

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

Aunt Harriet Mason KY-3

I don't remember any weddings, but do remember the funeral of Mr. Marion who lived between the big house and Lick Skillet. He was going to be buried in the cemetery at Lick Skillet, but the horses got scared and turned the spring wagon over and the corpse fell out. The mourners sure had a time getting things straightened out, but they finally got him buried.

"One time when I was actin' nurse for missis, there was another nigger gal there and we was playin' horse-shoes. Celia hit me in the head. It got blood all over the baby's dress. Missis came out, she say, 'I'll hit you niggers if you don't stop playing with horse-shoes.'" The scar is on my head yet whar Celia hit me. I ain't played since. Do you blame me?

"Missis told her brother Sam one day to whoop me. Every time he hit me, I'd hit him. I wan't feared then. I didn't know no better. Look like white folks goin' to have their way and niggers goin' to have theirs.

"Me and missis was goin' to a neighbor's house one day in a sleigh. The baby was wrapped up in a comfort (it had a hole in it). The baby slipped out. I say, 'Lor' missis, you're lost that baby.'

"No, I haven't, Missis say. We stopped and shook the comfort and John was gone. 'Ain't that awful, Miss Mat?' We went back and found him a mile behind."

Bert Mayfield KY-4

Marse Stone had a big sugar camp with 300 trees. We would be waked up at sun-up by a big horn and called to get our buckets and go to the sugar camps and bring water from the maple trees. These trees had been tapped and elderwood spiles were placed in the taps where the water dripped to the wooden troughs below. We carried this water to the big poplar troughs which were about 10 feet long and 3 feet high. The water was then dipped out and placed in different kettles to boil until it became the desired thickness for "Tree Molasses". Old Miss Polly would always take out enough of the water to boil down to make sugar cakes for us boys. We had great times at these "stirrin' offs" which usually took place at night.

I was told that one of our slaves ran off and was gone for three years. Some white person wrote him to come home that he was free. He was making his own way in Ohio and stopped in Lexington, Kentucky for breakfast; while there he was asked to show his Pass papers which he did, but they were forged so he was arrested. Investigators soon found that his owner was Mr. Stone who did not wish to sell him

and sent for him to come home. Uncle Ned's own Tim said he "would go fetch him back" but instead he sold him to a southern slave trader.

Wes Woods KY-8

"We fished with a stock pole and a twine string. We had big times hunting fishing worms for bait. We used to catch Hockney, Hads and Chubs. My mistus would not let me go fishing on Sunday, but I would slip off and go anyhow. I nearly always had a good string caught and I would tie them to a branch on the creek until the next day; then I would go fishing and in about two hours I would come back with the fish, and she would say, "Wes, you had good luck today"; and I would say, "Yes Mistus, I did", but never did I tell her when I caught the fish.

Ann Gudgeon KY-9

"The onliest time ole Miss eber beat me was when I caused Miss Nancy to get et up wit de bees. I tole her 'Miss Nancy, de bees am sleep, lets steal de honey.' Soon as she tetchted it, day flew all ober us, and it took Mammy bout a day to get the stingers outen our haid. Ole Miss jest natually beat me up bout dat.

Rev. John R. Cox KY-12

A slave owner, in West Virginia, bought a thirteen year old black girl at an auction. When this girl was taken to his home she escaped, and after searching every where, without finding her, he decided that she had been helped to escape and gave her up as lost. About two years after that a neighbor, on a closely farm, was in the woods feeding his cattle, he saw what he first thought was a bear, running into the thicket from among his cows. Getting help, he rounded up the cattle and searching the thick woodland, finally found that what he had supposed was a wild animal, was the long lost fugitive black girl. She had lived all this time in caves, feeding on nuts, berries, wild apples and milk from cows, that she could catch and milk. Returned to her master she was sold to a Mr. Morgan Whittaker who lived near where Prestonsburg, Kentucky now is.

A Dr. David Cox, physician from Scott County, Virginia, who treated Mr. Whitaker for a cancer, saw this slave girl, who had become a strong healthy young woman, and Mr. Whitaker unable to otherwise pay his doctor bill, let Dr. Davis have her for the debt.

