

# Florida Slave Narratives: Lee, Randall

Federal Writers' Project

**1937**

Randall Lee of 500 Branson Street, Palatka, Florida, was born at Camden, South Carolina about seventy-seven years ago, maybe longer.

He was the son of Robert and Delhia Lee, who during slavery were Robert and Delhia Miller, taking the name of their master, as was the custom.

His master was Doctor Miller and his mistress was Mrs. Camilla Miller. He does not know his master's given name as no other name was ever heard around the plantation except Doctor Miller.

Randall was a small boy when the war between the states broke out, but judging from what he remembers he must have been a boy around six or seven years of age.

During the few years he spent in slavery, Randall had many experiences which made such deep impressions upon his brain that the memory of them still remains clear.

The one thing that causes one to believe that he must have been around seven years of age is the statement that he was not old enough to have tasks of any importance placed upon him, yet he was trusted along with another boy about his own age, to carry butter from the plantation dairy two miles to the 'big house.' No one would trust a child younger than six years of age to handle butter for fear of it being dropped into the dirt. He must have at least reached the age when he was sent two miles with a package and was expected to deliver the package intact. He must have understood the necessity of not playing on the way. He stated that he knew not to stop on the two-mile journey and not to let the butter get dirty.

Randall had the pleasure of catching the pig for his father for Doctor Miller gave each of his best Negro men a pig to raise for himself and family. He was allowed to build a pen for it and raise and fatten it for killing. When killing time came he was given time to butcher it and grind all the sausage he could make to feed his family. By that method it helped to solve the feeding problem and also satisfied the slaves.

It was more like so many families living around a big house with a boss looking over them, for they were allowed a privilege that very few masters gave their slaves.

On the Miller plantation there was a cotton gin. Doctor Miller owned the gin and it was operated by his slaves. He grew the cotton, picked it, ginned it and wove it right there. He also had a baler and made the bagging to bale it with. He only had to buy the iron bands that held the bales intact.

Doctor Miller was a rich man and had a far reaching sight into how to work slaves to the best advantage. He was kind to them and knew that the best way to get the best out of men was to keep them well and happy. His arrangement was very much the general way in that he allowed the young men and women to work in the fields and the old women and a few old men to work around the house, in the gin and at the loom. The old women mostly did the spinning of thread and weaving of cloth although in some instances Doctor Miller found a man who was better adapted to weaving than any of his women slaves.

Everyone kept his plantation under fence and men who were old but strong and who had some knowledge of carpentry were sent out to keep the fence in repair and often to build new ones. The fences were not like those of today. They were built of horizontal rails about six or seven feet long, running zig-zag fashion. Instead of having straight line fences and posts at regular points they did not use posts at all. The bottom rails rested upon the ground and the zig-zag fashion in which they were laid gave strength to the fence. No nails were used to hold the rails in place. If stock was to be let in or out of the places the planks were unlocked so to speak, and the stock allowed to enter after which they were laid back as before.

Boys and girls under ten years of age were never sent into the field to work on the Miller plantation but were required to mind the smaller children of the family and do chores around the "big house" for the mistress and her children. Such work as mending was taught the domestic-minded children and tending food on the pots was allotted others with inborn ability to cook. They were treated well and taught 'manners' and later was used as dining room girls and nurses.

Randall's father and mother were considered lucky. His father was overseer and his mother was a waitress.

Doctor Miller was a kind and considerate owner; never believed in punishing slaves unless in extreme cases. No overseer, white or colored could whip his slaves without first bringing the slave before him and having a full understanding as to what the offense was. If it warranted whipping them it had to be given in his presence so he could see that it was not given unmercifully. He indeed was a doctor and practised his profession in the keeping of his slaves from bodily harm as well as keeping them well. He gave them medicine when they did not feel well and saw to it that they took needed rest if they were sick and tired.

Now, Robert Lee, Randall's father, was brought from Virginia and sold to Doctor Miller when he was a young man. The one who sold him told Doctor Miller, "Here's a nigger who wont take a whipping. He knows his work and will do it and all you will need to do is tell him what you want and its as good as done." Robert Lee never varied from the recommendation his former master gave when he sold him.

