

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
The American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)
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SALENA TASWELL

Salena Taswell, 364 NW 8th St., Miami, Fla.

1. Where, and about when, were you born?

In Perry, Ga. in 1844.

2. If you were born on a plantation or farm, what sort of farming section was it in?

Ole Dr. Jameson's plantation near Perry, Ga. north of Macon.

3. How did you pass the time as a child? What sort of chores did you do and what did you play?

I worked around the table in my Massy's dining room. I didn't play. I sometimes pulled threads for mother. She was a fine seamstress for the plantation.

4. Was your master kind to you?

Yes; I was the pet.

5. How many slaves were there on the same plantation or farm?

He must have had about 400 slaves.

6. Do you remember what kind of cooking utensils your mother used?

We had copper kettles, crocks, and iron kettles. "I waited on de table when Lincum came dare. That day we had chicken hash and batter cakes and dried venison."

7. What were your main foods and how were they cooked?

We had everything that was good (I ate in my Massy's kitchen) Sweet potatoes biscuits, corn bread, pies and everything we eat now.

8. Do you remember making imitation or substitute coffee by grinding up corn or peanuts?

No, we always had the best of Java coffee. I used to grind it in the coffee mill for my Massy.

9. Do you remember ever having, when you were young, any other kind of bread besides corn bread?

Yes. Batter cakes, biscuits and white bread.

10. Do you remember evaporating sea water to get salt?

No. We did not live so far from Macon and the Ole Doctor he was rich and bought such things. That is how he come to be so rich. He didn't charge the poor folks when he doctored them, but they would be so glad that he made them well that they kep' a givin' him things, bed quilts, chickens, just ever' thing. Then he had such a big plantation about 200 or 300 acres, but I didn't live on the plantation. I worked in his home.

11. When you were a child, what sort of stove do you remember your mother having. Did they have a hanging pot in the fire place, and did they make their candles of their own tallow?

My mother did not cook,—she was a special seamstress servant. They had fireplaces on the plantation and they always used tallow candles at the doctor's place until after the 'mancipation, then the doctor was one of the first ones to buy coal oil lamps.

12. Did you use an open well or pump to get the water?

No, we went to the spring to get the water. We toted it in cedar buckets. The spring was boxed into a well shaped hole, deep enough to dip the water out of it. It was the best water. They had a town pump at Macon.

13. Do you remember when you first saw ice in regular form?

Yes. They had icicles in Georgia.

14. Did your family work in the rice fields or in the cotton fields on the farm, or what sort of work did they do?

My father was a blacksmith. He did all kinds of blacksmithing. He even made plows.

15. If they worked in the house or about the place, what sort of work did they do?

My mother was one of the best seamstresses; she sewed all day long with her fingers. She made the finest silk dresses and even made tailored suits.

16. Do you remember ever helping tan and cure hides and pig hides?

They did those things on the plantation. They cured goat skins and sheep skins, too. The sheep skins would dry so slowly that they would let the slaves lie on them at night to keep them warm and hasten the drying.

17. As a young person what sort of work did you do? If you helped your mother around the house or cut firewood or swept the yard, say so.

I cleaned and dusted and waited on the table, made beds and put everything in order, washed dishes, polished silverware and did the most trusty work.

18. When you were a child do you remember how people wove cloth, or spun thread, or picked out cotton seed, or weighed cotton, or what sort of bag was used on the cotton bales?

I did not need to spin but I used to play with the spinning wheels. They ginned the cotton on the plantation. They used a horse to pull the gin.

They weighed the cotton with a beam and weight. A good slave picked 200 lbs of cotton in a day. Nancy could pick 300 or 400 lbs in a day. She'd go out early in the day and run in ahead of the sun and no one would know she had been out. That's how she would get ahead of the rest.

19. Do you remember what sort of soap they used? How did they get the lye for making the soap?

They made soft soap boiled in a big kettle. They made the lye out of ashes packed in an old barrel that had a hole in the bottom. They would make a hollow in the top of the barrel and pour rain water in it. This would gradually soak through the ashes and seep out of the bottom of the barrel which they tipped up so that it would drain the lye out into a vessel. Then they would take the lye and boil it in the kettle with old grease

and meat rinds. The lye was very strong. They had to be careful not to get any of it on their hands or it would take the skin off. As they would stir the grease and lye it would foam and cook like a jelly and when it cooled we had soft soap. It would sure chase the dirt, but it was hard on the hands.

20. What did they use for dyeing thread and cloth, and how did they dye them?

They would dig indigo roots and cook the roots and branches for blue dye. For purple they mixed red and blue. They would pick the berries off the gallberry bushes for red. The robin's yellow and mixed yellow and red for orange; and yellow and blue for green.

21. Did your mother use big, wooden washtubs with cut-out holes on each side for the fingers?

Yes. We made cedar tubs on the plantation. And we had some men who made large wooden bowls out of juggles cut from logs of the tupla tree. They would run them through a machine and they would come out round and then they would smooth them down. They mixed bread in those big bowls.

22. Do you remember the way they made shoes by hand in the country?

Yes, all our shoes were made on the plantation.

23. Do you remember saving the chicken feathers and goose feathers always for your featherbeds?

Yes.

