

GEORGIA JOHNSON
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GEORGIA JOHNSON
Ex-Slave—Age 74

Almost without exception the old Negroes who have given their "ricollections" have had life stories centered around one plantation. Unlike these Aunt Georgia Johnson, 74 years old, of Athens, Georgia, moved about considerably during her childhood, lived in several states and had many and varied experiences. After coming back home she is of the opinion shared by all Georgians: "Dar's no place kin tetch Georgie."

"Ma's fust name was Myra. I don't 'member what her other name was. Atter her white folkses had done died out up in Maryland, her Pa, her brudder and sister was sold off up dar, and a man named Jim Grisham brung de rest of de slaves from dat plantation down to Lexin'ton, Georgie to sell 'em. Marse Duncan Allen bought my Ma and her Mammy dar at de sale in Lexin'ton and tuk 'em to his big old plantation in South Callina.

"Ma said her didn't never see no hog meat 'til she come to dis country. Her said dey et all sorts of fishes; just went to de beach and got crabs, oysters, and swimp (shrimp) wid de hulls still on 'em, but when her done et some hog meat at Marster's plantation, her said hit sho' was good. Marse Duncan Allen give my Ma to his gal, Mist'ess Laura, for her maid. My Pa, he was Charlie Allen; he b'longed to Marse Duncan Allen too. When Mist'ess Laura done went and married Marse Blackwell of E'berton, Georgie, Marse Duncan give 'em my Pa for a weddin' present and dey fetched my Ma and Pa wid 'em to live in E'berton, Georgie. Atter dey got moved and settled, my[Pg 329] Ma and Pa dey got married. Ma, her wukked in de big house and done most of de cookin'. Pa driv' de carriage for de white folks. Marster and Mist'ess was powerful good to deir slaves.

Marster, he run a big store at E'berton, and 'sides dat he had a big plantation and a heap of Niggers too.

"On de plantation dey had big gyardens whar dey raised heaps of cabbages, potatoes, colla'd greens, turnip sallet, onions, peas, rutabagas, and pun'kins and sech lak. Dey raised plenty of chickens, tukkeys, hogs, cows and sheep, and dey wove good wool cloth on de plantation looms out of de wool f'um dem dar sheep.

"Slave quarters was just one room log cabins what was built so de corners come together to big old chimneys. Yessum, I 'members dey just had one big chimney to evvy four cabins. Dey cooked on de fireplace and had pot racks for to hang de pots on, and ovens to bake in. Us sho' could do 'way wid a heap of sweet 'tatoes what had done been roasted in de ashes. Cabins was planked up on de inside and de outside was daubed wid mud in de cracks to keep out de wind and rain. Our home-made beds, nailed to de side of de cabins, had ticks filled wid wheat straw. White folks had nice corded beds. Ma said hit was lots of trouble to keep dem cords tight. Dey had hooks for to draw 'em up tight and den peg 'em down wid wooden pegs.

"Marster allus give his Niggers passes on Sundays so as dem paddyroller folks wouldn't ketch 'em and beat 'em up, if dey went off de plantation. Niggers went to de white folks church and listened to white preachers. When Ma jined de church, dey had to break de ice in Beaver Dam Crick to baptize her. Her was so happy and shouted so [Pg 330] loud, dey had to drag her out of de crick and take her way back in de woods to keep her from 'sturbin' de rest of de folks at de baptizin'.

"I was borned in de last year of de War so I don't have no sho' 'nough ricollections 'bout dem hard times what old folks says dey had dem days. Atter de War was over, us all stayed on wid Marster for a long time. Mist'ess was moughty good to us chillun. Us played wid de white chillun, and one day Mist'ess cotch us all a-fightin', and her switched us all, but it didn't hurt. Marster used to git my sister to shout for him. I kin just see her now, a-twistin' and jumpin' and hollerin' for all de world lak grown-up Niggers done at meetin's and baptizin's, 'til she done fell out. Den Marster, he say, 'Take her to de kitchen and feed her good.'

"Pa and Marster had a fallin' out, 'cause Marster wouldn't have no settlement wid 'im. He just wouldn't give my Pa no money. Marster said us younguns still b'longed to 'im and dat us had evvything us needed, and could git anything us wanted at his store and he thought he had done 'nough for us. But my Pa said he didn't wanter take up evvything he wukked for in trade, 'cause he would lak to have some money too.

