

Oliver Bell

Interview with Oliver Bell

—*Ruby Pickens Tartt, Livingston*

DE BES' FRIEND A NIGGER EVER HAD

Oliver Bell says the first thing he remembers was seeing his mother whipped. He was born in slavery, but most of his knowledge of the evils, as well as the joys of antebellum days, is by hearsay only.

"I was borned on de De Graffenreid Place," he said, "nine miles west of Livingston-Boyd Road. My mother was Luella De Graffenreid an' my pappy was Edmund De Graffenreid. Den dey changed my name to Bell. I had one brother, Nat, an' two sisters, Jestina an' Clara. I has 'bout sixteen chilluns, all born on de same place an' most of dem is livin' dere yit. My chillun by my firs' wife are Ed, Jack, Holly, Buck, Clarence, Sally, Liza, Mag an' Luella. Dey ma was Mandy Powell, frum York. Den my second wife, Bettie Brown, gived me de res' of my chilluns. Le's see, dey is Jimmy, J.W. Alfonso Wallace, Henry, Edna an' — —

" He hesitated, explained, "Dat's as many as I kin' 'member jest now.



Oliver Bell, Livingston, Alabama

"My gran'ma's name was Cely De Graffenreid an' my gran'pa's name was Peter. He was a shoemaker fur de place an' made plows, too. He was a worker an' he learnt me how to pull fodder an' chop corn an' cotton when I was jest a little scamp jes' a little black nigger.

"Us all b'longed to Mr. Tresvan De Graffenreid an' Mistus Rebecca; an' dey was all good to us. Ol' Mistus read de Bible to us an' got us baptized in de river at Horn's bridge, but dat was atter de surrender. In slavery times dey didn't like for us to sing an play loud in de quarters. Honey, I 'members when us had de big prayer meetin's. Dey would shut de door so de voice won't git out, an' dey would turn de washpot down de door. Dat was to keep de voice inside, dey tol' me."

Oliver mused a moment, recalling the old times.

"Us chilluns useta have a good time singin' an' a-playin'," he said. "I 'members one of our little verses run somethin' lak dis:

Shoo, shoo, shoo gander

Th'ow yo' feathers 'way yander.

"Us had ol' corn hollers, too, but I fergits um now. I does remember though you could hear dem niggers holler a whole mile.

"No'm, it warn't so bad wid us. De white folks was good to us niggers. Us had 'nough to eat, lak greens, frum de big house. Us had our rations weighted out; peck o' meal, three pounds of meat, half gallon of 'lasses, made at home in wodden mills; an' dat was for a week. An' sometimes, on a Sunday us had a little sugar, coffee an' flour. No'm, us didn't know what rice was.

"What I seed of slavery was a bad idea, I reckon, but ev'ybody thought dey marster was de bes' in de lan'. Us didn't know no better. A man was growed plum' green 'fo he knew de whole worl' didn't belong to his ol' marster.

"Us didn't have no bought medicine in dem days; jes' whut us got outta de woods lak slippery ellow fer fever an' poke salad root; dey he'p a lot. An' May-apple root would he'p you same as castor oil.

"Didn't nobody he'p us learn nothin' much, but mos' of my chilluns went to Booker T's school. Dey say he's a mighty smart man, an' my chilluns thinks so, too. It's all right; I wish I could read an' write; den I'd tell you things you'd lak to know."

His face clouded for the briefest moment.

"I tell you de fust thing I 'members, an' I don't know whut started it. One day my mammy done sumpin' an' ol' marster made her pull her dress down 'roun' her waist an' made her lay down 'crost de door. Den he taken a leather strop an' whooped her. I 'members dat I started cryin' an' Mistus Beckie said, 'Go git dat boy a biskit.'

"I reckerlecks my mammy was a plow han' an' she'd go to work soon an' put me under de shade of a big ol' post-oak tree. Dere I sat all day, an' dat tree was my nurse. It still standin' dere yit, an' I won't let nobody cut it down.

"Mammy say I never did learn to walk; jes' one day she sot me down under de oak, an' fust thing she knowed she look up an' dere I was walkin' down de middle of a cotton row.

"'Nother thing I 'members when I was a little boy; dat dey was 'vidin' de corn atter de s'render. Dr. DeGraffenreid measured de corn out to all of 'em whut was share han's. He'd take a bushel an' give 'em a bushel. When he mos' through he'd throw a ear of corn to dis one, an' give himse'f a ear; den he break a ear in two, an' he take part an' give dem part. Dat was close measurin', I tell you.

"Us lived in de third house frum de big house in de quarter, an' when I was a boy it was my job to set out shade trees. An' one day de Ku Klux come ridin' by an' dey leader was Mister Steve Renfroe. (Alabama bandit of Reconstruction days). He wore long hair an' he call my pappy out an' ax him a heap of questions. While he sittin' dere his horse pull up nigh 'bout all de trees I done sot out.

