

Hattie Anne Nettles

Interview with Hattie Anne Nettles

—*Preston Klein, Opelika, Alabama*

DRUMS BEATING AND FIFES BLOWING

"Dey was sad times, honey; all de people was goin' to war wid de drums beatin' all aroun' and de fifes blowin.'"

Hattie Anne Nettles looks younger than her eighty years, but she remembers climbing a fence to watch gray-clad soldiers of the Confederacy marching toward the front. She also remembers a few details about slavery, although she was only a child at the time.

Hattie was born in Tallapoosa, Ga. Her father and mother were Archie and Matilda Benson. She had eight brothers and sisters; Charlie, George, Abraham, Mose, Lucinda, Mandy, Margaret and Queenie.

"Us had corded beds in dem times," she said, "an' dey was screwed in de corners to tighten 'em. Our cookin' was simple, too. Us used a griddle hoe to cook on de big fireplaces.

"Our dresses was homespun cloth dyed wid indigo, an' us didn't have very many clothes. But us kept plenty warm in de winter; an' in de hot summers us didn't need mor'n a thin li'l ol' dress."

Hattie called her master "a good Christian-hearted man who did de bes' he could for de niggers."

"I 'members," she said, "dat all de chilluns was good, too, 'ceptin' two of de boys. Dey was bad uns for sho' an' was arguin' an' fightin' all de time.

"Honey, Ol' Marster sho'ly did lak to sing, an' he was pretty good at dat. I 'members dat he useter git out in de back an' sing to de top of his voice: 'I'se Gwine Home to Die No More.'

"What I 'members most, dough, was de quiltin's an' spinnin' frolics dat de women-folks had. Den, on Sattidy nights, dere was Sattidy night suppers an' dances. All de peoples sho'ly did cut de high step at de dances."

Hattie beamed as the trend of conversation turned to Christmas on Southern plantations.



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"Dat was a time!" she exclaimed. "Us had to go to mornin' prayer, but atter dat us went back to de cabins, dressed in our Sunday bes', an' went up to de 'Big House' fer some foolishness. An' it was sho'ly real foolishness, too.

"When I was growed up I married Bill Lockhart an' us had fifteen chilluns an' eight gran'chilluns. In de ol' days niggers axed de white marster for de bride an' no license was needed. Iffen dey lef' de plantation, de other white marster bought 'em so de girl could go wid her man.

"Our ol' marster was as good as he could be like I done tol' you. He looked atter de slaves when dey got sick an' sont for de doctor. In dem days dey would draw blood. Dey would draw almos' a quart from de body, an' you usually got well, too."

Hattie recalled one night of terror on the plantation when the Ku Klux Klan raided a prayer meeting where a large number of Negroes had congregated.

"De Klansmen beat up lots of dem," she said. "If a nigger didn't behave, dey'd nigh 'bout kill him."

Hattie lives in Opelika with a daughter. Flowers dot her clean yard and her old days are full of happiness.