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Interview, M.N. McCullough and Rose Shepherd, December 13, 1938

M. N. McCullough

Rose Shepherd

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

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Florida Folklore
Negro Legends
Rose Shephard
December 13, 1938.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

M. N. McCullough

2581 St. Johns-ave.,

Jacksonville, Florida.

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Mr. McCullough is a native of Brunswick, Georgia, where he was reared and passed his boyhood and young manhood, and most of the following story relates to that section of Georgia, with its adjacent islands - St. Simons, Jekyll, and Cumberland Island and Amelia Island, on Nassau Sound:

"When I was a child, there was a story handed down of the slave ship "Wanderer" - the last to land on the Georgia coast before slaves were considered contraband. It met with so much opposition from the authorities in control of the port, that the shipmaster put about without attempting to unload and dispose of his cargo of blacks, with the expressed destination of Mobile, Alabama.

"However, a storm came up, the ship was badly wrecked, and most of the slaves escaped, some taking shelter on Jekyll Island. There were three, a man and two negro women who made their way to Brunswick, remarkable in their way, who became familiar in the early background of this Georgia city. It is said they were native Africans, and I believe it.

"The man was immense - about six feet-six or seven inches tall, and big in proportions - known as "General Fluker." He had a tapeworm, and his appetite was enormous. At the county fair and other similar

affairs, "General Fluker" was known to consume a crate of eggs - or what constituted a crate of eggs in those days - and other food in proportion.

"He had a big wagon tire which he would sling away from him with such control of his arm muscles that the wheel would roll an immense distance, or so it seemed to our young eyes, and at a certain point it would face about and come back to him. In the negro section, it was thought this was some kind of "magic," but General Fluker" gaged the performance by the proper control of his arm muscles. All the other negroes were afraid of him, and one night he was followed to his shanty home and murdered by another negro who thought a streak of continued bad luck was due to a conjure or spell put on him by "General Fluker."

"One of the women was known as "Red-eye Jane." Evidently a hemorrhage had broken a blood vessel in her right eye, and it was always fiery red, hence the name applied to her.

"Red-eye Jane was copper colored. She had a most violent temper, and no one was ever known to have bested her in an argument. She had one child, a mulatto boy. No children were terribly afraid of her, and people called her a "witch" or "old witch" because she was so mean and hateful.

"The boy grew up in Brunswick and became a stationary engineer. He was employed by people in the harbor for hoisting cargoes out of shipholds, and other such heavy work.

"The other of the three who escaped from the slave ship was an immense, very black woman, who was dubbed "Steamboat" on account of her size. She was the widest woman I have ever seen. She waddled when she walked, giving more and more the impression of a steamboat in mo-

tion.

"I remember seeing her one Easter Sunday on her way to church. Someone had given her a dress, another a parasol, and a third a corset. Her dress was about four sizes too small, but she had laced herself into it in the tight corset, and with the small parasol and the big hat like women wore in those days, she was a sight to be remembered. We began whistling like a steamboat, and calling to her, and while she got pretty mad, she did not say anything and went grandly on to church.

"These two negro women - "Red-eye Jane" and "Steamboat" supported themselves by taking in washing and doing similar work. They probably had "husbands" of a sort, and when they got tired of them, ran them off and took unto themselves others. But it was easy to live in those days, and negroes could always go to some white person who would provide them with clothing, food, and shelter if they could not take care of themselves.

"Our housekeeper, when I was a young man, had her own little three-room house in the rear of the "big house." She was paid \$2.50 a week for her work, while her food, clothing, and household things were given her.

"I was employed in my father's shipping office, receiving \$15.00 per week, which was considered an excellent salary for those times, so all things considered, the housekeeper was paid as well for her services as I was for mine, and the proportion is not out of line with such employment of the present day."

GLYNN COUNTY:

"In Glynn County there were many rice plantations. - on Butler's Island, St. Simons, Catherine's, - on the Altamaha, and at Darien.

"There were various tribes represented among the negroes, who for the most part, were about three generations removed from their African ancestors. There was a small race, known as "Guineas." Another was of an immense size, like "General Fluker," and "Steamboat."

"They talked with each other in the "Gullah" language, which was unintelligible to the white people.

"Another race was the "Geeche," a light colored tribe, but not mulatto.

"I do not remember any strange beliefs or legends - but they all believed in three good meals a day. They did however, wear charms of different kinds to ward off disease - a coin with a hole in it on a string around the left ankle; a bag of asafoetida on a string around the neck - the first to ward off "rheumatiz" and the other to keep them from "ketchin" things like fevers and small-pox. They were all superstitious and belived in "conjures."

"But they were the most loyal and simple people in the world - they were like good and bad children. They were not thieves, and did not break in and steal like negroes of today, but if they needed anything they saw lying around not in use, they would "appropriate" it. This was a trait well known, and nothing was thought of it.

"Even after the War, they were still loyal and affectionate, and when they later drifted into commercial lines and became stevedores, etc., they never moved into town from the plantation. I had occasion to work with them for many years in my father's shipping business, and they were the best laborers we have ever had in the south.

"There are two men in Brunswick - Mr. Nat. Nightingale, a little younger than I am, and Mr. Henry F. Dubignon, eight or ten years older than myself, who has been clerk of the Court in Glynn County. They can tell a lot.

"Mr. Dubignon is the son of one of the owners of Jekyll Island, which was sold to the Jekyll Island Club, one of the most exclusive of its kind in the country. He is the last of his family.

"The Nightingales owned "Dungeness" on Cumberland Island.

"I could not tell of any of the folklore of Amelia Island, Cumberland Island, Fernandina, or Nassau Sound, but he probably could. However, a letter would do no good. Someone would have to call on each of these gentlemen, and I am sure they would gladly give any information asked for.

"I could talk without limit of Glynn County - it is a paradox - it has never grown, is backward in some things, yet a leader, and when it comes to comparison with other counties, Glynn always takes the blue ribbon. This county has won the highest award for three years in Public Health work and accomplishment, and the trophy is now theirs for "keeps."

"The islands along the Georgia coast have always been alluring and full of romance and legend. Captain Wiley, of Brunswick, has written several books about this section, all worth careful reading. His people, the Wileys, the Coopers, the Spauldings, Captain Mallory - are all a part of the Islands and their history. They were opposed to slavery, and papers in possession of the family show they wrote to England to send them freedmen to work their rice and cotton plantations, as they were opposed to slavery. A Union officer in Brunswick, a very wealthy man, wagered Captain Wiley his people wanted slavery, for the low cost labor to man their plantations, and offered to pay for the

publication of the book, if Captain Wiley could prove his contention. The book was written, the evidence was conclusive, and the Union officer paid all the bills.

"These Islands also featured Sea Island cotton, a long staple cotton that brought top prices in all markets, and Brunswick was a busy port in cotton shipping season.

RICE PLANTATION:

"The last rice plantation - "Eborland" - was laid out on St. Simon's Island, and cost \$600,000. to install. It really took considerable engineering to install flood control measures - high banks to hold the Altamaha River in check at flood season - a series of large and small ditches in which the rice was planted where the water must be regulated to stand within two inches of the top of the grain as the shaft grew. In August when the rice bloomed, the flood gates were lowered, the water drained out, and the grain matured. Then the harvesting! No wonder rice planters were wealthy, they had to be."

"A Philadelphia man, by the way, bought acreage on St. Simons and laid out "Eborland," where hundreds of acres were planted to rice, but it has gone also, with the glory and glamour of the early days of the South."