

Mrs. Mary Jane (Mattie) Mooreman

Interviewed by Mary D. Hudgins

Yes, ma'am. I've been in Hot Springs, been in Hot Springs 57 years. That's a long time. Lots of changes have come--I've seen lots of changes here--changed from wooden sidewalks and little wood buildings. Your name's Hudgins? I knew the Hudginses--knew Miss Nora well. What's that? Did I know Adeline? Did I know Adeline! Do you mean to tell me she's still alive? Adeline! Why Miss Maud, (addressing Mrs. Eisele, for whom she works--and who sat nearby to help in the interview) Miss Maude, I tell you Adeline's WHITE, she's white clean through! (see interview with Adeline Blakeley, who incidentally is as black as the ace of spades--in pigmentation.) Miss Maude, you never knew anybody like Adeline. She bossed those children and made them mind--just like they were hers. She took good care of them. (Turning to the interviewer) You know how the Hudgins' always were about their children. Adeline thought every one of them was made out of gold---made out of pure GOLD. She made them mind. I remember once, she was down on Central Avenue with Ross and he did something or other that wasn't nice. She walked over to the umbrella stand, you remember how they used to have umbrellas for sale out in front of the stores. She grabbed an umbrella and she whipped Ross with it--she didn't hurt him. Then she put it back in the stand and said to the man who ran the store, 'If that umbrella's hurt, just charge it to Harve Hudgins.' That's the way Adeline was. So she's still alive. Lord, how I'd like to see her. Bring me a picture of her. Oh Miss Mary, I'd love to have it.

Me? I was born on the Green River near Hartford, Kentucky. Guess I was about a year and a half, from what they told me, when my mistress married. Don't know how she ever met my master. She was raised in a convent and his folks lived a long way from hers. But anyhow she did. She was just 13 when she married. The man she married was named Charles Mooreman M-O-O-R-E-M-A-N. They had a son called Charles Wycliff Mooreman. He was named for his mother's people. I got a son I called Charles Wycliff too. He works at The Arlington. He's a waiter. They say he looks just like me. Mr. Charles Wycliff Mooreman--back in Kentucky. I still get letters from him.

Miss Mary, I guess I had a pretty easy time in slavery days. They were good to us. Besides I was a house niggah. (Those who have been house niggahs never quibble at the word slave or

negro. A subtle social distinction brewed in the black race to separate house servants from field hands as far as wealthy planters from poor white trash..) Once I heard a man say of my mother, 'You could put on a white boiled shirt and lie flat down on the floor in her kitchen and not get dirty.'

Cook? No, ma'am! (with dignity and indignation) I never cooked until after I was married, and I never washed, never washed so much as a rag. All I washed was the babies and maybe my mistress's feet. I was a lady's maid. I'd wait on my mistress and I'd knit socks for all the folks. When they would sleep it was our duty--us maids--to fan them with feathers made out of turkey feathers--feather fans. Part of it was to keep them cool. Then they didn't have screens like we have today. So part of it was to keep the flies off. I remember how we couldn't stomp our feet to keep the flies from biting for fear of waking them up.

No, Miss Mary, we didn't get such, good food. Nobody had all the kinds of things we have today. We had mostly buttermilk and cornbread and fat meat. Cake? Indeed we didn't. I remember once they baked a cake and Mr. Charles Wycliff--he was just a little boy--he got in and took a whole fistful out of the cake. When Miss found out about it, she gave us all doses of salts--enough to make us all throw up. She gave it to all the niggahs and the children--the white children. And what did she find out? It was her own child who had done it.

Yes ma'am we learned to read and write. Oh, Miss Maude now--I don't want to recite. I don't want to. (But she did Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star and The Playful Kitten--the latter all of 40 lines.) I think, I think they both come out of McGuffey's second Reader. Yes ma'am I remember McGuffey's and the Blueback speller too.

No, Miss Mary, there wasn't so much of the war that was fought around us. I remember that old Master used to go out in the front yard and stand by a locust tree and put his ear against it. He said that way he could hear the cannon down to Bowling Green. No, I didn't ever hear any shooting from the war myself.

Yes ma'am, the Confederates used to come through lots. I remember how we used to go to the spring for water for them. Then we'd stand with the buckets on our heads while they drank--drank out of a big gourd. When the buckets were empty we'd go back to the spring for more water. Once the Yankees come by the place. It was at night. They went out to the quarters and

they tried to get them to rise up. Told them to come on in the big house and take what they wanted. Told them to take anything they wanted to take, take Master's silver spoons and Miss' silk dress. 'If they don't like it, we'll shoot their brains out,' they said. Next morning they told Master. He got scared and moved. At that time we were living at Cloverport. It was near the end of the war and we were already free, only we didn't know it. He moved on up to Stephensport. That's on the Ohio too. He took me and a brother of mine and another black boy.

