

Taken from **SLAVE NARRATIVES, A folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews With Former Slaves**, TYPE WRITTEN RECORDS PREPARED BY THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT 1936 – 1938 ASSEMBLED BY THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PROJECT WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SPONSORED BY THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 1941 This interview was written by George K. Bartlett of Kansas City, Missouri from the field copy of Kathleen Williams.

HOW DID UNCLE JOE GET HOME?

Living at 410 West Pettis Street, Sedalia, is Joseph Higginson, a pensioned Negro soldier of the Civil War, who can look back through the long vista of years and visualize slave life in Missouri, when the institution of slavery was at its most thriving and potential period.

He was born a slave on a farm near Boonville, Missouri, in 1845 if his claim of being 92 years old in the summer of 1937, is correct.

He is somewhat bent and withered and his appearance of great age is accentuated by white patriarchal whiskers below the chin, while his cheeks are clean shaven; a style much in vogue during the life time of Horace Greeley.

His home, a little, four room, frame cottage, with its tiny front porch set close against the picket fence enclosing the lot, mirrors somewhat the deterioration age has placed upon its occupant. Both house and fence are weather beaten, gray from age and lack of paint.

“Could you and would you tell about slavery days?” he was asked.

“Yes Ma’am, “ he courteously and smiling replied, the smile revealing big, strong teeth. “Yes, indeed. Would you all step in the house and set? I am so happy to have company.”

He selected the dining room, which is also the comfortably furnished living room, as the place to “set and talk”. In this room is an oak dining table, chairs and a china closet, through the glass doors of which may be seen attractively decorated dishes, some of them of very old pattern. There is also an old fashioned combination desk and bookcase, and a chest of drawers. The windows are adorned with curtains and drapes of good quality.

The clean condition of the interior was a revelation of a 92 year old Negro man’s desire and ability to keep house, and keep it clean. He lives alone, his wife having died many years ago.

There is in the appearance of this ancient Negro with shoulders now bowed; the dark brown skin, extending across the bald head; the large nose; immense teeth; shaven cheeks below which is a mat of white whiskers encircle the throat, like the ruff on a condor’s neck; there is in his appearance that which stamps him at once as the living bridge between the present day’s civilization and a dim past; the knowledge of which exists today in the memories of but few persons.

As he talked, strange sights, scenes and cultures were told, sometimes with words that have changed much in meaning.

This is his story:

“Old man Higginson was my master. We lived on a farm and dere was a big family of us. I is the only one left. The farm laid just below the Lamine and Missouri Rivers, and I can’t tell exactly where it was. Everybody called us ‘free niggahs’ – ‘cause Higginson slaves was treated so good. Yes, ma’am. My mammy lived to be 80 years old – and didn’t have a gray hair in her haid. She was part Black Hawk Indian, - and I show it in me too.

Then as his thoughts raced back to slavery days, the pictures of youth crowded thick and fast, and he burst forth into a half chanted description of the panorama of his memories. “I’ve seen hundreds of Indians pass thru the country, on foot. Boss man let ‘em have a shack

overnight. Next mawning day set out of foot, and take up de road, one behind the other. Yes, suh! Just wrapped in a blanket one behind the other. Winter and summer, and barefoot too!”

Then he told of game and game ways.

“yes suh! I done seen wild deer hop over fences, and hundreds of wild turkeys. We used to build turkey pens and dig a trench, put feed in dere and covar it ovar wid fresh and de turkeys would come to feed, and we would trap ‘em. Yes, ma’am, an I done seen 100 to 150 wild turkeys in a flock. I has dat! Lots of wild pigeons, too. I has seen a thousand geese flyin’ over in the early morning’, Then I’ve trapped quail too, in rail pens, built ten feet square. Yes, suh!

“But listen! – slaves couldn’t shoot; was a law agin it in slaves times; no slave could own or shoot a gun. We couldn’t shoot game. An’ dat come dis way. President Jackson say, ‘Keep books and guns out slaves hands if you want to keep ‘em slaves’.”

