

August 1937

Interview, Victoria Harris and Zelia Sweett, Stories of Ex-Slaves, August 17, 1937

Victoria Harris

Zelia Sweet

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/formerly_enslaved_narratives

Recommended Citation

Harris, Victoria; Sweet, Zelia; and Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida, "Interview, Victoria Harris and Zelia Sweett, Stories of Ex-Slaves, August 17, 1937" (1937).

Narratives of Formerly Enslaved Floridians. 26.

https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/formerly_enslaved_narratives/26

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Floridiana - General at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Narratives of Formerly Enslaved Floridians by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

11478

SUPPLEMENTARY INSTRUCTIONS #9-E

TO

THE AMERICAN GUIDE MANUAL

FOLKLORE

STORIES FROM EX-SLAVES

INTERVIEW WITH:

VICTORIA HARRIS

**Zelia Sweett
New Smyrna, Florida**

August, 17, 1937

STORIES OF EX-SLAVES

Zelin Sweett

VICTORIA HARRIS; 551 Mary Ave., New Smyrna, Fla.
Ex-slave, 77 years old.

I wuz born in Baldwin County, Georgia, at the ole stage stables whut belonged to my master. Our house wuz about, I recon, between eight an nine miles from Milledgeville. The sixth of last goin' July I wuz 77 years ole. My mother's name wuz Nancy, she wuz born right there in Georgia. They say my daddy wuz a yankee, I doan know, but his name wuz Lee Rainwater.

I had nine sisters an five brothers. They meant to free my mother, her havin so many child'en, if the war hadn' come.

I knowed my great granma, but didn' know much about her, an my gran daddy..I doan member seein' him since the day he wuz sot free. Member seein' him rushin' round the day they give out papers or somethin', in the yard to sot em free, an that the last time. My mother's daddy come from Alabama; all the rest of my people I know anything about, wuz born in Baldwin County. I wuz born in Georgia, lived in Georgia an wuz fifty years ole fore I crossed the line to go anywhere. I cried when I come to Florida an I cried many times since.

I belonged to the Butts'es, My first ole mistis wuz named Thomas. The Butts'es wuz good as ever lived, when the slaves were whopped, she whopped em, didn' let no one else whop em.

When I wuz about five months ole, they tuok me in the big house for a kinda play toy. They put holes in my ears an gold rings in em, an when I knowed I had a hand, they had gold rings on my fingers. ~~They raised me~~ Me an two of the white child'en wuz raised together. We stayed together all the time an the white child'en they fought they cousins for me, when they pick on me.

We didn' have no quarters. Our white Folks an us all stayed in one big yard, divided by a white picket fence. Our houses right close the big house, but the oldest people wuz the closest so the mistis could step over an take care of em easy like.

Had one big garden where everything come from. Had a cook for the white folks an a cook for the colored people, an the colored folks cookin' done in the same kitchen, where ole miss looked over it all. When I wuz growin' up we raised everything we eat'bout, but rice an coffee. Gathered peas, thrash em out an put em in boxes. We had plenty rabbits an possums an things like that..went down seinin' fishin'. I never remember seein' no body ~~with~~ fish with a pole an line..we just seined em.

Had a woman to spin for the white an one for the colored. My mother spun for the colored an Aunt Cindy for the white folks. Spun cotton an wool...They sheared they own sheep an sent the wool to town, to Milledgeville, an had it carded. We card the cotton ourselves. Miss did all the weavin'. Had they own geese for feather beds. All the old colored women had feather beds Miss give em. Our white folks good folks. Everybody had shoes an wore homespun close.

Masters name wuz Arthur Butts, he never did nothin', wuz just around. He didn' have nothin' to do with us, Mistis do everything. We called Mistis "Budda". Master had no black child'en round ~~there~~ there. I slep many times in cold weather with my Mistis. Master

wake up an say, "here this chile in here tween us", an Mistic reach down an pull me up an say, "Oh well, she must be lonesome".

