

ELLEN BETTS, 118 N. Live Oak St., Houston, Texas, is 84. All of her people and their masters came from Virginia and settled in Louisiana about 1853. Her grandparents belonged to the Green family and her parents, Charity and William Green, belonged to Tolas Parsons. Ellen lives with friends who support her. Her sole belonging is an old trunk and she carries the key on a string around her neck.

"I got borned on de Bayou Teche, clost to Opelousas. Dat in St. Mary's Parish, in Louisiana, and I belonged to Tolas Parsons, what had 'bout 500 slaves, countin' de big ones and de little ones, and he had God know what else. When my eyes jes' barely fresh open, Marse Tolas die and will de hull lot of us to he brother, William Tolas. And I tells you dat Marse William am de greates' man what ever walk dis earth. Dat's de truth. I can't lie on him when de pore man's in he grave.

"When a whuppin' got to be done, old Marse do it heself. He don't 'low no overseer to throw he gals down and pull up dere dress and whup on dere bottoms like I hear tell some of 'em do. Was he still livin' I 'spect one part of he hands be with him today. I knows I would.

"When us niggers go down de road folks say, 'Dem's Parson's niggers. Don't hit one dem niggers for God's sake, or Parsons sho' eat your jacket up.'

"Aunt Rachel what cook in de big house for Miss Cornelia had four young'uns and dem chillen fat and slick as I ever seen. All de niggers have to stoop to Aunt Rachel jes' like dey curtsy to Missy. I mind de [Pg 77] time her husband, Uncle Jim, git mad and hit her over de head with de poker. A big knot raise up on Aunt Rachel's head and when Marse 'quire 'bout it, she say she done bump de head. She dassn't tell on Uncle Jim or Marse sho' beat him. Marse sho' proud dem black, slick chillen of Rachels. You couldn't find a yaller chile on he place. He sho' got no use for mixin' black and white.

"Marse William have de pretties' place up and down dat bayou, with de fine house and fine trees and sech. From where we live it's five mile to Centerville one way and five mile to Patterson t'other. Dey hauls de lumber from one place or t'other to make wood houses for de slaves. Sometime Marse buy de furniture and sometime de carpenter make it.

"Miss Sidney was Marse's first wife and he had six boys by her. Den he marry de widow Cornelius and she give him four boys. With ten chillen springin' up quick like dat and all de cullud chillen comin' 'long fast as pig litters, I don't do nothin' all my days, but nuss, nuss, nuss. I nuss so many chillen it done went and stunted my growth and dat's why I ain't nothin' but bones to dis day.

"When de cullud women has to cut cane all day till midnight come and after, I has to nuss de babies for dem and tend de white chillen, too. Some dem babies so fat and big I had to tote de feet while 'nother gal tote de head. I was sech a li'l one, 'bout seven or eight year old. De big folks leave some toddy for colic and cryin' and sech and I done drink de toddy and let de chillen have de milk. I don't know no

better. Lawsy me, it a wonder I ain't de bigges' drunker in dis here country, countin' all de toddy I done put in my young belly! [Pg 78]

"When late of night come, iffen dem babies wake up and bawl, I set up a screech and out-screech dem till dey shut dere mouth. De louder dey bawl de louder I bawl. Sometime when Marse hear de babies cry, he come down and say, 'Why de chillen cry like dat, Ellen?' I say, 'Marse, I git so hongry and tired I done drink de milk up.' When I talk sassy like dat, Marse jes' shake he finger at me, 'cause he knowed I's a good one and don't let no little mite starve.

"Nobody ever hit me a lick. Marse allus say bein' mean to de young'uns make dem mean when dey grows up and nobody gwineter buy a mean nigger. Marse don't even let de chillen go to de big cane patch. He plant little bitty patches close to de house and each li'l nigger have a patch and he work it till it got growed. Marse have de house girls make popcorn for 'em and candy.

"I nuss de sick folks too. Sometime I dose with Blue Mass pills and sometime Dr. Fawcett leave rhubarb and ipicac and calomel and castor oil and sech. Two year after de war, I git marry and git chillen of my own and den I turn into de wet nuss. I wet nuss de white chillen and black chillen, like dey all de same color. Sometime I have a white'un pullin' de one side and a black one de other.

