

Will Oats

Mercer County

Interview by Hazel Cinnamon

Will Oats, 84 years of age, was born in Wayne County, up Spring Valley in 1854. He was the son of Betty Oats and Will Garddard of North Carolina. He has three sisters: Lucy Wilson, Frances Phillips that live in Ohio, and Alice Branton of Mercer County, Kentucky. He has two brothers; Jim Coffey and Lige Coffey of Harrodsburg.

As a child he lived with his mother, brothers, sisters, and grandmother. Their quarters were in the yard of their master, and they were as comfortable as any slaves—with plenty to eat and clothes to keep them warm.

Will was just a boy at that time, and he cut wood and carried it in and did other chores around the house such as help to milk and feed the stock. Their food was plentiful and they ate all kinds of vegetables, and had plenty of milk and butter, fat meat, and bread.

The family all wore homemade clothing, cotton shirts, heavy shoes, very heavy underwear; and if they wore out their winter shoes before the spring weather they had to do without until the fall.

Will was owned by Lewis Oats and his sister. They lived in a two story house built of log and weather boarded. They were very wealthy people. The farm consisted of over 230 acres. They owned six slaves, and they had to be up doing their morning work before the master would wake.

When the slaves would disobey their master while working, they were punished in some way, but there was no jail. They didn't know how to read or write, and they had no church to attend. All they had to do when not at work was to talk to the older folks. On Christmas morning they would usually have a little extra to eat and maybe a stick of candy. On New Year's Day their work went on just the same as on any other day.

As a boy, Will loved to play marbles, which was about the most interesting game they had to play. Of course, they could play outside, as all children do now, when they had spare time.

At that time there were few doctors and when the slaves would get hurt or sick; they were usually looked after by the master or by their overseer.

After the war had closed, Will's grandmother walked from Monticello to Camp Nelson to get her free papers and her children. They were all very happy, but they were wondering what they were going to do without a home, work, or money. But after Will and his mother and grandmother got their freedom, the grandmother bought a little land and a house and they all went there to live. Of course, they worked for other people and raised a great deal of what they ate. Will lived there until he grew older and went out for himself, and later moved to Mercer County where he lives now.