

Joseph Holmes

I

Personal interview with Joseph Holmes

Grand Avenue, Prichard, Alabama

—Ila B. Prine, Mobile, Alabama

DEY KEP' NIGGERS IN GOOD CONDITION TO SELL

Standing in the middle of the road at Prichard, suburb of Mobile, and gesticulating while talking to a small group of interested listeners an old Negro man ended his talk to the small gathering and punctuated his last sentence with a spat of tobacco.

"No'm," he continued after I had put in my appearance and asked him a question, "I doesn't know whether I was a slave, but jus' de same I seed Gen'l Grant's army when it went th'ough Virginy. Jus' as sho' as you is standin' dar, lady, I seed dem mens all dressed in blue suits, a-marching' side by side, gwine down de road pas' our place. It tuk 'em three days to go by our house.

"An' I remembers when dem Yankees came to our ole Mistis' house an' take a ladder an' clumb up to de roof an' tear de boards outter de ceilin' to git dem big hams an' shoulders my white folks done had hid up dar. When de Yankees find dat stuff dey give it all to de niggers. Den atter de solgers lef' ole Miss called us to her an' tol' us we was free, but for us to give back some of de meat an' things dat de Yankees done give us, 'ca'se she didn't have nothin' to eat 'roun' de place. 'Course we was glad to do it, 'ca'se Mistis sho' was good to us.

"I remembers ebery Sunday mawnin' dat she'd make de older slaves bring all de little niggers up to de big house, so she could read de Bible to 'em, and den she give us plenty of dem good biscuits and taters dat Susanne cook for us. She'd say: 'Git 'roun' dere, Susanne, and he'p dem little niggers' plates.' I really thought Mistis was a angel.

"Talkin' 'bout niggers bein' free. Ole Miss tol' us was free, but it was ten or twelve years atter de surrender befo' I knowed whut she meant. I was a big boy goin' to school befo' I had an understandin' as to what she meant.

"Ole Miss taught de niggers how to read an' write an' some of 'em got to be too good at it, 'ca'se dey learned how to write too many passes so's de pattyrollers wouldn't cotch 'em, an' on dem occasions was de onlyes' times dat I ever seed one of our niggers punished.

"Mistis never 'lowed no mistreatin' of de slaves, 'case dey was raisin' slaves for de market, an' it wouldn't be good bizness to mistreat 'em. Lor' Miss, my white folks was rich; dey had as many as five or six hundred niggers; men, women an' chilluns. De plantation was big, but I doesn't remember how many

acres it was, but I does remember dat de cabins was all built in rows, an' dere was streets laid out among de cabins. De chimneys was built outten dirt an' sticks, an' you know up in Virginny it got powerful cold, so when dey built de cabins dey th'owed dirt up under 'em to keep de wind an' snow out.

"I was bawn in Henry County, Virginny, near Danville, an' I's been to Vicksburg an' Petersburg a many a time wid my pappy to de wheat an' 'bacca market. Lor', honey, Virginny is de bes' place on earth for good eaten' an' good white folks. If anybody tells you dat de white folks was mean to dere niggers, dey neber come from Virginny, 'case us was too near de free states, an' I done already tol' you dat dey raised niggers to sell an' dey kep' 'em in good condition. In dose days white folks an' black folks was black folks. Jus' lak Booker T. Washington was a riber between de niggers of dis generation an' learnin'. He had all dat was fine an' good, an' he give de bes' to his people iffen dey would take it. Dat was de way wid de white folks den; dey didn't do no whuppin'.

"I's de onlyes' rat lef' in de pond, an' 'case I ain't hung in de smoke house, folks thinks I's not as old as I say I is, but chile, I's been here a long time. I 'members how black Sam useta preach to us, an' when I growed up I useta think warnt nobody Christians cep'n us Babtists, but I know better now, an' de longer I lives de mo' I realizes dat de churches go 'way 'case dey leaves off de ordinances of God, although us has a Bible an' mo' Christian readin' dan ever befo'.

