

## **Jane Simpson** **St. Louis, Missouri**

The subject of this sketch is Jane Simpson, familiarly known in her neighborhood as Aunt Jane. She is more than 90 years old but her exact age is not certain. She lives at 2712-1/2 Clark Avenue with her niece and family. In a very poorly furnished old 3-room brick apartment, seated in the front bedroom, was Jane Simpson, frail and slender, very light complexion with beautiful long white hair, well combed and neatly dressed. Owing to a recent illness, she was not able to do any housework. Jane very feebly tells the following story of her life:

I was born more than 90 years ago down in Burkesville, Kentucky. My memory's not so good, 'cause I have been sick more than 20 years, and just got up less than a week ago from a very bad spell. But I might tell my story scattering like. I'll do the best I can.

I've been sold six times in my life, first to Chris Ellis, second, to John Emerson and my third owner was Jessie Cook. I wasn't old enough to be much help, till I became the property of Master Cook. Then I was big enough to pick up chunks in the field, set brush heaps afire, burn up rubbish, pull weeds and the like. He sold me to Dr. Hart around the age of ten to be his house girl.

The doctor kept me till the Civil War was in the air and they started running the slaves to Texas 'cause they thought the Yankees couldn't make it plumb to Texas, but they did. By the time we got as far as Crowley's Ridge, peace was declared.

My father's owner was old Bill Cuington, the meanest slave owner in the county. They made him go to war, so when he came back, he told my papa that he was as free as him now, and he could go if he wanted to, or stay, he didn't care which, but if he stayed he wouldn't get nothing for his work. So a white neighbor friend heard Master Bill say it. He told my father to come to his place with him down the road apiece where he was clearing up land, but if he got caught, don't ever tell he helped him get away 'cause some of the land he was clearing up was owned by Cuington, and Cuington would fire him if he knew he helped one of his ex-slaves in anyway.

So Papa took my Mother and us 4 children the route this white friend helped him to go to Clarington, Arkansas. He got us a job on a farm owned by his friend, Jerry Diles. Our whole family went to work on Mr. Diles' farm and we made a good crop. Mama milked, I cooked, the rest of the family farmed, and we stayed there more than 4 years. When we left we had money enough to buy us a farm and stock of our own.

I remember well when I was a child how they wouldn't allow us children anything to eat but pumpkin and mush. We didn't own clocks those days. We just told the time by the sun in the day and the stars at night. If it was clouded we didn't know what time it was. The white folks didn't want to let the slaves have any time for themselves, so the old folks used to let us children run and play at night, while the white folks slept and they watched the stars to tell about what time to call us in and put us to bed, before the white folks knew we were out. I've been sold six times in my life. I never got more than three or four whippings, but they cut the blood out of me every one of them times. If ole Miss got mad about something, just anything at all, she'd have you whipped, when maybe you had not done a thing, just to satisfy her spiteful feeling. I never can forget, I was sitting upstairs in ole Miss' house, quilting, when the first Yankee army boat went to Vicksburg, Mississippi. Ole Miss made me get right up and go get her children out of school and bring them right home. She was scared to death mostly, but the boat went right on. It didn't even stop. I had to take her children back and forth to school every day. They were mighty nice children. Those very white children taught me to read and write, but I've been sick so bad and so long, I forgot every bit of it.

My first old master never was married, and he only bought 2 slaves in his whole life, and had between 50 and 100 slaves - all kinfolks. They raised children on his plantation worse than flies. I never had a child in my life but I raised a host of other folks' children. Ole Master was a drunkard. He got drunk one night and fell off a rock and broke his hip. He died from the fall. Before he died he told Papa, he knew he was going to die, and he had been so mean to his old slaves that he wanted to do something for them, and no one ever knew where he kept his money. My grandpapa, Meridie, and grandmother, Juda, were the only 2 slaves he ever bought and all the rest came from them 2.

Ole Master Chris told grandfather before he died, there was a keg buried at the foot of the cliff with all his money in it, for he was very rich. My old grandfather told the overseer about it. They wouldn't dare to dig and find anything on the owner's plantation without the overseer letting them, especially when the boss is dead. And the overseer of course said he looked for the keg and didn't find anything. I had an uncle who was buying his freedom from Master Chris and was almost paid out when Master Chris died, but he didn't know anything about keeping receipts, so he was put on the auction block and sold again.

My mama and daddy had 13 children and they are all dead but me. My papa's name was Dave Bedford. He was 103 years old when he died in Holly Grove, Arkansas. My sister died and left 9 children and I raised everyone of them. One boy is deaf and dumb, and lives in Little Rock, Arkansas and is one of the best paper hangers down there. My husband was a farmer. He has been dead so long, I can't tell when he died. My grand-niece said he's been dead 22 years, I don't know. My children I raised and my friends have been taking care of me ever since my husband died, because I can't take care of myself.

While my husband lived we farmed all the time and lived well. When he died, I had \$4000 in the bank at Mound Bayou, Mississippi. The bank went down and I have been a beggar ever since. Never did get one penny of that money. I have been here in St. Louis so long, I don't know how long I have been here.

A Democrat offered my husband 80 acres of land if he would vote a Democrat ticket and get his friends to change from Republicans to Democrats and my husband told him he would suffer his right arm to be cut off before he would do that, and he didn't change either. I only voted once in my life that was for a Republican President, I don't remember which one.

The niggers didn't expect nothing from the white folks when they got set free. They were so glad to get set free, they were just glad to be loose. I never even heard of white folks giving niggers nothing. Most of the time they didn't even give them what they were supposed to give them after they were free. They were so mad because they had to set them free, they just stayed mean as they would allow them to be anyhow, and are yet, most of them. I used to hear old slaves pray and ask God when would the bottom rail be the top rail, and I wondered what on earth they were talking about. They were talking about when they are going to get out from under bondage. Course I know now.

I don't hardly know what to say about this new generation. They ain't nothing like when I came along, nor nothing like when you come along. You can just look at a person and tell whether they are late day folks or not. They are the worst, ill mannered, biggody generation I ever heard of. They don't care for folks' feelings and just as lazy and good for nothing as they can be. Instead of being better because their opportunities are better, they are worse, and I feel so sorry about it. The old folks wanted to be free so bad they used to sing a song named 'Free, Free My Lord, March on The Heavenly Way.' I can't remember any of the other songs.

I've been sick so much. I wish I could go back to the Arkansas country where my mama and papa died. There are 11 children down there right now that I raised, and a lot of my relatives, too. They would take care of me if I could get there, I would not have to live like I am living here. I see better without glasses than I do with them, I don't read anyway. I belong to the St. Paul A.M.E. Church, but haven't been able to go for six years but twice. I don't get any help from the relief, and we need help the worst way. My grandniece tries to work when she can get it, but she is sick, too.