

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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From the WPA Slave Narratives:
Emma Johnson Age 83

"I was born July 4, 1854, four miles east of Holly Springs. My Master was Mr. Joe Howard. He owned my mother, my uncle and myself.

"I was taken in the big house to live when I was two years old. Later on I waited on Old Miss, nursed and cleaned up. When I got big enough, I helped to wash and cook. I worked in the field too, hoeing and picking cotton.

"I reckon I played some games, but all I remember is "handy-over" - that was throwing a ball across the house.

"I went to school for a month once, but mostly I learnt myself how to read. Niggers raised with white folks naturally learn things. I can't do much writing.

"When Old Miss was in a good humor she treated me nicely, but when 'Old Harry' got in her, she was mean. I never did hold it against her and I never will. I don't think she knowed any better. If we was sick she was good to us, there wasn't a better woman then.

"I saw plenty of Yankees during the War. They took all Old Master's stock and killed the cows, hogs and chickens right in the field and brought them to the commissary in town.

"They set the house on fire once, then locked the door and come out. The family was in the back of the house and they smelled smoke. They broke in the parlor door and found the fire and put it out.

"General Van Dorn came to our house with some soldiers on the way to raid the Yankees in Holly Springs. He was a tall, sandy-headed man. I was too little to know what it was all about.

"And the next day, General Grant and his soldiers come to the house after they was run out of town. He was a heavy-set, blackheaded man.

"Yankee soldiers was foraging one day near our house and one of them was shot from the ambush and killed. I heard the shot and saw a soldier pick him up and carry him off on his horse.

"I saw General Forrest one time, too, when he came to the house. He was tall and blackheaded.

"I've seen the Ku Kluxers going down the road in droves as long as from my house a block down the road. They had on white gowns with something black in front and a great big tin button that looked like an owl at night.

"I found one of their suits under the fodder in the hay loft one day when I was looking for hen nests. Old Miss took it away from me right quick and asked me if anybody saw it, but nobody else did. Then she hid it somewhere.

"I couldn't stand to live through another war, it was terrible. Sometimes we didn't have so much as a grain of corn on the place. At those times, Old Master would go off with an empty sack and come back late in the evening with some food in it.

"If we ever had food left over, it was put in a pot and buried in the ground so the Yankees couldn't find it. We were all hungry many a time.

"Old Master never did tell us we was free. He called us up to tell us, then every time he would start to tell it, he would bust out and cry. He never did tell it.

"After the war I farmed for twenty-two years, then I took in washing and ironing. I bought this house with money I made washing and ironing. I rent out part of it and the Government gives me four dollars a month. I have to save money for taxes out of that.

"Slavery was bad but God's hand was in it. His way is past finding out but it is always right.

"We are living in your day now, Honey, we done left ours behind."

Interviewer's note:

Height, 5 feet; weight, 140 pounds; color, mulatto; unusually intelligent.