24. Do you remember when women wore hoops in their skirts, and when they stopped wearing them and wore narrow skirts?

Yes. The doctor's folks were so stylish that they would not let the servants wear hoops, but we could get the old ones that they threw away and have a big time playing with them and we would go around with them on when they were gone and couldn't see us.

25. Do you remember when you first saw your first windmill?

Never did see one.

26. Do you remember when you first saw bed springs instead of bed ropes?

Yes. When I was a slave, I slept in a gunny sack bunk with the sacks nailed against the wall on two sides, in a corner of the room and then there was a post at the corner of the bed and two poles nailed from the post to the walls and the gunny sacks were nailed to those poles. My bed was a two-story bed. There was another gunnysack bed above me with poles fastened to the same post. We tore old rags and made rag rugs for quilts to cover us with. I worked in the doctor's house in the daytime but I had to sleep in the shed at night. Then after I wasn't a slave no more, I never slept on anything else but a rope bed. When springs come I wondered what anyone wanted wid 'em. Rope beds was good enough.

27. When did you see the first buggy and what did it look like?

The doctor, he had the best of such things. He had a regular buggy and sometimes he driv two horses in hit. Uncle Albert, he wuz his driver. When the doctor wanted to put on great style, and go to the station to meet some rich company he had one of the fancy cabs with the driver sittin' up high in front, but when he went to see his patients, he'd take his feet to go around. He had two saddle packs with a strap that he would throw over his shoulder. He would have one pack hanging in front and the other hanging behind.

28. Do you remember your grandparents?

No, my mother's mother was taken from her and sold when she was a baby. So I never seed my grandmother and I don't know any more about my grandfather than a goose about a band box.

29. Do you remember the money called "shin-plasters?"

I've seen plenty. I guess my master had barrels of them.

30. What interesting historical events happened during your youth,—such as Sherman's Army passing through your section? Did you witness the happenings and what was the reaction of the other Negroes to them?

Sherman's army went through Perry but they did not do any damage there. They expected them to come and buried lots of food and valuable things, and when they came they took them to the smoke houses and told them to help themselves. They did not burn any houses there.

31. Did you know any Negroes who enlisted or joined the northern army?

Yes, plenty went with their boss, but ran off to Sherman's army when he came along. One woman's husband I knowed, Mr. Bethel, he stayed with his master and didn't run off with the Northern army. When he was given his freedom, his master give him nice house.

32. Did you know any Negroes who enlisted in the Southern Army?

About all I knew.

33. Did your master join the Confederacy? What do you remember of his return from the war? Or was he wounded or killed?

His two sons joined the army. James was killed, but Bud, he would never get through telling war stories when he came back.

34. Did you live in Savannah when Sherman and the Northern forces marched through the state, and do you remember the excitement in your town or around the plantation where you lived?

No.

35. Did your master's house get robbed or burned during the time of Sherman's march?

No.

36. What kind of uniforms did they wear during the civil war?

Blue and gray.

37. What sort of medicine was used in the days just after the war? Describe a Negro doctor of that period.

We never got sick. Sometimes they would give us oil with a drop or two of turpentine in a big spoonful. They put turpentine on cuts and sores.

38. What do you remember about Northern people or outside people moving into a community after the war?

Yes, Jake Enos, he was a colored teacher. He was sent down to teach the colored school. He taught around from Atlanta to Florida. He took yellow fever and died. My brother, he taught school, but I never went to school. I learned my ABC's from my massy's children. I aint never forgot 'em. I could say 'em now.

39. How did your family's life compare after Emancipation with it before?

I had it the same. I had it good with my massy, but the rest wuz paid some little wages. Our plantation was called a free place. Some of the slaves worked so well and made money for the massy and gained their freedom even befo' 'mancipashun. I heard one come to him and say I howe dat man \$10 an' he retched down in his pocket an' paid hit.

40. Do you know anything about political meetings and clubs formed after the war?

I heered about de Kuklux but I never did see none.

41. Do you know anything regarding the letters and stories from Negroes who migrated north after the war?

I hear talk 'bout some massys goin' arter dem an' bringin' back mor'n dey had in de fust place.

42. Were there any Negroes of your acquaintance who were skilled in any particular line of work, if so give details?

The Turners made furniture wid knobs an' bumps on just like that stand and bed. They made fancy chairs an' put cowhide seats stretch-across 'em.

43. What sort of school system was there for the instruction of the Negro? Were there any Negro teachers in your community?

Yes. My son, he went to Negro school three months a year. The son said that he studied Webster's Speller, Harvey's Reader, learned his ABC's and studied some in history, geography and arithmetic.

44. How old were you at the close of the civil war?

21 years.

45. Describe the type of early religious meeting, the preachers, etc.

I went to town to my massy's church. I sat 'long side on 'em and held the baby. My father, he held meetings on the plantation and prayer meetings just like they have now.

46. Do your friends believe in charms and conjure bags, and what has been their experience with magic and spells?

I guess some claim dey believe in sech things, but I don't know whether they do or not.

47. Did you ever use an ox to plow with? What sort of plow?

Yes, I see 'em plow wid hoxen. Dey used the kind of plows they made on the plantation. I didn't plow, but I used to have fun a goin' roun' in the old ox two-wheel wagon cart. I'd go down de hill in it; we'd get in the dump cart and holler an' have a big time.

48. How much did various foods and drinks and commodities cost just at the end of the war and afterwards?

I don't know what things cost.