

Mary Ella Grandberry

Interview with Mary Ella Grandberry

—*Levi D. Shelby, Jr., Tusculumbia, Alabama*

TODAY'S FOLKS DON'T KNOW NOTHIN'

Life as a child is not clear in the ninety-year old memory of Mary Ella Grandberry, who lives in Sheffield, but she remembers that she did not have time to play as do children of today.

"I don't know jes' how old I is," Mary Ella said, "but I knows dat I'm some'ers nigh ninety yars ol'. I was borned in Barton, Alabama. My father an' mother come from Richmond, Virginny. My mammy was name Margaret Keller an' my pappy was Adam Keller. My five sisters was Martha, Sarah, Harriet, Emma an' Rosanna, an' my three brothers was Peter, Adam, Jr., an' William.

"Us all live in a li'l two-room log cabin jes' off the Big House. Life wan't ver' much for us, 'caze we had to work an' slave all de time. Massa Jim's house was a little ol' frame buildin' lack a ord'nary house is now. He was a single man an' didn't hab so terr'ble much, it seem. He had a whole lot, too, but jes' to look at him you'd thank he was a po' white man. Dere was a lot o' cabins for de slaves, but dey wasn't fitten for nobody to lib in. We jes' had to put up wid 'em.

"I don' 'member much about when I was a chil'. I disremembers ever playin' lack chilluns do today. Ever since I kin 'member I had a water bucket on my arm totin' water to de han's. Iffen I wan't doin' dat, I was choppin' cotton. Chilluns nowadays sees a good time to w'at we did den. Ever' mornin' jes' 'bout hip of day de oberseer was 'roun' to see dat we was ready to git to de fiel's. Plenty times us had to go widouten breakfas', 'caze we didn' git up in time to git it 'fo' de man done come to git us on de way to de fiel'. Us wukked 'twell dinner time jes' de same before we got anythang to eat.

"De food we et was fix jes' lack hit is now. My mammy fixed our grub at home. De on'y diffe'nce 'tween den an' now was us didn' git nothin' but common things den. Us didn' know what hit was to git biscuits for breakfas' ever' mornin'. It was cornbread 'twell on Sundays den us'd git fo' biscuits apiece. Us got fatback mos' ever' mornin'. Sometimes us mought git a chicken for dinner on a Sunday or some day lack Chris'mas. It was mighty seldom us gits anythin' lack dat, dough. We lacked possums an' rabbits but dey didn' come twell Winter time when some of de men folks'd run 'crost one in de fiel'. Dey never had no chanst to git out an' hunt none.

"Dere was no sech thang as havin' diffe'nt clo's for winter an' Summer. Us wore de same thang in summertime as in de wintertime. De same was true 'bout shoes. Us wore brogans from one yeah to de yuther.

"My Ol' Massa was a puttygood man but nothin' exter. One thang 'bout him, he wouldn' 'low none of de oberseers to whup none of us, lessen he was dar to see hit done. Good thang he was lack dat, too, 'caze he sabed de blacks a many a lick what dey'd got iffen he hadn' been dar. Massa Jim was a bach'lor, an' he ain't never had much truck wid women folks. Iffen he had any chilluns, I never knowed nothin' 'bout 'em.

"De oberseers was terrible hard on us. Dey'd ride up an' down de fiel' an' haste you so twell you near 'bout fell out. Sometimes an' most inginer'ly ever' time you 'hin' de crowd you got a good lickin' wid de bull whup dat de driver had in de saddle wid him. I hearn mammy say dat one day dey whupped po' Leah twell she fall out like she was daid. Den dey rubbed salt an' pepper on de blisters to make 'em burn real good. She was so so 'twell she couldn' lay on her back nights, an' she jes' couldn' stan' for no clo's to tech back whatsomever.

"Massa Jim had 'bout one of de bigges' plantations in dat section. I guess he had nigh onto a hun'erd blacks on de place. I never knowed 'zackly how many thar was nor how big de place was.

