

Mississippi Narratives
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From the WPA Slave Narratives:
Robert Young

"I was bawn May de fifteenth, in year 1844, 'bout twelve mile east of Crystal Springs on de ole Watkins place. My mammy an' pappy was bawn there fo' me. They names was Emily Watkins an' Prince Watkins an' dey jes had me.

"Dey was Marse Gus Watkins an' Mis' Margret an' dey had a boy name Mr. Henry Watkins. Onc't when Mr. Henry got in a augument wid his papa, over some darkies hit was too, Mr. Henry cut his guts out an' blood stain is still on de flo' of de room in dat house where hit happened. An' atter that Mis' Margaret Marse Freeman Young an' dat's how come me to come by name of Young.

"Dey was two chillun o' Mis' Margarets, Mis' Nanny an' Mr. Buddy. I 'member carrin' dem to school over to Hopewell. Mr. Buddy rode in de saddle on hose 'hind me an' Mis' Nancy rode her own hose wid a side saddle on him. I tuk 'em in de mawnin an' went on back home wid de hoses den' 'bout three 'clock in de afternoon I went to fetch 'em. I warent' much older dan dey was an' played rite 'long side of 'em.

"De Watkins house was big an' made out'n lumber an' painted white. I reckon hit had ten o' twelve rooms in hit.

"Marse seen I was a good one to allus wait on de wimmens so he kept me in de big house. I had a lil' room wid a trunnel bed an' a chair in hit. In de mawnins I got up an' made de fiahs an' I was de hostler too, got up de stock, kept de tools in de tool house, drawed water an' run de errans roun' de place.

"I reckon you could jes call me a house boy an' waitman causin' I waited on white fokes' table. Atter they et me an' Aunt Milberry, de cook, would eat our vitals. Yessum, Aunt Milberry was a terrible good cook.

"Must a' been bout a hunred darkies on dat place. See, dey was rich an' farmed 'bout eight hunred acres o' land wid cotten, cohn, 'tatoes, wheat, rice, an' cane. Dey had a quarter wid 'bout twenty houses on de place. Gennelly dey was made out'n logs wid dirt chimleys. De famblies done dey own cookin' in big ole iron pots over de fiah place.

"Marse Henry was de overseer an' he give out rashins onct a week. He give out fo' pounds o' meat, so

much sugar, so much flour --- he raised his own wheat an' made de flour he give us an' likewise de rice which was beat in a mortar, you know. Den he give greens an like out'n de garden.

"My pappy was onliest one had a garden of his own an' Marse Henry 'lowed him piece o' land to farm fo' hisself jes like he wadn't no slabe 'tall. I 'member he raised ten an twelve bales cotten in a year an' sole hit fo' hisself. You see, my pappy was a big strong nigger an' hepped Marse Henry cuntrol de udder darkies. Marse Henry would git him to thow 'em while he whupped 'em wid a bull whip. Some sho did need hit 'cause dey was rogues an' some would'n wuk. Many a time I seen many as twelve gallons o' whiskey in pappy's house Marse Henry let him keep.

"On Chris'mas Marse give all de men's a gallon of whiskey an' let em off'n wuk fo' a week. Den was de frolickin' an' dancin' in de quarters an' on all de udder places roun' 'bout. An' I tell you 'bout de dancin'. Den hit wasn't lak 'tis now --- wadn't no catchin' hole o' each udder. Dey had side shufflin' an' heel an' toe to fiddlin'. One song I 'member dey sang, 'Chris'mas don't come but onc't a yeah, An' ever nigger want his share!' (pronounced to rhyme with yeah.)

"An' on Thanksgivin' an' fo'th July white fokes had big picnics an taken de darkies 'long wid 'em. You never seen so much food --- all de barbequed beef an' de like. Why, you could git nuff dat was thowed 'way to do fo' a week to carry home wid you.

