

Katherine Eppes

Interview with Katherine Eppes

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

CABINS AS FAR AS YOU COULD SEE

"Ma" Eppes sat on the steps of her weatherbeaten, unpainted little cabin, duplicate of the dozens that make up Rat Row, Negro quarter of Uniontown, and looked down the vista of memory to her childhood when she lived in "where de log cabins stretched as far as you could see in de slave quarters."

Despite her eighty-seven years, Katherine Eppes, known to everyone as "Ma," came as spryly to her tiny porch as her rotund body would permit. She smiled broadly at her interviewer and seated herself slowly.

"Sho', honey, I can tell you mo'n anything you want to know 'bout the big fight, 'ca'se I been here a long time," she began her story. "Dey ain't many lef' to tell 'bout dem days. My mammy an' pappy was Peter an' Emma Lines an' us all belonged to Marsa Frank and Miss Sarah Lines. I was born on dey plantation five miles below Faunsdale 'bout 1850 so dey tells me.

"I is right ol' but thank Gawd I still got my teefies an' my ha'r lef'." Proudly the old woman unwrapped her "head rag" to display a thick mop, woolly white but neatly parted into squares. Dozens of little plaits, wrapped with yards of twine, just as her hair had been dressed in the slave quarters before the War, adorned her head. She sat with uncovered head unblinking in the bright June sunshine, as she took up the tale of her health. "I sees pretty good, too, but I's so hebbly I ain't able to toe myse'f 'roun' as pert as I useter.

"It was diff'rent back in dem days when I belonged to rich white folks. Dey had plenty of niggers an' dey was log cabins in de quarters jes' as far as your eyes could see. Marsa Frank an' Miss Sarah was good to de black folks, too. Dey son, young marsa Frank, fit in de big war. Atter de war was over I stayed on de Lines' place 'twell atter I ma'ied, an' Ol' Miss gin me my weddin' dress an' a long veil down to my foots.

"When us was chillun in de quarters we did a mighty lot of playin'. Us useta play 'Sail away Rauley' a whole lot. Us would hol' han's an' go 'roun' in a ring, gittin' faster an' faster an' dem what fell down was outa de game.

"My mammy wukked in de Big House, aspinnin' an' anussin' de white chillun. All of dem called her 'mammy.' Ah 'members one thing jes' lack it was yestiddy. Miss Sarah went to 'Mospolis (Demopolis) to visit wid her sister, an' whilst she were gone de oberseer, what go by de name of Allen, whupped my Mammy crost her back 'twell de blood runned out.

"When Miss Sarah comed back an' foun' it out, she was de maddes white lady I eber seed. She sont for de oberseer, an' she say: 'Allen, what you mean by whupping Mammy? You know I don't allow you to tech my house servants.' She jerk her dress down an' stan' dere lookin' like a sojer wid her white

shoulders shinin' lack a snow bank, an' she say: 'I 'druther see dem marks on my own shoulders dan to see 'em on Mammy's. Dey wouldn't hurt me no wuss.' Den she say: 'Allen, teck your fambly an' git offen my place. Don't you let sundown ketch you here. 'So he lef'. He wasn't nothin' but white trash nohow."

"Ma" Eppes sat silent for a time as she recalled the vision of Miss Sarah standing straight and regal in her dismissal of the overseer. Finally she turned with an abrupt change of subject.

"Honey, is you a Christian?" she asked earnestly. "I hopes you is, ca'se you is too fine lookin' for to go to Hell. I b'longs to de Baptis' Church, an' dey calls me Ma Eppes 'ca'se I's de mother of de church. I loves to sing de gospel Hymns."

She began to sing in a high, cracked voice, her body swaying with the rhythm. The song rose until her neighbors had gathered to form quite an audience. With much moaning between every line, she sang:

"I am a sojer of de Cross,

A follerer of de Lam'.

I'm not afeard to own His name,

Nor to 'fen' His cause."

(Chorus)

"I wan' you to come,

I wan' you to come,

I wan' you to come

An' be saved."

She was still singing as I left her, the neighbors joining in the choruses. Suppers would be late in the row of weatherbeaten cabins, because the spirit of song was on the gathering