

**Velma Bell
District #2
Augusta, Ga.**

**EX-SLAVE INTERVIEW
Uncle Shang Harris
Toccoa, Georgia (Stephens County)**

"Uncle Shang" Harris, at the age of 97, is more vigorous than many men twenty years younger. Erect and stocky, holding his white woolly head high, he retains the full favor of living. When the interviewer entered his cabin he rose from the supper table wiping from his mouth the crumbs of a hearty meal, and peered uncertainly through the gathering dark.

"Does I 'member 'bout slav'ey times?" His face relaxed into a broad smile, "G-lory, hallelujah, I sho does! I was born den and freed den. What you want know? I kin tell you all about it." He led the way to two chairs near the stove.

"My marster was Mr. Bob Alexander. He lived in Franklin County jes' dis side o' Carnesville. He treated me good—yes mam, he sho did. My marster didn't have no beatin' o' his niggers. I didn't do no work back in dem times—nuttin' but play. Me and my sister belonged to de youngest boy (dey was seven boys in dat family) and we jes' climbed trees and frolicked all de time. We had plenty in de eatin' line too.

"But law chile, eve'ybody didn't have dat. Some de marsters tied dey niggers to posts and whupped 'em till dey nigh killed 'em. Lots of 'em run away and hid in de woods. De marsters would put de dogs after you jes' like a coon. Dey'd run you and tree you"—imitating the sound of baying dogs—"oh, glory,[Pg 118] hallelujah—dat's de way dey done 'em! I'se seed bare feets all cracked up wid de cold. We don't have no cold weather now. Why, I'se seed big pine trees bust wide open—done froze, and de niggers would be out in dat kind o' weather. But dey'd ruther do dat dan stay and git beat to death. Many a night jes' 'bout dark, I'd be a-settin' in my cabin wid my ole lady (dat was after I got older) and see somebody prowlin' roun' in de bushes, and I'd know hit was some po' nigger was hidin' and didn't had nuttin' to eat. My marster nuse to say, 'Harris, when you see somebody hongry, gi' 'im sumpin' to eat'. We didn't never turn 'em down even when dey look so bad dey was right scarey.

"No'm, I never was sold. Mr. Bob nuse to say, 'I got hogs, horses, mules and cows to sell, but no niggers.' He had 'bout twenty slaves. De biggest portion of 'em stayed on de farm.

"Lots o' folks did sell dey niggers, and sometimes dey'd take yo' chile and go to Alabama or Virginia, and you wouldn't never see him no mo'. Dey kept de dark ones together and de bright ones together. Hit didn't make no diffunce 'bout families. Dey warn't no marryin' 'mongst de niggers way back in time. De marsters wanted you to increase to give 'em more niggers, but dey didn't had no marryin'. I had three wives and I got my fourth one now. Dey all treated me good.

"Dat mixed-up color in niggers come from slav'ey times. Some de marsters beat de slave women to make 'em give up to 'em.[Pg 119]

"Dey talks a heap 'bout de niggers stealin'. Well, you know what was de fust stealin' done? Hit was in Afriky, when de white folks stole de niggers jes' like you'd go get a drove o' horses and sell 'em. Dey'd bring a steamer down dere wid a red flag, 'cause dey knowed dem folks liked red, and when dey see it dey'd follow it till dey got on de steamer. Den when it was all full o' niggers dey'd bring 'em over here and sell 'em.

"No'm I never was hired out to nobody in slav'ey times. Didn't I tole you we didn't do no work? I never seed no money—not a nickel. De most money I ever seed was when my boss buried some when de Yankees was.

"We nuse to have frolics and break-downs all de time—quiltin's and finger-pickin's and dances and all sech as dat. Finger-pickin's was when we'd pick de cotton off de seeds by hand. We'd spread it down in front o' de fire place 'cause it was easier to pick when it was hot.

