



Cato Carter



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CATO CARTER was born in 1836 or 1837, near Pineapple, Wilcox County, Alabama, a slave of the Carter family. He and his wife live at 3429 Booth St., Dallas, Texas.

"I'm home today 'cause my li'l, old dog is lost and I has to stay 'round to hunt for him. I been goin' every day on the truck to the cotton patches. I don't pick no more, 'count my hands git too tired and begin to cramp on me. But I go and set in the field and watch the lunces for the other hands.

"I am a hunerd one years old, 'cause I's twenty-eight, goin' on twenty-nine, a man grownd, when the breakin' up come. I'm purty old, but my folks live that way. My old, black mammy, Zenie Carter, lived to be a hunerd twenty-five, and Oll Carter, my white massa—which was the brother of my daddy—lived to

be a hunerd four. He ain't been so long died. Al Carter, my own daddy, lived to be very ageable, but I don't know when he died.

"Back in Alabama, Missie Adeline Carter took me when I was past my creepin' days to live in the big house with the white folks. I had a room built on the big house, where I stayed, and they was allus good to me, 'cause I's one of their blood. They never hit me a lick or slapped me once, and told me they'd never sell me away from them. They was the bes' quality white folks and lived in a big, two-story house with a big hall what run all the way through the house. They wasn't rough as some white folks on their niggers.

"My mammy lived in a hewn-oak log cabin in the quarters. There was a long row of cabins, some bigger than t'others, 'count of fam'ly size. My massa had over eighty head of slaves. Them li'l, old cabins was cozy, 'cause [Pg 203] we chinked 'em with mud and they had stick chimneys daubed with mud, mixed with hawg-hair.

"The fixin's was jus' plain things. The beds was draw-beds—wooden bedsteads helt together with ropes drawn tight, to hold them. We scalded moss and buried it awhile and stuffed it into tickin' to make mattresses. Them beds slep' good, better'n the ones nowadays.

"There was a good fireplace for cookin' and Sundays the Missie give us niggers a pint of flour and a chicken, for to cook a mess of victuals. Then there was plenty game to find. Many a time I've kilt seventy-five or eighty squirrels out of one big beech. There was lots of deer and bears and quails and every other kind of game, but when they ran the Indians out of the country, the game jus' followed the Indians. I've seed the bigges' herds of deer followin' the way the Indians drifted. Whenever the Indians lef', the game all lef' with them, for some reason I dunno.

"Talkin' 'bout victuals, our eatin' was good. Can't say the same for all places. Some of the plantations half starved their niggers and 'lowanced out their eatin' till they wasn't fittin' for work. They had to slip about to niggers on other places to piece out their meals. They had field calls and other kinds of whoops and hollers, what had a meanin' to 'em.

"Our place was fifteen hunerd acres in one block, and 'sides the crops of cotton and corn and rice and ribbon cane we raised in the bottoms, we had veg'tables and sheep and beef. We dried the beef on scaffolds we built and I used to tend it. But bes' of anythin' to eat, I liked a big, fat coon, and I allus liked honey. Some the niggers had li'l garden patches they tended for themselves. [Pg 204]

"Everythin' I tell you am the truth, but they's plenty I can't tell you. I heard plenty things from my mammy and grandpappy. He was a fine diver and used to dive in the Alabama river for things what was wrecked out of boats, and the white folks would git him to go down for things they wanted. They'd let him down by a rope to find things on the bottom of the riverbed. He used to git a piece of money for doin' it.

"My grandmammy was a juksie, 'cause her mammy was a nigger and her daddy a Choctaw Indian. That's what makes me so mixed up with Indian and African and white blood. Sometimes it mattered to me, sometimes it didn't. It don't no more, 'cause I'm not too far from the end of my days.

"I had one brother and one sister I helped raise. They was mostly nigger. The Carters told me never to worry 'bout them, though, 'cause my mammy was of their blood and all of us in our fam'ly would never

be sold, and sometime they'd make free man and women of us. My brother and sister lived with the niggers, though.

"I was trained for a houseboy and to tend the cows. The bears was so bad then, a 'sponsible pusson who could carry a gun had to look after them.

"My massa used to give me a li'l money 'long, to buy what I wanted. I allus bought fine clothes. In the summer when I was a li'l one, I wore lowerin's, like the rest of the niggers. That was things made from cotton sackin'. Most the boys wore shirttails till they was big yearlin's. When they bought me red russets from the town, I cried and cried. I didn't want to wear no rawhide shoes. So they took 'em back. They had a weakness for my cryin'. I did have plenty fine clothes, good woolen suits they spinned on the place, and doeskins and fine[Pg 205] linens. I druv in the car'age with the white folks and was 'bout the mos' dudish nigger in them parts.

"I used to tend the nurslin' thread. The reason they called it that was when the mammies was confined with babies havin' to suck, they had to spin. I'd take them the thread and bring it back to the house when it was spinned. If they didn't spin seven or eight cuts a day, they'd git a whuppin'. It was consid'ble hard on a woman when she had a frettin' baby. But every mornin' them babies had to be took to the big house, so the white folks could see if they's dressed right. They was money tied up in li'l nigger young'uns.

