

Irene Poole

Interview with Irene Poole

—*Susie R. O'Brien, Uniontown, Alabama*

HUSH WATER FOR TALKATIVE WOMEN

Under the spreading branches of an enormous fig tree laden with ripe fruit "Aunt Irene" sat dreaming of old times. At her feet several chickens scratched and waited for the soft plop of an over ripe fig as it fell to the ground.

Aunt Irene's back is bent with age and rheumatism, but her two-room cabin is as clean and neat as a pin. Her small yard is a mass of color where marigolds, zinnias, verbena and cockscomb run riot, and over the roughly-made arch at the gate trailed cypress vine in full bloom. "Good morning Aunt Irene," I said. "A penny for your thoughts."

"Well honey, I don't know as dey is wo'th a penny; not to you anyhow. I was jes' stud'in' 'bout ole times an' 'bout mah ole marster. You know if he was livin' today he would be a hundred an' sixteen years ole."

"Who was your master Aunt Irene? Tell me about him."

"His name was Jeff Anderson Poole an' he was de bes' man in de world. Mah ole miss was name Mollie. I was born on his plantation three miles from Uniontown eighty five years ago.

"Mah pappy, Alfred Poole, b'longed to Marse Jeff an' he bought mah mammy, Palestine Kent, from another plantation 'cause mah pappy jes' couldn' do no work fer thinkin' 'bout her.

"Marse Jeff paid fifteen hunderd dollars for my mammy an' her three little chillun. Marse Jeff was rich, he owned three big plantations an' Lawd knows how many niggers. Dey was a hunderd head on our plantation. He lacked to race horses an' had a stable full o' fine racers. I spec' he made lots o' his money on dem horses. Miss Mollie say when he win he swell out his ches' an' stick his thum's in de armhole of his ves' an' talk 'bout it, but when he lose he don't say nothin'.

"Yas ma'am dere was always plenty to eat. A thousan' poun's o' meat wasn't nothin' to kill on our plantation. My mammy was de cook in de big house an' my pappy driv de carriage an' went 'roun' wid Marse Jeff when he tuck trips. I was a house servant too. When I wasn' nothin' mo' in a baby, de oberseer's wife tuck me to train, so I would know how to ac' in de big house.

"One day she started to give me a whuppin'. Us was out in de yard an' when she bent over to git a switch I runned under her hoopskirt. When she look 'roun' she didn't see me nowhar. After while she started on up to de house an' I runned along wid her under de hoopskirt, takin' little steps so I wouldn't trip her up, till I seed a chance to slip out." Irene threw back her head and laughed loud and long at this amusing memory.

Asked then about her mistress she said: "Yas ma'am she was good. She never punished me, she used to go 'roun' de quarters eve'y mornin' to see 'bout her sick niggers. She always had a little basket wid oil, teppentine an' number six in it. Number six was strong medicine. You had to take it by de drap. I always toted de basket. She gived me mah weddin' dress. It was white tarletan wid ban's o' blue ribbin. I sole de dress las' year but I can show you de pantalets she made me. I used to wear 'em to meetin' on Sunday when us had singin' an' de preacher said words." Aunt Irene brought out the deep ruffled pantalets carefully folded and yellow with age, she had treasured them for seventy-five years.

"No ma'am, Marse Jeff didn't go to de war, I don't know why. I guess it was 'cause he was so rich. Now don't you be thinkin' he was gun shy, 'cause he wasn't an' he done his part too 'cause he took keer o' five widders an' dey chillun when dey men got kilt in de war.

"My pappy lef de night de Yankees tuck Selma. It was on Sunday, an' I ain't seed him since.

"After de surrender us staid on with Marse Jeff. Us didn't keer nothin' 'bout bein' free 'cause us had good times on de plantation. On Sadday dey had corn shuckin's an' de niggers had a week at Chris'mas wid presents for eve'ybody. Camping at de big house an' mo' to eat in one day den I sees now in a year.

"Aunt Irene, do you remember anything about the conjurers in the old days?"

"I don't put much sto' by dem folks. Dey used to give you de han' so you could please yo' mistress an' dey would sell you hush water in a jug. Hush water was jes' plain water what dey fixed so if you drink it you would be quiet an' patient. De mens would git it to give to dey wives to make 'em hush up. I reckon some of de mens would be glad to git some now 'cause gals dese days is got too much mouf."