"Does I 'member de old songs? Hallelujah, I sho does!" The old darkey began to pat his foot and clap his hands while he sang, "Pickin' out de cotton an' de bolls all rotten", repeating the same line over and over to a sing-song melody as impossible of transcription as a bird-call. Suddenly his smiling face fell serious and the song stopped.

"But since de Lawd saved me from a life o' sin, I don't think about dem things. I don't 'member 'em much now. I been saved forty odd years." [Pg 120]

"Was that a sinful song, Uncle Shang?"

"Dat's de devil's song, dat is. A-dancin' an' a stompin' dat-a-way!

"Folks nuse to have fights sometimes at de frolics but dey didn't do no killin'. Hit ain't like dat now. Dey stob you now, but dey didn't do dat den. Somebody'd always stop 'em 'fore it got dat fur."

"Yes'm, we sung spirituals. We sung 'De good ole-time religion', an' sech as dat. I can't 'member all dem good songs now."

His middle-aged wife, washing dishes over the wood stove, struck up, "I am bound for de promise land," and he joined in with a firm voice. But neither remembered many songs distinctly.

"We didn't had no schools. Dey wouldn't let de white chillen tell us about books. One day I axed about sumpin' in a book, and one de chillen say, 'Mamma tole me not to learn you nuttin' or she'd whup me'."

Asked about holidays, Uncle Shang replied, "Thanksgiving we give thanks in de church on our knees. Warn't no slave gallery. White and colored all together and shouted together.

"Christmas we frolic and eat cake. We had serenades, too, on banjoes and old tin pans and whatever you wanted to make a noise. And a gallon o' liquor—anything you want!" with a loud laugh.[Pg 121]

"Yes, mam, I 'members when de war broke out. Hit was on a Sunday morning, jes' as clear and bright as could be. And Gen'l Lee prayed till it thundered. Jes' 'fore de sun riz he was fixin' to go to a battle. He got down on his knees and he jarred de worl'. Yes, mam, hit thundered and when de folks heered it, dey all commenced runnin' todes him wid de butts o' dey guns, and stacked de guns 'round a sweet-apple tree." Uncle Shang was not quite clear as to who had stacked the guns, but he was sure it had been done.

"I 'members when de Yankees come too. De Yankees come in—well, hallelujah!—one Friday mornin' 'bout sun-up. Mamma took a notion to go out in de syrup-cane patch, and I was settin' on de fence. I could hear dem cannons a-boomin' and de sun was a-risin' so red jes' like blood. Den I seed de Yankees a-comin' wid dey blue coats on an' all dem brass buttons jes' a-shinin'. I holler, 'Mamma—look a-yo-o-onder!' One man had a flag wid red on it—dat's for blood. One man come in a hurry and say, 'All come to de house.'

"Den he look at me a-settin' on de fence, and he say, 'Hey, boy, you mighty fat'. He talk and he talk and by dat time de yard was full o' Yankees. 'Lemme ask you sumpin', he say, 'Where's de horses?' Wid dat, he shot off a pistol—BAM!

"My boss had done took 'em off. I say, 'I don' know nuttin' 'bout 'em.'

"All dey got from our house was a big sack o' flour. Dey[Pg 122] didn't burn nuttin' o' ours. Dey say, 'You all feelin' so good, havin' a good time—we won't take nuttin.'

"De calvary was here 'fore de Yankees was. Dey had on blue coats, too. Dey make de boss haul corn all day a-Sunday to fed dey horses.

"Dey try to git de niggers to go back North wid 'em, and dey had a big crowd o' colored goin', but I wouldn't go. A fust cousin to my Dad left 'cause dey beat him so. I think he done well in de North. But I didn't want to go.

"After freedom was, some de marsters wouldn't tell you. But our marster tole us. He said, 'You free as I is. If you want to stay wid me, all right. If not, you know where to go.'

"Mistis warn't like de boss," (mimicking a precise, slightly acid voice), "She say, 'I don't want to hear of no fightin' now. You'll git your arms cut off if you fight.'

