

SARAH GUDGER

Ex-slave, 121 years

Investigation of the almost incredible claim of Aunt Sarah Gudger, ex-slave living in Asheville, that she was born on Sept. 15, 1816, discloses some factual information corroborating her statements.

Aunt Sarah's father, Smart Gudger, belonged to and took his family name from Joe Gudger, who lived near Oteen, about six miles east of Asheville in the Swannanoa valley, prior to the War Between the States. Family records show that Joe Gudger married a Miss McRae in 1817, and that while in a despondent mood he ended his own life by hanging, as vividly recounted by the former slave.

John Hemphill, member of the family served by Aunt Sarah until "freedom", is recalled as being "a few y'ars younge' as me", and indeed his birth is recorded for 1822. Alexander Hemphill, mentioned by Aunt Sarah as having left to join the Confederate army when about 25 years of age, is authentic and his approximate age in 1861 tallies with that recalled by the ex-slave. When Alexander went off to the war Aunt Sarah was "gettin' t' be an ol' woman."

Aunt Sarah lives with distant cousins in a two-story frame house, comfortably furnished, at 8 Dalton street in South Asheville (the Negro section lying north of Kenilworth). A distant male relative, 72 years of age, said he has known Aunt Sarah all his life and that she was an old woman when he was a small boy.

Small in stature, about five feet tall, Aunt Sarah is rathered rounded in face and body. Her milk-chocolate face is surmounted by short, sparse hair, almost milk white. She is somewhat deaf but understands questions asked her, responding with animation. She walks with one crutch, being lame in the right leg. On events of the long ago her mind is quite clear. Recalling the Confederate "sojers, marchin', marchin'" to the drums, she beat a tempo on the floor with her crutch. As she described how the hands of slaves were tied before they were whipped for infractions she crossed her wrists.

Owen Gudger, Asheville postmaster (1913-21), member of the Buncombe County Historical Association, now engaged in the real estate business, says he has been acquainted with Aunt Sarah all his life; that he has, on several occasions, talked to her about her age and early associations, and that her responses concerning members of the Gudger and Hemphill families coincide with known facts of the two families.

Interviewed by a member of the Federal Writers' Project, Aunt Sarah seemed eager to talk, and needed but little prompting.

SARAH GUDGER

(born September 15, 1816)

Interview with Mrs. Marjorie Jones, May 5, 1937

I wah bo'n 'bout two mile fum Ole Fo't on de Ole Mo'ganton Road. I sho' has had a ha'd life. Jes wok, an' wok, an' wok. I nebbah know nothin' but wok. Mah boss he wah Ole Man Andy Hemphill. He had a la'ge plantation in de valley. Plenty ob ebbathin'. All kine ob stock: hawgs, cows, mules, an' hosses. When Marse Andy die I go lib wif he son, William Hemphill.

I nebbah fo'git when Marse Andy die. He wah a good ole man, and de Missie she wah good, too. She usta read de Bible t' us chillun afoah she pass away.

Mah pappy, he lib wif Joe Gudgah (Gudger). He ole an' feeble, I 'membahs. He 'pend on mah pappy t' see aftah ebbathin' foah him. He allus trust mah pappy. One mo'nin' he folah pappy to de field. Pappy he stop hes wok and ole Marse Joe, he say: "Well, Smart (pappy, he name Smart), I's tard, wurried, an' trubble'. All dese yeahs I wok foah mah chillun. Dey nevah do de right thing. Dey wurries me, Smart. I tell yo', Smart, I's a good mind t' put mahself away. I's good mind t' drown mahself right heah. I tebble wurried, Smart."

Pappy he take hole Ole Marse Joe an' lead him t' de house. "Now Marse Joe, I wudden talk sich talk effen I's yo'. Yo' ben good t' yo' fambly. Jest yo' content yo'self an' rest."

But a few days aftah dat, Ole Marse Joe wah found ahangin' in de ba'n by de bridle. Ole Marse had put heself away.

No'm, I nebbah knowed whut it wah t' rest. I jes wok all de time f'om mawnin' till late at night. I had t' do ebbathin' dey wah t' do on de outside. .Wok in de field, chop wood, hoe cawn, till sometime I feels lak mah back sholy break. I done ebbathin' 'cept split rails. Yo' know, dey split rails back in dem days. Well, I nevah did split no rails.

Ole Marse strop us good effen we did anythin' he didn' lak. Sometime he get hes dandah up an' den we dassent look roun' at him. Else he tie yo' hands afoah yo' body an' whup yo', jes lak yo' a mule. Lawdy, honey, I's tuk a thousand lashins in mah day. Sometimes mah poah ole body be soah foah a week.

Ole Boss he send us niggahs out in any kine ob weathah, rain o' snow, it nebbah mattah. We had t' go t' de mountings, cut wood an' drag it down t' de house. Many de time we come in wif ouh cloes stuck t' ouh poah ole cold bodies, but 'twarn't no use t' try t' git 'em dry. Ef de Ole Boss o' de Ole Missie see us dey yell: "Git on out ob heah yo' black thin', an' git yo' wok outen de way!" An' Lawdy, honey, we knowed t' git, else we git de lash. Dey did'n cah how ole o' how young yo' wah, yo' nebbah too big t' git de lash.

