

Henry D. Jenkins

Interview with Henry D. Jenkins, 87 years old

— *W.W. Dixon, Winnsboro, S.C.*

Henry D. Jenkins lives in a four-room frame house, which he owns. His wife, two single daughters, his son and his son's wife and three small children live with him. The house is constructed on a tract of land containing four hundred and eighty (480) acres, which Henry also owns.

He does not suffer with an inferiority complex. He is self-reliant and thrifty, with a pardonable pride in his farm and his rise from slavery to a position of respectability as a church member, citizen, and tax payer. He is well preserved physically, for his age, 87 years, alert in his movements and animated in conversation.

His plantation and home is in the south western part of Fairfield County, six or seven hundred yards east of State highway #215.

"Yes sir, tho' I am a 'spectable colored citizen, as you see me; I pays taxes and owns my own plantation. I was once a slave on de Reese place, in Sumter County, below Columbia. Just when I come to b'long to Mr. Joseph Howell, I don't know. I recollects dat Marse Joe had 'bout twenty families of slaves and dere was six hundred acres in his plantation.

"My mistress was his wife, Miss Sara. They had four chillun. Miss Mattie, married Oscar Chappell. Johnnie, married a Miss Lever. Thomas, married some lady in Columbia, disremember de fam'ly name. Miss Jessie, married Rev. Huggins, a Baptist preacher, though her folks wasn't of dat 'suasion; they was Methodist. Us niggers was 'structed early in 'ligion. Took to Cedar Creek and camp meetin'. My white folks had a fine carriage. A mulatto boy, Adam, was de driver. Sometime I'd go wid him to meet visitors from de low country at de station, and look after de baggage and sich.

"Yes sir, I doesn't deny it, I got many whuppins. Dere's not much to a boy, white or black, dat don't need a whuppin' sometime on de way up. When you break a wild spirited colt, they make de best hoss or mule. I can do more work today, than most of dese triflin', cigaret young mens. You sees me today, as straight as a arrow and like a wild cat on my foots.

"You bet yo' life, my white folks was de bestest in de land. They wasn't mealy mouthed; they made everybody work, sun to sun, seven days in de week. But didn't de good Lord set de 'zample? Yes sir, he made us all work, women in de perils of child birth, drapped cotton seed and corn kernels. Dr. Turnipseed, dat was our doctor, 'low dat light labor lak dat good for them.

"Farm hands got a peck of meal, three pounds bacon, quart of 'lasses, cup of salt, and two cups middlin' flour, no white flour. Had good warm clothes in winter, one-piece cotton suit in summer, and de little niggers went dressed in deir shirt tails from fust of June, to fust of October. They sho' did, and was as happy over it as de day was long.

"My mother named Emma. Never married to my daddy, 'cause they didn't live on de same place and b'long to same master. Daddy b'long to de Halls. I have a brother by dis same mammy. Daddy go by de name of Dinkins. He took up wid another woman after freedom, and my brother and me was 'shame of him. Us 'cided to take Jenkins for our name but keep a 'D' in de middle, so if anything come up, de 'D' could 'cite 'membrance of who us really is. You see what I mean?

"Our shoes for de winter was made on de place, out of leather from our own tan-yard and from our own cow hides. Marster had a good fish pond. He had a four-hoss gin, though mules pulled it. De lint cotton was packed in a bale and a screw pit. Baggin' was any old thing, like old sacks or canvas sheetin'.

"My mother jined de Baptis' church, and I followed in her foot steps. Everybody ought to b'long to some church, 'cause it's 'spectable, and membership in de church is both a fire and a life insurance. It 'sures you 'ginst hell fire, and gives you at death, an eternal estate in Hebben. What you laughin' at? It's de gospel truth I'm givin' you right now. Wish everybody could hear it and believe it.

"My marster, Joe Howell, went off to de old war. His niggers was so well trained, dat they carried on for him whilst he was gone and dere was no trouble. Everything went on just de same as if he was dere.

"Pat-a-rollers (patrollers) would come often and ketch niggers sometime; caught my daddy once and whup him good. Ours was a fine body of slaves and loyal to de mistress and her chillun.

"Dances? Yes sir, I can hear them fiddles and de pattin' now. Dis de way de dance was called: 'Balance all; sashshay to your partners; swing her 'round and promenade all; forward on de head; ladies change;' and all dat. Then de jigs went on. Believe me, them was times!

"The main drawback on Marster Joe's plantation was, de water on de place was no 'count. Us had to haul water on a sled, wid a mule, from de Friday place; dat's de onliest trouble us had. Sometime us had to tie up fodder and 'tend to de hay in de field on Sunday.

"I married fust a girl name Sarah, in 1878. Got three chillun by her. She died. Not good for a man to live alone, de Lord say. I picked out another Sarah, but called her Sallie. Us has had nine chillun. Three of dese [TR: are] Sailor, Tera, and Monroe. Monroe lives on my place and farms 'long side of me. Sam is in Detroit, Michigan; Henry in Florida (Florida).

"When de Yankees come, what they do? They did them things they ought not to have done and they left undone de things they ought to have done. Yes, dat just 'bout tells it. One thing you might like to hear. Mistress got all de money, de silver, de gold and de jewels, and got de well digger to hide them in de bottom of de well. Them Yankees smart. When they got dere, they asked for de ve'y things at de bottom of de well. Mistress wouldn't tell. They held a court of 'quiry in de yard; called slaves up, one by one, good many. Must have been a Judas 'mongst us. Soon a Yankee was let down in de well, and all dat money, silver, gold, jewelry, watches, rings, brooches, knives and forks, butter-dishes, waters, goblets, and cups was took and carried 'way by a army dat seemed more concerned 'bout stealin', than they was 'bout de Holy War for de liberation of de poor African slave people. They took off all de hosses, sheeps, cows, chickens, and geese, took de seine and de fishes they caught, corn in crib, meat in smoke house, and everything. Marse General Sherman said war was hell. It sho' was. Mebbe it was hell for some of them Yankees when they come to die and give account of de deeds they done in Sumter and Richland Counties."

