

ELI COLEMAN

Madisonville, Texas

ELI COLEMAN, 91, was born a slave of George Brady, in Kentucky. Eli's memory is poor and his story is somewhat sketchy. He now lives in Madisonville, Texas.

I have an old bill of sale, and it shows I was born in 1846 and my master was George Brady. I know my pappy's name was the same as mine, and Mammy was Ella, and I had one brother named Sam, and my sisters were Sadie and Rosa and Viola. They're all dead now.

Pappy was owned by Master Coleman, who was brother to Master Brady. Pappy could only see Mammy once a week when he was courting for her. I heard Pappy tell about his pappy, over in Africa, and he had near a hundred wives and over three hundred children. Pappy never did work. All he ever did was trade. He'd make one thing and another and trade it for something to eat. He could get lots of fruit and game out of the woods in them days, and there were lots of fish.

Our log house was built of logs, trimmed, and had six rooms. It was long, like a cow barn or chicken house, and my room was third. We had one door to each room, covered over with hides. We dug out one corner for the bed and fenced it up and gathered straw and moss and tore up corn shucks, and put in the corner to sleep on. What I mean, it was a warm bed.

We did all kinds of work, chopping cotton and split rails and cut rock, and work in the tobacco field. We'd cut that tobacco and hang it in the shed to dry. It had to be hanged by the stubble end.

We had plenty to eat, such as corn pones. The corn was grated by hand and cooked in ashes, and no salt or soda or fancy things like they put in bread now. There was possum and rabbit and we cooked them differently than now. A great big old pot hung over the old rock fireplace. Food cooked that way still tastes good. Master Brady always gave us lots out of the garden. He fed us regular on good, substantial food, just like you'd tend to you horse, if you had a real good one.

Master Brady, he was one these jolly fellows and a real good man, always good to his black folks. Missy, she was plumb angel. They lived in a old stone house with four big rooms. It was the best house in the whole county and lots of shade trees by it. We had about a hundred acres in our plantation and started to the field before daylight and worked as long as we could see, and fed any stock and got to bed about nine o'clock.

Master whipped a slave if he got stubborn or lazy. He whipped one so hard, that slave said he'd kill him. So Master put a chain around his legs, so he just hardly walk, and he had to work in the field that way. At night he put another chain round his neck and fastened it to a tree. After three weeks Master turned him loose, and that the proudest nigger in the world, and the hardest working nigger Master had after that.

On Saturday night we could get a pass or have a party on our own place. Through the week we'd fall into our quarters and them patterrollers would come walk all over us, and we'd be plumb still, but after they'd gone some niggers got up and out.

On Christmas Day, Master would make a great big egnog and let us have all we want with a big dinner. He killed a yearling and made plenty of barbecue for us.

Master was a colonel in the war and took me along to care for his horse and gun. Those guns, you couldn't hear anything popping. We niggers had to go all over and pick up those who were killed. The hurt we carried back. Those too badly hurt we had to carry to the burying place and the white man would finish killing them, so we could roll them in the hole.

When Master said we were free, we all began to take on. We didn't have no place to go and asked Master could we stay, but he said no. But he did let some stay and furnished teams and something to eat, and work on the halves. I stayed and was sharecropper, and that was when slavery started, for when we got our crop made, it took every bit of it to pay our debts and we had nothing left to buy winter clothes or pay doctor bills.

About a year after the war I married Nora Brady, just a home wedding. I asked her to come live with me as my wife and she agreed and she just moved her clothes to my room and we lived together a long time. One morning Nora just died, and there weren't any children, so I set out for Texas.

I'd heard the railroad was building in Texas and they hire lots of niggers. I get a horse from Master, and roll up a few clothes and get my gun. I never got very far before the Indians took my horse away from me. It was about fifty miles to a train and I didn't have any money, but I found a white man who wanted wood cut and I work near a month for him and get \$2.00. I get on a train and come a hundred miles from where that railroad was going across the country, and I had to walk near all that hundred miles. Once and now a white man coming or going let me ride. But I got there, and the job pays me sixty cents a day. That was lots of money those days. Near as I remember, it was 1867 or 1868 when I came to Texas.

Then I married Agnes Frazer, and we had a big wedding and a preacher and a big supper for two or three weeks. Her pappy killed game and we ate barbecue all the time. We had eleven children, one a year for a long time, five boys and six gals. One made a school teacher and I ain't seen her nearly forty-five years, because she took a notion to go north and they won't let her back in Texas because she married a white man in New York. I don't like that. She don't have any sense or she wouldn't have done that, no, sir.

Since the nigger been free it's been Hell on the poor old nigger. He has advanced some ways, but he's still a servant and will be, long as God's curse still stay on the Negro race. We were turned loose with nothing and have been under the white man's rule so long we couldn't hold any job but labor. I worked almost two years on that railroad and the rest my life I farmed. Now I get a little pension from the government and the white folks are sure good to give it to me, because I ain't good for work no more.