

Dellie Lewis

Interview with Dellie Lewis

—*Mary A. Poole, Mobile, Alabama*

DELLIE LEWIS KNOWS CURES AND 'CUNJER'

"To begin at de beginnin', white folks," said Dellie Lewis, "I was bawn on de plantation of Winston Hunter at Sunflower in Washington County, Alabama. It's on de Southern Railroad. De fus' thing dat I remembers was when de Gran' Trunk Railroad cut dere right of way through near Sunflower. Dey had a chain gang of prisoners dat warn't slaves aworkin' on de road, an' me an' anudder little nigger gal was sont wid big cans of buttermilk to sell 'em. One day a handsome white gent'man rode to our house an' axe me fo' a drink of cool water. He was de fo'man on de road. Jus' as soon as I handed it to him he done fell offen his hoss on de groun'. I run to de Mistis an' she got some of de niggers 'roun' de place to ca'ay de gent'man to de big house, an' do you know it, white folks, dat man, he neber open his eyes again! He keppa callin' de Mistis his mammy, but he neber open his eyes to see dat she warn't his mammy. He died a little later wid a conjested chill.

"Den I remembers one of de Alabama River floods, dat swep' ober de lan' an' washed away lots of de food. De gover'ment sont some supplies of meat, meal an' 'lasses. De barrels was marked U.S. an' one nigger, bein' tired of waitin' an' bein' powerful hongry tol' us dat de U.S. on de barrel meant Us, so us commence' to eat. When de oberseer come to gib us de meat an' 'lasses, us be done et it all up.

"Us slaves useta git up at dawn; de oberseer blowed a cow hawn to call us to work. De Hunter slaves was 'lowed to go avisitin' udder slaves atter work hours an' on Sundays, an' iffen we was to meet a pattyroller, an' he axe us whar we f'um an' who we b'long to all us had to say was we's Hunter niggers; an' dat pattyroller didn't do nothin', caze de Hunter niggers warn't neber whupped by no pattyroller. Some niggers when dey was kotched eben dough dey warn't Hunter niggers, dey'd say it jus' de same, caze dem pattyrollers was always 'fraid to fool 'long wid a Hunter nigger. Massa Hunter, he was somp'n'.

"Durin' de Christmas celebration, us all had gif's. Us had quilting bee's wid de white folks, an' iffen a white gent'man th'owed a quilt ober a white lady he was 'titled to a kiss an' a hug f'um her. Atter de celebratin' we all had a big supper.

"An' speakin' of cures, white folks, us niggers had 'em. My grandmammy was a midwife an' she useta gib women cloves an' whiskey to ease de pain. She also gib 'em dried watermelon seeds to git rid of de grabel in de kidneys. For night sweats Grandmammy would put an axe under de bed of de sick pusson wid de blade asittin' straight up. An' iffen yo' is sick an' wants to keep de visitors away, jus' putt a fresh laid aig in front of de do' an' dey won't come in. If you is anxious fo' yo' sweetheart to come back f'um a trip put a pin in de groun' wid de point up an' den put a aig on de point. When all de insides runs outen de aig yo' sweetheart will return.

"Yassuh, white folks, us useta hab games. Us useta play, 'Puss in de cawner,' 'Next do' neighbor' an' 'Fox an' geese.' I kin gib you some of de songs we useta sing:

Old sweet beans and barley grows,
Old sweet beans an' barley grows,
You nor I nor nobody knows,
Where old sweet beans an' barley grows.

Go choose yo' east,
Go choose yo' wes',
Go choose de one dat you love best,
If she's not here to take her part,
Choose de nex' one to yo' heart.

"I is always been a 'piscopalian in belief, white folks. I ma'ied Bill Lewis when I was fifteen year old in Montgomery an' us had three chilluns. I is strong in my faith.

In mercy, not in wrath,
Rebuke me, gracious Lawd
Les' when Dy whole displeasure rise,
I sink beneath Dy rod.

"Yassuh, I remembers de war. I seed de Yankees a-marchin' through our place an' down de road dat led to Portland in Dallas County. Dey was mighty fine looking wid all dere brass buttons and nice lookin' uniforms. Dey didn't gib us much trouble. Dey had a Cap'n dat was good an' kin'. I heered him say dat dere warn't agoin' to be no stealin' an' atrampin' through folks' houses. Dey slep' outen de yard for one night; den dey went on in to Portland.

"Mr. Munger was our oberseer, but he had money of his own. He was better dan mos' oberseers, an' dere warn't no po' white trash, dem onery buckers libed further back in de woods.

"When us was sick Dr Lewis Williams, who was de doctor of de massa, 'tended to us slaves. I remembers sittin' in de doctor's lap while he tried to soothe my ailments.

"Us house servants was taught to read by de white folks, but my gran'-mammy, Alvain Hunter, dat didn't have no learnin' but dat knowed de Bible back'ards an' farwards, made us study. When me an' my brother was learnin' outen de Blue Back Speller she say:

"'How's dat? Go ober it.'

"Den we would laugh an' answer, 'How you know? You can't read.'

"Jus' don't soun' raght. De Lawd tell me when its raght. You-all can't fool me so don't try.'

"When de marriages was performed, de massa read de ceremony an' de couples would step off over a broomstick for luck. Den we all had a big supper, an' dere was music an' dancin' by de plenty."