

Josh Horn

Interview with Josh Horn

—*Ruby Pickens Tartt, Livingston, Alabama*

CHASING GUINEA JIM, THE RUNAWAY SLAVE

Seven miles East from Livingston on State Road No. 80, thence Left two miles via a dim road through the woods to a cultivated section, the beginning of a large plantation area, stands the old-timey cabin of Josh Horn, a well known and influential figure in the colored community. Vigorous and active despite his more than 80 years, Josh exemplifies the gentleness with which time deals with those dwelling in a healthful spot and living the simple lives of a rural people. I found him nodding on his front steps.

"Josh," I said, "I've come to get you to tell me some old war-time stories, and I want to ask you some questions about you and Alice and how you-all are getting along. I just want to know all about you and your family as far back as you can remember."

"All right, Miss Ruby, I's glad to tell you what I knows," said Josh, "and it ain't gonna be a lot of fibbin', but jes' lak everything was. I's telling you lak you axed me."

"Now, 'bout how us is getting along. I's telling you de troof, ef I was took 'fore God, I'd sayjes' lak I's saying now, ef my chillun ever et a moufful dat wasn't honest, dey et it somewhar else, 'ca'se I ain't ever stole a moufful somepin' t'eat for 'em in all my life. It's honest vittles dey et, and varmint I's killed in de woods, 'ca'se us raised chillun fast, and us had a heap of 'em, sixteen, if I 'members right, and soon's I found out dat I could help feed 'em dat way, I done a heap of hunting. And everybody knows I's a good hunter. Alice used to make me go every Friday night; den us always had a 'possum or two for Sunday."

"Why," I asked, "didn't you go Saturday night?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Josh said, "Alice is a good Christian woman, and she knowed I'd hunt mighty nigh all night, and she didn't want nobody see me coming in Sunday morning wid no gun and no dogs; so I went every Friday night and went in de week too, and dat holp a lot to feed de chillun. I don't owe nobody, not a nickel."

"I lak to got in debt, when de Government come in and tried to help us wid dat cotton doings. Dey cut it down so on me, tell I couldn't make nothing; but I's getting on all right now, and so is my chillun. Us is got fourteen living, and dey's all been to school, but ain't but one been to Booker Washington's school, but dey kin all read and write, and some of 'em teaching school out here in de country. De doctor, he come clear out here to see us, 'ca'se I always pays him. He jes' here wid Alice last night. It's nine mile and two of dem's back here in de woods through Marse Johnnie's place, but he come when us went attter him 'bout midnight, and dat's a comfort to know he come."

I asked, what was the matter with Alice.

"Well, I'll tell you, Miss Ruby. She was back dere wid me in de kitchen, and I got through eating and I come out and set down in de swinger to git some air. De moon was shining, and Alice come out, saying loud as she could: 'Who is you? Who is you?' De chillun run to her wid a lamp and I run, and 'twan't nobody dere. Well, Alice said 'twas a big man standing right 'side her dressed in black, and she called it Death. Us couldn't do nothing wid her, and she didn't know nobody, me nor de chillun, so I went to Livingston atter Dr. McCain, and he come and set wid her 'bout a hour. He said 'twas de 'cute 'digest ion or somepin' lak dat. I knowed 'twan't no sperrit; I don't b'lieve in nothing lak dat."

"Well," I said, "I don't know, Josh, I've been hearing some ghost tales that freeze the blood in my veins."

"Yassum," said Josh, "if you wants to hear ghost tales, I kin sho tell 'em, ca'se I seed dis here wid my own eyes. 'Tain't no made-up nothing, needer; jes' somepin' I seed jes' lak I tells you."

"Green Hale and Isham Mathews b'longed to New Hope church, and de Reverend Bird Hall pastored dere. Dey axed me down to hear him preach one night, and us three, me and Green and Isham, was riding along side and side. I's riding a mule, but it was a fast mule, and Green couldn't keep up, en Isham said: 'Somebody been hunting.' I looked up and 'twas a sapling right 'cross de road. He said, 'Fellow oughten leave nothing lak dat. When de moon git low, it hit him in de face.' De moon was straight up and down den, and I said: 'Dat's right', and I's telling you de troof, dat sapling jes' riz up, turned aroun' in de air, en de brush part tickled my mule and Isham's hoss in de face. If you ever seed 'em buck and rare and jump up, dey sho did. Den dey took off down de road, and we didn't hold 'em back, and here come Green. We lef' him behind, 'cause his mule couldn't keep up. If you ever heard a man pray more earnest dan old Green, I ain't! He come down de road a-yelling: 'Lord, us live togedder, let us die togedder.' He meant for us to wait on him, but I couldn't hold dat mule, and I wan't trying to hold him! I was getting away from dar!

