

## Ella Dilliard

### **Personal interview with Ella Dilliard**

### **756 Canal Street, Mobile, Alabama**

—*Ila B. Prine*

### *ELLA'S WHITE HEN IS HEAPS OF COMPANY*

Ella Dilliard, an old Negro woman who lives at 756 Canal Street, Mobile, says she was a small girl during slavery time, and does not know the hardships of it, because she was owned by good people. Her mother's name was Mary Norris, owned by Mrs. Calvin Norris, who lived in Selma, Ala., but had a homestead in Mobile. Her father belonged to people by the name of Childress, and his name was Green Childress. She doesn't remember much about him because his white people took him to Texas.

Ella said that her mother was her madame's hairdresser, and that Mrs. Norris had her mother taught in Mobile. So Ella's life was very easy, as she stayed around the big house with her mother, although her grandmother, Penny Anne Norris, cared for her more than her mother did. One of the things she remembers quite distinctly was her grandmother's cooking on the fireplace, and how she would not allow any one to spit in the fireplace. She said her grandmother made corn-pone and wrapped it in shucks and baked it in ashes.

Ella said she did not know many colored people, since the quarters were quite a ways from the big house, and that the plantation was managed by an overseer. She said the quarters were built in rows with streets between them.

She also remembers the first boat she ever saw that was when she was brought to Mobile after the surrender, and when she saw the boat she said to her mother: "Look at that house sitting on the water."

Ella said that there were three cooks at the big house, their names being Hannah, Judy, and Charlotte, and the gardener's name was Uncle John. Ella also said that one thing that she remembers so well about the kitchen in the big house was a large dishpan, that had a partition in the middle of it, one side you washed the dishes in, and the other side was used for scalding them.

The slaves always had Saturdays to wash their clothes and do things for themselves. Ella, not having lived among Negroes, does not know much about their habits and customs, but she does remember seeing the big white covered wagons that the slaves were carried in to be sold; and remembers hearing talk of the "Pattyrollers." She said when the slaves were sold, they were put on a block, and that the man who were buying would look in their mouths just like they did horses.

Ella said she was born in Greensboro, Alabama, but the plantation where she later lived was on the Alabama river near Selma, Ala. She doesn't know how many acres it comprised, or how many slaves that her master owned. She remembers her madame made her stop calling her mother "mammy," and her

father "daddy." She said: "You know, Miss, that the white children now-a-days calls their parents 'mammy and daddy' like the colored people used to. The children now do not respect their parents as they should, and in fact everything is so different the truth done 'be under the table.' You know, miss, I am telling the truth, because the Bible says, 'Woe be unto the one that lies; Judgment is on t the land.'

"In those days people had to work to live, and they raised most everything they used, such as cattle, hogs, cotton, and foodstuff. Then the women spun the thread out of the cotton, and wove the cloth."

Ella helped her grandmother at the weaving by picking up the shuttles for her. She said they generally used the cloth as it was woven. The shoes were made on the place and were called red brogans.

As for the churches, the white folks had the brush arbor camp meetings, where the people would go and camp in little cabins for weeks, so they could attend the church. They had newspapers then, Ella said, "but 'course they ain't like you have now, there warn't so many as there is now.

"You asked something, miss, about medicines. I don't remember much about any medicine, because Mr. Calvin Norris was a doctor, and he always treated us when we were sick. There was a Dr. Browder who 'tended the plantation."

Ella is a bright colored, small woman, whose eyes are very keen. She says that a short time ago she had some trouble with her eyes, and she got something from the drug store to bathe them with, but it did not help them. So she caught some pure rain water and "anoointed" her eyes with that, and now she can see to thread a needle. Her life has been very colorful in many respects. She recalled as a small child, that, during the war, a minie-ball came through a brick wall of the servant house where they were living, but it fell without harming any of the servants. She said when Wilson's raid was made on Selma, that the Yankee men went through the houses just like dogs, taking whatever they wanted.

"I 'members Mr. Parkman putting two sacks of money down in his big well, and him getting it out with hooks after the Yankees left."

Later when she was brought to Mobile she worked for Judge Oliver Semmes for twenty years. Judge Semmes was the son of Admiral Raphael Semmes, and she said he was a blessed, good man. For the past fourteen years she has been working for the Frank Lyons family of Mobile.

Ella lives in a double tenement house, having one room and a small kitchen. The room is full of old furniture and odd things. On the mantle is a lovely old china pitcher that once was owned by Judge Semmes and which Ella prizes very much. The thing that puzzles Ella most among the modern inventions, she said, are the aeroplanes, and the way ice is made. She said:

"Miss, we never had any ice way back yonder. We had nice, old, open brick wells, and the water was just like ice. We would draw the water and put around the milk and butter in the dairy. It's a mystery to me how they make that ice, but, my goodness! I guess I need not worry my head about things, because I am not here for long. All my family is dead and gone now, and the only companion I have is this here little white hen. Her name is Mary. You see, I bought her last year to kill for Christmas, but I couldn't do it. She is so human; and you ought to see the eggs she lays. I even have a few to sell sometimes. I just keeps Mary in the room at night with me, and she is heaps of company for me."