

# Mississippi Narratives

## Prepared by

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### For the State of Mississippi

### Lucy Thurston Age 101

In the ever-interesting search for the very old negro, the slaves of civil war times, one arrives at the somewhat startling realization that they are few and fast becoming rare finds. Scattered to the far corners of Dixie, contented in their memories of the sparkling, gay South, the bounty and joy of a sun-kissed land, and the darkness and distress of a war plagued section--these old darkies look past the inquiring visitors eyes, back into those luxurious, pre-war days and tell tales of the abundance, the high living, the excitement and fast pace of the courtly and chivalrous men and gracious women of the old slaveholding South.

"Yes suh, I'se an old slave. Iffen' you all jest sit dar whilst I tell you some things I rec'lects 'bout them times, I sho' be mighty pleased to oblige."

And obliging she is, for she loves nothing better than to rare back before an attentive audience and exercise both her memory and her great imagination. Courteous and humble with all the charm of the "old times" negro, her interesting tale rolls along, revealing an intimate story that will never grow old, or lose its interest in the telling. The ex-slave is a precious find and the story he tells makes history.

Lucy Thurston is just such a character. Her age-old eyes have seen 101 years pass rapidly by. She is full of wisdom and philosophy that is the heretage age. Her children, grand-children and great grand-children have scattered into the world, leaving her in her one-room cottage alone and unattended, save by a kindly white neighbor, herself of the "Old School", who has assured Aunt Lucy that -- "I'se privileged to stay heah' till de' Lord makes' room and calls me to his side. I'se libed' ma' life and served Him faithful an' I'se ready to mek' ma' peace, but de' Lord sees fit to leave me yet awhile."

Kinky head, completely white, Aunt Lucy could easily pose for a most interesting picture as she sits calmly in her easy, rocking chair, wrinkled hands folded peacefully in her lap and bare feet protruding innocently beneath folds of a clean cotton dress.

"Now when I'se small, I lived in Flemingsburg, Kentucky. My Marster was Claiborn Woods an' he sho' had a fine, big plantation. Us niggahs had plenty to eat an' us neber wanted fer' nothin'. De' Lord was good to Marster an' he be good to us. At hog killin' time he fill up big trays o' meat an' sat it out on de table fer' us to hep' ourselves.

As soon's dat meat disapeah' hit be piled up agin'. Mos' all de niggahs wuk out in the fiels. We stay happy all the time.

Marster was a full-blooded 'ristocrat, but he be kind ter ever' livin' creature. All his chillun growed up to be fine young folks. The boys wuh han'some, an' the gals beautiful lak the Missus. All the time I'se grownin' up we had great times at Marster's place.

My Mammy named Betsy. Whin' I be twelve yeah' old Marster called Mammy an' he say. "Betsy, I done sold ya'." Mammy don't mek no fuss 'cause she know better. She only say, "Whar am I going Marster?" "You an' Lucy be sold to Marster Ballot an' he gwine tak' you all to New Orleans."

We pak up that night an' early the nex mawnin' we leave our good Marster Ballot on de boat. Did mah' eyes pop outten' mah haid' when we gets to New Orleans! More people den' I ebber sees in ma' whole life. I was some scaired an' hol on ta' mammys' hand hard. Marster Ballot sol me to Marster Robert Dickey in New Orleans.

He put us up on the slavery block an' bade us twist an' turn an' sho' our teeth. Marster Dickey bid on Mammy,

but some other man out bid him an' my Mammy was sol away frum me. I cried an' cried, but twarnt' no use.

Marster Dickey took me to Covington, La. an' I wuk out in the fiels. Finally I got happy an' sang wid de res'. I member one song us used to sing mos' of all was. --

"Ohooooooooo lil Liza, lil Liza Jane,

Ohooooooooooooooooo lil Liza, lil Liza Jane.

Hair as blak as coal in de mi--ine,

Lil Liza Jane,

Eyes so large an' big an' fin'

Lil Liza Jane.

OHooooooooo lil Liza, lil Liza Jane,

OHooooooooo lil Liza, lil Liza Jane.

