WPA Slave Narratives
Florida
Events: Things Seen and Heard Tell Of
John Sepich, ed.

Josephine Anderson FL-1

"My weddin dress was blue--blue for true. I thought it was de prettiest dress I ever see. We was married in de court-house, an dat be a mighty happy day for me. Mos folks dem days got married by layin a broom on de floor an jumpin over it. Dat seals de marriage, an at de same time brings em good luck.

"Ya see brooms keeps hants away. When mean folks dies, de old debbil sometimes doan want em down dere in da bad place, so he makes witches out of em, an sends em back. One thing bout witches, dey gotta count everthing fore dey can git acrosst it. You put a broom acrosst your door at night an old witches gotta count ever straw in dat broom fore she can come in.

Samuel Simeon Andrews FL-2

"Parson" describes himself as being very frisky as a boy and states that he did but very little work and got but very few whippings. Twice he ran away to escape being whipped and hid in asparagus beds in Sparta, Georgia until nightfall; when he returned the master would not whip him because he was apprehensive that he might run away again and be stolen by poorer whites and thus cause trouble. The richer whites, he relates, were afraid of the poorer whites; if the latter were made angry they would round up the owners' sheep and turn them loose into their cotton fields and the sheep would eat the cotton, row by row.

He compares the relationship between the rich and poor whites during slavery with that of the white and Negro people of today.

Titus Bynes FL-9

Bynes was quick to learn. He could tell the time of day and could distinguish one newspaper from another. He recalled an incident which happened when he was about eight years of age which led him to conceal his precociousness. One day while writing on the ground, he heard his mistress' little daughter tell her mother that he was writing about water. Mistress Flowden called him and told him that if he were caught writing again his right arm would be cut off. From then on his precociousness vanished.

Taylor Gilbert FL-11

It was the custom of slaves who wished to go from one plantation to another to carry passes in case they were stopped as suspected runaways. Frequently slaves would visit without benefit of passes, and as result they suffered severe torturing. Often the sons of the slaves' owners would go "nigger hunting" and nothing--not

even murder was too horrible for them to do to slaves caught without passes. They justified their fiendish acts by saying the "nigger tried to run away when told to stop."

Florida Clayton FL-13

Florida, in a retrogressive mood, can recall the "nigger hunters" and "nigger stealers" of her childhood days. Mr. Nimrod and Mr. Shehee, both white, specialized in catching runaway slaves with their trained bloodhounds. Her parents always warned her and her brothers and sisters to go in someone's yard whenever they saw these men with their dogs lest the ferocious animals tear them to pieces. In regards to the "nigger stealers," Florida tells of a covered wagon which used to come to Tallahassee at regular intervals and camp in some secluded spot. The children, attracted by the old wagon, would be eager to go near it, but they were always told that "Dry Head and Bloody Bones," a ghost who didn't like children, was in that wagon. It was not until later years that Florida and the other children learned that the driver of the wagon was a "nigger stealer" who stole children and took them to Georgia to sell at the slave markets.

Charles Coates FL-14

The single garment was worn summer and winter alike and the change in the weather did not cause an extra amount of clothes to be furnished for the slaves. They were required to move about so fast at work that the heat from the body was sufficient to keep them warm.

When the slaves wanted to hold church they had to get special permission from the master, and at that time a slave hut was used. A white Preacher was called in and he would preach to them not to steal, lie or run away and "be sure and git all dem weeds outen dat corn in de field and your master will think a heap of you." Charles does not remember anything else the preacher told them about God.

Charles relates an incident of a slave named Sambo who thought himself very smart and who courted the favor of the master. The neighboring slaves screamed so loudly while being whipped that Sambo told his master that he knew how to make a contraption which, if a slave was put into while being whipped would prevent him from making a noise. The device was made of two blocks of wood cut to fit the head and could be fastened around the neck tightly. When the head was put in, the upper and lower parts were clamped together around the neck so that the slave could not scream. The same effect as choking. The stomach of the victim was placed over a barrel which allowed freedom of movement. When the lash was administered and the slave wiggled, the barrel moved.

Now it so happened that Sambo was the first to be put into his own invention for a whipping. The overseer applied the lash rather heavily, and Sambo was compelled to wiggle his body to relieve his feelings. In wiggling the barrel under his stomach rolled a bit straining Sambo's neck and breaking it. After Sambo died from his neck being broken the master discontinued the use of the device, as he saw the loss of property in the death of slaves.

Irene Coates FL-15

Two incidents which she considers caused respect for slaves by their masters and finally the Emancipation by Abraham Lincoln she tells in this order.

The first event tells of a young, strong healthy Negro woman who knew her work and did it well. "She would grab up two bags of guana (fertilizer) and tote 'em at one time," said Irene, and was never found shirking her work. The overseer on the plantation, was very hard on the slaves and practiced striking them across the back with a whip when he wanted to spur them on to do more work.

Irene says, one day a crowd of women were hoeing in the field and the overseer rode along and struck one of the women across the back with the whip, and the one nearest her spoke and said that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he or she would die. The overseer heard the remark and the first opportunity he got, he rode by the woman and struck her with the whip and started to ride on. The woman was hoeing at the time, she whirled around, struck the overseer on his head with the hoe, knocking him from his horse, she then pounced upon him and chopped his head off. She went mad for a few seconds and proceeded to chop and mutilate his body; that done to her satisfaction, she then killed his horse. She then calmly went to tell the master of the murder, saying "I've done killed de overseer," the master replied--"Do you mean to say you've killed the overseer?" she answered yes, and that she had killed the horse also. Without hesitating, the master pointing to one of his small cabins on the plantation said--"You see that house over there?" she answered yes--at the same time looking--"Well" said he, "take all your belongings and move into that house and you are free from this day and if the mistress wants you to do anything for her, do it if you want to." Irene related with much warmth the effect that incident had upon the future treatment of the slaves.

