

Frank Gill

Personal interview with Frank Gill

708 South Hamilton Street, Mobile, Alabama

—Ila B. Prine, Mobile, Alabama

A SLAVE BOY ESCAPES WHIPPING BY PULLING TAIL OF FROCK COAT

A low, stout, sleek headed Negro man, sat in an old rocking chair in an end room of a long row of rooms of a tenement house at 708 South Hamilton Street, Mobile, Alabama. This old darkey said, when asked by the writer if he lived during slavery times: "I not only lived durin' slavery times, but I was here before a gun was fired, an' b'fore Lincoln was elected. I tells you, Miss, de fust time I 'members anything—a tale of any kind. I was livin' in Vicksburg, Lee County, Mississippi, an' mah maw an' paw's names was Amelia Williams an' Hiram Gill. I couldn't tells you whar dey war from, dough. But I does know dat Mista Arthur an' George Foster owned us, up 'til I war a big boy. De way it was, dere mother, Ol' Missy, was a widow, an' her had dese two boys, an' she had money, I tells you she had barrels ob money; so when de two boys got old enough she divide de slaves, an' property 'tween 'em. Me an' mah maw fell to Arthur Foster, and sum ob our kindred fell to George Foster. Mister George was a Captain in de army an' was killed near Vicksburg.

"De Ol' Missy's place shore was big, I couldn't say how many acres dere was, but hit run four or five miles, an' she owned hundreds ob slaves. She had lots ob log cabin quarters, whut had de cracks daubed wid mud, an' den ceiled wid boards. I'se tellin' you dey was twice as warm as de houses we lib in now. Dey had chimbleys built ob mud an' sticks, an' had big wide, fireplaces, dat we cooked on, an' de beds was homemade, but Lor' dey was heaps stronger dan dey is now, in dese times. Dem beds was morticed together.

"As I said b'fore I was a boy between fourteen or fifteen years old b'fore de slaves was divided, an' when I was on de Ol' Missy's place, I stayed aroun' de house, an' wait on dem, an' 'tend de horses. Anudder thing I had to do, dey would send me for the mail. I had to go twelve miles atter hit an' I couldn't read or write, but I could bring everybody's mail to dem jes' right. I knowed I had better git hit right. You see I could kinder figure, so I could make out by de numbers.

"Ol' Missy an' Mister Arthur both was good to me an' all de slaves, dey 'low de slaves to make dere own patch ob cotton, an' raise chickens, an' he would sell hit for dem. Cotton was de main crop, in dem days, hit would sell as high as twenty-five cents a pound. 'Course dey raises corn, pears, an' other things on de

plantation, too, but dey made de cotton. Master Jesus! dey sumtimes made from fifty to one hundred an' fifty bales.

"I 'members how all de women had looms, both black and white, weavin' cloth for de clothes; an' den dey raised sheep to git de wool to make dem gray uniforms. Lord, at sheep shearing time! hit was big times. Let me tell you, Miss, dem uniforms was made out ob all wool, too, but I cain't 'member whut dey used to dye 'em gray, but I 'members dey dyed wid red oak bark, walnut bark, an' also a brush whut growed down on the branch, also dey used de laurel leaves to dye yellow, as well as clay. Dey so't de dye wid salt, an' hit really stayed in.

"Let me tell you, dey really fed us slaves good, up 'til such a length o' time atter de war broke out, den food began to git scarce.

"You see de Government taxed 'em, an' dey had to gib so much to feed de soldiers. Even den us had a good time, I 'members how de li'l chillun played ball, and marbles, 'specially marbles, hit was our big game. Even atter night dey had a big light out in de backyard, an' us would play. Sometimes us would hunt at night, and well I 'members one Sat'day night I went huntin' wid mah uncle, an' didn't git in 'til daylight nex' mawning, an' I was sleepy an' didn't git de shoes all cleaned before church time. So ol' Marsar called me an' tuk me to de carriage house to gib me a whippin'. Ol' Marsar's boy was about de same age as me an' he beg his paw not to whip me, an' I was beggin', too, but he carried me on, an' when we got in de carriage house, Ol' Marsar had to climb up on de side wall to git de whip, an' he had on one ob dos long tailed coats, an' hit left dem tails hangin' down, so I jes' grabbed hold ob dem, an' made him fall, an' den I run to de Ol' Missy's room, 'ca'se I knowed when I got in dere, dat Ol' Marsar would neber hit me.

