

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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Joanna Thompson Isom

Foreward: Joanna Isom is a tall, slender and very intelligent mulatto woman; her features are almost classical in their regularity; she was born into the household of Mr. Jacob Thompson, a short while before the outbreak of the Civil War; Jacob Thompson was the recognized Democratic leader in the state during pre-war days, and was a member of President Van Buren's cabinet. Joanna is very devout in her belief in "the saving faith" that has carried her through much sickness and trouble; she lives in her own home at the end of Freemantown; this home she bought "43 years ago, come this August"; it is a whitewashed, double cabin set picturesquely amid shade trees and rock enclosed flower beds; a ravine divides the back premises from a beautiful hill-side clothed in growths of native forest oaks, dog-wood, and wild-flowers; a setting that could grace a mansion; she has electric lights, running water, and a phonography with many records of negro songs, spirituals, and sermons; they were given to her she says by "friends, chilluns, an' gran'chilluns when she expressed a wish for them during a serious illness; "dey did me mo' good dan all de doctors an' medicines."

One's attention is immediately attracted when entering the yard by her many flower beds surrounded by copings which she has built of native rocks, shells, bits of glass, discarded toys, and other odds and ends. She is very proud of them and delights to tell of the numbers of visitors who have come to see her rocks and flowers and to hear her tell of other days; she says: "Dese rocks is my pets; I'se always loved flowers and rocks, an' I'se been collectin' dem for nigh onto forty years; one time when I wuz very sick wid de brain fever, de doctor tole me he couldn't do nothin' more for me, an' fur me to stay out in de fresh air, an' not to study or do no work; so I got to ramblin' round over dese hills and gullies an' when I'd cum 'cross one ov dese curious rocks I'd manage somehow to git hit to de big road an' den I'd hail ennybody what cum along an' git dem to bring hit to town fer me. The Professors frum de University

have cum down here to look at my rocks, an' lots ov folks have tried to buy dem, but I wouldn't sell dem fer nothin' 'cause I loves dem. I guess dere must be more dan a truck load of dem. Professor Bondurant tole I wuz a scientist, an' why don' I cum up to de University an' go to school, but I tole him de doctor tole me not to go to no school. There's sumthin' of everything 'mong dese rocks an' I tells de Professors what dey looks lak to me an' dey ses: "You iz rite, Joanna, dey sho does." Now here is one dat looks lak a baby's shoe, an' dis one I calls my "deformed baby"; dis iz my gol'fish, an' dis one I calls my "Indian pot" - my husban' used hit ger hiz ash tray' here's a ham' here's one dat looks lak a man's face and head, an' I calls hit my "husban'" an' I'd ruther have him fer dese men ain't fittin' to have; dis one at least stays whar I puts him."

Now, Joanna, talk about yourself.

"Well ma'am, my name is Joanna Isom; I wuz born jus' befo' de war; Mister Jacob Thompson bought my mother an' my gran'mother in Georgia long befo' de War; my mother wuz named Amy; she wuz a "mollygascan" (Madagascan?) I have heared by gran'mother giv' de prescription ov her; she sed she wuz jus' too butiful; she was jet black, but her skin wuz as smoothe as mole-skin; her hair wuz perfectly straight an' hung down below her knees; she had large limbs, an' little han's an' feet - de men jus' fell on dere faces fer her; I don't know nuthin' 'bout my father, but dey tells me I has indian blood; when I wuz young my hair wuz red, but when I had de brain fever hit all cum out; hit has cum out four times in my life an' ever' time hit cums back darker."

"I was raised rite up in de house wid Miss Sallie - dat wuz Mr. Macon Thompson's wife; dey wuz de riches' white folks in town an' dey had lots ov slaves. Mister Macon giv' me to Miss Sallie when I wuzn't but three hours ole; hit wuz dis way: when one ov de slaves got sick dey had to get de marster's permission to have a doctor; when my mother wuz confined Mars' Macon bro't Dr. McEwen to see her an' he stayed rite dere; she wuz havin' convulsions an' befo' she died she giv' me to Mister Macon to raise rite; he wropped me up in a towel, an' put me in hiz overcoat pocket an' tuk me to Miss Sallie's room whar she wuz sick in bed an' he sed to her: "I bro't you sumthin' that I bet you aint never seen befo'; hit is a seven month's baby jus' three hours olde; I hasn't never had no toe nails to speak ov".

