

William Henry Towns

Interview with William Henry Towns

—*Levi D. Shelby, Jr., Tuscumbia, Alabama*

DIS WAS DAT LONG AGO

"It's been so long sence, I don' 'member much," William Henry (Bill) Towns said talking of slavery days. Towns was only seven when the Civil War began and his memories are those of childhood, which he mixes with reminiscences and opinions of the older slaves with whom he came in contact immediately after the war. Towns knows the exact date of his birth. He says:

"I was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, December 7, 1854. My mother was name Jane Smoots. She come from Baltimore, Maryland. My father's name was Joe Towns, and he come from Huntsville, Alabama.

"I had a passel of brudders an' sisters; Charlie and Bob was my brudders; Betty, Kate, Lula an' Nelie was my sisters. Dere wasn't but two of us endurin' slavery. Dat was me an' Nelie; de rest was born atter slavery. Me an' Nelie was Townses, the rest, Charlie, Kate, Lula, Bob and Betty was Joneses. How dat come 'bout was dis away. Endurin' slavery my father was sold to anudder slave owner. Atter de war my mother married Frank Jones; den dese yuther chillun was born.

"It done been so long sence all of dis was I disremembers most 'bout it. Anyway, the Big House was a two-story house; white like mos' houses endurin' dat time. On the north side of the Big House set a great, big barn, where all de stock an' stuff dat was raised was kep'. Off to de southwes' of de barn an' wes' of de Big House set 'bout five or six log houses. These house was built facin' a space of ground in de center of a squa'e what de houses made. Anybody could stan' in his front do' an' see in at the front of de yuther houses.

"Sometimes enduring' de week an' on Sunday, too, de people would git together out in dis squa'e an' talk 'fore goin' to bed. The chillun what was too young to work was always out in de front playin'. Jes' acrost from our place was anudder wid de quarters built 'mos' de same as ourn 'ceptin' dat dey had a picket fence 'roun' de quarters to pervent 'em from runnin' away. 'Course Mr. Young didn't have to worry 'bout his han's runnin' away, cause he wan't a mean man like some of de slave holders was. He never spoke harsh or whupped 'em, an' he didn't 'low nobody else to do it neither.

"I remember one day a fellow come from acrost on anudder farm an' spoke sumpin' 'bout Mr. Young bein' too easy wid his servants. He said, 'Them darn niggers will think they is good as you iffen you keep up de rate you goin' now, Young.' Mr. Young just up an' told him if he ever spoke like dat again he'd call his bluff. Mr. Young told him de he didn't work his people like dey was oxes.

"All of Mr. Young's hands liked him 'cause he didn't make 'em sleep on corn shuck mattresses an' he didn't have dey meals cooked in a wash pot. A lot of de yuther slaves didn't know what it was to eat

meat, lessen it was a holiday. Mr. Young 'lowed his people to eat just what he eat. I hear my mother tell a tale 'bout a man what took a meat skin an' whipped his chillun's mouth wid it to fool folks like dey had some meat for dinner. Ole Caleb told one a lil' bit bigger'n dat, though. He said one night him an' a feller was comin' from prayer meeting an' they runned 'crost a possum settin' in de root of a tree by de side of de road. He say he stopped to git him an' dis yuther feller told him he wouldn't bother wid him 'cause he wouldn't git none of him no how. Caleb ast him why he said that. He said, "Cause your ole master is gwine take him jes' soon as you git home wid him." Caleb told him dat Mr. Young wasn't dat kin'er man. De yuther feller ho'ped Caleb to ketch dat possum, an' he got a piece of him de nex' night when ever'body come in from de fiel'. Caleb said de ol' feller enj'yed de meat so much dat he wished he took him an' his family de 'hole possum.

"We didn't live so far from Big Spring Creek. 'Co'se, we didn't do no fishin', 'cause we younguns had to 'tend gaps to keep de cattle off'n de crops. De grownups had to go to de fiel'. Life was kin'er happy durin' slavery 'cause we never knowed nothing 'bout any yuther sort of life or freedom. All we knowed was work from one en' of de year to de yuther, 'ceptin' on holidays. Den we'd have to go to church or set around de fire an' lis'en to de old folks tell stories. The grownups would go to a dance or do sumpin' else for indertainment. Co'se us younguns got a heap of pleasure outten dem fairy tales dat was tol' us by de older ones. I know ma an' dem use to tell some of de awf'lest tales sometimes. I'd be 'fraid to go from one part of de house to de yuther widoutten somebody wid me. Us younguns would had to play some sort of a game for indertainment. Dere was a whole lot of games an' riddles to be played dem days. It have been so long sence I played any of 'em I'se mos' near disremembers de biggest part of 'em. I 'members a song or two an' a few riddles what ol' Caleb use to tell us. De song goes sumpin' like dis:

Saturday night an' Sunday, too.

