

ADAH ISABELLE SUGGS
Vanderburgh County 5th District
Interviewed By Lauana Creel
1415 S. Barker Avenue, Evansville, Indiana

Among the interesting stories connected with former slaves one of the most outstanding ones is the life story of Adah Isabelle Suggs, indeed her escape from slavery planned and executed by her anxious mother, Harriott McClain, bears the earmarks of fiction, but the truth of all related occurrences has been established by the aged negro woman and her daughter Mrs. Harriott Holloway, both citizens of Evansville, Indiana.

Born in slavery before January the twenty-second, 1862, the child Adah McClain was the property of Colonel Jackson McClain and Louisa, his wife.

According to the customary practice of raising slave children, Adah was left at the negro quarters of the McClain plantation, a large estate located in Henderson county, three and one-half miles from the village of Henderson, Kentucky. There she was cared for by her mother. She retains many impressions gained in the early childhood of the slave quarters; she remembers the slaves singing and dancing together after the day of toil. Their voices were strong and their songs were sweet. "Master was good to his slaves and never beat them" were her words concerning her master.

When Adah was not yet five years of age the mistress, Louisa McClain, made a trip to the slave quarters to review conditions of the negroes. It was there she discovered that one little girl there had been developing ideas and ideals; the mother had taught the little one to knit tiny stockings, using wheat straws for knitting needles.

Mrs. McClain at once took charge of the child taking her from her mother's care and establishing her room at the residence of the McClain family.

Today the aged Negro woman recalls the words of praise and encouragement accorded her accomplishments, for the child was apt, active, responsive to influence, and soon learned to fetch any needed volume from the library shelves of the McClain home.

She was contented and happy but the mother knew that much unhappiness was in store for her young daughter if she remained as she was situated.

A custom prevailed throughout the southern states that the firstborn of each slave maiden should be the son or daughter of her master and the girls were forced into maternity at puberty. The mothers naturally resisted this terrible practice and Harriott was determined to prevent her child from being victimized.

One planned escape was thwarted; when the girl was about twelve years of age the mother tried to take her to a place of safety but they were overtaken on the road to the ferry where they hoped to be put across the Ohio River. They were carried back to the plantation and the mother was mildly punished and imprisoned in an upstairs room.

The little girl knew her mother was imprisoned and often climbed up to a window where the two could talk together.

One night the mother received directions through a dream in which her escape was planned. She told the child about the dream and instructed her to carry out orders that they might escape together.

The girl brought a large knife from Mrs. McClain's pantry and by the aid of that tool the lock was pried from the prison door and the mother made her way into the open world about midnight.

A large tobacco barn became her refuge where she waited for her child. The girl had some trouble making her escape; she had become a useful and necessary member of her mistress' household and her services were hourly in demand. The Daughter "young missus" Annie McClain was afflicted from birth having a cleft palate and later developing heart dropsy which made regular surgery imperative. The negro girl had learned to care for the young white woman and could draw the bandages for the surgeon when "Young Missus" underwent surgical treatment.

The memory of one trip to Louisville is vivid in the mind of the old negress today for she was taken to the city and the party stopped at the Galt House. "It was a grand place," she declares, as she describes the surroundings; the handsome draperies and the winding stairway and other artistic objects seen at the grand hotel.

The child loved her young mistress and the young mistress desired the good slave should be always near her; so, patiently waiting was required by the negro mother before her daughter finally reached their rendezvous.

Under the cover of night, the two fugitives traveled the three miles to Henderson, there they secreted themselves under the house of Mrs. Margaret Bentley until darkness fell over the world to cover their retreat. Imagine the frightened negroes stealthily creeping through the woods in constant fear of being recaptured. Federal soldiers put them across the river at Henderson and from that point, they cautiously advanced toward Evansville. The husband of Harriott, Milton McClain, and her son Jerome were volunteers in a negro regiment. The operation of the Federal Statute providing for the enlistment of slaves made enlisted negroes free as well as their wives and children, so, by that statute, Harriott McClain and her daughter should have been given their freedom.

When the refugees arrived in Evansville they were befriended by free negroes of the area. Harriott obtained a position as a maid with the Parvine family, "Miss Hallie and Miss Genevieve Parvine were real good folks," declares the aged negro Adah when repeating her story. After working for the Misses Parvine for about two years, the negro mother had saved enough money to place her child in "pay school" there she learned rapidly.

Adah McClain was married to Thomas Suggs on January 18, 1872. Thomas was a slave of Bill McClain and it is believed he adopted the name Suggs because Mr. Suggs had befriended him in times of trouble. Of this fact neither the wife nor daughter has positive proof. The father has departed this life but Adah Suggs lives on with her memories.

Varied experiences have attended her way. Wifehood and devotion; motherhood and care she has known for she has given fifteen children to the world. Among them were one set of twins, daughters and triplets, two sons and a daughter. She is a beloved mother to those of her children who remain near her and says she is happy in her belief in God and Christ and hopes for a glorious hereafter where she can serve the Lord Jesus Christ and praise him eternally.

What greater hope can be given to the mortal than the hope cherished by Adah Isabelle Suggs?