

Sallie Layton Keenan

Interview with Sallie Layton Keenan, 80 yrs. old

20 Calhoun St., Union, S.C.

—Caldwell Sims, Union, S.C.

'Aunt' Sallie (80 yrs. old) and 'Uncle' Robert live with their grandson. A daughter lives nearby. They like to tell of the days when they were children:

"Land o' de libbin, my maw, she wuz one o' de Hughes and Giles niggers. She used to lob to set down by de fire an' tell us younguns 'bout de times what de had down dar on de big ribber (Broad River). Our plantation, she used to say, wuz de one what de white folks called Mt. Drury. But when maw wuz rael young, jus big enough to wait on de fine white ladies, she wuz put on de 'block', you nos what dat wuz, and sold to Marse 'Matt' Wallace. Marse Matt took it into his haed dat he wuz a gwine to a place what dey calls Arkansas. His white folks, specially his wife's, dem wuz de Mengs, dey riz up an put forth mighty powferful objections. Fer a long time he wuz jus onsettled in he mind 'bout zactly what he really wuz a gwine to do.

"Peers to me like my maw 'lowed dat he sorter kept his intentions secret when he had rightly make up he mind 'bout de whole business. In dem days, dere wo'nt no trains like dare is now. Everbody had to ride in waggons, and de white ladies, dey allus rid in fine carriages. De chilluns, dey rid wid de wimmen folks. Our Marster, he rid high steppin' horse, cept on de Sabbath, when he rid wid de missus to meetin' house out on de creek. (Brown's Creek).

"Anyhow, one cold mornin' not long fore Christmas and jus atter Thanksgivin' us sot out fore day, or dat is, my maw and pa did, kaise I wuz not born till we got to Mississippi River. Dar wuz fo' in de white folks carriage—I is heered Maw tell it a thousand times, over and over—In de carriage dar wuz Missus; and de fo' chilluns, Jeanette, Clough, Winter and Ida. Marse Matt, he rid de horse right by de side o' de carriage. Paw—de call him 'Obie', he driv a waggin wid all de little nigger chaps in it dat wuz too little to walk. De big nigger boys and gals dat wuz strong, dey walked. De roads wuz jus narrow little trails wide enough fer de carriage and de waggin to git through de lins o' de trees. Dey would hit you in de face iff you didn't duck 'em, so maw allus 'lowed. Dey had pack mules dat fetched along de supplies, fer dey had to spen' de night in de thick woods what nebber had been cut. All kinds er varmints used to git atter dem and maw 'lowed dat dey wuz scared when dey sot camp, and she used to tremble mo' den she slep. When she did sleep, she 'lowed dat she drempt de awful varmints wuz a gittin' atter her. De missus, she wuz scared at night too. Marse Matt, he 'lowed he warn't one bit scared, but maw sat dat Missus say he jump powerful in he sleep sometimes.

"Marse Matt had done sot a task of so many miles fer dem to travel from sun-up to sundown, but maw 'lowed dat dey nebber did hardly git dat fer. De pack mules would git short winded, and sometime de carriage horses, dey would git lame; or one o' de waggin wheels would take and break; or it wuz allus some bad luck er follerin atter dem. Den Marse Matt, he 'lowed dat he didn't believe in no travelin' signs, and 'cause o' dat, maw 'lowed dat dey had de worstest kind o' luck. Dat is de reason dat de train did not git no further than 'Promoter' County, Miss. (Mr. Wallace really went to Como, Desoto County, Miss., verified by Mrs. J. Clough Wallace). It took dem fo' weeks to reach 'Promotor'. Dar dey set up de new home. Maw 'lowed dat dey wuz called tender footed poineers by dem what had got dar ahead of dem. Peers like maw 'lowed dat dey stayed dar five year. Anyway de fus year, a lot o' de niggers tuck all manner o' ailiments and dey died. De Missus, she kept full o' cold in dat log house. Dey had a fine house here, you nos de house what Miss Roberta Wallace libs in, well, dat wuz de one, cepin it wuz not as fine as Miss Roberta got it now. Anyway, maw and paw, dey didn't like it no better dan missus, cepin dey wuz skeered to speak dere minds. Finally, de Marster, he tuck down sick, and in spite o' all dat Missus do fer him, maw 'lowed he kept a growin' worsen and worsen till he tuck and died one bad night. Missus, 'Dandy' de Marster allus called her, had got so broke down wid worry and sorrow, dat she wuz nigh to death's door, herself, when de Marster died, maw said. Fer dat reason, dey kept it from her fer two weeks. Dey thought dat she wuz gwine to have de pneumonia, like him, but she started to gittin' well fore she tuck de pneumonia. Maw said dat dey used all o' de ole nigger remedies on de Missus dat dey knowed and fer dat reason dey brung her through. Maw is told me dem remedies but I is so ole now, dat I jus remembers dem. If Bob wuz at hissself he could give you some. You come by here some day when de moon is right and den Bob'll be in his right mind to tell you some o' dem.

