

Billy Abraham Longslaughter

Interview with Billy Abraham Longslaughter

—*F.L. Diard, [HW: Mobile?]*

HE CANED A CHAIR FOR PRESIDENT BUCHANNAN

On a bright April afternoon, while strolling along the Louisville and Nashville banana wharf and watching the crisp breezes from the gulf make small waves lick at the pilings, I met an old Negro man who was fishing for croakers off the pier. He had, sitting beside him, a basket containing wicker canes for making and repairing chairs. In the course of our conversation, I asked him his age.

"I'se eighty year old, white folks," he replied.

"Well," I said, "you must have been a slave back in the days before the war."

"Yassuh, boss. I were eight year old when Gen'l Grant freed de niggers." He spoke the words in a clear, strong voice and with a slight rolling motion of his gray bristly head.

"But General Grant didn't free the slaves, Uncle," I protested.

"Oh, yassuh he did too, white folks," he said respectfully; fo' I was right dere when de gen'l come into Richmond and sot us free."

"What about Abraham Lincoln?" I asked.

"Well, I guess he done a part of it, but he didn't do no fightin', kaze he hadda 'tend to de business in de White House. He lef' de freein' part to Gen'l Grant. I don' guess Mr. Abe lived long enough ter help us niggers much. He went to de Ford's Circus and got hisse'f shot."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Billy Abraham Longslaughter. De niggers all calls me Billy, but ole Massa Longslaughter afore he died called me William."

"Where were you born, Uncle Billy?"

"On ole Massa Longslaughter's plantation near Richmond Virginny."

"Can you read and write?"

"Dey neber teach me no readin' and writin' kaze I had to work in de fields." His rusty hand rubbed across his woolly head, as my questions continued with the regularity of a metronome; nevertheless, Uncle Billy seemed always glad to answer them. I couldn't help but notice with what ease he moved about. He had the agility of a man twenty years his Junior, though his face, being caverned with wrinkles, gave him the appearance of great age.

"Where is your home now, Uncle Billy?" I continued.

"Most any place I goes, white folks. Ma wife, she died 'bout forty year ago in Virginny, and I been a trabelin' eber since."

"What do you do for a living besides fish?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "I canes a few chairs," pointing to his basket of chair-canes beside him on the stringer of the wharf. "You see, white folks, when all dis repression came on an' dere war'n't no work fo' de people tuh do, jes lak all de young scallawags I hops me a train and goes on a trip."

"Where do you go next, Uncle Billy?"

"Well, I guess I mought run ober to New Orleans if I can catch me a freight train a goin' dat away."

"About your fixing chairs," I said. "Have you ever repaired any for well known people?"

"Lor', white folks, I caned a chair oncet fo' President Buchanan and he used it ter sit on in de White House. I'se made many a chair fo' famous people as I trabeled about. I guess I jus' keep on a goin' as long as I'se able, and when I goes on dat last trip across de quiet riber, I'se goin' ter make one for ole Gabriel, so's he can res' hisself in between times he blows on dat hawn."