"I wanted to git de papers for midwifin' but, law, I don't never have no time for larnin' in slave time. If Marse cotch a paper in you hand he sho' whop you. He don't 'low no bright niggers 'round, he sell 'em quick. He allus say, 'Book larnin' don't raise no good sugar cane.' De only larnin' he 'low was when dey larn de cullud chillen de Methodist catechism. De only writin' a nigger ever git, am when he git born or marry or die, den Marse put de name in de big book. [Pg 79]

Law, I 'lect de time Marse marry Miss Cornelia. He went on de mail boat and brung her from New Orleans. She de pretties' woman in de world almost, 'ceptin' she have de bigges' mouth I nearly ever seed. He brung her up to de house and all de niggers and boys and girls and cats and dogs and sech come and salute her. Dere she stand on de gallery, with a purty white dress on with red stripes runnin' up and down. Marse say to her, 'Honey, see all de black folks, dey 'longs to you now.' She wave to us and smile on us and nex' day she give her weddin' dress to my ma. Dat de fines' dress I ever seen. It was purple and green silk and all de nigger gals wear dat dress when dey git marry. My sister Sidney wore it and Sary and Mary.

"Miss Cornelia was de fines' woman in de world. Come Sunday mornin' she done put a bucket of dimes on de front gallery and stand dere and throw dimes to de nigger chillen jes' like feedin' chickens. I sho' right here to test'fy, 'cause I's right dere helpin' grab. Sometime she done put da washtub of buttermilk on de back gallery and us chillen bring us gourds and dip up dat good, old buttermilk till it all git drunk up. Sometime she fotch bread and butter to de back gallery and pass it out when it don't even come mealtime.

"Miss Cornelia set my ma to cuttin' patterns and sewin' right away. She give all de women a bolt or linsey to make clothes and ma cut de pattern. Us all have de fine drawers down to de ankle, buttoned with pretty white buttons on de bottom. Lawsy, ma sho' cut a mite of drawers, with sewin' for her eleven gals and four boys, too. In de summertime we all git a bolt of blue cloth and white tape for trimmin', to make Sunday dresses. For de field, all de niggers git homespun what you make jumpers out

of. I 'lect how Marse say, 'Don't go into de field dirty Monday mornin'. Scrub youself and put on de clean jumper.' [Pg 80]

"Marse sho' good to dem gals and bucks what cuttin' de cane. When dey git done makin' sugar, he give a drink call 'Peach 'n Honey' to de women folk and whiskey and brandy to de men. And of all de dancin' and caperin' you ever seen! My pa was fiddler and we'd cut de pigeon wing and cut de buck and every other kind of dance. Sometime pa git tired and say he ain't gwineter play no more and us gals git busy and pop him corn and make candy, so to 'tice him to play more.

"Marse sho' turn over in he grave did he know 'bout some dat 'lasses. Dem black boys don't care. I seen 'em pull rats out de sugar barrel and dey taste de sugar and say, 'Ain't nothin' wrong with dat sugar. It still sweet.' One day a pert one pull a dead scorpion out de syrup kettle and he jes' laugh and say, 'Marse don't want waste none dis syrup,' and he lick de syrup right off dat scorpion's body and legs.

"Lawsy me, I seen thousands and thousands sugar barrels and kettles of syrup in my day. Lawd knows how much cane old Marse have. To dem cuttin' de cane it don't seem so much, but to dem what work hour in, hour out, dem sugar cane fields sho' stretch from one end de earth to de other. Marse ship hogs and hogs of sugar down de bayou. I seen de river boats go down with big signs what say, 'Buy dis here 'lasses' on de side. And he raise a world of rice and 'taters and corn and peanuts, too.

"When de work slight, us black folks sho have de balls and dinners and sech. We git all day to barbecue meat down on de bayou and de white folks come down and eat long side de cullud.

"When a black gal marry, Marse marry her hisself in de big house. He marry 'em Saturday, so dey git Sunday off, too. One time de river boat come [Pg 81] bearin' de license for niggers to git marry with. Marse chase 'em off and say, 'Don't you come truckin' no no-count papers roun' my niggers. When I marry 'em, dey marry as good as if de Lawd God hisself marry 'em and it don't take no paper to bind de tie.' Marse don't stand no messin' round, neither. A gal have to be of age and ask her pa and ma and Marse and Missy, and if dey 'gree, dey go ahead and git marry. Marse have de marry book to put de name down.

"One time Marse take me 'long to help tote some chillen. He done write up to Virginny for to buy fresh hands. Dey a old man dat hobble 'long de road and de chillen start to throw rocks and de old man turn 'round to one prissy one and say, 'Go on, young'un, you'll be where dogs can't bark at you tomorrow. Nex' mornin' us cookin' in de kitchen and all a sudden dat li'l boy jes' crumple up dead on de floor. Law, we's scairt. Nobody ever bother dat old man no more, for he sho' lay de evil finger on you.

