

Florida Slave Narratives: Pretty, George

Federal Writers' Project

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George Pretty of Vero Beach and Gifford, Florida, was born a free man, at Altoona, Pennsylvania, January 30, 1852. His father Isaac Pretty was also free born. His maternal grand-father Alec McCoy and his paternal grand-father George Pretty were born slaves who lived in the southern part of Pennsylvania.

He does not know how his father came to be born free but knows that he was told that from early childhood.

In Altoona, according to George, there were no slaves during his life there but in southern Pennsylvania slavery existed for a time. His grand-parents moved from southern Pennsylvania during slavery but whether they bought their freedom or ran away from their masters was never known to George.

As in most of the southland, the customs of the Negro in Altoona abounded in superstition and ignorance. They had about the same beliefs and looked upon life with about the same degree of intelligence as Negroes in the south.

The north being much colder than the south naturally had long ago used coal for fuel. Open grates were used for cooking just as open fireplaces were used in the south. Iron skillets or spiders as they called them, were used for cooking many foods, meats, vegetables, pies puddings and even cakes were baked over the fire.

The old familiar, often referred to as southern ash cake, was cooked on the hearth under the grate, right in Altoona, Pennsylvania. The north because of its rapid advance in the use of modern ways of cooking and doing many other things has been thought by many people to have escaped the crude methods of cooking, but not so. George told how a piece of thick paper was placed on the hearth under the grate and corn dough put upon it to bake. Hot ashes were raked over it and it was left to cook and brown. When it had

remained a long enough time, the ashes were shaken off, the cake brushed clean with a cloth and no grit was encountered when it was eaten.

Isaac Pretty, George's father owned a large harness shop at Altoona and made and sold hundreds of dollars worth of saddles and harness to both northern and southern plantation owners. (1)

There was a constant going and coming of northern and southern owners; southern ones seeking places to buy implements for farming and other inventions as well as trying to locate runaway slaves.

Abolitionists were active in the north and there were those who assisted slaves across the boundary lines between free and slave states.

Negroes in the north who were free and had intelligence enough saw the gravity in assisting their slave brothers in the south. Some risked their lives in spreading propaganda which they thought would aid the enslaved Negroes in becoming free.

In and around Altoona, Negroes were very progressive and appreciated their freedom, and had a great deal of sympathy for their fellows and did all they could to demonstrate their attitude toward the slave traffic. Money was solicited and freely given to help abolitionists spread propaganda about freedom.

It is striking to note the similarity of living conditions in Pennsylvania and Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas. Ex-slaves who live in Florida now but who came here since the Emancipation of the Negro tell of living conditions of their respective states; they are very similar to the modes of living in Altoona, during slavery. (2)

Soap was made from grease and lye just as it was made in the south. Shin-plaster (paper money similar to green back, which represented amounts less than a dollar) were very plentiful and after the Civil War confederate money of all kinds was as so much trash.

Food stuffs which were raised on the farm at Altoona were: corn, peanuts, white potatoes and peas. Enough peas were raised to feed the stock and take care of the family for 18 months. Potatoes were raised in large quantities and after they were dug they were banked for the winter. By banked, it is meant, large holes were dug in the cellar of the house or under the house or inside of an outhouse; pine straw was put into this pit and the potatoes piled in; more straw was laid on and more potatoes piled in until all were in the pit. Dirt was shoveled over the lot and it was left until for using them. Northern people used and still use a large amount of white, or Irish potatoes.

In curing hides of cows for making leather the same method was employed as that used in the south. Hides were first salted and water was poured over them. They were covered with dirt and left to soak a few days. A solution of red oak bark was made by soaking the bark in water and this solution was poured over the hides. After it soaked a few days the hair was scraped off with a stiff brush and when it dried leather was ready for making shoes and harness.

George's father dealt extensively in leather and when he could not get enough cured himself, he bought of others who could supply him.

Now George's mother was very handy at the spinning wheel and loom. He remembers how the bunch of cotton was combed in preparation for spinning. Cards with teeth were arranged on the spinning wheel and the mass of cotton was combed through it to separate it into fibers. The fibers were rolled between the fingers and then put upon the spinning wheel to be spun into thread. As it was spun, it was wound upon spools. After the spools were filled they were taken off and put on the loom. Threads were strung across the loom some above others and the shuttle running back and forth through the threads would make cloth. All that was done by hand power. A person working at the loom regularly soon became proficient and George's mother was one who bore the name of being a very good weaver of cloth. Most of the clothes the family wore were home spun.

Underwear and sleeping garments were made of the natural colored homespun cloth. When colored cloth was wanted a dye was made to dip them in so as to get the desired color. Dyes were made by soaking red oak bark in water. Another was made of elder berries and when a real blood red was desired polk berries were used. Polk berries made a blood red dye and was considered very beautiful. Walnut hulls were used to make brown dye and it was lasting in its effects.

In making dye hold its color, the cloth and dye were boiled together. After it had "taken" well, the cloth was removed from the dye and rinsed well, the rinse water was salted so as to set the color.

