

September 1937

Interview, Frank Berry and Pearl Randolph, Slave Interview and Additional Information, August 18, 1936 and September 11, 1937

Frank Berry

Pearl Randolph

Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/formerly_enslaved_narratives

Recommended Citation

Berry, Frank; Randolph, Pearl; and Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida, "Interview, Frank Berry and Pearl Randolph, Slave Interview and Additional Information, August 18, 1936 and September 11, 1937" (1937). *Narratives of Formerly Enslaved Floridians*. 1. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/formerly_enslaved_narratives/1

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Floridiana - General at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Narratives of Formerly Enslaved Floridians by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)
Jacksonville, Florida

Pearl Randolph
Field Worker
Complete

Slave Interview
August 18, 1936
Additional information
Sept. 11, 1937

Frank Berry, living at 1614 West Twenty-Second Street, Jacksonville, Florida, claims to be a grandson of Osceola, last fighting chief of the Seminole tribe. Born in 1858 of a mother who was part of the human chattel belonging to one of the Hearnases of Alachua County in Florida, he served variously during his life as a State and Federal Government contractor, United States Marshall (1881), Registration Inspector (1872).

The master gave them a strip of land for farming purposes. However, they were to pay for the use of this parcel of land each year. Vividly he recalls helping his mother raise corn and cotton so that at the end of the year they would be able to pay off the landlord. Christmas eve was the end fiscal period for all accounts. Each year found them in debt to the landlord deeper and deeper. To help out in the expenses, his mother would make lye soap to sell the landlord. Lye for the soap then was obtained by placing old hickory-wood ashes in a suspended hamper pouring boiling hot water over the ashes. The red liquid is caught in a trough that empties into a tub. This lye is the principal ingredient of the lye soap.

Being of destitute means, the daily meal usually consisted of rice, potatoes, sometimes pork, and bread; made by placing flour dough in hot ashes, the bread resulting from this was called ash-oake. Large iron

skillets with lids were the cooking utensils used at that time.

Berry was taught to read and write by a colored teacher from the North named Miss Townsend a few years after the Civil War. The teacher would go from church to church once a week to give instruction to the students.

Being only eight years of age when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, he remembers little of his life as a slave. The master was kind in an impersonal way but made no provision for his freedom as did many other Southerners--usually in the form of land grants--although he gave them their freedom as soon as the proclamation was issued. Berry learned from his elders that their master was a noted duelist and owned several fine pistols some of which have very bloody histories.

It was during the hectic days that followed the Civil War that Berry served in the afore-mentioned offices. He held his marshalship under a Judge King of Jacksonville, Florida. As State and Federal Government Contractor he built many public structures, a few of which are still in use, among them the jetties at Mayport, Florida, which he helped to build and a jail at High Springs, Florida.

Berry told of an incident occurring after the Civil War that completely shattered his faith in justice meted out to Negroes by Negro members of Juries. One day he went to a grocery store to make a purchase. An argument ensued between the white storekeeper and himself, both drew pistols. A policeman happened to be passing at the time, was summoned by white storekeeper. Berry was arrested. During that time, when a Negro was tried, the jury was composed of the same number of whites as colored. Since the trial

was in the middle of the week, only one Negro could be found to serve on the jury. The jury was dead-locked for hours, the white men were for acquittal and the Negro for the conviction of Berry. After much deliberation, Berry was freed. After the trial, one of his white members of the jury said to him, "Frank, we would have let you out twenty minutes after we considered your case if it hadn't been for the colored members of the jury." Berry said that if he was tried for life he wouldn't want a Negro on the Jury or a Negro lawyer on his case. Continuing "Negroes are like smoke, they will go whatever way the wind blows if paid. During this period, Negro lawyers were not allowed to practice before the bar in Miami. Berry said the reason for this was, Negro lawyers consumed too much time in stating their cases and were a nuisance after they finished.

The Ku Klux Klan was very active during voting time and would use all kinds of force and violence to make the Negroes vote the way they desired. Later they would use force and threats to scare the Negroes away from the polls. However, several Negroes held important political jobs at that time. Gen. J. T. Walls, an ex-slave, served eight years as a senator of Florida. Joseph Lee, served as mayor of Jacksonville and as Municipal Judge. George Andrews was Chief of Police during the same period.

