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Interview, Claude Augusta Wilson and James Johnson, Slave Interview, November 6, 1936

Claude Augusta Wilson

James Johnson

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

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

James Johnson
Field Worker
Complete

Slave Interview
November 6, 1936

1,792 words
8 Pages

Claude Augusta Wilson

In 1857 on the plantation of Tom Dexter in Lake City, Columbia County, Florida, was born a Negro, Claude Augusta Wilson, of slave parents. His master Tom Dexter was very kind to his slaves, and was said to have been a Yankee. His wife Mary Ann Dexter, a southerner was the direct opposite, she was very mean. Claude was eight years old when emancipation came.

The Dexter plantation was quite a large place, covering 100 or more acres. There were about 100 slaves, including children. They had regular one-room quarters built of logs which was quite insignificant in comparison with the palatial Dexter mansion. The slaves would arise early each morning, being awakened by a "driver" who was a white man, and by "sun-up" would be at their respective tasks in the fields. All day they worked, stopping at noon to get a bite to eat which they carried on the fields from their cabins.

At "sun-down" they would quit work and return to their cabins, prepare their meals and gossip from cabin to cabin, finally retiring to await the dawn of a new day which signalled a return to their routine duties. At sundays they would gather at a poorly constructed frame building which was

known as the "Meeting House." In this building they would give praise and thanks to their god. The rest of the day was spent in relaxation as this was the only day of the week in which they were not forced to work.

Claude Augusta worked in the fields, his mother and sister worked in the Dexter, mansion. Their duties were general house work, cooking and sewing. His mother was very rebellious toward her duties and constantly harrassed the "Missus" about letting her work in the fields with her husband until finally she was permitted to make the change from the house to the fields to be near her man.

The "missus" taught Claude's sister to sew and to the present day most of her female descendants have some ability in dressmaking.

The mansion was furnished with the latest furniture of the time, but the slave quarters had only the cheapest and barest necessities. His mother had no stove but cooked in the fireplace, using a skillet and spider (skillet, a small metal vessel with handle used for cooking; spider, a kind of frying pan), Winston's Simplified Dictionary, 1924. The cooking was not done directly on the coals in the fireplace but placed on the hearth and hot coals pulled around them, more coals being pulled about until the food was cooked as desired. Corn bread, beans, sweet potatoes (Irish potatoes being unknown) and collard greens were the principal foods eaten. Corn bread was made as it is today, only cooked differently. The corn meal after being mixed was wrapped in tannin leaves (elephant ears) and placed in hot coals. The leaves would parch to a crisp and when the bread was removed it was a beautiful brown and unburned.

Sweet potatoes were roasted in the hot coals. Corn was often roasted in the shucks. There was a substitute for coffee that afforded a striking similarity in taste. The husks of the grains of corn were parched, hot water was then poured in this, the result was a pleasant liquid substitute for coffee. There was another bread used as a desert, known as potato bread, made by boiling potatoes until done, then mashing, adding grease and meal, this was baked and then it was ready to serve. For lights, candles were made of tallow which was poured into a mould when hot. A cord was run through the center of the candle impression in the mould in which the tallow was poured, when this cooled the candle with cord was all ready for lighting.

The only means of obtaining water was from an open well. No ice was used. The first ice that Claude ever saw in its regular form was in Jacksonville after emancipation. This ice was naturally frozen and shipped from the north to be sold. It was called Lake Ice.

Tanning and curing pig and cow hides was done, but Claude never saw the process performed during slavery. Claude had no special duties on the plantation on account of his youth. After cotton was picked from the fields the seeds were picked out by hand, the cotton was then carded for further use. The cotton seed was used as fertilizer. In baling cotton burlap bags were used on the bales. The soap used was made from taking hickory or oak wood and burning it to ashes. The ashes were placed in a tub and water poured over them. This was left to set. After setting for a certain time the water from the ashes was

poured into a pot containing grease. This was boiled for a certain time and then left to cool. The result was a pot full of soft substance varying in color from white to yellow, this was called lye soap. This was then cut into bars as desired for use.

