

Jane Johnson

Interview with Jane Johnson, 90 years old

—*Henry Grant, Columbia, S.C.*

Jane Johnson is living with her niece at 1430 Harden Street, Columbia, S.C. She is of small stature, dark, not black, plump and apparently well cared for. On account of her age and bodily afflictions she is incapable of self-support. Her niece is unmarried, owns a comfortable home, works and provides for her grandmother in a good and satisfactory manner.

"Come in, white folks, take dat chair and set down. I hears dat you wants to talk to me 'bout myself and my master in slavery time. My name is Jane Johnson and I's 'bout ninety years old, from de best 'membrance I has from my white folks friends and my own people. One thing I does know, I's been here so long, dat I sometimes think I's near 'bout a hundred years old.

"I b'long to Master Tom Robertson. My mistress' name was Ophelia. I didn't see her much in slavery time, 'cause she stayed in de big house on Arsenal Hill, Columbia, S.C. De onliest time I see her a-tall, was when I was sent to de big house for somethin' and dat wasn't often. Master and mistress had heaps of chillun, 'mong them was twins, all dead now, if I 'members right, 'cept Master Tom Robertson, a grandson and a rich man too; he living right here in Columbia. My old master lived in Columbia but his plantation, where us slaves lived, was 'bout four or five miles from Columbia on de Sumter road, just beyond de soldiers hospital (Veterans Hospital), dat's right.

"Master Tom come to de plantation every day 'cept Sundays and sometimes he come dat day, 'specially in crop season. He never talked to us slaves much, just talked to de overseer 'bout us all, I reckon. De overseer was a nigger and de meanest man, white or black, I ever see. Dat nigger would strut 'round wid a leather strap on his shoulder and would whip de other slaves unmerciful. He worked us hard from sunrise to sunset every day in de week, 'cept some Saturday evenin's. 'Most of de grown slave women knocked off from field work at dinner time on Saturdays and done de washin' for de rest of de slaves.

"Yes sir, us had a plenty of rations to eat; no fancy vittles, just plain corn bread, meat and vegetables. Dere was no flour bread or any kind of sweet stuff for de slaves to eat. Master say sweet things 'fected de stomach and teeth in a bad way. He wanted us to stay well and healthy so us could work hard.

"Master Tom was good to us, course he was, 'cause he didn't see us much no way. But dat nigger overseer was de devil settin' cross-legged for de rest of us on de plantation all de time. I never has believed dat master 'tended for dat nigger to treat us like he did. He took 'vantage of his bein' 'way and talk soft talk when he come again. Yes sir, he sho' did.

"Not very long after de Yankees come, us was told dat de niggers was free. You might think dat was a happy day for us slaves, but I didn't think lak dat. I was kinda lonesome and sad lak. Us slaves was lost, didn't know what to do or where to go. Don't you think dat was a sad time?

"How old was I when I done my courtin'? What's dat? Dat courtin' stuff is what white folks does, no nigger knows what dat fancy thing is. Us just natchally lives together; men and women mates lak de animals out dere. Colored people don't pay no 'tention to what white folks call love, they just 'sires de woman they wants, dat's all. I married dat man of mine, Tilghman Thompson, and us got 'long right smart, 'til he die. I got 'nother one, Anderson Johnson, and he die too, so here I is, left here yit.

"You knows de black man has had a long, hard road to travel since he was first brought to this country. From de first, he b'long to de white man to be took care of and to work. Some colored folks 'pear to be doin' right well dese days but back yonder long befo' I was born, I's been told, they didn't know how to provide for themselves. What I wants to know, what de nigger gwine to do widout de 'sistance of de white man? What they has got come from them, you knows dat. I hear some of them growlin' 'round, dat they is gwine to do dis and gwine do dat and they don't do nothin', 'cept talk too much. They sho' better do right; live in peace and git somethin' dat will stay with them.

"Maybe I's wrong to say dis but you knows, white man, de nigger is a far way back of de white man; his time ain't come yit, leastwise dat's de way it 'pear to me. De nigger come from Africa and other hot places, so he takes after de hot country he come from and has a short temper, hard head, and not 'nough sense to keep him out of trouble when he gits mad or 'cited. When he come here, de white man made him work, and he didn't like dat. He is natchally lazy and when he had to work, then he began to get huffy and to conjure up in he mind hate and other bad things against de whites. Ever since the first time de nigger found out he had to work, he has silently despised the white man. If he had lived and done nothin', then he would be a 'tirely different person to dis very day, I knows dat.

"Does I 'member President Lincoln? I sho' does, but not so much, 'cause I was too young to have much sense. I has heard my mammy and daddy say he was a good man and wanted everybody to be free, both white and black. Dere was a heap of poor white folks in slavery time, and some of them lived mighty hard, worse than the slaves sometimes. You knows blood is thick and it is gwine to turn to its kind befo' helpin' de others. They say slavery was wrong but what 'bout hard times? Dat is de worse kind of slavery, I thinks. All dis hollerin' 'round 'bout freedom they has, shucks, all dat kind of talk ain't nothin'. When you has work and some money in your pocket so you can go to de store and buy some meat and bread, then you has de best freedom there is, don't tell me.

"President Roosevelt is 'nother good man. He has looked down on de poor and 'tressed in dis land wid mercy; has give work and food to de poor people when nobody else would. He sho' has turnt dis country 'round and tried so hard to make things right wid de people. When he turn dis way and turn dat way, them men up there where he is, try to stop him from helpin' us, but de Blessed Master is gwine to hold his hands up. They ain't gwine to be able to stop him, 'cause he has done so much good in de world. Dat man is gwine to be 'membered by de people always, but them dat has fought him and worked against him is sho' gwine to be forgot. Nobody wants to 'member them for de evil they has done. You knows dat if you sows evil you is sho' gwine to gather evil in time. They ain't gwine sow much longer; their harvest time is right out dere in sight, but de President is gwine to live on wid us.

"I's gettin' old now, I has to draw on de 'membrance of de past, tottle 'long in de present and stare wid dese old eyes out dere into what is to come (future). I has rheumatism and high blood pressure, so you see I's in for a troublesome time from now on to dat last day. I's livin' wid my niece now, in her own home, dat is some pleasure to me in my old age

