

Gus Brown

Interview with Gus Brown

—*Alexander B. Johnson, Birmingham, Alabama*

GUS SAW MASSA'S HAT SHOT OFF

"They is all gone, scattered, and old massa and missus have died." That was the sequence of the tragic tale of "Uncle" Gus Brown, the body servant of William Brown; who fought beside him in the War between the States and who knew Stonewall Jackson.

"Uncle Gus" recalled happenings on the old plantation where he was reared. His master was a "king" man, he said, on whose plantation in Richmond, Virginia, Uncle Gus waited on the tables at large feasts and functions of the spacious days before the War. He was entrusted to go with the master's boys down to the old swimming hole and go in "washin." They would take off their clothes, hide them in the bushes on the side of the bank, put a big plank by the side of the old water hole and go in diving, swimming and have all the fun that youngsters would want, he said.

Apparently his master's home was a plantation house with large columns and with all the glitter and glamour that the homes around Richmond have to offer. About it were large grain storage places for the master was a grain dealer and men on the plantation produced and ground large quantities into flour.

Gus worked around the house, and he remembers well the corn shuckings as he called them on which occasions the Negroes gave vent to emotion in the form of dancing and music. "On those occasions we all got together and had a regular good time," he said.

"Uncle," he was asked, "do you remember any of the old superstitions on the plantation? Did they have any black cat stories?"

"No sir, boss, we was educated Negroes on our plantation. The old bossman taught his Negroes not to believe in that sort of thing.

"I well remember when de war came. Old massa had told his folks befo' de war began dat it was comin', so we was ready for it.

"Beforehand the master called all the servants he could trust and told them to get together all of the silver and other things of value. They did that, he explained and afterward they took the big box of treasures and carried it out in the forest and hid it under the trunk of a tree which was marked. None of the Negroes ever told the Yankees where it was so when the war ended the master had his silver back. Of course the war left him without some of the things which he used to have but he never suffered.

"Then de war came and we all went to fight the Yankees. I was a body servant to the master, and once a bullet took off his hat. We all thought he was shot but he wasn't, and I was standin' by his side all the time.

"I remember Stonewall Jackson. He was a big man with long whiskers, and very brave. We all fought wid him until his death.

"We wan't beaten, we was starved out! Sometimes we had parched corn to eat and sometimes we didn't have a bite o' nothin', because the Union mens come and tuck all the food for their selves. I can still remember part of my ninety years. I remembers we fought all de way from Virginia and winded up in Manassas Gap.

"When time came for freedom most of us was glad. We liked the Yankees. They was good to us. 'You is all now free. You can stay on the plantation or you cango.' We all stayed there until old massa died. Den I worked on de Seaboard Airline when it come to Birmingham. I have been here ever since.



Gus Brown, Birmingham, Alabama

"In all de years since de war I cannot forget old massa. He was good and kind. He never believed in slavery but his money was tied up in slaves and he didn't want to lose all he had.

"I knows I will see him in heaven and even though I have to walk ten miles for a bite of bread I can still be happy to think about the good times we had then. I am a Confederate veteran but my house burned up wid de medals and I don't get a pension.

"Thank you, mister bossman, fer the quarter. It will buy me a little grub. I'se too old to work but I has to."

The reporter left him sitting with his little pack and a long fork in his hands; in his eyes, dimmed with age, a far-off look and a tear of longing for the Old Plantation