Joe Higgeson chuckled a little with a glint of humor in his eyes and changed the subject.

“Everybody made whiskey in dem days, and had little ‘stilleries all over the country, made apple and peach brandy. Good too. One day I was sent to a neighbors for brandy. I took a little taste and walked on. Den I took anoder little taste, and walked on. Den I took anoder little taste and sot down de jug. Den I took anoder little taste, and so on and so on. Pretty soon I looked up, and I nevar did know how I got to whar I’s gwinter. Nobody ever say anything about it or tell me nuffin! I guess somebody carry me whar I’s gwinter.”

He was asked if he ever remembered seeing slaves sold at Boonville.

“Yes, ma’am! “he exclaimed. “Why down at Boonville, woman and a baby was put up to be sold, and de buyer he want de woman, but he don’t want de baby, so they separated ‘em, and was getting’ ready to put ‘em on de boat for Noo Orleans, and ship ‘em down de river, and de woman she ran back to kiss de baby goodbye, and de trader picked up a whip and cracked it and shouts, “A bellerin cow will soon forget its calf”. She was sold down de river and nevar saw de baby again. Now dat was sad”. He paused and then resumed.

“One tradar, name of Henry Moore, he used to handcuff all the niggahs together till time to put ‘em on de boat for Noo Orleans. Dey always carried whips and they’d crack dem to see how far de darkies could jump. Yes, Suh!! Yes, Suh!!! Deed they Did!!!

This reminiscences tickled him mightily and he laughed heartily at thoughts of the capers the negroes cut when the whip cracked.

“An I remembers one boat load. Boat load got as far as Cairo, Illinois, and lots of de darkies jumped overboard and was drowned.”

“Were the overseers on the plantations Negroes or Whites?”

“Overseahs, white,” Higgeson replied, “Overseahs white.” A dary was the niggah driver. Darkies didn’t ever get to go to the big house where the planter lived. De niggah driver reported to the ovahseah, and the ovaheah reported to the Boss.”

“Now this is the way with me,” Higgeson continued. “My father, who was also my boss, he kept a store, and I went to de store to take care of de children, cause de boss done send for me. Well, one time when the wah was on, some Federal soldiers come and done scared me so bad I forgot all about de chile and run home, and de soldiers burned de bridge, you had to cross befo’ you got to de store. So after dat de old man run a boat across.”

Hoping to get some idea of how Christmas was celebrated among the Negroes on the farms and plantations the aged man was asked what he remembered of Christmas, in slavery times.

“One Christmas I never goin’ to forget”, he replied.

“Jes before Christmas lots of people came to de store to buy and de groun’ was all covered wid snow. An de man what run de store was getting ready to close up, cause it was

getting dark, and close at dark a man come and wanted in and de store keeper wouldn't let him in. An it got later and later, and by and by Joseph, dats me, was sent to de store to find why de store keeper ain't come home yet and Joseph went to de store, and looked in and saw de old man on his back, his throat cut wid de blood runnin' all over de floor and \$1,400 dey knowed he had – gone. Dere was whiskey and blood runnin' all over de floor. Whiskey was cheap dem days; good whiskey, too.

“When they set the niggahs free, the boss man come out and read de papers to ‘em sayin’ dey was free. And I went to Boonville and joined de Union Army, November 23, 1863. I served in de 25th Corps, Second Division under General Whitsell. I was in de last battle of de war at Palmetto Ranch, Texas, on de Rio Grande, just 25 miles from de Gulf. When I was discharged from de army to go home, I thought – why I have no home, where shall I go? Den I decided to go back to Boonville. All my family was scattered.

“But I was lucky. Someone had started to build a shack, and had not finished it. I got permission to finish it and picked up building material here and dere, and made it into a home. I never been without a home since. My wife and I lived together 61 years. She is gone now.”

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