Had a yaller gal on my mind.

Monday mornin', break of day,

White folks had me gwine.

"De riddles was like dis;

Slick as a mole, black as a coal,

Got a great long tail like a thunder hole.

(Skillet)

Crooked as a rainbow, teeth lak a cat,

Guess all of your life but you can't guess dat.

(black berry bush)

Grows in de winter, dies in de spring,

Lives wid de root stickin' straight up.

(icicle)

"Dere was anudder song what Caleb use to sing. It goes like dis:

Whar you gwine buzzard? Whar you gwine crow?

Gwine down to de river to do jes' so.

"Dere was a whole lot more to dat song what I disremembers.

"Anudder song what comes to my min' is:

Hawk an' de buzzard went down to de law;

When de hawk got back he had a broken jaw.

Lady's pocketbook on de judge's bench

Haden' had no use for a pocketbook sence.

"Sometimes I visits wid ol' Mingo White an' me an' him talks over dem days dat me an' him was boys. We gits to talkin' an' 'fore you knows it ol' Mingo is cryin' lak a baby. 'Cordin' to what he says he is lucky ter be a-livin'. Dis is one thing I never likes ter talk 'bout. When slavery was goin' on it was all right for me 'cause I never had it hard, but it jes' wan't right to treat human bein's dat way. If we hadn't a-had to work an' slave for nothin' we might have somepin' to show for what we did do, an' wouldn't have to live from pillar to pos' now.



William Henry Towns, [TR: Tuscumbia?], Alabama

"Speakin' of clothin', everything that we wore back den was made by han'. Many a night my ma use' to set an' spin wid a spindle. I have set an' done the cardin' for her so she could git her tas' done. In de summer we would wear un'erwear what was made outten cotton. In de winter it was made outten flannel. De shoes was made of cowhide what was tanned right dere on de place. Dem was de hardes' shoes I ever seen. Sometimes dey'd wear out 'fore dey was any ways soft, an' den sometimes atter dey was wore out you couldn't hardly ben' 'em. Some of de han's would go bar'footed until de fall an' den wear shoes. Slippers wan't wore den. De fust pair of slippers I ever 'members havin' was de ones what I bought for my weddin'. Dey didn't cos' but a dollar an' six bits. My weddin' suit didn't cos' but eight dollars, an' a straw hat to match it cos' six bits.

"As I said afore, Massa Young an' ol' Mistis was mighty good folks on 'count of dey never whupped any of they han's. Iffen dere was one dat would give trouble dey would git rid of him. De overseers had to be kin' to de hands or else he was outten a job. De chillun was mighty nice, too. Ever' time dey went to town or to de sto' dey would bring us younguns some candy or somepin'. Joinin' our farm was a farm whar de slaves fared lak dogs. Dey was always beatin' on some of dem.

"Ever'body worked hard enduring' dat time. Dat was all we thought we was 'spose' to do, but Abe Lincoln taught us better'n dat. Some say dat Abe wan't intrusted so much in freein' de slaves as he was in savin' de union. Don' make no diff'ence iffen he wan't intrusted in de black folks, he sho' done a big thing by tryin' to save de union. Some of de slaveholders would double de proportion of work so as to git to whip 'em when night come. I heard my ma say after slavery that dey jes' whipped de slaves so much to keep dem cowed down an' 'cause dey might have fought for freedom much sooner'n it did come.

"Caleb come from N'Orleans, Louiseanner. He say dat many a day ship loads of slaves was unloaded dere an' sold to de one offerin' de mos' money for dem. Dey had big chains an' shackles on dem to keep 'em from gittin' away. Sometime dey would have to go a long ways to git to de farm. Dey would go in a wagon or on hoss back.

"Talk 'bout learnin' to read an' 'rite—why, iffen we so much as spoke of learnin' to read an' 'rite we was scolded like de debil. Iffen we was caught lookin' in a book we was treated same as iffen we had killed somebody. A servant bett'nt be caught lookin' in a book; didn't make no diff'ence if you wan't doin' nothin' but lookin' at de pictures.