The other incident occured in Virginia. It was upon an occasion when Mrs. Abraham Lincoln was visiting in Richmond. A woman slaveowner had one of her slaves whipped in the presence of Mrs. Lincoln. It was easily noticed that the woman was an expectant mother. Mrs. Lincoln was horrified at the situation and expressed herself as being so, saying that she was going to tell the President as soon as she returned to the White House. Whether this incident had any bearing upon Mr. Lincoln's actions or not, those slaves who were present and Irene says that they all believed it to be the beginning of the President's activities to end slavery.

The slaves were given fat meat and bread made of husk of corn and wheat. This caused them to steal food and when caught they were severely whipped.

Neil Coker FL-16

Several amusing incidents are related by the ex-slave of the events of this period. Dozens of the Negro soldiers, he says, discarded their uniforms for the gaudier clothing that had belonged to their masters in former days, and could be identified as soldiers as they passed only with difficulty. Others would pause on their trip at some plantation, ascertain the name of the 'meanest' overseer on the place, then tie him backward on a horse and force him to accompany them.

Young Winston Davis FL-17

"A peculiar case was that of Old Jim who lived on another plantation was left to look out for the fires and do other chores around the house while 'marster' was at

war. A bad rumor spread, and do you know those mean devils, overseers of nearby plantations came out and got her dug a deep hole, and despite her cries, buried her up to her neck--nothing was left out but her head and hair. A crowd of young 'nigger boys' saw it all and I was one among the crowd that helped dig her out.

Sam and Louisa Everett FL-22

On this plantation were more than 100 slaves who were mated indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions. If their master thought that a certain man and woman might have strong, healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relation, even though they were married to other slaves. If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones "Big Jim" would make them consummate this relationship in his presence. He used the same procedure if he thought a certain couple was not producing children fast enough. He enjoyed these orgies very much and often entertained his friends in this manner; quite often he and his guests would engage in these debaucheries, choosing for themselves the prettiest of the young women. Sometimes they forced the unhappy husbands and lovers of their victims to look on.

Louisa and Sam were married in a very revolting manner. To quote the woman:

"Marse Jim called me and Sam ter him and ordered Sam to pull off his shirt--that was all the McClain niggers wore--and he said to me: 'Nor, do you think you can stand this big nigger?' He had that old bull whip flung acrost his shoulder, and Lawd, that man could hit so hard! So I jes said 'yassur, I guess so,' and tried to hide my face so I couldn't see Sam's nakedness, but he made me look at him anyhow."

"Well, he told us what we must git busy and do in his presence, and we had to do it. After that we were considered man and wife. Me and Sam was a healthy pair and had fine, big babies, so I never had another man forced on me, thank God. Sam was kind to me and I learnt to love him."

Louisa and Sam last heard the ringing of this bell in the fall of 1865. All the slaves gathered in front of the "Big House" to be told that they were free for the time being. They had heard whisperings of the War but did not understand the meaning of it all. Now "Big Jim" stood weeping on the piazza and cursing the fate that had been so cruel to him by robbing him of all his "niggers." He inquired if any wanted to remain until all the crops were harvested and when no one consented to do so, he flew into a rage; seizing his pistol, he began firing into the crowd of frightened Negroes. Some were _killed_ outright and others were maimed for life. Finally he was prevailed upon to stop. He then attempted to take his own life. A few frightened slaves promised to remain with him another year; this placated him. It was necessary for Union soldiers to make another visit to the plantation before "Big Jim" would allow his former slaves to depart.

Duncan Gaines FL-23

Duncan Gaines does not remember his grandparents but thinks they were both living on some nearby plantation. His father was the plantation blacksmith and Duncan liked to look on as plowshares, single trees, horse shoes, etc were turned out or sharpened. His mother was strong and healthy, so she toiled all day in the fields. Duncan always listened for his mother's return from the field, which was heraled by a song, no matter how tired she was. She was very fond of her children and did not

share the attitude of many slave mother who thought of their children as belonging solely to the masters

The Gaines were industrious and soon owned a prosperous farm. They seldom had any money but had plenty of foodstuffs and clothing and a fairly comfortable home. All of the children secured enough learning to enable them to read and write, which was regarded as very unusual in those days. Slaves had been taught that their brain was inferior to the whites who owned them and for this reason, many parents refused to send their children to school, thinking it a waste of time and that too much learning might cause some injury to the brain of their supposedly weak-minded children.

Clayborn Gantling FL-24

"My recollection is very bad and so much is forgotten, but I have seen slaves sold in droves like cows; they called 'em 'ruffigees,' and white men wuz drivin' 'em like hogs and cows for sale. Mothers and fathers were sold and parted from their chillun; they wuz sold to white people in diffunt states. I tell you chile, it was pitiful, but God did not let it last always. I have heard slaves morning and night pray for deliverance. Some of 'em would stand up in de fields or bend over cotton and corn and pray out loud for God to help 'em and in time you see, He did.

"They had whut you call "pattyrollers" who would catch you from home and 'wear you out' and send you back to your master. If a master had slaves he jes' could not rule (some of 'em wuz hard and jes' would not mind de boss), he would ask him if he wanted to go to another plantation and if he said he did, then, he would give him a pass and that pass would read: "Give this nigger hell." Of course whan the "pattyrollers" or other plantation boss would read the pass he would beat him nearly to death and send him back. Of course the nigger could not read and did not know what the pass said. You see, day did not 'low no nigger to have a book or piece of paper of any kind and you know dey wuz not go teach any of 'em to read.

Arnold Gragston FL-25

(Verbatim Interview with Arnold Gragston, 97-year-old ex-slave whose early life was spent helping slaves to freedom across the Ohio River, while he, himself, remained in bondage. As he puts it, he guesses he could be called a 'conductor' on the underground railway, "only we didn't call it that then. I don't know as we called it anything--we just knew there was a lot of slaves always a-wantin' to get free, and I had to help 'em.")

"Most of the slaves didn't know when they was born, but I did. You see, I was born on a Christmas mornin'--it was in 1840; I was a full grown man when I finally got my freedom."

