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Interview, Ambrose Douglass and Martin D. Richardson, Slave Interview Brooksville, circa 1937

Ambrose Douglass

Martin D. Richardson

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

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FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
The American Guide (Negro Writers Unit)
Jacksonville, Fla.

Martin D. Richardson
Field Worker
Words

Slave Interview
Brooksville

AMBROSE DOUGLASS

In 1860, when he was 16 years old, Ambrose Hilliard Douglass was given a sound beating by his North Carolina master because he attempted to refuse the mate that had been given to him --- with the instructions to produce a healthy boy-child by her ---- and a long argument on the value of having good, strong, healthy children. In 1937, at the age of 92, Ambrose Douglass welcomed his 38th child into the world.

The near-centenarian lives near Brooksville, in Hernando County, on a run-down farm that he no longer attempts to tend now that most of his 38 children have deserted the farm for the more lucrative employment of the cities of the phosphate camps.

Douglass was born free in Detroit in 1845. His parents returned South to visit relatives still in slavery, and were soon reenslaved themselves, with their children. Ambrose was one of these.

For 21 years he remained in slavery; sometimes at the plantation of his original master in North Carolina, sometimes in other sections after he had been sold to different masters.

"Yassuh, I been sold a lot of times," the old man states. "Our master didn't believe in keeping a house, a horse or a ducky after he had a chance to make some money on him. Mostly, though, I was sold when I cut up."

"I was a young man," he continues, "and didn't see why I should be anybody's slave. I'd run away every chance I got. Sometimes they near killed me, but mostly they just sold me. I guess I was pretty husky, at that."

"They never did get their money's worth out of me, though. I worked as long as they stood over me, then I ran around with the gals or sneaked off to the woods. Sometimes they used to put dogs on me to git me back.

"When they finally sold me to a man up in Suwanee County --- his name was Harris --- I thought it would be the end of the world. We had heard about him all the way up in Virginia. They said he beat you, starved you and tied you up when you didn't work, and killed you if you ran away.

"But I never had a better master. He never beat me, and always fed all of us. 'Course, we didn't get too much to eat; corn meal, a little piece of fat meat now and then, cabbages, greens, potatoes, and plenty of molasses. When I worked up at 'the house' I et just what the master et; sometimes he would give it to me hisself. When he didn't, I et it anyway.

"He was so good, and I was so scared of him, till I didn't ever run away from his place," Ambrose reminisces; "I had somebody there that I liked, anyway. When he finally went to the war he sold me back to a man in North Carolina, in Hornett County. But the war was near over then; I soon was as free as I am now.

"I guess we musta celebrated 'Mancipation about twelve times in Hornett County. Every time a bunch of No'thern sujers would

come through they would tell us we was free and we'd begin celebratin'. Before we would get through somebody else would tell us to go back to work, and we would go. Some of us wanted to jine up with the army, but didn't know who was goin' to win and didn't take no chances.

"I was 21 when freedom finally came, and that time I didn't take no chances on 'em taking it back again. I lit out for Florida and wound up in Madison County. I had a nice time there; I got married, got a plenty of work, and made me a little money. I fixed houses, built 'em, worked around the yards, and did everything. My first child was already born; I didn't know there was goin' to be 37 more, though. I guess I would have stopped right there.....

"I stayed in Madison County until they started to working concrete rock down here. I heard about it and thought that would be a good way for me to feed all them two dozen children I had. So I came down this side. That was about 20 years ago.

"I got married again after I got here; right soon after. My wife now is 30 years old; we already had 13 children together." (His wife is a slight, girlish-looking woman; she says she was 13 when she married Douglass, had her first child that year. Eleven of her thirteen are still living.)

"Nossuh, I ain't long stopped work. I worked here in the phosphate mine until last year, when they started to paying pensions. I thought I would git one, but all I got was some PWA work, and this year they told me I was too old for that. I told 'em I wasn't but 91, but they didn't give me nothin' else. I guess I'll git my pension soon, though. My oldest boy ought to git it, too; he's sixty-five."