Patsy Jane Bland
1519 North Twenty-Seventh Street,
Terre Haute, Indiana, Vigo County
Interviewed by A. Anna Bowles Wiley

‘Aunt Patsy’ Jane Bland will be 107 years of age on August 8, 1937. Long before the Civil War was thought of, a little black child was born in a cabin on the plantation of William Kettering in Shelby County, Kentucky.

She was one of a large family, none of whom were destined, however, to live to her age. Aunt Patsy Jane was sold twice after that, to Charles Morgan, and to John Boyle.

She was the mother of four when the Civil War began with the shot fired on Fort Sumter, and when the war was over, the slaves freed, Aunt Patsy took her four children, right smart size then, into freedom.

Aunt Patsy remembers her plantation life well. Her mental faculties are in excellent condition, and while she will tell you that her mind doesn’t work in a straight line, she can tell of those long-past days in an interesting way, that carried one back through historical facts to days of slavery, when the owner looked after his black men and women because they were his property if for no other reason.

Gazing backward, Aunt Patsy recalled that she "was a regular lamb" when she was a child, that there was nothing she did not do to have fun, and many were the lickings she got for it.

She had to work, too, for life was not all play and she recalls sitting at the feet of her little mistress and learning to spell out her letters until the mother of the white child decided that she was getting too smart and she had to stop, until she was married to her last and fourth husband, who taught her some more. Aunt Patsy could read for a long time by spelling it out, but recently her eyes "ain’t so good."

Aunt Patsy lives at 1519 North Twenty-seventh street now, with her next to the youngest son, Johnny Wilson, who is a man up in years. She cooks for the two of them and her little home is

clean and orderly. "I ain't seen a well day for three years," she told the reporter, and when asked how she got around, she said she did pretty well with her wooden leg, (which was an old hickory cane that supported her well, as she made her way about, to cook or mend).

Aunt Patsy remembers the day all the colored folks on her plantation were freed. There was crying, there was shouting, there was joy and sadness, many not wishing to leave and go out into the world of which they knew nothing. She gathered her four children around her and with her husband, Mr. Wilson, left the plantation. When asked if she was happier free, Aunt Patsy Jane looked off into the distance and said: "Free, Is anybody ever free? Isn't everybody, you know a slave to someone or something or other?" Showing that logic still lives within this remarkable woman, who was transplanted to Terre Haute in 1919, because some of her folks were up here.

She has a small pension from her husband, Mr. Bland, who was a soldier in the Civil War, that assists in her keeping.

She has worked always and would know no other way. She has carded and spun, helped raise tobacco, two crops, some years when she would cut the leaves to the old stalk and let another crop grow.

At the south of her home is a patch of tobacco right now, being raised by her son and herself, but Aunt Patsy says she Is too delicate to smoke that old Tennessee Red now. She smokes sack tobacco in her old corncob pipe - just cannot do without it and It helps so much to dream over past days when Aunt Patsy was young, tall and hardy as a young pine tree, when she ate sweet 'taters and possum with the rest, sang jubilee songs and even made up songs down in Kentucky, on the old plantation.

She remembers sleeping on a straw pallet on the floor, then one time on a trundle bed which shoved back under the big bed when filled with small dark faces; she remembers baking corn dodger on a hot brick fireplace, of hanging the kettle over the crane to cook "Pawn hoss," made from meal and bacon; of roastin' sweet taters and sweet corn, and baking ash cake in the hot ashes; of seeing a wedding of white folks on the place in the big house.

The wedding preparations began days in advance with the saving of chickens and eggs and butter. The liveliest egg-beating, butter creaming, raisin stoning, sugar pounding, cake icing, coconut scraping, and grating, Jelly straining, silver cleaning, egg frothing, floor rubbing, pastry making, ruffle crimping, tarlatan smoothing, trunk moving time you ever saw, and the peeping at the bride with her long veil and train, and the guests the whole army of slaves turned out to help.

Aunt Patsy remembers the night before the wedding when they all gathered in the quarter to sing every song they knew over and over again, celebrating the leaving of the bride for Virginia and how Young Miss died soon after her big wedding and was buried in her bridal dress.

She recalls deaths of some of the white folks, of the burying of her negro friends. She ran away one time to see where that roar like a storm came from that they heard, and she found it was a waterfall over a dam, seven miles away, and got a good "hiding" when she got back. She recalls her oldest daughter, who now lives in Dayton, Ohio, and "looks as old as her maw" who used to whoop it up "Hurray for Jeff Davis."

Aunt Patsy has done every sort of work even to plowing, "I worked like a man, I've spun flax, cut the wool off sheep, washed it, carded and spun it for stockings and underwear, I never wore anything but wool underwear in the wintertime and none of my younguns did either.

"I used to sit and knit wool up for their stockings. Indeed I have worked hard," states Aunt Patsy, who recalls that her clothes were also made of tow linen.

She had seven children in all and they are gone -- gone like those visions she sits and sees over her old cob pipe.

Mrs. Bland is a woman to whom there are thousands of women who might lift their hats in tribute. She has indeed earned her passage through this Ocean of Life and freedom of peace, superseding any freedom of the past. She is a Baptist by religion, and when she can get going, she attends the church nearest to her home.

