

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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Polly Turner Cancer age 100

Polly Cancer is a small, wizened, very black and very old negress; her weight is less than one hundred pounds; her height about 5 ft. 4 ins; she claims that she is one hundred years old and that her mother lived to be 100 years old; her hearing is keen and her mind clear and active; she lives with a son and his wife in a long whitewashed cabin far removed from any highway; this cabin though rude and poor is kept clean and livable by a daughter-in-law whose unvarying kindness to the trying old woman, say her neighbors "will win her a star in her crown in Glory." They (say) "she never loses patience with her and not only prepares her meals but brings them to her on a tray; she never sasses her back, just goes off and cries when she gets more than she can stand." Another son is farming the fertile little valley at the foot of the barren hillside on whose top is perched Polly's home; in the front of the cabin is her flower garden filled with many varieties of flowers - chief among which are holly-hocks and "old maids." In the rear is a well cared for vegetable garden and an orchard in which grow pear, peach, and quince trees. Her sons are thrifty farmers, and able to provide well for Polly; they rent their lands from a citizen in Abbeville who personally supervises their operations; crops are excellent this year.

A Federal Writer visited the home on a swelteringly hot July day; she was met by the daughter-in-law who reported that Polly had gone down the hill to get some brush to add to the log fire burning in the chimney in her room, which she never permits to go out. She does not have to do this because there is no one to get it for her, but because "she just wants sumthin' to do wid hersef'."

She keeps her own room and hotly resents Mamie - her daughter-in-law - giving it a cleaning up when she is away; has been known to fly into a rage on coming home and finding that it had been cleaned up. Her neighbor and kinswoman by marriage says, "One time Mamie got into de room an' cleant hit up jus' lak new an' when Polly cum an' saw hit she said, "I bet sum nasty low down nigger haz bin in my room doin' sumthin' dey thinks I isn't fittin' to do." Sum folks puts mo' on yer dan you kin stan', but Mamie didn't say nary word to her; she hasn't never sed a cross word to her."

In a few minutes old Polly came toiling up the hill, bearing an arm load of dead tree branches. Her small black face was bathed in sweat, and as soon as she could lay down her load and rest awhile she, without have to be urged, began the story of her long life of servitude and toil. She likes to talk, especially about "de good old days," and is not lacking in humor.

She said, "I aint no 'count now; I'se tired an' short brefted an' hasn't 'long to go, thank God; I'se done plenty wuk in my day but de Lord haz laid hiz han' on me, an' I'se jus' here in good folks way. I'se bin down de hill ter git me a little brush to mak' me a little blaze; I'se bin doin' dat all my lif' long, 'cause Dr. Pegues tole me 'fore de surrender to allus keep a little fire to drive de dampness out; an' I likes to heat me sum water to sponge my 'hind, an' to wash de slobber out ov my mouf; an' Dr. Pegues tol' me allus to wash my tongue off, an' I does hit ever' mornin' an' I spec dats why I haz lived so long."

"My name is Polly Cancer an' I was born a slave; I b'long'd to de Turners; my Ole Marster was named Bill an' my Ole Mistus was named, Florena; she was a Rankin an' dey lived on Woodson's Ridge; I waited on my Ole Miss 'til she died. Dey lived in de house on de big road; you kin see hit frum here; hit wuzn't sech a fine house, but my white folks had plenty ov money; I don't 'no nuthin' 'bout my granmammy 'cause I ain't never seen her; my mother cum from S.C. from a place called Chinquapin; when she cum here dere wuzn't many white folks, jus' indians; de country was full of wolves, an' deers, an' bears, an' foxes; de folks wud stay up all nite huntin' dose foxes; sumtimes dey'd run rite by my house."

