

## Cheney Cross

# Interview with Cheney Cross

—Annie D. Dean

## *GITTIN' MY PENSION*

From all accounts, Aunt Cheney Cross must be quite ninety years old. "In jevin' de war," she says, "I had done long pass my thirteenth birthday." Today Aunt Cheney is a true reflection of slavery days and the Southern mammy.

Away from highways and automobiles, she lives several miles from Evergreen on a small farm in the piney woods with her "baby boy."

Talk with Aunt Cheney reveals that Evergreen's city marshall, Harry L. Riley, "put out to hope" this old family servant who had "tended" to his father, George Riley; his mother, "Miss Narciss," and "Miss Lizzible," his sister. She also helped bring his own "chillun" into the world.

Aunt Cheney had promised Mr. Riley that she would come in town on a certain Saturday morning in May, 1937, and would bring a letter from her young "mistis" for me to read.

It was past noon on that particular Saturday when she came up the back steps, a little out of breath, but smiling. "Lawd, honey," she said, "here 'tis pas' dinner time an' I 'se jes' makin' my arrivement here. No'm, I don't wants no dinner, thank you jes' de same. Whut makes me so late here now, I stopped by Miss Ella Northcutt's. She's my folks too, you know, an' she done made me eat all I kin hole! No'm, honey, I can't eat no cabbage. Me an' cabbage never is set horses together much, but I will thank you for the ice tea."

Settling herself down in a low chair, she sighed and began taking off her shoes. "Honey, you don't mind ef I resses my feets does you? My white folks is sp'ilin' me here today. I'll be lookin' for it tomorrow, too, an' I won't be gittin' it." Her black eyes twinkled in her shiny, old, wrinkled face as she talked on.

"I tole Mr. Harry I 'se comin'. An' here I is! How'd I come? I come on Mack and Charlie, dat's how! Yes, ma'am! Dese two boys here, dey brung me." Pushing her feet out for inspection, she leaned forward, smiling and pleased. "Dese here foots, dey's Mack an' Charlie. Dey's my whole pennunce for gittin' about. Don't you worry none. Mr. Harry he'll git be back home 'gainst dark come on.

"Lawd, honey, I don't want to know no better folks'n Mr. Harry an' Miss Emma. I follow dem good folks clean up to Muscle Show! Yessum, I sho' did. At fust, I tole'm I couldn't go nohow. But dey pull down on me so hard, look lack I couldn't he'p myself.

"I stayed on up dere at Muscle Show twell I got so homesick to see my baby boy I couldn't stan' it no mo'. Now, cose, my baby boy he was den de father of his own, a boy an' a girl, but to me dat boy is still jes' my baby, an' I had to come on home."

Aunt Cheney's little, old body shook with laughter as she leaned back and said: "Yes, ma'am! I ain't been home no time atall neither, 'twell here come Mr. Harry back to Evergreen wid his own self. Yes, Lawd! I kin see'm now, comin' up de big hardwood road, his haid raired back, asmokin' a sugarette lack he's a millinery! Lawd, Lawd! Me nor Mr. Harry neither one ain't never gona be contentious nowheres but right here. An' dat's de Gawd's trufe!

"Iffen Mr. Harry hadn't come on back here, I never woulda seed no pension. Dat's de Gawd's trufe, too. Nobody here didn't know my eggzack age, cause dis wasn't my originally home. All dem whut did know close onto my age done died out an' I knows it. So when Mr. Harry put out to hope me, I says in my heart 'Thank Gawd!'

"I tole Mr. Harry dat iffen anybody in de world knowed my age, it was my young mistis, an' I didn't know eggzackly where she at, but her papa was Captain Purifire (Purifoy). Back yonder he was de madistra of our town, an' he had all of dem lawin' books. I figgered dat my birthright would be down in one of dem books. I knowed in reason dat my mistis still got dem books wid her, 'cause dey ain't been no burnin's dat I done heard about. I knowed, too, dat Mr. Harry was gona fine out where she at.

"I 'members Captain Purifire jes' lack a book. I does dat! Now, cose, when he come on in home from de war he didn't 'zackly favor hisse'f den, 'cause when I seed him comin' roun' de house he look so ragged an' ornery I tuck him for de ole Bad Man hisse'f. I tuck out behind de smoke house, an' when I got a good look at him th'ew a crack it look lack I could recognize his favor, but I couldn't call his name to save my life. Lawd, honey! He's a sight! All growed over an' bushy! You couldn't tell iffen he's man or beas'. I kep' on alookin' whilst he's comin' roun' de corner, an' den I heard him say 'Cheney, dat you?' I'se so happy, I jes' melt down."

