

Sarah Waggoner
Savannah, Missouri
Interviewed by G.K. Bartlett
Kansas City, Missouri

A familiar figure in Savannah, Missouri is that of an aged, bent and withered Negro woman with a little patch of white whiskers on her chin, a cap on her head winter and summer; who is seen almost daily pulling a little red wagon along the streets. Aunt Sarah Waggoner, as she is called, lives alone in a small unpainted house, almost a hut, near the right-of-way of the Chicago Great Western Railroad; about three blocks southeast of the courthouse. The yard as well as the house is cluttered with all kinds of junk, odds and ends which Aunt Sarah has picked up as she meanders through the town. She has been a fixture in Savannah for many years and has the friendship of the white people, who commend her faithfulness and religious fervor.

"How are you?" she asked pleasantly when answering my knock at her door. When it was explained that her recollections about slave life before the war were wanted, she beamed delightedly. "Yes ma'am. Come on in and set, and soon as I fix the fire I'll tell you everything about slave times. Everything I can remember." She wiped off a chair for her visitor, then busied herself at the old wood and coal cook stove, where some vegetables were simmering in an antiquated iron kettle, and fat meat was frying in the skillet. "I was a slave," she stated. "I was born in Kentucky. In Grayson or Hardin County. I don't know which exactly, because we lived in both counties; and I never did think to ask old Miss Howard who raised me; and I forgot to ask my mother if she knew, and I don't think she knew." Sarah paused for a moment, then continued plaintively, "I wish I knew for sure."

"Who was old Miss Howard?"

She was white folk. I was raised by the Howards. Mr. and Mrs. Jim Howard. They owned me. We called him Pap, and her Old Miss. My mother's name was Waggoner. She belonged to Mr. Howard too. My father belonged to another man and lived on a farm near us.

No ma'am, no, we were never sold. I'll tell you how 'twas. You see, Mr. Howard's father—he came over from England. He called all his sons to his bedside at the last and gave each of them some of the colored people and told them to take good care of them and never to let them be

sold. I had a cousin, June, who was sold here at the courthouse door in Savannah. He and another boy were sold down South. The Howards brought me from Kentucky to Missouri. That was before the war. I've been here a long time. I'm 93 years old.

"Sure I know how old I am", she remonstrated. "I'm 93 years old right now (1937). And I know my birthday too. I know it for sure, February 17th. I'm sure about that, for it comes so close to that of Abe Lincoln. His birthday is February 12th." Memories of the past surged through Aunt Sarah's mind and awakened emotions. She rose to her feet, and speaking with the enraptured ecstasy of her race when roused by religious fervor, testified. "I know about Abe Lincoln, because his cousin Cap Lincoln; Yes, Cap Lincoln, lived right nigh us in Kentucky. And he sure was a fine man! I knew about Abe Lincoln before he ever ran for president. Long before he was assassinated. You see, I lived next to some of his kin folks. Yes ma'am! Oh, yes, ma'am! Long before the war! Yes, Oh Lord! Yes, ma'am! Abe Lincoln was just next to Jesus Christ. Yes, Oh Lord! Yes! That he was! Just next to Jesus Christ! I remember when I was freed!" The exaltation of Aunt Sarah dimmed and faded, and with a quavering subdued voice she whispered: "I wish I knew, I wish I knew. Abe Lincoln was born in Hardin County; in the same month I was; almost the same day. I wish I knew I was born in the same county he was, but I ain't never going to know.

Yes ma'am, I was moved with the Howards from Kentucky, right up to the Nodaway River, about ten miles from Savannah. It took us about six weeks to come with oxen. I saw the immigrant trains going through to California. That was before the war. I've been here a long time. I'm 93 years old. I've been here since the woods burned, and I'm going to be here a long time yet, because my mother was a hundred and fifteen before she died.

My, but the Indians were thick when I first came here. And there was buffalo; and there were deer; and there were quail just thick. I wasn't scared of the Indians, and I ain't scared of anything now. No, ma'am. Because why? Because the white folks put the first clothes on me, and fed me; and they've been doing it ever since.

You want to know what kind of clothes we wore in those days? I'm going to tell you. I just had two dresses. The best one was made out of plain, white muslin. I went out in the woods and got walnut bark to color it brown. I always had to wash it on Saturday, because we all had to go to church on Sunday. Yes ma'am, I went to the white folks' church, and part of the time I was the

only nigger gal there. Then I had another dress and a shirt. I made them just like Old Miss taught me. That was my work dress. It was made with a cord around the bottom, a cord as big as my little finger, so I couldn't tear it; because I went over fences like a deer. The shirt was made like a long petticoat. In the winter Old Miss made us stockings out of yarn, and we had brogan shoes. Didn't you ever see any brogan shoes? Don't you know what they looked like? Huh. They were neither lined nor bound; and we used a pegging awl to make holes for the laces. Some of them had copper toes.