The mistis daughter learned me to knit, an make button holes, an spin, an I aint forgot em. I tells anybody, an I doan tell it underneath cover, or no same or nothin. I had as good a mistis as ever breathed. I had good white people. I aint never had a white person whop me. But she had as mean a daughter as ever lived an her name wuz Miss Mary.

The white folks had a big frame house. Musta had near 200 acres of land, it wuz fo' miles from where we live to Miss Sally's an thar wuz on the same plantation. Doan know how many slaves. Had a saw mill..fo' stories..an a grist mill. It wuz a big plantation. Ever so many yankees worked in the mill. Every time we go down there we git a wooden tub. In Georgia the houses high enough to sweep under every time you sweep the yard...down here they too low.

Go to work soon when it got good light, an come in when it gits too hot, an go back in the ~~afternoon~~ evenin' 'bout two o'clock. Work from sun to sun. White folks good I tell you..they want they slaves to last.

I ain't know nothin' 'bout no overseers, our white folks never had none. Mistis say the slaves whut work wuz all growed an if they didn' have 'nough sense to do they work, whoppin em wouldn' do no good.

My mistis George Butts, when her child'en married, she give em a family of slaves. Didn' separate em. But I had a auntie once ~~that~~ tried to go to Texas with her kin, whut wuz goin' with some of the family movin' there. She only got as far as the river, an they brought her back. Moest slaves punished for, wuz goin' out without

a pass. Patter-roller git em an whop em. I reckon they wuzant much travelin' done in them days.

Young Master an Mistis teach em to read an write. I aint never been teached. First I wuz too little, an then when my brothers an sisters went to school, I wuz out in the fiel's. Uncle Martin learned me tho.

When I wuz a chile I never seen no baptizin' in a rivers, just in a pool in the back yard. Went to the white folks church. My favorite song is "On Jerdan's Stormy Banks I Stand".

When Mistis died she sent for all her ole slaves to come. Her child'en were to walk next the hearse an the slaves to come next. Then all the other folks. The white folks did'n like it, but Miss Mary say she gonna have it just like her mother say. So we all went.

When I wuz a sinner I tole tall tales an riddles an such. Since I got religion all that went from me...just like that. But I remember one we usta tell about, "As I wuz goin' over London Bridge, I met a man, if I'd tell his name, I'd be to blame, for in this riddle I've told his name five times".

They usta talk about "raw head an bloody bones", but I doan remember much cept I wuz scared to death...When I went out at night I shut my eyes, so the ghose couldn' find me by they whites.

Each plantation had a special call for whensomethin' wuz wrong or to call in the people. Ours had a big steel whut you beat. One next us had a bell, an one south of us had a whistle like. Know any time just whut plantation wuz callin' they folks.

The funniest story ever happened to me, happened just after they put the trains in to Millegeville.. I want soared of no trains, seed em all the time, but I never been on one twell the day they wuz havin' a big camp meetin' an I decided to go, Got on the train an

they wuz a ole lady settin' next to me. She done put her haid down when the train start an after a while she look up at me an say, " Sis, is she done lit yet?" She thourht the train done flew in the air. I didn' know whut to think, but I didn' ask no questions to show off my foolishness like she done. That sho wuz a big day.

Usta git may apple root for sickness, an it sho work you clean. Use black snake root for fever. Pull up scurfy grass, wash it twell you wash all the dirt off, boil it an it sweat the fever off. Got toothache weed, dried the leaves, an pounded it up, put it in a ole cob pipe an smoke it. For fever they mostly use slippery elm bark, boil it an drink the tea. Star grass, it fine for dissentery. Dry the roots, ring em in yo hands an pour boilin water over em.

We usta wear asafetida an garlic in a bag round our neck to keep off sickness until after I come out the country an learned some sense. Every house up where I come frum had red onions settin' round in it, to take up diseases. Never eat them onions, they poison throw em out.

Mo'ist I know 'bout the war wuz when they started burnin' up things, an we went round sass'n' em, we didn know the danger twell one of em (the yankees) slapped the baby out Aunt Kitty's lap. Yes' em, Aunt Kitty, she had a little baby an this artillium man asked her whut her baby name. She say it name, "Jeff Davis", He slap it out her lap an said, "Jeff Davis wuz a fool".