My gran'mother hoped raise me an' I used sit aroun' de fire at nite an lissen to her tell 'bout de things she sed her gran'mamy tol' her; she tol' 'bout how de slaves got into dis country; she sed de firs' africans cum followin' a red flag; she sed a white man cum over an' stayed long nuf to learn dere langwidge, an' den he ast dem if dey didn't want to go to a civilized country; an' den he wou'd sot on a log an sign dem up in a book; de bigges' day dey ever had in Africa wuz when dat draftin' of africans wuz fixin' to leave; dey put a piece of red flannel five yards long on a pole, lak a service flag, an' den dey histed hit up an' waved hit an' waved hit in de air an' de africans jus' rallied 'roun' hit an' followed dat flag; ef hit hadn't been for dat man my gran'mammy wouldn't have been in dis country."

"I wuz born after dey moved to Oxford; my gran'mammysed dey come on a boat" (In pioneer days Wyatt, an extinct town on the Tallahatchie river 10 miles north of Oxford was the port of entry for much of the commerce of the county)

"I wuzn't more dan give years ole when de yankees burnt Mister Jacob Thompson's fine house, but I remember well seein' dem, an' I have heared my gran'mammy tell how dey raided hit; she sed dey would take de very bes' things Miss Sallie had; dat's what made me so mad wid de nasty devils: 'scuse me; I know dey wuz white folks, but I don't keer ef dey wuz; dey didn't hav' no bizness to take Miss

Sallie's bes' homespun blankets, an' put dem on dere hosses fer saddle-blankets, an' dey tuk her fine silk dresses an' put dem on deyselves wid hoop skirts an' all, an' den dey hopped on dey hosses an' rid away, whoopin' an' hollerin' an' singin' -

"Yankee Doodle dandy

Buttermilk and brandy."

I didn't know no better dan to think hit wuz funny, an' I tho't dey wuz jus' havin' some fun, an' I laughed at dem; I couldn't understan' why ever'body wuz cryin'. I heard my gran'mammysay how a lot of de white folks saved dey silver; when Mr. Jacob Thompson heard de yankee wuz goin' to raid Oxford, he sont word to de white folks for miles 'round to bring dey silver to hiz house an' put hit in a big two room house he had; hit wuz a house fer de servants an' wuz big 'nuf to hol' four double beds; Mr. Cullin, an' Miss Pinkie Turner's father an' all de white folks put dey silver in boxes an' put dey names on hit, an' bro't hit in dey carriages an' put hit in one of de rooms; hit was full from flo' to ceilin' an' den he put one of de grannies wid a whole mes (mass) of chilluns in de oder room an' hung a curtain over hit an' den he put a sign on de do: "SMALL POX IN HERE" an' when de yankees cum de grannies had every thing hollerin' an' when de yankees saw dat sign dey cleared out."

"I married Henry Isom when I wuz 15 years ole; we wuz married in de parlor of Mr. Macon Thompson's home; I'se had ten chillun; I didn't want but two; dat wuz 8 too many; my husban' died 19 years ago an' I wouldn't look at no man livin'; dere aint nuthin' to dese men nohow, I tells you."

"I hav' been midwife, an' nuss, an' washerwoman; when I wuz little my granny taught me some ole, ole slave songs dat she sed had been used to sing babies to sleep ever since she wuz a chile. I used to sing dis one:

"Little black sheep, where's yo' lam'

Way down yonder in de meado'

The bees an' de butterflies

A-peekin' out hiz eyes

The poor little black sheep

Cry Ma-a-a-my."

Anudder one I sings to de chilluns goes lak dis:

"I know, I know dese bones gwine rize agin

Dese bones gwine rize agin

I heard a big rumblin' in de sky

Hit mus' be Jesus cummin' by

Dese bones gwine rize agen

Dese bones gwine rize agen.

