

**Ruth Thompson, Interviewing
Graff, Editing
Ex-Slave Interview
Cincinnati
CHARLES H. ANDERSON
3122 Fredonia St.,
Cincinnati, Ohio**



"Life experience excels all reading. Every place you go, you learn something from every class of people. Books are just for a memory, to keep history and the like, but I don't have to go huntin' in libraries, I got one in my own head, for you can't forget what you learn from experience."

The old man speaking is a living example of his theory, and, judging from his bearing, his experience has given him a philosophical outlook which comprehends love, gentleness and wisdom. Charles H. Anderson, 3122 Fredonia Street, was born

December 23, 1845, in Richmond, Virginia, as a slave belonging to J.L. Woodson, grocer, "an exceedingly good owner—not cruel to anyone".

With his mother, father, and 15 brothers and sisters, he lived at the Woodson home in the city, some of the time in a cabin in the rear, but mostly in the "big house". Favored of all the slaves, he was trusted to go to the cash drawer for spending money, and permitted to help himself to candy and all he wanted to eat. With the help of the mistress, his mother made all his clothes, and he was "about as well dressed as anybody".

"I always associated with high-class folks, but I never went to church then, or to school a day in my life. My owner never sent me or my brothers, and then when free schools came in, education wasn't on my mind. I just didn't think about education. Now, I read a few words, and I can write my name. But experience is what counts most."

Tapping the porch floor with his cane for emphasis, the old fellow's softly slurred words fell rapidly but clearly. Sometimes his tongue got twisted, and he had to repeat. Often he had to switch his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other; for, as he explained, "there ain't many tooth-es left in there". Mr. Anderson is rather slight of build, and his features are fine, his bald head shiny, and his eyes bright and eager. Though he says he "ain't much good anymore", he seems half a century old instead of "92 next December, if I can make it".

"I have been having some sick spells lately, snapped three or four ribs out of place several years ago, and was in bed for six weeks after my wife died ten year ago. But my step-daughter here nursed me through it. Doctor says he doesn't see how I keep on living. But they take good care of me, my sons and step-daughter. They live here with me, and we're comfortable."

And comfortable, neat, and clean they are in the trimmest little frame house on the street, painted grey with green trim, having a square of green lawn in front and another in back enclosed with a rail fence, gay flowers in the corners, rubber plants in pots on the porch, and grape arbor down one side of the back yard. Inside, rust-colored mohair overstuffed chairs and davenport look prim with white, crocheted doilies, a big clock with weights stands in one corner on an ornately carved table, and several enlarged framed photographs hang on the wall. The other two rooms are the combined kitchen and dining room, and a bedroom with a heatrola in it "to warm an old man's bones". Additional bedrooms are upstairs.

Pointing to one of the pictures, he remarked, "That was me at 37. Had it taken for my boss where I worked. It was a post card, and then I had it enlarged for myself. That was just before I married Helen".

Helen Comer, nee Cruitt, was a widow with four youngsters when he met her 54 years ago. One year later they were married and had two boys, Charles, now 47, employed as an auto repair man, and Samuel, 43, a sorter in the Post Office, both bachelors.

"Yes sir, I sure was healthy-looking them days. Always was strong, never took a dollars worth of medicine in fifty year or more till I had these last sick spells. But we had good living in slave days. In one sense we were better off then than after the war, 'cause we had plenty to eat. Nowadays, everybody has to fen' for himself, and they'd kill a man for a dime.

"Whip the slaves? Oh, my God! Don't mention it, don't mention it! Lots of 'em in Old Dominion got beatings for punishment. They didn't have no jail for slaves, but the owners used a whip and lash on 'em. I've seen 'am on a chain gang, too, up at the penitentiary. But I never got a whipping in my life. Used to help around the grocery, and deliver groceries. Used to go up to Jeff Davis' house every day. He was a fine man. Always was good to me. But then I never quarreled with anybody, always minded my own business. And I never was scared of nothing. Most folks was superstitious, but I never believed in ghosts nor anything I didn't see. Never wore a charm. Never took much stock in that kind of business. The old people used to carry potatoes to keep off rheumatism. Yes, sir. They had to steal an Irish potato, and carry it till it was hard as a rock; then they'd say they never get rheumatism.

