

Clay Reaves

Palestine, Arkansas

Age: 80

Interviewer: Miss Irene Robertson

I will be eighty years old on my next birthday. It will be July 6th. Father was bought from Kentucky. I couldn't tell you about him. He stayed on the Reaves place that year, the year of the surrender, and left. He didn't live with Mother ever again. I never did hear any reason. He went to Joe Night's farm. He left me and a sister - older, but there was one dead between us. Mother raised us. She stayed on with the Reaves two years after he left. The last year she was there she hired to them. The only thing she ever did before freedom was cook and weave. She had her loom in the kitchen. It was a great big kitchen built off from the house and a portico joined it to the house. I used to lay up under her loom. It was warm there in winter time. I was the baby. I heard mother say some things I remember well.

She said she was never sold. She said the Reaves said her children need never worry, they would never be sold. We were Reaves from back yonder. Mother's grandfather was a white man. She was a Reaves and her children are mostly Reaves. She was light. Father was about, might be a little darker than I am (mulatto). At times she worked in the field, but in rush time. She wove all the clothes on the place. She worked at the loom and I lay up under there all day long. Mother had three girls and five boys.

Mr. Reaves (we called him 'master') had two boys in the army. He was a real old man. He may have had more than two, but I know there was two gone off. The white folks lived in sight of the quarters. Their house was a big house and painted white. I've been in there. I've never seen any grandparents of mine - that I was allowed to claim kin with.

When I got up some size, I was allowed to go see my father. I went over to see him sometimes. After freedom, he went to where his brothers lived. They wanted him to change his name from Reaves to Cox and he did. He changed it from James Reaves to James Cox. But I couldn't tell you if at one time they belong to Cox in Kentucky or if they belong to Cox in Tennessee or if they took on a name they liked.

I kept my name Reaves. I am a Reaves from start to finish. I was raised by mother and she was a Reaves. Her name was Olive Reaves. Her old mistress' name was Charlotte Reaves, old master was Edmond Reaves. Now the boys I come to know were John, Bob; girls, Mary and Jane. There were older children. Mother was a sensible, obedient woman. Nobody ever treated her very wrong. She was the only one who ever chastised me. They spoiled me. We got plenty of plain rations. I never saw anybody married till after the surrender. I saw one woman chastised. I wasn't close. I never learned what it was about. Old Master Reaves was laying it on.

Mother moved to New Castle, Tennessee from Mr. Reaves' place. We farmed--three of us. We had been living southeast of Boliver, Tennessee, in Hardeman County. I think my kin folks are all dead. Father's other children may be over in Tennessee now. Yes, I know them. Mother died over in Palestine with me. She always lived with me. I married twice, had one child by each wife. Both wives are dead and my children are dead.

Mother said I had three older brothers who went to the Civil War and never came back home. She never heard from them after they went off. I don't know, but it was my understanding that they were to be soldiers. I don't recollect them.

Mother got so she wasn't able to work in the field several years before she died. She worked in the field as long as she was able. She lived with me all my whole life till she died. But I farmed. Some years we did well, and some years we just could live. I farmed all my life but a few years. I love farm life. It is independent living. I mean you are about your own man out there. I work my garden out at my shop now. I make baskets and bottom chairs in Palestine. A few years I kept Mrs. Wilkerson's yard and garden. Her husband died and she moved off to Memphis. They did live in Palestine.

I heard it said that Reaves said he could keep his own farm. The Ku Klux never bothered us. I have heard a lot of things but I am telling you what I know. I don't know nothing about the Civil War nor the Ku Klux. I was most too small a boy at that time to know much.

I used to vote. Can't write my name. Don't fool with it. I went to school on rainy days. I went a few other days. People used to have to work. I always wanted to work. I piddle around all the time working now. I went to colored teachers altogether. I can read a little.

I had a brother-in-law in Arkansas. I heard a lot of talk. I went on a visit and stayed three months. I went back and moved here. I came to this State--over at Palestine--March 11, 1883 on Sunday. I have a good recollection, or I think I have for my age. I've lived a pretty sensible life, worked hard but had good health. If I had another life to live now I would go to the farm. I love farm life.

I chop wood, garden, go in the woods get my splints for baskets, chairs. I live by myself. I eat out some with... I call them kin. They are my sister's children. I get some help, \$10 and commodities.

When I did vote I voted Republican or I thought I did. But now if I did vote, I might change up. Times have changed.

I don't know much about the young generation. I do talk with them--some. They are coming up in a changed time. I wouldn't talk against the colored race of people. Some of them work--are good. Some don't. I think some will not work. Maybe they would. I come to know mighty little about them--no more than I know about the white girls and boys. I see them on the streets about as much as I ever see colored folks anywhere.