"My mammy's name was Eliza Rowlets an' my pappy's was Joseph Holmes. My pappy had de same name as de peoples dat owned him an' my gran'mammy name was Lucy Holmes. Gran'mammy Holmes lived to be over a hundred years old, an' she was de fust pusson I ever seed daid. In dem days it tuk three days to bury a pusson, 'case dey dug de graves as deep as de corpse was tall.

"Land sakes a-livin', us had great times, an' I forgot to tell you dat us had home-made beds wid two sides nailed to de wall an' de mattresses was made outen wheat straw.

"As for huntin' I done plenty of it an' one thing I got to git forgiveness for was when I lef' Virginny, I lef' 'bout fifty or sixty snares set to cotch rabbits an' birds.

"My mammy had eight chilluns an' we was raised in pairs. I had a sister who come along wid me, an' iffen I jumped in de river she done it too. An' iffen I go th'ough a briar patch, here she come along too.

"'Bout de fruit; it makes my mouth water to think about dem cheese apples, dat was yaller lak gold, an' dose Abraham apples, an' de cherry tree as big as dese oaks here. I's eaten many a big sugar and sweetheart cherry. But dere was another kind called de Gorilla dat growed as big as de yaller plums down dis way. Now let me tell you somp'n 'bout Virginny; 'dey had dere laws 'bout drink. Dey had de bes' peach an' cherry brandy an' mos' any kin' you eber heared of, but dey didn't 'low you to make drink outten anything you could make bread wid; sich as corn or rye. Us had our brandy same as you would coffee, 'case it was cold, an' some mawnin's my pappy would git de brandy out an' my mammy would putt a little water an' sugar wid it an' gib it to us chilluns. Us neber thought nothin' 'bout drinkin'. I kinda believes lak dat ole infidel Ingersoll who said dat anything dat was a custom was dere religion.

"Now you axed about hog-killin' time? Dat was de time of times. For weeks de mens would haul wood an' big rocks, an' pile 'em together as high as dis house, an' den have several piles lak dat 'roun' a big hole in de groun' what had been filled wid water. Den jus' a little atter midnight, de boss would blow de ole hawn, an' all de mens would git up an' git in dem pig pens. Den dey would sot dat pile of wood on fire an' den start knockin' dem hogs in de haid. Us neber shot a hog lak us does now; us always used an

axe to kill 'em wid. Atter knockin' de hog in de haid, dey would tie a rope on his leg an' atter de water got to de right heat, fum dose red-hot rocks de hog would be throwed in an' drug aroun' a while, den taken out an' cleaned. Atter he was cleaned he was cut up into sections an' hung up in de smoke house. Lawsie, lady, dey don't cure meat dese days; dey jus' uses some kind of liquid to brush over it. We useta have sho' 'nuff meat.

"Den come cawnshuckin' time. My goodness, I would jus' love to be dar now. De cawn would be piled up high an' one man would git on dat pile. It was usually a kinda nigger foreman who could sing an' git de work outten de niggers. Dis fo'man would sing a verse somp'n lak dis:

Polk and Clay went to war,

Polk come back wid a broken jaw.

Den all de niggers would sing back at him wid a kinda shoutin' sound. Near 'bout all de times de fo'man made up his own songs, by pickin' dem outen dat shuckin'! It war de jug dat dey brung aroun' eve'y hour. Dat's de onlyes' time de slaves really got drunk.

"In dem ole days I went to plenty of dances an' candy pullin's durin' de Yule season, but I doesn't do dat no mo'. I's a preacher an' when I fus' lef' Virginny, I come to Georgy an' stayed dar twenty years whar I kicked up plenty of dus'. I even taught school dar. Den I come to Alabamy an' lived in Evergreen for 'bout twenty mo' years. Since I been in Mobile I's worked for sich men as ole Simon, Damrich, an' Van Antwerp, an' all dere chilluns has been in dese here arms of mine. I's been a square citizen an' dere hasn't been a time dat I is had to call on nobody but Uncle Sam when ole man 'pression cotched me. But thank de Lawd I is still able to git about an' have all my senses 'cep' my eye-sight, an' it's jus' a little po'ly. I is got all my teeths 'cep' one, an' my mammy was always proud of my hair. See how silky an' fine it is? Not quite white, dough. I hope I lives long enough for it to turn white as snow. I think St. Peter will lak it better dat way."