"Before I got it, though, I helped a lot of others get theirs. Lawd only knows how many; might have been as much as two-three hundred. It was 'way more than a hundred, I know.

"But that all came after I was a young man--'grown' enough to know a pretty girl when I saw one, and to go chasing after her, too. I was born on a plantation that b'longed to Mr. Jack Tabb in Mason County, just across the river in Kentucky."

"Mr. Tabb was a pretty good man. He used to beat us, sure; but not nearly so much as others did, some of his own kin people, even. But he was kinda funny

sometimes; he used to have a special slave who didn't have nothin' to do but teach the rest of us--we had about ten on the plantation, and a lot on the other plantations near us--how to read and write and figger. Mr. Tabb liked us to know how to figger. But sometimes when he would send for us and we would be a long time comin', he would ask us where we had been. If we told him we had been learnin' to read, he would near beat the daylights out of us--after gettin' somebody to teach us; I think he did some of that so that the other owners wouldn't say he was spoilin' his slaves."

"He was funny about us marryin', too. He would let us go a-courtin' on the other plantations near anytime we liked, if we were good, and if we found somebody we wanted to marry, and she was on a plantation that b'longed to one of his kin folks or a friend, he would swap a slave so that the husband and wife could be together. Sometimes, when he couldn't do this, he would let a slave work all day on his plantation, and live with his wife at night on her plantation. Some of the other owners was always talking about his spoilin' us."

"He wasn't a Dimmacrat like the rest of 'em in the county; he belonged to the 'know-nothin' party' and he was a real leader in it. He used to always be makin' speeches, and sometimes his best friends wouldn't be speaking to him for days at a time."

"Mr. Tabb was always specially good to me. He used to let me go all about--I guess he had to; couldn't get too much work out of me even when he kept me right under his eyes. I learned fast, too, and I think he kinda liked that. He used to call Sandy Davis, the slave who taught me, 'the smartest Nigger in Kentucky.'

"It was 'cause he used to let me go around in the day and night so much that I came to be the one who carried the runnin' away slaves over the river. It was funny the way I started it too."

"I didn't have no idea of ever gettin' mixed up in any sort of business like that until one special night. I hadn't even thought of rowing across the river myself."

"But one night I had gone on another plantation 'courtin,' and the old woman whose house I went to told me she had a real pretty girl there who wanted to go across the river and would I take her? I was scared and backed out in a hurry. But then I saw the girl, and she was such a pretty little thing, brown-skinned and kinda rosy, and looking as scared as I was feelin', so it wasn't long before I was listenin' to the old woman tell me when to take her and where to leave her on the other side."

"I didn't have nerve enough to do it that night, though, and I told them to wait for me until tomorrow night. All the next day I kept seeing Mister Tabb laying a rawhide across my back, or shootin' me, and kept seeing that scared little brown girl back at the house, looking at me with her big eyes and asking me if I wouldn't just row her across to Ripley. Me and Mr. Tabb lost, and soon as dust settled that night, I was at the old lady's house."

"I don't know how I ever rowed the boat across the river the current was strong and I was trembling. I couldn't see a thing there in the dark, but I felt that girl's eyes. We didn't dare to whisper, so I couldn't tell her how sure I was that Mr. Tabb or some of the others owners would 'tear me up' when they found out what I had done. I just knew they would find out."

"I was worried, too, about where to put her out of the boat. I couldn't ride her across the river all night, and I didn't know a thing about the other side. I had heard a

lot about it from other slaves but I thought it was just about like Mason County, with slaves and masters, overseers and rawhides; and so, I just knew that if I pulled the boat up and went to asking people where to take her I would get a beating or get killed."

"I don't know whether it seemed like a long time or a short time, now--it's so long ago; I know it was a long time rowing there in the cold and worryin'. But it was short, too, 'cause as soon as I did get on the other side the big-eyed, brown-skin girl would be gone. Well, pretty soon I saw a tall light and I remembered what the old lady had told me about looking for that light and rowing to it. I did; and when I got up to it, two men reached down and grabbed her; I started tremblin' all over again, and prayin'. Then, one of the men took my arm and I just felt down inside of me that the Lord had got ready for me. 'You hungry, Boy?' is what he asked me, and if he hadn't been holdin' me I think I would have fell backward into the river."

"That was my first trip; it took me a long time to get over my scared feelin', but I finally did, and I soon found myself goin' back across the river, with two and three people, and sometimes a whole boatload. I got so I used to make three and four trips a month.

"What did my passengers look like? I can't tell you any more about it than you can, and you wasn't there. After that first girl--no, I never did see her again--I never saw my passengers. I would have to be the "black nights" of the moon when I would carry them, and I would meet 'em out in the open or in a house without a single light. The only way I knew who they were was to ask them; "What you say?" And they would answer, "Menare." I don't know what that word meant--it came from the Bible. I only know that that was the password I used, and all of them that I took over told it to me before I took them.

"I guess you wonder what I did with them after I got them over the river. Well, there in Ripley was a man named Mr. Rankins; I think the rest of his name was John. He had a regular station there on his place for escaping slaves. You see, Ohio was a free state and once they got over the river from Kentucky or Virginia. Mr. Rankins could strut them all around town, and nobody would bother 'em. The only reason we used to land quietly at night was so that whoever brought 'em could go back for more, and because we had to be careful that none of the owners had followed us. Every once in a while they would follow a boat and catch their slaves back. Sometimes they would shoot at whoever was trying to save the poor devils.

"Mr. Rankins had a regular 'station' for the slaves. He had a big lighthouse in his yard, about thirty feet high and he kept it burnin' all night. It always meant freedom for slave if he could get to this light.

"Sometimes Mr. Rankins would have twenty or thirty slaves that had run away on his place at the time. It must have cost him a whole lots to keep them and feed 'em, but I think some of his friends helped him.

"Those who wanted to stay around that part of Ohio could stay, but didn't many of 'em do it, because there was too much danger that you would be walking along free one night, feel a hand over your mouth, and be back across the river and in slavery again in the morning. And nobody in the world ever got a chance to know as much misery as a slave that had escaped and been caught.

