

BILLY SLAUGHTER

1123 Watt St., Jeffersonville

Beulah Van Meter

District 4, Clark County

Billy Slaughter was born Sept. 15, 1858, on the Lincoln Farm near Hodgenville, Ky. The Slaughters who now live between the Dixie Highway and Hodgenville on the right of the road driving toward Hodgenville about four miles off the state highway are the descendants of the old slave's master. This old slave was sold once and was given away once before he was given his freedom.

The spring on the Lincoln Farm that falls from a cliff was a place associated with Indian cruelty. It was here in the pool of water below the cliff that the Indians would throw babies of the settlers. If the little children could swim or the settlers could rescue them they escaped, otherwise they were drowned. The Indians would gather around the scene of the tragedy and rejoice in their fashion. The old slave when he was a baby was thrown in this pool but was rescued by white people. He remembers having seen several Indians but not many.

The most interesting subject that Billy Slaughter discussed was the Civil War. This was ordinarily believed to be fought over slavery, but it really was not, according to his interpretation, which is unusual for an old slave to state. The real reason was that the South withdrew from the Union and elected Jefferson Davis President of the Confederacy. In his own dialect he narrated these events accurately. The southerners or Democrats were called "Rebels" and "Secesh" and the Republicans were called "Abolitionists."

Another point of interest was John Brown and Harpers Ferry. When Harper's Ferry was fired upon, that was firing upon the United States. It was here and through John Brown's Raid, that war was virtually declared. The old Negro explained that Brown was an Abolitionist, and was captured here and later killed. While the old slave had the utmost respect for the Federal Government he regarded John Brown as a martyr for the cause of freedom and included him among the heroes he worshipped. Among his prized possessions is an old book written about John Brown's Raid.

The old slave's real hero was Abraham Lincoln. He plans another pilgrimage to the Lincoln Farm to look again at the cabin in which his Emancipator was born. He asked me if I read history very much. I assured him that I read it to some extent. After that, he asked me if I recalled reading about Lincoln during the Civil War walking the White House floor one night, and a Negro named Douglas remained in his presence. In the beginning of the War, the Negroes who enlisted in the Union Army were given freedom, also the wives, and the children who were not married.

Another problem that was facing the North at this time was that the men who were taken from the farm and factory to the army could not be replaced by the slaves and production continued in the North as was being done in the south. Not all Negroes who wanted to join the Union

forces were able to do so because of the strict watchfulness of their masters. The slaves were made to fight in the southern army whether they wanted to or not. This lessened the number of free Negroes in the Northern army. As a result, Lincoln decided to free all Negroes. That was the decision he made the night he walked the White House floor. This was the old darkey's story of the conditions that brought about the Emancipation Proclamation. Freeing the Negroes was brought about during the Civil War but it was not the reason that the war was fought, was the unusual opinion of this Negro. "Uncle Billy's" father joined the Union army at the Taylor Barracks, near Louisville, Ky., which was the Camp Taylor during the World War. Uncle Billy's father and mother and their children who were not married were given freedom. The old slave has kept the papers that were drawn up for this act.

The old darkey explained that the Negro soldiers never fought in any decisive battles. There must always be someone to clean and polish the harness, care for the horses, dig ditches, and construct parapets. This slave's father was at Memphis during the battle there.

The Slaughter family migrated to Jeffersonville in '65. Billy was then seven years old. At that time there was only one depot here—a freight and passenger depot at Court and Wall Streets. What is now known as Eleventh St. was then a hickory grove—a paradise for squirrel hunters. On the ridge beginning at 7th and Mechanic Sts. were persimmon trees. This was a splendid hunting haven for the Negroes for their favorite wild animal—the o'possum. The ridge is known today as 'Possum Ridge. The section east of St. Anthony's Cemetery was covered in woods. Since there were a number of Beechnuts, pigeons frequented this place and were sought here. One could catch them faster than he could shoot them.

At this time there were two shipyards in Jeffersonville—Barmore's and Howard's. Barmore's shipyard location was first the location of a big meat-packing company. The old darkey called it a "pork house".

The old slave had seen several boats launched from these yards. Great crowds would gather for this event. After the hull was completed in the docks the boat was ready to launch. The blocks that served as props were knocked down one at a time. One man would knock down each prop. There were several men employed in this work on the appointed day of the launching of the boat. The boat would be christened with a bottle of champagne on its way to the river.

"Uncle Billy" worked on a steamboat in his earlier days. This boat traveled from Louisville to New Orleans. People traveled on the river for there were few railroads. The first work the old darkey did was to clean the decks. Later he cleaned up inside the boat, mopped up the floors, and made the berths. The next job he held was a ladies' cabin man. Later he took care of the quarters where the officials of the boat slept. The darkey also worked as a second pantryman. This work consisted of waiting on the tables in the dining room. The men's clothes had to be spotless. Sometimes it would become necessary for him to change his shirt three times a day.

The meats on the menu would include pigeon, duck, turkey, chicken, quail, beef, pork, and mutton. Vegetables of the season were served, as well as desserts. It was nothing unusual for a

half dollar to be left under a plate as a tip for the waiter. Those who worked in the cabins never set a price for a shoeshine. Fifteen cents was the lowest they ever received.

During a yellow fever epidemic before a quarantine could be declared, a boatload of three hundred people left Louisville at night to go to Memphis, Tenn. During the same time, this boat went to New Orleans where yellow fever was raging. The captain warned them of it. In two narrow streets, the old darkey recalled how he had seen the people fall over dead. These streets were crowded and there were no sidewalks, only room for a wagon. Here the victims would be sitting in the doorways, apparently asleep, only to fall over dead.

When the boat returned, one of the crew was stricken with this disease. Uncle Billy nursed him until they reached his home at Cairo, Ill. No one else took the yellow fever and this man recovered.

Another job "Uncle Billy" held was helping to make the brick used in the U.S. Quarter Master Depot. Colonel James Keigwin operated a brick kiln in what is now a colored settlement between 10th and 14th and Watt and Spring Sts. The clay was obtained from this field. It was his task to off-bare the brick after they were taken from the molds, and to place them in the eyes to be burned. Wood was used as fuel.

"Uncle Billy" reads his Bible quite often. He sometimes wonders why he is still left here—all of his friends are gone; all his brothers and sisters are gone. But this he believes is the solution—that there must be someone left to tell about old times.

"The Bible," he quotes, "says that two shall be working in the field together and one shall be taken and the other left. I am the one who is left," he concludes.