

THE STORY OF "UNCLE" MOBLE HOPSON. (pronounced Mobile)

**Interview Saturday, November 28th at his
home on the Poquoson River.
(Recorded from memory within 1 hour after
"being talked to by him.")**

Uncle Moble hobbles unsteadily from his little shade beside the outhouse into the warm kitchen, leaning heavily on the arm of his niece. He looks up on hearing my voice, and extends a gnarled and tobacco-stained hand. He sinks fumblingly into a chair. It is then that I see that Uncle Moble is blind.

"No, don't mind effen yuh ast me questions. Try tuh answer 'em, I will, best ways I kin. Don't mind et all, effen yuh tell me whut yuh want to know. Born'd in fifty-two, I was, yessuh, right here over theer wheer dat grade big elum tree usta be. Mammy was uh Injun an' muh pappy was uh white man, least-ways he warn't no slave even effen he was sorta dark-skinned.

"Ole pappy tole me 'bout how cum the whites an' the blacks an' the Injuns get all mixed up. Way back 'long in dere it war, he nevuh tell me jes' what year, dey was a tribe uh Injuns livin[32] 'long dis ribber. Dey was kin to de Kink-ko-tans, but dey wasn't de same. Dey had ober on the James de Kink-ko-tans an' dey had dis tribe ober here.

"Well, de white man come. Not fum ober dere. De white man cum cross de Potomac, an' [HW: den he] cross de York ribber, an' den he cum on cross de Poquoson ribber into dis place. My pappy tell me jes' how cum dey cross all uh dose ribbers. He ain't see it, yuh unnerstand, but he hear tell how et happen.

"Dis whut de white man do. He pick hisself a tall ellum long side de ribber an' he clumb to de top an' he mark out on de trunk wid he ax uh section 'long 'bout, oh, 'long 'bout thirty-fo'ty feet. Den he cut de top off an' den he cut de bottom off so de thick trunk fall right on de edge uh de ribber. An' den he hollar out dat ellum log tell he make hisself uh bout an' he skin off de bark so et don't ketch in de weeds. Den he make hisse'f uh pattle an' dey all makes pattles an' dey floats dat boat an' pattles cross to de udder side.

"Well, dey cross de Potomac an' dey has tuh fight de Injuns an' dey cross de York an' fit some more tell dey kilt all de Injuns[33] or run 'em way. When dey cross de Poquoson dey fine de Injuns ain't aimin' tuh fight but dey kilt de men an' tek de Injun women fo' dey wives. Coursen dey warn't no marryin' dem at dat time.

"Well dat's how cum my people started. Ah hear tell on how dey hafta fight de Injuns now an den, an' den de Britishers come an' dey fit de British.

"An' all uh dat time dere warn't no black blood mixed in 'em, least wise, not as I heer'd tell uh any. Plenty blacks 'round; ah seen 'em. My pappy nevuh would have none. My uncle had 'em, ober on dat pasture land dere was his land.

"Why I usta get right out dere many uh day and watch 'em at workn' [HW: in de 'baccy fields.] Big fellars dey was, wid cole-black skins ashinin' wid sweat jes' lak dey rub hog-fat ober dere faces. Ah ain't nevuh bothered 'em but my bruther—he daid now sence ninety-three he got uh hidin' one day fo' goin' in de field wid de blacks.

[HW: Insert] "Well we all heer tell uh de was, [HW: an ah listen to de grown folk talk on et,] but dey ain't paid so much mind to et. Tell one day de blacks out in de field an' dey ain't no one out dere tuh mek 'em work. An' dey stand 'round[34] an' laugh an' dey get down an' wait, but dey don' leave dat field all de mawning. An' den de word cum dat de Yankees was a comin', an' all dem blacks start tuh hoopin' an' holl'rin', an' den dey go on down to deer shacks an' dey don' do no work at all dat day.

"An' when do Yanks [HW: git heer] dey ain't non uh de slave-holders no whers round. Dey all cleared out an' de blacks is singin' an' prayin' an' shoutin' fo' joy cause Marse Lincoln done set em free.

"Well, dey tuk de blacks an' dey march em down de turnpike to Hampton, an' den dey put em tuh work at de fort. Ah ain't nevuh go ober dere but ah heer tell how de blacks come dere fum all 'round tell dey git so many dey ain't got work fo' 'em tuh do, so dey put 'em tuh pilin' up logs an' teking 'em down agin, an' de Yankees come and go an' new ones come but dey ain't troublin nothin' much 'ceptin' tuh poach uh hawg or turkey now an' den.