"Saturday was our busy day at the store; but after work, I used to go to the drag downs. Some people say 'hoe down' or 'dig down', I guess 'cause they'd dig right into it, and give it all they got. I was a great hand at fiddlin'. Got one in there now that is 107-year old, but I haven't played for years. Since I broke my shoulder bone, I can't handle the bow. But I used to play at all the drag downs. Anything I heard played once, I could play. Used to play two steps, one of 'em called 'Devil's Dream', and three or four good German waltzes, and 'Turkey in the Straw'—but we didn't call it that then. It was the same piece, but I forget what we called it. They don't play the same nowadays. Playin' now is just a time-consumer, that's all; they got it all tore to pieces, no top or bottom to it.

"We used to play games, too. Ring games at play parties—'Ring Around the Rosie', 'Chase the Squirrel', and 'Holly Golly'. Never hear of Holly Golly? Well, they'd pass around the peanuts, and whoever'd get three nuts in one shell had to give that one to the one who had started the game. Then they'd pass 'em around again. Just a peanut-eating contest, sorta.

"Abraham Lincoln? Well, they's people born in this world for every occupation and Lincoln was a natural born man for the job he completed. Just check it back to Pharoah' time: There was Moses born to deliver the children of Israel. And John Brown, he was born for a purpose. But they said he was cruel all the way th'ough, and they hung him in February, 1859. That created a great sensation. And he said, 'Go ahead. Do your work. I done mine'. Then they whipped around till they got the war started. And that was the start of the Civil War.

"I enlisted April 10, 1865, and was sent to San Diego, Texas; but I never was in a battle. And they was only one time when I felt anyways skittish. That was when I was a new recruit on picket duty. And it was pitch dark, and I heard something comin' th'ough the bushes, and I thought, 'Let 'em come, whoever it is'. And I got my bayonet all ready, and waited. I'se gittin' sorta nervous, and purty soon the bushes opened, and what you think come out? A great big ole hog!

"In June '65, I got a cold one night, and contracted this throat trouble I get—never did get rid of it. Still carry it from the war. Got my first pension on that—\$6 a month. Ain't many of us left to get pensions now. They's only 11 veterans left in Cincinnati.

"They used to be the Ku Klux Klan organization. That was the pat-rollers, then they called them the Night Riders, and at one time the Regulators. The 'Ole Dragon', his name was Simons, he had control of it, and that continued on for 50 year till after the war when Garfield was president. Then it sprung up again, now the King Bee is in prison.

"Well, after the war I was free. But it didn't make much difference to me; I just had to work for myself instead of somebody else. And I just rambled around. Sort of a floater. But I always worked, and I always eat regular, and had regular rest. Work never hurt nobody. I lived so many places, Cleveland, and ever'place, but I made it here longer than anyplace—53 year. I worked on the railroad, bossin'. Always had men under me. When the Chesapeake and Ohio put th'ough that extension to White Sulphur, we cut tracks th'ough a tunnel 7 mile long. And I handled men in '83 when they put the C & O th'ough here. But since I was 71, I been doin' handy work—just general handy man. Used to do a lot of carving, too, till I broke my shoulder bone. Carved that ol' pipe of mine 25 year ago out of an ol' umbrella handle, and carved this monkey watch charm. But the last three year I ain't done much of anything.

"Go to church sometimes, over here to the Corinthian Baptis' Church of Walnut Hills. But church don't do much good nowadays. They got too much education for church. This new-fangled education is just a bunch of ignoramacy. Everybody's just looking for a string to pull to get something—not to help others. About one-third goes to see what everbody else is wearing, and who's got the nicest clothes. And they sit back,

and they say, 'What she think she look like with that thing on her haid?'. The other two-thirds? Why, they just go for nonsense, I guess. Those who go for religion are scarce as chicken teeth. Yes sir, they go more for sight-seein' than soul-savin'.

"They's so much gingerbread work goin' on now. Our most prominent people come from the eastern part of the United States. All wise people come from the East, just as the wise men did when the Star of Bethlehem appeared when Christ was born. And the farther east you go, the more common knowledge a person's got. That ain't no Dream Boat. Nowadays, people are gettin' crazier everyday. We got too much liberty; it's all 'little you, and big me'. Everybody's got a right to his own opinion, and the old fashioned way was good enough for my father, and it's good enough for me.

"If your back trail is clean, you don't need to worry about the future. Your future life is your past conduct. It's a trailer behind you. And I ain't quite dead yet, efn I do smell bad!"