At this time the slave girl was about twenty-one years of age, and Dr. Davis took her home to Scott County, Virginia where he married her to his only other slave, George Cox, by the ceremony of laying a broom on the floor and having the two young negroes step over the broom stick.

Mrs. Duncan KY-13

"After the War was over mammie's old man did not want us with them, so he threatened to kill us. Then my old mammie fixed us a little bundle of what few clothes we had and started us two children out to go back to the Campbell family in Albany. The road was just a wilderness and full of wild animals and varmints. Mammie gave us some powder and some matches, telling us to put a little down in the road every little while and set fire to it. This would scare the wild animals away from us.

"We got to the river at almost dark and some old woman set us across the river in a canoe. She let us stay all night with her, and we went on to 'Grandpap Campbells' (We always called him grandpap instead of master, as the others did.) When he saw us comin' he said 'Lawd have mercy here comes them poor little chillun'.

"I stayed with them that time until I was big enough to be a house girl. Then I went to live with the Harrison family in Albany; and I lived with them till I married old Sam Duncan and come to Wayne County to live. I've raised a family of nine children and have thirty-seven grand children and twenty great grand children.

"Every one of my children wears a silver dime on a string around their leg, to keep off the witches spell. One time, before my daughter Della got to wearing it, she was going down the road, not far from our house, when all at once her leg gave way and she could not walk. Of course I knowed what it was. So I went after Linda Woods, the witch doctor. She come with a bottle of something, all striped with all colors, but when you shake it up it was all the same color. She rubbed her leg with it and told me to get all the life everlasting (a weed you know) that I could carry in my arm, and brew it for tea to bathe her leg in. Then pour it in a hole in the ground, but not to cover it up. Then not to go down the same road for nine days.

"We did all she said, and her leg got all right as soon as we bathed it. But she did not wait nine days, and started down the road the next day. The very same thing happened to her again. Her leg give way under her and she could not walk a step.

"I went after Linda Woods again. This time she said, 'D--m her, I told her not to go over that road for nine days.' But she came with the striped bottle and destroyed the witch spell again, telling her this time if she went over the road again for nine days that she would remain a cripple all her life, for she would not cure her again.

"Della stayed off that road for nine days, this time, and all the family have worn the silver dime around their legs ever since.

"Another time my old man Sam got down in his back. Well, he went to Henry Coulter (he was another witch doctor). He just shot in the back with a glass pistol, and cured him. Of course there was not any bullet in the pistol, but it cured him. He could draw a picture of a chicken on a paper and shoot it, and a chicken would fall dead in the yard, yes sir. I've seen him do it. Old Henry is dead now though. When he died he had a whole trunk full of the queerest looking things you ever seed. And they took it all and buried it. Nobody would touch it for anything.

"I always keep a horse shoe over my door to keep the spirits away. We live very close to the graveyard, and my boy Ed said he had been seeing his brother Charley in his room every night. If he was livin' right he would not be seeing Charlie every night. Charlie never bothers me. He was my boy that died and is buried in this graveyard above our house."

Amelia Jones KY-15

Master White was good to the slaves, he fed us well and had good places for us to sleep, and didn't whip us only when it was necessary, but didn't hesitate to sell any of his slaves, he said, "You all belong to me and if you don't like it, I'll put you in my pocket" meaning of course that he would sell that slave and put the money in his pocket.

The day he was to sell the children from their mother he would tell that mother to go to some other place to do some work and in her absence he would sell the

children. It was the same when he would sell a man's wife, he also sent him to another job and when he returned his wife would be gone. The master only said "don't worry you can get another one".

Both sides were cruel during the Civil War. Mrs. McDaniel who lives here tells a story of how her father was killed in Clay County, while eating dinner one day. Some federal soldiers drove up and asked what side he was on and upon saying the confederate side, they took him outside and shot him with a gun in his own yard.

Jenny McKee KY-16

The old negro lady slaves would sit in the door way of their little shacks and play with pieces of string, not knowing what else to do to pass off the time. They were never restless for they knew no other life than slavery.

