

RICHARD CARRUTHERS, 100 year old ex-slave, was born in Memphis, Tennessee. Mr. Billy Coats bought him and his mother and brought them to Bastrop Co., Texas. He came to Houston 20 years ago and lives in a negro settlement known as Acres Home, about 8 miles northeast of Houston. It is a wooded section, with a clearing here and there for a Negro shack and plots of ground for growing "victuals and co'n."

"I wants to tell the Gospel truf. My mammy's name was Melia Carruthers and my papa's name was Max. My papa's papa's name was Carruthers, too. My brothers names was Charlie and Frank and Willie and John and Tom and Adam.

"When I was still little Mr. Billy Coats bought my mama and us and with about 500 of his slaves we set out to come to Texas. We goes to Bastrop County and starts to work. My old missy—her name was Missy Myra—was 99 year old and her head was bald as a egg and had wens on it as big as eggs, too.

"In them days the boss men had good houses but the niggers had log cabins and they burned down oftentimes. The chimney would cotch fire, 'cause it was made out of sticks and clay and moss. Many the time we have to git up at midnight and push the chimney 'way from the house to keep the house from burnin' up.

"The chairs was mostly chunks of cordwood put on end, or slabs, just rough, and the beds was built like scaffoldin'. We made a sort of mattress out of corn shucks or moss.

"My missy, she was good, but the overseer, he rough. His temper born of the debbil, himse'f. His name was Tom Hill, but us called him 'Debbil Hill.' [Pg 198]

Old Debbil Hill, he used to whup me and the other niggers if we don't jump quick enough when he holler and he stake us out like you stake out a hide and whup till we bleed. Many the time I set down and made a eight-plait whup, so he could whup from the heels to the back of the head 'til he figger he get the proper ret'ibution. Sometime he take salt and rub on the nigger so he smart and burn proper and suffer mis'ry. They was a caliboose right on the plantation, what look like a ice-house, and it was sho' bad to git locked up in it.

"Us got provisions 'lowanced to us every Saturday night. If you had two in the family, they 'lowanced you one-half gallon 'lasses and 12 to 15 pounds bacon and a peck of meal. We have to take the meal and parch it and make coffee out of it. We had our flours. One of them we called biscuit flour and we called it 'shorts.' We had rye and wheat and buck grain.

"If they didn't provision you 'nough, you jus' had to slip 'round and git a chicken. That easy 'nough, but grabbin' a pig a sho' 'nough problem. You have to cotch him by the snoot so he won't squeal, and clomp him tight while you knife him. That ain't stealin', is it? You has to keep right on workin' in the field, if you ain't 'lowanced 'nough, and no nigger like to work with his belly groanin'.

"When the white preacher come he preach and pick up his Bible and claim he gittin the text right out from the good Book and he preach: 'The Lord say, don't you niggers steal chickens from your missus. Don't you steal YOUR MARSTER'S hawgs.' That would be all he preach. [Pg 199]

"Us niggers used to have a prayin' ground down in the hollow and sometime we come out of the field, between 11 and 12 at night, scorchin' and burnin' up with nothin' to eat, and we wants to ask the good Lawd to have mercy. We puts grease in a snuff pan or bottle and make a lamp. We takes a pine torch, too, and goes down in the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see niggers git so full of the Lawd and so happy they draps unconscious.

"I kep' a eye on the niggers down in the cotton patch. Sometime they lazy 'round and if I see the overseer comin' from the big house I sings a song to warn 'em, so they not git whupped, and it go like this:

"Hold up, hold up, American Spirit!
Hold up, hold up, H-O-O-O-O-O-O!"

"We used to go huntin' and they was lots of game, bears and panthers and coons. We have bear dawgs, fox dawg and rabbit dawg that mostly jus' go by the name of houn' dawg. Then they have a dawg to run niggers.

"I never tried the conjure, but they would take hair and brass nails and thimbles and needles and mix them up in a conjure bag. But I knows one thing. They was a old gin between Wilbarger and Colorado and it was hanted with spirits of kilt niggers. Us used to hear that old mill hummin' when dark come and we slip up easy, but it stop, then when you slip away it start up.

"I 'member when the stars fell. We runs and prays, 'cause we thinks it jedgment day. It sure dumb old Debbil Hill, them stars was over his power.

"On Sundays we put shoes on our feet and they was brass toed. They was so hard and stiff they go 'tump, tump, tump,' when we walk. That's the only day we got 'cept Christmas and we jus' got somethin' [Pg 200] extry to eat. All them women sho' knowed how to cook! I often tell my wife how glad I was one mornin' when my missy give me a hot, butter biscuit. I goes down and shows it to all the other boys. We didn't git them hot, butter biscuits in them days.

"I used to dance the pigeon wing and swing my partners 'round. Was them womenfolks knock-kneed? You sho' couldn't tell, even when you swung 'em 'round, 'cause they dresses was so long.

"I's been all 'round the mountain and up on top of it in my day. Durin' slave time I been so cold I mos' turn white and they sot me 'fore the fire and poultice me with sliced turnips. Come a norther and it blow with snow and sleet and I didn't have 'nough clothes to keep me warm.

"When a nigger marry, he slick up his lowers and put on his brass-toed shoes, then the preacher marry him out of the Bible. My pappy have a pass to visit my mammy and if he don't have one, the paddle roller conk him on the head. My grandma and grandpa come here in a steamboat. The man come to Africa and say, 'Man and woman, does you want a job?' So they gits on the boat and then he has the 'vantage.

"When I was 21 and some more, I don't know jus' how old, I was a free man. That the day I shouted. We niggers scattered like partridges. I had a fiddle and I'd play for the white folks wherever I went, when they has the balls. I marries after 'while, but I don't know what year, 'cause we never done paid no 'tention to years. My first wife died after a long [Pg 201] time, I think 'bout 34 year and I married another and she died this very year. Jus' three months later I marries my housekeeper, named Luvena Dixon,

cause I allus lived a upright life and I knowed the Lawd wouldn't like it if I went on livin' in the same house with Luvena without we was married. She is 52 year old, and we is happy. [Pg 202]
