

CELIA HENDERSON

Born Hardin County, Kentucky in 1849

Interviewed by Miriam Logan

Lebanon, Ohio

My mammy was Julia Dittoe, and pappy, he was named Willis Dittoe. They lived in Louisville till Mammy was sold for her master's debt. She was a powerful good cook, Mammy was, and she was sold to pay that debt.

She took us four children along with her, and Pappy and the others stayed back in Louisville. They took us all on a boat on the Big River--ever hear of the big River? Mississippi its name--but we call it the Big River.

Natchez on the hill - that's where they took us. Natchez-on-the-hill this side of N'Orleans. Mammy, she had eleven children. No ma'am, don't remember all their names no more. No ma'am, never see Pappy no more. I remember Mammy crying' going' down on the boat, and us children crying' too, but the place we got was a nice place, nicer than what we left. Family by the name of GROHAGEN, it was, that got us. Yes ma'am. They were nice to Mammy, for she was a fine cook, Mammy was. A fine cook!

Me? Go along! I ain't no such cook as my mammy was. But my boy, he was a fine cook. I ain't nothin' of a cook. Yes ma'am, I cook for Mis Gallagher, and for 4 of the sheriffs here, up at the jail. But the fancy cooking I ain't much on, no ma'am I ain't. But my boy and Mammy, now, They were fine! My boy cooked at hotels and wealthy homes in Louisville 'til he died.

There was cotton down there in Natchez, but no tobacco like up here. No ma'am, I never worked in cotton fields. I helped Mammy tote water, hunt chips, hunt pigs, get things out of the cold house That way, I guess I went to work when I was about 7 or 8 years old. Children are smart now, and they have to be taught to work, but in those days us colored children worked; and we had a good time working for there weren't no shows, no playthings like they have now to take up day time, no ma'am.

Never no church for colored people does I remember in Natchez. One time There was a drought, and the water we hauled from way over to the river. Now that was down right work,

hauling that water. There was an old man, he was powerful in prayer, and gathered the darkies under a big tree, and we all kneeled down while he prayed for the poor beasts what needs good clean water for to drink. That was a pretty sight, that church meeting under the big tree. I always remember that, and how that day he found a spring with his old cane, just like a miracle after prayer. It was a pretty sight to see my cows and all the cattle trotting for that water. The men dug out a round pond for the water to run up into, out of the spring, and it was good water that wouldn't make the beasts sick, and we-all was sure happy.

Yes ma'am, I'm the only one of mammy's children livin'. She had 11 children. My granny on pappy's side, she lived to be one hundred and ten years old, powerful old, everybody says, and she was part Indian, gran'ma was, and that made her live to be old.

Me? I had two husbands and three children. My first husband died and left me with three little children, and my second husband, he died 'about six years ago. I came here to Lebanon about forty years ago, because my Mammy was here, and she wanted me to come. When I was little, we lived nine years in Natchez on the hill. Then when the war was over Mammy wanted to go back to Louisville because her folks were all there. I live in Louisville till I come to Lebanon. All I remember about the close of the war, was that white folks were broken up and poor down there at Natchez; and the first time I heard the EMANCIPATION read out, There was a lot of prancing around, and a big time.

I saw soldiers in blue down there in Natchez on the hill, once I saw them coming down the road when I was driving my cows up the road. I was scared sure, and I hid in the bushes on the side of the road until they went by. I don't remember that my cows were much scared though. Mammy sais better hide when you see soldiers marching by, so that time a whole line of them came along, I hid.

Down there Mammy did her cooking outdoors, with a big oven. You get your fire going just so under the oven, then you shovel some fire up on top of the oven to get your bacon just right. They were big black kettles with hooks and they ran up and down like on pulleys over the oven stove. Then there was the cold house. No electric ice box like now, but a house underground where things were kept just as cold as an ice box. No ma'am, don't remember just how it was fixed inside.

Yes ma'am, we came back to Louisville. Yes ma'am, my children go to school, like I never did. Colored teachers in the colored school. Yes ma'am, my children went far as they could take them.

Medicine? My old mammy was great for herb doctoring and I hold by that too a good deal, Yes ma'am. Now-a-days you get a rusty nail in your foot and have lockjaw. But I remember Mammy--she put soot mix with bacon fryings on my foot when I ran a big nail into it, and my foot got well nice!

