

# Mississippi Narratives

## Prepared by

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

### For the State of Mississippi

## Tom Hunley

Yes'm, Miss, I does remember somethin' about de Old War --- not much 'cause I was jus' a chile six years old when Mr. Abe Lincoln sont for his soldiers to come back up Nawth.

My mammy she done tole me many a time --- I jus' buried her eight year ago, Miss --- she tole me many a time about Mr. Abe Lincoln stoppin' at her ol' marster's place. No, Miss, it weren't any place around here that Mr. Abe Lincoln came; it was way' down somewhere's where my mammy used to work at before I was born. Dis Delta was swamp an' canebrake den and mighty few plantations.

She remember Mr. Abe Lincoln, though. She was workin' in de cook-kitchen for her ole marster what gave her away later to ole Tom Hunley, my pappy. Dat's where I gets my name, Tom Hunley, from my ole slave pappy. Anyways, Mr. Abe Lincoln come down de river, a-workin'. My mammy tole me many a time what he had on: ole boots, ole huntin' cap, and his suit was --- well, it wasn't very much 'count. He et dinner with my mammy's ole marster and when he was gawn away he writ back. He writ back an' say: "Look like my rail-splittin's over." Last time he writ to my mammy's ole marster he say: "Now war is on us". Yes'm, he et dinner, an' he writ back.

When Mr. Abe Lincoln's soldiers come I was a li'l chile. My mammy was in Mr. Jim Baskin's cook-kitchen because my pappy was on Mr. Jim Baskin's place, an' she had been guv to my pappy by her ole marster. De soldiers had guns and dese long bay'nits. Dey let me look at 'em. Dey had canteens. I play wit de canteens like a chile will do, makin' pretend to drink out'n 'em. When de soldiers went away, ol' man Tom Hunley, my pappy, an' some other colored men went off wit' 'em. My pappy never did come back

no mo' after that. My mammy she stayed on at Mr. Jim Baskins place. Seem to me his place was down here close to Pochontas, Miss'ippi.

Den my mammy went in de cook-kitchen for Mister General Myer, and he brought us up de river to Holmes County. A man wit a ox wagon brought us to de river, an' den we got on de boat. She was de Lucy Kiern and I sho' remembers her well. We was on Mister General Myer's place den for a long time. He had some mighty big plantations In dem days we et ground corn meal and pickle pork meat. Us chilluns shoes had brass toes and dey was red rust leather. We couldn't wear 'em out. We could have worn our foots out sooner dan dem shoes. All we did was outgrow 'em.

When I was a man I holp to clean up Horseshoe. It was bad water no matter how big your skiff was, an' it was full of bad trees an' logs. You couldn't get acrosst Horseshoe anykind of way until we cleant it up.

Seem to me I 'member de ole days when I was jest a little chile better dan I doos de time after I was mangrown. I jest been here in de Delta ever since I come up de river on de ole Lucy Kiern, workin' here and there for folks mostly in an' abouts Greenwood until now I'se a ole man. Ole Tom was what white folks called me, or Uncle Tom. Dat's what dey called me until Mr. J.P. come along, and he changed my name when he put me in de newspaper.

Yes'm! Yes, ma'am! Mr. J.P. really did stay here in Greenwood once. You say you heard dat an' didn't know whether to believe or not? Well, yes ma'am he was here sho nuff. Dat's been somethin' like twenty-five year ago. He had a office over de Crumont --- does you remember de Crumont? You mus' have been jest a li'l chile when it closed up. Well, upstairs, dat was where Mr. J.P. had his office --- leastways his li'l room where he did his drawin' at. Twan't no regular office. I cleant up that place in dem days, an' I come trompin' up de stairs wit my mop an' bucket de fust time Mr. J.P. ever seed me. He cotch one glimpse of me, an' he jump an' holler: "Bless goodness, uncle! You stand right there 'til I can git yo' picture." Den he hole up his fingers like dis and squinch he eye at me, and fus' thing I knowed he had my picture.

"Now," he says, "I got to get a name for you." And sho nuff, I'se comin' up de stairs one day a-gnawin' on a big ham-bone what a white lady had guv me.