While we were there I remember he took me to a circus. I remember how the lady--she was dressed in pink, came walking down a wire--straight on down to the ground. She was carrying a long pole. I won't ever forget that.

Not long afterwards I was married. We were all free then. My husband asked my master if he could marry me. He told him 'You're a good man. You can come and live on my farm and work for me, but you can't have Mattie.' So we moved off to his Master's farm. A little while after that his Master bought a big farm in Arkansas. He wanted to hire as many people as he could. So we went with him. He started out well, but the first summer he died. So everything had to be sold. A man came down to bid on some of the farm tools and stock--come to the auction, he told us to come on up to Woodruff county and work for him. We were there 7 years and he worked the farm and I took care of myself and my babies. Then he went off and left me.

I went into the Cotton Plant and started working there. Finally he wrote to me and tried to get me to say we hadn't ever been married. Said he wanted to marry another woman. The white folks I worked for wouldn't let me. I'd been married right and they wouldn't let me disgrace myself by writing such a letter. Finally I came on to Hot Springs. For a while I cooked and washed. Then I started working for folks, regular. For 9 years, though, I mostly washed and ironed. I came to Hot Springs on the 7th of February--I think it was 57 years ago. You remember Miss Maude--it was just before that big hail storm. You were here, don't you remember--that hail storm that took all the windows out of all the houses, tore off roofs and swept dishes and table-cloths right off the tables. Can't nobody forget that, who's seen it.

Miss Mary, do you know Miss Julia Huggins? I worked for her for a long time. Worked for her before she went away and after she came back. Between times I cooked for Mrs. Button (Burton--but called Button by everyone) Housley. When Miss Julia came back she marched right down to Mrs. Housley's to tell me she wants me to work for her again. 'Can't get her now,'

says Mrs. Housley, 'Mattie's done found out she's black.' But anyhow I went to see her, and I went back to work for her, pretty foxy Miss Julia was. I've been working for Mrs. Eisele pretty near twenty five years. Saw her children grow up and the grandchildren. Lansing, he's my heart.

Once when Mr. and Mrs. Eisele went to see Mrs. Brown, Lansing's mother, they took me with them. All the way to Watertown, Wisconsin. There weren't any more niggas in the town and all the children thought I was something to look at. They'd come to see me and they'd bring their friends with them. Once while we were there, a circus came to town. The children wanted me to see it. Told me there was a negro boy in it. Guess they thought it would be a treat to me to see another niggah. I told 'em, 'Lord, don't you think I see lots, lots more than I want, everyday when I am at home?'

It used to scare me. The folks would go off to a party or a show and leave me alone with the baby. No, Miss Mary, I wasn't scared for myself. I thought somebody might come in and kidnap that baby. No matter how late they were, I'd sit on the top step of the stairs leading upstairs--just outside the door where Lansing was asleep. No matter what time they come home they'd find me there. 'Why don't you go on in your bedroom and lie down?' they'd ask me. 'No,' I'd tell 'em, 'somebody might come in, and they would have to get that baby over my dead body.'

Jonnie, that's my daughter (Mrs. D.G. Murphy, 338 Walnut Street, a large stucco house with well cared for lawn) she wants me to quit work. I told her, 'You put that over on Mrs. Murphy--you made her quit work and took care of her. What happened to her? She died! You're not going to make me old.' Twice she's got me to quit work. Once, she told me it was against the law. Told me there was a law old folks couldn't work. I believed her and I quit. Then I came on down and I asked Mr. Eisele (an important business executive and prominent in civic affairs, [HW: aged 83]) He rared back and he said, 'I'd like to see anybody stop me from working.' So I came back. Another time, it was when the old age pensions came in. They tried to stop me again. Told me I had to take it. I asked Mr. Eisele if I could work just the same. 'No,' he says 'if you take it, you'll have to quit work.' So I stamped my foot and I said, 'I won't take nobody's pension.' The other day Jonnie called up here and she started crying. Lots of folks write her notes and say she's bad to let me work. Somebody told her that they had seen me going by to work at 4 o'clock in the morning. It wasn't no such. I asked a man when I was on the way and it was 25 minutes until 5. Besides, my clock had stopped and I couldn't tell what time it was.

Yes, Miss Mary, I do get here sort of early, but then I like it. I just sit in the kitchen until the folks get up. You see that picture over there, it's Mr. Eisele when he was 17. I'd know that smiling face anywhere. He's always good to me. When they go away to Florida I can go to the store and get money whenever I need it. But it's always good to see them come back. Miss Maude says I'm sure to go to Heaven, I'm such a good worker. No, Miss Mary, I'm not going to quit work. Not until I get old.