

## Henry Garry

### Interview with Henry Garry

—*W.F. Jordan, Birmingham, Alabama*

#### *MR. RENFROE HANGS ON A CHINYBERRY TREE*

"Howdy Cap'n! Kin you tell me how to fin' Jedge Ab's co't? I knowed 'zactly whar hit was in de ole co't house, but I gits all bumfuzzled tryin' to fin' anybody in dis new buildin'."

His name was Henry Garry. He wore a suit of faded and extensively patched Confederate gray and a cap of the regulation porter's style. His face bore the expression worn only by those of his race who had lived and toiled in a much earlier and in many instances, happier day. In the presence of "white folks" he was at ease, indicating an intimate association and relationship among them and in their service.

"What business have you in Judge Abernathy's court? You don't look like a criminal," was the response.

"Oh, nawsah, I ain't neber done nothin' to nobody no time. But I sho' don't know what dis new generation of niggus comin' to. Hit war bad 'nough when dey couldn' git nothin' but bootleg cawn licker; now dey kin buy all de gin dey wants right here in Bummin'ham, an' dem rapscallions git out on Sat'd'y night, fill up on gin an' git all lit up lak a meetin' house. Den de fust thing dey know dey gits tangled up wid somebody wid a razor or a meat axe or somp'n an' 'long come de law, locks 'em up an' de debil's to pay."

"But why should all that disturb you? They haven't run you in have they?" he was asked.

"Nawsuh, hits dat triflin' nevwew of mine. Dat boy kin sho' git into mo' kin's of trouble dan a pet monkey. He in jail now for some debilment or yuther an' I 'spect I'se gwine to hab to git him out ag'in. Dat's what I'se gwine to see Jedge Ab 'bout. Wisht I could git dat boy back down in Sumter County on Marse John Rogers' plantation. Dat's whar he b'long at. Betcha Marse John wouldn' take none of his foolishment."

"Are you familiar with the people and history of Sumter County?" he was quizzed further.

"Lawd man, I was bawn in de back yahd whar Marse John Rogers live right now. Dat was right atter de surrender an' my mammy b'long to de Vandegraaf family who useter live dar an' owned all dat plantation. My daddy's name was Daniel Grady. Dey come f'um Virginny long time 'fo' de wah. All dem ole peoples is dead now. Onlies' kinfolks I hab lef' down dah is a cousin. She mos' a hundert yeahs ole an' still libs on her little farm a few miles from Gainesville. An' Cap'n when I says libs, I means libs. Ain't nothin' dat grow outten de groun' nor in de groun' in Alabama dat's good for folks to eat but what she got it an' plenty. I goes down dar to visit her twicet a yeah, an', man alive, hit am a sin de 'mount of grub I puts away endurin' dem two weeks I stays dar. Yassah, I'se 'bout due to go down dah now, 'caze dat gyarden sass en' spring chickens jes' 'bout ripe.

"My mammy was a seamstress for de Vandegraaf plantation an' made all de clothes for bofe black and white. She neber did leave de plantation atter de slaves was freed but stayed right dar till she died, she an' my daddy bofe. But dey was good hones', 'spectable, chu'ch-goin' people, my daddy an' mammy was. De little log chu'ch house is still dar an' de niggers still keeps up de services. De ole pastor nearly a hundert yeahs ole now, but it would s'prise you how spry he gits 'bout an' conduc's de meetin's.

"I don't know 'bout yuther parts, but from what my mammy tell me de slaves in Sumter County mus' hab had a mighty good time, had plenty of ebery t'ing an' nothin' to worry 'bout. Seems lak dar warn't no trouble 'mongst de whites an' blacks 'twell atter de wah. Some white mens come down from de Norf' an' mess up wid de niggers. I was a mighty little shaver, but I 'members one night atter supper, my daddy and mammy an' us chilluns was settin' under a big tree by our cabin in de quarters when all at wunst, lickety split, heah come gallopin' down de road what look lak a whole army of ghos'es. Mus' hab been 'bout a hundert an' dey was men ridin' hosses wid de men and hosses bofe robed in white.

"Cap'n, dem mens look lak dey ten feet high an' dey hosses big as elephan's. Dey didn't bodder nobody at de qua'ters, but de leader of de crowd ride right in de front gate an' up to de big dug well back of our cabin an' holler to my daddy. 'Come heah nigguh! Ho-oh!', 'cose we skeered. Yassuh, look lak our time done come.

"My daddy went ober to whar he settin' on his hoss at de well. Den he say, 'Nigguh git a bucket an' draw me some cool water.' Daddy got a bucket, fill it up an' han' it to him. Cap'n, would you b'lieve it? Dat man jes' lif' dat bucket to his mouf' an' neber stop twell it empty. Did he hab 'nough? He jes' smack his mouf an' call for mo'. Jes' lak dat, he didn' stop twell he drunk three buckets full. Den he jes' wipe his mouf an' say, 'Lawdy, dat sho' was good. Hit was de fust drink of water I'se had sence I was killed at de battle of Shiloh.'

"Was we good? Cap'n, from den on dar wasn't a nigger dare stick his head out de do' fo' a week. But nex' day we fin' out dey was Ku Kluxes an' dey foun' de body of a white man hangin' to a pos' oak tree ober by Gran' Prairie. His name was Billings an' he come from de Norf. He been ober 'roun' Livingston messin' up de niggers tellin' 'em dey had been promised forty acres and a mule, an' dey ought to go 'head an' take 'em from de white folks.