"So a whole lot of 'em went on North to other parts of Ohio, or to New York, Chicago or Canada; Canada was popular then because all of the slaves thought it was the last gate before you got all the way _inside_ of heaven. I don't think there was much chance for a slave to make a living in Canada, but didn't many of 'em come back. They seem like they rather starve up there in the cold than to be back in slavery.

"The Army soon started taking a lot of 'em, too. They could enlist in the Union Army and get good wages, more food than they ever had, and have all the little gals wavin' at 'em when they passed. Them blue uniforms was a nice change, too.

"No, I never got anything from a single one of the people I carried over the river to freedom. I didn't want anything; after had made a few trips I got to like it, and even though I could have been free any night myself, I figgered I wasn't getting along so bad so I would stay on Mr. Tabb's place and help the others get free. I did it for four years.

"I don't know to this day how he never knew what I was doing; I used to take some awful chances, and he knew I must have been up to something; I wouldn't do much work in the day, would never be in my house at night, and when he would happen to visit the plantation where I had said I was goin' I wouldn't be there. Sometimes I think he did know and wanted me to get the slaves away that way so he wouldn't have to cause hard feelins' by freein 'em.

"I think Mr. Tabb used to talk a lot to Mr. John Fee; Mr. Fee was a man who lived in Kentucky, but Lord! how that man hated slavery! He used to always tell us (we never let our owners see us listenin' to him, though) that God didn't intend for some men to be free and some men be in slavery. He used to talk to the owners, too, when they would listen to him, but mostly they hated the sight of John Fee.

"In the night, though, he was a different man, for every slave who came through his place going across the river he had a good word, something to eat and some kind of rags, too, if it was cold. He always knew just what to tell you to do if anything went wrong, and sometimes I think he kept slaves there on his place 'till they could be rowed across the river. Helped us a lot.

"I almost ran the business in the ground after I had been carrying the slaves across for nearly four years. It was in 1863, and one night I carried across about twelve on the same night. Somebody must have seen us, because they set out after me as soon as I stepped out of the boat back on the Kentucky side; from that time on they were after me. Sometimes they would almost catch me; I had to run away from Mr. Tabb's plantation and live in the fields and in the woods. I didn't know what a bed was from one week to another. I would sleep in a cornfield tonight, up in the branches of a tree tomorrow night, and buried in a haypile the next night; the River, where I had carried so many across myself, was no good to me; it was watched too close.

"Finally, I saw that I could never do any more good in Mason County, so I decided to take my freedom, too. I had a wife by this time, and one night we quietly slipped across and headed for Mr. Rankin's bell and light. It looked like we had to go almost to China to get across that river: I could hear the bell and see the light on Mr. Rankin's place, but the harder I rowed, the farther away it got, and I knew if I didn't make it I'd get killed. But finally, I pulled up by the lighthouse, and went on to my freedom--just a few months before all of the slaves got their's. I didn't stay in Ripley,

though; I wasn't taking no chances. I went on to Detroit and still live there with most of 10 children and 31 grandchildren.

"The bigger ones don't care so much about hearin' it now, but the little ones never get tired of hearin' how their grandpa brought Emancipation to loads of slaves he could touch and feel, but never could see."

Charlotte Mitchell Martin FL-28

Charlotte Mitchell Martin, one of twenty children born to Shepherd and Lucinda Mitchell, eighty-two years ago, was a slave of Judge Wilkerson on a large plantation in Sixteen, Florida, a little town near Madison. Shepherd Mitchell was a wagoner who hauled whiskey from Newport News, Virginia for his owner. Wilkerson was very cruel and held them in constant fear of him. He would not permit them to hold religious meetings or any other kinds of meetings, but they frequently met in secret to conduct religious services. When they were caught, the "instigators"--known or suspected--were severely flogged. Charlotte recalls how her oldest brother was whipped to death for taking part in one of the religious ceremonies. This cruel act halted the secret religious services.

Wilkerson found it very profitable to raise and sell slaves. He selected the strongest and best male and female slaves and mated them exclusively for breeding. The huskiest babies were given the best of attention in order that they might grow into sturdy youths, for it was those who brought the highest prices at the slave markets. Sometimes the master himself had sexual relations with his female slaves, for the products of miscegenation were very remunerative. These offsprings were in demand as house servants.

Sarah Ross FL-29

Born in Benton County, Mississippi nearly eighty years ago, Sarah is the daughter of Harriet Elmore and William Donaldson, her white owner. Donaldson was a very cruel man and frequently beat Sarah's mother because she would not have sexual relations with the overseer, a colored man by the name of Randall. Sarah relates that the slaves did not marry, but were forced--in many cases against their will--to live together as man and wife. It was not until after slavery that they learned about the holy bonds of matrimony, and many of them actually married.

The slaves arose with the sun to begin their tasks in the fields and worked until dusk. They were beaten by the overseer if they dared to rest themselves. No kind of punishment was too cruel or severe to be inflicted upon these souls in bondage. Frequently the thighs of the male slaves were gashed with a saw and salt put in the wound as a means of punishment for some misdemeanor. The female slaves often had their hair cut off, especially those who had long beautiful hair. If a female slave was pregnant and had to be punished, she was whipped about the shoulders, not so much in pity as for the protection of the unborn child. Donaldson's wife committed suicide because of the cruelty not only to the slaves but to her as well.

Rebecca Hooks FL-30

There seemed to be a general belief among slave owners that mulattoes could not stand as much laborious work as pure blooded Negro slaves. This accounts probably for the fact that the majority of ex-slaves now alive are mulattoes.