Tubs for washing clothes and bathing purposes were made of wood. Some were made from barrels out in tew parts. In cutting a stay was left longer on each side and holes were cut length wise in it so there would be sufficient room for all of the fingers to fit. That was for lifting the tub about.

A very interesting side of George's life was depicted in his statement of the longevity of his innocence. We may call it ignorance but it seems to be more innocence when compared to the incident of Adam and Eve as told in the Holy Bible in the book of Genesis. He was 33 years of age before he knew he was a grown man, or how life was given humans. In plain words he did not know where babies came from, nor how they were bred.

Whenever George's mother was expecting to be confined with a baby's birth, his father would say to all the children together, large and small alike, "your mother has gone to New York, Baltimore, Buffalo" or any place he would think of at the time. There was an upstairs room in their home and she would stay there six weeks. She would go up as soon as signs of the coming child would present themselves. A midwife came, cooked three meals a day, fed the children and helped keep the place in order.

In older times people taught their children to respect older persons. They obeyed everyone older than themselves. The large children

were just as obedient as the small ones so that it was not hard to maintain peace and order within any home.

The midwife in this case simply told all of the children that she did not want any of them to go upstairs, as she had important papers spread out all over the floor and did not want them disturbed. No questions were asked, she was obeyed.

George does not remember having heard a single cry the whole time they were being born in that upper room, and he said many a baby was born there. Decorum reigned throughout the household for six weeks or until their mother was ready to come down. When the time was up for mother to come down, his father would casually say, "children your ma is coming home today and what do you recon, someone has given her another baby." The children would say, almost in concert, "what you say pa, is it a boy or girl?" He would tell them which it was and nothing more was said nor any further inquiry made into the happening.

The term "broke her leg" was used to convey the meaning of pregnancy. George relates how his mother told him and his sister not to have any thing more to do with Mary Jones, "cause she done broke her leg." George said "Ma taint nothin matter wid Mary; I see her every day when the bell rings for 12; she works across the street from Pa's shop and she and me sets on the steps and talks till time fur her to go back to work." His mother said, "dont spute me George, I know she is broke her leg and I want yall to stay way frum her." George said, "Ma I aint sputing you, jes somebody done misinform you dats all. She aint got no broke leg, she walks as good as me." His mother said "then I'm a lie." George quickly replied, "no ma, you aint no lie, but somebody done told you wrong."

Nothing was said further on the question of Mary Jones until that same evening when Isaac Pretty came home from the shop. The mother took him aside and told him of how she had been disputed and called a lie by George and added that she wanted George whipped for it.

"Come here George," came a commanding voice shortly after the mother and father had been in conference. George obeyed and his

father took him apart from the family and locked himself and George in a room. He said "George I know I haven't done right by not telling you, you are grown. You are 33 years old now and I want to tell you some things you should know." George was all eyes and ears, for he had been told when previously asked how old he was, "I'll tell you when you get grown." That was all he had heard from his parents for years and he was just waiting for him to tell him. His father told him how babies were born and about his mother confining herself in the upper room all the different times when she expected babies. He told him that his mother had never been out of town to Boston or Baltimore on any of the past occasions. In fact he told George all he knew to tell him.

Now the startling thing about it all is that when he had finished giving the information about babies he said, "Now George your mother told me that you called her a lie today." George at once said, "Pa I didn't call her a lie, I jes told someone had misinform her 'bout Mary, that she aint got her leg broke cause I see her every day." His father said "I know 'taint right to whip you fur that George but your Ma said she wanted me to whip you and I'll have to do it." That settled it. George received his first lesson in sex and received the last flogging his father ever gave him. He was now grown and could take his place as a man.

Afterwards the mother took all her daughters aside and told them the same as Isaac had told George. (That is she told the grown girls about sex life.)

George and his older sister talked the whole plan over after they got a chance and decided that since they were now grown, they did not have to give their earnings to their parents any longer. They decided to move into one of their father's houses on the place and furnish it up. They were making right good money considering the times related George, and with both of them pulling together they soon would have sufficient money saved up to buy a piece of land and start out on a plot of ground of their own.

George told his father their plans. His father asked how much money he had. He told him 200 dollars or more. His father said "you've saved 200 dollars out of what I've allowed you?" George

answered in the affirmative. His father said, "do you know how far that will go?" George said he did not, his father answered "Not far my boy."

A few days after the conversation, Isaac Pretty furnished one of his houses with the necessary equipment and let George and his sister live there. They had their own bed-rooms and each bought some food. The girl and George both cooked the meals and did the main thing they had set out to do, letting nothing stand in the way of their progress.

When a few months had passed both children had accumulated a nice sum of money. George was prepared to marry and take care of a wife. His sister Eliza, who lived with him had saved almost as much money and when she married she was an asset to the man of her choice rather than a liability.

George had close contact with nature in his early life. The close contact with his mother for 33 years had done something for George which was lasting as well as beneficial. She was a close adherent to nature. She believed in and knew the roots and herbs which cured bodily ailments. This was handed down to her children and George Pretty claims to know every root and herb in the woods. He can identify each as they are presented to him, says he.

