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Folklore: Stories from Ex-Slaves
Lucas County, District Nine
Toledo, Ohio
The Story of MRS. HANNAH DAVIDSON.

Mrs. Hannah Davidson occupies two rooms in a home at 533 Woodland Avenue, Toledo, Ohio. Born on a plantation in Ballard County, Kentucky, in 1852, she is today a little, white-haired old lady. Dark, flashing eyes peer through her spectacles. Always quick to learn, she has taught herself to read. She says, "I could always spell almost everything." She has eagerly sought education. Much of her ability to read has been gained from attendance in recent years in WPA "opportunity classes" in the city. Today, this warm-hearted, quiet little Negro woman ekes out a bare existence on an old age pension of \$23.00 a month. It is with regret that she recalls the shadows and sufferings of the past. She says, "It is best not to talk about them. The things that my sister May and I suffered were so terrible that people would not believe them. It is best not to have such things in our memory."

"My father and mother were Isaac and Nancy Meriwether," she stated. "All the slaves went under the name of my master and mistress, Emmett and Susan Meriwether. I had four sisters and two brothers. There was Adeline, Dorah, Alice, and Lizzie. My brothers were Major and George Meriwether. We lived in a log cabin made of sticks and dirt, you know, logs and dirt stuck in the cracks. We slept on beds made of boards nailed up.

"I don't remember anything about my grandparents. My folks were sold around and I couldn't keep track of them.

"The first work I did out from home was with my mistress's brother, Dr. Jim Taylor, in Kentucky, taking care of his children. I was an awful tiny little somethin' about eight or nine years old. I used to turn the reel for the old folks who was spinning. That's all I've ever known—work.

"I never got a penny. My master kept me and my sister Mary twenty-two long years after we were supposed to be free. Work, work, work. I don't think my sister and I ever went to bed before twelve o'clock at night. We never got a penny. They could have spared it, too; they had enough.

"We ate corn bread and fat meat. Meat and bread, we kids called it. We all had a pint tin cup of buttermilk. No slaves had their own gardens.

"The men just wore jeans. The slaves all made their own clothes. They just wove all the time; the old women wove all the time. I wasn't old enough to go in the field like the oldest children. The oldest children—they worked. After slavery ended, my sister Mary and me worked as ex-slaves, and we worked. Most of the slaves had shoes, but us kids used to run around barefoot most of the time.

"My folks, my master and mistress, lived in a great, white, frame house, just the same as a hotel. I grew up with the youngest child, Mayo. The other white children grew up and worked as overseers. Mayo always wanted me to call him 'Master Mayo'. I fought him all the time. I never would call him 'Master Mayo'. My mistress wouldn't let anyone harm me and she made Mayo behave.

"My master wouldn't let the poor white neighbors—no one—tell us we was free. The plantation was many, many acres, hundreds and hundreds of acres, honey. There were about twenty-five or thirty families of slaves. They got up and stood until daylight, waiting to plow. Yes, child, they was up early. Our folks don't know how we had to work. I don't like to tell you how we were treated—how we had to work. It's best to brush those things out of our memory.

"If you wanted to go to another plantation, you had to have a pass. If my folks was going to somebody's house, they'd have to have a pass. Otherwise they'd be whipped. They'd take a big man and tie his hands behind a tree, just like that big tree outside, and whip him with a rawhide and draw blood every whip. I know I was scared every time I'd hear the slave say, 'Pray, Master.'

"Once, when I was milking a cow, I asked Master Ousley, 'Master Ousley, will you do me a favor?'

"He said in his drawl, 'Of course I will.'

"'Take me to McCracken County,' I said. I didn't even know where McCracken County was, but my sister was there. I wanted to find my sister. When I reached the house where my sister stayed, I went through the gate. I asked if this was the house where Mary Meriwether lived. Her mistress said, 'Yes, she's in the back. Are you the girl Mr. Meriwether's looking for?' My heart was in my mouth. It just seemed I couldn't go through the gate. I never even saw my sister that time. I hid for a while and then went back.

"We didn't have any churches. My master would come down Sunday morning with just enough flour to make bread. Coffee, too. Their coffee was parts of meal, corn and so on. Work all week and that's what they had for coffee.

"We used to sing, 'Swing low, sweet chariot'. When our folks sang that, we could really see the chariot.

"Once, Jim Ferguson, a colored man, came to teach school. The white folks beat and whipped him and drove him away in his underwear.

"I wanted so hard to learn to read, but I didn't even know I was free, even when slavery was ended.

"I been so exhausted working, I was like an inch-worm crawling along a roof. I worked till I thought another lick would kill me. If you had something to do, you did it or got whipped. Once I was so tired I couldn't work any more. I crawled in a hole under the house and stayed there till I was rested. I didn't get whipped, either.

"I never will forget it—how my master always used to say, 'Keep a nigger down' I never will forget it. I used to wait on table and I heard them talk.

"The only fun we had was on Sunday evening, after work. That was the only chance we got. We used to go away off from the house and play in the haystack.

"Our folks was so cruel, the slaves used to whisper 'round. Some of them knew they was free, even if the white folks didn't want 'em to find out they was free. They went off in the woods sometimes. But I was just a little kid and I wasn't allowed to go around the big folks.

"I seen enough what the old folks went through. My sister and I went through enough after slavery was over. For twenty-one long years we were enslaved, even after we were supposed to be free. We didn't even know we were free. We had to wash the white people's feet when they took their shoes off at night—the men and women.