"De folks now'days is allus complainin' 'bout how dey is havin' sech hard times, but dey jes' don' know nothin'. Dey should hab come up when I did an' dey'd see now dey is libin' jes' lack kings an' queens. Dey don' have to git up 'fo' day when hit's so dark you kin jes' see your han's 'fo' your eyes. Dey don' know what it's lack to have to keep up wid de leader. You know dey was allus somebody what could wuk faster dan de res' of de folks an' dis fellow was allus de leader, an' ever'body else was s'pose to keep up wid him or her whatsomever hit was. Iffen you didn' keep up wid de leader you got a good thrashin' when you gits home at night. Hit was allus good dark when de han's got in from de fiel'. Co'se iffen dar was a lady what had a baby at home, she could leave jes' a little 'fo' de sun sot.

"Younguns now'days don' know what it is to be punish'; dey thank iffen dey gits a li'l whuppin' from dey mammy now dat dey is punish' terrible. Dey should of had to follow de leader for one day an' see how dey'd be punish' iffen dey gits too far behin'. De bigges' thang dat us was punish' for was not keepin' up. Dey'd whup us iffen we was caught talkin' 'bout de free states, too. Iffen you wan't whupped, you was put in de 'nigger box' an' fed cornbread what was made widouten salt an' wid plain water. De box was jes' big 'nough for you to stan' up in, but hit had air holes in hit to keep you from suffocatin'. Dere was plenty turnin' 'roun' room in hit to 'low you to change your position ever' oncet in a while. Iffen you had done a bigger 'nough thang you was kep' in de 'nigger box' for months at de time, an' when you got out you was nothin' but skin an' bones an' scurcely able to walk.

"Half de time a slave didn' know dat he was sol' 'twell de massa'd call him to de Big House an' tell him he had a new massa from den on. Ever' time dat one was sol' de res' of 'em'd say, 'I hopes nex' time'll be me.' Dey thought you'd git a chanst to run away to de free states. I hearn my mammy say dat when she come from Virginny dat she come on a boat built outten logs. She say she never was so sick in all her life. I seed a 'hole wagon load of slaves come through our farm one day what was on dere way to Arkansas. Dey was de mos' I ever seed travel at de same time.

"De white folks didn't 'low us to even look at a book. Dey would scol' an' sometimes whup us iffen dey caught us wid our head in a book. Dat is one thang I sho'ly did want to do an' dat was to learn to read an' write. Massa Jim promised to teach us to read an' write, but he neber had de time.

"Dere wan't but one chu'ch on de place what I lived on, an' de colored and de white both went to hit. You know we was neber 'lowed to go to chu'ch widoutten some of de white folks wid us. We wan't even 'lowed to talk wid nobody from anudder farm. Iffen you did, you got one of de wus' whuppin's of your life. Atter freedom Massa Jim tol' us dat dey was 'fraid we'd git together an' try to run away to de No'th, an' dat was w'y dey didn' wan' us gittin' together talkin'.

"A few years 'fo' de war my pappy learnt to read de Bible. (Mary Ella apparently forgot her previous comment on penalties for learning to read). Whenever we would go to chu'ch he would read to us an' we'd sing. 'Bout de mos' two pop'lar songs dey sung was 'Steal Away' an' 'I Wonder Whar Good Ol' Dan'el Was.' 'Steal Away' is sech a pop'lar song what ever'body knows hit. De yuther one is done mought' nigh played out, so I'll sing hit for you. It goes lack dis:

I wonder whar was good ol' Dan'el,

I wonder whar was good ol' Dan'el,

I wonder whar was thankin' (thinking) Peter,

I wonder whar was thankin' Peter.

(Chorus)

I'm goin' away, goin' away.

I'm goin' away, goin' away.

I wonder whar was weepin' Mary,

I wonder whar was weepin' Mary,

I'm goin' away, I'm goin' away,

I'm goin' away to live forever,

I'll never turn back no mo'.

"De slaves would git tired of de way dey was treated an' try to run away to de No'th. I had a cousin to run away one time. Him an' anudder fellow had got 'way up in Virginny 'fo' Massa Jim foun' out whar dey was. Soon as Massa Jim foun' de whar'bouts of George he went atter him. When Massa Jim gits to George an' 'em, George pertended lack he didn' know Massa Jim. Massa Jim as' him, "George don't you know me?' George he say, 'I neber seed you 'fo' in my life.' Den dey as' George an' 'em whar did dey come from. George an' dis yuther fellow look up in de sky an' say, 'I come from above, whar all is love.' Iffen dey had owned dey knowed Massa Jim he could have brung 'em back home. My pappy tried to git away de same time as George an' dem did, but he couldn' see how to take all us chillun wid him, so he had to stay wid us. De blacks an' de whites would have de terr'bles' battles sometimes. Dat would be

when de blacks would slip off to de No'th an' was caught an' brung back. De paterollers'd ketch de colored folks an' lock 'em up twell de owner came atter 'em.