II

Personal interview with Joseph Holmes

Grand Avenue, Prichard, Alabama

—*Ila B. Prine, Mobile, Alabama*

TWELVE YEARS 'TWEEL I UNDERSTOOD SURRENDER

In the middle of the road near Prichard, an incorporated suburb of Mobile, stood an aged Negro man, gesticulating as he told a tale of other days to a small audience. Tall, straight, with gray hair and mustache, he was a picturesque figure. He does not know whether he was born in slavery, he said, but he knows his age to be about eighty-one.

"I doesn't know whether I was a slave, but jes' de same I seed General Grant's army when hit went th'ough Virginny," he said "Jes' as sho' as yo' is standin' dar, lady, I seed him, and I seed dem men all dressed in dem blue suits a-marchin' side by side, gwine down de road pas' our place. Hit tuk dem three days tuh git pas' our house.

"An' does I 'member when dem Yankees come tuh Ol' Mistiss house an' tuk a ladder an' clim' up tuh de roof an' tear de boards outta de ceilin' tuh git dem big hams an' shoulders dey had hid up dar? I sho' does. De women folks makes de slaves hide wid de meat; an' when dem Yankees fin' dat stuff dey jes' gib hit all tuh de niggers, an' I 'members too, how Ol' Miss calls us all to her atter dey lef' an' tole us dat us was free, but she tole us dat us hab tuh gib back ob de meat an' 'serves 'case she didn't hab a bit tuh eat. 'Cose we was glad tuh do hit 'case Ol' Miss sho' was good tuh her slaves.

"I 'members ebery Sunday mawnin' dat she made de older slaves bring all de little niggers up to her big white, two-story house, so she could read de Bible to us, an' den she gib us plenty dem good biscuits an' 'taters dat she had de cook, Susanne, cook for us. She'd say 'Git 'roun' dere, Susanne, an' he'p dem li'l niggers plates,' I, raily thought Ol' Miss was an angel.

"Talkin 'bout niggers bein' freed, Ol' Miss tole us us was free, but hit was ten or twelve years atter de Surrender, befo' I knowed whut she was talkin' 'bout. I was a big boy goin' to school befo' I had any understanin' as tuh whut she meant.

"Ol' Miss taught de niggers how to read an' write, an' some ob dem got to be too 'ficient wid de writin', 'case dey larn how tuh write too many passes so de pattyrollers wudn't git dem. Dat was de onliest time I ebber knowed Ol' Miss tuh hab de slaves punished.

"Ol' Miss nebber 'lowed no mistreatin' de slaves, case dey was raisin' slaves for de market, an' hit wouldn't be good business to mistreat 'em. Lor' mah white folks was rich; dey had as many as five or six hundred niggers, men, women and chillun. De plantation was big but I don't 'member how many acres I does 'member de cabins was all built in rows, an' streets was laid out 'tween de cabins. De chimbeys was built outta dirt an' sticks, an' sticks, an' yo' know up in Virginny hit got turrible cold an' de snow would pile up, so when de cabins was built, de men th'owed dirt up under de house to keep de snow an' cold out. Yo' might think dat dirt would wash out from under de house, but hit didn't. Hit jes' made dem so warm an' com'fo'ble we didn't suffer.

"Dat was de way wid de white folks den; dey didn't do no whippin' an' mistreatin' ob de slaves. Oh, once in a while Ol' Miss might slap de cook's face an' tell her tuh bear down 'roun' dere, an' if she wanted de servin' boys to hurry, she would say 'Cutch hit,' meanin' fer dem to cut some steps an' git 'bout in a hurry.