Martha J. Jones KY-20

My Uncle, John C. Turner, had farms close to my father's in West Va., and he had fifty-two slaves when the war ended. He would buy, sell and trade them all the time. The slaves were judged by the Masters. If they were big and strong they would bring a good price, as they would be better workers for the fields, and then, I would watch my uncle swap and buy slaves, just the same as he was buying any other stock for his farm.

George Dorsey KY-21

"Bout the time the war was over I seen my first soldier. The road that passed along in front of our house was a dirt road. I'd gone with mother to watch her milk a young cow late one night, 'bout dark I guess, when I heard somebody hollerin' and yellin' an' I looked down the road an' seen 'em comin'. I was 'bout five years old then an' it looked to me like all the army was comin' up the road. The captain was on a hawse an' the men afoot an' the dust from the dirt road a flyin'. There was a moon shinin' an' you could see the muskets shinin' in the moonlight. I was settin' on a fence an' when I seen 'em it scared me so I started to run. When I jumped off I fell an' cut a hole in my forehead right over this left eye. The scar's there yet. I run in the house and hid. Mr. Sammy Duvall had to get on a hawse an' go to New Liberty an' fetch a doctor to plug up the hole in my head. I seen lots of soldiers after that an' I always run under the bed or hid in a closet or somewheres. They stayed 'round here for a long time. Finally provender got low and the soldiers took to stealing. We called it stealin', but I reckon it warn't for they come and got the stuff like meat out o' the smoke house in broad open daylight. Mr. Duvall had a chestnut earl stallion he called Drennon an' they come, or somebody did, an' got him one night. One day, 'bout two or three weeks later, Will Duvall, a son o' Mr. Sammy Duvall, heard that the hawse was over in Henry County where the soldiers had a camp. So he went over there and found the Captain an' told him he'd come after old Drennon. The Captain said to describe him an' Will said, "Captain, he's a chestnut earl named Drennon. If'n I whistl' a certain way he' nicker an' answer me."

"Well, they went down to the stable where they had a lot of stalls like, under tents. An' when they got there, Will, he whistled, an' sure 'nough, old Drennon nickered. So the Captain, he said, That's your hawse all right. Go in an' get him an' take him on home.

Will brought the hawse home an' took him down in the woods on the creek where the water'd washed all the dirt offen a big, flat rock and we kep him hid for three or four weeks. We didn't want to loose him again.

Mr. Duvall usta ride a blazed-face, sarl [HW: sorrel] mare named Kit. He most al'ays taken me up behind him, 'specially if he was goin' to town. Kit was trained to hunt deer. I can't remember any deer in the country but Mr. Duvall yousta tell me 'bout 'em an' 'bout the way they had their hawses trained. He said there wus a place down on Panther Lick Creek, below where we lived, that was a deer lick. The deer would come there and lick the ground close to the creek because there was salt left there by the high waters. He'd put a strap with a littel bell on 'round ole Kit's neck; an' tie her to a tree not far from this lick. Then he'd hide behin' 'nother tree close to Kit. When the deer come ole Kit'd shake her head an' the deer would raise their heads to see what the noise made by the bell was an' where it was comin' from. Then he'd shoot the deer in the head. He showed me the place where he killed the biggest buck he ever seen right here jess out o' town a little ways. He kept the horns. An' I remember seein' 'em in the attic at his house. He had an ole riffle he called "Ole Betsy" that'd been his deer rifle.

After I got to be a big boy, huntin' and fishin' was good. I never got to do any uv it except on Saturdays and Sundays. Everbody had a brush fence 'round the house to keep the stock in out o' the yard and one day I seen a big bird sail down on the fence and run under it. Mother was out in the back yard so I said to myself, I'll get the gun and kill that hawk. I taken good aim at its head and banged away. At the crack o' the gun I never heard such a flutterin' in my life. Mother come runnin' to see what was the matter and when she seen it, she said, Son, that's a pheasant. Some day you'll be a good hunter. An' guess I was for I killed lots o' pheasants, quail, squir'ls and rabbits.

Little Sammy Duvall had a pointer he called "Quail". She was the smartest dog I ever seen, but everybody had smart dogs them days. Quail'd trail birds when they was runnin' till she got clost and then circle 'round 'em an' make her stand.