"Ah was jes' a little shaver gittin' in my teens den but ah 'member clear as day all ah dat. An' ah heer tell uh uh big[35] battle up Bethel way an' dey say dey kilt up dere uh bunch uh men, de 'federates an' de Yankees both. But ah ain't seed it, though Uncle Shep Brown done tole me all 'bout et.

"Uncle Shep Brown lived down aways on de ribber. 'Long 'fore de Yankees come he jined up wid de 'federates. He fit in dat battle at Big Bethel but he ain't get uh scratch. He tell me all 'bout de war when he come back home. He tell me all 'bout de fall uh Richmond, he did.

"Was one day down [HW: en] de lower woods in de shade he tell me 'bout Richmond, Uncle Shep did. Why, I remember et jes' lak it was yestiddy. Was whittlin' uh stick, he was, settin' on uh stump wid his game laig hunched up ontuh uh bent saplin'. He was whittlin' away fo' uh 'long time 'thout sayin' much, an' all at once he jump in de air an' de saplin' sprang up an he start in tuh cussin.

"'Gawdammit, gawdammit, gawdammit,' he kept sayin' tuh hisse'f an' limpin' round on dat laig game wid de roomatissum. Ah know he gonna tell me sompin den cause when Uncle Shep git ehcited[36] he always got uh lot tuh say.

"'Gawdammit,' he say, 'twas de niggahs tak Richmond.'

"'How dey do dat Uncle Shep?' ah ast, though ah knowed he was gonna tell me anyway.

"'De niggahs done tuk Richmond,' he keep on sayin' an' finally he tell me how dey tak Richmond.

"'Ah seed et muhse'f,' he say, 'my comp'ny was stationed on de turnpike close tuh Richmond. We was in uh ole warehouse,' he told me, 'wid de winders an' de doors all barred up an' packed wid terbaccy bales awaitin' fo' dem Yanks tuh come. An' we was a-listenin' an' peepin' out an' we been waitin' dere most all de ev'nin'. An' den we heer [HW: uh] whistlin' an' uh roarin' like uh big blow an' it kep' gittin' closer. But we couldn't see nothin' uh comin' de night was so dark. But Dat roarin' kep' a-gittin' louder an' louder an' 'long 'bout day break there cum fum down de pike sech uh shoutin' an' uh yellin' as nevuh in muh born days ah'd heerd.'

"'An' de men in dat warehouse kept askinkin' away in de darkness widdout sayin' nothin', cause dey didn't know what[37] debbils de Yankees was alettin' loose. But ah stayed right there wid dem dat had de courage tuh face et, cause ah know big noise mean uh little storm.'

"'Dar was 'bout forty of us left in dat ole warehouse ahidin' back of dem bales uh cotton an' terbaccy, an' peepin out thew da cracks.'

"'An' den dey come. Down de street dey come—a shoutin' an' aprancin' an' a yellin' an' asingin' an' makin' such uh noise like as ef all hell done been turn't loose. Uh [HW: mob uh] niggus. Ah ain't nevuh knowed niggus—even all uh dem niggus—could mek sech uh ruckus. One huge sea uh black faces filt de streets fum wall tuh wall, an' dey wan't nothin' but niggus in sight.'

"'Well, suh, dey warn't no usen us firin' on dem cause dey ain't no way we gonna kill all uh dem niggus. An pretty soon dey bus' in de do' uh dat warehouse, an' we stood dere whilst dey pranced 'rounst us a hoopin' an' holl'rin' an' not techin' us at all tell de Yankees soljers cum up, an' tek away our guns, an' mek us prisoners an' perty soon dey march us intuh town an' lock us up in ole Libby Prison.' [38]

"'Thousings of 'em—dem niggus.' he say, 'Yassir—was de niggus dat tuk Richmond. Time de Yankees get dere de niggus done had got de city tuk.'"

[HW: II]

[HW: **Why Uncle Moble is a Negro**]

Uncle Moble is a noble figure. He turns his head toward me at my questions, just as straight as if he actually is looking at me.