"They whupped the women and they whupped the mens. I used to work some in the tan'ry and we made the whips. They'd tie them down to a stob, and give 'em the whuppin'. Some niggers, it taken four men to whup 'em, but they got it. The nigger driver was meaner than the white folks. They'd better not leave a blade of grass in the rows. I seed 'em beat a nigger half a day to make him 'fess up to stealin' a sheep or a shoat. Or they'd whup 'em for runnin' away, but not so hard if they come back of their own 'cordance when they got hungry and sick in the swamps. But when they had to run 'em down with the nigger dogs, they'd git in bad trouble.

"The Carters never did have any real 'corrigible niggers, but I heard of 'em plenty on other places. When they was real 'corrigible, the white folks said they was like mad dogs and didn't mind to kill them so much as killin' a sheep. They'd take 'em to the graveyard and shoot 'em down and bury 'em face downward, with their shoes on. I never seed it done, but they made some the niggers go for a lesson to them that they could git the same.

"But I didn't even have to carry a pass to leave my own place, like the other niggers. I had a cap with a sign on it: 'Don't bother this nigger, [Pg 206] or there will be Hell to pay.' I went after the mail, in the town. It come in coaches and they put on fresh hosses at Pineapple. The coachman run the hosses into Pineapple with a big to-do and blowin' the bugle to git the fresh hosses ready. I got the mail. I was a trusty all my days and never been 'rested by the law to this day.

"I never had no complaints for my treatment, but some the niggers hated syrup makin' time, 'cause when they had to work till midnight makin' syrup, its four o'clock up, jus' the same. Sun-up to sundown was for fiel' niggers.

"Corn shuckin' was fun. Them days no corn was put in the cribs with shucks on it. They shucked it in the fiel' and shocked the fodder. They did it by sides and all hands out. A beef was kilt and they'd have a reg'lar picnic feastin'. They was plenty whiskey for the niggers, jus' like Christmas.

"Christmas was the big day at the Carter's. Presents for every body, and the bakin' and preparin' went on for days. The li'l ones and the big ones were glad, 'specially the nigger mens, 'count of plenty good whiskey. Mr. Oll Carter got the bes' whiskey for his niggers.

"We used to have frolics, too. Some niggers had fiddles and played the reels, and niggers love to dance and sing and eat.

"Course niggers had their ser'ous side, too. They loved to go to church and had a li'l log chapel for worship. But I went to the white folks church. In the chapel some nigger mens preached from the Bible, but couldn't read a line no more than a sheep could. The Carters didn't mind their niggers prayin' and singin' hymns, but some places wouldn't 'low them to worship a-tall, and they had to put their heads in pots to sing or pray.

"Mos' the niggers I know, who had their mar'age put in the book, did it after the breakin' up, plenty after they had growned chillen. When they got [Pg 207] married on the places, mostly they jus' jumped over a broom and that made 'em married. Sometimes one the white folks read a li'l out of the Scriptures to 'em and they felt more married.

"Take me, I was never one for sickness. But the slaves used to git sick. There was jaundice in them bottoms. First off they'd give some castor oil, and if that didn't cure they'd give blue mass. Then if he was still sick they'd git a doctor.

"They used to cry the niggers off jus' like so much cattle, and we didn't think no diff'rent of it. I seed them put them on the block and brag on them somethin' big. Everybody liked to hear them cry off niggers. The cryer was a clown and made funny talk and kep' everybody laughin'.

"When massa and the other mens on the place went off to war, he called me and said, 'Cato, you's allus been a 'sponsible man, and I leave you to look after the women and the place. If I don't come back, I want you to allus stay by Missie Adeline! I said, 'Fore Gawd, I will, Massa Oll.' He said, 'Then I can go away peaceable.'

"We thought for a long time the sojers had the Fed'ral whupped to pieces, but there was plenty bad times to go through. I carried a gun and guarded the place at nighttime. The paddyrollers was bad. I cotched one and took him to the house more'n once. They wore black caps and put black rags over their faces and was allus skulduggerying 'round at night. We didn't use torches any more when we went 'round at night, 'cause we was afeared. We put out all the fires 'round the house at nighttime.

"The young mens in grey uniforms used to pass so gay and singin', in the big road. Their clothes was good and we used to feed them the best we had on the [Pg 208] place. Missie Adeline would say, 'Cato, they is our boys and give them the best this place 'fords.' We taken out the hams and the wine and kilt chickens for them. That was at first.

"Then the boys and mens in blue got to comin' that way, and they was fine lookin' men, too. Missie Adeline would cry and say, 'Cato, they is just mens and boys and we got to feed them, too.' We had a pavilion built in the yard, like they had at picnics, and we fed the Fed'ral in that. Missie Adeline set in to cryin' and says to the Yankees, 'Don't take Cato. He is the only nigger man I got by me now. If you take Cato, I just don't know what I'll do.' I tells them sojers I got to stay by Missie Adeline so long as I live. The Yankee mens say to her, 'Don't 'sturb youself, we ain't gwine to take Cato or harm nothin' of yours.' The

reason they's all right by us, was 'cause we prepared for them, but with some folks they was rough somethin' ter'ble. They taken off their hosses and corn.

