

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
The Federal Writer's Project of
The Works Progress Administration
For the State of Mississippi
Robert Laird

Robert Laird, ex-slave lives in Jackson, Mississippi with his second wife. He was born in 1854, was owned during slavery by the Jones' of Copiah County. He weighs about one hundred and fifty nine pounds and is about five feet and five inches in height. His general coloring is a dark yellow and his hair is white with age. He lives with his wife and daughter. He tells this of his life.

"I was owned in slavery time by Marse Jones. He owned a big plantation wid a bunch ob slaves. Marse raised de general run ob crops on his farm; grewed cotton fer a little money and peas, corn an' taters an' de lak fer food stuff, but what he went in fer de biggest was hogs. Ole Marse sho' did lak his hogs, an' I growed up to lak em too. From de time I could leave my one room log cabin I wanted to be 'round Marse's hogs, an' de fust wuk I ever done was round de hogs. I did inji gwine to de pens wid big bucket ob slop an' hear dozens ob dem hogs a squeelin' an' runnin' lak some 'em wild. Yo' could hear 'em a mile. Ole Marse, he could talk to 'em, hit seemed lak dey could under stand eber thing he say. I soon learned to gib dat ole hog holler. I did love to hear de sound ob dat call a rollin' thro' de woods an' 'cross de pasture an' fiel's.

"When I was little a settin' 'round de bright pine knot fires at nite, I enjied de tales my grand mamy an' grand pappy use to tell. Some ob 'em was scary an' when I'd go to my pallet on de cabin flo', I'd pull de civer over my head to keep from seein' de ghos'es an' hob goblins dey would tell 'bout. Den dey was al'as fearin' some 'em terrible from some sign dey had saw or from some 'em dey had heard. I jes' lived knowing a big calamity was 'bout to kitch us. Dey would tell what deir folks would tell ob how de colored

folks was captured by de slave traders an brung over here an' sole to de Southern farmers. Some times dey was toted off lak pigs wid sugar or some 'em purty. Den again dey was snatched right up an run off wid an' when dey would git 'em on a boat dey would be gone.

"I dressed in jes' my long shirt dat was made from homespun cloth. Dey was big, an' thick, an' rough, an' heavy. Dey would las' so long 'til I'd fergit when dey was made. I wore brogan shoes when it was real cold but de res' ob de time I went barefooted.

"Marse Jones had us slaves taught how to read an' write. He didn't want us not to know nothin'. He couldn't read all on account of his bad eyes so he use to hab me to set by him an' read to him. I could read purty good den an' I would set fer hours on a stretch an' read to him. Some times from de Bible an' again from farm papers, mostly 'bout hogs.

"Marse prized his timber too. He made us take a heap o' care ob hit, an' wouldn't 'low no fires to git a holt in it. He laked his big pine forest next to his house. I'se gone wid him many a time as he would go through it. He'd stop an' jes' look, as far as yo' could see was tall straight pines wid de ground as smooth as yo' han' wid nothin' but pine straw under 'em. Not one sprig ob under growth. Hit sho' was a purty sight. In de fall ob de year Marse would turn his hogs in de pine forest fer to eat de moss. Now a hog loves moss lak a nigger loves possum an' taters.

Day is one thing I would love fer folks to know an' dat is how de colored folks lak to take deir dogs at night an' go out in de swamps an' tree a possum. Dats' times wid de dogs a barkin' an' de moon a shinin' an a possum up a tree or in a stump hole. When de possum is kotched he will cull up, he is den put on de end ob a pole, he stays all culled up an' holds on tight. Yo' can throw dat pole 'cross yo' shoulders an' go home an' bake dat possum on de hot coals in de fire place wid sweet 'taters an coffee. Dat is a eatin'. Dat suits de niggers next to watermellon in de summer time.

"Marse had a fiddle dat us laked to hear him play. I never could dance but I could jump up an' down an' pat my hands. I laked music so well 'till my feet jes' wouldn't be still.

"Now in de 60's de war to free us got stirred up an' at las' started. Sometimes us would hear dat us would git a mule or some 'em when us was freed, but us didn't know much 'bout hit. We was scared ob de yankees an' while de war was gwine on dey was having a battle over at Vicksburg, Mississippi. We could hear de cannons an' see de lights. I can tell yo' us was all a scart a plenty. One day Ole Missus heard de yankees a commin', right in de middle dat awful battle dey hid de slaves. I can recollect dey hid me in de barn. I was under some hay an' to scart to breath. I was dier, still an' quiet till I thought I was a gwine to die. After ages Marse say fer us to come out. I slipped out fearin' dey would kotch me no how.

"After de war us staid on wid Marse fer a few years wukin' fer Marse fer wages. Den us got a little place an' started out fer our selves.

"I was alwas' a good farmer an' has made a heap o' money from time to time, but jes' didn't take care o' hit in de right way to ever have anything. I was alwas' lak my ole Marse I laked to fool 'round raisin' hogs. I got a heap o' pleasures in my life time a raisin' hogs.

"Besides being a farmer an' raisin' hogs I'se been what yo' might call a Missionary preacher. I'se jes' gone 'round whar de folks need to hear de gospel an' preached it to 'em de bes' I could. I feels lak I has done some good in dis world. I was considered a good singer too. All de churches I ever went to dey would alwas' call me up an' git me to sing. "Ole Time Religion", an' "De Ole Ship O' Zion", is among my favorites.

I married while I was a young man an' only raised two chillun to be grown. I gib 'em a farmers education. My boy, he is a wukin' fer a feed company in Jackson an' my gal wuks fer white folks. My wife died an' I married again fifteen years ago. I'se a livin' wid my las wife now.

"I wants to warn de young generation dat if dey don't mend deir ways dey is headed fer ever-lastin' doom, an' I wants to warn 'em to take care o' what dey make an' invest right. I'se sho' los' a lot by not thinkin' in time. I'se glad to see my race gittin' along but dey is gwine places too fas'.

Interviewer: Unknown

Transcribed by Ann Allen Geoghegan