Be careful there, Quail, Mr. Sammy would say. He'd nearly always get eight or ten out uv a covey an' sometimes the whole covey. I yousta go along jess to see him shoot. He hardly ever missed. There was so many quail that nobody ever thought to leave any uv a covey if he wanted that many an' they didn't get so scattered that he couldn't fin' em.

After the deer was all killed out, people trained their deer hounds to chase foxes, coons and such like. The white boys from town yousta come and get Will and young Sammy to go coon huntin'. They al'ays had ten or twelve dogs. They al'ays taken me along an' treated me jest the same as if I was as white as they was. If I got behind or out o' sight somebody was sure to say, 'Where's George'?

One night we treed three coons in a big hollow oak. They started to cut down the trees an' put me at the butt with a fire bran'. When the tree fell the coons'd come out an' I was supposed to drive 'em back with the fire, jest lettin' out one at a time so's the dogs could kill 'em. I was about half scared uv 'em and when one big feller come out I backed up an' he got by me. I throwed the fire at him an' it lit on his back an' burnt' him. I never seen a coon run so fast. But the dogs soon treed him again an' we got him. Then we come back an' the dogs picked up the trail uv another one an' we caught him. I never seed a bigger one. He was as long as this umbrella (3-1/2 ft.)

The other one got away. Coon huntin' was a great sport with the boys an' men in those days.

I caught the only grey eagle that was ever seen 'round here. They was a bunch of us boys out rabbit huntin' one day one fall. The dogs got after a rabbit an' chased it across a holler out o' range. I had the only gun in the crowd an' was right after that rabbit. The dogs run over the track an' could see 'em over on the hillside jess settin' still. All at once I seen a big bird--I taken it to be a hawk, fold its wings like a man'd fold his arms 'round his body, and drop straight down on the rabbit. But the rabbit saw it too for when the eagle got there he was ten feet up the hillside. The bird hit, "boom", jest like that. But the rabbit was goin' over the hill an' the eagle musta saw him for he riz an' flew in that direction.

'You boys stay back, I'll kill that hawk. That's the biggest hawk I ever seen,' I told them. When I got to the top of the ridge I seen him settin' in the top uv a big tree. The boys stayed where I told them and I slipped along till I got pritty close enough to shoot him. He was either watchin' the rabbit or didn't think I was watchin' him for I got pritty close before he started to fly. Jess as he opened his wings I let him have it with my old muzzle loader shotgun. Down he come makin' as much noise as a whole flock o' hawks oughta made. He was alive when I got to him an' made right at me, strikin' with his claws an' bill. The dogs come when they heard the shot an' he whipped 'em off. Every time he struck one of 'em he (the dog) would holler like he'd been speared. The other boys wanted to kill it but I gotta a long pole an' got it on him so's it held him down. We'd found out by this time that one wing was broke by my shot. So we jess hold of the tips of his wings an' led him to the house. His wing spread was 'bout six or eight feet. When I got him to the house I told 'em I had the biggest hawk they ever seen. A ole man by the same of William said, "Hell that ain't no hawk, that's a grey eagle." A ole colored fiddler, named Fred Roberts, sent word he'd buy it from me. He even got so fraid he wouldn't get it that he come for it.

'What'll you take for him', he asked me, and before I could say anything he says, 'I'll give a dollar for him'.

That was a lot of money for me an' boy like I sold him then and there. I coulda got two or maybe three dollars for him. Fred taken him to town an' fed him live hens and raw meat. On court days or when there was a crowd in town he showed him for ten cents a look. I bet he made \$50.00 on him. People yousta to come for miles to see that eagle. He finally died.

Fishin' was good too. We cut our poles in the woods an' used to flax thread for lines. Where people built water-gaps in fences that crossed the creeks the water'd fill in till it made a dam. Then the creek spread behind it. Them water holes was full o' perch an' cat fish. They didn't get much bigger them your hand but they bit fast and we had lots o' fun catchin' 'em.

