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Interview, Haints and Jules A. Frost, Slave Interview, October 20, 1937

Haints

Jules A. Frost

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

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STORIES OF FLORIDA

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H A L L E N T S

By Jules A. Frost

I cain't tell nothin' 'bout slavery times 'cept what I heard folks talk about. I was too young to remember much, but I recollect seein' my gran'ma milk de cows and do de washin'. Gran'pa was old, an' dey let him do light wuk, mos'ly fish an' hunt.

I don't 'member nothin' 'bout my own daddy. He died when I was a baby. My stepfather was Stephen Anderson, an' my mammy's name was Dorcas. He come f'm Vajiany, but my mammy borned an' raised in Wilmington. My name was Josephine Anderson 'fore I married Willis Jones. I had two half-brothers younger'n me, John Henry an' Ed, an' a half-sistah, Elsie. De boys had to min' de calves an' sheeps, an' Elsie nursed de missus' baby. I done de cookin', mos'ly, an' he'ped my mammy spin.

I was on'y five year old when dey brung me to Sanderson, in Baker County, Florida. My stepfather went t' wuk fer a turpentine man, makin' bar'ls, an' he wuk at dat job tell he drap dead in de camp. I reckon he mus'a had heart disease.

I don't recollect ever seein' my mammy wear shoes. Even in de winter she go barefoot, an' I reckon' cold didn't hurt her feet no mo'n her han's an' face. We all wore dresses made o' home-spun. The thread was spun an' de cloth wove right in our own home. My mammy an' gran'mammy an' me done it in spare time.

My weddin' dress was blue--"blue fer true." I thought it was de prettiest dress I evah see. We was married in de co't-house, an' dat be a mighty happy day fer me. Mos' folks dem days git married by layin' a broom on de flo' an' jumpin' ovah hit. Dat seals de marriage, an' at de same time, brings 'em good luck.

Y'see brooms keeps ha'nts away. When mean folks dies, de old dabblil sometimes don't want 'em down dere in de bad place, an' he mak witches out of 'em, an' send 'em back. One thing 'bout witches, dey gotta count ev'ything 'fore dey c'n git 'crost it. You put a broom 'crost yer do' at night, an' ol' witch gotta count ev'y straw in dat broom 'fore she kin come in.

Some folks jest hach'ly kin see ha'nts better'n othahs. Teeny, my gal kin. I reckon dat be 'cause she be'n borned wid a veil--you know, a caul, somp'n what be ovah some babies' faces when dey be borned. Folks borned wid a caul kin see sperrits, an' tell what gwine happen 'fore hit come true.

Useter worry Teeny a right smart, seein' sperrits day an' night. My husband say he gwine cure her, so he take a grain o' corn an' put hit in a bottle in Teeny's bedroom ovah night. Den he plant hit in de yuhd, an' driv plenty stakes roun' de place; an' when hit be growin' good, he put leaf-mold roun' de stalk, an' watah hit ev'y day, an' tell us don't nobody tech dat stalk o' corn. Hit raise three big years, an' w'en dey be good roastin' years, he pick 'em off an' cook 'em good an' tell Teeny eat ev'y grain off'n all three cohs. He watch 'er while she done it, an' she ain't nev' be'n worrit no mo'. She sees 'em jes' do same, but dey don't bothah her none.

Fust time I evah knowed a ha'nt to come into our quarters was w'en I was jes' big enough to go out to parties. De game w'at we useter play mos' was "spin de plate." Ev'y time I think o' dat name it gimme de shivers. One time dere was a strange young man come to a party where I was. Said he name Richard Green, an' he be'n takin' keer o' de hosses fer a rich man w'at gwine buy a plantation in dat county. He look kinda slick an' dressed-up--sorta dif'nt f'm de res', an' all de gals 'gin to cus' sheep's eyes at 'im, an' hope he gwine choose dem w'en dey staht playin' games.

Pretty soon dey 'gin playin' "spin de plate," an' hit come my tu'n fust thing. I spin hit an' call out "Mistah Green!" He jumps to de middle o' de ring to grab de plate an' "Bang!"--'bout fo' guns go off all to wunst, an' Mistah Green fall to de flo' plum daid, shot throo de haid.

'Fore we knowed who done it, de sheriff an' some mo' men jump jump down f'm de loft, where dey be hidin' an' tell us quit hollerin' an' don't be scairt. Dis man be a bad desper---you know, one o' dem outlaws, w'at kills folks. He some kind of a foreigner, an' jes' tryin' mek b'lieve he a niggah. so's dey don't fin' 'im.

Well, we didn't feel lak playin' no mo' games; an' f'ever attar dat you couldn't git no mo' niggahs to pass dat house alone attar dark. Dey said de place was ha'nted, an' ef you look throo de window any dark night, you e'd see a man in dere spinnin' de plate.

I sho' didn't nevah look in, 'cause I done seen mo' ha'nts a'ready dan I evah wants t' see ag'in. One night I was goin' t' my granny's house. Hit was jes' comin' dark, an' w'en I got to de orick an' staht 'crost on de foot-log, dere on de othah end o' dat log was a man wid his haid out off an' layin' plum ovah on his shouldah.

He look at me, kinda pitiful, an' don't say a wud; but I closely nov' wait to see w'at 'e gwine talk about. I pure flew back home, an' was so scairt I couldn't tell de folks w'at de mattah tell I set down to git my bref.