"Sundays the slaves would wash out their clothes. It was the only time they had to themselves. Some of the old men worked in their tobacco patches. We never observed Christmas. We never had no holidays, son, no, sir! We didn't know what the word was.

"I never saw any slave funerals. Some slaves died, but I never saw any of them buried. I didn't see any funerals at all.

"The white folks would come down to the cabins to marry the slaves. The master or mistress would read a little out of a book. That's all there was to it.

"We used to play a game called 'Hulgul'. We'd play it in the cabins and sometimes with the white children. We'd hold hazelnuts in our hands. I'd say 'Hulgul' How many? You'd guess. If you hit it right, you'd get them all and it would be your turn to say 'Hulgul'. If you'd say 'Three!' and I only had two, you'd have to give me another to make three.

"The kids nowadays can go right to the store and buy a ball to play with. We'd have to make a ball out of yarn and put a sock around it for a cover. Six of us would stay on one side of a house and six on the other side. Then we'd throw the ball over the roof and say 'Catch!' If you'd catch it you'd run around to the; other side and hit somebody, then start over. We worked so hard we couldn't play long on Sunday evenings.

"School? We never seen the inside of a schoolhouse. Mistress used to read the Bible to us every Sunday morning.

"We say two songs I still remember.

"I think when I read that sweet story of old,
When Jesus was here among men,
How he called little children like lambs to his fold,
I should like to have been with them then.

"I wish that his hands had been placed on my head,
That his arms had been thrown around me,
That I might have seen his kind face when he said
'Let the little ones come unto me.'

"Yet still to his footstool in prayer I nay go
And ask for a share of his love,
And that I might earnestly seek Him below
And see Him and hear Him above.

"Then there was another:

"I want to be an angel
And with the angels stand
With a crown upon my Forehead
And a harp within my hand.

"And there before my Saviour,
So glorious and so bright,
I'd make the sweetest music
And praise him day and night.

"And as soon as we got through singing those songs, we had to get right out to work. I was always glad when they called us in the house to Sunday school. It was the only chance we'd get to rest.

"When the slaves got sick, they'd take and look after themselves. My master had a whole wall of his house for medicine, just like a store. They made their own medicines and pills. My mistress's brother, Dr. Jim Taylor, was a doctor. They done their own doctoring. I still have the mark where I was vaccinated by my master.

"People was lousy in them days. I always had to pick louses from the heads of the white children. You don't find children like that nowadays.

"My mistress had a little roan horse. She went all through the war on that horse. Us little kids never went around the big folks. We didn't watch folks faces to learn, like children do now. They wouldn't let us. All I know about the Civil War was that it was goin' on. I heard talk about killin' and so on, but I didn't know no thin' about it.

"My mother was the last slave to get off the plantation. She travelled across the plantation all night with us children. It was pouring rain. The white folks surrounded her and took away us children, and gave her so many minutes to get off the plantation. We never saw her again. She died away from us.

"My brother came to see us once when slavery was over. He was grown up. My master wasn't going to let him see us and he took up his gun. My mistress said he should let him see us. My brother gave me a little coral ring. I thought it was the prettiest thing I ever saw.

"I made my sister leave. I took a rolling pin to make her go and she finally left. They didn't have any more business with us than you have right now.

"I remember when Yankee soldiers came riding through the yard. I was scared and ran away crying. I can see them now. Their swords hung at their sides and their horses walked proud, as if they walked on their hind legs. The master was in the field trying to hide his money and guns and things. The soldiers said, 'We won't hurt you, child.' It made me feel wonderful.

"What I call the Ku Klux were those people who met at night and if they heard anybody saying you was free, they would take you out at night and whip you. They were the plantation owners. I never saw them ride, but I heard about them and what they did. My master used to tell us he wished he knew who the Ku Kluxers were. But he knew, all right, I used to wait on table and I heard them talking. 'Gonna lynch another nigger tonight!'

"The slaves tried to get schools, but they didn't get any. Finally they started a few schools in little log cabins. But we children, my sister and I, never went to school.

"I married William L. Davison, when I was thirty-two years old. That was after I left the plantation. I never had company there. I had to work. I have only one grandchild still living, Willa May Reynolds. She taught school in City Grove, Tennessee. She's married now.

"I thought Abe Lincoln was a great man. What little I know about him, I always thought he was a great man. He did a lot of good.

"Us kids always used to sing a song, 'Gonna hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree as we go marchin' home.' I didn't know what it meant at the time.

"I never knew much about Booker T. Washington, but I heard about him. Frederick Douglass was a great man, too. He did lots of good, like Abe Lincoln.

"Well, slavery's over and I think that's a grand thing. A white lady recently asked me, 'Don't you think you were better off under the white people?' I said 'What you talkin' about? The birds of the air have their freedom'. I don't know why she should ask me that anyway.

"I belong to the Third Baptist Church. I think all people should be religious. Christ was a missionary. He went about doing good to people. You should be clean, honest, and do everything good for people. I first turn the searchlight on myself. To be a true Christian, you must do as Christ said: 'Love one another'. You know, that's why I said I didn't want to tell about my life and the terrible things that I and my sister Mary suffered. I want to forgive those people. Some people tell me those people are in hell now. But I don't think that. I believe we should all do good to everybody."