

Interview of Mrs. Della Harris
2 E. Byrne Street
Petersburg, Virginia
By—Susie Byrd
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"I don't know just how old I is. Muma sent me to private school wid white chillun fo' one week. I was 13 years old at de time uh Lee's surrender. I belong to Peter or Billy Buck Turnbull Warrenton, N.C. Put this down. My mother and family all belong to Peter Buck as his slaves. We didn't work until after the war; then we came to Petersburg. I went to dancing school wid the white folks and can dance any kind of dance sets. My father was a musicianer. He belonged to John Carthan, in Warrenton, N.C. In dem days you had to take your Moster's and Mistess' name. In slavery time when a slave married he had to ask his Moster and Mistess.

"We never went to church. We used to hear de bells ringing loud, baby, yes, clear and strong. No, never seen [HW: no] Sunday school, and the first time I went in a church I looked all around, and baby, I thought dat I was in heaven. It wasn't long, Miss Sue, before I got 'ligeon, and, yes, I jined [HW: de] church, 15 years old I wuz. Never will forget the time, or dat place. Den I lived here with an ant, muma's sister, who was named Kate Williams. Her husband wuz my uncle, and he worked and died at de White House in Washington City.

"I don't know de name of de President he worked for, but you can find dat out on dem books. You know you young folks calls um records.

"Yes child I'm proud of my age never gave no body no trouble.

"I have 8 children dead and now only one son living. Peter Turnbull was good to all his slaves, as far as I know. Mama was a cook in slavery time. She died in Petersburg, yes, right here in dis hole.

"No muma never owned any thing, always rented and aint never owned nothing but a passel of children.

"My muma was a genuine Indian. Some people say you can't own Indians. I don't know how cum, but I do know she was owned by these people, but she surely was an Indian. Every body knows me all over Virginia. [25]

"When I use to be in dining room service I would hear de white folks talk, and, do you know, Miss Sue you can hear a lot that way?

"Moster said he couldn't sell me 'cause I was so little. Just kept me fur to wait on de little chillun in de house.

"Miss Sue, you'll have to give me something for telling you all dis here, if it ain nothing but a horse cake.

"I've seen lots of dis world in travel. Done bin to Baltimore City; done bin to Philidelphia.

"I aint gwine give you no more, gal.

"Yes, to Lynchburg, den I worked at Mont Royal School, Baby, where Mrs McDaniel was manager.

"The man gwine say, 'dat woman bin some where.' If I stayed long enough I mighta got some learning but I stayed only one year. Got tired of that place. From one season to another is a year, aint it? Ah! Lord!

"Young folks now adays are just fur a good time, and a good time too they have. Yes, Siree Bob!

"Gwine stop now, Miss Sue, aint gwine give you no mo'. Man gwine say, Miss Sue, where in the devil did you get this stuff? Gal, you are a mess. You gonna write most all dat book about Della. Go on now, dats nough.

"In dem days chillun were chillun, now every body is grown. Chillun then were seen and not heard. When old persons came around muma sent us out and you better not be seen. Now every body [HW: act] grown. Make the man laugh.

"I've always enjoyed good health. Never had a Doctor in my life, not even when my chillun wuz born. Dis rubbing when people got pain just rubs it in. Eating so much and late hours is cause you young folks dying. All muma's chillun wuz healthy.

"[HW: Real] food in dem days, yes, muma fed us good vituals from white folks. I tell you, we had good owners. I didn't see sun set when I wuz a child. Always went to bed early, [26] child, I wish I could call back dem days. Muma said people lived so much longer because they took care of themselves.

"All dis here education an' people just now got it."

[HW: Question:] Do you think, Mrs. Harris, education has helped our race?

"Well, child, I don' know. Folks are so indifferent now I am afraid to say. Pshaw.... Colored folks now. Some are messy [HW: an'] don't know how to be polite.

"Talking about lightning days. Its lightning at every bodys house. Lord have mercy on dese here young folks and deliber me from the plantation, I pray.

"Courting dem days wuz like everything I reckon you all do now adays. You promise to 'bey the man, but before you finish its cussing, Honey.

"In olden days husbands loved. Sho God did tend to wife and took care of them and they had to stay home cause it wuz always a new baby. I tell you, Miss Sue, man ought not never had you to find history 'cause you gwine tell it all. As I said, we loved. Is de young folks marrying fur love? Dey don't stay together long enough to warm hands. We went to church together and praised God; led prayer meetings and, yes siree, would feel good.

"Now you all done start opening theatres on Sunday. Miss Sue, all dat stuff you putting down will sure make the man laugh."