

Jimmie Johnson

Interview with "Uncle" Jimmie Johnson (90)

172 E. Park Ave., Spartanburg, S.C.

—F.S. DuPre, Spartanburg, S.C.

"I was born in Virginia, but Dr. L.C. Kennedy bought me, my mother and brothers and we moved to Spartanburg. My father stayed in Virginia. Dr. Kennedy lived near where North Church Street and Kennedy Place now is, and I lived in a two-room house in his back yard. I was just a baby at the time. My old masser was as good and kind to me as he could be, so was my missus. My mother died when I was ten years old, and Missus was just like a mother to me all the time. When I got old enough I used to do some things around the yard for Masser and Missus.

"Masser was an Episcopalian, and I went to Sunday School where the rock church now stands (Church of the Advent). Miss Mary Legg was my teacher, and she was a saintly woman. She was a niece of old Masser. Old Missus used to come to the house where I lived and teach me my alphabet. After I got older, I used to take care of Masser's horse and buggy for him; used to hitch-up the horse for him and go with him on his ways to see a patient. Bless his heart, he let me take my Webster's blue back speller and my history with me when I would drive with him. I would study those books and Masser would tell me how to pronounce the hard words. That is the way I got my education. Masser would tell Missus that Jimmie was a smart boy, that he had no father nor mother and that they must be good to him. They sure was. I never wanted for a thing. Sometimes on our drives Masser would tell me some Latin words, but I never did study Latin—just English.

"My masser would say that Jimmie had sense, was a good boy, so Missus would let me practice on her organ or her piano in the house. I got pretty good on these, so when I got to be a young man, I taught lessons on both the reed organ and the melodian, then on the piano. I taught the rudiments of music and piano for about 25 years.

"When the Yankee soldiers come to Spartanburg it scared me. They kept telling me that they were not going to hurt me, but I got a pile of brick-bats and put them under the house. I told Missus I wasn't going to let any of the soldiers hurt her. The Yankee soldiers did not bother me. They came all around our house, but every one of them was quiet and orderly. They took some of Missus' sugar and hams, but did not kill any of the chickens. I told them not to take the sugar, but they took it and the hams anyhow.

"Missus told me that I was free, but I told her I was going to stay on where I was and protect her until I died. And when Masser died, I grieved and grieved about him. I loved him dearly and I know he loved me. He was good and kind to me always. He never whipped me, not once. I grieve about my masser to this day. He was a kind gentleman.

"No, I never married, and I haven't got anybody kin to me now. My brothers all died and I am the only one left. I adopted four children. I taught them music and we got on pretty well after Missus died. I

stayed with her until she died. I told Masser I was going to stay with them even if I was free, and I did. When Masser died, I had no one to love but Missus. I taught music and gave piano lessons, but I can't do that now, as I am too old. Lately I tried to cut some wood. I would cut a lick, then rest; cut a lick, then rest, so I gave it up.

"Lord bless your soul! I am so glad you told who you are, and you talk like Masser Dan. You know he and I used to play together as boys. He would give me anything he had. Honey, come around and see me again. I is sure glad to see you. What did you say your name was?" Upon being told, his face would light up with a smile, and he would repeat just what he had said before. He was then asked when he got to be a poet. "Law' chile, my old missus told me I was going to be a poet."

This ninety-year-old ex-slave then sat down at the piano and played for the writer.