And, can she shout, when she gets to the meeting house! She certainly can. Her religion is deep, she says.

She will celebrate her birthday at her home on August 8, and she does hope that everyone whom she knows will send her a birthday present. It is not everyone who can reach the age of 107 and have their picture taken, too. No sirree.

And there are few women, who can count back to many years before the War of the Rebellion, and remember seeing the soldiers from whom they ran like a rat, and hid out "because they were scared." But Aunt Patsy Jane Bland has much to think of, and so she sits in her old armchair, looking out of her door, remembering - and remember - and it is indeed a long way back.

Patsy Jane Bland
Terre Haute, Indiana

When interviewed, Patsy Jane Bland was nearly 107 years old and had outlived most of her seven children. According to her obituary in the Terre Haute Tribune (June 29, 1938), she died at the age of 107 in Terre Haute and was buried in Rockport, Indiana. At the time of the interview, she was living at 1519 North 27th Street in Terre Haute with her next-to-youngest son, Johnny Wilson, who himself was up in years. Patsy said her oldest daughter lived in Dayton, Ohio, and “looks as old as her ma.”

She came to Terre Haute in 1919 because some of her relatives already were living there. She still cooked and kept house, but she told the fieldworker that “I ain’t seen a well day for three years.” Nevertheless, with the help of a hickory cane, which she called her “wooden leg,” she got around fairly well. She was living on benefits from her late husband, a Civil War veteran. Patsy said her religion was deep, and whenever she could she attended a Baptist church near her home. She was preparing to celebrate her birthday at home on August 8, 1937, and said she hoped everyone she knew would send her a birthday present.

Sitting in an old armchair, smoking a pipe, and looking out the door, she reflected on her past. On the south side of her house was a patch of tobacco raised by her son and her, but Patsy said she was “too delicate to smoke that old Tennessee red now.” Instead, she smoked “sack tobacco” in her corncob pipe, claiming she could not do without it.

One of a large family, Patsy was born on August 8, 1830, in a cabin on the plantation of William Kettering in Shelby County, Kentucky. She was sold twice, first to Charles Morgan, and then to John Boyle. Patsy recalled that as a child she was a “regular lamb”, though there was nothing she would not do to have fun, and “many were the lickings” she got. Although she claimed that at her age her mind did not “work in a straight line,” the interviewer reported that “her mental faculties are in excellent condition” and she remembered plantation life well. She was one of only a few people then living who could recall so many years before the Civil War.

Along with her owner’s daughter, she learned to “spell out her letters” until the white child’s mother decided that Patsy was getting too smart, so her education ended until she was married to her fourth and last husband, who taught her some more. Patsy said she could read “for a long

time by spelling it out," but recently her eyes "ain't so good." On the plantation, Patsy did all kinds of work, even plowing: "I worked like a man. I've spun flax, cut wool off sheep, washed it, carded, and spun it for stockings and underwear. I never wore anything but wool underwear in the wintertime, and none of my younguns did either. I used to sit and knit wool up for their stockings. Indeed, I've worked hard." Patsy also recalled that her clothes were made of tow. Besides carding and spinning, Patsy helped raise tobacco—two crops some years, when she would cut the leaves off the old stalks to let another crop grow. She said she had always worked and would not have had it any other way.

Patsy remembered sleeping on a straw pallet on the floor and in a trundle bed shoved back under the big bed. She remembered baking corn dodger on a hot brick fireplace; hanging the kettle over the crane to cook "pawn hoss," which was made from meal and bacon; roasting sweet potatoes and sweet corn, and baking ash cake in hot ashes. She said blacks sang jubilee songs and even made up songs down on the old plantation in Kentucky. Patsy also recalled observing the wedding of the master's daughter in the big house. The wedding preparations began days in advance with the saving of chickens, eggs, and butter. She said the preparations included the liveliest egg-beating, butter-creaming, raisin-stoning, sugar-pounding, cake-icing, coconut-scraping, and -grating, jelly-straining, silver-cleaning, egg-frothing, floor-rubbing, pastry-making, ruffle-crimping, tarlatan-smoothing, and trunk-moving time you ever saw. All the slaves turned out to help. She also recalled peeping at the bride with her long veil and train and at the guests. The night before the wedding, the slaves all gathered in their quarters to sing, over and over, every song they knew to celebrate the bride's marriage and her departure to Virginia. Patsy also remembered that the young bride died soon after the big wedding and that she was buried in her bridal dress. She recalled, too, the deaths of some other whites and the burial of some of her black friends.

Already the mother of four when the Civil War began, Patsy remembered seeing soldiers, and "because they were scared," the slaves ran from them and hid out. She remembered the day all the blacks on her plantation were set free. There was shouting and crying; there was joy and sadness. She said many blacks did not want to leave the plantation to go out into a world of which they knew nothing. Patsy, though, gathered her four children around her, and with her husband, who was named Wilson, left the plantation. When the fieldworker asked if she was happier free, Patsy looked off into the distance and said, "Free? Is anybody ever free? Isn't everybody you know a slave to someone or something or other?"

From Baker, Ronald L.. Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless (pp. 70-72). Indiana University Press. Kindle Edition.