"Us all woe lowells whut de darkies made fo' us out'n clof dey made on de loom. Overseer, he seen to hit dey wove at night. Dey wuked till 'bout nine an had taller can'els to see by. Dey saved de taller when dey kill beefs an' po' hit in moulds to make can'els. I seen my mammy make 'em plen'y times. An' dey was a tanner dat made shoes fo' us dan on de place.

"Wuk started on place in mawnins 'bout fo' 'clock. Overseer would ring a bell an' I member hearin' feets hit de flo' one right atter 'nother when de bell would ring. All de darkies got out to field fast as dey could. My mammy an' pappy was bof field hands.

"When darkie chillun got sick dey gave us sage tea an' pine top tea fo' a bad cold. Marse Henry would let one o' de older ones stay wid us if we was bad off sick an' send fo' de doctor ef we didn' git better. He was mighty good 'bout dat an' den he didn't want his darkies dyin' off.

"De darkies went to de white fokes chuch at Ole Hopewell an' atter de white fokes preachin' den de preacher preached to us darkies. He would jes tell us not to steal our masters meat from de smoke house, or cotten or tatoes or 'lasses an' like that. An' do not kill each other. I was baptized in de white fokes pool at Hopewell.

"I seen patterrollers go by but dey did'n never bother none us 'caus'n Marse did'n 'low hit. Us got passes tho' when we went to other places to carry messages or go to dances.

"Well, when de wah come my pappy went wid' 'em an' was cook fo' de rebel army. He stayed de hole fo' yeahs cookin'. Den he come back home one day bringin' a gal he done pick up on his trabels an' wanted mammy to let her lib wid us too. Den he would have two wives. Mammy didn' like hit none tall an' run him an' de gal off an' we didn' never heah no mo' from him atter that. He tole us tho' fo he lef' 'bout how dey fit over at Vicksburg an' said blood run down de streets lak water atter a rain. Dey was ober two hun' red mens killed in a day. Den he tole bout how dey built bres-wuks for to fight over.

"Yes'sum, I seen de Yankee sojiers come to de Watkins' place all dress up in blue suits an' ridin' fine hoses. Dey rid up an' hepped dey selves to de vitals in de smoke house an' de cohn in de cohn crib an' stole de hoses whut we had. Dey neber did bodder wid us cullud people tho. Seems like trouble was all wid de whites an' dey run an' hid when dey seen 'em comin'. All de valuables was awready hid in de swamp.

"On 15th o' May Marse sed ye are free but effen ye want to stay on heah wid me I'll pay ye same as if had neber been under bondage. Mammy tuk me wid her over to de Ferguson's an' we lived an' wuked there fo' a long time.

"In slabery time de cullud fokes didn' git married lak dey does now by a preacher. All dey done den was to jump over de hannel of a broom an' call dey selves married an' go on off togedder. Fus' time I married was arter surrender an' I wo' a black broadclop suit but I was so drunk I didn't know I was gettin' married. Fus' wife's name was Jane Black an' dey gabe us a big feast an' dinner --- dat's where I got so drunk --- an' she had to hole me up 'fo de preacher. My mammy 'n-Law 'bused me some'n awful. I 'member she said anybuddy would marry drunk wa'nt good as a dog an' one married a drunk nigger wadn't no better... Me an Jane jes set fo' de fiah all night long, me on one side an' her on 'tudder, Law, me. Now, my secon' wife was name May an' us had two chillun name Prince an' Tazie Young.

"My chillun bof went to school an' atter surrender I had chance to go but didn' neber do hit so till dis day I aint' got no learnin. I been jes farmin' long as I was able but can't do dat no mo' now 'cause of de misery I got in my back."

Robert Young is almost six feet tall though pitifully stooped now. His features are large and coarse with a thick short neck. He must weigh about 160 lbs., or more, and his color is a dark chocolate brown. His hair is white and kinkey. He lives in Freetown of Crystal Springs and is physically able to do only a little labor. "

Interviewer: Unknown
Transcribed by Ann Allen Geoghegan