

HARRISON BECKETT, born a slave of I.D. Thomas of San Augustine, Texas, now lives in Beaumont. A great-grandson climbed into Harrison's lap during the interview, and his genial face lit up with a smile. He chuckled as he told of his own boyhood days, and appeared to enjoy reminiscing. At times he uses big words, some of his own coining.

"I's 'mong de culls now, like a hoss what am too old. I's purty small yit when 'mancipation comes and didn't have no hard work. Old Massa have me and de other li'l niggers keep de stock out de fields. Us li'l boogers have to run and keep de cows out de corn and de cotton patch. Dat ought to been 'nough to keep us out of debbilment.

"It come to pass my mammy work in de field. Her name Cynthia Thomas and daddy's name Isaac Thomas. But after freedom he goes back to Florida and find out he people and git he real name, and dat am Beckett. Dat 'bout ten years after 'mancipation he go back to he old home in Florida. Mammy's people was de Polkses, in Georgia. Mammy come in from de field at nine or ten o'clock at night and she be all wore out and too tired to cook lots of times. But she have to git some food for us. We all had a tin pan and git round de table and dat like a feast. But lots of times she's so tired she go to bed without eatin' nothin' herself.

"My sisters was Ellen and Sani and Georgy-Ann and Cindy and Sidi-Ann. Dey's all big 'nough to work in de field. My brudders name Matthew and Ed and Henry and Harry, what am me, and de oldes' one am General Thomas.

"Dey more'n a hundred head of black folks on Massa Thomas' two farms, and 'bout a hundred fifty acres in each farm. One de farms in iron ore, what [Pg 56] am red land, and de other in gray land, half sand and half black dirt.

"Us slaves live in pole houses and some in split log houses, with two rooms, one for to sleep in and one for to cook in. Day ain't no glass windows, jus' holes in de walls. Dere was jack beds to sleep on, made out of poles. Dey has four legs and ain't nail to de walls.

"Old Massa he care for he hands purty well, considerin' everything. In ginnin' time he 'low de women to pick up cotton from de ground and make mattresses and quilts. He make some cloth and buy some. A woman weave all de time and when de shickle jump out on de floor I picks it up. I used to could knit socks and I was jes' a li'l boy then, but I keep everything in 'membrance.

"Dey have some school and de chillen larnt readin' and writin', and manners and behaviour, too. Sometime dey git de broke-down white man to be teacher. But us didn't know much and it taken ten years or more after freedom to git de black men de qualification way he could handle things.

"One time us boys git some watermillions out in de bresh and hit 'em or drap 'em to break 'em open. Dere come massa and cotch us not workin', but eatin' he watermillions. He tell my daddy to whip me. But lots of times when us sposed to mind de calves, us am out eatin' watermillions in de bresh. Den de calves git out and massa see dem run and cotch us.

"Old massa was kind and good, though. He have partiality 'bout him, and wouldn't whip nobody without de cause. He whip with de long, keen switch and it didn't bruise de back, but sho' did sting. When he git real mad, he pull up you shirt and whip on de bare hide. One time he whippin' me and I [Pg 57] busts de button off my shirt what he holdin' on to, and runs away. I tries to outrun him, and dat tickle him. I sho' give de ground fits with my feets. But dem whippin's done me good. Dey break me up from thievin' and make de man of me.

"De way dey dress us li'l nigger boys den, dey give us a shirt what come way down 'tween de knees and ankles. When de weather am too cold, dey sometimes give us pants.

"De white preachers come round and preach. Dey have de tabernacle like a arbor and cullud folks come from all round to hear de Gospel 'spounded. Most every farm have de cullud man larnin' to preach. I used to 'long to de Methodists but now I 'longs to de Church of Christ.

"Massa Thomas, he de wholesale merchant and git kilt in New Orleans. A big box of freight goods fall on him, a box 'bout a yard square on de end and six yards long. He's carryin' back some good for to make exchangement and dey pullin' up de box with pulley and rope and it fall on him. De New Orleans folks say it am de accidentment, but de rest say de rope am cut. One of massa's old friends was Lawyer Brooks. He used to firmanize de word.