Aunt Cheney was really living over her past. "You see, it's lack dis," she said: "My fore parents, dey was bought. My Mistis an' my daddy's mistis, too, was Miss Mary Fields, an' my daddy was Henry Fields. Den de Carters bought my daddy from Miss Mary Fields. Well, dey mix up an' down lack dat, twell now my young mistis, what used to be little Frances Purifire, she's married to Mr. Cunningham.

"I was brung up right in de house wid my white folks. Yessum, I slep' on de little trundler bed what pushed up under de big bed, in durinst de day. I watched over dem chillun day an' night. I washed 'em an' fed 'em an' played wid 'em. One of de babies had to take goat's milk. When she cry, my mistis say, 'Cheney, go on an' git dat goat.' Yes Lawd! An' dat goat sho' did talk sweet to dat baby! Jes' lack it was her own. She look at it an' wag her tail so fas' an' say: "Ma-a-a-a-a!" Den she lay down on de flo' whilst us holes her feets an' let de baby suck de milk. All de time dat goat bees talkin', 'Ma-a-a-a-a,' twell dat baby got satchified.

"When us chillun got tuck wid any kind of sickness or zeezes, us tuck azzifzity an' garlit. You know, garlit what smell lack onions. Den we wore some roun' us necks. Dat kep' off flu-anz.

"Dese days it look lack somepin t'eat don't tas'e lack dat we cooked back yonder. De coffee us used had to be fresh groun' ever' day. An' when it commence to bile, I put dese here knees down on de flo' befo' de fire an' stir dat coffee for de longes'. Den my gran'ma she hung dat pot up on dem pot hooks over de

fire an' washed de meat an' drap it in. Time she done pick an' overlook de greens an' den wrinched 'em in spring water, de meat was bilin'. Den she take a great big mess of dem fresh turnip greens an' squash 'em down in dat pot. Dey jes' melt down an' go to seasonin'.

"Nex' thing I knowed, here come my mistis, an' she say: 'Now Cheney, I wants some pone bread for dinner.' Dem hick'ry coals in dat fire place was all time ready an' hot. They wouldn't be no finger prints lef' on dat pone when Cheney got th'ew pattin' it out neither. Better not! Look lack dem chillun jes' couldn't git 'nuff of dat hard corn bread.

"Plenty of fancy cookin' went on 'roun' dat fire place, but somehow de pot licker an' pone bread longside wid de fresh buttermilk stirs my mem'ry worse'n anything.

"All dis good eatin' I 'se speakin' 'bout tuck place befo' de Yankees raided us. It was den, too, dat my mistis tuck me down to de spring back of de house. Down dere it was a holler tree stump, taller'n you is. She tell me to clam' up to de top of dat holler tree, den she han' me a big heavy bundle, all wropped up an' tied tight. Hit sho' was heavy! Den she say: 'Drap it in, Cheney.' I didn't know den whut she's up to, but dat was de silver an' jew'lry she was hidin'.

"Yes honey, I 'members dat Yankee raid lack it was jes' yistiddy. I 'se settin' dere in de loom room, an' Mr. Thad Watts' lil' gal, Louise, she's standin' at the winder. She say: 'O-o-oh! Nannie! Jes' look down yonder!' 'Baby, what is dat?' I says. 'Dem's de Yankees comin'!' 'Gawd hep us!' I says, an' befo' I kin ketch my bref, de place is kivered. You couldn't stir 'em up wid a stick. Feets sounded lack mutterin' thunder. Dem bayonets stick up lack dey jes' setting on de mouf of dey guns. Dey swords hangin' on dey sides singin' a chune whilst dey walk. A chicken better not pass by. Iffen he do, off come his head!

"When dey pass on by me, dey put' nigh shuck me outa my skin. 'Where's de men's?' dey say an' shake me up. 'Where's de arms?' Dey shake me twell my eye balls loosen up. 'Where's de silver?' Lawd! Was my teefs drappin' out? Dey didn't give me time to ketch my bref. All de time, Miss Mary jes' look 'em in de eye an' say nothin'!

"Dey tuck dem enfield rifles, half as long as dat door, an' bus' in de smoke house winder. Dey jack me up off'n my feet an' drag me up de ladder an' say: 'Git dat meat out.' I kep' on th'owin' out Miss Mary's hams an' sawsidges, twell dey holler 'stop'. I come backin' down dat ladder lack a squirrel, an' I ain't stop backin' twell I retch Miss Mary.

"Yes, Lawd! Dem Yankees loaded up a waggin full of meat an' tuck de whole barrel of 'lasses! Takin' dat 'lasses kilt us chillun! Our mainest 'musement was makin' 'lasses candy. Den us cake walk 'roun' it. Now dat was all gone. Look lack dem sojers had to sharpen dey swords on ever'thing in sight. De big crepe mullen bush by de parlor winder was bloomin' so pink an' pretty, an' dey jes' stood dere an' whack off dem blooms lack folkses heads drappin' on de groun'.