Rebecca resembled very much a daughter of William Lowe. The girl was really her aunt, and very conscious of the resemblance. Both had brown eyes and long dark hair. They were about the same height and the clothes of the young mistress fitted Rebecca "like a glove." To offset this likeness, Rebecca's hair was always cut very short. Finally Rebecca rebelled at having her hair all cut off and blankly refused to submit to the treatment any longer. After this happening, the girls formed a dislike for each other, and Rebecca was guilty of doing every mean act of which she was capable to torment the white girl. Rebecca's mother aided and abetted her in this, often telling her things to do. Rebecca did not fear the form of punishment administered her and she had the cunning to keep "on the good side of the master" who had a fondness for her "because she was so much like the Lowes." The mistress' demand that she be sold or beaten was always turned aside with "Dear, you know the child can't help it; its that cursed Cherokee blood in her."

There were no disorders in that section as far as Rebecca remembers, but she thinks that the slaves were kept on the Lowe plantation a long time after they had been freed. It was only when rumors came that Union soldiers were patrolling the countryside for such offenders, that they were hastily told of their freedom. Their former master predicted that they would fare much worse as freemen, and so many of them were afraid to venture into the world for themselves, remaining in virtual slavery for many years afterward.

Rev. Squires Jackson FL-31

Very devoted to his mother, he would follow her into the cotton field as she picked or hoed cotton, urged by the thrashing of the overseer's lash. His master, a prominent political figure of that time was very kind to his slaves, but would not permit them to read and write. Relating an incident after having learned to read and write, one day as he was reading a newspaper, the master walked upon him unexpectingly and demanded to know what he was doing with a newspaper. He immediately turned the paper upside down and declared "Confederates done won the war." The master laughed and walked away without punishing him. It la interesting to know that slaves on this plantation were not allowed to sing when they were at work, but with all the vigilance of the overseers, nothing could stop those silent songs of labor and prayers for freedom.

He remembers the start of the Civil war with the laying of the Atlantic Cable by the "Great Eastern" being nineteen years of age at the time. Hearing threats of the War which was about to begin, he ran away with his brother to Lake City, many times hiding in trees and groves from the posse that was looking for him. At night he would cover up his face and body with spanish moss to sleep. One night he hid in a tree near a creek, over-slept himself, in the morning a group of white women fishing near the creek saw him and ran to tell the men, fortunately however he escaped.

After four days of wearied travelling being guided by the north star and the Indian instinct inherited from his Indian grandmother, he finally reached Lake City. Later reporting to General Scott, he was informed that he was to act as orderly until further ordered. On Saturday morning, February 20, 1861, General Scott called him to his tent and said "Squire; I have just had you appraised for $1000 and you are to report to Col. Guist in Alachua County for service immediately." That very night he ran away to Wellborn where the Federals were camping. There in a horse stable were

wounded colored soldiers stretched out on the filthy ground. The sight of these wounded men and the feeble medical attention given them by the Federals was so repulsive to him, that he decided that he didn't want to join the Federal Army. In the silent hours of the evening he stole away to Tallahassee, throughly convinced that War wasn't the place for him. While in the horse shed make-shift hospital, a white soldier asked one of the wounded colored soldiers to what regiment he belonged, the negro replied "54th Regiment, Massachusetts."

During the Civil War, cloth as well as all other commodities were very high. Slaves were required to weave the cloth. The women would delight in dancing as they marched to and fro in weaving the cloth by hand. This was one kind of work the slaves enjoyed doing. Even Cotton seeds was picked by hand, hulling the seeds out with the fingers, there was no way of ginning it by machine at that time. Rev. Jackson vividly recalls the croker-sacks being used around bales of the finer cotton, known as short cotton. During this same period he made all of the shoes he wore by hand from cow hides. The women slaves at that time wore grass shirts woven very closely with hoops around on the inside to keep from contacting the body.

<u>“Prophet” John Henry Kemp FL-32</u>

Oketibbeha County, Mississippi was the birthplace of the "Prophet". The first master he can remember was John Gay, owner of a plantation of some 2,700 acres and over 100 slaves and a heavy drinker. The "Prophet" calls Gay "father", and becomes very vague when asked if this title is a blood tie or a name of which he is generally known.

According to Kemp--Gay was one of the meanest plantation owners in the entire section, and frequently voiced his pride in being able to employ the cruelest overseers that could be found in all Mississippi. Among these were such men as G.T. Turner, Nels T. Thompson, Billy Hole, Andrew Winston and other men with statewide reputations for brutality. When all of the cruelties of one overseer had been felt by the slaves on the Gay plantation and another meaner man's reputation was heard of on the Gay plantation, the master would delight in telling his slaves that if they did not behave, he would send for this man. "Behaving"--the "Prophet" says, meant living on less food than one should have; mating only at his command and for purposes purely of breeding more and stronger slaves on his plantation for sale. In some cases with women--subjecting to his every demand if they would escape hanging by the wrists for half a day or being beaten with a cowhide whip.

"One day when an old woman was plowing in the field, an overseer came by and reprimanded her for being so slow--she gave him some back talk, he took out a long closely woven whip and lashed her severely. The woman became sore and took her hoe and chopped him right across his head, and child you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death."

So great was the fear in which Gay was held that when Kemp's mother, Arnette Young, complained to Mrs. Gay, that her husband was constantly seeking her for a mistress and threatening her with death if she did not submit, even Mrs. Gay had to advise the slaves to do as Gay demanded, saying--"My husband is a dirty man and will find some reason to kill you if you don't." "I can't do a thing with him." Since Arnette worked at the "big house" there was no alternative, and it was believed that out of the union with her master, Henry was born. A young slave by the name of

Broxton Kemp was given to the woman as husband at the time John Kemp was born, it is from this man that "Prophet" took his name.

The possible loss of his slaves upon the declaration of freedom on January 1, 1866 caused Gay considerable concern. His liquor-ridden mind was not long in finding a solution, however, he barred all visitors from his plantation and insisted that his overseers see to the carrying out of this detail. They did, with such efficiency that it was not until May 8, when the government finally learned of the condition and sent a marshall to the plantation, that freedom came to Gay's slaves. May 8, is still celebrated in this section of Mississippi, as the official emancipation day.