Doctors were never used by the ordinary family when George was growing up and during his stay at Altoona. He was called in to sew up a cut place which was too much for home treatment. He was also called in to probe for a bullet but for fever or colds or even child-birth he was considered an unnecessary expense.

Herbs and roots were widely utilized in olden days and during slavery and early reconstruction. The old slave has brought his practices to this era and he is often found gathering and using them upon his friends and neighbors.

George Pretty knows that black snake root is good for blood trouble for he has used it on many a person with safety and surety. Sasafras tea is good for colds; golden rod tea for fever; fig leaves for thrash; red oak bark for douche; slippery elm for fever and

female complaint (when bark is inserted in the vagina); catnip tea is good for new born babies; sage tea is good for painful menstruation or slackened flow; fig leaves bruised and applied to the forehead for fever are very affective; they are also good to draw boils to a head; okra blossoms when dried are good for sores (the dried blossoms are soaked in water and applied to the sore and bound with clean old linen cloth); red shank is good for a number of diseases; missing link root is for colds and asthma. George said this is a sure cure for asthma. Fever grass is a purgative when taken in the form of a tea. The blades are steeped in hot water and a tea made. Fever grass is a wide blade grass growing straighter than most grass. It has a blue flower and is found growing wild around many places in Florida. It is plentiful in certain parts of Palatka, Florida.

Riding vehicles in early days were called buggies. The first one George remembers was the go cart. It had two wheels and was without a top. Only two people could ride in a go cart. The equilibrium was kept by buckling the harness over and under the horse's belly. The strap which ran under the belly was called the belly girt. There was a side strap which ran along the horse's side and the belly girt was fastened to this. Loops were put to vantage points on the side strap and through these the shafts of the cart were run. The strap going under and over the horse kept the cart from going too far forward or backward.

During George's early life plows looked very much like they do today. They had wooden handles but the part which turned the ground was made of point iron, (he could not describe point iron.) Plows were not made of cast iron or steel as they are today.

Two kinds of plows were used so far as George remembers. One was called the skooter plow and the other the turn plow. The skooter plow he describes as one which broke the ground up which had been previously planted. When the earth needed loosening up to make more fit for planting, this plow was used over the earth, leaving it rather smooth and light. The turn plow was used to turn the ground completely over. Where grass and weeds had grown, the earth needed turning over so as to thoroughly uproot the weeds and grass. The ground was usually left a while so that the weeds could

die and rot and then men with hoes would go over the ground and make it ready for planting.

When freedom came to Negroes in the slave territory, George remembers that Sherman's army drilled a long time after the Civil War had ended. He saw them right in Pennsylvania. He was much impressed with their blue suits and brass buttons and which fitted them so well. Some of the men wore suits with braid on them and they supposedly were the officers of the outfit. Negro and white men were in the same companies he saw and all were manly and walking proudly.

As George was fifteen years of age when freedom came much of which he related happened after Emancipation. He being out of the slave territory did not have as much contact with the slaves, but he lived around his grand parents who had been slaves in the southern part of the state. After slavery they moved up to Altoona, with George's parents and brought much in the way of customs to George.

Grandfather McCoy and also grandfather Pretty told of many experiences that they went through during their enslavement. The Negro and white over-seer was much in evidence down there and buying and selling of children from their parents seemed to have left a sad memory with George.

Isaac Pretty's family was large. He had seven girls and seven boys, George being the eldest. George remembers how his heart would ache when his grandfather told of the children who were torn from their mother's skirts and sold, never to see their parents again. He went into deep thought over how he would have hated to have been separated from his mother and father to say nothing of leaving his brothers and sisters. They were brought up to love each other and the thought of breaking the family ties seemed to him very cruel.

When George was told that he was grown as formerly related, he saved his money and when the great earth quake in Charleston occurred he went down there to see what it had done to the place. Before that time in 1882 he remembered having seen the first block of ice. When he got there, the Charleston people had been making

ice for a few years. It was about that time that George saw the first pair of bed springs.

George remained in Pennsylvania and other states farther north for a long time after freedom. His first trip to Florida was made in 1893. He came direct from Altoona, Pennsylvania, with a white man whose name he has forgotten as he did not remain in the man's employ very long after reaching the state.

Since that time he has farmed in and around different parts of Florida, but now he resides at Tero Beach and Gifford, Florida. He makes regular trips to Palatka, being as much at home there as in the cities on the East Coast.

George says that he has never had a doctor attend him in his life, neither while he was in Altoona, nor since he has been in Florida. He claims to be able to identify any root or herb that grows in the woods in the State of Florida having studied them constantly since his arrival here. Before coming to this state he knew all the roots and herbs around Altoona and it still acquainted with them as he makes regular visits there, since he moved away 43 years ago.

George Pretty is a dark complexioned man; about five feet three inches in height; weighs about 135 pounds and looks to be much younger than he is. When asked how he had maintained his youth, he said that living close to nature had done it together with his manner of living. He does not dissipate, neither does he drink strong drink. He is a ready informant. Having heard that only information of slavery was wanted, he volunteered information without any formality or urging on the part of the writer.

Source:

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