

Mingo White

Interview with Mingo White

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JEFF DAVIS USED TO CAMOUFLAGE HIS HORSE

Mingo White lives at Burlison in Franklin County, Alabama, and though he doesn't know his age he remembers that he was a big boy when the War between the States began. His reminiscences of slavery days, when he was a field hand, are an incongruous combination of stories of severe cruelty and free Saturday afternoons, Sunday holidays and happy festivals of cornshucking and community cotton picking. He talks of punishments visited on recalcitrant slaves beyond human endurance and of tasks saddled on one person that would take half a dozen to accomplish. Mingled with these perhaps fogged memories of the nonagenarian are interesting sidelights of "drivers," paterollers," Ku Kluxers and share-cropping in reconstruction days.

"I was born in Chester, South Carolina, but I was mos'ly raised in Alabama," Mingo said. "When I was 'bout fo' or five years old, I was loaded in a wagon wid a lot mo' people in 'hit. Whar I was boun' I don't know. Whatever become of my mammy an' pappy I don' know for a long time.

"I was tol' there was a lot of slave speculators in Chester to buy some slaves for some folks in Alabama. I 'members dat I was took up on a stan' an' a lot of people come 'roun' an' felt my arms an' legs an' chist, an' ast me a lot of questions. Befo' we slaves was took to de tradin' post Ol' Marsa Crawford tol' us to tell eve'ybody what ast us if we'd ever been sick to tell 'em dat us'd never been sick in our life. Us had to tell 'em all sorts of lies for our Marsa or else take a beatin'.

"I was jes' a li'l thang; tooked away from my mammy an' pappy, jes' when I needed 'em mos'. The only caren' that I had or ever knowed anything 'bout was give to me by a frein' of my pappy. His name was John White. My pappy tol' him to take care of me for him. John was a fiddler an' many a night I woke up to find myse'f 'sleep 'twix' his legs whilst he was playin' for a dance for de white folks. My pappy an' mammy was sold from each yuther too, de same time as I was sold. I use' to wonder if I had any brothers or sisters, as I had always wanted some. A few years later I foun' out I didn't have none.

"I'll never forgit de trip from Chester to Burlison. I wouldn't 'member so well I don't guess, 'cepin' I had a big ol' sheep dog name Trailer. He followed right in back of de wagon dat I was in. Us had to cross a wide stream what I tuk to be a ribber. When we started 'crost, ol' Trailer never stop followin'. I was watchin' him clost so if he gived out I was goin' to try to git him. He didn't giv' out, he didn't even hab to swim. He jes' walked 'long an' lapped de water lack a dog will.

"John took me an' kep' me in de cabin wid him. De cabin didn' hab no furniture in hit lack we has now 'days. De bed was a one-legged, hit was made in de corner of de room, wid de leg settin' out in de middle of de flo'. A plank was runned 'twix' de logs of de cabin an' nailed to de post on de front of de

bed. Across de foot an' udder plank was runned into de logs an' nail' to de leg. Den some straw or cornshucks was piled on for a mattress. Us used anythang what we could git for kivver. De table had two legs, de legs set out to de front whilst de back part was nail' to de wall. Us didn't hab no stove. Thar was a great big fireplace whar de cookin' was done. Us didn't hab to cook, though, lessen us got hungry after supper been served at de house.

"I warn't nothin' but a chile endurin' slavery, but I had to wuk de same as any man. I went to de fiel' and hosed cotton, pulled fodder and picked cotton wid de res' of de han's. I kep' up too, to keep from gittin' any lashes dat night when us got home. In de winter I went to de woods wid de men folks to ho'p git wood or to git sap from de trees to make turpentine an' tar. Iffen us didn't do dat we made charcoal to run de blacksmifshop wid.

"De white folks was hard on us. Dey would whup us 'bout de leas' li'l thang. Hit wouldn't a been so bad iffen us had a had comforts, but to live lack us did was 'noug to make anybody soon as be dead. De white folks tol' us dat us born to work for 'em an' dat us was doin' fine at dat.

