

Esther King Casey

Interview with Esther King Casey

—*Edward F. Harper, Birmingham*

Living with her grandchildren at 801 Washington Avenue, Birmingham, Alabama, Esther King Casey, former slave of Capt. Henry King of Americus, Georgia, recalls from fading memory a few vivid scenes of the days when men in gray moved hurriedly about the town, suddenly disappeared for a while and then returned, one by one, with weary, halting tread and hollow faces, while gloom and despair hovered over the town like a pall of desolation.

Less vivid in her memory are the stories told her by her grandmother of a long voyage across the ocean, of the arrival in a new land called Mobile, and of slaves being sold at public auction. Less vivid, too, are the memories of her own journey to Georgia, where she, with her parents and brother, were brought to be the slaves of Captain King.

"I was only four or five years old when we came to Captain King's big house," said the old woman, brightening with pride in her ability to recollect. Her manners bore the marks of culture and refinement, and her speech was surprisingly void of the usual Negro dialect. She is an example of the former slave who was educated along with the white children in the family.

"There were eight or ten slaves in all," Esther continued. "We lived in a house in the backyard of Captain King's Big House. My mamma was the cook. Papa was a mechanic. He built houses and made tools and machinery. Captain King gave me to the 'white lady;' that was Miss Susan, the Captain's wife. Captain King was a fine man. He treated all of us just like his own family. The 'white lady' taught us to be respectable and truthful."

When asked if she had ever been punished for misbehavior the old woman smiled and said: "Once the 'white lady' whipped me for playing with the jailer's children. She had told me not to play with them because they were not good company for me. She said that she wanted to raise me to be good and truthful, and that the jailer's little white children told lies and talked bad."

Esther remembers well the mobilization of gray-uniformed troops at the courthouse which stood only a block from the King residence. "The town was filled with soldiers for several days," she said. "They assembled about the courthouse and had speakings. One day I passed there with my papa and saw Abraham Lincoln hanging from a noose in the courthouse square. Of course, it was only an effigy of Abraham Lincoln which was used to show what the soldiers thought of him. Papa told me that the soldiers shot the effigy full of bullet holes before they left town.

"Before Captain King left he brought a man with him from the courthouse to value his property. The slaves were valued, too. I remember Captain King lifting me high above his head and saying to the man: 'I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for this little gem.'"

She paused a moment. The light in her eyes showed that she was reliving the thrill of that childhood incident.

"Then Captain King left with the other soldiers. Papa stayed and took care of the 'white lady' and the house. After a while my brother ran away and joined the troops to fight for Captain King. He came back after the war, but Captain King did not. Several years later I saw a man down in south Georgia who told me that he belonged to Captain King's troops. He said that he was standing near him when he was killed.



Esther King Casey, Birmingham, Alabama

"After the proclamation the slaves were free. Most of them leased out to plantation owners. I stayed with mamma and the 'white lady.'"

Mrs. King had taught the little slave girl to read and write, and when schools were opened for the freed slaves she told the child's mother to send her to school. Fees of fifty cents a month were charged, which Mrs. King paid as long as the child remained with her. At eighteen years of age the girl had acquired sufficient education to qualify to teach in the public schools for Negroes. After three years of teaching she married Jim Casey, an ex-slave, who took her to his "three-plow" farm in south Georgia.

"No man ever lived who was finer than Jim," said the old woman. "My daughter used to say that I loved him more than God, and that God was jealous and took him away from me."

After her only daughter's death in 1919, Esther was brought to Birmingham by her grandson who has kept her comfortably ever since. Her hair is just turning gray, though she was born in 1856. The little briar pipe, which she endeavors to conceal from strangers, is the only outward evidence that she has anything in common with others of her generation.