The old tale of corn bread baked on the hearth covered with ashes and sweet potatoes cooked in like manner are vivid memories upon the mind of Randall. Syrup water and plenty of sweet and butter milk, rice and crackling bread are other foods which were plentiful around the cabin of Randall's parents.

Cows were numerous and the family of Doctor Miller did not need much for their consumption. While they sold milk to neighboring plantations, the Negroes were not denied the amount necessary to

keep all strong and healthy. None of the children on the plantation were thin and scrawny nor did they ever complain of being hungry.

The tanning yard was not far from the house Doctor Miller. His own butcher shop was nearby. He had his cows butchered at intervals and when one died of unnatural causes it was skinned and the hide tanned on the place.

Randall as a child delighted in stopping around the tanning yard and watching the men salt the hide. They, after salting it dug holes and buried it for a number of days. After the salting process was finished it was treated with a solution of water and oak bark. When the oak bark solution had done its work it was ready for use. Shoes made of leather were not dyed at that time but the natural color of the finished hide was thought very beautiful and those who were lucky enough to possess a pair were glad to get them in their natural color. To dye shoes various colors is a new thing when the number of years leather has been dyed is compared with the hundreds of years people knew nothing about it, especially American people.

Randall's paternal grandparents were also owned by Doctor Miller and were not sold after he bought them. Levi Lee was his grandfather's name. He was a fine worker in the field but was taken out of it to be taught the shoe-makers trade. The master placed him under a white shoemaker who taught him all the fine points. If there were any, he knew about the trade. Dr. Miller had an eye for business who could make shoes was a great saving to him. Levi made all the shoes and boots the master, mistress and the Miller family wore. Besides, he made shoes for the slaves who wore them. Not all slaves owned a pair of shoes. Boys and girls under eighteen went bare-footed except in winter. Doctor Miller had compassion for them and did not allow them to suffer from the cold by going bare-footed in winter.

Another good thing to be remembered was the large number of chickens, ducks and geese which the slaves raised for the doctor. Every slave family could rest his tired body upon a feather bed for it was allowed him after the members of the master's family were supplied. Moss mattresses also were used under the feather beds and slaves did not need to have as thick a feather bed on that

account. They were comfortable though and Randall remembers how he and the other children used to fall down in the middle of the bed and become hidden from view, so soft was the feather mattress. It was especially good to get in bed in winter but not so pleasant to get up unless 'pappy' had made the fire early enough for the large one-room cabin to get warm. The children called their own parents 'pappy' and 'mammy' in slavery time.

Randall remembers how after a foot-washing in the old wooden tub, (which, by the way, was simply a barrel cut in half and holes cut in the two sides for fingers to catch a hold) he would sit a few minutes with his feet held to the fire so they could dry. He also said his 'mammy' would rub grease under the soles of his feet to keep him from taking cold.

It seemed to the child that he had just gone to bed when the old tallow candle was lighted and his 'pappy' arose and fell upon his knees and prayed aloud for God's blessings and thanked him for another day. The field hands were to be in the field by five o'clock and it meant to rise before day, summer and winter. Not so bad in summer for it was soon day but in winter the weather was cold and darkness was longer passing away. When daylight came field hands had been working an hour or more. Robert Lee, Randall's father was an overseer and it meant for him to be up and out with the rest of the men so he could see if things were going allright.

The Randall children were not forced up early because they did not eat breakfast with their 'pappy'. Their mother was dining-room girl in her mistress' house, so fed the children right from the Miller table. There was no objection offered to this.

Doctor Miller was kind but he did not want his slaves enlightened too much. Therefore, he did not allow much preaching in the church. They could have prayer meeting all they wanted to, but instructions from the Bible were thought dangerous for the slaves. He did not wish them to become too wise and get it into their heads to ran away and get free.

There was talk about freedom and Doctor Miller knew it would be only a matter of time when he would loose all his slaves. He said to

Randall's mother one day, "Delhia you'll soon be as free as I am." She said. "Sho' nuf massy?" and he answered. "You sure will." Nothing more was said to any of the slaves until Sherman's army came through notifying the slaves they were free.

The presence of the soldiers caused such a comotion around the plantation that Randall's mind was indelibly impressed with their doings.