"I seed the trees bend low and shake all over and heard the roar and poppin' of cannon balls. There was springs not too far from our place and the sojers used to camp there and build a fire and cook a mule, 'cause they'd got down to starvation. When some of the guerillas seed the fire they'd aim to it, and many a time they spoiled that dinner for them sojers. The Yankees did it and our boys did it, too. There was killin' goin' on so ter'ble, like people was dogs.

"Massa Oll come back and he was all wore out and ragged. He soon called all the niggers to the front yard and says, 'Mens and womens, you are today as free as I am. You are free to do as you like, 'cause the damned Yankees done 'creed you are. They ain't a nigger on my place what was born here or ever lived here who can't stay here and work and eat to the end of his days, as long as this old place will raise peas and goobers. Go if you wants, and stay if you wants.' [Pg 209] Some of the niggers stayed and some went, and some what had run away to the North come back. They allus called, real humble like, at the back gate to Missie Adeline, and she allus fixed it up with Massa Oll they could have a place.

"Near the close of the war I seed some folks leavin' for Texas. They said if the Fed'ral's won the war they'd have to live in Texas to keep slaves. So plenty started driftin' their slaves to the west. They'd pass with the womens ridin' in the wagons and the mens on foot. Some took slaves to Texas after the Fed'ral's done 'creed the breakin' up.

"Long as I lived I minded what my white folks told me, 'cept one time. They was a nigger workin' in the fiel' and he kept jerkin' the mules and Massa Oll got mad, and he give me a gun and said, 'Go out there and kill that man.' I said, 'Massa Oll, please don't tell me that. I ain't never kilt nobody and I don't want to.' He said, 'Cato, you do what I tell you.' He meant it. I went out to the nigger and said, 'You has got to leave this minute, and I is, too, 'cause I is 'spose to kill you, only I ain't and Massa Oll will kill me.' He drops the hanes and we run and crawled through the fence and ran away.

"I hated to go, 'cause things was so bad, and flour sold for \$25.00 a barrel, and pickled pork for \$15.00 a barrel. You couldn't buy nothin' lessen with gold. I had plenty of 'federate money, only it wouldn't buy nothin'.

"But today I is a old man and my hands ain't stained with no blood. I is allus been glad I didn't kill that man.

"Mules run to a ter'ble price then. A right puny pair of mules sold for \$500.00. But the Yankees give me a mule and I farmed a year for a white man and watched a herd of mules, too. I stayed with them mules till four o'clock even Sundays. So many scoundrels was goin' 'bout, stealin' mules. [Pg 210]

"That year I was boun' out by 'greement with the white man, and I made \$360.00. The bureau come by that year lookin' at nigger's contracts, to see they didn't git skunt out their rightful wages. Missie Adeline and Massa Oll didn't stay mad at me and every Sunday they come by to see me, and brung me li'l del'cate things to eat.

"The Carters said a hunerd times they regretted they never larned me to read or write, and they said my daddy done put up \$500.00 for me to go to the New Allison school for cullud folks. Miss Benson, a Yankee, was the teacher. I was twenty-nine years old and jus' startin' in the blueback speller. I went to

school a while, but one mornin' at ten o'clock my poor old mammy come by and called me out. She told me she got put out, 'cause she too old to work in the fiel'. I told her not to worry, that I'm the family man now, and she didn't never need to git any more three-quarter hand wages no more.

"So I left school and turnt my hand to anything I could find for years. I never had no trouble findin' work, 'cause all the white folks knowed Cato was a good nigger. I lef' my mammy with some fine white folks and she raised a whole family of chillen for them. Their name was Bryan and they lived on a li'l bayou. Them young'uns was crazy 'bout mammy and they'd send me word not to worry about her, 'cause she'd have the bes' of care and when she died they'd tend to her buryin'.

"Finally I come to Texas, 'cause I thought there was money for the takin' out here. I got a job splittin' rails for two years and from then on I farmed, mostly. I married a woman and lived with her forty-seven years, rain or shine. We had thirteen chillen and eight of them is livin' today. [Pg 211]

"Endurin' the big war I got worried 'bout my li'l black mammy and I wanted to go back home and see her and the old places. I went, and she was shriveled up to not much of anything. That's the last time I saw her. But for forty-four years I didn't forget to send her things I thought she'd want. I saw Massa Oll and he done married after I left and raised a family of chillen. I saw Missie Adeline and she was a old woman. We went out and looked at the tombstones and the rock markers in the graveyard on the old place, and some of them done near melted away. I looked good at lots of things, 'cause I knowed I wouldn't be that way 'gain. So many had gone on since I'd been there befo'.

"After my first wife died I married 'gain and my wife is a good woman but she's old and done lost her voice, and has to be in Terrell most the time. But I git 'long all right, 'cept my hands cramps some.

"You goin' take my picture? I lived through plenty and I lived a long time, but this is the first time I ever had my picture took. If I'd knowed you wanted to do that, I'd have tidied up and put on my best. [