

George Strickland

Interview with George Strickland

—*Preston Klein, Opelika, Alabama*

CORNSHUCKIN' WAS DE GREATES' THING

George Strickland, alert for all his ninety-one years but blinking in the bright sunlight as he laid his battered felt hat beside the rocking chair in front of his cabin in Opelika, Alabama, as he looked back down the decades and remembered the times when "cornshuckin' was de greates' thing." Though only a boy when the War between the States ended, he recalled days of slavery easily as he told the following story.

"I was nine years old when us niggers was sot free an' 'fo' dat time us refuged from Mississippi to Mobile, den to Selma, den to Montgomery an' from dar to Uchie, near Columbus, Georgia, whar we stayed 'til us was freed.

"My mammy an' daddy come from Mississippi fust. Dey was Cleveland an' Eve Strickland an' dar was fo' of us chilluns, Will, Sam, Missouri an' me. Us quarters had dirt flo's an' was in two long rows wid a street between. On de east side of de settlement was de barns, shops an' sich like. De beds was boxed up an' nailed to de wall, den dey was filled wid pinestraw. Dey fed us li'l niggers in wood troughs made of poplar. De cook in de big house cooked pots of greens an' po'd potlikker an' all in de troughs. Us et hit wid mussel shells or wid usses han's or gourds. Our wimmin folks would bile de gourds to keep dem from being bitter. Usses had two acre paster dat usses would turn under in de fall an' plant hit in turnips. I 'clare fo' goodness dey growed nearly as big as a gallon bucket.

"Deygived us clo'es ev'y Saddy night an' de winter clo'es had some cow hair in dem to make 'em warm.

"Ol' Marsa John Strickland was circuit preacher an' him an' Miss Polly lived up in a big log house. De logs was hewed an' split an' lined on each side. De logs stood on dey sides an' didn' lay flat. Dey chilluns was Mary, Laura, Sallie, Wiley, George an' Lougene.

"When Ol' marsa went off to preach, de overseer was mean an' whupped de niggers so bad Mistis runned him off. Dey had 'bout a hundred slaves an' would wake dem up by beating on a big piece of sheet ine (iron) wid a long piece of steel.

"De well didn' hab no windless but had a lever wid a bucket fastened on one end of hit, an' we would hold to de yuther end to dip de bucket in de water.

"When dey whupped de niggers dey would tie dem to a tree an' whup dem good. When dey was sold dey would put 'em on a stand or block, as dey called hit den, an' dey w'ud roll up dey sleeves to see de muscles. Den dey bid on dem an' bought 'em for 'bout \$1,000 to \$1,500 apiece. Us traveled in ox carts, an' I fust rid on a stage when I went to Uchie. When slaves would be ver' bad dey would chain dem out all night. You sho' had to stay at home an' wuk.

"Our chu'ch was nearby an' us sot nex' to de do'. Mistis called up all de li'l niggers, talked to dem an' had pra'r. De yuthers had pra'r meetin' oncet a week.

"De wimmin folks had a big time quiltin's wid somebody aplayin' on ol' gourds wid horse hair strings, called old gourd, horse hair dance.

"Cornshuckin' was de greates' thing of all. Ol' Marsa tuck a jug of likker 'roun' an' got dem tight an' when dey got full dey would h'ist him up an' down, tote him 'roun' an' holler. Den de fun started an' dey would play de old gourd an' horse hair dance, de han'saw an' case knife. Dey could run dey han' up an' down de saw to change de tune an' de leader was on top of de pile of corn singin' whilst all de yuthers would follow.

"Us chilluns was 'sleep den, but us had our good times hidin' de switch an' playin' han'-over ball. Dey sho' skeer us nearly into fits wid tales of Rawhead and Bloody-bones.

"I'se never tuk a oath ner teched nothin' didn' b'long to me in all my life.

"Our med'cin' was Jerus'lem oak seed what was beat up to give de chilluns for worms.

"On Sund' mornin' dey giv' us biskits for breakfast, which was so rar' dat we would try to beat de yuthers outten dey'n.

"Oncet dey piled ev'ythin' on waggins an' put all us li'l niggers on top. Us rations, lak coffee, meal, meat an' mos' ev'ythin' was kivered over wid sheets. Den dey tuk us off an' us stayed t'ree days an' nights.

"Ol' marsa tuk one of de fellers wid him to be on de front line to help keep off de Injuns, so us chilluns b'lieves.



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"Dat battle of Atlanta was de wust thing dat's ever been. All de houses for a fur piece jes' shuck from de big guns. De Yankees camped in a big hundred acre fiel' close by. Den dey rushed up to de house, kicked de gate down, tuk Mistiss trunk out an' bus' hit open huntin' money. But dey foun' none, so dey sot fire to de house an' ast, whar de horses? De niggers couldn' tell an' den dey burnt de house down.

"Atter dat, Ol' Marsa tell us, us is free from him but needn't leave iffen us didn' want to go, but could stay on wid him an' he'd treat us right an' give us half of what us made.

"In after years I ma'ed Josephine Bedell an' us had George, Phillip, Renza, Eldridge (de baby), May Willie an' Leila. I's got some gran-chillun, too, but kain't think of dey names.

"Hit was de plans of God to free us niggers an' not Abraham Lincoln's.

"I's allus tried to live under de correction of de Lord. Hit's my duty to try to do so."