

Tom McAlpin

Interview with Tom McAlpin

—*John Morgan Smith*

A WHUPPIN' WID DE TRIMMIN'S

"Mornin' Boss," said uncle Tom McAlpin, "how is you dis mornin'?" The old former slave spoke cordially with a definite twinkle in his muddy eyes though his age had passed the four score and ten mark. His mind was alert; his memory vivid, and his faculties of speech quite unusual. Tom McAlpin was indeed a remarkable man. There was really a sincere note of welcome in his voice as he came forward, placed a large piece of cast-iron pipe against the steps of his house, 1928 Ave. D. So., Birmingham, and looked up at me showing a mouth of straggly teeth in a warm smile.

"Yassuh," he continued in his high-pitched voice after our salutations, "I'll be glad to serve you as bes' I kin wid my knowledge of de pas' years. Jus' you set down in dat chair," he pointed to what was left of an ante-bellum wicker seat; "I'll set on dese steps an' us'll go over de whole thing from de beginnin's.

"Fus' thing I guess you wants to know is whar an' when I was born. Yassuh, an' who I b'long to. Well, Boss, I was born in Martersville, Alabamy. Dat's five miles southwest of Talladega. I come into dis ole worl' on a sunny day in June, eighteen fawty fo'. I belonged to Dr. Augustus McAlpin, an' from dat day to dis, I is seed many things come an' go, an' I is aimin' to see a lot mo' befo' I cross to de udder side.

"De docta jus' had a small plantation, 'bout 100 acres, I s'pose, an' he didn't have but 12 slaves, 'caze dere warn't no need fo no mo'. He was busy in town adocrin' folks. He didn't have no time to do any real farmin'.

"My job aroun' de place was to nuss de chilluns, white an' nigger. We all played 'roun' together. Sometimes we play coon an' rabbit, fox an' houn' and snatch, but what was de mostes' fun was a-ridin' ole Sut. Sut was a donkey an' us useta hitch him to a wagon, an' six of de chilluns would ride in de wagon an' I'd ride on his back. Sometimes us'd ride all de way into Talladega wid Sut.

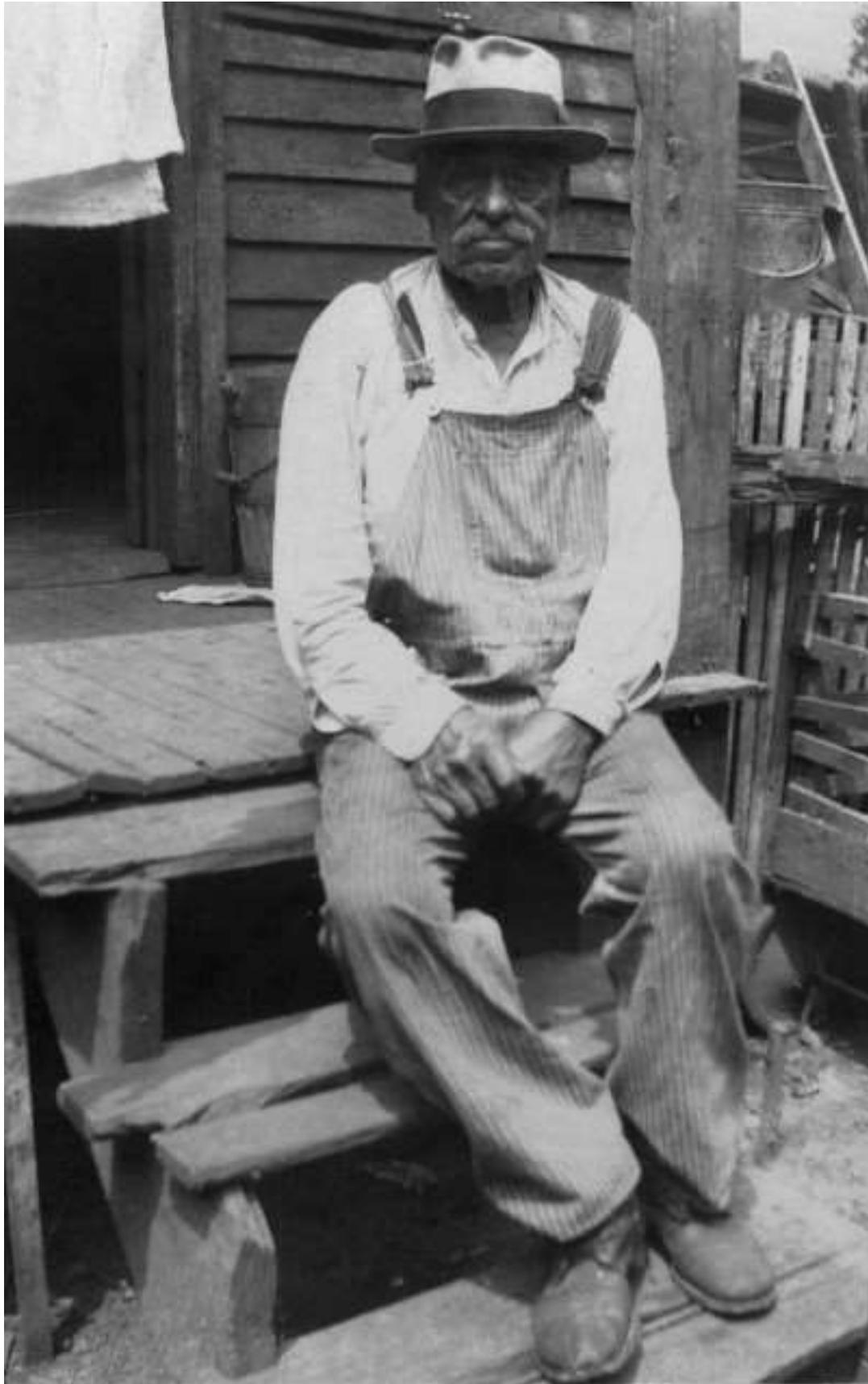
"Nawsuh, I ain't neber got no whuppin' but one, an' it was a sho' 'nough complete one, boss, wid all de trimmin's. It all happened when de Massa told me he better not cotch dem hogs in de corn, an' iffen he did, I was agoin' to git a whuppin'. Well, boss, dere was one ole hog dat I jus' couldn't keep outten dere so I tuk a needle an' sewed up his eyes. 'Course I was jus' a little black 'un an' didn't know whut I was adoin', but I sho' sewed up dat hog's eyelids so's he couldn't see nothin'. Dat kep' him outten de corn all raght, but when de Massa found it out he gave me a lickin' dat I ain't forgot yit. Boss, dat was de onlies' lesson I ever needed in my life. It done de wuk.

