

## Moses Lyles

### Interview with Moses Lyles, 81 years old

—*W.W. Dixon, Winnsboro, S.C.*

Moses Lyles lives in the section of Fairfield County that borders on Broad River. He lives in a two-room house, of the 'saddlebag' type, with his wife, Carrie, and his daughter, Carita. The home is the ordinary tenant house of a Negro in the South. Pictures, cut out of the illustrated Sunday editions of newspapers, are used to decorate the inside walls of the rooms. There are two windows to each room, which are closed with plank shutters. The floors are clean and yellowed from much scouring and sweeping. On the outside is a tiny walk to the house, bordered on either side by rows of jonquils. And about the yard are 'butter and egg' flowers, that were so much in vogue in slavery times.

"Yes sir, I was a slave. I b'long to Dr. John J. McMahon, dat is, my mammy was his cook. My father b'long to Marse Thomas Lyles. Deir plantations jined and folks could see 'cross de fields from one house to another. I never hear 'bout any trouble dat was caused by pappy comin' every so often to see and be wid my mammy.

"My mistress name Sarah. Her and Marster John was de father and mother of young Marster John J. McMahon, a lawyer. My old marster and mistress have two girls, Miss Annie and Miss Lillie, dat was livin' when Marster die. Just a few weeks after he die, here come young Marse John into a troubled land, in de last year of de war, '65. What you think of dat? Niggers 'low dat's what give him de power dat him have. You never hear 'bout dat? Well, they do say, when a male child come after de father's death, dat male child gwine to be a big man in all sorts of ways. How was him great? What did him do? Why everything. Widout a daddy and widout money, him got to be a 'fessor in de college and a lawyer. He tell de judge what's what in dat very court house over yonder. Git to be de head of all de teachers in de State and show them how to learn de chillun. He come back sometimes and show farmers how to farm. Know how to cure my dog of de mange, show my wife how to cure her chickens dat had de 'pip', and tell us what to do if ever a cow git sick wid de hollow horn or de hollow tail. Why, Marse John could count all de stars in de sky, tell you deir names while settin' on de top rail of de lot fence at night; git up de nex' mornin', look 'round and say whether it gonna rain or not, dat day. He not tell by de sky, but just go out, run his fingers through de grass, and dat grass tell him, somehow, it gonna rain or it not gonna rain. How him love dat old place, and de Salem cross road and Monticello. Him was riding high in de saddle of might and power down dere in Columbia. Him come home and say to me and Carrie: 'I love dis old place, wid its red hills and gullies, its pine trees, ash trees, hickory trees and scaly bark trees, de berry weeds and thistles 'bout de barnyard fence and I want to be buried up here, not in Columbia, so dat de weeds and grasses, dat I walk on when a boy, might grow over me when I's dead.' Then him say: 'Mose does you know how to castrate and spay pigs?' I say: 'I does not.' Him say: 'Time for you to learn.' Us and de hands go out to de lot and wid de guff, guff, guff and guffin' of de old hogs and de squealin' of de pigs, him take all patience and learn me spayance and castration.

"My pappy, as I might have told you, was Henry Lyles and my mammy, Mary Woodward. My brudders and sisters was John, Henry, Martha, Sallie, Jim, and de baby of all, Bill. Bill and me is de only ones livin'.

"One day I was plowin' 'long and a thinkin' a whole lot of foolishness 'bout social 'quality dat was bein' preached to us by de leaders of de Radical 'Publican party, which I b'longed to. Nigger men lak dat kinda talk, nigger women didn't lak it so much. They fear dat if nigger man have a chance to git a white wife, they would have no chance wid de nigger men. They was sure dat no white man would take a black wife, 'ceptin' it be a poor white trash man and then if they git one of them, him would beat her and work her harder than in slavery time.

"When I git to de end of de row, I say: 'Whoa!' I turns my back to de plowstock, ketches my hands on de handles and say to myself: 'De great Moses in de Bible have a black wife. What is good 'nough for him is just too good for me.' Then Carrie flit through my mind, as I see her de last time in a red pokeberry dyed dress, a singin': 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Jesus Gonna Carry Me Home'. Then I think 'bout dat word 'carry' in de tune and dat word 'home' in de song and dat word 'me' twist and 'tween them two words 'carry' and 'home', I says: 'Come 'round here, mule. Dat sun soon go down; ain't got long here for to stay. You got to eat and you's got to trot and I's got to ride. You's got to carry me to see Carrie.' I went dat night and ask her for to be my wife. Her say: 'Dis is mighty sudden, Mose. When de idea fust come to you?' Then I tell her and she laugh. What she laugh 'bout? Laugh at de fool things I tell her and de very joy of de moment.

"Us marry dat fall and have had nine chillun. Who they? Dere's Henry, Tozier, Lydia, McGee, Nancy, Tolliver, Bessie, May, and Carita. Carita name Carrie for her mammy but her loll it 'bout her tongue and change it to Carita.

"Old Marse Dr. John McMahan was of de buckra type. Freedom come too soon. De nigger was de right arm of de buckra class. De buckra was de horn of plenty for de nigger. Both suffer in consequence of freedom."