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Sam and Louisa Everett: slave interview, October 8, 1936

Sam Everett

Louisa Everett

Pearl Randolph

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)
Mulberry, Florida

Pearl Randolph
Field Worker
Complete
1,139 Words
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Slave Interview
October 8, 1936
John A. Simms
Editor

Sam and Louisa Everett

Sam and Louisa Everett, 86 and 90 years of age respectively, have weathered together some of the worst experiences of slavery, and as they look back over the years, can relate these experiences as clearly as if they had happened only yesterday.

Both were born near Norfolk, Virginia and sold as slaves several times on nearby plantations. It was on the plantation of "Big Jim" McClain that they met as slave-children and departed after Emancipation to live the lives of free people.

Sam was the son of Peter and Betsy Everett, field hands who spent long back-breaking hours in the cotton fields and came home at nightfall to cultivate their small garden. They lived in constant fear that their master would confiscate most of their vegetables; he so often did.

Louisa remembers little about her parents and thinks that she was sold at an early age to a separate master. Her name as nearly as she could remember was Norfolk Virginia. Everyone called her "Nor." It was not until after she was freed and had sent her children to school that she changed her name to Louisa.

Sam and Norfolk spent part of their childhood on the plantation of "Big Jim" who was very cruel; often he would whip his slaves into insensibility for minor offences. He sometimes hung them up by their thumbs whenever they were caught attempting to escape--"er fer no reason at all."

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."

Life on the McClain plantation was a steady grind of work from morning until night. Slaves had to rise in the dark of the morning at the ringing of the "Big House" bell. After eating a hasty breakfast of fried fat pork and corn pone, they worked in the fields until the bell rang again at noon; at which time they ate boiled vegetables, roasted sweet potatoes and black molasses. This food was cooked in iron pots which had legs attached to their bottoms in order to keep them from resting directly on the fire. These utensils were either hung over a fire or set atop a mound of hot coals. Biscuits were a luxury but whenever they had white bread it was cooked in another thick pan called a "spider". This pan had a top which was covered with hot embers to insure the browning of the bread on top.

Slave women had no time for their children. These were cared for by an old woman who called them twice a day and fed them "pot likker" (vegetable broth) and skimmed milk. Each child was provided with a wooden ladle which he dipped into a wooden trough and fed himself. The older children fed those who were too young to hold a ladle.

So exacting was "Big Jim" that slaves were forced to work even when sick. Expectant mothers toiled in the fields until they felt their labor pains. It was not uncommon for babies to be born in the fields.

There was little time for play on his plantation. Even the very small children were assigned tasks. They hunted hen's eggs, gathered poke berries for dyeing, shelled corn and drove the cows home in the evening. Little girls knitted stockings.

There was no church on this plantation and itinerant ministers avoided going there because of the owner's cruelty. Very seldom were the slaves allowed to attend neighboring churches and still rarer were the opportunities to hold meetings among themselves. Often when they were in the middle of a song or prayer they would be forced to halt and run to the "Big House." Woe to any slave who ignored the ringing of the bell that summoned him to work and told him when he might "knock off" from his labors.

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.

Sam and Louisa moved to Boston, Georgia where they sharecropped for several years; they later bought a small farm when their two sons became old enough to help. They continued to live on this homestead until a few years ago, when their advancing ages made it necessary that they live with the children. Both of the children had settled in Florida several years previous and wanted their parents to come to them. They now live in Mulberry, Florida with the younger son. Both are pitifully infirm but can still remember the horrors they experienced under very cruel owners. It was with difficulty that they were prevailed upon to relate some of the gruesome details recorded here.

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REFERENCES

1. Personal interview with Sam and Louisa Everett, P. O. Box 535
o/o E. P. J. Everett, Mulberry, Florida.