"Yassuh, dere was pattyrollers 'roun' our place, but dey never cotched me, 'caze I was too swif' for 'em. Boss, I could take holt of a hosses tail an' run 'roun' de pasture an' keep up wid him. I was sho' fas' on my feets.

"Nawsuh, us wan't never given no money for nothin', but I learnt how to make baskets an' I would take 'em in to Talladega on Sat'day evenings an' sell 'em to de white folks for fifteen cents. Den when I needed somp'n lak 'bacca or a little piece of chocolate, I could go to de sto' an' buy it. Lots of slaves on yuther plantations warn't 'lowed to make any money dough.

"Nawsuh, I ain't never had no schoolin', 'ceptin' what I could git outen de little white folks' books myself. Us niggers useta tote dere books to school for 'em an' on de way I would look in de book an' git a little learnin'.

"When us niggers on de McAlpin place et, us et raght at de same table dat de white folks et at. Atter dey finished dere meal, us slaves would sit down raght atter dem an' eat de same kinda food. Yassuh.



Tom McAlpin, Birmingham, Alabama

"Sho' I 'members de war. I 'members when de war commence', Jeff Davis called for volunteers; den a little later when de south needed mo' mens to fight, Jeff Davis' officers would go th'ough de streets, an' grab up de white mens an' put ropes 'roun' dere wrists lak dey was takin' 'em off to jail. An' all de while dey was jus' takin' 'em off to de war. Dey made all de white mens go. It was called de 'scription. Some niggers went too. Dem niggers fought raght side of dere masters. Some went as body guards an' some went as soldiers.

"Yassuh, Boss, I recalls de time dat de 'federate soldiers, bless dere souls, hid dere few hosses in de basement of de old Masonic Institute in Talladega an' hid dere amunition in de hollow stone pillars. Gen'l Wilson an' his raiders come th'ough dar, but dey never did fin' dem 'federate supplies. Dem Yankees jus' lak to scare eve'ybody roun' de place to death. Dey shot up de town an' dem blue coats tuk eve'ything we had: cotton, sugar, flour, hams, preserves, clothes, corn; eve'ything, Boss, eve'ything. Dey even burned up some houses.

"But Boss, dere ain't never been nobody a fightin' lak our 'federates done, but dey ain't never had a chance. Dere was jes' too many of dem blue coats for us to lick. I seen our 'federates go off laughin' an' gay; full of life an' health. Dey was big an' strong, asingin' Dixie an' dey jus knowed dey was agoin' to win. An' boss, I seen 'em come back skin an' bone, dere eyes all sad an' hollow, an dere clothes all ragged. Boss, dey was all lookin' sick. De sperrit dey lef' wid jus' been done whupped outten dem, but it tuk dem Yankees a long time to do it. Our 'federates was de bes' fightin' men dat ever were. Dere warn't nobody lak our 'federates.

"I was in Richmond dat cold day dat Gen'l Lee handed his sword over to de yuther side, an' I seen Jeff Davis when he made a speech 'bout startin' over. I seen de niggers leavin' dere homes an' awanderin' off into de worl' to God knows whar, asayin' good-bye to dere white folks, an' atryin' to make dere way de bes' dey kin. But, white boss, it jes' seem lak you let a nigger go widout a boss an' he jes' no good. Dere ain't much he kin do, 'caze dere ain't nobody to tell him. Yassuh, I was sont to Richmond to bring home some of our wounded 'federates. Dey sont me 'caze dey knowed I was agoin' to do my bes', an' 'caze dey knowed I warn't afeered of nothin'. Dat's de way I've always tried to be, white boss, lak my white people what raised me. God bless 'em."