

Ellen Thomas

Interview with Ellen Thomas

—*Mary A. Poole, Mobile*

TABLE SERVICE AS TAUGHT TO AUNT ELLEN

In a little cottage at 310 Wienacker Avenue, in the western part of Mobile, lives Ellen Thomas, who claims to be 89 years old. She is small of stature, dark brown in color, with high cheek bones and small regular features. Although she wears the old-fashioned bandana handkerchief bound about her head, the story of 'Aunt' Ellen is unusual, in that having been raised as a house servant in a cultured Southern family, she absorbed or was trained in the use of correct speech, and does not employ the dialect common to Negroes of the slavery days.

'Aunt' Ellen was born in Mobile. Her mother, Emeline, was a dwarf who was brought from St. Louis to Mobile by a slave-trader. When put up for sale, her deformity enlisted the sympathy of Judge F.G. Kimball, who bought her and brought her to his home on Dauphin Street, between Hallett Street and Georgia Avenue. Later, Sam Brown, a free Negro from the West Indies, came to Mobile and, wanting Emeline for his wife, agreed to pay Judge Kimball for her, giving himself as security. Sam and Emeline had only two children, Pedro and Ellen, both born on Judge Kimball's place and raised in his home as house servants, having little contact with the field slaves.

In her childhood, Ellen had as her special mistress Miss Cornelia, one of the Kimball girls, who trained her in the arts of good housekeeping, including fine sewing, which was itself an art among the women of that period. Ellen relates with much pride, her ability to put in tucks and back-stitch them in the front of men's shirts, to equal the best machine work of the present day. Although hampered by failing eyesight in recent years, her work with the needle today is proof that her claims are not exaggerated.

In all her experience as a slave, she recalls but one whipping. This was with a small switch in the hands of Judge Kimball. The cause? She answered: "I ain't coming," when he called her; and at his second call, she said: "I shan't do it." She was seven years old at the time.

Judge Kimball insisted that the house servants use good English, she said. Thus brought up as a child among the Kimball children, and because of her duties as a house servant, she mingled little with the field hands and acquired none of their dialect. Even her long association with free Negroes since the war, has failed to eradicate early impressions and practices in the use of words, and she stresses this in conversation with educated white persons.

Because she was a house servant, Ellen was accorded many privileges not enjoyed by ordinary slaves. Good food, neat clothing and cleanliness of person were requirements rigidly enforced. As personal maid to young girls little older than herself, her lot was quiet and the association developed a devotion and friendship that was lifelong. Among the privileges that fell to her as a child, she recalls that of

accompanying the family on carriage rides—usually seated beside the driver to the envy of her little mistress on the more dignified inside seat.



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Her training as a house servant was very broad and involved every feature of a well kept household of that period. She has especial pride in her ability to serve at table, particularly when there were guests present. A feature of the training given her and which Ellen says she never knew of anyone else receiving was, after being taught to set the dining table complete for guests, she would be blindfolded and then told to go through the motions of serving and so learn to do so without disturbing anything on the table. So proficient did she become in serving, that a few times when they had guests, Judge Kimball would for their amusement have Ellen blindfolded and direct her to serve the dinner. In passing dishes a small silver tray was used.

Ellen said that they tried to teach her brother Pedro to serve the table likewise; but his natural clumsiness prevented. He could never learn.

During the war, she said, her master had an immense pit dug near the house, put his cotton in the pit and built the woodpile over it. The Federal invaders never found it.

Judge Kimball owned extensive tracts of land above Mobile and used a large number of his slaves to cut timber for wood and lumber; hewn timber being largely used for house-building. He built a house for every one of his children, from his own timber, and even had his own coffin made from home-grown cedar. Ellen failed to follow this act of her master with approval, judging from her tone in speaking of it.

She remembers the Surrender and the incidents accompanying that event. She was seventeen years old. Thus she describes the first visit afterward of the enemy. "I was helping to cook breakfast one morning, frying codfish and potatoes, when I heard a drum and ran to tell Master. He jumped up and said: 'It's the Yankees! Tell Pedro to get a sheet and hang it out in front.' Pedro was excited and, instead of getting a sheet, got one of Mistress' best table cloths and hung it from a big oak tree near the front gate. When the Yankees rode up, they dismounted and Master invited them in for breakfast."

One of the Yankee Lieutenants asked her name, and she told him: "Ellen Brown." He looked puzzled at her answer, knowing her master's name to be Kimball. (Since her father was a free man, 'Aunt' Ellen said that she and her brother, Pedro, always retained their own name, instead of "Kimball.") The lieutenant then said: "All right, Ellen, bring me a glass of milk at thirteen o'clock."

She went to her little mistress, and asked her "what that old lieutenant meant by 'thirteen o'clock.'"
Miss Cornelia laughed and said he meant "one o'clock."

'Aunt' Ellen related how Judge Kimball was always teaching them and gave them regular lectures. She particularly remembers one of his sayings: "You can never swing on yellow pine tree, as it is tender and pliable."

She remained with the Kimballs three years after the war, worked for other families a short time and then married Amos Thomas when she was about twenty years old. They had a very large family, eleven girls and nine boys. She now has great-grandchildren who are married.

Although there is little doubt that her age is approximately what she claims, 'Aunt' Ellen is remarkably well preserved, physically and mentally. Her activity and industry would not be inappropriate to a woman a score of years younger. Unlike many persons of her years she does not constantly look forward to her time of departure, but takes life as it comes — caring more for today than for tomorrow