I know, I know dese bones gwine rise agen
Dese bones gwine rize agin
Mind my brothers how you step on de cross
Yo' rite foot's slippin' and yo' soul will be los'
Dese bones gwine rize agin
Dese bones gwine rize agin."
Dis is anudder ole one:
"Preachin' time soon will be over all dis lan'
My Lord's callin' me an' I mus' go."

"When I wuz a chile de mammy's wou'l give us teas for de complaints; to keep de measles broke out she'd give us sheep pasture and cow pasture tea, wid whiskey in it; fer fevers dey would give dog-fennel tea; they'd bathe us wid it an' make us keep tanked up on it; an' hit would cool fevers jus' so nice; fer hackin' coughs an' hurtin' in de lungs dey giv' us molasses, an' hog hoof, an' fennel tea, an' hit wuz good fer de consumption; one time de chillun had de hoopin' cough in de winter an' it luk lak dey wuz goin' to die, but when spring cum as soon as dey got some dog-fennel and giv' dem dey didn't hav' no mo' trouble; anudder sumthin' dat is good for coughs is to git de inside bark from de north side of a chestnut tree an' make a tea; an' groun' up scalybarks goodies is good for coughs.

"Sum folks is skeered ov hants, but I aint skeered ov nothin' but de livin'; I wouldn't be skeered to go through no cemetery at night."

"I has tried all my life to liv' a 'spectable life an' serve de Lord; one night when I was very sick I ask'd de Lord to do what wuz bes'; I had stuck a black berry thorn in my thum' an' it got infested an' de doctor tol' me hit had to be taken off; when I ask'd de Lord to do what wuz bes' he appeared to me; he had a shinin' light 'round his head an' he sed to me: "Joanna diz is de Savior of de worl'; get up de Lord will provide; an' I got up shoutin' an' has been up ever since; anudder time I wuz sick an' I went rite up in heaven an' saw de angels playin' on golden strings stretched all over heaven; they wuz singin' "Happy Home; Sweet home; where never comes de night." My son cum in 'bout dat time an' heard me talkin' to de angels an' he jus' stud dere a-shakin' an' after he couldn't stop shakin' he started runnin' an' hit de steps so hard dey broke down; an' I aint never been able to fix dem; dat's de reason I hasn't got no front steps today."

Dey as'd me wuz dey ennything I wanted an' I tol' dem I wanted some records for to play sum of de good ole songs an' dey giv' me all dese records fur my fonygraf."

"I used to wash an iron fur some students at de University an' when I would take dere clothes to dem I w'uld talk to dem 'bout de Bible an' havin' faith ef dey wanted to go to heaven an dey would ast me: "Joanna, did yo' ever read in yo' Bible 'bout black angels in heaven?" an' I jus' stud on my indignity an'

sed: "Dere aint nothin' black in Heaven; everthing is pure white an' everbody iz pure an' white." I unnerstans 'most ever thing in de Bible 'cept dose "begats" lak Isaas begat Jacob."

"Atter de'pression hit an' I wuz sick an' near crazywid worryin' over losin' my home fur taxes - dey tole me dat hit wuz gone over de hall; Mister Stone sed he didn't no what to tell me for he wuz in de same fix; I made up some poetry, hit goes dis way:

"Out in de col', col' worl'

Out in de street

Askin' a penny frum each one I meet

Sadly I roam

When I knock on yo' do'

I'ze a weary one driven frum my home."

"Since I been doin' dis beggin' - dat's what I calls dis here "relief", I goes up to de office an' sees so many ole white folks what caint read an' write - dey don't know one single letter; I ses to myself; "White folks iz all born free how cum dey caint read an' write; hit looks lak sum body woul'd hev learned dem sumthin'. I ses: "Niggers aint de onliest fools in de worl."

"Dere aint no diffrunce twixt niggers an' white folks, 'cept dey color; white folks stays out of de sun, but ef you cuts dey finger, dey both bleeds alike; nationality wont let dem be de same; ef hit wuzn't fer station de worl' w'ud be better off; dats what makes dem have to stay on dey own side of de street."

"Befo' you go I wants you to hear my little gran'chilluns sing; Come here, Patricia an' Louise an' sing dat song - "That little light of mine; I'm gwine to let hit shine;" now say de Lord's Prayer fer de Lady. ...