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Jack Bess



Jack Bess' House

JACK BESS was born near Goliad, Texas in 1854, a slave of Steve Bess who was a rancher. He worked with stock as a very young boy and this was his duty during and after the Civil War, as he remained with his boss for three years after emancipation. He then came to old Ben Ficklin four miles south of the present San Angelo, Texas, when it was the county seat of Tom Green County and before there was a San Angelo. He continued his work on ranches here and has never done any other kind of work.

For the past several years he has been very feeble and has made his home with a daughter in San Angelo, Texas.

Jack who was assisted out of bed and dressed by his grandson, hobbled in on his cane and said, "I was jes' a small boy workin' on de ranch when I hear talk 'bout conscription' [Pg 74] de men for de war what was agoin' to set de slaves free. We didn' know hardly what dey was a talkin' 'bout 'cause we knowed dat would be too good to be true. I jes' keeps on workin' wid my hosses and my cattle (dere wasn't no sheep den) jes' like dere wasn't no war, 'cause dat was all I ever knowed how to do.

"Our ole marster, he wasn't so very mean to us, course he whips us once and awhile but dat wasn't like de slave holders what had dem colored drivers. Dey sho' was rough on de slaves. I's been told lots 'bout de chains and de diffe'nt punishments but our treatment wasn't so bad. Our beds was pretty good when we uses dem. Lots of de time we jes' sleeps on de groun', 'specially in summer.

"Our log huts was comfortable and we had some kind of floors in all of dem. Some was plank and some was poles but dat was better den de dirt floors some cabins have.

"De eats we have was jes' good eats, lots of meats and vegetables and de like; 'possum and coon and beef and pork all cooked good. Our clothes was jes' home spun like all de others.

"We didn' have such a big ranch and not many slaves but we all gits along. We learns a little 'bout readin' and writin'.

"I don't 'member any camp meetin's 'til after de war. We had a few den and on Christmas times we jes' tears up de country. Lawdy! Lawd! Dat fiddlin' went on all night, and we dance awhile den lay down and sleeps, den gits up and dances some mo'e. We would have big cakes and everything [Pg 75] good to eat.

"When we gits sick dey jes' gives us some kind of tea, mostly made from weeds. Mos' of de time we gits well.

"When de news comes dat we was free our boss, he say, 'You free now.' Course we was glad but we didn' know nothin' to do but jes' stay on dere, and we did 'bout three years and de boss pays us a little by de month for our work.

"I's lef' dere den and comes to old Ben Ficklin to work on a ranch. Dat was before dere was any San Angelo, Texas. I's been here ever since, jes' a workin' from one ranch to another long as I was able. Now I's jes' stayin' 'round wid my chillun and dey takes good care of me." [Pg 76]