Long time ago I came here to see Mammy, I had terrible misery. I was asleep dreaming about it, and saying, 'Mammy you reckon axle grease going to help it?' Then I woke up and went to her where she's sleeping and said it. 'What is axle grease going to help?' and I told her, and she said 'Axle grease put on hot, with red flannel going to take it away child.' I was an old woman myself then--about fifty, but Mammy, she climbed out of bed and got out in the yard where there was an old wagon, and she scraped that axle off, and heated it up and put it on with a red flannel. Then I got easy! I sure was thankful when that grease and flannel got to working on me! You try it sometime when you get one of them cold miseries in the winter time.

But go along! Folks are too smart nowadays to use those good old medicines. They just call the Doctor and he comes and cuts them wide open for the appendicitis--he sure does!

Yes ma'am, I have the doctor, if I need him. I have the rheumatism, no pain--I just get stiffer, and stiffer right along.

My sight is poor now. I can't work any more. I did ironing after I quit cooking--washing and ironing. I like a nice wash and iron the best for work. But last year my eyes gave out on me, and they told me not to worry, they're going to give me a pension. The man goes to a heap of work to get those papers fixed just right.

Yes ma'am, I'm the only one of Mammy's children living. Mu, Grandma on Pappy's side, she lived to be one hundred and ten years old - powerful old everybody says. She was part Indian, grandma was, and that made her to be old.

Yes ma'am, most I ever earned was five dollars a week. I get twenty dollars now, and pay eight dollars for rent. We got no more--I figure --a working for ourselves than what we'd have were we slaves, for they give you a log house, and clothes, and you eat all you want to, and when you buy things, maybe you don't make enough to get you what you need, working sun-up to sun down. No ma'am. Of course I'm not working now, when you get to be the hour-working people do now; but I don't know anything about that way of doing.

We wore cotton clothes while we were young, just plain weave it was; no collar nor cuffs and' belt like store clothes. Then, men just have a kind of clothes like ... well, like a chemise, then some pantaloons with a string run through at the knees. Bare feet--Yes ma'am, no shoes. Never need no coat down to Natchez, no ma'am.

When we came back to Louisville on the boat, we slept in the straw on the floor of the boat. It gets colder 'and colder! Come big chunks of ice down the river. The sky is dark, and it is cold and it spits snow. I wish I were back in Natchez that time after the war were over! Yes ma'am, I remember that much.

I worked along with Mammy until I was married, then I got on by myself. Mammy came here to Lebanon with the Suttons--she married Sam. Sutton's pappy. Yes ma'am. There were about 12 of the family that came here, and I came to see Mammy,... then I got work, and I stayed.

Cooking? Yes ma'am, the meat is so high now, I like groundhog. Groundhog is good eating. A peddler was by with a groundhog for ten cents apiece. Groundhog is good as fried chicken any day. You clean the hog, and boil it in salt water till it's tender, then you make flour gravy, put it on after the water drains off; you put it in the oven with the lid on and bake it a nice brown. No ma'am, I don't like fish so well, nor coon, nor possum. They are too greasy. I like chicken, groundhog and pork. with the wild meat you want plain boiled potatoes, Yes ma'am Irish potatoes, sure enough, I heard of eating skunk, and muskrat, but I ain't cookin them. But I tell you that groundhog is good eating.

I was baptized by a white minister in Louisville, and I've been a Baptist for sixty years now. Yes ma'am. There are plenty of colored churches in Louisville now, but when I was young, the white folks had to see to it that we were Baptised and knew Bible verses and hymns. There weren't smart colored preachers like Reverend Williams ... and there ain't so many now.

Up to Xenia is the colored school, and there are more smart colored folks, old ones too--that could give you-all a real story if you find them. But me, I can't read, nor write, and don't remember anything before the War good.

*Celia is very black as to complexion; tall spare; has small grey eyes. In three long interviews she has tried very hard to remember for us from her youth and back through the years; it seems to trouble her that she cannot remember more. Samuel Sutton's father married her mother. Neither she or Samuel had the kind of a story to tell that I was expecting to hear from what little I know about colored people. I may have tried to get them on the songs and amusements of their youth too often, but it seems that most that they knew was work; did not sing or have a very good time. Of course I thought they would say that slavery was terrible, but was surprised there too. Colored people here are used to having white people come for them to work as they have no telephones, and most white people only hire colored help by the day or as needed. Celia and Samuel, old age pensioners, were very apologetic because they are no longer able to work.