"De nex' time dat I saw my mammy I was a great big boy. Dere was a 'oman on de place what ever'body called mammy, Selina White. One day mammy called me an' said, Mingo, your mammy is comin'.' I said, 'I thought dat you was my mammy.' She said 'No I ain't your mammy, yer mammy is 'way way from here. I couldn't believe dat I had anudder mammy and I never thought 'bout hit any mo'. One day I was settin' down at de barn when a wagon come up de lane. I stood 'roun' lack a chile will. When de wagon got to de house, my mammy got out an' broke and run to me an' th'owed her arms 'roun' my neck an' hug an' kiss me. I never even put my arms 'roun' her or nothin' of de sort. I jes' stood dar lookin' at her. She said, 'Son ain't you glad to see your mammy?' I looked at her an' walked off. Mammy Selina call me an' tol' me dat I had hurt my mammy's feelin's, and dat dis 'oman was my mammy. I went off an' studied and I begins to 'member thangs. I went to Selina an' ast her how long it been sence I seen my mammy. She tol' me dat I had been 'way from her sence I was jes' a li'l chile. I went to my mammy an' tol' her dat I was sorry I done what I did an' dat I would lack fer her to fergit an' forgive me for de way I act when I fust saw her. After I had talked wid my real mammy, she told me of how de family had been broke up an' dat she hadn't seed my pappy sence he was sold. My mammy never would of seen me no mo' if de Lawd hadn't a been in de plan. Tom White's daughter married one of Mr. Crawford's sons. Dey lived in Virginia. Back den it was de custom for women to come home whenever dey husbands died or quit 'em. Mr. Crawford's son died an' dat th'owed her to hab to come home. My mammy had been her maid, so when she got ready to come home she brung my mammy wid her.

"Hit was hard back in dem days. Ever' mornin' fo' day break you had to be up an' ready to git to de fiel'. Hit was de same ever' day in de year 'cep' on Sunday, an' den we was gittin' up earlier dan the folks do now on Monday. De drivers was hard too. Dey could say what ever dey wanted to an' you couldn't say nothin' for yourse'f. Somehow or yuther us had a instinct dat we was goin' to be free. In de even't when de day's wuk was done de slaves would be foun' lock' in dere cabins prayin' for de Lawd to free dem lack he did de chillun of Is'ael. Iffen dey didn' lock up, de Marsa or de driver would of heard 'em an' whupped 'em. De slaves had a way of puttin' a wash pot in de do' of de cabin to keep de soun' in de house. I 'members once ol' Ned White was caught prayin'. De drivers took him de nex' day an' carried him to de pegs, what was fo' stakes drove in de groun'. Ned was made to pull off ever'thang but his pants an' lay on his stomach 'tween de pegs whilst somebody stropped his legs an' arms to de pegs. Den dey whupped him 'twell de blood run from him lack he was a hog. Dey made all of de han's come an' see it,

an' dey said us'd git de same thang if us was cotched. Dey don't 'low a man to whup a horse lack dey whupped us in dem days.

"After my mammy come whar I was I ho'ped her wid her work. Her tas' was too hard for any one person. She had to serve as maid to Mr. White's daughter, cook for all of de han's, spin an' card four cuts of thread a day an' den wash. Dere was one hundred an' forty-four threads to de cut. If she didn't git all of dis done she got fifty lashes dat night. Many a night me an' her would spin an' card so she could git her task de nex' day. No matter whut she had to do de nex' day she would have to git dem fo' cuts of thread, even on wash day. Wash day was on Wednesday. My mammy would have to take de clo's 'bout three quarters of a mile to de branch whar de washin' was to be done. She didn't have no wash board lack dey have now 'days. She had a paddle what she beat de clo's wid. Ever'body knowed when wash day was 'case dey could hear de paddle for 'bout three or four miles. "Pow-pow-pow," dat's how it sound. She had to iron de clo's de same day dat she washed an' den git dem four cuts of thread. Lots of times she failed to git 'em an' got de fifty lashes. One day when Tom White was whuppin' her she said, 'Lay it on Marsa White 'case I'm goin' to tell de Yankees when dey come.' When mammy got through spinnin' de cloth she had to dye it. She used shumake berries, indigo, bark from some trees, and dar was some kind of rock (probably iron ore) what she got red dye from. De clo's wouldn't fade neither.

"De white folks didn't learn us to do nothin' but wuk. Dey said dat us warn't 'spose' to know how to read an' write. Dar was one feller name E.C. White what learned to read an' write endurin' slavery. He had to carry de chillun's books to school fer 'em an' go back atter dem. His young marsa taught him to read an' write unbeknowance' to his father an' de res' of de slaves. Us didn' have nowhar to go 'cep' church an' we didn' git no pleasure outten it 'case we warn't 'lowed to talk from de time we lef' home 'twell us got back. If us went to church de drivers went wid us. Us didn't have no church 'cep' de white folks church.