For dyeing thread and cloth, red oak bark, sweet gum bark and shoe make roots were boiled in water. The wash tubs were large wooden tubs having one handle with holes in it for the fingers. Chicken and goose feathers were always carefully saved to make feather mattresses. Claude remembers when women wore hoop skirts. He was about 20 years of age when narrow skirts became fashionable for women. During slavery the family only used slats on the beds, it was after the war that he saw his first spring bed, and at that time the first buggy. This buggy was driven by ex-governor Reid of Florida who then lived in South Jacksonville. It was a four wheeled affair drawn by a horse and looked sensible and natural as a vehicle.

The paper money in circulation was called "shin plasters." Claude's uncle, Mark Clark joined the Northern Army. His master did not go to war but remained on the plantation. One day at noon during the war the gin house was seen to be a fire, one of the slaves rushed in and found the master badly burned and writhing in pain. He was taken from the building and given first aid, but his body being burned in oil and so badly burned it burst open, thus ended the life of the kindly master of Claude.

The soldiers of the Southern Army wore gray uniforms with gray caps and the soldiers of the Northern Army wore blue.

After the war such medicines as castor oil, rhubarb, calomel and blue mass and salts were generally used. The Civil War raged for some time and the slaves on Dexter's plantation prayed for victory of the Northern Army, though they dared not show their anxiety to Mary Ann Dexter who was master and mistress since the master's death. Claude and his family remained with the Dexters until peace was declared. Mrs. Dexter informed the slaves that they could stay with her if they so desired and that she would furnish everything to cultivate the crops and that she would give them half of what was raised. None of the slaves remained but all were anxious to see what freedom was like.

Claude recalls that a six mule team drove up to the house driven by a colored Union soldier. He helped move the household furniture from their cabin into the wagon. The family then got in some in the seat with the driver and others in back of the wagon with the furniture. When the driver pulled off he said to Claude's mother who was sitting on the seat with him, "Doan you know you is free now?" "Yeh Sir," she answered, " I been praying for dis a long time." "Come on den les go." he answered, and drove off. They passed through Clustee, then Sanderson, Macolenny and finally Baldwin. It was raining and they were about 20 miles from their destination, Jacksonville

but they drove on. They reached Jacksonville and were taken to a house that stood on Liberty Street, near Adams. White people had been living there but had left before the Northern advance. There they unloaded and were told that this would be their new home. The town was full of colored soldiers all armed with muskets. Horns and drums could be heard beating and blowing every morning and evening. The colored soldiers appeared to rule the town. More slaves were brought in and there they were given food by the government which consisted of hard tack (bread reddish in appearance and extremely hard which had to be soaked in water before eating). The meat was known as "salt horse." This looked and tasted somewhat like corned beef. After being in Jacksonville a short while Claude began to peddle ginger bread and apples in a little basket, selling most of his wares to the colored soldiers.

His father got employment with a railroad company in Jacksonville, known as the Florida Central Railway and received 99¢ a day, which was considered very good pay. His mother got a job with a family as house woman at a salary of eight dollars a month. They were thus considered getting along fine. They remained in the house where the Government placed them for about a year, then his father bought a piece of land in town and built a house of straight boards. There they resided until his death.

By this time many of the white people began to return to their homes which had been abandoned and in which slaves found shelter. In many instances the whites had to make monetary or other concessions in order to get their homes back. It was said that colored people had taken possession of one of the large white churches of the day, located on Hogan Street, between Ashley and Church Streets. Claude relates that all this was when Jacksonville was a mere village, with cow and hog pens in what was considered as downtown. The principal streets were: Pine (now Main), Market and Forsyth. The leading stores were Wilson's and Clarke's. These stores handled groceries, dry goods and whisky.

As a means of transportation two-wheeled drays were used, mule or horse drawn cars which was to come into use later were not operating at that time. To cross the Saint Johns River one had to go in a rowboat, which was the only ferry and was operated by the ex-governor Reid of Florida. It docked on the north side of the river at the foot of Ocean Street, and on the south side at the foot of old Kings Road. It ran between these two points, carrying passengers to and fro.

The leading white families living in Jacksonville at that time were the Hartridges, Bostwicks, Doggetts, Bayels and L'Engles.

Claude Augusta Wilson, a man along in years has lived to see many changes take place among his people since the Emancipation which he is proud of. A peaceful old gentleman he is, still alert mentally and physically despite his 79 years. His youthful appearance belies his age.

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REFERENCE

1. Personal interview with Claude Augusta Wilson,
Sunbeam, Florida