"Massa have two boys, Mr. Jimmie and Li'l Ide and dey both goes to de war. Li'l Ide, he go up in Arkansas and dey say when dat first cannon busts at Li'l Rock, he starts runnin' and never stops till he gits back home. I don't see how he could do dat, 'cause Li'l Rock am way far off, but dat what dey say. Den de men comes to git 'serters and dey gits Li'l Ide and takes him back. Mr. Jimmie, he didn't break de ranks. He stood he ground.

"Mammy and dem tell me when war am over de boss and he wife, dey calls [Pg 58] de slaves up in de bunch and tells 'em, 'You's free as I is. Keep on or quit, if you wants. You don't have to stay no further, you's free today.' Dat near June 19th, and all of 'em stays. Massa say, 'Go 'head and finish de crop and I feed you and pay you.' Dey all knowed when he kilt de hawgs us git plenty of meat. Dat young massa say all dat, 'cause old massa done git kilt.

"It's at Panola County where I first hears of de Klux. Dey call dem White Caps den. Dey move over in Panola County and ranges at de place call Big Creek Merval by McFaddin Creek. Dey's purty rough. De landowners tell dey niggers not to kill de White Caps but to scare dem 'way. At night dey come knock and if you don't open it dey pry it open and run you out in de field. Dey run de niggers from Merryville round Longview. Dey some good men in de Klux and some bad men. But us work hard and go home and dey ain't bother us none.

"Dey used to be a nigger round dere, call Bandy Joe. He git kilt at Nacogdoches fin'ly. He could turn into anything. De jedge of he parish was Massa Lee and he say dey ought let Bandy Joe live, so dey could larn he art. Dey done try cotch him de long time, and maybe be holdin' him and first thing they know he

gone and dey left holdin' he coat. Dey shoot at him and not hurt him. He tell he wife dey ain't no kind bullet can hurt him but de silver bullet.

"Dat Bandy Joe, he say he a spirit and a human both. Iffen he didn't want you to see him you jus' couldn't see him. Lots of folks liked him. De judge say he wish he could'a been brung to town, so he could 'zamine him 'bout he gifts. De judge knowed Bandy Joe could dis'pear jus' like nothin', and he like to hear he quotation how he git out he skin. I'd like to know dat myself. [Pg 59]

"I 'magine I seed ghosties two, three times. I used to range round at nighttime. I rides through a old slavery field and de folks tell me, 'Harry, you better be careful gwine 'cross dat old field. They's things dere what makes mules run 'way. One night it am late and my mule run 'way. I make my mind I go back and see what he run from and somethin' am by de fence like de bear stand up straight. It stand dere 'bout fifteen minutes while I draws my best 'pinion of it. I didn't get any nearer dan to see it. A man down de road tell me de place am hanted and he dunno how many wagons and mules git pull by dat thing at dat place.

"One time I's livin' 'nother place and it am 'twixt sundown and dusk. I had a li'l boy 'hind me and I seed a big sow with no head comin' over de fence. My ma, she allus say what I see might be 'magination and to turn my head and look 'gain and I does dat. But it still dere. Den I seed a hoss goin' down de road and he drag a chain, and cross de bridge and turn down de side road. But when I git to de side road I ain't seed no hoss or nothin'. I didn't say nothin' to de li'l boy 'hind me on de mule till I gits most home, den asks him did he see anythin'. He say no. I wouldn't tell him 'fore dat, 'cause I 'fraid he light out and outrun me and I didn't want to be by myself with dem things. When I gits home and tell everybody, dey say dat a man name McCoy, what was kilt dere and I seed he spirit.

"I's 'bout twenty-one when I marries Mandy Green. Us has twelve chillen, and a world of grandchillen. I travels all over Louisiana and Texas in my time, and come here three year ago. My son he work in de box fact'ry here, and he git a bodily injurement while he workin' and die, and I come here to de burial and I been here ever since. [Pg 60]