Mary Wright KY-25

"I heard my Mammy talk of "De Nigger Risin". De Klu Klux uster stick de niggers head on er stake alongside de Cadiz road en dar de buzzards would eat them till nuthin' was left but de bones. Dar war a sign on dis stake dat said "Look out Nigger You are next". Us chilluns would not go far way from dat cabin. I'se tells you dat is so. I jes knowed dat dis Ku Klux would do dat to us sho if weuns had been caughted.

Sophia Word KY-26

"The Mistress had an old parrot and one day I wuz in the kitchen making cookies, and I decided I wanted some of them so I took some out and put them on a chair and when I did this the mistress entered the door, I picks up a cushion and throws over the pile of cookies on the chair and mistress came near the chair and the old parrot cries out, Mistress burn, Mistress burn, then the mistress looks under the cushion and she had me whipped but the next day I killed the parrot, and she often wondered who or what killed the bird.

"My master wuzn't as mean as most masters. Hugh White was so mean to his slaves that I know of two gals that killt themselves. One nigger gal sudie wuz found across the bed with a pen knife in her hand. He whipped another nigger gal most to death fer fergiting to put onions in the stew. The next day she went down to the river and fer nine days they searched fer her and her body finally washed upon the shore. The master could never live in that house again as when he would go to sleep he would see the nigger standing over his bed. Then he moved to Richmond and there he stayed until a little later when he hung himself.

Peter Bruner KY-31

Peter Bruner, was born in Winchester, Kentucky, Clark Co., in 1845. His master was John Bell Bruner, who at that time treated him fairly well. When Peter was 10 years of age his master brought him and his sister to Irvine. After arriving in Irvine, Peter's master was very cruel to him. They got only cornbread, fat meat and water to eat. If his master's hunger was not satisfied, he would even take this little from them.

Peter, endured torture as long as he could and finally decided to escape. He went to Richmond, Kentucky on to Lexington. On his way he made a contract with a man to drive his horses to Orleans, but was caught while in Lexington. On his way they caught him and took him to jail and he remained until his master came for him. This did not down him, for just as soon as he could he escaped again, and this time got as far as Xenia, Ohio, but was again caught and brought back. This time he was severely beaten for three hours.

When 17 years old, Peter was hired out to Jimmy Benton, who was more cruel than John Bruner, but was again brought back. It was then that he tried again to escape. This time he went through Madison Co. near Sugar Creek. This was about the year 1861, when the war had begun. Again he was caught and taken back, but this time by Joe Bruner. He escaped several times, but never could seem to get anywhere. Once when he and another slave, Phil, escaped they were caught and made to walk the entire distance barefoot. After this Peter, was chained each night to a chair. One morning while eating his breakfast he heard a knock at the door and on opening it he found a troop of Union Home Guards. Jim Benton and John Bruner were taken to prison. After this Peter went to Miller's Creek and worked at odd jobs for awhile.

When John Bruner was taken from Prison, he was much better to Peter. Soon after John was released from Prison, Peter escaped again. This time he had joined a regiment in the war. He went through hardships, cold, hunger and illness.

Often when they were awoken in the morning they would find their blankets frozen to the ground. He was sick several times. His feet frozen and other things

would go wrong such as having fever and once he had Variloid. After serving for awhile he was mustered out and returned to Winchester, where his mother lived.

Easter Sudie Campbell KY-32

"Wen my Pappy kum home from de war, he war on de "Govmint" side he brung a pistol back wid him dat shot a ball dey hed caps on hit en used dese in de war. De Ku Klux jum after him one night en he got three of dem wid dis pistol, nobody eber knowed who got dose Kluxes.

"Den ergin I went ter de fish pond one day fishing en cotched two or three big fish wen I went home thot I'd go back dat night en I begun to dig sum fishing worms en my boss he saw me en axed, 'Wot I doing'. I told him I war ergoing ter de pond ter fish dat night. He said 'don you go ter dat pond ternight Easter foh if you does something will run you erway.' I jes laughed at him en dat night I en my boy wese goes ter de pond en as we war er standing in dar quiet like we heared something squeeching like er new saddle en er horses er trotting. We listened en waited wen something wen inter dat pond right twixt us liker er ball er fire. Weums sho did leave dar an de next morning my boss axed me if we cotched enthing en we told him wot we saw en he said he knowed weums would be run erway foh he war run erway hisself.