

Ben Leitner

Interview with Ben Leitner, 85 years old

— *W.W. Dixon, Winnsboro, S.C.*

"I see you go by de road de other day, on your way to old man Wade Jackson's house. 'Member de old fellow dat am paralyzed, de one dat lives beyond Fellowship graveyard? I was setten' in dat graveyard when you and Marse Thomas pass in de automobile. I 'quire nex' day where you was a goin', then Marse Thomas say you goin' 'round doin' sumpin' 'bout old slaves and 'spect you'd like to see me. So here I is.

"Well, I's knowed you since you was knee-high and Marse Thomas say, maybe you help me to get a pension. If you can't, nobody can.

"I was born a slave of old Marse Robin Brice, not far from New Hope A.R.P. Church. My mistress was name Miss Jennie. My young marsters' was: Marse John, Marse Chris, and Marse Tom. Marse Tom been a little runt; they call him Tom Shanty. Him got to be a member of de Legislature, after de war. All them went to de 'Federate War. Deir sister, Amanda, marry Marse Bill Kitchen. You 'member him, don't you? Course you does.

"'Member dat day baseball fust come out and they got up a team, not a team then; they called it a 'Nine', when de game fust come to woodward section? If you ketch a ball on de fust bounce, dat was a 'out'. No sich thing as a mask for de face, gloves for de hands, and mats to protect your belly. No curves was allowed, or swift balls throwed by de pitcher. Him have to pitch a slow dropball. De aim than was to see how far a batter could knock de ball, how fast a fellow could run, and how many tallies a side could make. Mighty poor game if de game didn't last half a day and one side or de other make forty tallies.

"Marse Bill Kitchen was workin' in de store of his brudder-in-law, Marse John A. Brice. Him was called out to make one of de 'Nines'. Him went to de bat, and de very fust lick, him knock de ball way over center field. Everybody holler: 'Run Kitchen! Run Kitchen! Run Kitchen!' Marse Bill stand right dere wid de bat; shake his head and long black whiskers and say: 'Why should I run? I got two more licks at dat ball!' They git de ball, tech him and de umpire say: 'Out'. Marse Bill throw de ball down and say; 'D—n sich a game!' Folks laugh 'bout dat 'til dis day.

"My daddy name Bill Leitner. Him never b'long to Marse Robin. Him b'long to Marse John Partook Brice. Mammy b'long to Marse Robin. Her name Sarah. Daddy have to have a pass to come to see mammy.

"My brudders and sisters was Eliza, Aleck, and Milton. Patrollers whup daddy one time when they come to de house and find him widout a pass. Marster have mammy whup us chillun, when us need a whuppen. Her milk de cows, churn, and 'tend to de milk, butter and dairy. I helped her wid de cows and calves, and churnin'.

"You ask me is I had plenty to eat? Sure I did, wid all dat milk 'round me all de time. Best thing I 'member right now was runnin' my finger 'round de jar where de cream cling, and suckin' it off my fingers.

"Marster took good care of his slaves. They never went hungry or cold.

"My marster and mistress live in a big two-story house. Us live in little log house, wid log chimneys. I 'members fightin' chinchies in de summertime and fleas all de time. I wore a asafetida bag 'round my neck, when a child to keep off croup, measles, diphtheria, and whoopin' cough. Marster send for Dr. Walter Brice when any slave get very ill.

"De fust year of freedom I work for Marse Chris Brice. Been wid de Brices all my life. Now livin' on Marse Tom Brice's place.

"When de Yankees come, they ramsack de house for silver and gold. They burn de house and gin-house; carry off mules, hosses, and cows. They took de chickens, load all de provisions, put them in a four-hoss waggin, and leave us and de white folks cold and hungry. It was cold winter time then too.

"I marry a ginger cake lady, one-fourth white, daughter of Louis Grier. Tho' I ain't much on looks as you sees me today, dat gal often, befo' and after de weddin', put her arms 'bout me and say: 'Ben you is de han'somest man I ever have see in de world.'

"Us had three chillun. My wife led me to de light of de Lord. I jined de Red Hill Baptist Church, under de spell of Peter Cook's preachin' and my wife up in de choir a singin': 'Give me dat old time Religion.' Preacher Miller is my pastor now. Peter Cook dead and gone to glory long years ago. I 'members now dat old preacher's warm hand, when he took my hand dat night I jined. Him say: 'God give you a life to live. You have a soul to save. God give you His Son to save dat soul. Glory be His name!'"