

ELI COLEMAN, 91, was born a slave of George Brady, in Kentucky. Eli's memory is poor and his story is somewhat sketchy. He now lives in Madisonville, Texas.

"I has a old bill of sale, and it shows I's born in 1846 and my massa am George Brady. I know my pappy's name was same as mine, and mammy was Ella, and I had one brother named Sam, and my sisters was Sadie and Rosa and Viola. They's all dead now.

"Pappy was owned by Massa Coleman, what was brother to Massa Brady. Pappy could only see mammy once a week when he's courtin' for her. I heard pappy tell 'bout his pappy, over in Africy, and he had near a hundred wives and over three hundred chillen.

"Pappy never did work. All he ever did was trade. He'd make one thing and 'nother and trade it for something to eat. He could get lots of fruit and game out of the woods them days, and there was lots of fish.

"Our log house was built of logs, trimmed, and had six rooms. It was long, like a cowbarn or chicken house, and my room was third. We had one door to each room, covered over with hides. We dug out one corner for the bed and fenced it up and gathered straw and moss and tore-up corn shucks, and put in the corner to sleep on. What I mean, it was a warm bed.

"We did all kinds of work, choppin' cotton and split rails and cut rock, and work in the tobacco field. We'd cut that tobacco and hang it in the shed to dry. It had to be hanged by the stubble end.

"We had plenty to eat, sech as corn pones. The corn was grated by hand and cooked in ashes, and no salt or soda or fancy things like they put in bread now.[Pg 237]

"There was possum and rabbit and we cooked them different to now. A great big, old pot hung over the old rock fireplace. Food cooked that way still eats good. Massa Brady allus give us lots out of the garden. He fed us reg'lar on good, 'stantial food, jus' like you'd tend to you hoss, if you had a real good one.

"Massa Brady, he was one these jolly fellows and a real good man, allus good to his black folks. Missy, she was plumb angel. They lived in a old stone house with four big rooms. It was the best house in the whole county and lots of shade trees by it.

"We had 'bout a hundred acres in our plantation and started to the field 'fore daylight and worked long as we could see, and fed ane stock and got to bed 'bout nine o'clock. Massa whopped a slave if he got stubborn or lazy. He whopped one so hard that slave said he'd kill him. So Massa done put a chain round his legs, so he jus' hardly walk, and he has to work in the field that way. At night he put 'nother chain round his neck and fastened it to a tree. After three weeks massa turnt him loose and that the proudest' nigger in the world, and the hardes' workin' nigger massa had after that.

"On Saturday night we could git a pass or have a party on our own place. Through the week we'd fall into our quarters and them patterrollers come walk all over us, and we'd be plumb still, but after they done gone some niggers gits up and out.

"On Christmas Day massa make a great big egnog and let us have all we wants with a big dinner. He kilt a yearlin' and made plenty barbecue for us.[Pg 238]

"Massa was a colonel in the war and took me along to care for his hoss and gun. Them guns, you couldn't hear nothin' for them poppin'. Us niggers had to go all over and pick up them what got kilt. Them what was hurt we carried back. Them what was too bad hurt we had to carry to the burying place and the white man'd finish killin' them, so we could roll them in the hole.

"When massa say we're free, we all 'gun to take on. We didn't have no place to go and asked massa could we stay, but he say no. But he did let some stay and furnished teams and something to eat and work on the halves. I stayed and was sharecropper, and that was when slavery start, for when we got our cop made it done take every bit of it to pay our debts and we had nothing left to buy winter clothes or pay doctor bills.

"'Bout a year after the war I marries Nora Brady, jus' a home weddin'. I asks her to come live with me as my wife and she 'greed and she jus' moved her clothes to my room and we lived together a long time. One mornin' Nora jus' died, and there warn't no chillen, so I sets out for Texas. I done hear the railroad is buildin' in Texas and they hires lots of niggers. I gits a hoss from massa and rolls up a few clothes and gits my gun.

"I never got very far 'fore the Indians takes my hoss away from me. It was 'bout fifty mile to a train and I didn't have no money, but I found a white man what wants wood cut and I works near a month for him and gits \$2.00. I gits on a train and comes a hundred mile from where that railroad was goin' 'cross the country, and I has to walk near all that hundred miles. Once and now a white man comin' or goin' lets me ride. But I got there and the job pays me sixty cents a day. That was lots of money them days. Near as I 'member, it[Pg 239] was 1867 or 1868 when I comes to Texas.

"Then I marries Agnes Frazer, and we has a big weddin' and a preacher and a big supper for two or three weeks. Her pappy kilt game and we et barbecue all the time. We had eleven chillen, one a year for a long time, five boys and six gals. One made a school teacher and I ain't seen her nearly forty-five years, 'cause she done took a notion to go north and they won't let her back in Texas 'cause she married a white man in New York. I don't like that. She don't have no sense or she wouldn't done that, no, sir.

"Since the nigger been free it been Hell on the poor old nigger. He has advance some ways, but he's still a servant and will be, long as Gawd's curse still stay on the Negro race. We was turnt loose without nothin' and done been under the white man rule so long we couldn't hold no job but labor. I worked most two years on that railroad and the rest my life I farms. Now I gits a little pension from the gov'ment and them white folks am sho' good to give it to me, 'cause I ain't good for work no more.[Pg