Mouse in de hol and de cats' gwine get it,

Lil Liza Jane,

Cats in de' tree an' de dawg gwine get it,

Lil Liza Jane.

Ohooooooooo lil Liza, lil Liza Jane,

Ohhhhhhhh lil Liza, lil Liza Jane.

We use to beat the rice out fine' and we had the biggest strawberries of anybody roun' bout. There was a house called the "Spinnin' House." Dat was whar Marster kep all de old ladies and lil chillun at wuk. On rainy days whin' we couldn't wuk out in de fiels we all go to de spinnin' house an wuk.

The church was fo' mile away an we all dress up clean an' go pray ebery' Sunday night.

Whin' I was 19 I got married. I din' lak my husband at fust, but we finly' gets long pretty fine. In dem days all a man had to do to get his' self a wife was jest to tell the Master "I laks dat gal over there." I had four chillun' whin de war ended an' we was sat free.

De Marster call us all together whin de war was ovah, an say--"You all free people like me now. All who wants to stay kin' stay. I'll pay you off in shares."

We stayed for two, three year'--but den we think we trable' some, an' we com' to Mississippi. We stay several places fer awhile an wuk, den we move somewars else. I member' one place we farmed fer a man an' he paid us \$10.00 a year and let us keep some of the crops. We had the finest lookin' watermelon patch fer many a mile. An' our cotton was somthin' to gaze on. We was mighty proud. Den one night de Klu Kluxers come an' tole us to move on or else we be mighty sorry lookin' niggahs. We don' foun' out later dat dis man we wuk fer always had de Klux Kluxers chase away de niggahs what wuk fer him after de' wuk out a good crop fer him.

De Lord gave me 12 chilluns, but de is all away off somewhars' now, an I be all alone. I believe in de Lord an' He be good ter ole' Lucy, an I'se awaitin' now fer His call."

Second Interview:

The ensuing autobiography is reported as accurately as possible after numerous visits to the abode of one Lucy Thurston (re-report of Aug. 7, 1937) 101 year old ex-slave, residing in Brookhaven, Miss.. If a short introduction is permissible may the writer offer the following:

Lucy and I are now life-long friends. When she glimpses me picking my way across the field and through the weed-bedecked lane leading to her shack, she waves a wrinkled, trembling hand somewhere in my direction and spreads a toothless grin across her black, shiny countenance. I think it was the dress which first won me my enviable spot in the heart of Lucy. Or it might have been the cookies, or the jar of preserves, or the red straw hat. I've never been quite able to decide which, at any rate sometimes, I feel a bit guilty for looking the matter straight in the eye, it is just possible that I have bought Lucy's confidence with trifling, discarded, wordly articles and no mean amount of Dale Carnegies' miraculous

system. At any rate I am soothing my troubled conscious with the certainty that It has all been tit for tat. Havin't I in turn accumulated a tantalizing, super-super case of the "Scratches"? Something should be done about the red bugs in Lucys' over grown lane. And didn't I have to look mighty innocent, whistling all the while as I tried to edge nonchalantly out the back door when the jar of preserves was found missing?

Lucys' life, although not unusual for that of a slave of Civil War times has been interesting to say the least. Not a proficient talker, but age old in wisdom and the ways of human nature, the first few interviews with Lucy found me confiding my home life, family affairs and castle in the clouds ambitions, with Lucy quietly nodding her head and offering advice and encouragement. Suddenly awaking to the startling fact that as yet Lucy had barely sketched certain events in her own life, I remembered the old adage (or is it an adage?) that all negroes are children at heart. So on my very next visit I brought a camera and took her picture, and did she pose, and then I brought her the dress and since then have plied her with gifts, each time offhandedly suggesting that perhaps this was a bit different from what she wore while a slave on Mr. Dickeys' plantation in Covington, La.

Although the compiled information deduced after these interviews is not recorded word for word as Lucy gave it to me, it is nevertheless set down as nearly as possible in her style of conversation.

"While I was on Marster Dickeys' plantation I wuked mighty hard, same as the res' o' the niggahs. But we nevah' min' the wuk 'cause Marster was kin' an' good to us. Jest' a lil' ways frum' the quarters was the packing shed, an' when us give out o' meal an' meat us jest go ovah' dar' an' hep' ourselves.