"I seed de sargeant when he run his bayonet clean th'ew Miss Mary's bestest feather bed an' rip it slam open! Wid dat, a win' blowed up an' tuck dem feathers ever' which away for Sunday. You couldn't see where you's at. De sargeant, he jes' th'owed his head back an' laugh fit to kill hisse'f. Den fust thing next, he done suck a feather down his win'pipe! Lawd, honey, dat white man sho' struggled. Dem sojers th'owed water in his face. Dey shuck'm an' beat'm an' roll'm over, an' all de time he's gettin' limberer an' bluerer. Den dey jack him up by his feets an' stan'm on his haid. Den dey pump him up an' down. Den dey shuck'm twell he spit. Den he come to.

"Dey didn't cut no mo' mattrusses. An' dey didn't cut nothin' much up in de parlor, 'cause dat's where de lieutenant an' de sargeant slep'. But dey lef' de nex' day, de whole place was strewed wid mutilation.

"I 'members well back dere in jwin' de war how ever' oncet a month that come 'roun' a big box, longer'n I is an' wider too, was tuck to our sojer boys on de battle fiel'. You never seed de lack of sawsidges dat went in dat box! Wid cake an' chicken an' pies, an' Lawd! de butter all rolled up in corn shucks to keep it fresh. Ever'body from ever'where come to fix dat box an' he'p pile in de stuff. Den you hear 'em say: 'Poor sojers! Put it in here!' Den ever'thing look sorta misty, an' dey haids droop over, lack. Den you see a mother's bres' heave wid her silent prayer.

"Directly atter de surrender, de Ku Kluxes sho' was bad atter de Yankees. Dey do all sorts of things to aggrivate 'em. Dey's continual' tyin' grape vines crost de road, to git 'em tangled up an' make 'em trip up an' break dey own necks. Dat was bad too, 'cause dem poor Yankees never s'picioned no better'n dat dem vines jes' blowed down or somepin.

"Long about den, too, seem lack ha'nts an' spairits was ridin' ever'thing! Dey raided mostly 'roun' de grabeyard. Lawd, honey, I ain't hankerin' atter passin' by no grabeyards. 'Cose, I knows I got to go in dere some day, but dey do make me feel lonesome an' kinder jubus.

"I 'members one night, way back dere, when I'se walkin' down de big road wid Bud, an' he say: 'Look! Didn't you see me give dat road? Dat ha'nt done push me clean outa my place.' Now let me tell you somepin. Iffen you ain't never been dat clost to a ha'nt, you don't know nothin'! I 'lowed he gwine follow me home. When I got dere I shuck mustard seeds down on my flo'. When you sprinkles 'em lack dat he can't git outa dat room twell he done count ever' las' one of dem seed. Well sir, de nex' mawnin' all us could see was somepin lack a lump of jelly layin' dere on de flo' 'mongst dem seeds. Look lack he done counted hisse'f to a pulp.

"After dat night, I puts a big sifter down at my do'. You know ha'nts has to count ever' hole in dat sifter befo' dey can come th'ough. Some folks puts de Bible down dere, too. Den de poor spairit has to read ever' word of dat book befo' he crosses over.

"I reckon 'bout de terriblest thing ever happen to me was dat big lookin' glass. De lookin' glass was all laid out in de top of my trunk, waitin' for my weddin' day. One night I'se standin' by de trunk wid hit wide open. I seed somepin black befo' my eyes an' den a screech owl lit in my winder an' screech right in my face. I'se so scared I sot right down in de middle of dat lookin' glass. Hit bus' in a million pieces! Mamma th'owed up her han's an' holler, 'Git up from dere, gal. You gona have seven years of bad luck. Shoo dat hootin' owl away befo' you dies in your tracks!' Den I swoons off. I feels dem ha'nts gittin' ready to ride me clean down in my grabe. 'Bout den somepin kep' sayin' to me, over an' over: 'Th'ow dem pieces of lookin' glass in runnin' water.' Den hit say: 'Burn your mammy's ole shoe an' de screech owl leave.' Atter I does dat my min' was at res'.

"Soon as my daddy hear 'em firin' off for de Surrender, he put out for de plantation where he fust belong. He lef' me wid my mistis at Pine Flat, but 'twan't long twell he come back to git me an' carry me home wid him. I hates to leave my mistis, an' she didn't want to part from me. She say: 'Stay here wid me, an' I'll give you a school learnin'.' She say to Captain Purifire: 'You go buy my li'I nigger a book. Git one of dem Blue Back Websters,' she say, 'so I kin eddicate her to spell.' Den my daddy say: 'Her mamma tole me not to come home widout her an' she has to go wid me.'

"I never will fergit ridin' behin' my daddy on dat mule way in de night. Us lef' in sich a hurry I didn't git none of my cloze hardly, an' I ain't seed my mistis from dat day to dis