"I's de ol'est rat in de pon', an' 'case I ain't hung in de smokehouse, folks think I's not as ol' as I says I is, but chile, I's been heah. I 'members how Sam useta to preach to us, when we was at Ol' Miss's place, an' when I growed up, I 'members how I useta think nobody was a Christian 'ceptin' us Baptists, but I knows better now. An' de longer I lib de mo' I realize dat de chu'ches go away 'case dey leabes off de ordinances ob God, 'tho us has got de Bible an' mo' Christian litterchoor dan eber befo'.

"My ma's name was 'Liza Rowlets, an' mah daddy's name was Joseph Holmes. My daddy had de same name as de people whut owned him, an' my gran'ma's name was Lucy Holmes. Gran'ma Lucy libed to be a hundred yeahs old, an' she was de fust pusson I ebber seed daid. Hit tuk three days tuh bu'y a pusson den, 'case dey dug de graves as deep as yo' is tall, which means mo' than five feet deep. Lor' sakes a-livin' us had great times. I forgot tuh tell yo' dat us had home-made beds wid two sides nailed tuh de wall, an' de mattresses was made outta wheat straw. Dat's 'minds me dat dere wa'n't no pore cattle in dem times, 'case yo' could go whar dey thresh de wheat an' git all de straw yo' wanted an' feed de dry

cattle on hit. An' you wouldn't believe de fruit us did hab! Yo don't nebber see de like down dis way. Sich as apples, cherries, quinces, peaches an' pears.

"As fer huntin', I done plenty of it, an' one thing I got to git forgiveness fer was when I lef' Virginny, I lef' 'bout sixty or seventy snares set to ketch rabbits an' birds.

"My ma had eight chillun an' we was raised in pairs. I had a sister who come along wid me, an' if I jumped in de ribber tuh swim, she did hit too; if I clum' a tree, or went th'ough a briar patch, she done hit right behin' me. Ma wanted to know why her clo's was so tore up, an' when dey was pretty, we'd make hit right wid Ma by havin' a rabbit or coon wid us, an' sometimes a mud turtle. An' as fer 'possums an' coons, us ketch dem in plenty.

"'Bout de fruit, hit makes mah mouf watah tuh think 'bout dem cheese apples dat was yaller lac' gold, an' dose Abraham apples de lack of which ain't now to be had. An' dose cherry trees as big as dese oaks, wid long limbs an' big sugar an' sweetheart, an' black heart cherries. Den dere was annudder kin' of cherry called de gorilla, dat was roun' an' growed as big as de yaller plums down dis way.

"Now, let me tell yo' sumpin' 'bout Virginny. Hit had hits own law 'bout drink. Dey made de bes' peach an' cherry brandy an' mos' any kin' yo' ebber heerd ob, 'ceptin' dey didn't 'low yo' to make drink out ob anythin' you could make into bread. Now yo' understan's, sich as corn and rye.

"Us had our brandy same as yo' would coffee, 'case hit was cold an' some mawnin's us would git up an' de snow would be halfway up de do', an' de men would hab to ditch hit out, so us could git out of de house. On dem rail cold mawnin's my daddy would git de brandy out an' my ma wud put a li'l water an' sugar wid hit an gib to us chillun. An' den she'd take some in her mouf' an' put hit in de baby's mouf an' hit wud open hits eyes an' stamp hits foot rail peart lack.

"Us nebber thought nothin' of drinkin'. I kinda believes lack dat ol' infidel, Ingersoll, who said dat anythin' dat was de custom, was de religion.

"Folks was a heap kinder-hearted den dey is now, 'case dey kep' big dogs to hunt up people los' in de snow. Dey all seemed mo' happy 'case dey was all busy. At night instid of wastin' dey time, dey wud go tuh de big house an' spin an' weave an' make clo's.