"Marse Bill an' Miss Florena had several boys an' one girl; she was named Lucy an' she was borned on de way fum S.C. Dey had tents to stay in at nite." I'se heared my mammy say dat dere was a 'hole team ov dem kum togeder an' bro't dere slaves. Dey cum in wagons an' wud camp 'long de way. I named one ov de boys William fur he paw; dey was all kilt in de Freedom War 'cept Marster Blue an' Andy Turner; Marse Blue was a lieutenant, but Andy (note omission of Marster) wuzn't rite; he wuzn't sech a good man; he'd git atter me but I'd outrun him, an' I b'longd to him when we was sot free. Ole Marster was a funny, good ole man; he didn't b'live in havin' niggers dat wudn't wurk; he had an overseer 'fore de boys got big 'nuf to run things; all overseers iz mean; I'd run off an' hide in de thickets, an' de snakes wud run me out; we went to ole Marster an' tol' him how mean dat overseer was to us an' he turnt him off. Times wuzn't az hard den az dey iz now; my ole Marster owned two sections of good lan' an' dere was plenty ov sheep, an' cows, an' mules, an' hosses on de place; we didn't never hav' to worry 'bout us sumthin' t' eat an' sumthin' to wear; we had warm clothes in de winter an' cotton clothes in de summer; we raised our own wool an' cotton an' de slaves mad' hit into cloth; Ole marster had a table as long az frum here to de en' ov dat porch (about 12 or 14 ft). Marster's table wuzn't never empty an' he wuzn't goin' to 'fuse nobody sumthin' to' eat; dere ust ter be a lot ov travelers cumin' thru sellin' hosses an' darkies, an' kinds ov things, dey'd jus' drap in on ole marster an' he'd feed dem; dey lived lak rich folks; dere was a long row ov houses fur hiz black folks; rite in front ov hiz dinin' room was de place whar de slaves et' mother's didn't hav' to do dey own cookin' an' dey didn't hav' to feed dey own chilluns; dey had a cook to cook dey vittles; jes' bout sundown de mammies wud bring de chilluns an' set dem on a

block 'long de table giv' dem dey supper 'fore de old folks; dey had plenty t' eat - sech as bread, an' molasses an' all de milk to drink dat dey wanted; Ole Marster wud cum 'long an' say, "Haz everbody got 'nuf t'eat 'cuase I don't want nobody to go hongry at my hous'; he wudn't let de mammies whip dey own chillun eder; ef he cum 'cross a 'oman whuppin' her chile he'd say, "Git 'way 'oman; dats my bizness, an' he'd giv' one or two little whacks an' dat was all; I didn't never git no hard beatin's; onct I let de mules run 'way wid de wagon at de gin an' I got a whuppin' but hit didn't 'mount to much; All marsters black folks was well fed; we had hog meat an' beefs an' vegetables."

"I didn't never have to wurk hard den 'cause I was sickly; I had de rumatism, so ole Miss kep me in de house to wait on her; she tended to de garden an' when she wanted sumbody to wurk in de garden she's ask Marster fur sum han's an' she'd always say, "I wants Poll."

"When we was sick ole Miss looked atter us; if we was very sick she'd hav' us put on a trundle bed an' wait on us nite an' day 'til we got well; Ole Miss had plenty to do, lakin' atter de spinnin' an' preservin' an' measurin' out all dat provisions; she sho did dat hersef."

"In July an' August atter de crops was laid by de men wud all split rails an' cut de wud, an' de women wud card an' spin de cloth; dey had to reel four cuts ov cloth a day; de grannies wud spin de warp; I'se filled many a shuttle on quills (this information is rather vague as we of this generation do not understand spinning and weaving terms; she also said something about burning out corn cobs for shuttles or something to use.) de reel wud go "Cr-a-a-ack" ever time a cut was finished."

"We allus had to git a pass to travel 'round at nite; dats what dey kep de paterollers fur; to keep de niggers frum runnin' 'round at nite an' frum runnin' away;"

"When Crismus cum ole marster giv' us nice wool blanket, 'cordin' to de number ov chilluns; an' he giv' us brogan shoes; an' he'd order candy in big buckets fur us Christmas; he didn't hav' to go to town fur de man wud bring hiz samples to de hous' an' marster wud order de things sont."

"In dose days hit was dang'us to travel 'cause dere was so many robbers 'festin' de roads; when de folks was fixin' to go to Memphis dey wud all go in gangs; dey wud meet at de Ferry at Wyatt an' go togedder; dey wud all have fierce dogs an' guns; Marster wud tell 'bout ridin' on de Plank Roads to Memphis". (This information is interesting because there was an incorporated Plank Road built from Memphis to Hernando and before the county built roads people did go to Memphis by this route and ferried across the Tallahatchie river at Wyatt, the first settlement in the county and now extinct. See Oxford MS and encyclopedia on Plank Roads in U.S. Time probably prior to 1837)

"Marster used to let us raise our own chickens and sell dem at de tavern in Abbeville; we had to giv' dem to a man to sell fur us so de folks wud know dey wuzn't stolen." He'd let us make some money too by pickin' cotton at nite by de moonlight; we didn't hav' to do hit, but he'd let us ef we wanted to.

