

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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Henry Gibbs Age 85

"I was born about 3 miles from West Point out east. My Marster was old man Davis Cottrell, and old Miss was named Elsie". "Mars David come from Tennessee, Pulaski or Nashville and Miss Elsie was a Hooks." I members when dey went back to Tennessee on a visit when I was about 12 years old.

"Mars David bought my mammy from a speculator drove. She was sold because her old Marster was in debt and she went to de highest bidder." You know de way dey did in those days, Dey had a speculator block in Columbus, and when a man wanted a slave (servant) dey would go dare and buy one." My mammy was a field hand, She told me she was 15 years old when the stars fell. De morning de stars fell Ole Miss say "Mandy you are 15 years old." "She come from Virginia and her Marster was a lawyer."

"A carpenter or blacksmith or house maid always was worth more money dan a field hand. Heap more, sometimes 11 or 12 hundred dollars."

"My pap come from Salsberry, South Carolina, and his name was Charles Gibbs, cause his old Marster over there was named Gibbs."

"After Mars David bought him he was a Cottrell." "My pap was an all round nigger. Plow hand and a cobbler." "De man what raised my pap give him to his daughter, when he was sold to the speculator to be brought out to dis country, the daughter come into de kitchen looking so sad."

"Old man David Cottrell's son, John, bought a woman named Katie and two children, who was straight from Africa. She never did learn to talk like we did. When she should say "whip," she'd say "lick". She would call her Marster and Mistress "Buckler". "You know young Mars John Cottrell married Antonette Cooper, and dey never had any chillern." "A nigger girl and a boy named Henry fell to her when his father died."

"Mars Cooper was a horse raiser, and dis young nigger Henry rode his fine horses on de race track." "You know dey bet on dem races."

"I had one sister four years younger dan me. She died first year of the srender, and den dere was anoder sister name Viney."

"The first niggers Old Marster, (you know he was a young over seer on the Martin place on Tombigbee River) ever owned was Grant, who belonged to a Rainey in Tennessee, and his wife was Charity, who was bought from Jessie Ellis up in de prairie. "He bought her after my pap wanted her for his wife."

"Parson Ellis, de father of Jessie was a Premitive Baptist preacher. "I don't know how come, but he got where he didn't want any slaves. He just concluded to turn em all over to Mr. Seth Pool, and he stayed with Mr. Pool until he died after the srender. Mr. Pool was a deacon in his church." "You know where Church hill Cemetery?" Well, dere was a church right dere. It was moved when Mr. Flanigan bought this place from a Missionary Baptist, Parson Harris." "You know Mr. E. H. Dexter's house is a part of dat church. He has added compartments to it."

"Dey couldn't get no lumber easy in dose days." "De old log house what Parson Harris lived in stood under the old Cedar tree, just as you turn in on north side. I been dere many a time."

"You know my mammy was a field hand, but when de war come she had to help spin and weave, cause we couldn't get no cloth from Mobile." "Mistess, you know befo de war, dey would go to Tibbee swamp and clear up de timbers and make a flat boat and ship cotton to Mobile, Dey would ship de whole crop, and dey would bring back cloth, sugar and coffee and everything dey need, besides what was raised on de place."

"When de war come on, dey couldn't do dat no more, cause we was blocked off." "Den all hands had to weave cloth at home and make clothes for the soljer." "Dey had a thing what dey called a reel, on dis dey would put the thread that had been spun on a wheel. "The cotton or wool was first carded, then spin, into thread, which was then put on a broach or spool. "This was put on the reel which made it into

cuts of thread. The reel would click when a certain number of yards was reeled off." "Then dis was put into a pot of water in which meal had been mixed. Den boil it. Dis made de thread stout."

"Den it was put on de warping bars. De bars was at least 12 feet long. You could tell from dis how many yards of cloth it would weave. Made fine ozernburg." "The finer you spin de thread the finer de cloth." "Den dis cloth could be dyed." "Dey used walnut bark to die black. Maple bark made purple cloth, and Cherry bark and hickory or red oak would make red."

