

Autobiography of Elizabeth Sparks

(Interviewed at Matthews Court House, Virginia January 13, 1937. By Claude W. Anderson.)

Come in boys. Sure am glad ter see ya. You're lookin' so well. That's whut I say. Fight boys! Hold em! You're doin' alright. Me, I'm so mean nothin' can hurt me. What's that! You want me to tell yer 'bout slavery days. Well I kin tell yer, but I ain't. S'all past now; so I say let 'er rest 's too awful to tell anyway. Yer're too young to know all that talk anyway. Well I'll tell yer some to put in yer book, but I ain'ta goin' tell yer the worse.

My mistress's name was Miss Jennie Brown. No, I guess I'd better not tell yer. Done forgot about dat. Oh well, I'll tell yer. Some, I guess. She died 'bout four years ago. Bless her. She 'uz a good woman. Course I mean she'd slap an' beat yer once in a while but she warn't no woman fur fighting fussin' an' beatin' yer all day lak some I know. She was too young when da war ended fur that. Course no white folks perfect. Her parents a little rough. Whut dat? Kin I tell yer about her parents? Lord yes! I wasn't born then but my parents told me. But I ain't a goin' tell yer nuffin. No I ain't. Tain't no sense fur yer ta know 'bout all those mean white folks. Dey all daid now. They many good I reckon. Leastways most of 'em got salvation on their death beds.

Well I'll tell yer some, but I ain'ta goin' tell yer much more. No sir. Shep Miller was my master. His ol' father, he was a tough one. Lord! I've seen 'im kill 'em. He'd git the meanest overseers to put over 'em. Why I member time after he was dead when I'd peep in the closet an' jes' see his old clothes hangin' there an' jes' fly. Yessir, I'd run from them clothes an' I was jes' a little girl then. He wuz that way with them black folks. Is he in heaven! No, he ain't in heaven! Went past heaven. He was clerk an' was he tough! Sometimes he beat 'em until they couldn't work. Give 'em more work than they could do. They'd git beatin' if they didn't get work done. Bought my mother, a little girl, when he was married. She wuz a real Christian an' he respected her a little. Didn't beat her so much. Course he beat her once in a[51] while. Shep Miller was terrible. There was no end to the beatin' I saw it wif my own eyes.

Beat women! Why sure he beat women. Beat woman jes' lak men. Beat women naked an' wash 'em down in brine. Some times they beat 'em so bad, they jes' couldn't stand it an' they run away to the woods. If yer git in the woods, they couldn't git yer. Yer could hide an' people slip yer somepin' to eat. Then he call yer every day. After while he tell

one of colored foreman tell yer come on back. He ain'ta goin' beat yer anymore. They had colored foreman but they always have a white overseer. Foreman git yer to come back an' then he beat yer to death again.

They worked six days fum sun to sun. If they forcin' wheat or other crops, they start to work long 'fo day. Usual work day began when the horn blow an' stop when the horn blow. They git off jes' long 'nuf to eat at noon. Didn't have much to eat. They git some suet an' slice a bread fo' breakfas. Well, they give the colored people an allowance every week. Fo' dinner they'd eat ash cake baked on blade of a hoe.

I lived at Seaford then an' was roun' fifteen or sixteen when my mistress married. Shep Miller lived at Springdale. I 'member jes' as well when they gave me to Jennie. We wuz all in a room helpin' her dress. She was soon to be married, an' she turns 'roun an' sez to us. Which of yer niggers think I'm gonna git when I git married? We all say, "I doan know." An' she looks right at me an' point her finger at me like this an' sayed "yer!" I was so glad. I had to make 'er believe I 'us cryin', but I was glad to go with 'er. She didn't beat. She wuz jes' a young thing. Course she take a whack at me sometime, but that weren't nuffin'. Her mother wuz a mean ol' thin'. She'd beat yer with a broom or a leather strap or anythin' she'd git her hands on.

She uster make my aunt Caroline knit all day an' when she git so tired aftah dark that she'd git sleepy, she'd make 'er stan' up an' knit. She work her so hard that she'd go to sleep standin' up an' every time her haid nod an' her^[52] knees sag, the lady'd come down across her haid with a switch. That wuz Miss Jennie's mother. She'd give the cook jes' so much meal to make bread fum an' effen she burnt it, she'd be scared to death cause they'd whup her. I 'member plenty of times the cook ask say, "Marsa please 'scuse dis bread, hits a little too brown." Yessir! Beat the devil out 'er if she burn dat bread.

I went wif Miss Jennie an' worked at house. I didn't have to cook. I got permission to git married. Yer always had to git permission. White folks 'ud give yer away. Yer jump cross a broom stick tergether an' yer wuz married. My husband lived on another plantation. I slep' in my mistress's room but I ain't slep' in any bed. Nosir! I slep' on a carpet, an' ole rug, befo' the fiahplace. I had to git permission to go to church, everybody did. We could set in the gallery at the white folks service in the mornin' an' in the evenin' the folk held baptize service in the gallery wif white present.

