



Narrative of Jenny Proctor

Enslaved in Alabama, 1850-1865

Interview conducted ca. 1937, San Angelo, Texas

Federal Writers' Project, WPA

In the 1930s over 2,300 formerly enslaved African Americans were interviewed by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression.

Jenny Proctor's narrative is reproduced in full below as transcribed by the interviewer (brief introductory comments omitted). Bracketed notes added by NHC.



Jenny Proctor, 87, on the front steps of her home, San Angelo, Texas, ca. 1937

I's hear tell of dem good slave days but I aint nev'r seen no good times den. My mother's name was Lisa and when I was a very small chile I hear dat driver goin' from cabin to cabin as early as 3 o'clock in de mornin' and when he comes to our cabin he say, "Lisa, Lisa, git up from dere and git dat breakfast." My mother, she was cook and I don't recollect nothin' 'bout my father. If I had any brothers and sisters I didn' know it. We had ole ragged huts made out of poles and some of de cracks chinked up wid mud and moss and some of dem wasn't. We didn' have no good beds, jes' scaffolds nailed up to de wall out of poles and de ole ragged beddin' throwed on dem. Dat sho' was hard sleepin' but even dat feel good to our weary bones after dem long hard days work in de field. I 'tended to de chillun when I was a little gal and tried to clean de house jes' like ole miss tells me to. Den soon as I was 10 year ole, ole marster, he say, "Git dis yere nigger to dat cotton patch." I recollects once when I was tryin' to clean de house like old miss tell me, I finds a biscuit and I's so hungry I et it, 'cause we nev'r see sich a thing as a biscuit only some times on Sunday mornin'. We jes' have co'n braid and syrup and some times fat bacon, but when I et dat biscuit and she comes in and say, "Whar dat biscuit?"

I say, "Miss, I et it 'cause I's so hungry." Den she grab dat broom and start to beatin' me over de head wid it and callin' me low down nigger and I guess I jes' clean lost my head 'cause I know'd better den to fight her if I knowed anything 'tall, but I start to fight her and de driver, he comes in and he grabs me and starts beatin' me wid dat cat-o'-nine-tails.¹ and he beats me 'til I fall to de floor nearly dead. He cut my back all to pieces, den dey rubs salt in de cuts for mo' punishment. Lawd, Lawd, honey! Dem was awful days. When ole marster come to de house he say, "What you beat dat nigger like dat for?" And de driver tells him why, and he say, "she can't work now for a week, she pay for several biscuits in dat time." He sho' was mad and he tell ole miss she start de whole mess. I still got dem scars on my ole back right now, jes' like my grandmother have when she die and I's a-carryin' mine right on to de grave jes' like she did.

Our marster, he wouldn' 'low us to go fishing, he say dat too easy on a nigger and wouldn' 'low us to hunt none either, but some time we slips off at night and ketch 'possums and when old marster smells dem 'possums cookin' way in de night he wraps up in a white sheet and gits in de chimney corner and

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¹ A big leather whip, branching into nine tails. [Interviewer's footnote]

scratch on de wall and when de man in de cabin goes to de door and say, “Who’s dat?” He say, “It’s me, what’s ye cookin’ in dere?” and de man say, “I’s cookin’ ’possum.” He say, “Cook him and bring me de hind quarters and you and de wife and de chillun eat de rest.” We nev’r had no chance ter git any rabbits ’cept when we was a-clearin’ and grubbin’ de new grounds, den we ketch some rabbits and if dey looks good to de white folks dey takes dem and if dey no good de neggers git dem. We nev’r had no gardens. Some times de slaves git vegetables from de white folks’ garden and sometimes dey didn’.

Money? Umph um! We nev’r seen no money. Guess we’d a bought sumpin’ to eat wid it if we ev’r seen any. Fact is, we wouldn’ a knowed hardly how to bought anything, ’cause we didn’ know nothin’ ’bout goin’ to town.

Dey spinned de cloth what our clothes was made of and we had straight dresses or slips made of lowel [coarse cotton]. Sometimes dey dye ’em wid sumac berries or sweet gum bark and sometimes dey didn’. On Sunday dey make all de chillun change, and what we wears ’til we gits our clothes washed was gunny sacks wid holes cut for our head and arms. We didn’ have no shoes ’ceptin’ some home made moccasins and we didn’ have dem ’til we was big chillun. De little chillun dey goes naked ’til dey was big enough to work. Dey was soon big enough though, ’cordin’ to our marseter. We had red flannel for winter under clothes. Ole miss she say a sick nigger cost more den de flannel.

Weddin’s? Ugh um! We jes’ steps over de broom and we’s married, Ha! Ha! Ha!

Ole marster he had a good house. De logs was all hewed off smooth like and de cracks all fixed wid nice chinkin’, plum ’spectable lookin’ even to de plank floors, dat was sumpin’. He didn’ have no big plantation but he keeps ’bout 300 slaves in dem little huts wid dirt floors. I thinks he calls it four farms what he had.

Sometimes he would sell some of de slaves off of dat big auction block to de highest bidder when he could git enough fer one.

When he go to sell a slave he feed dat one good for a few days, den when de goes to put ’em up on de auction block he takes a meat skin and greases all ’round dat nigger’s mouth and makes ’em look like dey been eatin’ pleanty meat and sich like and was good and strong and able to work. Sometimes he sell de babes from de breas’ and den again he sell de mothers from de babes and de husbands and de wives, and so on. He wouldn’ let ’em holler much when de folks be sold away. He say, “I have you whooped if you don’t hush.” Dey sho’ loved dere six chillun though. Dey wouldn’ want no body buyin’ dem.