"When us come togedder, us was a mile from whar us done been, den us had to decide what to do. Isham said for us to go wid him, and Green said no, us nearer to his house; but us wan't near to nobody and I was so scared, hadn't been for Alice, I'd a jes' stayed right whar us was 'till sun-up. I said, 'No, every man better take keer his own self,' en us did. When I got home, I didn't take nothing off dat mule but myself. I jes' left him standing at de do' wid de saddle on. What skeered Green so, was a man, he said, what was ridin' right 'side him en didn't have no head! 'Twas a good thing he didn't tell me dat den, I'd jes' nacherly drap dead!

"No'm, I don't 'zackly believes in ghosties, but I heard Mr. Marshall Lee say he was riding on home one night and a woman stepped out in de road and say: 'Marshall, let me ride.' He say: 'My hoss won't tote double.' She say: 'Yes it will,' and she jump up behind him, and dat hoss bucked and jumped nigh 'bout from under him, but when he got home, she wan't dere. He say, his sister had jes' died and it mout been her."

"'Nother time, one Friday night, Alice say us better git a 'possum for Sunday. She say she didn't want none caught atter midnight on Sadday. I went down whar I knowed dey was 'simmons, and dem dogs never treed nothing; dey jes' run 'round dat 'simmon tree lak dey gone crazy. I'm telling you de troof, somepin' jump outer dat tree, had a head back'erds and for'erds and look lak a flame shooting out it eyes! 'Twan't lak no possum I ever seed, 'twan't lak nothing. Dem dogs, Liz and Roger en Cuba, made a bluge at me. Cotton was waist high, and I run down de cotton row and cross de road and dey trail me. I say: 'What ail you, dogs?' And dey jes' come on a-barkin', and dey run me to de bridge over Konkabyer."

So I clumb on de banisters. I seed dey had my trail an dey gonna ketch me, so I turn 'round and tore out for de slough. Dey lost my trail dere and when I got home, 'bout daylight, de thorns and de briars and all done tore my clothes plum off me. 'Twas t'ree days 'fore I ever seed dem dogs ag'in.

"And I kin tell you somepin' else. It's jes' lak I say, I's always been a hunter, en one night I went down in de post oak woods hunting by myself. Dis is a fact; 'tain't no lie. It's what I done. I had a mighty good dog, and I jes' kept walking and walking, and I got mighty nigh to Mr. Redhead Jim Lee's place, and I walked on and atter while I seed I'd lost my dog. I couldn't see him nowhar and I couldn't hear him nowhar, and den somepin' say to me, jes' lak dis: 'Josh, blow your horn!' Jes' lak dat, lak somebody talking to me. Well I give three loud, long blows and set dere awhile longer but dat dog didn't come. Co'se I knowed he'd come sometime, and so I jes' set dere on dat log and I jes' turned a fool, I reckon, but 'twas jes' lak somebody talking to me, lak it 'peared to me was whispering: 'Josh, you out here in dese woods by yo'self. You blowed dat horn and your enemy heard you. You's a fool, you is.' And I whispered back: 'Dat's a fact.' I couldn't hear what it was a-whispering to me, but us jes' talk back to one 'nuther, and 'bout dat time I look up and here come three men ridin' on new saddles wid shiny buckles gwine, 'squeechy, squeechy', jes' lak dat. I hears de hosses feed jes' as nachel as could be. I thought sho I seed 'em, and it 'pears to look clean outer reason, but dem men come riding right on up to me, and I jump over dat log and lay down flat on de other side, and it look lak I could see right through dat log and heard 'em say: 'Dar he is, dar he is', and I seed 'em p'inting dey finger right whar I was. I knowed dem hosses gwineter step over de log on top me, and I's telling you de troof, I jump up from 'hind dat log and run 'bout two miles, and if it hadn't been for dat slough, I don't know whar I'd a went. I come to myself in de middle of dat water, up to hyar, waist high, and dar was my dog, old Cuba, done treed a 'possum.