"I kin hyar dat ol' loom hummin' now, an' see great cards ob cloth comin' out, an' dem was clo's den dat was made from hit. Hit tuck fire tuh git dem offen' yo' dey was so strong. I doesn't 'member whut dey used fer dye, but I knows dey used copperas as sizin' to hol' de colors. Some of de cloth was dyed red, blue an' black. I jes' can't 'member 'bout de dye, but dey used copperas. 'Dat was the qualification of de intelligence ob de primitive age', in usin' dat copperas. Dey not only made our clo's, but also made out hats. Of co'se dey wa'n't very hatty, but was mo' cappy. Dey made 'em wid tabs ober de ears, an' t tie under de chin, an' was dey warm, I'll say!

"Now, when yo' axes 'bout hawg killin' time, dat was de time! Fer weeks de men would haul wood and big rocks, an' pile hit all together as high as dat house; den hab sev'ral piles like dese 'roun' a big hole in de groun' whut had been filled wid watah. Den jes' a li'l atter mid-night de boss would blow de ol' horn, an' all de men would git up an' git in dem hog pens. Den dey would set dat pile of wood on fire, an' den start knockin' dem hawgs in de haid. Us nebber shot a hawg like dey does now. Us allus used an ax to kill 'em wid.

"Atter knockin' de hawg in de haid, dey would tie a rope on hits leg, an atter de water got to de right heat from dose red hot rocks whut had been pushed out ob dat pile ob nu'in wood into de watah, dey wud th'ow de hog in an' drag hit aroun' awhile, an' take him out an' hab him clean in 'bout three pair o' minutes. Atter he was clean dey hung him up, an' den later cut him up an' hung him in de smoke house, an' smoke him wid great oak logs. Huh, dey don't cu'ah meat now, dey jes' use sum kinda brush an' liquid, but dey don't hab meat lack us did.

"Den come co'shuckin' time. Mah goodness, I jes' would love to be dere now. De co'n would be piled up high an' one man would git on dat pile. Hit usually was one who was kinda niggah fo'man dat could sing an' get de wuck out of de odder niggers. Dis fo'man would sing a verse somethin' lack dis:

Polk an' Clay went to War,

An' Polk come back wid a broken jar.

"Den all de niggers would sing back to him, an' hallo, a kinder shoutin' soun'. Ginerally dis fo'man made up his songs by pickin' dem up from whut he had heard white folks tell of wars. But Miss yo' know whut was de motor powah of dat co'n shuckin'? Hit was de ol' jug dat was brung 'roun' ebery hour. Dat's de onliest time any ob de slaves raily got drunk.

"I wish I could 'member dose ol' songs, but all dat hallo done lef' me, 'case de onliest singin' I hears now is de good ol' sisters singin' an' sayin' 'Amen.'

"In days gone by I went to plenty of dances an' candy pullin's but I doesn't do dat any mo'. I's a preacher, an' when I fu'st lef' Virginny I come to Georgia an' stayed dere twenty yeahs, an' I kicked up a plenty of dust in Georgia. I eben taught school an' built a plenty of chu'ches dere. Den I come on to Alabammy, an' libed in Evergreen fo' about twenty mo' yeahs, an' I built a two-story brick chu'ch dere. Since I's been in Mobile I's wu'ked by dat Bienville Squah for twenty-eight years, for sich men as ol' man Simon, Damrich, an' Van Antwerp, an' all dere chillun has been in dese arms. I's been a squah citizen an' dere hasn't been but one time in mah life I's had to call on anybody, an' dat was when I had tuh call on Uncle Sam when ol' man Depression got me. But thank God I's still able to be 'bout an' have all my faculties, 'ceptin' my eyesight is a li'l porely. I still has all mah teeth, 'ceptin' one, an' my ma allus tuck pride in mah haih, yo' see how fine an' silky hit is, an' hit ain't snow white yit. Dere is one thing to be thankful fer. Dat is 'case I's so near home.