

George Dorsey

OWENS CO.

Interviewed by John Forsee

Although this article is presented in narrative form and has but few characters, the writer believes it to be an excellent example of life in Owen County sixty or more years ago. With the exception of the grey eagle episode, similar events to these described were happening all over the county. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of any part of the article. The narrator (George Dorsey, age 76 (negro) Owentown, Kentucky, born in slavery and raised by a white family) bears a good reputation and is intelligent enough to react favorably and intelligently to questions concerning the past. Further interviews concerning more general subjects are planned.

I was born on the 16th day of June, 1860 on the old poor house farm about two miles from Owentown. My mother used to tell me I'd be a sleepy head. I didn't know what she meant by that so finally one day, after I got to be a great big boy, I asked her what she meant.

Well, she says, Chickens that are hatched in June just stand around in the hot sun and' sleep themselves to death. So, as you were born in June, you'll just be a sleepy head.

My mother belonged to Sammy Duvall, the father of little Sam Duvall who died not long ago. Little Sam used to be town marshall here and a guard at the pen over at Frankfort. I was born a slave and stayed one till the niggers were freed.

About the time the war was over I saw my first soldier. The road that passed along in front of our house was a dirt road. I'd gone with Mother to watch her milk a young cow late one night, about dark I guess, when I heard somebody hollering and yelling and I looked down the road and saw them coming. I was about five years old then and it looked to me like all the army was coming up the road. The captain was on a horse and the men afoot and the dust from the dirt road flying. There was a moon shining and you could see the muskets shining in the moonlight. I was sitting on a fence and when I saw them it scared me so I started to run. When I jumped off I fell and cut a hole in my forehead right over this left eye. The scar's there yet. I ran in the house and hid. Mr. Sammy Duvall had to get on a horse and go to New Liberty and fetch a doctor to plug up the hole in my head. I saw lots of soldiers after that and I always ran under the bed or hid in a closet or somewhere. They stayed around here for a long time. Finally provender got low and the soldiers took to stealing. We called it stealing, but I reckon it wasn't for they came and got the stuff like meat out of the smoke house in broad open daylight. Mr. Duvall had a chestnut earl stallion he called Drennon and they came, or somebody did, and got him one night. One day, about two or three weeks later, Will Duvall, a son of Mr. Sammy Duvall, heard that the horse was over in Henry County where the soldiers had a camp. So he went over there and found the Captain and told him he'd come after old Drennon. The Captain said to describe him and Will said, Captain, he's a chestnut earl named Drennon. If I whistle a certain way he'd nicker and

answer me. Well, they went down to the stable where they had a lot of stalls like, under tents. and when they got there, Will, he whistled, and sure enough, old Drennon nickered. So the Captain, he said, That's your horse all right. Go in and get him and take him on home.

Will brought the horse home and took him down in the woods on the creek where the water washed all the dirt off on a big, flat rock and we kept him hid for three or four weeks. We didn't want to lose him again.

When I was about six years old we moved off the creek to a new road up on the ridge. It was on the same farm but to another house. I had a great big, ole grey cat I called Tom. I wanted to move him so I put him in a pillow slip so as he couldn't see where we were taking him so he couldn't find the way back. He stayed around his new home for a few days and then he went back to his old home. Mr. Duvall went and got him again for me. Not many white men would do that for a little nigger boy. He must've told Tom something for he never ran off any more.

Mr. Duvall used to ride a blazed-face, sorrel mare named Kit. He almost always took me up behind him, especially if he was going to town. Kit was trained to hunt deer. I can't remember any deer in the country but Mr. Duvall used to tell me about them and about the way they had their horses trained. He said there was a place down on Panther Lick Creek, below where we lived, that was a deer lick. The deer would come there and lick the ground close to the creek because there was salt left there by the high waters. He'd put a strap with a little bell on around ole Kit's neck; and tie her to a tree not far from this lick. Then he'd hide behind another tree close to Kit. When the deer came ole Kit'd shake her head and the deer would raise their heads to see what the noise made by the bell was and where it was coming from. Then he'd shoot the deer in the head. He showed me the place where he killed the biggest buck he'd ever seen right here just out of town a little ways. He kept the horns. and I remember seeing them in the attic at his house. He had an old rifle he called Ole Betsy that'd been his deer rifle.