"De fust thing I 'members 'bout slave'y time, I wan't nothing but a boy, 'bout fifteen I reckon, dat's what Marse Johnnie Horn say. Us belong to Marse Ike Horn, Marse Johnnie's pa, right here on dis place whar us is now, but dis here didn't belong to me den, dis here was all Marse Ike's place. Marse Ike's gin got outer fix and we couldn't get it fixed. Colonel Lee had two gins and one of 'em was jes' below old Turner house. Recollect a big old hickory tree? Well dar's whar it was.

"I was plenty big 'nough to drive de mules to de gin. Set on de lever and drive 'em, jes lak a 'lasses mill, so dat night Marse Ike told us he want everybody go wid him to Colonel Lee's gin nex' morning, and didn't want nobody to git out and go ahead of him. Dat held up de ginning; made us not go to de ginhouse tell sunup.

"Us got de mules and jes' waited. 'Twixt daylight and sunup, us all standing dar at de gate and we heared a little fine horn up de road. Us didn't know what it meant coming to de house. And bimeby Mr. Beesley, what live not fur from Marse Ike, he rode up and had five dogs, five nigger dogs, what dey call 'em, and soon as he come, Marse Ike's hoss was saddled up and Marse Ike and him rode off down de road and de dogs wid em, 'head of us. Us followed 'long behind 'em, stay close as dey 'low us, to see what dey was up to. When dey got close to de ginhouse, ginhouse right 'side de road, dey stop us and Mr. Beesley told old Brown to go ahead. Old Brown was de lead dog and had a bell on him and dey was fasten togedder wid a rod, jes' lak steers. He turn 'em loose, and den he popped de whip and hollered at old Brown and told him 'nigger'. Old Brown hollered lak he hit. He want to go. And dey was a fence on bofe sides made it a lane, so he put old Brown over de fence on de ginhouse side, and told Brown to 'go ahead'. He went ahead and run all aroun' de ginhouse and dey let him in de gin-room and he grabbed in de cottonseed in a hole.

"Den somebody holler 'Guinea Jim', I looks and I didn't see him. Didn't nobody see him, but dey know dat's whar he been hiding. Mr. Beesley told old Brown he jes' fooling him, and Old Brown holler ag'in, lak he killing him, and Mr. Beesley say: 'Go git dat nigger' and old Brown started 'way from dar lak he hadn't been hunting nothing, but he went aroun' and aroun' dat gin and Mr. Beesley told him he hatter do better dan dat or he'd kill him, 'cause he hadn't come dar for nothing.

"Brown made a circle aroun' dat gin 'way down to de fence dat time, and he was so fat he couldn't git through de fence. You know what sort of fence, a rail fence it was. Den he stop and bark for help. Now I seed dis wid my own eyes. Dey put Brown on top de fence and he jump way out in de road, didn't stay on de fence. He jump and run up and down in de road, and couldn't find no scent of Jim. You knows how dey used to make dem rail fences?

"Well, Brown come back dar, and dis is de trufe, so help me Gawd. He bark, look lak, for dem to lift him back up on de fence, and bless God, if dat dog didn't walk dat rail fence lak he walking a log, as fur as from here to dat gate yonder, and track Jim jes' lak he was on de groun'. He fell off once, and dey had to put him back, and he run his track right on to whar Jim jumped off de fence way out in de road. Old Brown run right cross de road to de other fence and treed ag'in on t'other side de road toward Konkabia. Old Brown walk de fence on dat side de road a good piece, jes' lak he done on de other side, and dem other dogs, he hadn't never turned dem loose.

"When Brown he jump off dat fence, he jump jes' as fur as he kin on de fiel' side, lak he gwine ketch Jim lak a gnat or somepin' and he never stop barking no more, jes' lak he jumping a rabbit. Den, Mr. Beesley turn dem other dogs loose dat he hadn't never turned loose, 'ca'se he say old Brown done got de thing straight. And he had it straight. Dem dogs run dat track right on down to Konkabia and crossed it to de Blacksher side. Dey was a big old straw field dar den and dey cross it and come on through dat field, all dem dogs barkin' jes' lak dey looking at Jim. 'Reckley, dey come up on Jim running wid a pine brush tied behind him to drag his scent away, but it didn't bother old Brown.

