

January 1937

Additional information, Frank Berry

Frank Berry

Samuel 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)
Jacksonville, Florida

Samuel Johnson
Field Worker
Complete

Slave Interview
September 11, 1937

(Additional Information, Frank Berry)

(4) 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 of 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-cake. 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.

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 went 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 member 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 Klu 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 1890s 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 Indians boys attacked Billy Payne and in the end were throughly 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.

1) 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 heaped 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 that 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 they 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 go to do is to get some good corn whiskey, mix it with sweet gum roisin, 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 roisin, 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..."