

Charlie Van Dyke

Personal conversation with Charlie Van Dyke

713 S. Lawrence street, Mobile, Ala.

—Written by Mary A. Poole

IT TOOK \$50.00 TO PUT UNCLE CHARLIE ON DE FLOOR!

An old colored man, named Charlie Van Dyke, living at 713 S. Lawrence street, Mobile, Ala. claims to be 107 years old, but he has no authentic record of his birth. He told the writer he was born in North Carolina, and when he was ten years old, Mr. William Martee King, who owned his mother, "Nellie Drish", moved to Tuscaloosa, Ala., where the King family remained about a year, moving then from Tuscaloosa down into Dallas County, near Selma, Ala.

While Mr. and Mrs. King and their family remained in Tuscaloosa, Charlies mother Nellie Drish met and married William Van Dyke, who belonged to the Van Dykes, who owned the neighboring plantation.

Charlie assumed his step-father's name, but knew little of him, or of the Van Dykes to whom his step-father belonged, because, as Charlie explained to the writer, after the Kings moved down in Dallas County, (as Charlie always referred to his home in Alabama) and brought his mother Nellie and her family with them, his stepfather could only visit them once a year, and that privilege was given him on Christmas Day. He had to start back the next day, as he had to make the trip to and fro on horse back.

Uncle Charlie said the Kings owned about a thousand acres in Dallas County and had about a hundred head of slaves, but with all their riches they lived in a plain plank house.

He smiled and said, "Now-a-days folks passing such a house, would say 'Colored folks live there.'"

The slave quarters were the regular log wood cabins, said Uncle Charlie, with space between each row and a little plot of ground to separate each cabin to itself.

Uncle Charlie said his mother cooked for the white folks, and sometimes she didn't get down to their cabin but on Sunday afternoon, that he being the oldest had to look after the younger children, and that he was never required to do heavy work as he broke his leg when a boy, so the folks let him just work around the yard and look after his sisters and brothers and also the other slave children.

Uncle Charlie said Mr. King traveled a lot, went to France once, that took almost a year and the overseer had full charge and he was mean and made everybody stand around. He even made the slaves shuck corn on Sundays, each had their allotted amount to shuck before they could stop.

When the writer asked about church on the plantation, Uncle Charlie replied: "Church was what they called it but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal.

Nothing about Jesus was ever said, and the overseer stood there to see the preacher talked as he wanted him to talk."

The only day that Uncle Charlie said they were given any real holiday was Christmas, everybody got his drink of whiskey on Christmas, and not another drink until next Christmas, "it sure seemed a long time between drinks", added Charlie with a smile.

Uncle Charlie said they did let you have a funeral when some one died, they made the coffin on the plantation and carried it by hand to the graveyard, singing as they went along. He tried to recall the hymns, but all he could chant in a sing-song way was,

Last word he said was about Jerusalem

And he traveled along to the grave!

When asked about war days, Uncle Charlie was first on the Confederate side, then on the Northern side, and he seemed somewhat bewildered about it all, he said he saw a stockade, as he called it, in Selma, Ala., and he remembered food stuff being sent to the soldiers, and also recalled the Yankees coming, and a Captain coming up the road and telling them the soldiers were coming. Uncle Charlie said the colored folks thought the Captain had to go back North before they came back, but in a flash like lightening there they were, hundreds of them, and they scared folks so bad some of them jumped in the river and tried to swim across and those that couldn't, they just drowned.

When the writer tried to check up on Uncle Charlie's age, asking him how old he was when the war started, he replied:

"I dont know but I was a man long afore it all started, lady, and I was thirty-three years old when I married 'bout a year after the surrender."

When asked why he waited so long to get married, Uncle Charlie said:

"Didn't you know in slavery days they wouldn't allow a man to marry unless he could split a hundred rails a day?"

The writer smiled and said:

"Now, Uncle Charlie," and then he chuckled, and said:

"Well, I guess the right one didn't come 'long till I met her."

When asked if he had a regular wedding feast, he replied.

"Yes, lady, it took \$50.00 to put me on the floor."

Charlie and Theresa had "five head of children", as Uncle Charlie expressed it, of which three are dead and two living, but he claims his children do not look after him, but his church folks and friends give him the helping hand. He is a member of the St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, of Mobile.

Uncle Charlie says he has his religion from the foregone prophets, that he "don't understand this day religion", that he came along when people were serving Daniel's God, and when people had to be born again, now they serve a sanctified God and jump from one religion to another.

Uncle Charlie finished the interview by saying, "Lord teach me how to pray, And teach me to love it woo."