We wuk all week long from sun up 'til sun down out in de' fiels. But when Saturday' noon comes us quits an' gets ready fer the big doins'. Sometimes we'd stay up all night a'singin' an' dancin' an' goin' on. Life on the plan'tation was good an' I wish' we had dem' times back agin'.

Each family had their own cabin an we libes' almos' same as we libes today. Only difference was we had somebody to take kere' o' us an' see we gets enough cloes' an' eats, and nowadays we has to root fer' ourselves. I nevah' was hongry' on de' plan'tation but there has been many a day since then that me an my famlies' gone wid out food.

We was' given two Sunday dresses a yeah' an' two pairs O' shoes. Mos' times we din' wear any kin' O' stockings so whin shoe buying time rolls roun' one o' us ud carry a sock an' pass hit roun' whin hit come yo' turn ta' try on de' shoes.

The house servants was taught ta' read an' write, mosly' by the Marsters' daughters. Sometimes they get mighty upidy 'cause they served the Marster an' his family, but us fiel' hands wud soon take em down a peg o' two iffen they act smart allicky wid us.

We din' mess 'roun wid' them much. The Marster an' all the folks in the "big house" ud go ta the church we had on the plan'tation every Sunday an' we'd dress up an' go too. We had ta'.

We use' ta' heah' of niggahs on de' other plan'tations what wasn't treated as good as our Marster treated us, runnin' away up North, but I nevah' heahed' of any on our place escapin'.

When wah broke out we went right on livin' same as usual. Twarn't no difference after the wah' either. We went right on farmin' as usual. The Marster tell us we free to go, but not many lef'. We stayed on an wuk' an when time came fer' us to gather our crops' the Marster take out fer' our food an' supplies an' pay us what was lef'.

Mos' the niggahs wuk thata' way now a'days. They wuk on shares fer' the white man an' he take out what they borrow frum him while they is wuking their crop.

When we was tole we free niggahs mos of us din' know what to do an' when' we free we was los'. Some niggahs got in their haids de' was' equal like the white folks an' they spect they was gwine hev' fine homes' an' lib like dere Marsters. But they fo'gets they got ta' wuk fer all dat. An' whin they fins' dat out dey gets lazy an' figgers dey jes' won't do nothin' a'tall bout' it but lay roun' an' waits'. But mos' us con'tent to stay wid our ole' Marster an' wuk fer him an' gets our pay that a'way.

'Cos we wasn't under any obligation ta stay on de plan'tation after de' wah, an' some lef' an' thought they was gwine get rich an' be high fa'lootin'. But de' ways' I figger it all is, we is niggahs, de' white folks is white folks, an de good Lord din' mek' us equal, an' us niggahs ud be happier servin' a good kin' Marster din' we'd be tryin' to get somewarhs' we don' belon'. I think we ought be lowed to get some larnin', sos' we kin' read an' write, but I don' see much use in votin', lessen' you knows what you votin' bout an' mos niggahs don' take de time to fin' dat out.

Frum' the time the wah' ended up til now us niggahs what use to be on plan'tations has ambled frum' place to place wukin' fer one white man after 'tother, gettin' paid on shares. When they finly gets ole' like me I guess some white folks kin' nough to look after them. I'se ole an' hep'less now but Missus Hardy an some mo sweet ladies is a'kerin' fer me an' I prays' the Lord bless em every one.

These young niggahs now a'days don' know nothin' bout plan'tation days sos' they don' know what they missed. But they ain't no different frum the way we used to be. Niggahs is niggahs. They hav' to get out an' mek' their livin' an some lives tolerable good, an' some does poorly.

But fer the mos' paht' they is doin' sactly what we did on the plan'tation. They is washin' an ironin' an' cookin' an' takin' kere' o' the white folks chillun, an' hit ain't gwine be much different when judgement day comes an we all go see our Maker.

What you gwine' bring yo' po' ole' Lucy nex time you comes' visitin' lil' Missey? I needs some shoes powerful' bad.