

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
The Federal Writer's Project of
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Gus Clark age 85

Uncle Gus Clark and his aged wife live in a poverty-stricken deserted village about an eighth of a mile east of Howison.

Their old mill cabin, a relic of a forgotten lumber industry, is tumbling down. They received direct relief from the ERA until May, 1934, when the ERA changed the dole to work relief. Uncle Gus, determined to have a work card, worked on the road with the others until he broke down a few days later and was forced to accept direct relief. Now, neither Gus nor Liza is able to work, and the only help available for them is the meager State Old Age Assistance. Gus still manages to tend their tiny garden.

He gives his story.

"I'se gwine on 'bout eighty-five. 'At 's my age now. I was born at Richmond, Virginny, but lef' dere right afte' de War. Day had done surrendered den, an' my old marster doan have no mo' power over us. We was all free an' Boss turned us loose.

"My mammy's name was Judy, an' my pappy was Bob. Clark was de Boss's name. I doan 'member my mammy, but pappy was workin' on de railroad afte' freedom an' got killed.

"A man come to Richmond an' carried me an' pappy ah' a lot of other niggers ter Loos'anna ter work in de sugar cane. I was little but he said I could be a water boy. It sho' was a rough place. Dem niggers

quar'l an' fight an' kills one 'nother. Big Boss, he rich, an' doan 'low no sheriff ter come on his place. He hol' cou't an' settle all 'sputes hisself. He done bury de dead niggers an' put de one what killed him back to work.

"A heap of big rattlesnakes lay in dem canebrakes, an' dem niggers shoot dey heads off an' eat 'em. It didn' kill de niggers. Dem snakes was fat an' tender, an' fried Joe lak chicken.

"Dere in Loos'anna we doan get no pay 'til de work is laid by. Den we'se paid big money, no nickels. Mos' of de cullud mens go back to where day was raised.

"Dat was afte' freedom, but my daddy say dat de niggers earn money on Old Boss' place even durin' slav'ry. He give 'em every other Sat'dy fer dayee'yes. Day cut cordwood for Boss, wimmens an' all. Mos' of de mens cut two cords a day an' de wimmens one. Boss paid 'em a dollar a cord. Day save dat money, fer dey doan have to pay it out for nothin'. Big Boss didn' fail to feed us good an' give us our work clo'es. An' he paid de doctor bills. Some cullud men saved enough to buy deyse'ves frum Boss, as free as I is now.

Osnubergs the cheapest grade of cotton cloth

"Slav'ry was better in some ways 'an things is now. We allus got plen'y ter eat, which we doan now. We can't make but fo' bits a day workin' out now, an' 'at doan buy nothin' at de sto'. Co'se Bose only give us work clo'es. When I was a kid I got two os'berg(1) shirts a year. I never we' no shoes. I didn' know whut a shoe was made for, 'til I'se twelve or thirteen. We'd go rabbit huntin' barefoot in de snow.

"Didn' wear no Sunday clo'es. Day wa'nt made for me, 'cause I had nowhere ter go. You better not let Boss ketch you off'n de place, less'n he give you a pass to go. My Boss didn' 'low us to go to church, or to pray or sing. Iffen he ketched us prayin' er singin' he whupped us. He better not ketch you with a book in yo' han'. Didn' 'low it. I doan know whut de reason was. Jess meanness, I reckon, I doan b'lieve my marster ever went to church in his life, but he wa'nt mean to his niggers, 'cept for doin' things he doan 'low us to. He didn' care for nothin' 'cept farmin'.

"Dere wa'nt no schools for cullud people den. We didn' know whut a school was. I never did learn to read.

"We didn' have no mattresses on our beds like we has now. De chillun slep' under de big high beds, on sacks. We was put under dem beds 'bout eight o'clock, an' we'd jes better not say nothin' er make no noise afte' den! All de cullud folks slep' on croker sacks full of hay er straw.

"Did I ever see any niggers punished? Yessum, I sho' has. Whupped an' chained too. Dey was whupped 'til de blood come, 'til dey back split all to pieces. Den it was washed off wid salt, an' de negger was put right back in de fiel'. Dey was whupped fer runnin' away. Sometimes dey run afte' 'em for days an nights with dem big old blood houn's. Heap o' people doan b'lieve dis. But I does, 'cause I seed it myse'f.

"I'se lived here forty-five years, an' chipped turpentine mos' all my life since I was free.

"I'se had three wives. I didn' have no weddin's, but I mar'ied 'em 'cordin to law. I woan stay with one no other way. My fust two wives is dead. Lian an' me has been mar'ied 'bout 'leven years. I never had but one chile, an' 'at by my fust wife, an' he's dead. But my other two wives had been mar'ied befo', an' had chillun. "Simon here," pointing to a big buck of fifty-five sitting on the front porch, "is Lisa's oldest boy."

(Mississippi Federal Writers, Slave Autobiographies)

Clark, Gus -- Additional Interview

Lives in tumble down cabin at Howison, Miss. About 1-1/2 mi. north of Saucier on new U.S. 49, and about one eighth mile east of this. No good road for car.

