

Hilliard Johnson

Interview with Hilliard Johnson

—*Ruby Pickens Tartt, Livingston, Alabama*

HOODOOIN' DE DOGS

Uncle Hilliard Johnson and his wife Callie live on the Johnson place about three and a half miles from Livingston, Ala., the same place Hilliard was brought as an infant of two in slavery days. He and Callie tend their own little patch of ground and they own a mule. White friends patch up the gaps in their financial structure and everybody knows them. Uncle Hilliard pulled up his mule in front of my house and climbed down from the high seat, leaving Callie sitting placidly in the sun.

He came around to the kitchen door and announced that he was here, "'ca'se he got de word I wanted to ax him somepin."

"Uncle Hilliard," I said, "I want to hear all about you and your family and whom you belonged to in slavery time."

"Well, Miss Ruby, iffen you is knowed me all dese years and still don' know who I'm is, and my family is, and who us belonged to, dey ain't no use of me stoppin' now to tell you. 'Sides, I's sick, I's been to de horspital in York, Dr. Hills', and he wants to operate. I's skeered of de knife and ain't got no money neither.

"I can't eat nothin' but tomato soup. Dem sho' is nice ones you got dere on de she'f, and oyster soup and rice soup and all lac dat. Can't eat no rough vittles lac collards. I ain't gittin' on well atall, but I'll 'blige you a while. I was thinkin' other day 'bout you and dem ole sperichel hymns I leads out to Mount Pilgrim. You's got 'Oh Lord, I'm a Waitin' on You', ain't you? I knowed you had dat 'bout 'And I Can't Do Nothin' Until You Comes. Sho Can't.' Well, here's one you ain't got, 'ca'se hit's a really old sperichel my gran'maw use to sing. I's sorter hoarse today, but hit go:

Jes' carry me and bury me

I'll rise at de comin' day.

Jes' carry me and bury me,

I'll rise at de comin' day.

"Now dat's jes' de chorus and de verse say:

When I was in my worldly ways

Nobody had nothin' to say.

Now I'm ridin' de pale white hoss

Ev'ybody got something to say."

"Den de chorus ag'in, and hit's a pretty one sho's you bawn."

I mentioned the figure of speech "pale white hoss", but he "didn't know nothin' 'bout no figures!"

"And another one, dey is so many, let me see. Here one but I jes' can't call to mine a heap of verses:

Trouble here and dey's trouble dere,

I really do believe dere's trouble ev'ywhere.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home."

"Den hit goes on and tell 'bout de moaner, says:

Oh, dey's a moaner here, dey's a moaner dere,

I really do b'lieve dey's a moaner ev'ywhere.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Oh dey's a sinner here, dey's a sinner dere,

I really do b'lieve dey's a sinner ev'ywhere.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Oh, dey's a Christun here, dey's a Christun dere

I really do b'lieve dey's a Christun ev'ywhere

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

Swing low, chariot, I'm gwine home.

"Den dey's a heap of 'em to dat song lac a "deacon" and a "member" and a "prayer" and a "singer", jes' a whole passel dem verses, but I reckon dem will do today.

"Now what else you want, 'ca'se dem mules is tired and I is too. 'Sides I got to see a man and Callie in de waggin and she's hot too. You knows Callie, she my wife, my second wife, and us got twelve chillun in all, growed and married. Us still live on de Johnson place three and a half miles from Livingston right han' side de ole Boyd road west from town. Us belonged to Miss Ella Johnson, she was us young Mistis, and Mr. Nep Johnson, dat's de onliest ones I ever knowed. My mammy, Frances Johnson, and my pappy, Alf Johnson, come from down 'bout Cubie Station. Young Mist'iss bought 'em I reckon and my gran'maw,

Rachel Johnson. Fus' thing I knowed, us was livin' on Johnson place. Dey was good to us, 'bout seventy-five of us all together, I reckon. All I 'members, dey looped de bridle rein over my feet an' let de mule drag me all over de orchard. It hurt my head. And dey beat some of 'em up scan'lous, but dey was pretty good to me, I reckon. See, I wa'n't so ole, jes' a young boy in slavery time, but I recall young Massa told Tom, a young nigger dere, one time not to go to de frolic.

"Clean up dem dishes and go ter bed,' he say. And Tom said 'Yassuh' but Marse Nep watch Tom th'oo de do' and atter while Tom slip out and away he went, wid young Massa right 'hin' him. He got dere and foun' Tom cuttin' groun' shuffle big as anybody. Young Massa called him, 'Tom,' he say, 'Tom, didn't I tell you you couldn't come to dis frolic?' 'Yassuh,' says Tom, 'You sho' did, and I jes' come to tell 'em I couldn't come!'

"Young Massa didn't hurt Tom none, but I is seed 'em strip 'em plum nekked and nigh 'bout kill 'em. I did see 'em kill old Collin, but dey done dat wid a shot gun jes' 'ca'se dey couldn't control him. Did they have nigger dogs, you say? Yassum, dey sho' did, but I'm tellin' you de troof now some of de black folks knowed how to git away from dem nigger dogs jes' lac dey wa'n't dere. Mr. Joe Patton, you know Mr. Joe Patton don' you? Young Mr. Joe, I'm talkin' 'bout what's over here in town and use to be de sher'ff. Well, in his day, he done seed a nigger hoodoo dem dogs 'ca'se dey had nigger dogs after S'render too. I kin tell you what I seed, but what dey done now, I doan' know, I couldn't tell you dat. But hit was a fair day, fair as 'tis now, and dey sot de dogs on dat nigger and 'fo' yer knowed hit dat nigger done lef' dere and had dem dogs treein' a nekked tree. 'Twa'n't nobody dere. Dey calls hit hoodoin' de dogs. And I'se seen hit more times than one. Time I tell you 'bout, Mr. Patton was ag'in. 'Twas a feller right here in town. I forgits his name but he was a tall nigger, married Dennis Coleman's daughter. You 'members Dennis Coleman, had dat gal call Hettie? Well, he married Hettie, and he whooped her up mightily. She 'ported on him to de sheriff, and he went to git him. I can't think what dat nigger go by now, but anyhow Mr. Patton couldn't ketch him and he sot de dogs on him and dey couldn't ketch him. Dey knowed whichaway he went, down 'bout Bear Creek on Miss Mamie Smith's place in de flatwoods. 'Twa'n't no trouble to ketch nobody down dere, but dem dogs couldn't do hit, and fus' thing you know he run back to Hattie's.

"Now jes' give me a few tomatoes, Miss Ruby, and I mus' cut dis short. Dey's a cloud comin' up over yonder by Peter's washpot and dat's when us gits a rain. I got a fur piece to go for a old man. Yassum, I'se nigh 'bout seventy-nine years old and porely."