"But dat carpetbagger couldn' do nothin' wid ole Slick 'dough. Slick? Yassah, dat what ebe'ybody call him. He hang 'roun' de co'te house at Livingston an' listen to de lawyers argufy. He try to 'member all de big words dem lawyers use. When dat carpetbagger come to town dat nigger Slick was carryin' his bag to de hotel an' when dey pass de mineral well in de street, de man axed Slick, 'What dat water good for? Hab it been tested?' Slick say, 'Oh yassah, dat water been scanalyzed by de bes' fenologists in de country, an' dey say hit's three quarters carbolic acid gas, an' de yuther seben eights is hydr ophobia.'

"Yassah, dat ole cannon in de co'te house yahd at Livingston was drug outten de Tombigbee ribber whar de Yankees done sunk it time of de wah. De Men's useter load 'er up an' shoot 'er off on big days at Livingston. Dey had to spike de ole gun, 'dough, to keep de deblish boys 'roun' town from shootin' it off jes' fo' fun.

"Git rid of de carpetbaggers? Oh yassah, dey vote 'em out. Well, sah, tell you how dey done dat. De 'publicans done paid all de niggers' poll tax, an' gib 'em a receipt so dey could vote same as de whites. Dey made up to 'lect de officers at de co't house all niggers an' den sen' yuther ones to Montgomery to

make de laws. Same day de 'lection come off dar was a circus in Livingston an' de Demmycrats 'suated de boss man of de circus to let all Sumter County niggers in de show by showin' dere poll tax receipts. Yessah, when de show was ober de 'lection was ober too, an' nobody was 'lected 'cepin' white Demmycrats.

"'Cose dat made Sumter County a mighty onhealthy place for carpetbaggers an' uppity niggers.



*Henry Garry, Birmingham, Alabama*

"Yo' ax me 'bout de old songs de slaves useter sing. Well, I don't 'members many of dem. Atter de S'render all de ole slaves what stayed on de plantations 'roun' Gainesville useter gather at de landin' dar waitin' to see de steamboats pull in from down de Tombigbee on dere way to Columbus, (Miss.), an' somebody'd start a song, an', Law' man, how dem niggers sing. Here one I heerd my mammy sing so much I learnt it:

"Read in de bible, understan'

Methuselah was de oldes' man.

He lived nine hundred an' sixty nine

Den died an' go to Heben in de Lawd's due time.

Methuselah was a witness

For my Lawd,

For my Lawd.

"Read in de Bible, Understan'

Samson was de stronges' man.

Went out to battle to fight one time

Killed a thousan' of de Philistines.

Samson was a witness

For my Lawd,

For my Lawd.

"Daniel was a Hebrew chile,

Went to de Lawd to pray a while.

De Lawd tole de angels de lions to keep,

So Daniel lay down an' went to sleep.

An' dat's anoder witness

For my Lawd,

For my Lawd.

"Now 'bout de ghos' tales. I neber heerd many ghos' yarns 'cep' 'bout de chinyberry tree whar dey hung Mistah Steve Renfro. He was 'lected High Sheriff dat time dey got all de niggers to go to de circus 'stead of goin' to de 'lection. He a fine lookin' man an' ride a big white hoss an' ebe'ybody lak him a lot 'cep' de carpetbaggers an' boddosome niggers. No matter whar, if he meet one of 'em, he look 'em squar' in de eye for a minute, den 'bout all he say would be, 'Get to hell outten heah!' An' man, iffen dey could fly dat would be too slow trabelin' for 'em, gettin' outten de county. But atter while he got in trouble 'bout money matters. Deysay he got color blind, couldn' tell his money from de county's. So dey 'rest him an' put him in jail, but he bust right out an' run off. Atter while he sneak back an' 'caze his Ku Klux frien's wouldn' help him outten de trouble when he got back in jail, he give 'em away an' tell what dere name was. One night a gang took him outten de Livingston jail an' go 'bout a mile outten town an' hang him to a chinyberry tree. I'se hyeard iffen you go to dat tree today an' kinda tap on hit an say, 'Renfro, Renfro; what did you do?' De tree say right back at you, 'Nothin'.'

"Nawsuh, folks down 'roun' Gainesville didn' pay much min' to signs an' conju' an' all dat stuff. My mammy wouldn' let us tote a axe on our shoulder th'ough de house, an' she wouldn' 'low a umbrella to be opened in de house, say hit bring bad luck. She neber fail to hab cown-fiel' peas an hawg-jowl for dinner on New Yeah's Day. She say hit a sign you hab plenty to eat balance ob de yeah. She put a ball of asafetida on a string an' make all us chillun wear it 'roun' our neck to keep off sickness. If a owl begin to hoot ober in Tombigbee bottom too close to de house, she put de shovel in de fire to make him stop.

"Wall, sir, I come to Bummin'ham mos' forty yeahs ago when Marse Josiah Morris finish de Morris Hotel. I fust run de elevators a while, den dey wukked me in de saloon what useter be jes' back of de office. I been heah eber sence. I 'speck 'bout de las' thing dat'll happen to dis ole nigguh will be to haul him away from de Morris Hotel in a black box.

"But Lawdy, Cap'n, I got to git up to Jedge Ab's co't. Lissen, Cap'n, iffen I gits dat no'count nevew outten jail I sho' would lak to git him a job. You don't know nobody what don't want to hire nobody to do nothin' does you?"