Randall Lee FL-34

On the Miller plantation there was a cotton gin. Doctor Miller owned the gin and it was operated by his slaves. He grew the cotton, picked it, ginned it and wove it right there. He also had a baler and made the bagging to bale it with. He only had to buy the iron bands that held the bales intact.

Everyone kept his plantation under fence and men who were old but strong and who had some knowledge of carpentry were sent out to keep the fence in repair and often to build new ones. The fences were not like those of today. They were built of horizontal rails about six or seven feet long, running zig-zag fashion. Instead of having straight line fences and posts at regular points they did not use posts at all. The bottom rails rested upon the ground and the zig-zag fashion in which they were laid gave strength to the fence. No nails were used to hold the rails in place. If stock was to be let in or out of the places the planks were unlocked so to speak, and the stock allowed to enter after which they were laid back as before.

Amanda McCray FL-36

Amanda was trained to be a house servant, learning to cook and knit from the blind mother who refused to let this handicap affect her usefulness. She liked best to sew the fine muslins and silks of her mistress, making beautiful hooped dresses that required eight and ten yards of cloth and sometimes as many as seven petticoats to enhance their fullness.

Hoops for these dresses were made of grape-vines that were shaped while green and cured in the sun before using. Beautiful imported laces were used to trim the petticoats and pantaloons of the wealthy.

Henry Maxwell FL-37

Just a tot when the Civil War gave him and his people freedom, Maxwell's memories of bondage-days are vivid through the experiences related by older Negroes. He relates the story of the plantation owner who trained his dogs to hunt escaped slaves. He had a Negro youth hide in a tree some distance away, and then he turned the pack loose to follow him. One day he released the bloodhounds too soon, and they soon overtook the boy and tore him to pieces. When the youth's mother heard of the atrocity, she burst into tears which were only silenced by the threats of her owner to set the dogs on her. Maxwell also relates tales of the terrible beatings that the slaves received for being caught with a book or for trying to run away.

Margaret Nickerson FL-42

"Now jes lis'en, I wanna tell you all I kin, but I wants to tell it right; wait now, I don' wanna make no mistakes and I don' wanna lie on nobody--I ain' mad now and I know taint no use to lie, I takin' my time. I done prayed an' got all de malice out o' my heart and I ain' gonna tell no lie fer um and I ain' gonna tell no lie on um.

"Dere wuz Uncle George Bull, he could read and write and, chile, de white folks didn't lak no nigger whut could read and write. Carr's wife Miss Jane useter teach us Sunday School but she did not 'low us to tech a book wid us hands. So dey useter jes take uncle George Bull and beat him fur nothin; dey would beat him and take him to de lake and put him on a log and shev him in de lake, but he always swimmed out. When dey didn' do dat dey would beat him tel de blood run outen him and den trow him in de ditch in de field and kivver him up wid dirt, head and years and den stick a stick up at his haid. I wuz a water toter and had stood and seen um do him dat way more'n once and I stood and looked at um tel dey went 'way to de other rows and den I grabbed de dirt ofen him and he'd bresh de dirt off and say 'tank yo', git his hoe and go on back to work. Dey beat him lak dat and he didn' do a thin' to git dat sort uf treatment."

"I had a sister name Lytie Holly who didn' stand back on non' uv em; when dey'd git behin' her, she'd git behin' dem; she wuz dat stubbo'n and when dey would beat her she wouldn' holler and jes take it and go on. I got some whuppin's wid strops but I wanter tell you why I am cripple today:

"I had to tote tater vines on my haid, me and Fred' rick and de han's would be a callin fur em all over de field but you know honey, de two uv us could' git to all uvum at once, so Joe Sanders would hurry us up by beatin' us with strops and sticks and run us all over de tater ridge; he cripple us both up and den we couldn' git to all uv em. At night my pa would try to fix me up cose I had to go back to work nex' day. I never walked straight frum dat day to dis and I have to set here in dis chair now, but I don' feel mad none now. I feels good and wants to go to he'ven--I ain' gonna tel no lie on white nor black cose taint no use."

"Some uv de slaves run away, lots uv um. Some would be cot and when dey ketched em dey put bells on em; fust dey would put a iron ban' 'round dey neck and anuder one 'round de waist and rivet um tegether down de back; de bell would hang on de ban' round de neck so dat it would ring when de slave walked and den dey wouldn' git 'way. Some uv dem wore dese bells three and four mont'n and when dey time wuz up dey would take em off 'em. Jake Overstreet, George Bull, John Green, Ruben Golder, Jim Bradley and a hos' uv others wore dem bells. Dis is whut I know, not whut somebody else say. I seen dis myself. En missus, when de big gun fiahed, de runerway slaves comed out de woods frum all directions. We wuz in de field when it fiahed, but I 'members dey wuz all very glad."

"When de big gun fiahed I was a young missy totin' cotton to de scales at de ginhouse; ef de ginhouse wuz close by, you had to tote de cotton to it, but ef it wuz fur 'way wagins ud come to de fields and weigh it up and take it to de ginhouse. I was still livin' near Lake Jackson and we went to Abram Bailey's place near Tallahassee. Carr turned us out without nuthin and Bailey gi'd us his hammoc' and we went dere fur a home. Fust we cut down saplin's fur we didn' had no house, and took de tops uv pines and put on de top; den we put dirt on top uv dese saplin's and

slep' under dem. When de rain would come, it would wash all de dirt right down in our face and we'd hafter buil' us a house all over ag'in. We didn' had no body to buil' a house fur us, cose pa was gone and ma jes had us gals and we cut de saplin's fer de man who would buil' de house fer us. We live on Bailey's place a long time and fin'lly buil' us a log cabin and den we went frum dis cabin to Gadsden County to a place name Concord and dere I stay tel I come here 'fore de fiah."

Dave Taylor FL-49

"One day my mammy gimme fifteen cents an' say 'Go down to de market and fetch me some fish. Ah' lissen--don't you let no grass grew unda yo' feet. Go on de run an' come back on de jump. Does you fall down, jes' keep on a-goin' some-how.'