"No mam, I didn't never go to school 'til after de war." "My ole Misses tried to have de boys teach me, but I wouldn't listen." "Dey say dey goin to whip me, but Mars David and Miss Elsie wouldn't low nobody to tech me." "She jes ruined me, cause she was so good to me."

(Tears are rolling down Uncle Henry's face as he relates these old days to me.) "Miss Elsie was as good a woman as ever wore skirts. Good to her slaves." "Allowed no one to be touched." "If Old Marster get rough, she would come and stop him. He'd whip his niggers sometimes when dey would work and mind - but never broke de hide. No sir!"

"Dis is what dem patarollers do Misses." "Dey would ride at night." "When dere was a nigger running around widout a pass from his Marster des patarollers would whip em." "Mars David never lowed em to touch his niggers." Said 'I God if I can't rule my own servants, den I sell em. Nobody goin help rule em."

"You know Misses, my Mars David couldn't read or write - but Miss Elsie was a educated scholar." "He'd say, 'Elsie come read me de news what de papers has.' He would sit by her while she read."

"Dere was heap o' people wouldn't want his niggers to read and write."

"Miss, de most owners was good to der servants. I was de mean overseers what treated em rough."

"My Marster, give his niggers every thing dey needed to eat - unless it was coffee. Dat was so high you know. On cold mornings all was called up and got a drink of whiskey."

"You see dere was one big garden, whar everything was raised, nuff for all. Dere was a special cook for de hands. Not old Marster's cook." "Every hand left his bucket at de kitchen wid de cook, and she would cook de food for one day." "Old Marster would come in de field, and would open our buckets and if dere

wasn't nuffin left, he would call, 'Who's bucket dis?' 'Mine Mars David'. He'd say, 'Didn't you have nuff to eat?' 'Yah, Sir' - "O you are a liar, who in the hell did you ever see who didn't leave some, if he had nuff?" "It got so dat de head driver, would tell de overs who left some to put some in de other buckets, so Marster wouldn't get after de cook."

"On Sunday morning everybody would go to de house, when dey get 3 pounds of meat to de hand." "De young growin chillern had to eat 4 times a day." "My young Misses took me in her room when I was a sucklin babe and raised me. When someone wanted to buy me, she say 'no' - gold can't buy dat nigger, he's been too much trouble to me. He would a'died if I hadn't nursed him."

"She told her own daughter, Martha, Mrs. Stacy, one day, when she seed her bump a young niggers head agin de wall, 'Don't you know you will never have a nigger with any sense if you bump der heads against de wall?' "She was young and didn't know no better." "Miss Alice Hibbler, her daughter, and me used to play togedder."

"Mr. Dave Cottrell jes like his Uncle John, He'l trade anything but his wife."

"Young John Cottrell, my young Marster, always gone off tradin."

"I tell you Miss, we never did get through pickin cotton - but we didn't pick at night. Dere was a plenty and plenty for de boll worm too. We'd weigh cotton twice a day. My daddy was de weigher, and Jack Cottrell's daddy, young Mars Albert, would put it down on a slate." "All dem young Cottrells got dere education at Siloam." "Dey had moved out

West of West Point, right out dere, now whar you see dem cedar trees across from the lake. John was livin at Cedar Bluff when de srender come."

"Dere was John, Albert, Dave and Charlie de baby, Martha, and I think Betty, who died at Macon in School." "Dat was de County seat den. You know dis was Lowndes County. Clay County was made out of de corners of four counties."

"Work all de week in Slavery times." "No, dere was a rule, dat de niggers must have half of every Saturday." "Den all, nearly, would go a fishin, unless dey worked in dere own patches. Sometimes dey raise things and old Marster would buy em, and de niggers would have dere own spending money for things they wanted to buy. Dis was given to de waggoner and he'd go to town and buy what dey want."

