

Silvia Witherspoon

Interview with Silvia Witherspoon

—*Susie R. O'Brien, Uniontown, Alabama*

FOOTS GETS TIRED FROM CHOPPIN' COTTON

Aunt Silvia Witherspoon sat dozing on the steps of her small cabin, her bare feet stretched out in the dry dust of the yard. A large horsefly settled upon her broad nose and after a moment Aunt Silvia's composure was disturbed to such an extent that she waved it off with her hand. On doing so her eyes opened and she saw me approaching the steps. She straightened. "Mawnin', Mistis. Jus' settin' heah coolin' off my foots. I'se plum wo' out f'um choppin' cotton.

"Yassmam," she continued, after I had asked a few questions, "I remembers some things 'bout de slavery days. 'Co'se I can't remember jus' 'zactly how old I is, but I mus' be mought nigh on to ninety, 'ca'se I was a raght sizable gal when de war ended. I was bawn on a plantation in Jackson, Mississippi, dat belonged to my Massa, Dr. Minto Witherspoon. My Pappy an' Mammy was name Lum an' Phyllis Witherspoon. De white folks lived in a big, white house made outten logs. Honey, Massa an' Mistis Witherspoon was quality! Yassmam, dey was quality. Us slaves was treated lak we was somp'n round dat place. Massa didn't 'low no oberseer to tote no strop 'hine his niggers. Besides dat we was fed good an' had good clothes. He useta done had brogans sont out in boxfuls f'um Mobile. My job was to do little things aroun' de white folks' house, but befo' dat I stayed in de quarters an' nussed my mammy's chilluns, while she worked in de fiel's. She would tie de smalles' baby on my back so's I could play widout no inconvenience. I laked to stay at de big house, dough, an' fan de flies offen de white folks while dey et. Dat was de bes' job I eber had. Mistis gived me a dress dat de white chilluns done out-growed an' on Sunday I was de dressed-upest nigger in de quarter.

"Massa 'longed to de Presbyterian chu'ch, so all us niggers was Presbyterians too. We all went to our own chu'ch dat was on de place dar.

"Massa kep' a pack of blood hounds but it warn't often dat he had to use 'em 'ca'se none of our niggers eber runned away. One day, dough, a nigger named Joe did run away. Believe me Mistis, dem blood hounds cotch dat nigger 'fo' he got to de creek good. It makes me laugh till yit de way dat nigger jumped in de creek when he couldn't swim a lick jus' 'ca'se dem houn's was atter him. He sho made a splash, but dey managed to git him out 'fo he drowned.

"I ma'ied about a year atter de war, an' Mistis, I didn't have no pretty dress to git ma'ied in. I ma'ied dat ole nigger in a dirty work dress an' my feets was bare jus' lak dey is now. I figured dat iffen he loved me, he loved me jus' as well in my bare feets as he would wid my shoes on.

"Does I believe in ghosties? Sho I does. I don't suppose you was bawn wid a veil on yo' face lak I was, 'ca'se I can see dem ghosties as plain as dey was here raght now. I'll tell you 'bout one dat comes out de white folks chu'ch yard. On dark rainy nights, I sees him, tall wid long white robes drappin f'um him. He carries a big light so bright dat you can't see his face, but he looks jus' lak a man. It don't bother me none, 'ca'se I don't bother it.

"I keeps a flour sifter an' a fork by my bed to keep de witches f'um ridin' me. How come I knows dey rides me? Honey, I bees so tired in de mawnin' I kin scarcely git outten my bed, an' its all on account of dem witches ridin' me, so I putt de sifter dere to cotch 'em. Sometimes I wears dis dime wid de hole in it aroun' my ankle to keep off de conjure, but since Monroe King tuk an' died us ain't had much conjerin' 'roun' here. You know dat ole nigger would putt a conjure on somebody for jus' a little sum of money. He sold conjure bags to keep de sickness away. He could conjure de grass an' de birds, an' anything he wanted to. De niggers 'roun' useta give him chickens an' things so's he wouldn't conjure 'em, but its a funny thing Mistis, I ain't never understood it, he got tuk off to jail for stealin' a mule, an' us niggers waited 'roun' many a day for him to conjure hissself out, but he never did. I guess he jus' didn't have quite enough conjurin' material to git hissself th'ough dat stone wall. I ain't never understood it, dough."