"Bout dat time Marse Pope Barrow was a gittin' up lots of Niggers to go wid him to Mis'sippi for to raise cotton out dar, whar he said dey was makin' heaps of money. Pa tuk us all and went 'long wid 'im. I just kin 'member dat place. Hit was all kivvered wid water. Marse Pope, he hired a lot of Irishmen to help dig ditches for to dreen de water

off his land. Den dey planted cotton and Pa said hit sho' was fine cotton, just a-growin' to beat de band, when[Pg 331] dem Irishmens got mad 'cause dey said Marse Pope hadn't paid 'em for deir wuk, and dey blowed up de dams and let all dat water back on de cotton. Hit was plumb ruint. Den Marse Pope, he left dar and tuk my Pa and all of us along wid him to Arkansas. Us made a big cotton crop out dar, but when all de cotton done been sold us Niggers didn't git nothin'. Ma, her had done all de cookin' for de mens what wukked for Marse Pope. His wife, Mist'ess Sallie Barrow used to come to see him and her allus brought her maid along wid her, and de maid, her stayed wid us. Ma said us chillun used to cry to go back to Georgie wid Mist'ess Sallie, 'cause her rid on one of dem boats what was run wid steam. Pa left Marse Pope 'cause he wouldn't give 'im no pay. Us sold our things and come to Memphis, Tennessee and went to farmin' for Marse Partee, and us just stayed dar long 'nough to make one crop. Whilst us was out dar, our little sister died. Just 'fore her died her said her was goin' to see God. Her told de debbil to git away f'um dar, 'cause her warn't gwine wid him. Dey put a little white dress on her and laid her out on de bed, 'til dey could make up a coffin out of plain pine wood for her. Dey just had a prayer and sung 'Hark F'um De Tomb,' and den dey buried her away in de groun'.

"Pa got his money for dat crop and den us come on back to da plantation in E'berton, Georgie, 'cause Old Marster had done been a-wantin' us back. He said he needed us, chillun and all, and us was sho' glad for to git back home. Ma done de cookin' and Pa driv' de carriage and done little jobs 'roun' de barns and hosses. Sometimes he wukked a little in de fiel's. Us chillun used to clean yards, git[Pg 332] in de wood, feed chickens and on Sundays atter dinner when dar warn't no company at de big house us would go up to de big plunder room in de attic and us would have de bestes' times wid de white chilluns, a-dressin' up in de old clothes what Mist'ess had stored away up dar. Sometimes when Marster would ketch us up dar all dressed up, he would make us come down and preach for him. Den he made us all set down 'cep' one what was to do de preachin'. Sometimes it was his own son he called on to preach to us, and dat white boy sho' told us Niggers 'bout our sins. Den dey would make my sister, Millie, sing, 'Po' Sinner Man, Done Gone Down Yonder'. One time when Marster's son was a preachin' he told all about a fight us done had once when I hit him wid a rock. He said I sho' was goin' to de debbil for dat. I just knowed Marster was gwine git atter me 'bout dat, but he just laughed and said hit warn't de fust time a preacher had done been hit wid a rock."

"Marse Deadwyler, de mayor, up at E'berton, lived on de plantation next to ours, and he had a big old deer what sho' hated chillun. Hit would try to stomp 'em to death, and us sho' did make tracks fast sometimes when dat old deer got out. And Marster had a old mule what would fight at us chillun too. One time us didn't know he was in de parstur when us went out dar to play. De gate was wukked wid draw poles and us couldn't git 'em down, so us had to crawl under a old crib house and hit was plumb dark

when Marster foun' us. Us sho' didn't go in de parstur no more lessen us knowed dat mule was fas'ened up good and tight at de barn." [Pg 333]

"One time, in de middle of de night, long atter us chillun had done gone to bed us heard grown folks runnin' 'roun', and dey told us to git up and see Mr. Deadwyler's house a burnin' up. Dat was de bigges' fire I ever seed. Blazes and sparks went way up, and dey didn't save nothin'. Us chillun got so 'cited us didn't go back to bed no more dat night."

"Niggers didn't have no church of dey own, but dey did have prayer meetin's. Dey would kindle 'em a big fire for light and to keep 'em warm, off clost to de woods, whar deir racket wouldn't 'sturb de white folks, and dey would gather 'roun' dat fire and pray. Sometimes slaves would just go off by deirselves in de woods to pray. One night when Ma was out in de woods a prayin' her heard a loud fuss back of her lak somebody was tearin' down de woods, and hit skeered her so her quit prayin' and run to de big house. Marster told her, hit was de debbil atter her."

