

Lightnin'

Interview with Lightnin'

—*John Proctor Mills*

Ignorant of the date of his birth, which occurred at Cahaba, the old State capital, Lightnin' was an overgrown, gangling youth of fourteen or thereabouts when the Civil War began. Born into slavery, he was the property of one Joel Matthews, cotton planter, whose fields lay near the then new capital city.

Lightnin' is happiest when spinning some yarn of the old days in Alabama for an interested audience, and when one such inquired as to how he came to be called "Lightnin'," the old man broke into a toothless grin and launched at once into another of the stories dear to his heart.

"Dat's Massa Joel's doin's, boss. I jist natcherly wa'nt neber any too peart an fas' on my foots, an de fus' thing Massa Joel eber sot me to fetch him was a cool drink o' water. De water done got wa'm 'fo' I brung it to him, an stid'er scoldin, he jist bus' out laffin' an' say: "Boy, you is so slow I gwineter call you after the fas'est thing on earth. Frum now on yo' name is Lightnin'." An I been Lightnin' eber since. Co'se I knowed Massa Joel was throwin' off on me, lil' as I was, but it looks lak I wa'nt bawn in no big hurry an I jist been movin' long slow-like eber since.

"Massa Joel musta been bawn on a sunshiny day 'cause he sho' was bright an' good natured. Eber' nigger on de place love him lak he was sont from Heaben. Mos' eber' day he come to de quarters wid de fambly doctor to look atter de niggers, fer he say a well-fed, healthy nigger, next to a mule, is de bes' propersition a man kin 'ves' his money in." An' us slaves fared as good as anybody.

"Naw suh! Massa Joel ain't neber hit me a lick in his life. He say a well nigger whut doan' wuhk, sho' ain't got no eats an care comin' his way, an ought'er be sont down de Ribber.

"Is I been mah'id? Yas suh. I done had fo' wives, an raise 'leben chillun. But 'taint lak in de ole days. Chillun all gone, an de ole nigger got no white folks, makes it mighty hahd to git along. 'Bout all de ole man kin do is fish an I does dat an gits a li'l somp'in to eat. 'Fo young Massa Tom passed on—he was Massa Joel's boy—I ain't neber wanted fer nothin'. I was Massa Tom's body guard. Us hunted an fished together, played wid de white chillun an sometimes I rid behin' him on de hoss, or on de fore seat wid de ca'iage driver when de fambly went to chu'ch.

"But dat's all in de pas', an de good Lawd say no man kin bring back de pas'. So I reckon, ef you all 'll 'scuse me, I better go fish my trotline an git somp'in to make the de skillit smell."