"I'se bin' married three times; de firs' time was in slav'rytime an' me an dat nigger jus' jumped de broom stick; dey called him Calhoun, but he wuzn't no regular husban'; he lef' me an' had three or four udder wives." I had two chilluns in slav'rytime; one of dem lived in Oxford; he was a preacher named Leroy Logan de udder was Bob Logan (she said something about her marster not knowing when they sold her that she had any children, but I didn't catch her meaning very well) I used to cuss an' swar dat I wudn't never marry no mo' but I did; de nex' time I was married we was free an' I had a big weddin' an' was married by de cullud magistrate; dey had cullud magistrates an' a cullud sheriff in de county; dem was carpet-bagger days. I lived wid him 'til death tuk him 'bout 30 years ago."

My ole Marster died 'bout two years befo' de war; folks sed dat Dr. Rushin giv' him too much morphine 'cause he snored hisself to death; he was peart dat mornin'; dat evenin' I was in de kitchin' parchin' a oven full ov coffee an' rye; dey used to grind de rye wid de coffee an' hit was good; de wimmen was makin' quilts when we heared de screamin' an' we knew Ole Marster was dead; dey buried him at de Ole Mt. Vernon Cemetery on de Memphis road from Abbeville."

Ole Miss didn't teach me to read an' write, but she did do dis; she wud read de bible to us to tell us what de Ole Bad Man was goin' to do to us; she wu'd sho us de pictsher ov him; he had a pitch fork in hiz han' an' a long forked tail an' a club foot an' horns on hiz head; he wud be dancin' roun' pinchin' folks an' stickin' de pitch fork in dem; an den he wu'd go rite out ov de top ov de ceilin'; I sho was skeered an' I luk for him to dis day." We went to do white folks church; de black folks wud set on one side ov de partition an' de white folks 'ud set on de udder; I didn't keer 'bout goin' to church, 'til I got 'ligion atter de war; when dat preacher cum talin' to me 'bout gittin' 'Ligion I'd tell him, "Kiss my foot." Hit sho tuk me a long time to git hit."

"Atter Ole Marster died dey put me on de block an' sol' me; dey stood me on a block on de porch an' here is how dey done hit; de man had a cane in hiz han' an' he wud hol' hit up an say, "What am I bid? Goin'- Goin', Goin'; den he wud hit de side ov de house "Blam" an' say "Gone." I sol' fur \$1500.00."

"My ole marster aint never sol none ov hiz niggers frum de family, but dey didn't 'no dat 'til dey red de will an' de will say dat we wuzn't to be separated, an' we all had to go back an' be sol' over an' dis time I was bo't by Andy Turner; de time 'fore I was bo't by Dr. Kennedy." I b'longed to Andy Turner when I was sot free" He said dat he had to wade knee deep in carpet-baggers an' he didn't want no damn free niggers no how."

"I well remembers de Freedom War an' how we wud hear ov de fittin' way off; Grant's army cum fitin' an' skirmishin' rite thru here. Befo' de men went to war dey wud drill at Abbeville; you cud see dem doin' de double quick an' marchin' wid poles on dey shoulders; de fifes wud be blowin' an' I thot hit was de puttiest site I has ever seen; bimeby Grant's soldiers cum dis side of de riber an' de hosses sounded lak thunder; dere wud be a Captain on one side an' a lieutenant on de oder side an' de captain wud say, "Close up de ranks." an' dey wud draw dey swords an' de hosses wud rar' up on dey hin' feets an' dey didn't never break ranks neder; when dose bombs began to fly an' de cannon go "Boom, boom" I was skeered to death; dere was plenty ov fitin' rite here in Abbeville an' Grant stayed here for five weeks an' dey burnt de hotel an' de deppo." Sum ov de niggers joined Grant's army (she always spoke of Grant without title.)

"Atter de war cum de Ku Klux; dey didn't cum to my house 'cause dey was lookin' fur niggers wid guns; all de niggers had bot guns wid de money dey was paid fur workin'; dey jus' wanted dem to hunt rabbits an' sich but de Ku Klux didn't want dem to hav' guns; dey wud hide out in de swamp, but sumhow de Ku Klux knew ever' thing dey did or said; dey mus' had a pilot; dey wud take deir guns away frum dem an' run dem out ov de swamp. De Ku Klux rid on horses an' de men's an' de hosses had on uniforms; dey wud ask fur a 'hole bucket of water an' dey sed dey was de speerits ov de soldiers dat were killed at Shiloh." (other historians report similarly) dats when dey had black magistrates an' black sheriffs; but dey didn't bodder me; you can sarch my rep thru her' 'cause I'se got hit." (She means all make a good report of her reputation.)