"Marse's brother, Conrad, what was a widdyman, come to live on de plantation and he had a li'l gal 'bout eight year old. One day she in de plum orchard playin' with a rattlesnake and Marse Conrad have de fit. De li'l gal won't let nobody hurt dat snake and she play with him. He won't bite her. She keeps him 'bout three year, and she'd rub and grease him. One day he got sick and dey give him some brandy, but he die and old Doc pickle him in de bottle of brandy. Dat gal git so full of grief dey take her to de infirm'ry in New Orleans and den one day she up and die.

"Dat snake ain't all what Doc Fawcett pickle. A slave woman give birth to a baby gal what have two faces with a strip of hair runnin' 'tween. Old Doc Fawcett pickle it in de jar of brandy. Old doc start to court Miss [Pg 82] Cornelia when Marse die, but she don't have none of him and he done went straight 'way and kill hisself.

"One day a li'l man come ridin' by on a li'l dun hoss so fast you couldn't see dat hoss tail a-switchin'. He whoopin' and hollerin'. Us niggers 'gun whoop and holler, too. Den first thing you know de Yanks and de Democrats 'gun to fight right dere. Dey a high old mountain front Marse's house and de Yanks 'gun pepper cannon ball down from de top dat hill. De war met right dere and dem Yanks and Democrats fit for twenty-four hours straight runnin'.

"When de bullets starts rainin' down, Marse call us and slip us way back into de woods, where it so black and deep. Next day, when de fight over, Marse come out with great big wagons piles full of mess-poke for us to eat. Dat what us call hog meat. Us sho' glad to 'scape from de Yankees.

"When us driv back to de plantation, sech a sight I never seen. Law, de things I can tell. Dem Yanks have kilt men and women. I seed babies pick up from de road with dere brains bust right out. One old man am drawin' water and a cannon ball shoots him right in de well. Dey draws him up with de fishin' line. Dey's a old sugar boat out on de bayou with blood and sugar runnin' long side de busted barrels. 'Lasses run in de bayou and blood run in de ditches. Marse have de great big orchard on de road and it wipe clean as de whistle. Bullets wipe up everythin' and bust dat sugar cane all to pieces. De house sot far back and 'scape de bullets, but, law, de time dey have!

"Dey's awful, awful times after dat. A old cotton dress cost five dollars and a pound of coffee cost five dollars and a pint cup flour cost six bits. [Pg 83] De Yanks 'round all de time and one day they comes right in de house where Miss Cornelia eatin' her dinner. Dey march 'round de table, jes' scoopin' up meat and 'taters and grabbin' cornpone right and left. Miss Cornelia don't say a word, jes' smile sweet as honey-cake. I reckon dem sojers might a took de silver and sech only she charm 'em by bein' so quiet and ladylike. First thing you know dem sojers curtsy to Missy and take dereself right out de door and don't come back.

"Den it seem like Marse have all de trouble in de world. He boy, Ned, die in de war and William, what name for he pa, drink bad all de time. And after de war dem Ku Kluxers what wear de false faces try to tinker with Marse's niggers. One day Uncle Dave start to town and a Kluxer ask him where am he pass. Dat Kluxer clout him but Uncle Dave outrun him in de cane. Marse grab de hoss and go 'rest dat man and Marse a jedge and he make dat man pay de fine for hittin' Uncle Dave. After dey hears of dat, dem old poky faces sho' scairt of old Marse and dey git out from Opelousas and stays out. When me and my husband, John, come to Texas de folks say dat Louisiana masters de meanes' in de world and I say right back at 'em dat dey is good and mean in every spot of de earth. What more, de Louisiana masters free dere niggers a year befo' any Texas nigger git free.

"When 'mancipation come, Marse git on de big block and say, 'You all is as free as I is, standin' right here. Does you want to stay with me, you can, and I'll pay you for de work.' All de niggers cheer and say dey want to stay, but Marse die not long after and all us niggers scatter.

"I sho' 'lect dat day old Marse die. He won't die till ma gits there. He keep sayin', "Where's Charity, tell Charity to come." Dey fotch [Pg 84] ma from de cane patch and she hold Marse's hand till he die. Us niggers went to de graveyard and us sho' cry over old Marse.

"Marse's brother, Goldham, carries all he hands back to de free country to turn 'em loose. He say de free country am de ones what's yellin' 'bout slave times, so dey could jes' take care of de niggers. Marse Goldham so big dat when he stand in de door you couldn't git by him, 'thout he stand sideways.

"Law, times ain't like dey was in slave days. All my ten chillen is dead and my old mangone, and now I reckon my time 'bout 'rive. All I got to do now am pray de Lawd to keep me straight, den when de great day come, I can march de road to glory. [Pg 85]