

Henry Cheatham

Interview with Henry Cheatham

—*Ila B. Prine*

I HEARD LINCOLN SET US FREE

"White folks, I'se glad you drapped by to have a talk wid me. I was gittin' powerfully lonely," said Henry Cheatham, who lives in Marysville, a Mobile suburb. "Sho' I'll be glad to tell you some about de slave days. I sho' 'members plenty. Well, to begin wid, I was born in 1850 near West Point. Dat's in Clay County, Mississippi, you know. I b'longed to Mr. Tom Hollingshead who was killed in de Cibil War. I 'members all de slaves agoin' in to take a last look at him atter dey done brung his body home.

"My mammy's name was Emmeline Cheatham, an' my pappy's was Sam Cheatham. I don't remember my grandpappy an' grandmammy at all.

"Us slaves libed in log cabins what was daubed wid clay to keep de rain an' win' out, an' de chimneys was made of clay an' sticks. De beds was home-made an' nailed agin' de wall wid legs on de outer side. De Massa's house was build of logs too, but it was much bigger'n de nigger cabins an' sot way out in front of oun. Atter de massa was kilt, old Miss had a nigger oberseer an' dat was de meanest debil dat eber libbed on de Lawd's green yearth. I promise myself when I growed up dat I was agoin' to kill dat nigger iffen it was de las' thing I eber done. Lots of times I'se seen him beat my mammy, an' one day I seen him beat my Auntie who was big wid a chile, an' dat man dug a roun' hole in de groun' an' put her stummick in it, an' beat an' beat her for a half hour straight till the baby come out raght dere in de hole.

"Why de Mistis 'low such treatment? A heap of times ole Miss didn't know nuthin' 'bout it, an' de slaves better not tell her, 'caze dat oberseer whup 'em iffen he finds out dat dey done gone an' tol'. Yassun, white folks, I'se seed some turrible things in my time. When de slaves would try to run away our oberseer would put chains on dere legs wid big long spikes tween dere feets, so dey couldn't git away. Den I's seen great bunches of slaves put up on de block an' sol' jus' lak dey was cows. Sometimes de chilluns would be seprated from dere maws an' paws.

"I come pretty near to bein' tuk away from my maw. When de slaves was bein' 'vided, one of ole Miss' datters was agoin' to Texas, an' I was goin' to have to go when somebody hollered 'Freedom', an' I sho' was glad 'caze I could stay wid my mammy now.

"In dose days us had plenty of good, plain food; such as pot likker, greens, cornbread, 'taters, peas, pears, an' at hog killin' us had chittlin's an' pig jowls an' back bone. Den us would cotch 'possums at night when dey come up in de corn fiel'. Us neber seed no flour dough.

"As for fishin', we neber did none, 'caze we hadda work too hard. We worked from 'can to can't.' Git up at sunrise, go to de fiel' an' stay till dark. In de middle of de day dey would sen' our somp'n t'eat to de fiel' wid a barrel of water. But for breakfas' an' supper, us hadda cook our own grub dey gib us.

"Our clo's warn't many. Us chilluns wo' a one-piece suit made outen osnaburg, an' us would hab to take dat off at night, wash it an' put it back on de nex' day. As for shoes, chillun neber had none. You see, white folks, I was jus' a chile, jus' big enough to tote water to de fiel's.



Henry Cheatam, Marysville, Alabama

"I 'members when de Yankees was acomin' th'ough I hoped to ca'y de hosses to de woods an' hoped to hide de meat an' bury de valu'bles, 'caze dem Yankees tuk whatever dey wanted, an' you better not say nothin' neither 'caze dey had dem long swyords ahangin' at dere sides.

"In dem days, de slaves done all de work an' carried all de news. De marsters sont notes from one plantation to anudder, an' when dey wanted de niggers to come to de Big House dey would blow an ole cow horn. Dey had certain number of blows for certain niggers. Dat is, de niggers dat was somp'n. Dey would also use dis horn for 'possum an' coon huntin' at night. De li'l niggers at night went to de big house to spin an' weave. I'se spun a many roll an' carded a many bat of cotton. I'se also made a many tallow candle by tyin' strings onto a long stick an' droppin dem down into moulds filled wid tallow. I'se hid many a night in de fence corners when I'd be agoin' som'ers to git my mammy some 'bacco. De pattyrollers would be out lookin' for slaves dat didn't hab no pass from dere oberseer, an' I'd hear dem acomin' an' I'd hide till dey pass on, 'caze iffen dey cotch me I sho' gwine have a sound beatin'.

