

Esther Green

Interview with Esther Green

—*Ila B. Prine*

US CHILLUN WORE SHOES LIKE GROWNUPS

'Aunt' Esther Green, of 554 Texas Street, Mobile, Alabama, was all too ready to talk about her slavery days in spite of her assertion that she didn't remember much about the war.

"I was jus' a chile," she says. "You can figure for yourself. Somebody tole me I was born in 1855, so I couldn't of been very old. I was born in State Line, Mississippi, and was owned by Edward Davis. He owned my mother, Rachel Davis and her mother, Melinda Davis. I never did know who my pappy was 'cause I never did see him.

"To de bes' of my recollections, my whitefolks was allus good to us niggers. He neber allowed no overseers and he never whipped none of dem, 'ceptin' maybe a switching once in a while for us litt'luns when we didn't behave. I never saw a growed up nigger whipped in all my life. Ole Massa jus' didn't b'lieve in dat. Massa was shorely a good man. Lots of times he would get us little niggers up on de porch at de big house and have us dance for him. We sho used to have a big time out on dem big white porches.

"I never had no work to do myself, 'cause I always stayed in de big house wid Miss Mary Davis, ole Massa's wife. I was in de house one day and ole Massa asked me if I wanted to eat at de table wid dem, so I pulled up a chair and spite of de fact dere was all kinds of good stuff to eat in front of me, I called for lye hominy. I sho did love dat stuff better'n anything else I ever et. Ole Massa and de res' of dem jus' laugh fit to kill. I reckon dey thought I was crazy sho' nuff', but I et hominy jes' de same.

"As to de number of slaves ole Massa had, I never knew. Us had log cabins to stay in. De cracks was chinked up wid yellow mud to keep de cold out and de chim'ney was made of straw and de same kind of mud, but dem cabins was warmer dan de house is nowadays. We didn't have no furniture 'ceptin' a home-made bed which was nailed to de wall on one side and two legs out in de middle of de floor. De mattresses was made of straw and hay. All de cookin' was done on de big open fireplaces what had big pottracks to hang de pots on.

"Massa rationed out de food every week and we usually got a peck of meal. We had plenty of 'taters and peas and other vegetables dat we growed on de place. At Chris'mas time, we was give meat and molasses to make cakes. Us always had plenty of plain food. And too, de men would go huntin' at night and come back wid lots of big fat 'possums and rabbits by de dozen, and mos' of de time, dey would even catch a coon. And old Ben, a nigger who had turkey traps, was always bringin' in lots of dem big fat birds.

"De men and women worked in de field all day, but I never picked a bit of cotton all my life. At night de women would spin and weave cloth, but I never did learn to do dat. Den dey would dye de cloth different colors, mostly red and blue though, and make dem into clothes. Us chilluns had a one-piece dress or slip. Our shoes was all homemade too. Massa had one man who tanned de leather. He would take it an put it into a long trough for a long time and den whatever was done dat was supposed to be done to it, he would take it out and cut it and make shoes. Us chilluns' had shoes same as de grown folks.

"On Sundays, we would got to de white folks' church. Dere was a shed built onto de church and we would sit on benches out under de shed and listen to de preacher. De white folks would have lots of big baptizings, but I never did see no niggers baptized den.

"Ole Massa had a big fambly, three boys and six girls. My own ma had eight chilluns. Us was always healthy and never had to have much medicine. 'Bout de only thing I remembers ever takin' was tea made from de root of de china berry tree. It made good tea for worms, but was to be used only at certain times of de moon. My man also used Jerusalem Oak seed for worms. I never fools wid tryin' to doctor nobody's chilluns now-a-days, things is all so different.

"My Grandma, Melinda, and ole Ben and his wife was three ole people Massa freed long time before de war. When all de niggers was freed, Massa called em up to de house and tole dem dat dey was loose to go wherever suited dem, but mos' of dem stayed on de place two or three weeks, and den one mornin' I woke up and all of dem had left durin' de night. I was de only nigger left on de place and I jus' cried and cried, mostly because I was jus' lonesome for some of my own kind to laugh and talk wid.

"I don't remember exactly what I did after de Surrender, but it was about four years afterwards dat I come to Mobile and I been here every since.

I's a member of de Mobile Delaware Baptist Church, but I can't attend very regular 'count of bein' all crippled up wid de rheumatisms. I reckon dat ailing is natural though, cause I been here a long time and I's got forty grandchilluns and more dan dat many great-grandchilluns.