"You know dis was silver money." "Mars David would take de silver and give de niggers de paper money what would buy things durin de war. Mars Davy had a truck half full of silver when dat war broke out. I believe he buried it when de Yankees come."

"When de war was fought, Confederisk money was killed, no count." "Den green back was used until silver come in for change." "I hear my ole Mistus say dat Confederick was made in Starkville."

"Everybody lived in log houses, cause dere wasn't no saw mills. The servants had quarters off from de big house."

"Yes, mam I members all about de yankees comin, I was most grown up."

"Listen, Dat evin, about one or two o'clock, de head driver sent me to de house for somein, and ole Miss told me de yankees was comin. Every nigger chile on de place and de cook was in de big house wid her." "De yankees come from Columbus, and our folks was at Shuquatonchee Creek. It was Forest who was de General of our folks. He stayed in my ole Marsters house all night. Dis de truf cause I stayed wid em." "I members seeing Gen. Forest use his spy glass and he say "Mr. Cottrell I see two yankee officers over on dat hill." "De yankees cross Shuquatonchee way up north about Abbott. Dey didn't know how close Forest was. Dat was when dey thought Forest was over dere about Columbus, or on dis side of Tombigbee."

"I served the table at breakfast and supper when Forest was at our house." "All de men niggers with teams, wagons and provisions was hid out in de bottoms." "De women and chillern stayed in de house, until atter General saw dem yankee officers. Den he thought dere was goin a be a battle and dey better get further away and dey did." "General said all de log houses would be blown up with canons. Dey begun fighting at de bridge, and de yankees 'treated. Forest crossed de bridge and run em up de M. & O. R.R. until dey got to Prairie. Dere was a big fight up dere cause we could hear dem cannons." "Some of Forest's men right out dere at our house told him dey wasn't goin to fight no more. Forest served de law on em, dat is dey was killed. Dem three men stood in a row and was shot down. It was a solumn time. Twelve men was in line and at de tap of a drum dey fired and de three men was no more." "General told Old Man Davy dat was de law." "How come I know?" "It was my business to follow at Mars David's heels and hear and saw everything."

"De Cottrell boys 'cept Charlie was already gone to de war, and he went de last year of de war and was wounded. "Albert was de first to go out and he come home widout being hurt - but Jimmie died in

prison. Never got home but once during de war. It was hard on Ole Miss, but she didn't take on very much."

"Who pee! Yesim we danced every Saturday night, and had a time dancin by de fiddle. De ole blacksmith would make oil out of lard and plait a wick and put in to burn for light - or sometimes dere would be a log fire for light. Den was when de patarollers would get em if de niggers was dere widout a pass." "I members once some fellow throwed a lot of ashes what was banked in de big fireplace, on de patarollers, so some niggers could get a way. De didn't have no passes. "Our white folks had big dances too. Dey danced in dem days. Nobody went but what was invited. Dey was guests. Today-anybody goes. Dey wore fine cloes. Dey was high too. Mars Albert paid \$150 one time for a pair fine dancin boots. At des parties dey had good fiddling."

"My God Miss - don't talk about funerals in dem days. I never seed a dead person until I was twenty years old."

"My Misses was old settled lady and I stayed right wid her, and don't member about no weddins. You know Miss Martha was married long before I was born. Her oldest boy, Joe, was old as me."

"Well you see, we'd have a pass to go to Church. Our slaves all come to dis hard shell Baptist Church out dere at Church hill. In May, we'd have foot-washins. De women would wash each others feet, and men would wash each others feet. You know we do dat now twice a year in our Primitive Baptist Church." "Dey would baptize in Tibbee Creek - de Methodist would sprinkle. Dey didn't believe in washing feet."

"Yesim we'd sing in dem days. Didn't sing like de do now." "When de folks was washing de would sing. "Come ye that love de Lawd." "Den dis one too."

"Let your joys be known."

Join in de songs with sweet accord

And thirst around de throne."