On the other side of the saw mill wuz whut they called "the mountain", an it wuz the first place we seen the fire. An then they set the saw mill afire. When they come to our house, we child'en wuz out on the scrub oaks playin' "ridey horse". Looks up an see every-thing blue comin' up the road. They rid up in my mother's house an up in the kitchen of the white folks house on they horses. Then they

set the barns afire, Lord they done the wrong thing, we commenced a sassin' right then. Would all get behind the yankees an sass em out. All the colored child'en mocked an sang 'bout,

"Lincoln set in a big arm chair, an Davis on a stool,

Lincoln rid a big bay horse, an Davis rid a mule."

all like that.

They camped right close the house. When the soldiers change they close, us child'en git in they things. Ole Miss say keep away or we git lice on us, but we didn' know nothin' 'bout lice an we kep' on sneakin up there. Once when we went up to the yankee camp I foun' a big roll of money, but we didn' know whut it wuz, so we used it to plaster our play house on the porch. Miss find us an ask where we got the pretty paper? She took it all off an give us cloth pieces to fix our house. I never knowed how much it wuz, until I got married. Saw a man in town git a bundle just like I foun', done up the same with three lubber bands round it, an they tol him they give him the whole bale o money, they doan want to split it. I doan know how much money wuz in a bale, but it sho wuz a heap.

I doan remember so much bout the war, but I can remember I know as good the day I wuz set free, as I got up this mawnin'. My Mistis wuz fixin' to put in a piece of cloth. (in the loom) Two of the white child'en an me wuz helpin'. There wuz a big yard an the upper part of the yard wuz the office for the stables. My cousin go down an git the mail an bring it to the house. Everybody come out an they would be jumpin' an laughin' an goin' on, an we would mock the yankees what wuz there. Ole Mistis never said nothin' but, "you neednt be so frisy 'round here ; the yankees will soon make a bowl of soup out of you ". They got to talkin' about it, that they wuz free. All this, that an nother. My mother tole me to go git

my close. I commenced cryin' an the white child'en commenced cryin'. I didn' know no better. I done seen em do so much until I didn' know what they wuz goin' to do.

Only Ku Klux I knowed about wuz on the Dixon place where I stayed to wait on ole Miss Dixon, whut wuz in a wheel chair. They wuz a boy whut stayed there whut had a out fit in his room, I saw it Mr Dixon had a mule with a split foot. A neighbor name Miss Sarah wuz boun' to run down the Ku Klux whut come to her plantation. They foun' them mule tracks, an know it wuz Mr Dixon's mule. He say he hadn' had that mule out, but they wuz his mule tracks all right. Went home an looked in thet boys room an foun' all his cadillies or what ever you call em. Mr Dixon tole him to git or he'd kill im.

First time I married wuz the 18 of August, but I doan know what year . I wuz 'bout 14 or 15 years ole. Had a cruel stepfather an married to git away from a hard taskmaster. Married out in the yard, had a hog, a goat, an uh sheep carcass on the barbecue pit, an 19 chickens, an no cakes than I could count. Married at noon just after the train come in. Had a big doin's lasted on to the next day. Preacher wuz down sick so the magistrate married us. I married in my mistis close, her weddin dress, an had Miss Kate's second day dress, it wuz whut you call grenadine. The weddin' dress wuz white handkerchief linen.

Next time I wuz married in town by Judge Ramsey, that wuz on the 22nd fo'th satidy in September. I had seven child'en. Not two livin, an three gran child'en, an three great gran child'en. My daughter's name is Willie, an my son is John Henry Graves, he up north just doin' any thing he kin. Willie she workin' for Miss Bonnet, cookin' an keepin' house over there. I been married three times, My first husband wuz Ephriam Butts, an my next husband wuz Wesley Graves...

then I married Henry Harris...(a sigh)...he just another man.

Well, I'll tell you...I knowed we was ~~all~~ in slavery, an in Gods own time he freed us.

I joined the church cause I want a home after death. When I die I don't want to see no no hell than I see right here on this earth.

Aug, 13, 1937.