

Tom Baker

Interview with Tom Baker

—*Susie R. O'Brien*

"Sho, I recollects about de slabery days," said uncle Tom as he whittled shavings from a soft piece of white pine. "I lived on a plantation down in Perry County an' I remembers a story bout somp'n dat happen to me a way back dar.

"I was a water boy for fifty fiel' han's dat worked in de sun all day long, an' I hadda carry many a bucket from de spring dat was one fiel' ober from where most of dem was workin'. De spring run down between some willow trees an' it was powerful cool down dere in de shade. I use' to lie on de moss an' let my bare belly git cool an' put my face in de outlet of de spring an' let de water trickle over my haid. Jus' about de time I gits a little rest one of dem niggers would call: 'Water boy! Bring dat bucket!' Den I grab up de bucket an' run back out in de hot sun.

"One day, on my las' trip, I was mighty tired an' I flop down on dat moss wid de sweat a-drippin' from my body, an' 'fo' I knowed it I done fell slap to sleep. When I woke up, it was almos' dark, an' I couldn't hear de slaves a-singing' in de fiel's, so I knowed dat dey had gone home. I shake my haid, an' look about me, an' my eyes came to res' on a little black bear cub a-drinkin' outen de spring. He so was a cute little boogar an' I made up my mind right den to try an' kotch him. I was jus' a little nigger 'bout ten year old an' didn't have no sense, but I sho' wanted dat little bear. He ain't seed me a-settin' dere, so I snuck up real cautious like, an' afore he knowed it I had dat little debil a-squealin' in my han's. I was jus' about to start home wid him, when I hears a rustlin' in de bushes an' afore I went ten feets, here come a big, black bear a-lopin' along right outen dem willow trees. I drop dat little critter 'caze I knowed dat was his mammy an' she was ravin' mad. When I let de little feller fall it must have hurt him somp'n awful caze he howl mo' dan eber, an' went a limp' up to his mammy. Well, suh, dat ole woman she got so mad she made fo' me lak two bolts of lightnin', but dese here feets of mine begin a-doin' dere stuff. I knowed she was a-gainin' on me so I lets out a whoop for help. She chased me 'cross dat empty field an' 'bout dat time I seen big Jim a-comin' through a row of cawn. 'Hurry Big Jim,' I calls, 'a bear is atter me!' Big Jim was de biggest nigger on our place. He must have weighed as much as half a bale of cotton. I was jus' 'bout gittin' to de aidge of de cawn when dat bear ketched me. He give me a slap wid his paw an' I goes down wid my mouf a-scoopin' up de dus'. My back felt like somebody done put a hot iron on it. Dat bear was a mean one. I was expectin' her to chaw me up an' I drewed my body up in a knot and kivered my haid wid my hands an' waited. But dat bear neber touch me agin'. I kinda snuck my eye aroun' an' I saw big Jim havin' it out wid her. Jim, he had a long knife an' dey was a-tumblin' an' a-rollin' in de dust, while I sot dere wid my eyes a-poppin' outen my haid an' my back feelin' like it was broke. Jim he wrap his legs roun' dat bear an' 'fore you knowed it he had done stuck dat ole critter a dozen times wid dat knife.

"About fifteen minutes later me an' Jim was a-walkin' back through de cawn fiel' an' I guess we looked a sight, 'caze I was all tore up an' Jim he looked like he done mess up wid a fambly of wildcats. He was bleedin' from haid to foot. When we walked into de big house to git some treatments an' medicine for our hurts, Mistis was a-standin' dere, and when she seed me an' Jim, she almost faint. She say: 'Whut done happen to my niggers?'

"Atter me an' Jim got fixed up I was jus' as happy, kaze I done seed de bes' fight dere eber was, an' I had me a little orphan bear cub."