

Nelson Birdsong

Personal interview with Nelson and Virginia Birdsong

Summerville, on Front Street

—*Ila B. Prine, Mobile, Alabama*

NELSON BIRDSONG REMEMBERS HIS MASTER

Nelson Birdsong, who lives on Front Street in the old suburb of Summerville, about three miles from Mobile, Alabama, was born a slave. A tall dark Negro man, with white hair and whiskers, he says he was born at Montgomery Hill, Alabama in Baldwin County, and that his people and he were owned by Mr. Tom Adkins.

Nelson said he was very small at the time of the Surrender, and could not tell very much about slavery days. In fact, he adds, "You know, missie, old folks in dem days did'nt 'low chillun to stan' 'roun' when dey was talking. We chillun was lacka shot out of a gun when anybody come in. We was glad when folks come in 'cause we c'ud run out an' play. Chillun now-a-days knows as much as we did when we was twenty-five years old."

Nelson does remember his "massa" saying he neber was going to 'let dat little nigger work.'

He did not remember much about coming to Mobile, but "seemed lack" his "mammy worked for Mrs. Dunn on Monroe street, and later dey moved out in old Napoleonville" (which is now Crichton, Alabama, a suburb of Mobile). He said his "Pa and Mammyden worked fo' gris' mill out dere, and also owned a big gris' mill in de fork whar de big fire station is now" (which is located at the intersection of St. Francis street and Washington Avenue, the latter formerly Wilkinson street). This grist mill was burned in the 1870's.

Nelson says the first work he remembered doing was "nussing a baby boy of Mr. Bramwell Burden, a gran'son of old man Burden."

Nelson has owned his little farm and three-room house until the past two or three years. He said he scuffled and tried to pay de taxes, but had got so old and his "knees had give out on him, and I seed I was agoin' to lose mah place so I turned it over to a man to keep up mah taxes, so I'd have a place to lib. De relief gibes me a little he'p now, an' me an' my wife makes out de bes' we can."

The house is the familiar type of two-room Negro house, with a porch across the front, and a shed room on the back. The bedroom had been papered with scraps of wallpaper of varied designs and so old that most of it had fallen off. The mantel is covered with the colored comics section, cut in a fancy pattern of

scallops. At the entrance of the house is a sack nailed to the floor and used for a foot mat, and at the two upper corners of the door are horse shoes for good luck. Nelson said he is a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and has been a Methodist all his life; that he and his wife Virginia "had only two chillun' and dey were bofe dead."

Nelson's wife, Virginia, came from a family of slaves, although she was not one herself. She said her folks were owned by Mr. Joe Pickett of Camden, Wilcox County, Alabama. She said she just can remember Mr. Joe taking her in his buggy, and she called him "Toe-Toe," as she couldn't say his name plainly. She also said as she grew older she always spoke of Mr. Joe, as "my Papa," instead of "my master," for "he sho' was good to me." She remembers her mother being chambermaid on the "Old Eleanora," a boat on the Alabama river, and as a small child going back and forth on the boat with her. When they finally settled in Mobile, her mother worked for the family of Dr. Heustis who lived in the corner house now occupied by the new Federal Court House and Custom House, at St. Louis and St. Joseph streets