

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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Allie Gray age 80

Born in 1857; 5 feet 5 inches tall; weight 120 pounds. Owns her own home and a house adjoining, where her son-in-law, her grandchildren and great grandchildren live. Very light color, with freckles and a good deal of red in her skin. She is half Irish, her father having been the plantation overseer. Does a small amount of work for the Fant family and they help her financially.

"I wus bawn on a big plantation at Holly Springs, but I don't know nothing 'bout the acres. I know it stretched from the hollow where all the scupperdine (scuppernong - muscadine) vines grew, den over the hill to old man Beards, den up de big road to Cap'n Hearn's, den 'round by de church, den way down de bottom where de cows wus always gitting mired up, den it touched Mahon Station on de fur side. It wus a big place shore 'nough, and so many niggers you couldn't count 'em.

"My master wus Marse Jeemes Fant and my mistress wus Miss Liza his wife. They had thirteen chillun but all of 'em dead now 'cept Mr Rice - he wus next to the baby.

"I don't know how old I is, but I wus bawn the same year that Mr Preston wus (he wus they 'leventh child), 'cause he always said, 'Cal, we come here the same year and we got to go out the same year'. But lawsy, he been gone and here I be still!

"My ma wus Nancy Fant, but I never knowed nothing 'bout my pa. My sister Liz is younger than I is and I knowed her pa. He wus a black nigger and married to my ma. He went thru the War with his young master and I wus in Memphis the day he wus musted out uv the Army.

"I reckon ef the young folks today could go back to how we lived, it would scare 'em to death. Now they can't keep house without fancy cook stoves and 'lectric 'frigerators. Everthing wus cooked over the fireplace in them days - I reckon it wus six foot wide, with hooks and little shelves around the back and sides.

"The niggers' food wus cooked in big pots, like wash pots, and the white folks in little pots. The buscuit skillet had legs to it and a heavy lid. It wus set down on the coals and then coals wus piled on de lid. The biscuits wus made out with your hand, they didn't have no cutters and rolling pins. The first time I ever see dough rolled out, it wus rolled with a round bottle.

"By and by, when cook stoves come in, Miss Liza bought one and it almost busted up the plantation, 'cause they wasn't nothing fitten to eat. Aunt Hensy, the cook, ruint everthing she cooked fer a month.

"We didn't have no parched coffee in them days, Marse Jeemes bought it green, a barrel at a time. Every Sad'day, they measure out two gallons and we parch it in a big iron pan over the coals, stirring it all the time to keep it from gitting too brown. Den we grind it in the coffee mill and we always mix rye with it for the nigger's coffee.

"Fresh meat wus always in circulation in dem days. Marse Jeemes would kill a shoat one day and send de quarters around to de neighbors. Den in two or three days, Cap'n Hearn would kill a mutton and send hit around to the neighbors. Den old man Beard would kill a calf and send hit around. Lawsy, nobody heard of buying a dimes worth of meat in de old days!

"Ef they thought meat wus going to spoil, they would hang it in the well to keep cool. We had ice all right, but we never thought of setting food on it and couldn't have ef we had wanted to 'cause the ice house wus too onconvenient. It wus built of two layers of brick with charcoal between and the only opening wus at the top. They would collect ice offen the lake and the ponds in winter and dump it in there and cover it with cotton seed. Den in the summer they would make ice cream with it and sometime they would pount it up and put on a sick person's head.

"We didn't have hot Sunday dinners like they do now. Everthing wus cooked on Sad'day. They would have cold meat and pickles and preserves and things like that.

"The niggers didn't do nothing on Sundays 'cept cook they own food at their own houses. Rations were measured out to them by Miss Liza Sad'day night. On week days the niggers all ate at great long tables in the big kitchen, all three meals. In the winter, when they didn't have to go to the field, they cooked they own meals in they own houses.

"Each nigger had his own task and in the fall after the crops were laid by, some hauled wood to last all the year, some plaited corn-shuch mule collars, and split rails and mended fences and bottomed chairs and lots of other things. Two women sewed all the time after Miss Liza cut out the clothes, and they sewed with they fingers 'cause they warn't no sewing machines. They spun the thread and dyed and wove it too. They dyed it with walnuts and shumake and oak bark, and copperas wus put in the dye too.