Shep went to war but not for long. We didn't see none of it, but the slaves knew what the war wuz 'bout. After the war they tried to fool the slaves 'bout freedom an' wanted to keep 'em on a workin' but the Yankees told 'em they wuz free. They sent some of the slaves to South Carolina, when the Yankees came near to keep the Yankees from gittin' 'em. Sent cousin James to South Carolina. I nevah will forgit when the Yankees came through. They wuz takin' all the livestock an' all the men slaves back to Norfolk, wid 'em to break up the system. White folks head wuz jes' goin' to keep on havin' slaves.

The slaves wanted freedom, but they's scared to tell the white folks so. Anyway the Yankees wuz givin' everythin' to the slaves. I kin heah 'em tellin' ol' Missy now. "Yes! give'er clothes. Let'er take anythin' she wants." They even took some of Miss Jennie's things an' offered 'em to me. I didn't take 'em tho' cause she'd been purty nice to me. Whut tickled me wuz my husban', John Sparks. He didn't want to leave me an' go cause he didn't know whah they's takin' 'em nor what they's gonna do, but he wanted to be free; so he played lame to keep fum goin'. He was jes' a limpin' 'round. It was all I[53] could do to keep fum laffin'. I kin hear Miss Jennie now yellin' at them Yankees. No! who are yer to Judge. I'll be the judge. If John Sparks wants to stay here, he'll stay. They was gonna take 'im anyhow an' he went inside to pack an' the baby started cryin'. So one of 'em said that as long as he had a wife an' a baby that young they guess he could stay. They took all the horses, cows, and pigs and chickens an' anything they could use an' left. I was about nineteen when I married. I wuz married in 1861, my oldest boy was born in 1862 an' the fallin' of Richmond came in 1865.

Before Miss Jennie was married she was born an' lived at her old home right up the river heah. Yer kin see the place fum ou side heah. On the plantation my mother wuz a house woman. She had to wash white folks clothes all day an' huh's after dark. Sometimes she'd be washin' clothes way up 'round midnight. Nosir, couldn't wash any nigguh's clothes in daytime. My mother lived in a big one room log house wif an' upstairs. Sometimes the white folks give yer 'bout ten cents to spend. A woman with children 'ud git 'bout half bushel of meal a week; a childless woman 'ud git 'bout a peck an' a half of meal a week. If yer wuz workin', they'd give yer shoes. Children went barefooted, the yeah 'round. The men on the road got one cotton shirt an' jacket. I had five sisters an' five brothers. Might as well quit lookin' at me. I ain't gonna tell yer any more. Cain't tell yer all I know. Ol Shep might come back an' git me. Why if I was to tell yer the really bad things, some of dem daid white folks would come right up outen dere graves. Well, I'll tell somemore, but I cain't tell all.

Once in a while they was free niggus come fum somewhah. They could come see yer if yer was their folks. Niggus used to go way off in quarters an' slip an' have meetin's. They called it stealin' the meetin'. The children used to teach me to read. Schools! Son, there warn't no schools for niggers. Slaves went to bed when they didn't have anything to do. Most time they went to bed when they could. Sometimes the men had to shuck corn till eleven and twelve o'clock at night.

If you went out at night the paddyrols 'ud catch yer if yer was out aftah time without a pass. Mos' a the slaves was afear'd to go out.

Plenty of slaves ran away. If they ketch 'em they beat 'em near to death.[54] But yer know dey's good an' bad people every where. That's the way the white folks wuz. Some had hearts; some had gizzards 'stead o' hearts.

When my mothers's master died, he called my mother an' brother Major an' got religion an' talked so purty. He say he so sorry that he hadn't found the Lord before an' had nuttin' gainst his colored people. He was sorry an' scared, but confessed. My mother died twenty years since then at the age of seventy-fo'. She wuz very religious an' all white folks set store to 'er.

Old Massa done so much wrongness I couldn't tell yer all of it. Slave girl Betty Lilly always had good clothes an' all the priviliges. She wuz a favorite of his'n. But cain't tell all! God's got all! We uster sing a song when he was shippin' the slaves to sell 'em 'bout "Massa's Gwyne Sell Us Termerrer." No, I cain't sing it for yer. My husban' lived on the plantation nex' to my mistress. He lived with a bachelor master. He tell us say once when he was a pickinnany ol' Marse Williams shot at 'im. He didn't shoot 'em; he jes' shoot in the air an' ol' man wuz so sceered he ran home an' got in his mammy's bed. Massa Williams uster play wif 'em; then dey got so bad that they'ud run an' grab 'is laige so's he couldn't hardly walk so when he sees 'em he jes' shoots in de air. Ol' Massa, he, jes' come on up ter the cabin an' say "mammy whah dat boy?" She say, in dah undah the bed. Yer done scared 'im to deaf! Ol' Massa go on in an' say, Boy! What's the mattah wid yer. Boy say, yer shot me master yer shot me! Master say, aw Gwan!—Git up an' come along. I ain't shot yer. I jes' shot an' scared yer. Heh! Heh! Heh! Yessir my ol' husban' sayed he sure was scared that day.

Now yer take dat an' go. Put that in the book. Yer kin make out wif dat. I ain't a gonna tell yer no more. Nosir. The end a time is at hand anyway. 'Tain't no use ter write a book. The Bible say when it git so's yer cain't tell one season from t'other the worl's comin' to end; here hit is so warm in winter that [HW: it] feels like summer. Goodbye. Keep lookin' good an' come again