

Frank Smith

Interview with Frank Smith

—*D.A. Oden*

"Yassuh, its jes' lak I tell yer. I was borned in Ole Virginny and my Ole Marster was Doctor Constable and he and us all lived out a piece fum Norfolk whar you kin see de whole ocean. I was writ down in de Bible, jes' lak Ole Marster's udder niggers, and Ole Mistis said hit was de six day of Jinnerwary in forty-eight when I was borned. How ole dat mek me now? Eighty-nine, gwine on ninety—dat's right.

"Ole Marster he died eight years fo' de Big War, and Ole Mistis 'refergeed' down to Alexandria, where her mammy and pappy lived and tuk me and Unker Dan and Aunt Melissy wid her; but she sole my mammy and my pappy and all de rest of de niggers ter de man what bought de plantation and us never did see 'em no mo'.

"I was de house-boy at Ole Mistis' pappy's house, I disremember his name; but, anyhow, I didn't wuck in de field lak de udder niggers. Wen de Big War started, Ole Mistis she tuck me and her chilluns and us 'refergeed', down somewhars dey was a co'thouse, whut dey called 'Culpepper', or sump'n lak dat, and us lived in town wid some mo' of Ole Mistis' kinfolks, but dey wan't her mammy and pappy. De so'jers marched right in front of our house, right by de front gate, and dey was gwine ter Ho'per's Ferry to kill Ole John Brown, whut was killin' white folks and freein' niggers fo' dey time. Dat was Mister Lincum's job, atter de war. And no niggers wan't ter be free tell den.

"We lived clos't ter de big hotel whar Ginerel Lee and a whole passel of soldiers stayed, and dey had de shineyest clo's I ebber seed. Dey was fine gem'men and Ole Mistis she let me wait on 'em whilst she didn' need me ter wuck eround de house, and dey gimme a dime lots of times. I shined Ginerel Lee's shoes sometimes—and he alluz gin me a dime and said: 'Dat looks nice.' Some of de ginerals jes' gimme de dime and didn't say nuthin' but dey wasn't big mens lak Ginerel Lee and Ole Marster. He was straight and dignerfied and didn't talk much, but he'd walk up and down on de front gallery and de ord'lies brung him telegrafs from Bull Run, whar us and de Yankees was fightin'. Lawzy missy, I heard em talkin' 'bout 'Bull Run' dat day and I 'lowed somebody's bull had got out and us and de Yankees was tryin' ter ketch him and git him back in de paster!



Frank Smith, Birmingham, Alabama

"Wen de war got too close to us, Ole Mistis tuck me and her little gal what was older'n me, and lef' Unker Dan and Aunt Melissa, and us went to Lynchburg, whar her mammy and pappy done move to, and us stayed wid dem ag'in, but Ole Mistis was gittin' worried over de war, and when I broke her iv'y-handled dinin' room knife and fergot ter tell her, she slap my head nearly off and got mad and sole me ter a man whut lived in Cleveland, Tennessee.

"Her pappy tried ter keep Mistis fum sellin' me. He said all I needed was a good brushin', but nobody couldn't do nothin' wid Ole Mistis wen she got good and mad!

"My new marster wan't lak my own whitefolks; so I up and runned way and jine de Yankee army and got a job workin' fer a cap'n name Esserton, or sump'n lak dat; him and a Lieutenant somebody. We followed General Sherman clear to Atlanta and ten mile fudder on, den dey turned back, and marched clear back to Chattanooga and den kep' on tell we got ter Nashville. I sho' was glad to git away fum Atlanta, cause dey was dead men eve'y way you looked atter dey quit fightin'. Dey gimme a uniform, but I didn't get no gun—I fought wid a fryin-pan.

"We stayed in Nashville a while and when de war was over, Cap'n Esserton wanted ter tek me to Illinois wid him and give me a job; but I didn't lak de Yankees. Dey wanted you to wuk all de time, and dat's sump'n I hadn't been brung up to do. Dey turned me free and I went wid a passel of General Lee's so'jers, what come along goin' home and us went down and crossed de bigges' ribber I eber seed. I tuk up on fus' one farm and den anudder, tell I found one I lak and den dat was two years atter we lef' Nashville (1867) and I stayed dar close to Baton Rouge sixteen years. Lawd, de cotton and sugar cane us did mek on dat rich lan'. Its' richer'n de gwana dey sells out here in Alabama!

"I went to Memphis on a 'scursion and stayed dar, doin fus' one thing and den another, 'cep git in jail, and I worked at a house painter's trade. I heered dey paid good wages fer paintin' in Bummin'ham and I come here de same year all dem niggers was killed in dat church stompede. I got a job wid Mr. Douglass, janitorin' at de Jefferson Theater and him and me stayed together three years. I bought a waggin and sold kerosene oil fer about a year, 'tell my money was all gone and den I got a job wid de Base Ball Association in de year 1913. I been wid 'em ever sence. I used ter meck fum \$8 ter \$15 a week, 'cordin' ter how times was, tell de 'pression come and I'se too ole ter wuk now, so I jes' totes de mail and does odd jobs and dey pays me \$3 a week fer dat. I 'plied fer ole-age pension two years back, but it hain't come yit. I got one boy livin' in Bummin'ham. He's 40 year old, but he don't help me nary cent. My fus' wife died in Louisiana and I married a gal in Memphis, but she lef' me when I los' my job one time and went to Detroit wid a passel of niggers. She ain't nebber writ back to me and I done quit payin' her any mind.

"Cep'n de rheumatiz, I'se in good health and gits around pretty good. Ole Mistis showed me how to read print and I ain't never fergot how. De Yankees didn't know dat I could read, and I never did let on. I kin see pretty well but hafter put on my glasses to read de print. Sho! I'se gwine to live to be a hunded years old! How many mo' years I got to go? Ten. Dat's right. I know I'se good fer dis year, 'cause I alluz notice dat ef I live trough March, I lives all de rest ob de year!"