The northern soldiers took all the food they could get their hands on and took possession of the cattle and horses and mules. Levi, the brother of Randall, and who was named after his paternal grandfather, was put on a mule and the mule loaded with provisions and sent two miles to the soldier's camp. Levi liked that, for beside being well treated he received several pieces of money. The federal soldiers played with him and gave him all the food he wanted, although the Miller slaves and their children were fed and there was no reason for the child to be hungry.

Levi Lee, the grandfather of young Levi and Randall, had a dream while the soldiers were encamped round about the place. He dreamed that a pot of money was buried in a certain place; the person who showed it to him told him to go dig for it on the first rainy night. He kept the dream a secret and on the first rainy night he went, dug, and found the pot of money right where his dream had told him it would be. He took the pot of money to his cabin and told no one anything about it. He hid it as securely as possible, but when the soldiers were searching for gold and silver money they did not leave the Negro's cabin out of the search. When they found the money they thought Levi's master had given him the money to hide as they took it from him. Levi mourned a long time about the loss of his money and often told his grandchildren that he would have been well fixed when freedom came if he had not been robbed of his money.

"Paddyroles" as the men were called who were sent by the Rebels to watch the slaves to prevent their escaping during war times, were very active after freedom. They intimidated the Negroes and threatened them with loss of life if they did not stay and work for their former masters. Doctor Miller did not want any of his slaves

treated in such manner. He told them they were free and could take whatever name they desired.

Robert Lee, during slavery was Robert Miller, as were all of the doctor's slaves. After slavery was ended he chose the name Lee. His brother Aaron took the name Alexander not thinking how it looked for two brothers of the same parents to have different surnames. There are sons of each brother living in Palatka now, one set Lees and the others, Alexander.

Randall, as was formerly stated, spent a very little time in slavery. Most of his knowledge concerning customs which long ago have been abandoned and replaced by more modern ones, is of early reconstruction days. Just after the Civil War, when his father began farming on his own plantation, his mother remained home and cared for her house and children. She was of fair complexion, having been the daughter of a half-breed Indian and Negro mother. Her father was white. Her native state was Virginia and she bore some of the aristocratic traits so common among those born in that state of such parentage. She often boasted of her "blue blood Virginia stock."

Robert Lee, Randall's father was very prosperous in early reconstruction days. He owned horses, mules and a plow. The plow was made of point iron with a wooden handle, not like plows of today for they are of cast iron and steel.

Chickens, ducks and geese were raised in abundance and money began accumulating rapidly for Robert and Delhia Lee. They began improving their property and trying to give their children some education. It was very hard for those living in small towns and out in the country to go to school even though they had money to pay for their education. The north sent teachers down but not every hamlet was favored with such.

Randall was taught to farm and he learned well. He saved his money as he worked and grew to manhood. Years after freedom he left South Carolina and went to Palatka, Florida, where he is today. He bought some land and although most of it is hammock land and not much good he has at intervals been offered good prices for it.

Some white people during the "boom" of 1925-26 offered him a few dollars an acre for it but he refused to sell thinking a better price would be offered if he held on.

Today finds Randall Lee, an old man with fairly good health; he stated that he had not had a doctor for years and his thinking faculties are in good order. His eyesight is failing but he does not allow that to handicap him in getting about. He talks fluently about what he remembers concerning slavery and that which his parents told him. He is between a mulatto and brown skin with good, mixed gray and black hair. His features are regular, not showing much Negro blood. He is tall and looks to weigh about one hundred and sixty-five pounds. His wife lives with him in their two-story frame house which shows that they have had better days financially. The man and wife both show interest in the progress of the Negro race and possess some books about the history of the Negro. One book of particular interest, and of which the wife of Randall Lee thinks a great deal, was written, according to her story, by John Brown. It is called "The History of the Colored Race in America." She could not find but a few pages of it when interviewed but declared she had owned the entire book for years. The pages she had and showed with such pride were 415 to 449 inclusive. The book was written in the year 1836 and the few pages produced by her gave information concerning the Negro, Lovejoy of St. Louis, Missouri. It is the same man for whom the city of Lovejoy, Illinois is named. The other book she holds with pride and guards jealously is "The College of Life" by Henry Davenport Northrop D.D., Honorable Joseph R. Gay and Professor I. Garland Penn. It was entered, according to the Act of Congress in the year 1900 by Horace C. Fry, in the office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington, D.C.

**Source:**

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