"Wid dat she turn an' spit on de step. 'You see dat spit,' she say. 'Ef hit be dry w'en you git back, I gonna beat de meat offen yo' bones. Git goin', now.'

"Well, I stahted, an I she' wasn't losin' no time. 'Bout hahf way to de mahket, I meets a couple o' stewards f'm a U.S. navy cutter anchored off de navy yard.

"Hol' on, dar, boy,' 'dey sing out, 'wha you gwine so fas'? Grab dis here basket an' tote hit down to de dock.'

"I knowed I couldn't git back home 'fore dat spit dried, an' I be'n figgerin' how I could peacify my mammy so's to miss dat beatin'. I figger of I mek a quarter or hahf a dollar an' gin it to 'er, she mebbe forgit de paddlin'. So I take de bahsket an' foller 'em down to de water front. W'en we git dere dey was a sailor waitin' fer 'em wid a boat f'm de cutter. I set de bahsket in de boat an' stood waitin' fo' my money.

"You ain't finished yo' job yit,' dey say. 'Git yo'se'f in dat boat an' put dat stuff on be'd.'

"W'en I gits on deck a cullud boy 'bout my size say 'Wanna look about a bit?' So I foller him below an' fo' I knowed it, I feel de boat kinda shakin.' I run to a porthole an' look out. Dere was Key West too far away to swim back to.

"I ran up on deck, an' dare was de steward w'at gin me de bahsket to tote. 'W'at th'ell you doin' on bo'd dis ship,' he ahsk me.

"I tells 'im I ain't wantin' t' stay no mo'n he wants me, an' he takes me to de cap'm. 'I reckon he b'long to do navy now,' says de cap'm, 'so dey fix some papers an' I makes my mark on 'em.

"Ahftah a bit I find we bound fo' N'Orleans. 'Fore we got dere, a ship hove 'longside an' gin us a message to put about. I ahsk a li'l Irishman, named Jack, wha we gwine, an' he say, 'Outa de worl'.'

"Jesus wep't I say, 'my mammy think I be daid.' I couldn't read nor write, an' didn't know how to tell noboddy how to back a letter to my mammy, so I jes' let hit go, an' we staht back de way we come.

"I thought hit be'n stormin' all de time, but w'en we pahs thoo de Florida straits I see w'at a real storm's like. I didn't know, ontell we was hahf way down de South American coast, headin fer Cape Horn, dat we done pahs Key West, but I couldn't got off if I'd wanted to, 'cause I'd done jined de navy.

"Hit seem lak months 'fore we roun' de Cape an' head back north on de Pacific, an' hit seem lak a year 'fore we drop anchor in Hong Kong. Dey tell me de admiral was stationed dere an' de cap'n had to report to him. W'ile he was doin' dis, we gits shore leave.

"Wen Jack an' me gits on land, we couldn't onnerstan' a word, but we mek signs, an' a tough-lookin' Chink motion fer us to foller him. We go down a dark street an' turn thoo an alley, then into a big room lighted with colored paper lanterns. On de flo' we see some folks sleepin' wit some li'l footstools 'longside 'em, an some of 'em was smokin' long-stemmed pipes. I figger mebbe dey goin' put us to sleep an' knock us in de haid. I look back an' see de do' swingin' shut, slow like, so I run back an' stick my foot in hit and shove hit back open.

"Jack an me run back de same way we come. Pretty soon we find anotha sailor an' go wit him to a yaller man dat could speak English. He pin a li'l yaller flag on our shirts an' say hit de badge o' de Chinese gov'ment, an' we be safe, cause we b'long to de U.S. navy.

"We go out to see de sights, but nevah hear one mo' word o' English; so ahftah a time we go back to de ship an' stay ontell we put to sea again.

"Nex' we sails fo' Panama. W'en we ties up dere, Jack an' me goes ashore. Ah nevah befo' see such pretty high-yaller gals in all my life. Looks lak dey made o' marble, dey so puffick.

"Me an' Jack gits likkered up de fust thing, an' I done lose 'im. Dat worry me some, 'cause we need each otha. Wit' his haid an' my arms we mek one pretty good man. Dat lil Irishman was a fightin' fool. Weighed only 90 pounds, but strong an' wiry. Co'se he git licked mos' do time, but he allus ready fer anotha fight.

"Didn't lak for folks to call him Irish. 'He fodder was Irish and he mudder American,' he say; 'I be'n born aboard a Dutch brig in French waters. Now you tell me what flag I b'longs undah.'

"Wen we gits back to de ship, de boys tells me some English sailors beat Jack up in de sportin' house. Sumbuddy sing out 'Beat it--de marines comin'!, an' dey all run for de ship an leff Jack dere.

"I don't ahsk no mo' questions; jes' start back on a run to find my buddy. At dat time I weigh 180, an' was pretty husky fer my age. Bein' likkered plenty, I nevah thought 'bout gittin' beat up mahse'f.

"W'en I gits back, dere was a big Limey stahndin' wid his arms crost de do'. 'All dem in, stay in, an' all de outs stay out,' he say.

"Now I be'n trained to respec' white folks--what is white folks--ever sence I bawn; but w'en I think 'bout Jack in dere, hahf dead, mebbe, dat Limey don't look none too white to me. I take a runnin' staht an' but 'im in de belly wid my haid.

"De nex' do' was locked, an' I bus' hit down. Dere was Jack, 'bout hahf done f'. Blood all over de fla'. Ev'thing in de room busted up an' tipped over. I hauls 'im to a back do', but hit locked. I kick out a winder, heaves 'im onto my shoulder, an' runs back to de ship.

"Wen we comes up, dere was de cap'm standin' at de rail. His blue eyes look lak he love to kill us.

"'Fall in!' he says, an' we does. 'Go for'd,' he says, an' we goes.

"'Now' he says, wat's all dis about?'

"'Well,' says Jack, 'I didn't staht no fight. I jes' goes into a saloon, peaceful like, an' a damn Limey says, pointin' to a British flag on dere own ship, 'You see dat flag?'

