

THOMAS LEWIS

North Summit Street, Bloomington, Ind.

Interviewed by Estella R. Dodson

District #11, Monroe County, Bloomington, Ind.

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I was born in Spencer County, Kentucky, in 1857. I was born a slave. There was slavery all around on all the adjoining places. I was seven years old when I was set free. My father was killed in the Northern army. My mother, step-father and my mother's four living children came to Indiana when I was twelve years old. My grandfather was set free and given a little place of about sixteen acres.

A gang of white men went to my grandmother's place and ordered the colored people out to work. The colored people had worked before for white men, on shares. When the wheat was all in and the corn laid by, the white farmers would tell the colored people to get out, and would give them nothing. The colored people did not want to work that way, and refused. This was the cause of the raids by white farmers. My mother recognized one of the men in the gang and reported him to the standing soldiers in Louisville. He was caught and made to tell who the others were until they had 360 men. All were fined and none allowed to leave until all the fines were paid. So the rich ones had to pay for the poor ones. Many of them left because all were made responsible if such an event ever occurred again.

Our family left because we did not want to work that way. I was hired out to a family for \$20 a year. I was sent for. My mother put herself under the protection of the police until we could get away. We came in a wagon from our home to Louisville. I was anxious to see Louisville, and thought it was very wonderful. I wanted to stay there, but we came on across the Ohio River on a ferry boat and stayed all night in New Albany. Next morning the wagon returned home and we came to Bloomington on the train. It took us from 9 o'clock until three in the evening to get here. There were big slabs of wood on the sides of the track to hold the rails together. Strips of iron were bolted to the rails on the inside to brace them apart. There were no wires at the joints of the rails to carry electricity, as we have now, for there was no electricity in those days.

I have lived in Bloomington ever since I came here. I met a family named Dorsett after I came here. They came from Jefferson County, Kentucky. Two of their daughters had been sold before

the war. After the war, when the black people were free, the daughters heard some way that their people were in Bloomington. It was a happy time when they met their parents.

Once when I was a little boy, I was sitting on the fence while my mother plowed to get the field ready to put in wheat. The white man who owned her was plowing too. Some Yankee soldiers on horses came along. One rode up to the fence and when my mother came to the end of the furrow, he said to her, "Lady, could you tell me where Jim Downs' still house is?" My mother started to answer, but the man who owned her told her to move on. The soldiers told him to keep quiet, or they would make him sorry. After he went away, my mother told the soldiers where the house was. The reason her master did not want her to tell where the house was, was that some of his Rebel friends were hiding there. Spies had reported them to the Yankee soldiers. They went to the house and captured the Rebels.

Next soldiers came walking. I had no cap. One soldier asked me why I did not wear a cap. I said I had no cap. The soldier said, "You tell your mistress I said to buy you a cap or I'll come back and kill the whole family." They bought me a cap, the first one I ever had.

The soldiers passed for three days and a half. They were getting ready for a battle. The battle was close. We could hear the cannon. After it was over, a white man went to the battle field. He said that for a mile and a half one could walk on dead men and dead horses. My mother wanted to go and see it, but they wouldn't let her, for it was too awful.

I don't know what town we were near. The only town I know about had only about four or five houses and a mill. I think the name was Fairfield. That may not be the name, and the town may not be there any more. Once they sent my mother there in the forenoon. She saw a flash, and something hit a big barn. The timbers flew every way, and I suppose killed men and horses that were in the barn. There were Rebels hidden in the barn and in the houses, and a Yankee spy had found out where they were. They bombed the barn and surrounded the town. No one was able to leave. The Yankees came and captured the Rebels.

I had a cousin named Jerry. Just a little while before the barn was struck a white man asked Jerry how he would like to be free. Jerry said that he would like it all right. The white men took him into the barn and were going to put him over a barrel and beat him half to death. Just as they were about ready to beat him, the bomb struck the barn and Jerry escaped. The man who owned us said for us to say that we were well enough off, and did not care to be free, just to avoid beatings. There was no such thing as being good to slaves. Many people were better than

others, but a slave belonged to his master and there was no way to get out of it. A strong man was hard to make work. He would fight so that the white men trying to hold him would be breathless. Then there was nothing to do but kill him. If a slave resisted, and his master killed him, it was the same as self-defense today. If a cruel master whipped a slave to death, it put the fear into the other slaves. The brother of the man who owned my mother had many black people. He was too mean to live, but he made it. Once he was threshing wheat with a 'ground-hog' threshing machine, run by horse power. He called to a woman slave. She did not hear him because of the noise of the machine, and did not answer. He leaped off the machine to whip her. He caught his foot in some cogs and injured it so that it had to be taken off.

They tell me that today there is a place where there is a high fence. If someone gets near, he can hear the cries of the spirits of black people who were beaten to death. It is kept secret so that people won't find it out. Such places are always fenced to keep them secret. Once a man was out with a friend, hunting. The dog chased something back off a high fence. One man started to go in. The other said, "What are you going to do?" The other one said, "I want to see what the dog chased back in there." His friend told him, "You'd better stay out of there. That place is haunted by spirits of black people who were beaten to death."