

Emma L. Howard

Interview with Emma L. Howard

—*Margaret Fowler, Fruithurst, Alabama*

IS MASSA GWIN'ER SELL US?

"Mammy, is Ol' Massa gwin'er sell us tomorrow?"

Yes, my chile.

Whar he gwin'er sell us?"

'Way down South in Georgia."

'Aunt' Emma L. Howard sat in a huge, old-fashioned rocking chair at her home, 170 Elmwood St., Montgomery, and sang the old slave song. When she had finished, her memory recalled the time, years ago, when she was a slave on the plantation of William and Georgiana Shepherd in Lowndes County, between Mac's Switch and Morgansville.

"Dat was one of de saddest songs we sung endurin' slavery days," she mused. "It always did make me cry."

She thought a moment, smiled.

"I 'members I was de only light nigger in de fambly," she said proudly. "I was brung up in de house wid de white chillun. Twice a week I went to my mammy's cabin an' took a bath. I had my own sof' shoes an' my own nightgown an' jacket an' played games wid my massa's chilluns."

She explained her duties about the Big House as sweeping the rambling porches and yards. Sometimes she churned. Afterward she would join the white children and played most of the day.

"We played hot-scotch, ring-'roun'-the-rosy an' lots of yuther things I can't 'member," she explained. "I musta been 'bout seven years old den."

Emma says she is 84 or 85, but she looks older. She remembers very little about her brothers and sisters. She can only recall "Sist' Cellie, Sist' Harriett an' Sist' Liza." Liza helped Aunt Evalina in the kitchen.

Emma lifted her eyes toward the ceiling, endeavoring to recall the exact number of servants her master owned.

"Edie was de laundress," she recalled, "an' Arrie, she was de weaver. Den dere was Becky, Melia, Aunt Mary, Ed, John, and Uncle George the house man, who married Aunt Evalina. Jake was de over-looker

(overseer). He was a great, big cullud man. Dar was more, but I can't 'member. I was jes' a little shaver den."

She remembers that the Big House was huge and white with a beautiful parlor and guest room, where the visitors were entertained. Gigantic white columns rose in front of the house, and clusters of magnolias surrounded it. The slave houses were located about two hundred yards back of the house.

"Massa Shepherd an' Mistis Georgiana was both good an' treated de servants kin'," Emma said. "I 'members dat I used to keep de flies offen Mistis Georgiana wid a big fan, an' once I went to sleep. She jest laugh when she foun' me sleepin' dar beside her.

"Massa would only whup a slave fer two things," she recalled. "One thing was if things warn't done up jes' right at hog killin' time, and de other was iffen a nigger warn't clean when he 'ported for work on Monday mornin's. Ol' Massa didn't do de whuppin's hisse'f. Jake did it, but Massa sat dar on his horse to see dat only a certain number of licks was give.

"How did we feel 'bout a white man who would be over-looker? We called him 'po white trash.' He wasn't thought much of by anybody."

Emma said that everyone went to church on Sundays and that she liked to sing the old religious hymns. When freedom came all the Shepherd servants had been taught to read and write, she said, and each family had enough money to buy a little home. "De Marster" would make each family keep pigs, hens and such; then he would market the products and place the money aside for them, Emma explained.

Talking further about work about the plantation, she said:

"Louisa cleaned de parlor an' kept Mistis' room nice." She took up a recital of work on the plantation. "Atter dat she didn't do anything but sew, an' Sist' Liza hoped her wid dat. After de weavin', we done sewin', and it took a lot of sewin' for dat family. Eve'body had two Sunday dresses, summer and winter, as well as clothes for eve'day.

"For de men's suits de wool had to be took off an' carded an' got ready to make. But we had plenty of wool from our own sheep.

"When dey kilt de hogs for winter meat, dey took some of de hands out of de field an' let dem ho'p. We had a smokehouse full of hams and middlin's, an' when rainy spells came, us chillun would rake up chips an' leaves an' make a smudge of smoke to keep de meat sweet.

"Massa Shepherd and Miss Georgiana was both mighty kin' hearted an' treated their servants good. Once when Marse Shepherd sent us chilluns down to de station wid a note, he say, 'Now, go fas'.' But we played 'long the way an' picked flowers. When we come steppin' back, he say, 'I told you to hurry.' I held out de flowers an' say, 'See, us brung you some flowers;' but he take up a little switch an' nettle my legs good.

"Massa always give us plenty of eve'thing. On Friday us worked an' washed, an' on Sattidy us cleaned for Sunday. Den on Sunday Massa would go 'roun' an' have a mouthful at every house to see dat eve'thing was done up jes' right, an' if they wasn't, somebody got a whuppin' next day.

"When us went to church on Sunday, Massa Shepherd, Miss Georgiana an' us three chilluns rode in de rock-a-way. Dat was a carriage shaped mos' like a bowl. De carriage was pulled by two big horses, an' de

coachman what sat up on de high seat had on a long double-breasted coat, shiny black boots an' a tall silk hat. Massa had on a silk hat, too, but he wore a tight-waisted coat. An' Miss Georgiana, she look lak a bokay.



Emma L. Howard, Montgomery, Alabama

"She didn't lak to wear hoops, because she had sprained her ankle once an' walked wid a limp. She liked to wear thin, cool, flowery dresses wid lots of ruffles an' lace. She also wore a scoop of white straw, mighty sof' over de years' an' flarin' high an' spreadin' over de face. It was filled wid flowers an' tied wid long streamers of ribbon."

Emma said that Mr. Shepherd died during the second year of the war, and that it was whispered he was poisoned because he was so good to his niggers. "Just before the war closed," she said, "Mrs. Shepherd married again and later moved to Texas.

"I was took on as a cook by a rich family named Marchiel, in Montgomery," she said. "Dey treated me lak I was deir own daughter. I was 'lowed to go out three nights a week, but no more, an' I had to be home by 'leven o'clock.

"I got engaged to be married an' de boy had to ax for me. I 'member dat Massa Marchiel say: 'If you don't take good care of her I'll take her back.' When de younges' daughter married she lef' me her veil an' wreath, an' dey give me a weddin' dress an' shoes.

"My husban' was a carpenter, an' we lived in dis house. When he died, I went to work for a family dat once was de richest family in de State. Dey comes to see me every few days, an' nex' week dey are comin' for me to spen' de day wid dem. De reason I has stayed so well is dat folks has always been so good to me.