"I got it!" he hollers, "Hambone! From now on yo' name is Hambone!" An' dats what I been ever since, wit my picture in de Commercial A-peal ever' morning. Mr. J.P. he went on back to Memphis, and he dead now, but Young Mister an' his momma what was Mr. J.P.'s lady, dey draws my picture now. Hambone! Yassuh, Mr. J.P. Alley was sho one fine young white man.

I'se an ole man, but I works all de time. You see me 'round about town wit my little cart what I pushes. works for thirteen differunt places. You heard me say dat over de radio? Well, now! I night-watches an' I cleans up an' does some other things, but I has thirteen jobs.

My chillun? You heard Mr. Bob ask me about dat or de radio too? Yessum, I has thirty-five chilluns an' I has to rent two houses to keep 'em in. My youngest, he three year old. Twenty of 'em is twins. All dis is what I went to New York to tell over de radio when Mr. Bob Ripley sont for me. I sho was skeered. Mr. Bob, he call me "Mr. Hunley", and I didn't know who he was talkin' to. If he had of said "Hambone" den I would have knowed he meant me. Yessum, I think ever'body back here in Greenwood musta been listenin' to Mr. Bob's Believe It Or Not jest to see what ole Hambone was a-goin' to say for hisself.

De big town? Miss, dat New York musta been built by de Lawd. I don't see how mens could ha' made dem gret big buildin's. It look mo' like de work of de Lawd to me.

I mought go back sometime on account of dem colored folks up dere in Harlem what want me to preach to 'em; but I sho was glad to get back to de Delta. I preaches here to de bound men in de jailhouse. Dat's what de good Jesus tole us to do. He say he come to call not de righteous but de sinners to repentance.

Dem colored people in New York needs de word of de Lawd. Dey got dat Father Devine a-preachin' all kinds of stuff to 'em, and it ain't a word of truth in what he preach. I met dat man and he shook my hand, but he ain't a man to trus'. He takin' dem po' folks money and dey labor fer hisself an' not for de Lawd.

No ma'am, I wouldn't be scared to preach to all dem colored folks up dere. Dey's lots of 'em but de good Jesus ain't say to preach nohow, he say to go befo' de people and speak de word of de Lawd what's in yo' heart an' what you know is true. Dat Devine, he hard on dose po' folks, and I'se feared dey ain't no truth 'bout him Yessum, I may go back.

Dere ought to be a whole heap mo' to tell, Miss, but I misremembers so much mo' dan I can tell. Mr. Abe Lincoln's war ... dat ole Lucy Kiern at de dock ... Mr J.P. a-pointing his pencil at me .... New York and Mr. Bob .... An' mo' dan dat, Miss, heaps mo' dan dat.

You's mo' dan welcome, Miss. Yes ma'am; thank you, ma'am.

(Hambone's characteristic reply to a greeting from his white friends is: "Yes, sir, thank you, sir! Thank you!" accompanied by bows which literally bend him double in spite of his age.)

Interviewer's notes:

Old Tom Hunley of Greenwood, Mississippi whose parents were slaves, and who was a slave himself as a child, is the original of the cartoon character "Hambone" whose philosophies are daily features of the Commercial Appeal and other papers.

The old negro first met J.P. Alley when the great cartoonist was a young man and comparatively unknown. In him, the artist immediately recognized a remarkable character, and his forthcoming "Hambone" is a faithful portrayal of the kindly, bald-headed, little old darkie. Also, "Hambone" of the newspapers speaks in the same humorously philosophical tone as the original. Pushing his little cart around the main streets, "Hambone" is a familiar landmark to Deltans as well as to Greenwood citizens. In the fall of 1936, Robert Ripley of the radio sent for "Hambone" to appear on his Believe It Or Not program. For two or three weeks after his return, the poor old darkie was swamped under swarms of his "white folks" who had to hear his personal impressions of New York.

"Hambone" is copyrighted as a character by Mrs. Alley, widow of the cartoonist, and her son J.P. Jr. who are carrying on the work of drawing the newspaper feature. Ripley was not allowed to use the copyrighted name in his broadcast, but was confined to "Hambone's" Believe It Or Not progeny and jobs. For that reason, it may not be possible to refer to Tom Hunley in a publication by his famous nickname.