning to cultivate his own crop and on Saturday afternoon he lolled around or went fishing or visiting. Saturday nights were always the time for dancing and frolicking. The master sometimes let them use a barn loft for a big square dance. The musical instruments consisted of fiddles; buckets, which were beaten with the hands; and reeds, called "blowing quills," which were used in the manner of a flute.

There were two churches on the plantation, "one for de white folks and one fer de niggers." The same preacher held forth in both congregations. When there were services in the white church there was no negro meetings; but negroes were allowed to sit in the gallery of the "white folk" church.

The master regarded his slaves as valuable piece of [HW:] property and they received treatment as such. When they were ill the doctor would be sent for or "Old Mistis" would come to the cabins bringing her basket of oil, pills, and linament.

Food was always given out to the slaves from the commissary and the smokehouse. There was flour and corn meal, dried beans and other vegetables, and cured pork and beef in the winter. In season the servants had access to the master's vegetable garden and they were always given as much milk as they could use.

Life [HW:] was very pleasant in those times; but Uncle Robert, at ease in a comfortable rocker, would not agree that it was more to his liking than this present-day existence.

When the subject of signs and omens was broached he waxed voluble in denying that he believed in any such "foolishment." [Pg 198] However, he agreed that many believed that a rooster crowing in front of the door meant that a stranger was coming and that an owl screeching was a sign of death. He suggested that a successful means of combatting the latter omen is to tie knots in the bed sheets or to heat a poker in the fire. In case of death, Uncle Robert says, to be on the safe side and prevent another death in the family, it is wise to stop the clock and turn its face to the wall and to cover all the mirrors in the house with white cloths. Uncle Robert's highly educated daughter smiled indulgently on him while he was giving voice to these opinions and we left him threatening her with dire punishment if she should ever fail to carry out his instructions in matters of this nature.