

Randolph Johnson

Interview with Randolph Johnson

—*Morgan Smith, [HW: Birmingham?]*

RANDOLPH AND THE LITTLE CRIPPLE

Randolph Johnson, age 84, although he admits he was "jes' a little picaninny" when the War between the States began, still recalls with vivid clarity the days of his childhood on the old plantation. Unlike most of the former slaves, he never worked hard. His hours were too filled with the joy of playing, for he belonged to a little crippled boy about his own age and guarded over him all the time. At night the little white master and his small black playmate slept in the same room; the latter having a pallet that he spread on the floor. During the day both little white and black played in the shade of the cedars on the grassy lawn. The kindly white owner of the plantation was always good to Randolph. Never a cross word was spoken to him, he says.

"But one day," Randolph said, "de little massa took very sick. Dey wouldn't even let me see him. I had a feelin' trouble was a comin', kaze little massa neber did have no real life like other boys. He was always a lookin' lak a sick puppy. I gues de Lawd jus' wanted him fo' hisself, and he took him.

"Adder dat I was put to work on a mule dat turned de wheel of de cotton gin. He jus' walk aroun' in circles lak de mule dat's pullin' a syrup press. Den de War came, and all de good clothes dat we had made on de loom turned to tatters. De food got low; some of de slaves run away and some of our houses was burned by de Yankees. Atter de war, de massa came back and told us niggers dat we waunt slaves no mo'. Said we could go, but if we wanted to stay we could do dat too. He gib' each fambly dat stayed a mule, a cow, some tools and money enough to run 'em till dey could git de crop harvested. He was de best massa dat any nigger ever had.

"Den I come to Bummin'ham. I worked on de railroad dey was puttin' through. I was a big nigger and I could make de others step. I was about six feet three inches and weighed near 200 pounds. I knowed my ole massa would have been proud of me if he coulda seed me a-workin' on de railroad and a liftin' dem ties and a sweatin' wid dem rails; I wished I coulda been in his cotton field and a-heard him talkin' fair like instid ob listenin' to dat foreman gibin' us de debil 'bout bein' lazy when we was a workin' our selfs nearly to death. Den one day I saw de foreman slap a nigger fo' drinkin' at de dipper too long. De nigger picked up a shovel and slam him in de haid, and run. Back in de slabery days dey didn't do somethin' and run. Dey run befo' dey did it, kaze dey knew dat if dey struck a white man dere want goin' to be no nigger. In dem days dey run to keep from doin' somethin'! Nowadays dey do it and den dey runs."