

Rufus Dirt

Interview with Rufus Dirt

— Woodrow Hand, Birmingham, Alabama

RUFUS WOULD TALK A LOT FOR A DIME

Foreword: This Negro, Rufus Dirt, was found on one of Birmingham's busiest streets begging for coins. Because of his inability to read, he was unable to give the number or location of his home. All he knew was "jes' som'ers on Southside, boss."

"I'll drop a dime in your hat uncle if you'll stand here and talk to me for a few minutes."

"Sho' boss, iffen you wants, I'll talk all day fo' dat much money. I'se been here fo' a long time an' I knows plenty to talk 'bout. What does yo' want to know?"

I explained my interest in slavery days and my search for ex-slaves, but he began telling me before I had time to finish. His ability to talk had somehow escaped what his age had done to his hair, which was sparse as well as snowy white. His eyes were a glazy red. One hand and arm seemed to be crippled, but the other waved around in the air as he talked and finally settled on my shoulder.

"Boss, I don' rightly know jes' how old I is. I was a driver (Negro boss of other slaves) during slavery and I reckons I was about twenty sompin'. I don' remember nothin' in particular that caused me to get dat drivin' job, ceptin' hard work, but I knows dat I was proud of it 'cause I didn' have to work so hard no mo'. An' den it sorta' made de other niggers look up to me, an' you knows us niggers, boss. Nothin' makes us happier dan' to strut in front of other niggers. Dere ain't nothin' much to tell about. We jes' moved one crop atter de other till layin' by time come and den we'd start in on de winter work. We done jes' 'bout de same as all de other plantations.

"My massa's name was Digby and we live at Tuscaloosa befo' de war. An' 'bout dat war, white folks. Dem was some scary times. De nigger women was a-feared to breathe out loud come night an' in de day time, dey didn't work much 'cause dey was allus lookin' fo' de Yankees. Dey didn' come by so much 'cause atter de first few times. Dere wa'nt no reason to come by. Dey had done et up ever'thing and toted off what dey didn' eat. Dey tuk all Massa's stock, burned down de smokehouse atter dey tuk de meat out, an' dey burned de barn, an' we'all think ever' time dat dey goin' to burn de house down, but dey musta forgot to do dat.

"When de war was finally over an' I was free, my family went to Vicksburg, Mississippi where we made a livin' first one way an' den de other. I don't know how long we stayed dere, but I was livin' in Bummin'ham when dere wa'nt nothin' much here a'tall. I watched all de big buildin's 'round here go up and I see'd dem build all de big plants and I'se still watchin', but I still don' know how to tell folks where places is, 'cause I don' know how to read numbers. I goes anywhere I wants to go an' I don't ever get lost, but jes' de same, I can't tell nobody where I am. I don' even know where we is standin' talking like dis right now. An' boss, I ain't beggin' 'cause I'se too lazy to work. I'se worked plenty in my time till I crippled dis arm in de mines and befo' my eyes got so bad," and with a grace and gentleness that may be called a characteristic of his generation, he added, "I hope I'se told you what you wants to know."

He had. I felt well repaid for the dime I had given him. As he walked off down the street, I noticed for the first time the large crowd that had gathered around us. Evidently slave tales carry more interest than this writer realized.