"De owners always tuk care of us, and when us got sick dey would git a doctor, an' ole Miss was all right, but dat oberseer was a debil. He wouldn't 'low no meetin' on de place. Sometimes us would slip down de hill an' turn de wash pot bottom up'ards so de soun' of our voices would go under de pot, an' us'd have a singin' an' prayin' raght dere.

"Mos' of de slave could go sometimes to de white folks church when dey gits a pass from dere Massa, but dat mean oberseer always tried to keep us from goin' so's us couldn't learn nothin'. He didn't want us to learn to read or write neither.

"No'm us didn't have nothin' lak matches till I was growed. Us used flint rocks an' cotton to start de fires.

"Us didn't have nothin' but food an' clothes. We didn't have no garden of our own an' der wan't no celebratin', 'ceptin' at hog killin'. Dat was de bigges' day of de year.

"On Sat'day afternoon we was 'lowed to play, but I can't 'member none of de games. Us jus' played lak all li'l niggers did den. At night time us jus' went to our cabins an' went to bed, 'caze we warn't 'lowed to do no singin'. Mos' of de singin' was done in de fiel's.

"Cornshuckin' time come when dey wanted to git de seed corn for plantin', an' us would commence de shuckin' when it commence rainin'.

"You axed me 'bout funerals an' weddin's. Us niggers nebber ma'ied an' don't 'member any big weddin's of de white folks. But dey buried folks den de same as dey does now, in a box. Dey would bury de slaves same as dey done de white folks, but us didn't eben have no babtizin' on 'count of dat oberseer. He didn't lak for us to git no religion. Cose all slaves didn't have hard treatment lak us did, 'caze dere oberseer an' Marster warn't as mean as ourn.

"No'm we didn't know nothin' 'bout no hoodoo stuff in dem days. Dey only had homemade medicines, dat is unless dey got sho' nuff powerful sick an' den dey would go to see a doctor. Us used bone-set tea made from a weed. Lawd, it was bitterer dan quinine, an' it were good for de chills an' fever, an' it would purge you too. Den us used life-everlastin' tea for fever, an' Jerusalem brush-reed to get rid of worms.

"But, Miss, I knows dere is gostes, 'caze when I was a little boy my mammy come in from de fiel' an' laid across de bed an' I was sittin' in front of de fireplace an' a big somp'n lak a cow widout no haid come in de do' an' I commence to beat on it wid my fists. Den my mammy say: 'What matter wid you, nigger?' Den dat critter he walk raght out de do'. I looked outen de window an' dere it was a-goin' in Aunt Marfa's cabin. I neber did see it no mo'. Den anudder time a white man died an' my mammy was a stayin' wid his sister an' dis spirit lak an angel come to my mammy an' tol' her to tell de white lady to read de Bible back'ards three times, 'caze dere was one talent 'tween her an' Jesus. Atter dat she were comforted. Anudder time, my pappy, Sam Cheatam, who was a wicked man, was a-sittin' in front of de fire an' a big brindle dog come to de do' an' started barkin'. My pappy say: 'What in de Hell am dat?' an' snapped his fingers at de dog. De dog he den dropped daid. Some folks say dat dere ain't no sich things as gostes, but I know dere is, 'caze dere is good spirits an' bad spirits.

"Dem was good ol' days, Mistis, even iffen us did have a hard time an' I don't know iffen it warn't better'n it is now. I has to almos' go hongry, an' I can't git no he'p from de government, 'caze I is over 65 years old. Fact is, I believe I 'druther be alivin' back dere dan today 'caze us at least had plenty somp'n t'eat an' nothin' to worry about. An' as for beatin'; dey beats folks now iffen dey don't do raght, so what's de difference? Yassum, Mistis, I worked as long as I was able an' didn't axe nobody for nothin', but now it's diff'rent, 'caze I ain't able to do no work. I'se tried to do raght and ain't never been in but one fight in my life. I now belongs to de Corinthian Babtist Church, an' I's tryin' to live so when de good Lawd calls I'll be ready to answer wid a clean soul.

"I'se had two wives, but I was only a young nigger when I had de fust un, an' had two chilluns by her, den I lef' her 'caze she warn't no 'count. Dat's been forty year ago, an' I ain't neber seen my chilluns in all dem years. My second wife I got when I lived thirty miles below Birmingham, Alabama, at de ol' Bank Mines. Dat's been thirty-five year ago an' us is still together. Us ain't neber had no chilluns. No'm, I don't know nothin' 'bout Abe Lincoln 'ceptin' dey say he sot us free, an' I don't know nothin' 'bout dat neither.