"After ol' Ned got secha terrible beatin' fer prayin' for freedom he slipped off an' went to de North to jine de Union Army. After he got in de army he wrote to Marsa Tom. In his letter he had dose words:

"'I am layin' down, marsa, and gittin' up, marsa;' meaning dat he went to bed when he felt like it an' got up when he pleased to. He told Tom White dat iffen he wanted him he was in the army an' dat he could come after him. After ol' Ned had got to de North, de yuther han's begin to watch for a chance to slip off. Many a one was cotched an' brung back. Dey knowed de penalty what dey would have to pay, an' dis cause some of 'em to git desp'rite. Druther dan to take a beatin' dey would choose to fight hit out 'twell dey was able to git away or die befo' dey would take de beatin'.

"Lots of times when de patterollers would git after de slaves dey would have de worse' fight an' sometimes de patterollers would git killed. After de war I saw Ned, an' he tol' me de night he lef' the patterollers runned him for fo' days. He say de way he did to keep dem frum ketchin' him was he went by de woods. De patterollers come in de woods lookin' for him, so he jes' got a tree on 'em an' den followed. Dey figured dat he was headin' fer de free states, so dey headed dat way too, and Ned jes' followed dem for as dey could go. Den he clumb a tree and hid whilst dey turned 'roun' an' come back. Ned went on widout any trouble much. De patterollers use ter be bad. Dey would run de folks iffen dey was caught out after eight o'clock in de night, iffen dey didn' have no pass from de marsa.

"After de day's wuk was done there warn't anything for de slaves to do but go to bed. Wednesday night they went to prayer meetin'. We had to be in de bed by nine o'clock. Ever' night de drivers come 'roun' ter make sho' dat we was in de bed. I heerd tell of folks goin' to bed an' den gittin' up an' goin' to yuther

plantation. On Sat'day de han's wukked 'twell noon. Dey had de res' of de time to wuk dey gardens. Ever' fambly had a garden of dere own. On Sat'day nights the slaves could frolic for a while. Dey would have parties sometimes an' whiskey and home-brew for de servants. On Sundays we didn't do anything but lay 'roun' an' sleep, 'case we didn' lack to go to church. On Christmas we didn't have to do no wuk: no more'n feed de stock an' do de li'l wuk 'roun' de house. When we got through wid dat we had de res' of de day to run 'roun' wharever we wanted to go. 'Co'se we had to git permission from de marsa.

"De owners of slaves use to giv' cornshuckin' parties, an' invite slaves from yuther plantations. Dey would have plenty of whiskey an' other stuff to eat. De slaves would shuck corn an' eat an' drink. Dey use'to giv' cotton pickin's de same way. All of dis went on at night. Dey had jack-lights in de cotton patch for us to see by. De lights was made on a forked stick an' moved from place to place whilst we picked. De corn shuckin' was done at de barn, an' dey didn' have to have de lights so dey could move dem frum place to place.

"De only games dat I played when I was young was marbles an' ball. I use to sing a few songs dat I heard de older folks sing lak:

Cecess ladies thank they mighty grand,
Settin' at de table, coffee pot of rye,
O' ye Rebel union band, have these ladies understand'
We leave our country to meet you, Uncle Sam.

"Dese songs was 'bout de soldiers an' de war. There was one 'bout ol' General Wise what went:

Ol' General Wise was a mighty man,
And not a wise man either,
It took forty yards of cloth to make a uniform,
To march in de happy land of Canaan.

Chorus:

Ha-ha, ha-ha, de south light is comin',
Charge boys, charge, dis battle we mus' have,
To march us in the happy land of Canaan.

"There was a song 'bout General Roddy too:

Run ol' Roddy through Tuscumbia, through Tuscumbia,
We go marchin' on.

Chorus:

Glory, glory hallelujah, glory, glory hallelujah,

Glory, glory hallelujah as we go marchin' on.

Ol' Roddy's coat was flyin', ol' Roddy's coat flyin' high,

Twel it almost touch de sky, we go marchin' on.