One of the leading Negro political figures in the 1898 was a powerful mulatto by the name of Sam Foster, reputed grandson of Billy Payne, the bad man of Payne Prairie fame. Berry stated that the famous Seven Years Indian War started on Paynes Prairie. Three drunken Indian boys attacked Billy Payne and in the end were thoroughly thrashed by Payne. The Indians returned with reinforcements and the fight was on. Repeated attacks by the

Indians caused the war to last for seven years.

It was during the war between the Indians and settlers that Berry's grandmother, serving as a nurse at Tampa Bay was captured by the Indians and carried away to become the squaw of their chief; she was later recaptured by her owners. This was a common procedure, according to Berry's statements. Indians often captured slaves, particularly the women, or aided in their escape and almost always intermarried with them. The red men were credited with inciting many uprisings and wholesale escapes among the slaves.

Country frolics (dances) were quite often attended by Indians, whose main reason for going was to obtain whiskey, for which they had a very strong fondness. Berry describes an intoxicated Indian as a "tornado mad man" and recalls a hair raising incident that ended in tragedy for the offender.

A group of Indians were attending one of these frolics at Fort Myers and everything went well until one of the number became intoxicated, terrorizing the Negroes with bullying, and fighting anyone with whom he could "pick" a quarrel. "Big Charlie" an uncle of the narrator was present and when the red man challenged him to a fight made a quick end of him by breaking his neck at one blow.

For two years he was hounded by revengeful Indians, who had an uncanny way of ferreting out his whereabouts no matter where he went. Often he sighted them while working in the fields and would be forced to flee to some other place. This continued with many hairbreadth escapes, until

he was forced to move several states away.

When asked what was his opinion of the present generation of Negroes, he replied, "They ain't worth a cuss, they are a bunch of yellow-bellied no good younguns." When I was a young man we were allowed to vote and we did fight for our rights. We owned all kinds of business establishments and helped one another out in times of adverse circumstances. Why, even these high class educated ministers ain't nuthin but windbags. During my time, I have gone to church and have seen women and men lying out on the floor prostrate from the powerful preaching of the minister. Sometimes they would lie there for two and three days at a time and the minister would still be preaching. Name me a preacher who is that good now? Even in slavery we were treated better than they are being now by the white people. When a Negro did something wrong, he was whipped and that was all to it. Negroes didn't kill each other as they do now. Even the white people didn't kill Negroes then as they do now. Negroes then were worth money to the white people and the couldn't afford to lose money by killing a Negro. slave. Anybody can kill a Negro now because they ain't worth a cent to nobody. These high-polluted Negro men we called doctors couldn't cure a cold. The Indians taught us Negroes all about medicine and herbs. Why if you had a bad cold, all you got to do is to get some good corn whiskey, mix it with sweet gum rosin, then drink it. If you wanted to draw a splinter out of your foot or finger, make a poultice out of pea-leaves and drip rosin, place it over the wound, and boy! in twenty-four hours the whole splinter will be out. Take me and my old lady, we have been married for 61 years and don't ever think of separating, while I have some sons and daughters that have married two and three times. Let me

tell you something, a good woman is the second step to an angel in heaven, but a bad woman is the second step to a demon in hell . . ."

Berry recalls the old days of black aristocracy when Negroes held high political offices in the state of Florida, when Negro tradesmen and professionals competed successfully and unmolested with the whites. Many fortunes were made by men who are now little more than beggars. To this group belongs the man who in spite of reduced circumstances manages still to make one think of top hats and state affairs. . Although small of stature and almost disabled by rheumatism, he has the fiery dignity and straight back that we associate with men who have ruled others. At the same time he might also be characterized as a sweet old person with all the tender reminiscences of the old days and the childish prejudices against all things new. As might be expected, he lives in the past and always is delighted whenever he is asked to tell about the only life that he has ever really lived. Together with his aged wife he lives with his children and is known to local relief agencies who supplement the very small income he now derives from what is left of what was at one time a considerable fortune.

REFERENCE

Personal interview with subject, Frank Berry,
1614 West Twenty-Second Street, Jacksonville, Florida