

Henry Barnes

Interview with Henry Barnes

—*Ila B. Prine, Mobile*

HE MISSES DEM 'SET-DOWN HAWGS'

In Prichard, a suburb of Mobile, lives an old, blind Negro, "Uncle Henry" Barnes, who says he was born in 1858, near Suggsville, Clarke County, Alabama.

"Cose I was borned a slave, but I don't 'member much 'bout hit, 'caze I was li'l. Dere is one t'ing I does 'member, an' dat was when dey cut watermelons at de oberseer's house an' dey want us li'l niggers run races to git our piece. I jes wouldn't run an' my mammy she whup me 'caze I so stubborn an' when I git my piece o' melon, I fly down de lane whar our log cabins was. Dem cabins was daubed wid clay, an' de chimbleys was built outten clay an' stick. Our beds was homemade an' had t'ree legs wid de yuther side nail to de wall. I 'member atter I got a big boy, my mammy had a bed made outten lumber an' I slep' in dat bed 'twel I was growed an' ma'ed.

"I 'members us's Ole Mistis, Miss Dell. Miss Dell was a good Mistis an' she useter hab Sunday School ebber' Sund'y mornin' at de Big House an' all us li'l niggers went up dar for her to teach us 'bout de Bible an' Jesus.

"Marse John was good to all he slaves an' he wouldn't stan' no rush er meanness to his niggers. Iffen de o'seer got mean, Ole Marster would turn him off. Ole Marster allus tukgood keer of he slaves, 'caze when dey got sick, he hab de doctor, jes lak when de white folks got sick. One o' Marse John's boys, Marse Bennie, was a doctor, an' he was a good doctor, cep'n' he gin us bad med'cin', but he cyured you.

"Cose us hab our med'cin' sich lak elderbush tea. Hit was red 'mos' lak whiskey an' us used hit for feber. Den dere was red sassafras tea fer spring feber, an' dey made Jerusalem oak candy full o' seeds an' gib to de chilluns to eat so dey could git rid of worms. Den us had mullen an' pine-top tea for colds an' feber. An' when us had a swellin' dey made a poultice of mullen leabes to take de swellin' out.

"Sometimes I wishes dat I could be back to de ol' place, 'caze us did hab plenty to eat, an' at hog-killin' time us had a mor'n a plenty. Ole Marster kill eight or ten set-down hawgs at one time, an' de meat, an' de lard an' de hawgjowl an' de chitt'lin's—m'm' I kin see 'em now.

"What a set-down hawg? Hit's a hawg what done et so much corn he got so fat dat he feets can't hol' him up an' he jes set on he hin' quarters an' grunts an' eats an' eats an' grunts, 'twel day knock him in de head.

"Dem was sho' good times, 'caze us had all us could eat den, an' plenty sugar cane to make 'lasses outten. An' dey made up biscuits in de big wood trays. Dem trays was made outten tupelo gum an' dey was light as a fedder. Us had plenty den, all de time, an' at Chris'mus an' when de white folks get ma'ed,

dey kill hawgs, turkeys, an' chickens an' sometimes a yearlin'. En dey cook de hawgs whole, barbecue 'em an' fix 'em up wid a big apple in he mouf. When de big weddin' come off, de cook in big pots, so's to hab 'nough for eber'body. Cose us didn't hab eaten' lak dat all de time, 'caze de reg'lar rations was t'ree pound of meat an' a peck of meal fer eber' han' from Sat'day twell Sat'day.

"De niggers was 'lowed to hab a li'l patch of dey own, dat dey could wuk at night an' Sat'day ebenin'! What dey make on dis patch was dey'n, an' Ole Marster pay 'em money for hit. Nobody didn't make de niggers wuk dey patches—iffen dey want de grass to took 'em, dat's all right wid Ole Marster. Ole Martser hab a big gyarden, 'mos' big as a fiel', whar dey raise greens an' collards an' turnups fer de whole place.