"Niggers wus better off then than they are now 'cause they didn't have no 'sponsibility, and they wus healthy 'cause they had to bathe and change they clothes ever' Sad'day night, and twice during the week in hot weather. Ef they didn't come out clean ever' Sunday morning the Straw Boss --- that what's we called the overseer --- whipped 'em on Monday.

"When niggers were very bad they were whipped and locked in the 'tater house --- but I don't remember but two ever being put in there.

"Niggers didn't need no money 'cause they wus furnished a house with a bed and bed clothes and chairs and boxes to put they clothes in, and clothes and food and tobacco raised on the place. After the tobacco dried out it wus beat to a powder to be smoked in pipes --- corn cob pipes.

"Uv course sometimes the women wanted some fancy folderols they couldn't git on the plantation. Ef it wus summertime they would pick blackberries, or wild grapes or persimmons and sell 'em in town on Sad'day afternoon. They never had to work on Sad'day after twelve o'clock. Sad'day nights they would have fiddle dances or quilting.

"We never heard of matches in them days. The fire wus started with flint rocks, and summer and winter it wus kept alive in the fireplaces. Before candles come in, all the light we had wus from meat drippings in a iron saucer; one end of a cotton string wus in the grease and the other end hung out and wus lighted. It wus hung on a hook just inside the fireplace.

"Then when candles come in, we made ours in iron moulds. The string was tied at one end and held real tight, while the hot beef or mutton tallow was poured in. The mould made ten candles at a time and was set in cold water and they sho made pretty, nice candles.

"They didn't have no schools and the niggers couldn't read or write. Leastways, nobody but Uncle Charlie Frasier. He would read the Bible to the niggers and hold prayermeeting during the week.

"Uncle Charlie was a free nigger from Africa and his wife too. His house was separate from the other niggers and he had his own garden. He raised rice 'cause he been use to living on it. They told him it wouldn't grow here but he showed 'em. And he fixed it nice too. He would cut down a tree and hollow out a section, then he would pour the rice in and maul off the chaff.

"Uncle Charlie was smart and funny too. When Mr Selden and Mr Arthur brought home they brides the same day, Uncle Charlie bowed in front of 'em and said, "I wishes you both joy and happiness and a boy or a girl every year.'."

"I remember the day Mr. Jimmie went off to the War. He went in a hurry and Aunt Hensy was busy cooking for the niggers, so I helped Miss Liza get him ready. We fried sausage and bacon and packed it in his canteen. He had two, one for his food and one was for water. Miss Liza had made straps to hang them over his shoulder out of bed ticking. All us chillun sat on a fance and watched him go over the hill out of sight. When he come back he had a stiff knee that was stiff to the day of his death.

"The Yankees stole the corn and wheat and drove off the horses and mules and killed the hogs and sheep, and took all the chickens, but we sho saved the turkeys. We could hear the Yankees coming, and we dropped corn under a old house and when the turkeys all was under the house, we nailed planks 'round the bottom. Then we swept away all the tracks. Yes, we sho saved the turkeys.

"I remember seeing 'em kill a hog, cut off his head and split him open down the middle, then they took out his intrels and dropped him in a tole sack and carried it off.

"One day Marse Jeemes was setting in a big chair with his fine boots on. A Yankee soldier came along and said, 'Ole man you don't need dese boots'. And he pulled 'em off Marse Jeemes feet and left his own old shoes in they place.

"The niggers went to the same church as the white people, only the white people went in the day and the niggers at night. Us all jined the church and wus Methodists like Marse Jeemes and Miss Liza wus. After the War wus over and they scattered out and mixed up with foreigners, a lot of 'em took up those fancy religions; some of 'em wus so highfaluting they got to be 'Piscoaplans and Presbyterians. Why I knowed one that jined what she call the 'Christian Church', - like us all wasn't Christians!

"I married John Gray after the War wus over. Miss Liza sont to town and got me a white dress and a long white veil and us married in the old fambly church, Hebron, that Marse Jeemes had built.

"Things wus changed then. Niggers had to work by the day or on shares. John picked cotton 'round the country and he worked on the railroad too.

"But they wus a funny thing 'bout John, - no matter whar he wus working, he always come home de day before my babies wus bawned. Look like they just waited for they pappy.

"Well, now they all gone, all six of 'em; and most of my white folks gone, and here I is just waitin' fer my time to come."