

## John Smith

### Interview with John Smith

—*Susie R. O'Brien, Uniontown, Alabama*

#### *"MAD 'BOUT SOME PIN"—SO THEY HAD A WAR*

John Smith is 103 but he doesn't want to be tied down. "Effen I's free, I wants to 'joy it," John says, and he lives up to his desire. Though he is a "war veter'n" with bullets in his side and leg and his century of life has enfeebled him, he roams the countryside about Uniontown continually, "settin' a spell" with his acquaintances.

It was only after several trips I finally caught him "settin'," and he showed no inclination to move from his advantageous position near a watermelon patch. He was industriously working on a huge slice of melon, his face buried in the sweet fruit, as I drove up to the little cabin where he was visiting.

As the car came to a stop he raised his head and wiped his dripping chin on his sleeve. He called to a little Negro girl in the yard, "Gal, go bring de white lady a rockin' cheer", and turning to me he said, "You'll 'scuse me for not gittin' up lak I ain't got no manners, won't you Mistess? I got a misery in my laig; you know de one whar I got shot in de war."

The rocking chair was brought out and taking a seat nearby I said, "Uncle John, I want you to tell me all about yourself, were you in the war and are you really a hundred and three years old?"

"Glad to, glad to mistess, but fust don't you want a watermillon?" He pointed to a patch nearby where the melons glistened in the sun. "Dis July sun make de juice so sweet you'll smack yo' mouf for mo'," and searching the rind to see that he had left none of the juicy red meat, Uncle John began his story.

"Well, I been livin' 'roun' dese parts 'bout ninety year. I was born somewar in North Ca'lina, I don't 'member much 'bout my Mammy an' Pappy 'cause I was took 'way from dem by de speckerlaters when I was 'bout thirteen year ole. De speckerlaters raised Niggers to sell. Dey would feed 'em up an' git 'em fat and slick and make money on 'em. I was sold off de block in 'Speckerlater's Grove' in North Ca'lina. De fus' day I was put up I didn't sold, but de nex' day I brung a thousand dollars. Mr. Saddler Smith from Selma bought me. Dey called him Saddler Smith cause he was in de saddle business and made saddles for de army. Dey fotch us down on boats. I 'member de song de men on de boat singed. Hit go like dis:

Up an' down de Mobile Ribber,

Two speckerlaters for one po' lil nigger.

"My marster was de best in dis country. He didn't had many niggers, but he sho' tuck good keer o' dem what he did had. He didn't 'low nobody to hit 'em a lick. Sometime when I would git cotch up wid in

some diverment de white folks would say, 'Whose nigger is you?' and I say, 'Marse Saddler Smith.' Den dey look at each oder an' say kinder low, 'Better not do nothin' to ole Smith's nigger. He'll raise de debil.'

"I didn't had no mistiss. My marster was a widder. He raised me up workin' 'roun' de saddle shop. I ain't never liked to work nowhow, but don't tell nobody dat. I was bout twentyseven year ole when de war broke out. De ole uns was called out fust and de young uns stayed home and practiced so dey could shoot straight an' kill a Yankee. Us practiced every Friday evenin'. Course I didn't know what dey fightin' 'bout. I jes' knowed dey was mad 'bout somepin'. Atter while Marster's son Jim j'ined de 'Federate sogers an' I went wid him for to tote his knapsack, canteen and sichlike and to look atter him. Dat's when I got dese here balls in my side and got a bullet in my laig, too. I was movin' de hawses to de back of de lines out de thick of de fight when, zipp, a minit ball cotch me right in de shoulder."

Proudly John displayed the balls in his side and the scar on his leg. The old woman, at whose cabin John was visiting, interrupted the story several times. Finally he got tired of it and said: "Shet yo' mouf 'oman, I don't need no ho'p, dis is grown folks talk, you don't know nothin' 'bout it, you wasn't even birthed tell two year 'fo' de Surrender. Now whar was I at? I slep' right by Marsa Jim's side. Sometime atter us done laid down and bofe of us be thinkin' 'bout home, Marse Jim say, 'John, I lak to have some chicken.' I don't say nothin' I jes' ease up an' pull my hat down over my eyes an' slip out. Atter while I come back wid a bunch o'chickens crost my shoulder. Nex' mornin' Marse Jim have nice brown chicken floatin' in graby what I done cook for him. Us was fightin' on Blue Mountain when Marse Jim got kilt. I looked and looked for him but I never did find him. Atter I lost my marster I didn't 'long to nobody and de Yankee's was takin' eve'y thing anyhow, so dey tuck me wid dem.

"I tuck keer of Gen'l Wilson's hawse, Gen'l Wilson was de head man in de Yankee army. But I didn't lak dey ways much. He wanted his hawse kep' spick and span. He would take his white pocket hankercher an' rub over de hawse and if it was dirty he had me whupped. I was wid Gen'l Wilson when he tuck Selma 'gins't Gen'l Forrest and sot fire to all dem things. I drive de artillery wagon sometime. Atter Surrender I was kinda puny wid de balls in my side."

"John," I asked, "why didn't they remove the balls at the time you were shot?"

"How could dey 'move de balls when I was runnin' fast as I could pick up my foots? I driv de stagecoach twixt Selma and Montgomery. I 'member my stops. Dey was Selma, Benton, Lown'esboro and Mon'gomery. I driv four hawses to it. Dere was a libbery stable at Benton and I changed hawses dere."

"Now John tell me about your wife and children," I said. "How many children did you have?"

"Gawd, I don't know mistess. Dey runnin' 'roun' de country like hawgs. Dey don't know me an' I don't know dem. I ain't never been mai'ed. Niggers didn't marry in dem days. I jes' tuk up wid one likely gal atter anoder. I ain't even mai'ed to de one I got now. I jes' ain't gwine tie myse'f down. Effen I's free, I's gwine to be free."

Uncle John sat for a time in deep thought, then said, "I wish I mought be back in dem days, 'cause I been seed de debil since I been free. Atter I was free I didn't had no marster to 'pend on and I was hongry a heap of times. I 'long to de 'Federate nation and always will 'long to y'all, but I reckon it's jes' as well we is free 'cause I don't b'lieve de white folks now days would make good marsters."

Uncle John had about talked out and as I rose to leave I said, "Thankyou John, this will make a good story," to which he replied indignantly, "Hit ain't no story. Hit's de Gawd's trufe mistess