"Didn't they hurt your feet?"

"Yes ma'am, but if they did hurt, we had to wear them anyway. Those old brogans; I'm sure glad they're gone"

During the war, Old Miss kept telling me I had to help her put new cloth in the loom and when little Jane, that's her little girl, wanted me to play, her mother would say, 'Sarey has to work fast now, because she is going to be free'. Oh Lord, Miss, Sarey will never be free. But I was freed.

Now I am going to tell you about home life. I worked in the house for Old Miss, and we had plenty to do and plenty to eat. When the white folks were through eating, I got a pan and got the grub, and sat on the floor and ate it.

Oh Lordy, but I worked hard since I was twelve years old. But not in the fields. Old Miss said there was plenty for me to do in the house, and there was, sure enough. I washed and cooked for all of us. And ironed too. I'd heat the irons, great big old irons, in the fireplace. I ironed on a quilt spread out on the floor, and I ironed just as nice as anybody. I lived right in the house with the white folks. In summer we slept, my brother Henry and me, in a trundle bed in the kitchen; and in the winter made a pallet beside the fireplace. Old Pap was good to us. He kept up a fire all night when it was cold. I never saw a cooking stove or a lace shoe until I was freed. We just had to burn our faces cooking over the fireplace. I milked eight cows and then put the milk away. That took a long time. They didn't have horses then, much. They had a yoke of oxen. Sometimes some of us were hired out to work but we didn't get any money for that ourselves. They drew the wages.

No ma'am, they didn't have any beauty parlors then. Huh. Old Miss never had her hair curled, or anything like that. We didn't know about face powder and primping up in those days. Huh. Old Miss never used anything on her face except soap and water.

Yes indeed. We sure did have good times, too. There were dances, and I liked to dance. Uh-huh. I was a regular king ruler at the dances. Many a time I danced till broad daylight, and then when I worked I was so sleepy I'd nod, and nod. Then old Pap, he'd say 'Go out there and make Sarey go to bed'. Yes, indeedy, we had good times, too.

Did I ever get whipped? I never was whipped—much. Old Miss never whipped me, because Pap did all the whipping. He said if there was any whipping to be done he'd do it. Anyway they never whipped me—very often,—because I did my work the best I could. I remember once, when Old Pap started off for St. Joseph, he rode back into the yard and said to old Miss. 'Don't whip Sarey, or let anybody else whip her, or I'll cut the hide off their backs when I get back.'

Yes ma'am, we always called them Pap and Old Miss. Pap wouldn't let me take his name because he was a Republican and believed that the colored people ought to have their own laws and doctors and all. He was afraid folks would think he was a rebel and the soldiers might kill him. We didn't dare take his name so I took my father's name of Waggoner. He belonged to one of the neighbors in Kentucky and didn't come to Missouri when we did.

Yes ma'am, I had two children during the war, a boy, Bob, and a girl, Mary; and later a girl, Minnie. Married? No ma'am, I never married. I never was married.

Well, no ma'am, I didn't have a very hard time after I was freed. Slaves were hardly ever allowed to look in the door of the school house, so we couldn't learn to read and write. When I was freed Pap tried to teach me in the evenings to count my fingers. He made me sit by the fireplace and learn to count and learn about money so the white folks couldn't cheat me after I was free. After I was free one of Mr. Howard's boys taught me my letters and helped me learn to read some.

After I was freed I went to St. Joseph and did housework. Then I was a chambermaid. After while I came back to Savannah to work for the Price family. They were mighty rich and had a big home. Place is still here. I had a fine time there. I remember Mr. Ed. V. Price. He was just a boy when I went there to work, and he did plague me terrible sometimes. He'd run into the kitchen, grab a handful of cake dough and run outside laughing. Then I got so I couldn't work no

more, and he was a rich man, and he always helped me. And he left me in his will ten dollars every month for the rest of my life.

Oh yes ma'am, I'm to get my state pension every month. It's going to be twelve dollars. I ain't got it yet, but I will before long. I ain't scared. Because the white folks put the first clothes on me, and fed me; and they've been doing it ever since.

With a weary, dimming of her eyes, old Sarah settled back in her chair, sighed and murmured, "I've been here a long time. I'm 93 years old."