

# Mississippi Narratives

## Prepared by

### The Federal Writer's Project of The Works Progress Administration

### For the State of Mississippi

## Salem Powell

Foreword: Salem Powell, ex-slave, lives six miles east of Shivers Miss, on the Shivers and Hebron road. He was born about 1857, was owned during slavery time by John Powell, in the Dry Creek settlement. He is of medium size and height, enjoying very good health, and is active for his age.

"Mr. Powell was a kind an' 'siderate Master, he owned my pappy an' mamy fer years 'afore I was born. Dey was named Willis an' Nancy an' took de name Powell from Mars. Us ole slaves all come by us' names lak dat.

"Mars plantation was big, an' in dat good farmin' region 'round Dry Creek. He fed an' clo'sed us well an' had comfortable cabins fer us ter live in, but us was fed at Mar's house. Dey had a big fire-place in de kitchen, an' in de winter a big roarin' log fire would be a burnin', us was sat down 'round dat fire an' fed in big pans. All ob us would be eatin outen dem at de same time. Fer supper us was fed mos' ob de time, on pot licker an' bread an' milk. If us got hungry between meals us et baked sweet taters. Now, in de summer time us was fed out under de trees in de back yard.

"Us made up de things us played an' what us played wid. Us made slingshots an' pop-guns ter shoot sparrows wid. Us shot rocks, china balls an' paper spit balls. Den we'd git planks an' slide down steep hills; de pine straw would make 'em slick, an' us could go jist a sailin' down. Us kotched craw fish an' waded an' splashed in all de water us could find, an' clumb all de trees on dat plantation.

"I had to help look after de stock some too. I knows I'se run a thousand miles after calves and hogs, dey alwas' went de wrong way at de wrong time, an could git by yo' afore yo' all know hit. I usto hab ter open an shet dem big gates to drive 'em through. We'd swing on 'em too, when we thought nobody could see us.

De slaves was made ter go to der fields early in de monins', by de break ob day. In cotton pickin' time dey would pick in groups, an' sing, holler an' shout. When nite come on dey would be tired an' almos' gin out. After dey was fed hit would be to sultry ter go ter bed, so dey would lay 'round on de ground under de trees or on de gallery floo' ob de cabins, an when dey had fiddles and guitars dey would play an' sing nigger spirituals an' under songs dey made up.

I was too little ter jine in wid de frolics an' de merriment ob de day, but I can recollect 'em a gwine off in de woods at nite an' buildin' big fires an' buck dancin'. A nigger sho' can buck dance, an' is happy when he is cuttin' a few steps. De slaves had ter have passes ter go ter a frolic or any whar off de plantation. If dey won't in by a set time, de patrol riders would go after 'em. Some times when dey knowed dey had stayed ober deir time dey would stretch grape vines cross de road 'bout three feet from de ground, to trip de riders horses. Dat was fun ter see 'em fall an' hear 'em cuss. Dey neber could kotch up wid who done hit.

"When de war come on I was to little ter know much 'bout hit. 'Bout all I does know, is, dat eber thing began ter go ter rach an ruin. Us learned right quick ter dread de Calvermen. Dey keep on comin' through as long as de war lasted, a takin' an' destroying eber thing ter eat, an' all de good clo'se and de horses an' cattle.

"After us was freed, hit was a few years 'afore us got justed to lookin' out fer ourselves. Us sho' did miss de feelin' ob bein' taken care ob.

"I fell in love wid a purty gal when I was a young nigger. I sho' did hab ter do some fancy courtin' 'afore she'd eber say she'd hab me. I was jst as lovin' lak as could be, she still wouldn't say yes. I was 'bout ter gib up when she uped an' said, "yes". Us got married an' raised a big fambly 'afore she died. I married again 'bout twenty years ago, an' is a livin' wid my second wife now. I'se lived a long time an' seed a heap o' changes an' hopes ter live an' see mo' changes take place yet.