"When dem dogs 'gin to push him, Jim drap de brush and runned back toward Konkabia. Now on Konkabia dere used to be beavers worse den on Sucarnatchee now. Dey was a big beaver dam 'twixt de bridge and de Hale place, and Jim run to dat beaver dam. You know when beavers build dey dam, dey cut down trees and let 'em fall in de creek, and pull in trash en brush same as folks, to dam de water up dar tell its knee-deep. De dogs seen him, old Brown looking at him, jes' 'fore he jump in 'bove de dam right 'mongst de trash and things dey'd drug in dar. Brown seed him and he jump in right behind him. Jim jes' dive down under de raff, en let he nose stick outer de water. Every once in a while Jim he put he head down under, he holding to a pole down dar, and once Mr. Beesley seed him, he jes' let him stay dar.

"Brown would swim 'bout 'mongst de brush, backerds and for'erds, and terreckly Mr. Beesley tole old Brown, 'Go git him.' Den all de men got poles and dug 'bout in de raff hunting him. Dey knowed he was dar, en Marse Ike had a pole gigger aroun' trying to find him too. Den he told Mr. Beesley to give him de hatchet and let him fix he pole. He sharpen de pole right sharp, den Marse Ike start to jug aroun' wid de pole, and he kinder laugh to hisse'f, 'ca'se he knowed he done found Jim. 'Bout dat time Jim poke he head up and say: 'Dis here me', and everybody holler. Den he ax 'em please, for God's sake, don't let dem dogs git him. Dey told him come on out.

"You see, Jim belonged to Miss Mary Lee, Mr. John Lee's Ma, and his Pa was kilt in de war, so Mr. Beesley was looking out for her. Well, dey took Jim outer dar, and Mr. Beesley whipped him a little and told him: 'Jim, you put up a pretty good fight and I's gwine to give you a start for a run wid de dogs.'

"Jim took out towards Miss Mary's, and Mr. Beesley helt old Brown as long as he could. Dey caught Jim and bit him right smart. You see dey had to let em bite him a little to satisfy de dogs. Jim could have made it, 'cept he was all hot and wore out.

"Dat's 'bout all I knows, 'cept us belonged to Marse Ike Horn, and fust us belonged to Mr. Price Williams, what run de hotel in Livingston. He took my gran'ma to Mobile, den he died. Us Ma belonged to dey two chillun, Miss Nancy Gulley, Mr. Jake's wife, en Miss Burt Blakeney. Marse Ike Horn was dey uncle, and us all come 'round to him, and us been here ever since. My mammy was Ann Campbell, and my pappy was John Horn, and us ain't never had no trouble wid nobody 'bout nothing.

"We's having a barbecue on de fo'th of July and us wants you to come down to it, if Alice gits along well, and I's gwine tell you 'bout Rod and Big John, and John Graverson when dey runned away and about how old man Jim Devers, Alice's step-pa, hid em in de cave under he house whar dey had as nice hams as I ever et, co'se a little tainted, but sho was good. Dem niggers was fat as beavers, jes' settin' dar eatin' dat meat.

"And 'bout de time Marse Ike slip up on a heap of niggers at a frolic 'twixt Sumterville and Livingston and put a end to de frolic. De niggers having a big dance, and Marse Ike and de patterrollers having a big run, said dey wanted to have some fun, and dey did. Said he eased up on 'em wid a white sheet 'round him and a big brush in he hand, and somehow or 'nother, dey didn't see him tell he spoke. Den he holler 'By God, I'm bird-blinding,' and he say dem niggers tore down dem dirt chimleys and run t'rough dat house. He say he ain't never heerd sich a fuss in a corn field in his born days. What he mean 'bout bird-blinding? When you goes in de canebrake it so thick, you takes a light to shine de bird's eyes and blind 'em, den you kin ketch 'em. Dat what he call bird-blinding'. Yassum, Marse Ike in dat too. He couldn't stand for 'em to have no fun 'thout he in it.

"Come back on de fo'th of July, and I's gwine tell you some sho-nuff tales. You sort of caught me when my min' wa'n't zackly on it. I ain't had no sleep, jes' settin' 'side de bed by Alice, ketching a nod now and den. I's too sleepy to sing you no song, but one I laks is dis: It suits me now in my age:

My lates' sun is sinking fas'

My race in nearly run,

My strongs' trial now is pas',

My triumph' jes' begun.

"You come back and I'll sing de res', I's got to see 'bout things now."