Now when we'd baptize, it would be,

"On Jordans stormy banks we stand."

And cast a wistful eye

To Caanons happy land

Where my possessions lie.

That generous fruit that never fails

On trees of mortal glory."

"What I thinks about religion?"

"Well, now listen, God Almighty give every boy de same spirit - the Spirit of God. God aint made no hell for us.

I been reading de Bible about 50 years and I aint found it. God made us for his own glory." "For your disobedience you shall be striped with many stripes." "Dis in de flesh." "Religion is de way I treat my fellow man." "I gwine reap what I sew." "De flesh is goin be punished befo he die, but the spirit belongs to God, and he goin take care of it." "Misses I never done nuffin in my life what I know was wrong." "My Missus taught me to live right and tell de truf. I's old nigger, and I believes according to de Bible dat everybody goin to same place."

"What I do after srender?"

"You see I was with my father when srender come. We stayed with Mars David from May until Christmas. My old Marster told us not to run off then we moved out here to Pools' and made a crop for six years straight. Since den I been hustling for myself. Now, I owns 229 acres of land. I able to keep up taxes and makes me a livin. I've made a mistake lendin money to my chillern to buy cars. All de chillern got a good farmers learnin."

"Can I plough?" "What's matter wid me? Hoe and do anything 'ceptin' when its too hot." "My house burnt up not long ago. Caught fire myself trying to put it out. Didn't save nothin. But had good credit left, and could start again, den de Red Cross helped me too.

"Dem times and now much difference as day and night. Befo de war everybody had a plenty and if you didn't your neighbors did, and it was yours. Everybody helped each other. In one way de cullurd folks was better off, I was cared for in everyway I just had to obey and work. Wasn't dat better times?"

"Lincoln?" "Misses I didn't know much about his proclamation. I believe I seed dat man once." Looks like I can see de paper now what Miss Elsie was readin telling about his election and takin his seat in Washington. The paper told about his trip cross de country in a piece of a wagon and an old broken down mule. I think that same man come to Mars David's house, pretending to be crippled. Mars David had me show him the way off de place. When we was out of sight, dat man put them crutches across his shoulder. I always have believed that man was Lincoln. I know why he was called a "rail (real) candidate," he was a rail splitter and lived in a log cabin."

"I never member much about Jeff Davis, but I been to Montgomery, Alabama where he was made President of de Confederacy and saw that big star made in de floor where he stood and made a speech. I seed his soljir clothes dere in a glass case."

"Well, I read a history about Booker T. Washington. A white woman was his mother. She told it before she died. He was smart and had a good education. I never seed where he give to his race, except a chance for an education. If he had done some 'en free for his race, we could afford to try to follow him." I used to read news papers a good deal, but I devotes my time now to de Bible."

"Dey say some of our color is well to do, but I don't know nuffin de do free for our race. Dey don't donate nuffin."

"Hants? Ghosts and Spirits? Listen Misses!" "Dere is a spirit - but when you really see it in person, its gone. The Spirit is leading you, and dats what skeers you when it turns back on you." "There is a thing I heard people tell. When people die in a house you can't live in it no more. My evidence is dey done hid some money and dey come to see about it." "A woman died once and she had hid some money in de wall, and she called up de chillern and told em where to find it." "Dats what I been told." "I ain't a fraid of hants. Horses and mules can see hants do."

"I seed a mule early one morning, what jes looked and looked and backed and backed. I tell my wife "Dat mule see a hant." A few days after dat, he was bein plowed and he reared up, and running back,

and kept reading up until he fell back on de plow and died." "I knowed he had seen a hant." "De Bible say a mule got a soul."

"Ku Klux?" "Now listen! Over here between Line Creek and Cedar Bluff, dey went in a gang of 25. Dey heard a cullerd man had said somen he oughtin. One of em went to his house and asked to be showed across de creek, and when he got out of his house, de crowd was dere to question him. He denied it. There was one Ku Klux who believed in him, and told him to stick to it if it was true. He did and Ku Klux's went dere way." "I heard dey kill people. Lots of em in Alabama. Dey wore great white whiskers and de faces." "I don't know de cause of em."

