

Amy Perry

Interview with Amy Perry (82)

—*Jessie A. Butler, Charleston,
S.C.*

Amy (Chavis) Perry is eighty-two years old. She is strong for her age and lives alone in an old building at the rear of 21 Pitt street where she supports herself by taking in washing. She is a self-respecting old negress, with a reputation for honesty among the "white folks" whom she considers her friends.

Amy has two names, "like de people in doze times"—Amy Rebecca. She "adopted the Rebecca." Her father was John Minser Chavis, a slave in the McClure family, who, she claims, lived to be 116 years old, and "who wukked up to de las'," and Sarah (Thompson) Chavis, who belonged to Mrs. William Keller, an ancestor of the Cogswell family of Charleston. Amy says she was given to Miss Julia Cogswell as a "daily gift," Miss Julia having been a child at the same time that she was. In reply to a few leading questions Amy gave the following story.

"We is live in de country, near Orangeburg, and I remembers berry little 'bout de war and de time befo' de war. You see I bin berry little, I bin only seven year old. Some ole people mek out like dey remembers a lot ob t'ings." Here she gave the writer a quizzical look. "You know imagination is a great t'ing. Dey eider mek all dat up or dey tell you what bin tell dem. I got to stick to de trut', I 'members berry little, berry little. I don't 'member much 'bout what we did in de country befo' de war, nor what we eat, nor no games and such. I don't know what de big people wear. De culleded people mek dey own cloth, and call um cotton osnaburg. Dey mek banyans for de chillen. Sleebe bin cut in de cloth, and dey draw it up at de neck, and call um banyan. Dey is wear some kind ob slip under um but dat all. Dey ain't know nutting 'bout drawers nor nutting like dat.

"De medicine I remember was castor oil, and dogwood and cherry bark, which dey put in whiskey and gib you. Dey is gib you dis to keep your blood good. Dogwood will bitter yo' blood, it good medicine, I know.

"I 'member de people hab to git ticket for go out at night. W'en dey is gone to prayer meeting I is see dem drag bresh back dem to outen dey step. If de patrol ketch you wid out ticket dey beat you.

"I 'members w'en de Yankee come tru, and Wheeler a'my come after um. Doze bin dreadful times. De Yankees massicued de people, and burn dere houses, and stole de meat and eberyting dey could find.

De white folks hab to live wherebber dey kin, and dey didn't hab enough to eat. I know whole families live on one goose a week, cook in greens. Sometimes they hab punkin and corn, red corn at dat. Times was haard, haard. De cullered people dodn't hab nutting to eat neider. Dat why my auntie bring me to Charleston to lib.

"De fust year atter freedom I gone to school on Mr. John Townsend place, down to Rockville. After peace declare de cullered people lib on cornmeal mush and salt water in de week and mush and vinegar for Sunday. Mine you, dat for Sunday. I don't see how we lib, yet we is. About eight year after de war we use to go down to de dairy for clabber. Dey give you so much for each one in de fambly, two tablespoon full for de grown people and one tablespoon for de chilluns. We add water to dat and mek a meal. In de country de cullered people lib on uh third (crop) but of course at de end of de year dey didn't hab nutting, yet dey has libed. I 'member w'en de Ku Klux was out too, de people bin scared 'cause dey is beat some and kill some."

When asked which she thought best, slavery or freedom, her answer was: "Better stay free if you can stay straight. Slabery time was tough, it like looking back into de dark, like looking into de night."

Feeling that as she remembered so little of plantation life her opinion was based on hearsay or her memories of war times, the writer told her of the answer of another old Negro woman: "No matter what slabery bring, if it hadn't been for slabery I nebber would hab met my Jesus." It seemed to make a strong impression on Amy who threw up her hands in the typical African gesture, and said "Praise de Lawd, w'en yo talk 'bout Jesus you is got me coming and going."

Amy is deeply religious. She owns four of Judge Rutherford's books which she claims to have read "from cubber to cubber" many times. "Some people b'lieve in dreams," she said, "but I don't hab no faith in dem. Lot ob people b'lieve in root and sich but dey can't scare me wid root. I roll ober dem from yuh to Jericho and dey wouldn't bodder me. A man died bad right in dat house yonder, and I went wid de doctor and close his sight and sich, and I come right home and gone to bed and sleep. He ain't bodder me and I ain't see um since. I don't believe in ghosts, nor dreams, nor conjuh, dat de worse. John de Baptist and dem dream dreams, and de Lawd show dem vision, but dat diff runt." With another comical look at the writer, she continued; "You can eat yo' stomach full and you'll dream. I b'lieve in some kind ob vision. You doze off, and you hab a good dream. I b'lieve dat. People get converted in dreams. I was twelve year ole when I get converted. I dreamed I was in a field, a large green field. A girl was dere dat I didn't had no use for. I had a bundle on my back. I honey de girl up and love um and de bundle fall on de ground. Dey put me in de church den.

"Some people say dey kin see ghost but you can't see ghost and lib. De Bible say if you kin see de wind you kin see spirit. If you kin see ghost you can see Gawd, and I know you can't see Gawd and lib. De Bible say so. I don't b'lieve in um, no ghost, and no cunjuh tho' my uncle Cotton Judson and my aunt Nassie both b'lieve in dem. Uncle Cotton could do most as much as de debbul (devil) hesself, he could most fly, but I nebber b'lieve in um no matter what he kin do."

In order to get her to talk the writer told her of a few of the accomplishments of the East Indians. She said, "Yes, Gawd got some people mek berry wise. Dey can't say dey mek demself wise. What race dese Indian come from, anyway, I know dem come from Indiana, but what race, Ham, Seth, Japheth or what. I hear de Indian hab some wise ways, and my people b'lieve in all kind ob ghost, and spirit an t'ing but I don't. I don't eben let um talk to me 'bout dem, w'en det start I say 'gone gome wid dat.' I can't

counteract de Bible and I can't counteract Gawd, I don't b'lieve in um. Dat what I don't visit round. My people lub (love) too much idle discourse, and idle discourse is 'gainst de Bible. I nebber trapsy round w'en I young and I don't now. Day why I don't hab no company. As long as ole people lib dey going to tell de young ones 'bout ghost an t'ing, and dey going to pass it on, and w'en dey die dey going to leab dat foolishness right yuh. No I don't b'lieve in no conjuh and no root. If dey gib me poison den dey got me."