

January 1937

## Interview, Mary Biddis, circa 1937

Mary Biddis

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

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## MARY BIDDIS

Bread was made from flour and wheat. Meats used were pork, beef, mutton and goat meat. This was smoked and therefore preserved. Coffee was used as the beverage--when this gave out, as often happened parched peanuts were used. They got up before daylight and breakfast was served. Master would eat, then Mary's family followed in the small dining room. Then dishes were washed by the children who would play until dinner time.

Washing was done in home-made wooden tubs, and boiling in iron pots. Soap was made from fat and lye. To make quilts, steel cards were placed in cotton, it was combed, taken out and cotton pad used for quilts as padding.

- Marriage. During slavery, slave would consult boss and tell him that he liked a particular woman. If woman belonged on another plantation, boss would see master and tell him that his slave liked her and wanted to take her for wife. As a rule, this was agreeable, hence, they lived together as man and wife, no civil or religious ceremony was performed. Slave could visit wife so often. After peace things changed. The justice of the peace at Gainesville, named Fryer, gave a big supper. Supper began early, about 25 slave couples attended. A big time was had, a barrel of lemonade served. The slaves who lived together were now married. Party broke up in early hours of morning.

Runaway. Two years before peace, a slave ran away from his master and lived in a cave, at nights he would slip up to some plantation and was

smuggled food by slaves. After peace was declared, he came out of hiding, he was a terrible sight to look upon--hairy from head to foot.

Father's Trip to Cedar Keys. Twice a year Mary's father went to Cedar Keys, Florida with his master. They went there to make salt. Ocean water was obtained, boiled and salt resulted. They brought home two or three barrels.

Second Wife Boss. Second wife was very mean. Used to run behind slaves with kettle of hot water. Boss always said that he would leave wife before he would give up Mary's family. When boss would go off and stay for some time and wife attempted to whip Mary or Mother, they would run off to another plantation and stay until he returned. This wife was eventually killed by his son-in-law.

Church. They went to the white folks' church and would sit in the rear. White preacher said: "You must mind your boss."

Freedom. Out of Mr. Jamison's entire life he had never been heard to curse until he heard of peace for slaves. A Mr. Kooper put 'nigger' on mule and sent him to the Jamison plantation to tell him of the slave freedom. Mr. Jamison cursed and broke down and cried. He called up Mary's mother and father, "Phyliss and Sandy, I aint got no more to do with you, you are free. You can stay with me if you want to and I'll give you one-third of all you raise." They agreed to this, but the old master didn't keep his word. Mary mounted the old mule "Mustang" and went to Newmansville and told the Union Captain. He sent a long sheet of paper to the master--

"It said if he didn't give them what he promised, he would be put in jail." The master straightway gave what he had promised. They then left the plantation seeking their new-found freedom in other parts.

"Roosevelt has done more than any other president in this field. All of 'um talking about givin us a pension. None of 'um did but Roosevelt. Year he's a good man and I'll vote for him," so said Mary Biddis as she sat in a rocking chair, her large bronze frame reclining and blowing out clouds of smoke as she puffed away at her clay pipe.