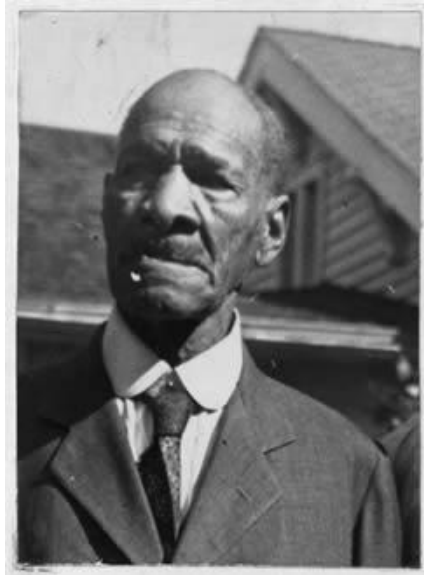


**JOHN W. FIELDS**

**Interviewed by Cecil C. Miller**

**Dist. #3, Tippecanoe Co.**

**September 17, 1937**



John W. Fields, 2120 North Twentieth Street, Lafayette, Indiana, now employed as a domestic by Judge Burnett is a typical example of a fine colored gentleman, who, despite his lowly birth and adverse circumstances, has labored and economized until he has acquired a respected place in his home community. He is the owner of three properties; un-mortgaged, and is a member of the colored Baptist Church of Lafayette. As will later be seen his life has been one of constant effort to better himself spiritually and physically. He is a fine example of a man who has lived a morally and physically clean life. But, as for his life, I will let Mr. Fields speak for himself:

My name is John W. Fields and I'm eighty-nine (89) years old. I was born March 27, 1848 in Owensboro, Ky. That's 115 miles below Louisville, Ky. There were 11 other children besides myself in my family. When I was six years old, all of us children were taken from my parents, because my master died and his estate had to be settled. We slaves were divided by this method. Three disinterested persons were chosen to come to the plantation and together they wrote the names of the different heirs on a few slips of paper. These slips were put in a hat and passed among us slaves. Each one took a slip and the name on the slip was the new owner. I happened to draw the name of a relative of my master who was a widow. I can't describe the heartbreak and horror of that separation. I was only six years old and it was the last time I ever saw my mother for longer than one night. Twelve children taken from my mother in one day.

Five sisters and two brothers went to Charleston, Virginia, one brother and one sister went to Lexington Ky., one sister went to Hartford, Ky., and one brother and myself stayed in Owensburg, Ky. My mother was later allowed to visit among us children for one week of each year, so she could only remain a short time at each place.

My life prior to that time was filled with heartaches and despair. We arose from four to five o'clock in the morning and parents and children were given hard work, lasting until nightfall gave us our respite. After a meager supper, we generally talked until we grew sleepy, we had to go to bed. Some of us would read, if we were lucky enough to know how.

In most of us colored folks was the great desire to able to read and write. We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. It was the law that if a white man was caught trying to educate a negro slave, he was liable to prosecution entailing a fine of fifty dollars and a jail sentence. We were never allowed to go to town and it was not until after I ran away that I knew that they sold anything but slaves, tobacco and whiskey. Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us. We knew we could run away, but what then? An offender guilty of this crime was subjected to very harsh punishment.

When my masters estate had been settled, I was to go with the widowed relative to her place, she swung me up on her horse behind her and promised me all manner of sweet things if I would come peacefully. I didn't fully realise what was happening, and before I knew it, I was on my way to my new home. Upon arrival her manner changed very much, and she took me down to where there was a bunch of men burning brush. She said, "See those men" I said: yes. "Well, go help them", she replied. So at the age of six I started my life as an independent slave. From then on my life as a slave was a repetition of hard work, poor quarters and board. We had no beds at that time, we just "bunked" on the floor. I had one blanket and many's the night I sat by the fireplace during the long cold nights in the winter.

My Mistress had separated me from all my family but one brother with sweet words, but that pose was dropped after she reached her place. Shortly after I had been there, she married a northern man by the name of David Hill. At first he was very nice to us, but he gradually acquired a mean and overbearing manner toward us. I remember one incident that I don't like to remember. One of the women slaves had been very sick and she was unable to work just as fast as he thought she ought to. He had driven her all day with no results. That night after completing our work he called us all together. He made me hold a light, while he whipped her and then made one of the slaves pour salt water on her bleeding back. My innards turn yet at that sight.

At the beginning of the Civil War I was still at this place as a slave. It looked at the first of the war as if the south would win, as most of the big battles were won by the South. This was because we slaves stayed at home and tended the farms and kept their families.