"I aint never bin skeered ov hants; one nite I was goin' 'long de Oxford road an' I heared sumthin' goin' "Umph." I was so skeered ever hair on my head stud up, but hit wuzn't nuthin' but a ole sow an' some pigs."

"Times is harder an' wickeder dese days; hit luks lak de Bible iz bein' fulfilled wid dese airplanes flying' thru de air. De folks thinks 'bout too much foolishness; I jus' thinks what a long time I'se bin here an' how fur I'se cum, but hit wont be long now, thank God."

"De lonliest song I sings iz, "De Lord knows when you iz rite, an' he knows when you iz 'rong; he sees ever' thing you do, he hears ever' thing you say." Dere caint be no song truer dan dat, an' I tries to speak what I aint 'fraid to repeat at de judgement day."

"I reckollict dey got de mail by stage from Pontotoc; they had fine horses, an' I thot de coaches was mity pretty."

"I heard tell 'mong de niggers dat de way dey got to de United States was dat de Africans sol' dem to de white traders; dey bot dem wid red bandanna handkerchiefs." (this tradition of red handkerchiefs was told also by Lucindy Shaw, and Joanna Isom tells of a long red flag that they followed.)

"De black folks lived in dey own quarters an' if de chilluns got to fitin' 'mong demselves de white folks wud wear dem out. De ole folks ruled white and black, an' dey never wud whip us on a Sunday; dey wud tell us dey wud wait 'til Monday; we wud try to dodge dem on Mondays thinkin' dey wud forgit, but we cudn't fool dem dat way; dey fooled us; dey never had no cookin' on Sunday neder."

"Dey had a room for de little chilluns an' de babies to stay in while de mudders had to go to de field; hit was near de kitchin where de wimmen cud watch dem; dey had cradles fur de babies, and de older chillun what was too young to go to de field to chop cotton had to help 'tend de babies, an' rock de cradles; de chilluns had to help keep de yards clean too; we wud have to sweep hit and keep hit raked up; chilluns didn't have no hard wuk to do but dey foun' plenty to keep us out ov idleness. De mothers wud cum to de house twice a day to suckle de babies - at 10 o'clock in de morning an' two o'clock in de evenin'; dey was taken good care of; Ole Marster wudn't let de wimmen do no heavy liftin' coz he wanted dem de have big fine babies; he always sed, "I don't want no runts." When we picked cotton he always made de men tote de sacks. One time a little nigger started to courtin' me an' marster tole him to git coz he didn't want no runts on his place." Dey had nurses fur de nigger chilluns sams az de whites."

"We sho had plenty t'eat; dey wud kill hogs an' make sausage, an' dey wud tak de guts an' turn dem an' stuff dem wid sausage; we wud hav' more meat dan you cud put in two rooms lak dis. De milkers got up at sun up to milk de cows an' dey wud churn five times a day."

"Ef you tried to go off de place de paterollers wud meet you in de road an' wear you out rite dar in de road."

"Chilluns didn't know ever' thing lak dey duz now; we thot dat de midwives foun' de babies an' giv' dem to de folks; we was allus lukin' in rotten stumps an' hollow logs fur babies; one time we cum 'cross an' ole squinch owl an' he lak to skeered us to death; I didn't know nuthin' when my firs' baby cum."

"Ole marster uster to let us gather chestnuts an' hazle-nuts on Sundays and den when de wagons was goin' to Memphis we wud put our sacks on dem an' dey wud sell dem fur us an' let us have de money; we wud generally spen hit fur lockets an' finger rings; I spec dey was brass, but we was jus' as proud ov dem as dey was pyor gol';"

"De folks had to all wear dresses buttoned up in de back in dose days; hit isn't lak hit iz today when dey goes haf nekked."

I remember seeing when I was a child a monument in the old cemetery here that was glass and we frequently tried to see into coffin, as we were told it was so made. This is as I remember the way it looked like a glass cylinder - she evidently is describing this type of tombstone.

"When ole marster died we all wint to de funeral; dey put him in a coffin wid a glass over hiz face; an' den dey put a monument dat was made ov glass an' you cud see rite down into de coffin;* I uster go to de grave yard luk down at him fur a long time; I don't know whedder dey pickled him or not but you sho cud luk down in de grave an' see him."

"De country was full ov wild turkeys den; dey used to dig a trench and spread corn along hit an' ketch all de turkeys dey wanted."