

Siney Bonner

Interview with Siney Bonner

—*W.F. Jordan*

"Hear dat whistle?" The speaker was Siney Bonner, an ex-slave, now living in the Norwood section of Birmingham. She had stopped for a "confab" where a group of other elderly Negroes of the neighborhood had gathered. "De whistles on dem Big Jacks what pull dese highsteppin' I.C. trains mind me of dem steamboats what used to pull up at de landin' at ole Pickensville on de Tombigbee River.

"'Cose dar wa'n't no railroads dem days an' de onlies' way folks had trabbelin' about was de steamboat which passed most every week, and de stage coach which passed twice a week.

"Lawsy, man, dem was de days, and many de time atter my daddy, whose name was Green Bonner, heard dat steamboat blow below Pickensville, he would hitch up de mules to de waggin and foller Massa John on hossback down to de landin' to fetch back de supply of sugar and coffee and plow-tools needed on de plantation. Dey would take me 'long to hold de mules and watch de waggin and it was a reglar picnic to me to see de big shiney boat and watch de goin's on.

"Massa John Bonner sho' did 'pend on my daddy. De massa paid a thousand green-back dollars for him down to Mobile. 'Nuf green-backs to wrap him up in, he said, so he named him Green Bonner.

"Yes suh, we was all Baptis'—de deep water kind, and every Sunday dey used to pile us into de waggins and pull out bright and early for Big Creek Church on the Carrollton road. Everybody fetched a big basket of grub and, sakes alive! sech another dinner you never see, all spread out on de grassy grove by de ole graveyard. Mos' all de quality white folks belonged at Big Creek and when dere slaves got sho' nuff 'ligion, dey have 'em jine at Big Creek and be baptized at de swimmin' hole. Some of de niggers want to have dere own meetin's, but Lawd chile, dem niggers get happy and get to shoutin' all over de meadow where dey built a brush arbor. Massa John quick put a stop to dat. He say, 'if you gwine to preach and sing you must turn de wash pot bottom up'; meanin', no shoutin'. Dem Baptis' at Big Creek was sho' tight wid dere rules too. Turn you out sho' if you drink too much cawn licker, or dance, or cuss.

"Massa John had a big fine bird dog. She was a mammy dog and one day she foun' six puppies out in de harness house. Dey was mos' all girl puppies so massa gwine drown 'em. I axed him to give 'em to me and purty soon de missus sent me to de pos'office, so I put de puppies in a basket and took 'em wid me. Dr. Lyles come by whar I was settin' and he say, 'Want to sell dem pups, Siney?' I tell him, uh-huh. Den he say, 'What 'nomination is dey?'. I tell him, dey's Methodis' dogs. He didn' say no mo'. Bout a week atter dat ole missus sent me to 'de pos'office again, so I took my basket of puppies. Sho' nuff, 'long come Dr. Lyles and he say, 'Siney, see you still ain't sold dem pups'. I say, 'Naw-suh'. Den he axed me ag'in what 'nomination dey b'long to. I tole him dey was Baptis' dogs. He say, 'How come? You tole me las'

week dem was Methodis' pups'. Ha-ha! Bless God!, look like he had me. But I say, 'Yas-suh, but you see, Doctah, dey got dere eyes open since den!' He laff and go on down to his newspaper office.



Siney Bonner, Birmingham, Alabama

"How old is I? Law chile, I don't know. My mammy say I was fifteen year old time of de surrender. I 'members dat mighty well. Massa John call all de niggers on de plantation 'round him at de big house and he say to 'em 'Now, you all jes' as free as I is. I ain't your marster no mo'. I'se tried to be good to you and take keer of all of you. You is all welcome to stay and we'll all wuk togedder and make a livin' somehow. Ef you don' want to stay, dem dat go will jes' have to root, pig, or die.' Some stayed and some lef'. My daddy stayed wid Marse John till he was called home to glory. Now dey all gone but Siney, and I'se jes' here, waitin' for 'em to call me.

"Yas suh, I been 'round Carrollton a heap. Atter Marse John and my daddy bofe died, I wuk'd 'round from place to place. Used to wuk for Mrs. Roper at de old Phoenix Hotel. I recollect when de new brick court house was built. De ole court house had been burned and dey 'rested a nigger named Bill Burkhalter for settin' it on fire. Dey sent him to de pen' an' some officers started wid him to Montgomery. When dey got to Sipse River a mob ketch'd up wid 'em an' took Bill and hung him dere in de swamp. 'Bout dat time a bad cloud come up. Dey axed Bill did he have anything to say. He say, 'I ain't burn no court house, an' ef you all kill me, my face gwine always ha'nt you'. Whilst he still hangin' dere in dat swamp de lightnin' flash and de thunder an' wind was somp'n awful. Nex' mornin' when de sun come up, bless my soul, right dere on de winder in de court house tower was a photygraf of de face of de nigger dey done hung for burnin' de old court house. Yas suh, I done seen dat wid my own eyes an' I speck dat picture still dere.

"But lawsy me, I got to get goin', kase I'se cookin' me a mess of poke sallet I picked down by de railroad tracks dis mornin'. Dat poke sallet and young ernions gwine to be mighty good, and dey sho 'mind me of dem good old days in Pickens county."