To eliminate this solid support of the South, the Emancipation Act was passed, freeing all slaves. Most of the slaves were so ignorant they did not realize they were free. The planters knew this and as Kentucky never seceded from the Union, they would send slaves into Kentucky from other states in the south and hire them out to plantations. For these reasons I did not realize that I was free until 1864. I immediately resolved to run away and join the Union Army and so my brother and I went to Owensburg, Ky. and tried to join. My brother was taken, but I was refused as being too young. I tried at Evansville, Terre Haute and Indianapolis but was unable to get in. I then tried to find work and was finally hired by a man at \$7.00 a month. That was my first independent job. From then on I went from one job to another working as a general laborer. I married at 24 years of age and had four children. My wife has been dead for 12 years and 8 months."

Mr. Miller, always remember that:

"The brightest man, the prettiest flower  
May be cut down, and withered in an hour."

Today, I am the only surviving member who helped organize the second Baptist Church here in Lafayette, 64 years ago. I've tried to live according to the way the Lord would wish, God Bless you.

"The clock of Life is wound but once.  
Today is yours, tomorrow is not.  
No one knows when the hands will stop."

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**2120 N. 20th St. Lafayette, Indiana**

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Mr. Fields says that all negro slaves were ardent believers in ghosts, supernatural powers, tokens and "signs." The following story illustrates the point.

A turkey gobbler had mysteriously disappeared from one of the neighboring plantations and the local slaves were accused of committing the fowl to a boiling pot. A slave convicted of theft was punished severely. As all of the slaves denied any knowledge of the turkey's whereabouts, they were instructed to make a search of the entire plantation.

On one part of the place there was a large peach orchard. At the time the trees were full of the green fruit. Under one of the trees there was a large cabinet or "safe" as they were called. One of the slaves accidentally opened the safe and, behold, there was Mr. Gobbler peacefully seated on a number of green peaches.

The negro immediately ran back and notified his master of the discovery. The master returned to the orchard with the slave to find that the negro's wild tale was true. A turkey gobbler sitting on a nest of green peaches. A bad omen.

The master had a son who had been seriously injured some time before by a runaway team, and a few days after this unusual occurrence with the turkey, the son died. After his death, the word of the turkey's nesting venture and the death of the master's son spread to this four winds, and for some time after this story was related wherever there was a public gathering with the white people or the slave population.

All through the south a horseshoe was considered an omen of good luck. Rare indeed was the southern home that did not have one nailed over the door. This insured the household and all who entered of pleasant prospects while within the home. If while in the home you should perhaps get into a violent argument, never hit the other party with a broom as it was a sure indication of bad luck. If Grandad had rheumatics, he would be sure of relief if he carried a buckeye in his pocket.

Of all the Ten Commandments, the one broken most by the negro was: Thou Shalt Not Steal. This was due mostly to the insufficient food the slaves obtained. Most of the planters expected a chicken to suddenly get heavenly aspirations once in a while, but as Mr. Fields says, "When a beautiful 250 pound hog suddenly tries to kidnap himself, the planter decided to investigate." It occurred like this:

A 250 pound hog had been fruitless. The planter was certain that the culprit was among his group of slaves, so he decided to personally conduct a quiet investigation.

One night shortly after the moon had risen in the sky, two of the negroes were seated at a table in one of the cabins talking of the experiences of the day. A knock sounded on the door. Both slaves jumped up and cautiously peeked out of the window. Lo there was the master patiently waiting for an answer. The visiting negro decided that the master must not see both of them and he asked the other to conceal him while the master was there. The other slave told him to climb into the attic and be perfectly quiet. When this was done, the tenant of the cabin answered the door. The master strode in and gazed about the cabin. He then turned abruptly to the slave and growled, 'Alright, where is that hog you stole?'

'Master', replied the negro, 'I know nothing about a hog'. The master was certain that the slave was lying and told him so in no uncertain terms. The terrified slave said, 'Master, I know nothing of any hog. I never saw him. The Good Man up above knows I never saw him. HE knows everything and HE knows I didn't steal him.'

The man in the attic by this time was aroused at the misunderstood conversation taking place below him. Disregarding all, he raised his voice and yelled, 'He's a liar, Master, he knows just as much about it as I do.'

Most of the strictly negro folklore has faded into the past. The younger negro generations who have been reared and educated in the north have lost this bearing and assumed the lore of the local white population through their daily contact with the whites. The older negro natives of this section are for the most part employed as domestics and through this channel rapidly assimilated the employers viewpoint in most of his beliefs and conversations.