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MATILDA BROOKS

A GOVERNOR'S SLAVES

Matilda Brooks, 79, who lives in Monticello, Fla., was once a slave of a South Carolina governor.

Mrs. Brooks was born in 1857 or 1858 in Edgefield, S.C. Her parents were Hawkins and Harriet Knox, and at the time of the birth of their daughter were slaves on a large plantation belonging to Governor Frank Pickens. On this plantation were raised cotton, corn, potatoes, tobacco, peas, wheat and truck products. As soon as Matilda was large enough to go into the fields she helped her parents with the farming.

The former slave describes Governor Pickens as being 'very good' to his slaves. He supervised them personally, although official duties often made this difficult. He saw to it that their quarters were comfortable and that they always had sufficient food. When they became ill he would himself doctor on them with pills, castor oil, turpentine other remedies. Their diet consisted largely of potatoes, corn bread, syrup, greens, peas, and occasionally ham, fowl and other meats or poultry. Their chief beverage was coffee made from parched corn.

Since there were no stoves during slavery, they cooked their foods in large iron pots suspended from racks built into the fireplaces. Fried foods were prepared in iron 'spiders', large frying pans with legs. These pans were placed over hot coals, and the seasoning was done with salt which they secured from evaporated sea-water. After the food was fried and while the coals were still glowing the fat of oxen and sheep was melted to make candles. Any grease left over was put into a large box, to be used later for soap-making.

Lye for the soap was obtained by putting oak ashes in a barrel and pouring water over them. After standing for several days—until the ashes had decayed—holes were drilled into the bottom of the barrel and the liquid drained off. This liquid was the lye,

and it was then trickled into the pot into which the fat had been placed. The two were then boiled, and after cooling cut into squares of soap.

Water for cooking and other purposes was obtained from a well, which also served as a refrigerator at times. Matilda does not recall seeing ice until many years later.

In the evenings Matilda's mother would weave cloth on her spinning-jenny and an improvised loom. This cloth was sometimes dyed in various colors: blue from the indigo plant; yellow from the crocus and brown from the bark of the red oak. Other colors were obtained from berries and other plants.

In seasons other than picking-time for the cotton the children were usually allowed to play in the evenings, when cotton crops were large, however, they spent their evenings picking out seeds from the cotton bolls, in order that their parents might work uninterruptedly in the fields during the day. The cotton, after being picked and separated, would be weighed in balances and packed tightly in 'crocus' bags.

Chicken and goose feathers were jealously saved during these days. They were used for the mattresses that rested on the beds of wooden slats that were built in corners against the walls. Hoop skirts were worn at the time, but for how long afterward Matilda does not remember. She only recalls that they were disappearing 'about the time I saw a windmill for the first time'.

The coming of the Yankee soldiers created much excitement among the slaves on the Pickens plantation. The slaves were in ignorance of activities going on, and of their approach, but when the first one was sighted the news spread 'just like dry grass burning up a hill'. Despite the kindness of Governor Pickens the slaves were happy to claim their new-found freedom. Some of them even ran away to join the Northern armies before they were officially freed. Some attempted to show their loyalty to their old owners by joining the southern armies, but in this section they were not permitted to do so.

After she was released from slavery Matilda came with her parents to the Monticello section, where the Knoxes became paid house servants. The parents took an active part in politics in the section, and Matilda was sent to school. White teachers operated the schools at first, and were later replaced by Negro teachers. Churches were opened with Negro ministers in the pulpits, and other necessities of community life eventually came to the vicinity.

Matilda still lives in one of the earlier homes of her parents in the area, now described as 'Rooster-Town' by its residents. The section is in the eastern part of Monticello.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interview with subject, Matilda Brooks; "Rooster-Town", eastern part of city, Monticello, Jefferson County, Fla.