

**Aunt VIRGINIA BELL, 1205 Ruthven St., Houston, was born a slave near Opelousas, Louisiana, on the plantation of Thomas Lewis. Although she remembers being told she was born on Christmas Day, she does not know the year, but says she guesses she is about 88 years old.**

"Well, suh, the fus' question you ask me, 'bout how old I is, I don' know 'zactly. You see it ain't like things is today. The young folks can tell you their 'zact age and everything, but in those days we didn' pay much 'tention to such things. But I knows I was bo'n in slavery times and my pappy tol' me I was bo'n on a Christmas Day, but didn' 'member jus' what year.

"We was owned by Massa Lewis. Thomas Lewis was his name, and he was a United States lawyer. I ain't gwineter talk 'gainst my white folks like some cullud folks do, 'cause Massa Lewis was a mighty fine man and so was Miss Mary, and they treated us mighty good.

"Massa had a big plantation near Opelousas and I was bo'n there. I 'member the neighbor folks used to bring their cotton to the gin on his farm for ginnin' and balin'. My mother's name was Della. That was all, jus' Della. My pappy's name was Jim Blair. Both of them was from Virginny, but from diff'rent places, and was brought to Louisiana by nigger traders and sold to Massa Lewis. I know my pappy was lots older than my mother and he had a wife and five chillen back in Virginny and had been sold away from them out here. [Pg 64] Then he and my mother started a family out here. I don' know what become of his family back in Virginny, 'cause when we was freed he stayed with us.

"When I got old enough I was housegirl and used to carry notes for Miss Mary to the neighbors and bring back answers. Miss Mary would say, 'Now, Virginny, you take this note to sech and sech place and be sure and be back in sech and sech time,' and I allus was.

"Massa Lewis had four or five families of us slaves, but we used to have some fun after work and us young folks would skip rope and play ring games. Durin' week days the field hands would work till the sun was jus' goin' down and then the overseer would holler 'all right' and that was the signal to quit. All hands knocked off Sat'day noon.

"We didn' have no schoolin' or preachin'. Only the white folks had them, but sometimes on Sundays we'd go up to the house and listen to the white folks singin'.

"Iffen any of the slave hands wanted to git married, Massa Lewis would git them up to the house after supper time, have the man and woman jine hands and then read to them outen a book. I guess it was the Scriptures. Then he'd tell 'em they was married but to be ready for work in the mornin'. Massa Lewis married us 'cordin' to Gospel.

"Massa used to feed us good, too, and we had plenty clothes. [Pg 65] Iffen we got took sick, we had doctor treatment, too. Iffen a hand took sick in the field with a misery, they was carried to their quarters and Massa or Miss Mary would give them a dose of epecac and make them vomit and would sen' for the doctor. They wouldn' fool none iffen one of us took sick, but would clean us out and take care of us till we was well.

"There was mighty little whippin' goin' on at our place, 'cause Massa Lewis and Miss Mary treated us good. They wasn't no overseer goin' to whip, 'cause Massa wouldn't 'low him to. Le's see, I don' rec'lec' more than two whippin's I see anyone git from Massa, and that has been so long ago I don' rec'lec' what they was for.

"When the War done come 'long it sho' changed things, and we heerd this and that, but we didn' know much what it was about. Then one day Massa Lewis had all the wagons loaded with food and chairs and beds and other things from the house and our quarters, and I heerd him say we was movin' to Polk County, way over in Texas. I know it took us a long time to git there, and when we did I never see so much woods. It sho' was diff'rent from the plantation.

"I had to work in the fields, same as the res', and we stayed there three years and made three crops of cotton, but not so much as on our old place, 'cause there wasn't so much clearin'. Then one day Massa Lewis tol' us we was free, jus' as free as he was—jus' like you take the bridle offen a hoss and turn him loose. We jus' looked[Pg 66] 'roun as iffen we hadn' good sense. We didn' have nothin' nor nowhere to go, and Massa Lewis say iffen we finish makin' de crop, he would take us back to Opelousas and give us a place to stay and feed us. So after pickin' we goes back and when we git there we sees where those rascal Yankees 'stroyed everything—houses burned, sugar kettles broke up. It looked mighty bad.

"Massa Lewis hadn' no money, but he fixed us up a place to stay and give us what he could to eat, but things was mighty hard for a while. I know pappy used to catch rabbits and take them to town and sell them or trade them for somethin' to eat, and you know that wasn't much, 'cause you can't git much for a little ol' rabbit.

"Then the Provo' Marshal, that was his name, give us a order for things to put in a crop with and to live till we made the crop. 'Course, I guess we wasn' as bad off as some, 'cause white folks knew we was Massa Lewis' folks and didn' bother us none.

Then I got married to John Bell, and it was a scripture weddin', too. He died 28 years ago, but I has stayed married to him ever since. We had thirteen chillen, but they is all dead now 'cept four, but they was raised up right and they is mighty good to they ol' mammy.[Pg 67]