"But de boss keep her cooled down. He say, 'Arms cut off—huh! You git yo's broke off if you don't hush.'

"After freedom, we didn't work for no regular wages—jes' knock about like chillen 'round de house. I don't know how old I was den, but I warn't no chicken. After while I worked on de railroad, de fust one here, what used wood burners. I helped build it. Dey's great tall pines growin' now where dat fill was made.

"White folks nuse to travel in wagons way back in time. When dey tuk de cotton to New York dey went to Athens in de[Pg 123] wagons wid oxen or mules, and den to New York on de train. De ladies rid 'round town in carriages—Rockaways—dem low one-hoss things. De driver sat on top. He wore a big beaver hat and good clothes and heavy gloves.

"White folks had lots o' dances and eve'ything went well. People was mighty nice in dis country.

"One my young bosses was a doctor. Dey didn't give dem little pills you have now, what don't do no good. Dey made tea out o' devil's shoestring, and yerbs out de woods, and blue mass pills. When babies come, dey had mid-wives. Dey didn't do nuttin' to cut de pains—you got to have dem.

"Yes, mam, I knows 'bout cunjurs—plenty o' cunjurs. Dem cunjur-folks takes weeds and yerbs, and fixes you so you can't sleep and can't eat and bark like a dog. One man told a girl he'd fix her so green flies 'ud follow her all de time—and dey did!

"One of 'em gin me some stuff once. Yes, mam, like to killed de old pap. I had done found some money in Alabama, and another man wanted me to gi' it to him so he put sumpin' in my coffee. When I tasted dat coffee I started cussin' (I was wicked den)—I couldn't sleep—couldn't rest. My nephew said, 'Somebody done hurt you!' My father-in-law tuk it off. He made some tea out o' rattle-snake master, and I drunk dat and swallowed a silver dime. Dat tuk de cunjur off. Some says it's good to take nine silver pieces and boil 'em and drink de water.[Pg 124]

"I knows sumpin' 'bout ghoses, too, but my foots got temper in 'em and when I sees anything, I runs. People say dey ain't no sech thing, but dey is.

"Dey was a house—people couldn't live dere, but a fellow said he could go dere, so he went. Fust thing he seed a cat rarin' and pitchin' in de fireplace. Den dey was a kickin' up in de loft, and here come a big old dog a-spittin', and fire all spranglin' out. He rared and growled. Den in come a woman. He say, 'What'll you have, lady?' She say, 'Dey's ten thousand dollars buried right where I'm a-standin'.

"He stayed dere till he got it too. De devil was trying to scare him off, but she wanted him to have it.

"People nuse to bury lots o' money 'way back in time, and lots o' folks is found it.

"Good-luck and bad-luck signs, you say? Well, lemme see," The old man paused to reflect and scratch his head. "Well, de bes' luck sign is to git in wid de Lawd. Keep wid Him; He'll keep you sweet in yo' soul. God's goin' to come down de mid-air. I seen dat one time. Jesus come to me—you never seen de like of it—de chariots—oh, glory!—and de purtiest singin' you ever heered, O-oh—g-lory, hallelujah! Dat was jes' last year.

"I had a good life. I been enjoyin' myself. I enjoys myself now, but I so old now I jes' staggers over de place. Can't do no work but chop wood once in a while. I enjoys myself in prayer.

"When de relief folks fus' come here, dey wouldn't give me nuttin' but I been prayin' and glory to Jesus I been gittin'[Pg 125] little sumpin' ever since dat time.

"De way things is goin' now, it's better dan in slav'ey times, 'cause dey ain't no knockin' and beatin'. Things is gone too fur for dat now. If eve'ybody would be o' one mind and serve de Lawd, dey wouldn't be no troubles.

"I don't know whether I'll get th'ough dis winter or not. Hit was mighty cold last year, and dey warn't much fuel. But I thanks de Lawd for all He's done for me, and I'se ready to meet Him when he comes."