"De Ol' Missy got up out ob de bed an' wouldn't let Ol' Marster whip me, an' she got so mad dat she tol' him dat she warn't going to church wid him dat morning, an' dat lack to kill de Ol' Marster, 'ca'se he shore loved an' was proud ob Ol' Missy. She was a beautiful woman. Dat ended de whippin', an' dat's de only time I 'members him tryin' to whip me.

"Ol' Missy didn't 'low dem to whip de women either, an' dey wouldn't 'low de women to roll logs either. But dey did work dem in de fiel's. 'Course dey kept de young women wid babies 'roun' de house, an' dey eat de same grub as de white folks eat.

"Talking 'bout log rollin', dem was great times, 'ca'se if some ob de neighborin' plantations wanted to get up a house, dey would invite all de slaves, men and women, to come wid dere masters. De women would help wid de cookin' an' you may be shore dey had something to cook. Dey would kill a cow, or three or four hogs, and den hab peas, cabbage, an' everything lack grows on de farm. An' if dere was any meat or food lef' dey would gib dat to de slaves to take home, an' jes' b'fore dark de o'seer or Ol' Marster would gib de slaves all de whiskey dey wanted to drink. Sometimes atter de days work, dey would hab a frolic, such as dancin', an' ol' time games.

"Dey would hab dese same kind ob gatherin's at cornshucking time, an' cotton pickin' time, but dere warn't so much foolishness at cotton pickin' time, 'ca'se dey didn't call one anudder den, 'ceptin' when de cotton got so far ahead ob dem, an' was 'bout to set in fer a wet spell, or rainy season.

"You axed me 'bout de patty-rollers? You see de City policemen walkin' his beat? Well, dat's de way de patty-rollin' was, only each county had dere patty-rollers, an' dey had to serve three months at a time,

den dey was turned loose. And if dey cotch you out widout a pass, dey would gib you thirty-nine lashes, 'ca'se dat was de law. De patty-rollers knowed nearly all de slaves, an' it wurn't very often dey ever beat 'em.

"You know folks was jes' de same den as dey is now, both black, and white. Some folks you could neighbor wid den, jes' lack you can now, an' dere was good folks den, jes' de same as dey is now.

"Christmas time was de bes' ob all, 'ca'se us allus had a big dinner, an' de Ol' Marster gib de women calico dresses an' shoes, an' de men shoes an' hats, an' would gib us flour, an' sugar, molasses, an' would buy beer, whiskey an' wine.

"De Ol' Marster tuk good keer ob us too, when any ob us got sick he send for de doctor, den when dey order de medicine to be giben at night, he'd see dat us got hit. But nowadays if you git sick, you hab to git de Doctor, an' den pay him yo' se'f. Den de Ol' Marster had to find clothes an' shoes for us, but now us has to scuffle an' git dem de bes' way us can.

"You know, Miss, I'se been here a long time, I eben 'members Jefferson Davis. I'se seen him many a time. He had a home 'tween here (Mobile) an' New Orleans, an' you knows he fust tuk his seat in Montgomery, an' den moved to Richmond, Virginny.

"I 'members, too, how I useta to think dat de Baptist was de only religion. You see John de Baptist come here baptizing, an' ever'body had to offer up sacrifices, a goat or a sheep or sumpin', jes' lack de man who was going to offer up his son for a sacrifice. But you knows, Jesus come an' changed all dat. De folks in dem times didn't hab nobody to worship; an' den one come, who said, 'Father, hand me a body, and I'll die for dem,' Dat's Christ, an' he was baptized, an' God gib Jesus dis whole world. So I believed, dat was de only religion.

"I 'members how us would hab big baptizings an' shout. Us allus went to church in de white folks church, dey had church in de mornings, us had ours in de afternoons. Us would hab to hab a pass, dough, 'ca'se de church was eight miles away from de plantation.

"Dere was plenty old songs us useta to sing, but I can't 'member 'em. Dere is dis one dat goes —

Wonderful Peter,

Wonderful Paul,

Wonderful Silas,

Who for to make a

Mah heart rejoice.

On Good Shepherds, feed a' mah sheep.

Don't you hear de young lambs a bleatin'?

Don't you hear de young lambs a bleatin'?

Don't you hear de young lambs a bleatin'?

Oh! Good shepherds feed a' mah sheep."