"My granpappy was a carpenter an' Ole Marster contrac' him out to de yuther plantations to build dey houses. De grown niggers had to be up 'fo' day. De oberseer blow he horn fust to git up by an' de nex' time he blow dey hatter be ready to go to de fiel'.

"Dere was a ol' 'oman what kep' all de li'l niggers, whilst dey mammies was in de fiel'. Dis ol' 'oman cooked fer de li'l uns an' fed 'em all day, an' dey mammies tuk 'em at night.

"Us's clo's was made outten osnaburg cloth an' dyed wid cop'rus an' sometime dey mix terbaccy an' peach tree leabes wid de dye. Us had a big orchard wid apples an' peaches an' pears, more'n us an' de hawgs togedder could eat up.

"When a nigger died, dey was buried in de graveyard lak dey do now, an' dey shouted an' hollered an' sometime a 'oman she faint an' hab to be tote home. De song dey sing mos' at de fun'ral was: Hark from de Toom'.

"Us sho' did hab plenty singin' o' hymns an' shoutin' at night in de cabins. Iffen de men want to break a night res' he go possum huntin' or rabbit huntin' jes' so he git pass from Ole Marster an' was at de fiel' nex' mornin' on time wid de yuther han's.

"I knowed Ole Marster went to de war, 'caze I heerd de folks talkin' bout hit an' wonder iffen Ole Marster gwine git kilt. Den I heerd 'em say de niggers was free, but us didn't leave Ole Marster for 'bout a year atter de s'render. Den us went to lib on de young mistis' place at Barlow Bend, atter she ma'ed Mr. Bob Flynn. Right dar I stayed twell I was grown and ma'ed. Den de fust move to town, us come up de Alabama Ribber to James' Landin'. I members all de big boats on de ribber. Dey sho' was fine 'uns.

"Den, I 'members atter I growed up dey tell 'bout how de Yankees comin' here an' how dey pester de white folks an' de niggers, too. Broke in dey smoke-houses, burn 'em up an' t'row t'ings away an' lef' nobody nottin' to eat. I don't 'member dat 'caze I was too li'l.

"Lady, you ax me iffen us knowed anyt'ng 'bout hoodoo? Yes, ma'am dere sho' was folkses what could put spells on you. I sho' was skeered o' dem kin' too. Atter I was nearly growed, dere was a gal name Penny what been down sick a long time an' dere was a cunjer doctor wukkin' on her tryin' cyure her, but her wan't 'greeable, so he let her die. Den a boy, name Ed, he had a mis'ry in he foot, an' hit went up he leg an' he cripple. Dere was a hoodoo doctor in de forks o' 'Bigbee Ribber come tend on him, an' he tol' ebber'body git outten de house 'cep'n' him an' Ed an' de Debil. He cyured Ed smack well.

"My mammy said I was borned wid a 'zernin' eye to see sperits, an' I seed sump'n lak a cow wid no haid. So mammy made me stir de fresh lard when dey was rendin' hit, 'caze dat cyures you of seein' de sperits. Atter I stirred de lard, I didn't see 'em no mo'.

"One time I was splittin' rails wid a nigger what could do anythin', but he was a bad man an' I was 'feered of him. I tol' him, iffen I had a pain or anything hurt me, I sho' would kill him wid my ax. I wudda split dat nigger wide open, jes' lak I split dem rails, iffen he try dat hoodoo on me.

"Talkin' 'bout fishin', I 'members when us would be plowin' down by de ribber, when hit come dinner-time an' whilst de mules eatin', us go down to de ribber an' fish. Den eb'ry Sat'day ebenin's us'd fish. Us kotch trout, gyar, jack an' carp. May was when de carp bite. Dey was so fat den dat you could cook em by deyse'f widout no grease. Den us ketch turkeys in pole pens baited wid corn.

"Lor' what's de use me talkin' 'bout dem times. Dey all pas' an' gone. Sometimes I gits to studyin' 'bout all de folks mos' is dead, an' I is here yit, libin' an' blin'; but I 'spec's hit won't be long twell I is ober de ribber wid de bles'."