'Bothah time, not so long ago, w'en I live down in Cary, I be walkin' down de railroad track soon in de mawnin' an' 'fore I knowed it, dere was a white man walkin' 'long side o' me. I jes' thought hit some-body, but I wan't sure, so I tu'n off at de fust street an' git 'way f'm dere. De nex' mawnin' I be goin' to wuk de same time. Hit kinda foggy an' dark, so I nevah seen nobody tell I might nigh run into dis same man, an' dere he sees, 'bout half a step ahead o' me, his two han's restin' on his hoo-hin', lak dis.

I was so cluss-up to 'm I c'd see 'im jes' as plain ez I see ya. He had fingahnails dat long, all clean an' polished; he was tall, an' had on a derby hat, an' stylish, black close; w'en I walk slow, he slow down, an' w'en I stop, he stop, nevah once lookin' 'round. My feets mak a noise on de cinder, twix' de rails, but he don't me a mite o' noise. Dat de fust thing got me scairt, but I figgah I battah fin' out fer sure offen he be a sperrit; so I say, good an' loud: "Looksee-here, mistah, I jes' an ol' cullud woman, but I knows my place, an' I wisht you wouldn't walk wid me, 'counta w'at folks gwine t' say."

He nevah look 'round, no mo'n if I wan't dere, an' I cut my eyes 'round to de side to see if dey somebody I kin holler to fer help. W'en I look back he gone; gone, lak dat, 'thout makin' a sound. Den I knowed he be a ha'nt; an' de nex' day, w'en I tell somebody 'bout it, dey say he be de gemmen w'at got killed at de crossin' a spell back, an' othah folks has seen 'im, jes lak I did. Dey say dey kin

hear babies cryin' at de trestle right near dere, an' ain't nobody yit evah found 'em.

Dat ain't de onliest ha'nt I evah seen, no suh. One day I go out to de smoke-house t' git a mess o' taters. Hit be atter sundown, but still pretty light, an' w'en I gits dere, de do' be unlocked an' a big man standin' half inside. "What you doin' stealin' our taters?" I hollers at 'im, an' Pow! He gone, jes' lak dat. Did I git back t' dat house? We mighty glad t' eat grits an' cornbread dat night.

W'en we livin' at Titusville, I see my ol' mammy comin' up de road jes' ez plain ez life. I stan' on de po'ch, fixin' t' run an' meet 'er, w'en all of a sudden she be gone, jes' lak dat. I 'gin t' cry an' tell de folks I ain't nevah gwine see my mammy 'gain. An' sho' 'nuff, I nevah did. She die at Sanderson, back in West Florida, 'fore I git t' see 'er.

Does I b'lieve in witches? S-a-a-y, I knows mo' 'bout 'em dan jes' "b'lieve"--I be'n rid by one of 'em. Yes, suh, right in dis yere house. You ain't nev' be'n rid by a witch? Well, you mighty lucky. Dey come in de night, ginerly soon atter you drap off t' sleep. Dey put a bridle on yo' haid, an' a bit in yo' mouf, an' a saddle on yo' back. Den dey take off dey skin an' hang hit up on de wall. Den dey git on yuh an' some nights dey lak t' ride yuh to death. You try to holler but you eaint, 'counta de iron bit in yo' mouf, an' you feel lak somebody holdin' yuh down. Den dey ride yuh back hom an' inta yo' baid. W'en you hit de baid you jump, an' grab de kivers, an' de witch be gone, lak dat; but you know you be'n rid mighty hard, 'cause you all wet wid sweat, an' you feel plum tired out.

Some folks say you jes' dreamin', 'counta de blood stop ciro'latin'

in yo' back. Shucks! Dey ain't nevah be'n rid by a witch, er dey ain't sayin' dat.

Ol' witch dootah, he want ten dollahs fer a piece o' string, what he say some kind o' charm words ovah. Tells me t' mek a image o' dat ol' witch outa dough, an' tie dat string roun' hit neck; den w'en I bake hit in de oven, hit swell up an' de magic string shet off her bref. I didn't have no ten dollah, so he say effen I git up fi' dollah he mek me a "hand"--you know, what cullud folke calls a "jack." Dat be a charm whut will keep de witches away. Yassuh, I knows how t' mak 'em, but dey don't do no good 'thout de magic wuds, an' I don't know dem. You tek a li'l pinch o' dried snake skin an' some graveyard dirt, an' some red pepper an' a lock o' yo' hair wrapped 'roun' some black rooster's feathers. Den you spit whiskey on 'em and wrop 'em up in red flannel an' sew hit inter a ball 'bout dat big. Den you hang hit undah yo' right armpit, an' ev'y week, you give hit a drink o' whiskey, t' keep hit strong an' pow'ful.

Dat keep de witches f'm ridin' yuh; but nary one o' dese charms wuk wid dis ol' witch. I got a prit-tee good idee who she is, an' she got a charm pow'fuller dan befe dem. But she cain't git crost flaxseed, not tell she count ev'y seed. You don't b'lieve dat? Huh! I reckon I knows--I done tried it out. I gits me a li'l bag o' pure fresh flaxseed, an' I sprinkle hit all roun' de baid; den I put some 'punto de mattress, unnder de sheet. Den I goes t' baid an' sleeps lak a baby, an' dat ol' witch don't bothah me no mo'.

On'y oncet. Soon's I wake up, I light a lamp an' look on de flo' an' dere, side o' my baid was my dress, layin' right ovah dat flaxseed, so's she o'd walk ovah on de dress, big ez life. I snatch up de dress

an' throw hit on de bald; den I got t' sleep, an' I ain't never be'n
bothah no mo'.

Some folks read de Bible back'ards t' keep witches f'm ridin'
'em, but dat don't do me no good, 'cause I caint read. But flaxseed
wurk so good I don't be studyin' night-ridin' witches no mo'.