We might a done very well if de ole driver hadn’ been so mean’ but de least little thing we do he beat us for it, and put big chains ’round our ankles and make us work wid dem on ’til de blood be cut out all around our ankles. Some of de marsters have what dey call stockades and puts dere heads and feet and arms through holes in a big board out in de hot sun, but our old driver he had a bull pen, dats only thing like a jail he had. When a slave do anything he didn’ like he takes ’em in dat bull pen and chains ’em down, face up to de sun and leaves ’em dere ’til dey nearly dies.

None of us was ’lowed to see a book or try to learn. Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster’s old blue back speller and we hides it ’til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch,² and studies dat spellin’ book. We learn it too. I can read some now and write a little too.

Dey wasn’t no church for de slaves but we goes to de white folks arbor on Sunday evenin’ and a white man he gits up dere to preach to de niggers. He say, “Now I takes my text, which is, nigger obey your marster and your mistress, ’cause what you git from dem here in dis world am all you ev’r goin’ to git, ’cause you jes’ like de hogs and de other animals, when you dies you aint no more, after you been throwed in dat hole.” I guess we believed dat for a while ’cause we didn’ have no way findin’ out different. We didn’ see no Bibles.

² Several long splinters of rich pine, of a lasting quality and making a bright light. [Interviewer's footnote]

Sometimes a slave would run away and jes' live wild in de woods but most times dey ketch'em and beats 'em, den chains 'em down in de sun 'til dey nearly die. De only way any slaves on our farm ev'r goes anywhere was when de boss sends him to carry some news to another plantation or when we slips off way in de night. Sometimes after all de work was done a bunch would have it made up to slip out down to de creek and dance. We sho' have fun when we do dat, most times on Sat'day night.

All de Christmas we had was ole marster would kill a hog and give us a piece of pork. We thought dat was sumpin' and de way Christmas lasted was 'cordin' to de big sweet gum back log what de slaves would cut and put in de fireplace. When dat burned out, de Christmas was over. So you know we all keeps a lookin' de whole year 'round for de biggest sweet gum we could find. When we jes' couldn' find de sweet gum we git oak, but it wouldn' last long enough, 'bout three days on average, when we didn' have to work.

We had a few little games we play, like Peep Squirrel Peep, You Can't Catch Me, and sich like. We didn' know nothin' 'bout no New Years Day or holidays 'cept Christmas.

We had some co'n shuckin's sometimes but de white folks gits de fun and de nigger gits de work. We didn' have no kind of cotton pickin's 'cept jes' pick our own cotton. I's can hear dem darkies now, goin' to de cotton patch way 'fore day a singin':

"Peggy, does you love me now?"
One ole man he sing:
"Sat'day night and Sunday too
Young gals on my mind,
Monday mornin' way 'fore day
Ole marster got me gwine.

Chorus:
Peggy, does you love me now?"

Den he whoops a sort of nigger holler, what nobody can do jes' like dem ole time darkies, den on he goes,

"Possum up a 'simmon tree,
Rabbit on de ground
Lawd, Lawd, 'possum,
Shake dem 'simmons down.
Peggy, does you love me now?"

Holler

Rabbit up a gum stump
'Possum up a holler
Git him out little boy
And I gives you half a dollar.
Peggy, does you love me now?"

We didn' have much lookin' after when we git sick. We had to take de worst stuff in de world fer medicine, jes' so it was cheap. Dat ole blue mass and bitter apple would keep us out all night. Sometimes he have de doctor when he thinks we goin' to die, 'cause he say he aint got any one to lose, den dat calomel what dat doctor would give us would purty nigh kill us. Den dey keeps all kinds of lead bullets and asafetida [medicinal herb] balls 'round our necks and some carried a rabbit foot wid dem all de time to keep off evil of any kind.

Lawd, Lawd, honey! It seems impossible dat any of us ev'r lived to see dat day of freedom, but thank God we did.

When ole marster comes down in de cotton patch to tells us 'bout bein' free, he say, "I hates to tell you but I knows I's got to, you is free, jes' as free as me or anybody else whats white." We didn' hardly know what he means. We jes' sort of huddle 'round together like scared rabbits, but after we knowed what he mean, didn' many of us go, 'cause we didn' know where to of went. Ole marster he say he give us de woods land and half of what we make on it, and we could clear it and work it or starve. Well, we didn' know hardly what to do 'cause he jes' gives us some ole dull hoes an' axes to work with but we all went to work and as we cut down de trees and de poles he tells us to build de fence 'round de field and we did, and when we plants de co'n and de cotton we jes' plant all de fence corners full too, and I never seen so much stuff grow in all my born days, several ears of co'n to de stalk and dem big cotton stalks was a layin' over on de ground. Some of de ole slaves dey say dey believe de Lawd know sumpin' 'bout niggers after all. He lets us put co'n in his crib and den we builds cribs and didn' take long 'fore we could buy some hosses and some mules and some good hogs. Dem mangy hogs what our marster give us de first year was plum good hogs after we grease dem and scrub dem wid lye soap. He jes' give us de ones he though was sho' to die but we was a gittin' goin' now and 'fore long we was a buildin' better houses and feelin' kind of happy like. After ole marster dies we keeps hearin' talk of Texas and me an' my ole man, I's done been married several years den and had one little boy, well we gits in our covered wagon wid our little mules hitched to it and we comes to Texas. We worked as share croppers around Buffalo, Texas 'til my ole man he died. My boy was nearly grown den so he wants to come to San Angelo and work, so here we is. He done been married long time now and got six chillun. Some of dem work at hotels, and cafes and fillin' stations and in homes.