"'Aye,' says Jack, 'an' still I don't see nuthin'.'

"'I be'n over de seven seas,' says de Limey, 'an' I see dat ol' flag mistress of all of 'em.'

"'You be'n around some,' says Jack, 'but I done a li'l sailin' mahse'f. Fust place I went was to France. Grass look lak hit need rain,' (So he tells dat Limey what he done fo' hit).

"'Nex' I goes to Germany,' he says; 'ground no good; need fer'lizer.' (So he tells 'im what he done on German soil).

"Atter dat I ships fo' England,' Jack tells de Limey, lookin' 'im straight in de eye. 'Fust thing I see w'en we land is dat British flag w'at you be'n braggin' so loud about.' (So he tells dat Limey w'at 'e used de flag fer).

"'Fore God, Cap'm,' says Jack, 'dat Limey lan' on me wid bofe feet 'fore I say anotha word. Nevah got in one lick. Fack is, Cap'm I ain't be'n doin' _no fightin'_ sence I done lef' dis here ship."

"'Go below,' says de cap'm 'an' clean yo'se'f up. Dis de lahst time you two gwine git shore leave on dis trip.' He try to look mad, but I see he wantin' to lahf.

"De nex' day," Uncle Dave finished, with a whimsical smile, "I see de bos'n readin' in de paper 'bout de war 'twixt America an' England. Hit was 'bout our li'l war--what _dey_ stahted an' _we_ finished."

The dusky old veteran of many battles unwrapped the small piece of black tobacco in the soiled handkerchief, decided on conservation, and slowly wrapped it up again.

"Nex' comes orders from de admiral in Hong Kong to sail fer Rio Janeiro. W'en we drop anchor, dere was some o' da meanes' lookin' wharf rats I evah see. Killers, dey was, willin' to knock anybody off, any time, fer a few cents. We lines up fer shore leave, but dey mek Jack an' me stay on de ship. Our rucus in Panama done got us in bad wid de cap'm. But Ah reckon hit was fer de bes'. One of our men come back wid a year cut off an' a busted nose. 'Nother one neveh come back at all.

"One mornin' I see 'em runnin' up a long pennant an' all de sailors lahf an dahnce about lak dey crazy. Hit was de signal 'omeward boun'. We weigh anchor and head fer N'York.

"'Well, Taylor,' da officer say, when he pay me off 'you gwine ship wid us again?'

"'I gotta go home,' I tells 'im; 'got a job t' finish up in Key West.'

"So dey gin me my discharge an' a Gov'ment pahs on de Mallory liner _Clyde_. W'en I gits to Key West, fust place I goes was to dat fish mahket w'ere my mammy done sent me three year an' six months befo'. I buy fifteen cents wuth o' fish an' go on home.

"W'en I git dere, dey was jes' settin' down to dinner. 'Wait,' Ah say, 'put on one mo' plate.'

"My mammy look at me lak she done see a ghost. Den she run an' 'gin beatin' on me.

"'Hol' on,' Ah tells 'er, 'you ain't forgot dat beatin' yit? I done got yo' fish,' an' I gin 'er de pahcel.

"'Mah boy, mah boy,' she say, 'Ah beatin' on yuh kase Ah so proud t' see yuh. Heah Ah done wear black fer yuh, an' gin yuh up fer daid; an' bress de Lawd, heah you is, lak come beck f'm de grave.'

"Ah retch down, in m' pocket an' pull a pahcel an' lay hit in her han'; three hunnert sebenty-eight dollahs, all de money I done made wid de Gov'ment sence Ah left, an' I gin hit all to 'er. She lak t' had a fit; an Ah she' was de head man o' dat fembly whilst Ah stayed.

Thomas Shack FL-51

The centennarian remembers his parents clearly; his mother was one Nancy and his father's name was Adam. His father, he says, used to spend hours after the candles were out telling him and his brothers about his capture and subsequent slavery.

Adam was a native of the West Coast of Africa, and when quite a young man was attracted one day to a large ship that had just come near his home. With many others he was attracted aboard by bright red handkerchiefs, shawls and other articles in the hands of the seamen. Shortly afterwards he was securely bound in the hold of the ship, to be later sold somewhere in America. Thomas does not know exactly where Adam landed, but knows that his father had been in Florida many years before his birth. "I guess that's why I can't stand red things now," he says; "my pa hated the sight of it."

His mother and the other women were given white cotton--he thinks it may have been duck--dresses "every now and then", he states, but none of the women really had to confine themselves to white, "cause they'd dye 'em as soon as they'd get 'em." For dye, he says they would boil wild indigo, poke berries, walnuts and some tree for which he has an undecipherable name.

Willis Williams FL-53

The manner of worship was very much in keeping with present day modes. Preachers appealed to the emotions of the 'flock' and the congregation responded with "amens," "halleluia," clapping of hands, shouting and screaming. Willis remarked to one white man during his early life, that he wondered why the people yelled so loudly and the man replied that in fifty years hence the Negroes would be educated, know better and would not do that. He further replied that fifty years ago the white people screamed and shouted that way. Willis wonders now when he sees both white and colored people responding to preaching in much the same way as in his early life if education has made much difference in many cases.

Charley Roberts FL-55

"I don't know why, but I remember we didn't have salt given to us, so we went to the smoke house where there were clean boards on the floor where the salt and grease drippings would fall from the smoked hams hanging from the rafters. The boards would be soft and soaked with salt and grease. Well, we took those boards and cooked the salt and fat out of them, cooked the boards right in the bean soup. That way we got salt and the soup was good.

Jennie Colder FL-56

"I picked cotton, shucked cotton, pulled fodder and corn and done all dat. I plowed with mules. Dis is Jennie Colder, remember dat. Don't forget it. I done all

dat. I plowed with mules and even then the overseer whipped me. I dont know exactly how old I am, but I was born before freedom."

William Neighten FL-59

"Don't ask me how much work I had to do. Gracious! I used to plow and hoed a lot and everything else and then did'nt do enough. I got too many whippings besides."