"Iffen a slave was cotched out after nine o'clock he was whupped. Dey didn' 'low nobody out atter it was dark 'lessen he had a pass from de Massa. One night, 'fo' George an' dis fellow (I disremembers his name, but I thinks it was Ezra) runned away, George tried to git over to de bunk whar he lived an' one of de oberseers seen him an' dey put him in de 'nigger box' for three weeks. Jes' as soon as he got out again, George an' dis Ezra slipped off. Dey had a sign dat dey would give each yuther eve'y night atter sundown. George would hang de lantern in de window, an' den he would take it outen de window an' hang it raght back in dar ag'in. I couldn't never make no sense outen it. I axed him one day whut he was adoin' dat for. He say dat 'fo' long I'd know 'zackly what is all about. Dis was de sign of how long dey have to wait 'fo' dey try to git away.

"Atter de day's work was over, de slaves didn't have nothin' to do but go to bed. In fac', dey didn't feel lack doin' nothin' else. On Satiday dey sot up an' washed so's dey could have some clean clothes to wear de comin' week. We wukked all day, ever' day 'cep'n some Sat'days, we had a half day off den. Us didn' git many an' on'y when us as' for 'em. On Sundays us jes' laid 'roun' 'mos' all day. Us didn't git no pleasure outten goin' to church, 'caze we warn't 'lowed to say nothin'. Sometimes even on Chris'mas us didn't git no res'. I 'members on one Chris'mas us had to build a lime kiln. When us git a holiday us rested. Iffen dere was a weddin' or a funeral on our plantation us went. Odderways we don't go nowhar.

"De war come when I was a big gal. I 'member dat my uncle an' cousin jined in wid de Yankees to hope fight for de freedom. De Yankees come to our place an' runned Massa Jim away an' tuk de house for a horsepittil. Dey tuk all of Massa Jim's clothes an' gived dem to some of dere frien's. Dey burned up all de cotton, hay, peas an' ever'thing dat was in de barns. Dey made de white folks cook for de colored an' den serve 'em while dey et. De Yankees made 'em do for us lak we done for dem. Dey showed de white folks what it was to work for somebody else. Dey stayed on our place for de longes'. When dey did leave, dere warn't a mouthful to eat in de house. When de war was over, Massa Jim told us dat we had to find som'ers else to live. Co'se some of my folks had already gone when he come home. Us lef' Massa Jim's an' moved to anudder farm. We got pay for de wuk what we did on dis yuther place. Raght atter de war de Ku Klux got atter de colored folks. Dey would come to our houses an' scare us mos' to death. Dey would take some of de niggers out an' whup 'em an' dose dat dey didn't whup dey tied up by dere fingers an' toes. Dese Ku Klux would come to our windows at night an' say: 'Your time ain't long acomin'.' De Ku Klux got so bad dat dey would even git us in de daytime. Dey tuk some of de niggers an' throwed 'em in de river to drown. Dey kep' dis up 'twell some folks from de North come down an' put a stop to it.

"I ma'ied Nelson Granberry. De weddin' was private. I don't have no chilluns, but my husban' got fo'. I haven't heered from any of 'em in a long time now. I guess dey all daid.

"Abe Lincoln was de bes' president dat dis country eber had. Iffen it hadn't been for him we'd still be slaves raght now. I don't think so much of Jeff Davis 'caze he tried to keep us slaves. Booker T. Washington was one of de greates' niggers dat ever lived, he always tried to raise de standard of de race.

"I joined the church 'caze de Bible says dat all people should join de church an' be Christians. Jesus Christ set up de church an' said dat ever'body what wanted to be saved to come unto him. Sin is de cause of de

world bein' in de fix dat it's in today. De only way to fight sin is to git together. Iffen we can do away wid sin raght now, de world would be a paradise. In de church we learn de will of God an' what he would have us do.

"Dere was no po' white trash in our 'munity; dey was kep' back in de mounta ins.