"Atter talkin' to my pappy, he rode on 'cross Horn's bridge, 'bout two miles souf of here, an' dere he met Ol' Man Enoch Sledge an' Frank Sledge. Dey was darkies whut b'longed to Marsa Simmy Sledge's father, Ol' Doctor Sledge. Slaves on dat plantation was 'lowed pretty good privilege atter de s'rrender an' was workin' on halvens. Uncle Enoch an' Frank was in town tradin' some, an' Mr. Renfroe didn't want 'em to have anything. When dey lef' town, dey pass de Ku Kluxes raght on de slough bridge. Mister Renfroe ax Enoch to give him a piece of string to fix his saddle wid; den shot him. Frank run to de river, but de Ku Kluxes cotched him an' shot him, too.

"De niggers went down to de river dat night an' got de bodies an' buried 'em in de ol' Travis graveyard. My mammy an' daddy is buried dere, too.

"Didn' nobody do nothin' 'bout Mister Renfroe 'till he went on an' got to messin' wid Marsa Simmy Sledge's things; stole a pair of mules an' de white folks rambled atter him 'till dey foun' him in Linden. Dey got so hot atter him dat he went to his camp in de flat woods down on Bear Creek. Dem was skeery times, 'case dat man never had no mercy for nobody.

"Dey's a cave down by de burial grounds whut de slaves dug when dey run away, an' Mister Renfroe stayed dere. It's on de river bank an' its dug up. You digs an' starts low an' pushes de dirt out an' digs up an' makes a big room up so de water won't git you. I knows whar dey's two of de caves on de place; my cow fell in one yestidy.

"When Ol' Marster Amos Travis come out here from Californy, he taken a lakin' to me an' wanted me to leave t'other side of de place an' move down dis side of de big house to take keer of dis swamp an' look atter de han's. But I wanted a big house wid four rooms an' two brick chimneys, an' I had to talk five years to git it. I's got some rosebushes now dat was at de big house raght atter de s'rrender, an' dey's growin' in my yard now.

"Speakin' 'bout graveyard, I was passin' dere one night, ridin' on 'bout midnight, an' sumpin' come draggin' a chain by me lak a dog. I got down off'n my horse, but couldn't see nothin' wid no chain, so I got back on de horse an' dere raght in front of me was a Jack-Me-Lantern wid de brightes' light you ever seed. It was tryin' to lead me off, an' ev'y time I'd git back in de road it would lead me off ag'in. You sho' will git los' if you follow a Jack-Me-Lantern.

"One of dem led a man down to de creek by dem double bridges; said he foun' he was travelin' in de wrong direction, gittin' frum home stidder clo'ster, so he jes' sit down under a tree an' waited 'til

daylight. I ain't skeered of nothin' but dem Jack-Me-Lanterns, but dey stirs you up in yo' min' till you can't tell whar you's at; an' dey's so bright dey nigh 'bout puts yo' eyes out. Dey is plenty of 'em over by de graveyard raght over yonder whar all my white folks is buried, an' mammy an' pappy, too. Dey's all dere 'cept Marsa Jess Travis; he was de nex' whut come in line for de place, an' he was de bes' frein' dis here nigger ever had.

"Fac' was, dat's whut he call me; 't was 'nigger'. He an' Mistus Mag lived raght dere in de big house; den dey move into town an' dat's whar he died. Me an' Marsa Jess made a 'greement an' he said if he was de longes' liver, he'd see me buried, an' if I be de longes' liver, I see him buried. So dat day I went to his office in de co'thouse an' he say he want to talk wid me. He say, 'You 'members us 'greement?' An' I say, 'Whut 'greement, Marsa Jess?' An' he say, 'Bout buryin'.' Den I say, sho', 'I 'members dat.'

"Den he got up an' give me some papers 'bout some lan', an' I say, 'Whut do all dis here mean, Marse Jess?' He say, 'nothin', nigger, 'cept I's jes' goin' outta business.' Den I say, 'Goodbye, Marse Jess,' an' he say, 'Goodbye, nigger,' an' I walked on 'crost de street. Den Mr. Killian say, 'Oliver, whut's happened over at de co'thouse?' An' I say, 'Ain't nothin' as I knows of.' Den he say, 'Yes, dey is; jes' look at de peoples gwine in a hurry.' Den I turn 'roun' an' run back an' dere lay Marse Jess. Mr. Smith was gettin' him up an' Marse Jess say to me, 'Well, nigger, I didn't do whut I tended to; I missed it.' An' I say, 'Boss, fer God's sake go to de hospital; I'll go wid you an' stay wid you.' Mistus Mag, she ast me to beg him, but he shuck his head an' say 'If I had a-wanted to live I wouldn't of shot myself.' He res' a minit, den say, 'Nigger, write Miss Calline an' tell her I says to always be good to you as long as you lives.'

"Yassum, I was raght dere, done jes' whut I tol' him I'd do; kep' my 'greement an' followed him to de grave. Co'se dat last 'bout Marse Jess ain't no slavery tale, but I thought you was atter hearin' all 'bout de family whut owned dis ol' place; an' Marse Jess was de bes' white frein' a nigger ever had; dis nigger, anyhow."