"Pa got mad again at Old Marster 'cause still he wouldn't have no settlement wid 'im, so us left E'berton again and went back to South Callina to de old Allen place where Pa had come f'um. Den Pa bought me a doll what would dance when you wound it up, and I sho' did love dat little dancin' doll. Soon Miss Laura come to see her pa, Marse Duncan Allen, and her brung me a little doll too. Her said I needed somebody to play wid 'cause I couldn't go to school on account of my eyes. Dey was bad and I warn't 'lowed to read nothin', but Ma larnt me to do a little sewin'. I felt moughty big and grown up soon as I could make my own dresses and chemise. Dey warn't hard to make, but I was moughty proud 'cause I had done made 'em my own self." [Pg 334]

"Marse Duncan Allen didn't have no little chillun of his own den, but he sho' seed atter us. For supper us had bread and milk, wid butter and 'lasses sirup. Dey says dats 'nough for chillun at night. Us was still dar on Marse Allen's place when me and Isaac McCollie got married. De white folks said I was too young 'cause I was just 15 den, but my Ma told me I could go ahead and git married if I wanted too. Isaac's two brudders was married at de same time. Whilst de boys was gone atter licenses and de preacher, us three gals was a-waitin' up at Marse Tom Young's house whar de weddin' was to take place. Dem other two gals was so skeered dat Marse Tom's housekeeper give each one of us a glass of gin to quiet our nerves, but I warn't skeered a bit, not me, when I had a chanst to be all dressed up lak dat, in a satin striped white weddin' dress wid a long train a-trailin' off de back of it. All de ten ruffles 'roun' dat dress was aidedged wid pink and de big puffed sleeves had pink cuffs. Hit did seem an awful long time 'fore dem boys got back wid Preacher Lockhart. Us was married dar at Marse Tom's and den us went back to Marse Duncan Allen's place whar de bigges' surprise I ever had was ready for us. Marster and Mist'ess had done 'lowed dat if I just had to git married dey would do de best dey could for me. Out in de big house yard was long tables just loaded down wid everything good—chickens, barbecue, pies, and a great big weddin' cake, what my good

old Mist'ess done baked for me her own self, and den us just had de bigges' sort of time a-dancin' and frolickin' atter us et all dat good supper. Isaac's Pa said he owed him one more year 'cause he was just 19 when us got married, and all us got for dat whole year's wuk was a little corn and one heifer.[Pg 335]

"Old Marse Blackwell had done died and Miss Laura was a-beggin' my Pa to come back and wuk for her, but he wouldn't go nowhar 'til atter Marse Duncan Allen died, den he moved back to Georgie, down nigh de Jim Smith place. Den Pa got a farm whar de stockade is now. Us wukked moughty hard a-gittin' a start, and dat hard wuk made good crops and us raised most all us needed to eat—veg'tables, hogs, cows, chickens, tukkeys, and sech lak. In de fall atter us had done wukked so hard all thoo' crop time, Pa let us have cornshuckin's. Us cooked for two or three days 'fore dem cornshuckin's 'cause dere was allus a big crowd to be fed. When de big day come, fust thing us done was choose a gen'ral. He just walked 'roun' de big piles of corn and led de singin'. Somehow, I can't 'member how dat song went, but it was all 'bout corn. De gen'ral started de song slow and den got it to goin' faster and faster and de livelier de song went de faster de shucks would fly, and de more often dey would pass 'roun' de liquor. Soon as all de corn was shucked, us had de big feast wid plenty of good coffee and toddy to go wid dem good victuals us had done been cookin' up; dem chickens, all dat fresh killed hog meat and a big spread of lightbread and pies and cakes. Dem was de good old days, and dey don't have no sech grand times a helpin' each other, and a-celebratin' de harvest time no more.

"Atter Isaac died, I wukked for diff'unt white folks, cookin' and washin' 'til I married Alec Johnson. Dis time us just went to de preacher for to git de knot tied and didn't have no big weddin'. I did have on a nice white dress, but hit warn't nigh so pretty and fancy as my fust weddin' dress. A few friends come 'roun' dat night and us handed 'em out a little cake and ice cream, but dere[Pg 336] warn't no big supper.

"Bofe my husbands is done been daid and gone long ago, but I'se still got two of my chillun, my gran'chillun and four great gran'chillun. Dey's all sweet and good to me, and sees dat I has all what I needs. I done lost de sight in one eye and de other one is failin' moughty fast. I prays and prays dat de good Lord will let me see a little, what time I'se got left to live.

"One of my chillun died de fust of dis year and soon I'm gwine to jine her. I hopes you laks what I ricollected, but somehow I can't call dem old times back to mind since I done got so old, lak I use to. Come back to see me again, Honey. Good-bye."