"All I laks bein white folks, I jes don't come out de same mold, but I thinks de race ought to keep pure. I don't want to sit by your friends, and you don't want to sit by mine 'cept where dere is business."

(Questions asked by interviewer)

(1) "Miss Joiner, we had plenty a good food. Ole Mars David believed in takin kere of his niggers. Dem what was energetic enough had dey own gardens and sometimes dey own meat. Dem what wasn't sponisible was handed out so much every Saturday. Ole Marster say: "If dis gives out come and get more". We raised all de wheat for de flour and ground it at de mill. De cook at de big house cooked for most of us, and put it in our buckets."

(2) "Well Mistes, its hard to tell what I thinks of dis generation. Somun must be done. Dey don't know whar dey going. Looks like dey done forget dey is a ruler above what rules everything. "Dey wont listen to us old heads what born in slavery time."

(3) "Yes Mam, dere was a jail for slaves, case sometimes dey did do bad things. As a rule Mars David controlled his own slaves not even lowing de patarollers to punish us. I knows about one slave at Siloam what killed de overseer, and he was given a trial, convicted and hanged by de sheriff. I seed dat hangin. We could see over dat plantation from our yard."

(Quoting from Historical Sketches of Oktibbeha Co. by Carroll, I find this verified)

"About 1856, near Silom (now in Clay County), a slave, Hampton, killed his overseer. This was the first case in the history of Oktibbeha in which a slave killed a white man. It aroused widespread interest. Distinguished talent represented both prosecution and defense. The prosecuting or district attorney was Isham G. Harris, a very forcible man. The defense lawyers were Harrison and Cruso, distinguished partners from Columbus, employed by the owner of the slave. Their fee was two-fold; a cash sum and

the ownership of the slave in case they secured his acquittal. Two special venires were drawn at each of two terms of court. Finally the case was tried, and the slave was convicted; he was hanged by Sheriff James in 1857. This was the first death penalty inflicted by the Court in this county."

(4) "Yes I knowed of slaves to run away to the north - er somewhures. Sometimes dey would go whur de come from. Dey followed de yankees away from West Point when dey was here. I seed one after de surrender."

(5) "When de slaves was sick, ole Miss looked after dem. Miss Elsie was even better to us dan Mars David. She would visit us herself, and show de older nigger women how to do. And a Dr. would come, too. Mostly we took quinine and blue mass and dovers powders and all sorts of teas."

(6) "What does I think of slavery?" Well, Mistes we fared better as slaves than when we was freed. Our boss man was good to us. Some overseers used em brutal, and dey was afeared to tell it." We is better off in one way, as slaves we would be sold often away from our children. In dat way we better off."

(7) "Any uprisings among slaves?" "No, Mam, I don't members nothin like dat." We slaves on one plantation couldn't talk to other slaves about things."

(8) "De slaves was promised by dem northern folks forty acres of land and a mule but I aint never knowed any of um to get it. We never got nuffin - and would have suffered but for the goodness of ole Mars David. Yes, Mam, we got 1/10 of that years crop, after surrender."

(9) "Yes, mam, ex slaves voted and held office too. Clay County Court house was full of niggers until after 1876. I voted myself for Fred Douglas a nigger for Legislature. "He couldn't read or write."

(10) "No, I wasn't forced to work as a servant after de war. We was paid for all we did."

(11) "After war cleared up, the farmers give the hands 1/3 of everything dey made and 125 lbs of meat to de hands, and bread free. Now listen Misses, dey come in here and done de worse thing by telling us dat dey white southern man was de niggers worst enemy dey had. Dis raised up strife between the races. I furst thought dis true - but when I come to consideration, I knowed dey was wrong. I loved my white folks den and I love Miss Elsie in her grave now, cause she was like my mother. I love her increase to-day."