"Speakin' of church; we went to de same church as de white folks did; only thing was we had to go in de evenin' atter de white folks. De white folks would go along an' read de Bible for de preacher, an' to keep dem from talkin of things dat might help dem to git free. Dey would sing songs like 'Steal Away,' 'Been Toilin' at the Hill So Long,' an' 'Old-Time Religion.'

"Ever' once in a while slaves would run away to de North. Mos' times dey was caught an' brought back. Sometimes dey would git desp'rit an' would kill demse'ves 'fore dey would stand to be brought back. One time dat I heard of a slave that had 'scaped and when dey tried to ketch him he jumped in de creek an' drown hisse'f. He was brought from over in Geo'gia. He hadn't been in Alabama long 'fore him an' two more tried to 'scape; two of 'em was caught an' brought back but dis yuther one went to de lan' of sweet dreams.

"After de day's work was done an' all had eat, de slaves had to go to bed. Mos' slaves worked on Sat'day jes' lak dey did on Monday; that was from kin' to caught, or from sun to sun. Mr. Young never worked his slaves 'twell dark on Sat'day. He always let 'em quit 'roun' fo' 'clock. We would spen' dis time washin' an' bathin' to git ready for church on Sunday. Speakin' of holidays; de han's celebrated ever' holiday dat deir white folks celebrated. Dere wan't much to do for indertainment, 'ceptin' what I'se already said. Ever' Christmas we'd go to de Big House an' git our present, 'cause ol' Mistis always give us one.

"Slaves never got sick much, but when dey did dey got de bes'. Dere was always a nurse on de farm, and when a slave got sick dey was righ' dere to give dem treatments. Back in dose days dey used all sorts of roots and yarbs for medicine. Peach tree leaves was one of de mos' of'en. Sassafras was anudder what was used of'en; hit was used mostly in de spring made in tea. Asafetida was anudder what was use to keep you from havin' azma. Hit was wore 'round de neck in a lil bag. Prickler ash was anudder what was taken in de spring. Hit was 'spose ter clean de blood. Some of de folks would use brass, copper an' dimes wid holes in 'em to keep from havin' their rumertiz.

"I was seben years old when de war commence. I 'members Mrs. Young said when de Yankees come dey was goin' to ast us iffen dey had been good to us. She said dat dey was goin' to ast us all 'bout how much money dey had; an' how many slaves what dey owned. She told us to say dey was po' folks an' dat dey didn't have no money. I 'member my mother said dat she hoped Mr. Young and dem to hide deir money som'ers in a well dat wan't bein' used 'cause it gone dry. Dem Yankees sho' did clean up whar they went along. Dey would ketch chickens by de bunches and kill 'em an' den turn 'roun' an' make de ol' Mistis clean 'em an' cook 'em for dem. Dem Yankees set fire to bales an' bales of cotton. Dey took de white folks clo'se an' did away wid 'em. Sometimes dey would tear 'em up or give dem to de slaves to wear. De war ended in sixty-five an' I was eleben years ol' den.

"Jes' atter de war we was turned loose to go for ourse'f. What I mean by dat, we was free. I didn't mean that we lef' Mr. Young's 'cause we stayed wid him for de longest atter slavery was over.

"My fust work was in a blacksmith shop down on West Six Street. I worked for fifty cents a day den until I learned de trade. Atter I worked at de blacksmith shop for about two years I took up carpenter work. I served apprentice for three years. I followed carpent'ing the res' of my life.

"I married Lizzie Anderson when I was twenty-one years ol'. She wan't but seventeen years ol'. We didn't have no big weddin', we jes' had de fambly dere. I raised ten chillun up until April de twenty fourth. That's when William Henry died. My chilluns doin' pretty well in life. Dere's two of my sons what's doctors; one is a carpenter. The other one is Grand Orator of the Shriners. My gals is doin' fine, too. Three of 'em is been school teachers, one a beauty cult'ist an' de other one a nurse. I feels sati'fied 'bout my chillun now. Dey seems to be able to make a livin' for they se'ves pretty well.

"I thinks that Abe Lincoln was a mighty fine man even if he was tryin' to save their union. I don't like to talk 'bout this that have done happened. It done passed so I don't say much 'bout it, specially de Presidents, 'cause it might cause a 'sturbance right now. All men means well, but some of 'em ain't broadminded 'nough to do anythin' for nobody but themse'fs. Any man that tries to help humanity is a good man."