After I got to be a big boy, hunting and fishing was good. I never got to do any of it except on Saturdays and Sundays. Everybody had a brush fence around the house to keep the stock out of the yard and one day I saw a big bird sail down on the fence and run under it. Mother was out in the back yard so I said to myself, I'll get the gun and kill that hawk. I'd taken good aim at its head and banged away. At the crack of the gun I never heard such a fluttering in my life. Mother came running to see what was the matter and when she saw it, she said, Son, that's a pheasant. Someday you'll be a good hunter. I guess I was for I killed lots of pheasants, quail, squirrels and rabbits.

Little Sammy Duvall had a pointer he called Quail. She was the smartest dog I ever saw, but everybody had smart dogs those days. Quail would trail birds when they were running till she got close and then circle around them and make her stand.

'Be careful there, Quail', Mr. Sammy would say. He'd nearly always get eight or ten out of a covey and sometimes the whole covey. I used to go along just to see him shoot. He hardly ever missed. There were so many quail that nobody ever thought to leave any of a covey if he wanted that many and they didn't get so scattered that he couldn't find them.

After the deer was all killed out, people trained their deer hounds to chase foxes, coons and such like. The white boys from town used to come and get Will and young Sammy to go coon hunting. They always had ten or twelve dogs. They always took me along and treated me just the same as if I was as white as they were. If I got behind or out of sight somebody was sure to say, 'Where's George'?

One night we treed three coons in a big hollow oak. They started to cut down the trees and put me at the butt with a fire brand. When the tree fell the coons'd come out and I was supposed to drive them back with the fire, just letting out one at a time so as the dogs could kill them. I was about half scared by them and when one big feller came out I backed up and he got by me. I threw the fire at him and it lit on his back and burnt him. I have never seen a coon run so fast. But the dogs soon treed him again and we got him. Then we came back and the dogs picked up the trail of another one and we caught him. I've never seen a bigger one. He was as long as this umbrella (3-1/2 ft.) The other one got away. Coon hunting was a great sport with the boys and men in those days.

I caught the only grey eagle that was ever seen around here. There were a bunch of us boys out rabbit hunting one day one fall. The dogs got after a rabbit and chased it across a holler out of range. I had the only gun in the crowd and was right after that rabbit. The dogs ran over the track and could see them over on the hillside just sitting still. All at once I saw a big bird—I took it to be a hawk, fold its wings like a man would fold his arms around his body, and drop straight down on the rabbit. But the rabbit saw it too, for when the eagle got there he was ten feet up the hillside. The bird hit, boom, just like that. But the rabbit was going over the hill and the eagle must have seen him for he rose and flew in that direction.

'You boys stay back, I'll kill that hawk. That's the biggest hawk I've ever seen,' I told them. When I got to the top of the ridge I saw him sitting in the top of a big tree. The boys stayed where I told them and I slipped along till I got pretty close enough to shoot him. He was either watching the rabbit or didn't think I was watching him for I got pretty close before he started to fly. Just as he opened his wings I let him have it with my old muzzle loader shotgun. Down he came making' as much noise as a whole flock of hawks ought to have made. He was alive when I got to him and made right at me, striking with his claws and bill. The dogs came when they heard the shot and he whipped them off. Every time he struck one of them he (the dog) would holler like he'd been speared. The other boys wanted to kill it but I got a long pole and got it on him so it held him down. We'd found out by this time that one wing was broken by my shot. So we just held the tips of his wings and led him to the house. His wing spread was about six or eight feet. When I got him to the house I told them I had the biggest hawk they had ever seen. A old man by the same of William said, 'Hell that ain't no hawk, that's a grey eagle!' An old colored fiddler, named Fred Roberts, sent word he'd buy it from me. He even got so afraid he wouldn't get it that he came for it.

'What'll you take for him', he asked me, and before I could say anything he said, 'I'll give a dollar for him'.

That was a lot of money for me, and boy I sold him then and there. I could've got two or maybe three dollars for him. Fred took him to town and fed him live hens and raw meat. On court days or when there was a crowd in town he showed him for ten cents a look. I bet he made \$50.00 on him. People used to come for miles to see that eagle. He finally died.

Fishing was good too. We cut our poles in the woods and used to flax thread for lines. Where people built water-gaps in fences that crossed the creeks the water'd fill in till it made a dam. Then the creek spread behind it. The water holes were full of perch and catfish. They didn't get much bigger than your hand, but they bit fast and we had lots of fun catching them.