Aged 85

I's gwine on about 85, thet's my age now. I was bawnd at Richmond, Virginny, but lef' dere right atter de Civilized War. Dey had done surrendered den en my ole marster doan hev no more power ovah us, we was all free en Boss turned us loose.

My mammy's name was Judy, en my pappy was Bob- Clark was de Boss's name. I doan 'member my mammy, but pappy was wukin on de railroad atter freedom en got killed.

A man cum to Richmond en carried me en my pappy en a lot of othah niggahs ter Loos'any to wuk in de sugar cane. I was little but he said I could be a water boy. It sho' was a rough place. Dem niggahs quarl en fight en kills one anuther. Big Boss, he very rich en doan low no sheriff ter come on his place. He hel' co't en settles all 'sputes hisself. He done bury de dead niggah en puts de one dat killed him back to wuk.

A heap of big rattlesnakes lay in dem canebrakes en dem niggahs shoot deir heads off en eat 'em. It didn' kill de niggahs. Dem snakes was fat en ten'er en fried jes' lak chicken.

Dere in Loos'any we doan get no pay twel the wuk is laid by. Den we was paid big money, no nickels. Mos' de cullud mens go back ter where dey was raised. Dat was atter freedom, but my daddy say dat de niggahs earn money on ole Boss's farm in slavery. He give em ev'ry othah Sat'day fer deyselves. Dey cut cordwood fer Boss, womens en all. Mos' of de mens cut two cords a day en de womens one. Boss paid em a dollar a cord. Dey save dat money, fer dey doan have to pay it out fer nothin'. Big Boss didn' fail to feed us well en giv us our wuk close. En he paid de doctor bills. Some cullud men saved enough to buy deyselves from Boss, as free as I is now.

Slavery was better in some ways den things is now. We allus got plen'y to eat, which we doan now. We can't make but 4 bits a day, wukin out now, en thet doan buy nothin' at de store. 'Course Boss only giv us wuk close. When I was a kid I got two osnaburg shirts a year. I never wore no shoes, I didn' know whut a shoe was made fer, twel I was 12 er 13. We would go rabbit huntin' barefooted in de snow.

Didn' wear no Sunday close. Dey wasn't made fer me, I hed nowhere to go. You better not let Boss ketch you offn de place, lessn he give you a pass to go. My Boss didn't low us to go to church, er ter pray er sing. Efn he ketched us prayin' er singin' he whipped us. He better not ketch you with a book in yo' hand, didn' low it. I doan know whut the reason was, jess meanness, I guess.

I doan believe my marster ever went to church in his life, but he wasn't mean to his niggahs, cept fer doin' things he doan 'low us to.

He didn' care fer nuthin' 'cept farmin'.

I never 'member hearin' the Bible read in slavery times. I jined church atter the surrender, when de light come to me dat it was necessary fer a man to serve God.

Dere was no schools fer cullud people den, we didn' know whut a school was. I never did learn to read.

We didn' have no mattrreeses on our beds lak we has now. We chillun slep unner de big high beds on sacks. We was put unner dem beds about eight o'clock, an we jes' better not say nothin' er make no noise atter den. All de cullud folks slep' on crokus sacks filled with hay er straw.

Did I ever see any niggahs punished. I sho' has, whipped en chained too. They was whipped twel the blood came, twel deir back, split all to pieces. Den it was washed off with salt en de niggah was put right back in de fiel'. Dey was whipped fer runnin' away. Sometimes dey run atter dem fer days en nights with dem big ole blood houn's. Heap o' people doan believe dis, but I does, fer I seed it myself.

I has lived here 45 years, en has chipped turpentine mos' all my life sence I was free.

I has had 3 wives. I didn' hev no weddins, but I married em 'cordin to law. I woan stay with one no other way. My fust two wives is dead, Liza en me has been married bout 11 years. I never hed but one chile, an thet by my fust wife, en he is dead. But my other two wives hed been married before, en had children. Simon here (pointing to a big man of 55, sitting on the front porch) is Liza's oldest boy.

Note.

Uncle Gus Clark and his aged wife live in one of the old cabins erected by the sawmill company at Howison years ago. It is now about to fall down. When writer was a visitor for the ERA old Gus, was still able to do an occasional day's work. Liza too, would wash for people. Now neither one is able to work. Their only resource is a small garden, which Gus still manages to tend, and \$4.85 a month Old Age Assistance from the State. In May, 1934, when the ERA changed the dole to work relief for all the able bodied, Uncle Gus was determined to have a work card. He said he could work as well yet as any white man. Nothing would do him except to go out on the road with the rest. After a few days, he broke down, and the foreman sent him home. Thereafter he was given Direct Relief, until the ERA cut all unemployables from its rolls. He can have no status under the WPA, and the only help available for him, or any other aged person, either white or black, is the State Old Age Assistance of \$4.85 a month wholly inadequate for the most basic necessities.