"De Missus, she come back powerful slow, and it wuz mi' nigh Thanksgiving when she got strong. It wuz so cold dat she used to 'low how she wish fer her paws big warm fire, and de Carolina sunshine. So one bad morning, she took and got a letter from her paw in Union. He axed her to fetch us all back here to Union. It had done tuck de letter over three weeks to git to her. Long fore de Marster had died he had gib up hope er gwine to Arkansas. When dat letter rive, maw 'lowed dat de Missus she tuck and started to cryin'. All dat day she cry and read it over an over. De very next morning she called up all us, I wuz born den, and maw 'lowed dat I wuz a carrin' a sugar tit in my mouf and dat I had de cooter bones round my neck. Course I disremembers all cept dat what I is been told over and over. When maw and paw went out dar, dey had one little chile. He wuz six years ole when dey got back here. One had done tuck and died fore dey lef here. Den me and my sister, we wuz born in Miss.

"Dat wuz one glad day fer us, kaise Missus 'lowed dat she wuz a gwine back to her paw in Union. All de niggers, dey started to dancing and a hollerin' like dey wuz wile. Maw 'lowed dat some folks dat libbed three miles away tuck and come to see us. Some o' dem called us slackers, er sometin' kaise we wuz a leavin'; but others, maw 'lowed, dat dey wished dey could go as fer as Georgia wid us. But I is nebber liked Georgia myself. Missus gib de orders fer us to begin packin' and maw said dat de way dem niggers worked wuz a dyin' sin. De Missus, she sell her mules and other stock, kaise we wuz a gwine to ride all de way back on de railroad train. It had jus broke through to Miss. Some o' de ole niggers 'lowed dat dey wuz feered to ride on dem things, bein' as dey wuz drawed by fire. Dey thought de debbil, he wuz a workin' in de inside of dem. Maw 'lowed dat if de Missus wuz not feered she would not be. De Missus was feered 'bout dem dat wuz not gwine to ride on de train, but when she 'lowed dat dey could jus stay in Miss. Maw said dat dey nebber did hear no mo''bout dem bein' feered o' de train.

"Maw and paw allus tole me 'bout de things what I did on de train. I wuz so young dat I jus remembers anything about dat. She 'lowed dat she tuck de cooter bones from my neck fore we started to de train. Maw 'lowed dat when de train come up, dey wuz so scairt dat we did not want to git on till she did. All de niggers wuz looked up to when dey got back here, maw 'lowed, kaise no niggers in Union had ebber rid on de train ceptin dem dat had rid fer as Alston, and dey wuz so few dat you could count dem on your hand.

"Missus 'Dandy' come right back to her paw's house. He wuz Mr. Clough Meng. Missus Dandy's little boy, Clough, wuz big enough to go to school when dey got back. It wuz Christmas when dey got to 'Promotor' County, and it wuz Christmas when us rive back.

"When my paw, 'Obie', wuz a courtin, a nigger put a spell on him kaise he was a wantin' my maw too. De nigger got a conjure bag and drapped it in de spring what my paw drunk water from. He wuz laid up on a bed o' rheumatiz fer six weeks. Dey all knowed dat he wuz conjured. He could not even set up when his victuals wuz fetched to him. So his brother knowed who had put de spell on him. He tuck and went to another old conjure man and axed him to take dat spell off'n paw. De conjure man 'lowed to paw's brother dat a grapevine growed over de spring, and fer him to go dar and cut a piece of it six feet long and fetch it to his house at night. When he tuck it to de conjure man's house, de conjure man, he took de vine in a dark place and done somethin to it—de Lawd knows what. Den he tole my paw's brother to take it home and give it to paw. De man what put de spell on paw, I mean de nigger what had it done, he come often and set down by paw and ax him what was ailen him. Our conjure man, he tole paw dat de nex time de man come an' set down by his bed, fer him to raise up on his lef elbow and rech down by his bed and take dat piece o' grapevine and hit de nigger over de head and face. Den atter he had done dat, our conjure man 'lowed dat paw could den rise up from his bed o' rheumatiz.

"It wont long before de nigger come to visit my paw. My paw, he axed him real nice like to have a seat. His maw had done put a chair by de bed, so dat he would set down wid his face toward paw. Atter he and paw got to talkin, paw reched down an' axed him to have a look at de grapevine dat he was gwine to smoke fer his ailment. Dat nigger, he 'lowed to my paw dat it wuz not a goin to do his rheumatiz no good. Jus as he 'lowed dat, paw, he riz up on his lef shoulder and elbow and wid his right han' he let loose and come down over dat nigger's face and forehead wid dat grapevine. Dat nigger, he jump up and run out o' dat house a hollerin' kaise he knowed dat paw and done got de spell offin him. My paw got up de next day and dey 'lows dat he nebber did have no mo' rheumatiz."