"Yuh wanta know why I'm put with the colored people? [HW: Sure, ah got white skin, leastwise, was white las' time ah' see et.] Well, ah ain't white an' ah ain't black, leastwise not so fur as ah know. 'Twas the war done that. Fo de war dere warn't no question come up 'bout et. Ain't been no schools 'round here tuh bothuh 'bout. Blacks work in de fields, an' de whites own de fields. Dis land here, been owned by de Hopson's sence de fust Hopson cum here, I guess, back fo' de British war, fo' de Injun war, ah reck'n. Ustuh go tuh de church school wid ole Shep Brown's chillun, sat on de same bench, ah did.

"But de war changed all dat. Arter de soljers come back home, it was diff'runt. First dey say dat all whut ain't white, is black. [39] An' [HW: den] dey tell de Injuns yuh kain't marry no more de whites. An' den dey tell usen dat we kain't cum no more tuh church school. An' dey won't let us do no bisness wid de whites, so we is th'own in wid de blacks.

"Some [HW: uh our folk] moved away, but dey warn't no use uh movin' cause ah hear tell et be de same ev'y wheer. So perty soon et come time tuh marry, an' dey ain't no white woman fo' me tuh marry so ah marries uh black woman. An' dat make me black, ah 'spose 'cause ah ben livin' black ev'y sence.

"But mah bruther couldn't fine no black woman dat suited him, ah reckon, cause he married his fust cousin, who was a Hopson huhse'f.

"Den dere only chile married hisse'f uh Hopson, and Hopsons been marryin' Hopsons ev'y sence, ah reck'n."

Uncle Moble Tells Where to Dig A Well[40]

"That well out dere? Naw, dat ain't old. Dat ain't been dere mo'un fifteen-twenty year. De ole well, she was ole, though she nevuh war much good. Paw ain't dug et in de right place. Old Shep Brown tolt him, but my old man ain't nevuh pay no mine to old Shep.

"But old Shep sho' did know how tuh dig uh well. Ah kin see now him ah comin' up de lane when paw was adiggin'. Moble he say—my paw an' me had de same name—Moble, ye ain't diggin' dat well de right place.

"Diggin' et wheer ah wants et,' answers paw, a diggin' away en de hole shoulder deep.

"Well, ye ain't gonna git much water. Oughta got yo'se'f uh ellum stick.'

"Don' need no ellum stick. Diggin' dis well in my own youd an' ah'm gonna dig et jes' wheer ah wants et. Go haid an' dig yo' own well.'

"Well, old Shep musta got sorta mad, cause he goes home an' de nex' day he digs hisse'f uh well.

"Ah seen him. Ah watched him when he figgered wheer tuh dig dat well. Sho' nuf old Shep got hisse'f uh prime ellum stick fum ah good sized branch dat was forked. First he skint all de bark off.

"Kain't fine no water lessen ye skin de bark off,' he tell me. Long 'bout 2-3 feet on each limb, et was. Well, old Shep tek dat ellum stick wid one fork in[41] each hand an' de big end straight up in de air an' he holt it tight an' started tuh walk around, wid me followin' right on his heels. An sho' nuff, perty soon ah seed dat branch commence tuh shake an' den et started tuh bend an' old Shep let et lead him across de field wid et bendin' lower all de time tell perty soon de big end uh dat ellum stick point straight down.

"Old Shep marked de spot an' got his pick an' commence tuh dig out dat spot. An' fo' old Shep had got down mo'un five uh six feet ah be dawg ef he don' hit uh stream uh water dat filt up de well in uh hurry so dat he git his laigs all wet fo' he kin clamb out.

"An' yuh moughten believe et but ah know dat tuh be uh fac', cause ah tuk dat ellum stick in muh own han's an' ah felt dat stick apullin' me back tuh dat water. No matter which way ah turn, dat stick keep atwistin' me roun' toward dat water. An' ah tried tuh pull et back an' old Shep tuk hole uh et wid me an' tried tuh hole et up straight but de big end uh dat ellum branch pult down and pointed tuh dat well spite uh both uh us.

"Still dere? Nawsuh, ah reckon dat old well been crumbled in an' filled up long time now. Old Shep died back en 93, ah reckon. His old shack blowed down, an' ah reckon dat ole well all covered up. But dat was some well while she lasted. Gave mo' water dan all de udder wells in Poquoson, ah reckon