"I was a pretty big boy when de war broke out. I 'member seein' the Yankees cross Big Bear creek bridge one day. All of de sojars crossed de bridge but one. He stayed on de yuther side 'twel all de res' had got 'crost, den he got down offen his horse an' took a bottle of somp'in' an' strowed it all over de bridge. Den he lighted a match to it an' followed de res'. In a few minutes the Rebel sojars come to de bridge to cross but it was on fire an' dey had to swim 'crost to de yuther side. I went home an' tol' my mammy dat de Rebels was chasin' de Union sojars, an' dat one of de Unions had poured some water on de bridge an' sot it afire. She laugh' an' say: 'Son, don't you know dat water don't make a fire? Dat musta been turpentine or oil?' I 'member one day Mr. Tom was havin' a big barbecue for de Rebel soldiers in our yard. Come a big roarin' down de military road, an' three men in blue coats rode up to de gate an' come on in. Jes' as soon as de Rebels saw 'em de all run to de woods. In 'bout five minutes de yard was full of blue coats. Dey et up all de grub what de Rebels had been eatin'. Tom White had to run 'way to keep de Yankees from gittin' him. 'Fo de Yankees come, de white folks took all dey clo's an' hung 'em in de cabins. Dey tol' de colored folks to tell de Yankees dat de clo's was dere'n. Dey tol' us to tell 'em how good dey been to us an' dat we lacked to live wid 'em.

"All day dat we got news dat we was free, Mr. White called us niggers to the house. He said: 'You are all free, jes' as free as I am. Now go an' git yerse'f somewhar to stick your heads.' Jes' as soon as he say dat, my mammy hollered out: 'Dat's 'nough for a yearlin'. She struck out 'crost de fiel' to Mr. Lee Osborn's to git a place for me an' her to stay. He paid us seventy-five cents a day, fifty cents to her an' two bits for me. He gave us our dinner along wid de wages. After the crop was gathered fer that year, me an' my mammy cut an' hauled wood for Mr. Osborn. Us lef' Mr. Osborn dat fall an' went to Mr. John Rawlins. Us made a share crop wid him. Us'd pick two rows of cotton an' he'd pick two rows. Us'd pull two rows of corn an' he'd pull two rows. He furnished us wid rations an' a place to stay. Us'd sell our cotton an' open corn an' pay Mr. John Rawlins for feedin' us. Den we moved wid Mr. Hugh Nelson an' made a share crop wid him. We kep' movin' an' makin' share crops 'twel us saved up 'nough money to rent us a place an' make a crop fer ourse'ves. Us did right well at dis until de Ku Klux got so bad, us had to move back wid Mr. Nelson for protection. De mens that took us in was union men. Dey lived here in the south but dey taken us part in de slave business. De Ku Klux threat to whup Mr. Nelson 'case he took up fer de niggers. Heap uv nights we would hear of the Ku Klux comin' an' leave home. Sometimes us was scared not to go an' scared to go 'way from home.

"One day I borrowed a gun frum Ed Davis to go squ'el huntin'. When I taken de gun back I didn't unload hit lack I allus been doin'. Dat night de Ku Klux called on Ed to whup him. When dey tol' him to open de do', he heard one of 'em say, 'Shoot him time he gits de do' open. 'Well, he says to 'em,' wait 'twel I kin

light de lamp.' Den he got de gun what I had lef' loaded, got down on his knees an' stuck hit th'ough a log an' pull de trigger. He hit Newt Dobbs in de stomach an' kilt him. He couldn't stay 'roun' Burleson any mo', so he come to Mr. Nelson an' got 'nough money to git to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The Ku Klux got bad sho' 'nough den and went to killin' niggers an' white folks, too.

"I ma'ied Kizi Drumgoole. Reverend W.C. Northcross perform' de ceremony. Dere warn't nobody dere but de witness an' me an' Kizi. I had three sons, but all of 'em is dead 'cepin' one an' dat's Hugh. He get seven chilluns. He wuks on de relief.

"Abe Lincoln was as nobler man as ever walked. Jeff Davis was as smart man as you ever wan' to see. Endurin' de war he sheared his horse in sich a way dat he looked lack he was goin' one way when he'd gwine de de yuther. Booker T. Washington did one of de greates' things when he fix it for nigger boys an' girls to learn how to git on in de worl'.

"Slavery wouldn't a been so bad, but folks made it so by selling us for high prices, an' of co'se folks had to try to git dey money's worth out of 'em. The chillun of Is'ael was in bondage one time an' God sent Moses to 'liver 'em. Well I 'spose dat God sent Abe Lincoln to 'liver us."