De rich white folks nebbah did no wok; dey had da'kies t' do it foah dem. In de summah we had t' wok outdoo's, in de wintah in de house. I had t' ceard an' spin till ten o'clock. Nebbah git much rest, had t' git up at foah de nex' mawnin' an' sta't agin. Didn' get much t' eat, nuthah, jes a lil' cawn bread an' 'lasses. Lawdy, honey, yo' caint know whut a time I had. All cold n' hungry. No'm, I aint tellin' no lies. It de gospel truf. It sho is.

I 'membah well how I use t' lie 'wake till all de folks wah sleepin', den creep outen de do' and walk barfoot in de snow, 'bout two mile t' mah ole Auntie's house. I knowed when I git dar she fix hot cawn pone wif slice o' meat an' some milk foah me t' eat. Auntie wah good t' us da'kies.

I nebbah sleep on a bedstead till aftah freedom, no'm till aftah freedom. Jes' an ole pile o' rags in de conah. Ha'dly 'nuf t' keep us from freezin'. Law, chile, nobuddyy knows how mean da'kies wah treated. Wy, dey wah bettah t' de animals den t' us'ne. Mah fust Ole Marse wah a good ole man, but de las'n, he wah rapid---he sho wah rapid. Wy, chile, times aint no mo' lak dey usta be den de day an' night am lak. In mah day an' time all de folks woked. Effen dey had no niggahs dey woked demselves. Effen de chillun wah too small tuh hoe, dey pull weeds. Now de big bottom ob de Swannano (Swannanoa) dat usta grow hunners bushels ob grain am jest a playgroun'. I lak t' see de chillun in de field. Wy, now dey fight yo' lak wilecat effen it ebben talk-ed 'bout. Dat's de reason times so ha'd. No fahmin'. Wy, I c'n 'membah Ole Missie she say: "Dis gene'ation'll pass away an' a new gene'ation'll cum 'long." Dat's jes' it --- ebbah gene'ation gits weakah an' weakah. Den dey talk 'bout goin' back t' ole times. Dat time done gone, dey nebbah meet dat time agin.

Wahn't none o' de slaves offen ouh plantation ebbah sold, but de ones on de othah plantation ob Marse William wah. Oh, dat wah a tebble time! All de slaves be in de field, plowin', hoein', singin' in de boilin' sun. Ole Marse he cum t'ru de field wif a man call de specalater. Day walk round jes' lookin', jes' lookin',

All de da'kies know whut dis mean. Dey didn' dare look up, jes' wok right on. Den de specalater he see who he want. He talk to Ole Marse, den dey slaps de han'cuffs on him an' tak him away to de cotton country. Oh, dem wah awful times! When de specalater wah ready to go wif de slaves, effen dey wha enny whu'didn' wanta go, he thrash em, den tie em 'hind de waggin an' mek em run till dey fall on de groun', den he thrash em till dey say dey go 'thout no trubble. Sometime some of dem run 'way an cum back t' de plantation, den it wah hardah on dem den befoah. When de da'kies wen' t' dinnah de ole niggah mammy she say whar am sich an' sich. None ob de othahs wanna tell huh. But when she see dem look down to de groun' she jes' say: "De specalater, de specalater." Den de teahs roll down huh cheeks, cause mebbe it huh son o' husban' an' she know she nebbah see 'em agin. Mebbe dey leaves babies t' home, meb be jes' pappy an' mammy. Oh, mah Lawdy, mah ole Boss wah mean, but he nebbah sen' us to de cotton country.

Dey wah ve'y few skules back in day day an time, ve'y few. We da'kies didn' dah look at no book, not ebben t' pick it up. Ole Missie, dat is, mah firs' Ole Missie, she wah a good ole woman. She read to de niggahs and t' de white chillun. She cum fum cross de watah. She wahn't lak de sma't white folks livin' heah now. When she come ovah heah she brung darky boy wif huh. He wah huh pussonal su'vant. Co'se, dey got diffent names foah dem now, but in dat day dey calls 'em ginney niggahs. She wah good ole woman, not lak othah white folks. Niggahs lak Ole Missie.

When de da'kies git sick, dey wah put in a lil' ole house close t' de big house, an' one of the othah da'kies waited on 'em.

Dey wah ve'y few doctahs den. Ony three in de whole section. When dey wanted med'cine dey went t' de woods an' gathahed hoahhound, slipperelm foah poltices an' all kinds ba'k foah teas. All dis yarbs bring yo' round. Dey wah ve'y few lawyers den too, but law-sy me, yo' cain't turn round fer dem now.

I 'membahs when mah ole mammy die. She live on Rims (Reems) Crick with othah Hemphills. She sick long time. One day white man cum t' see me. He say: "Sarah, did yo' know yo' mammy wah daid?" "No," I say, "but I wants t' see mah mothah afoah dey puts huh away."

I went t' de house and say t' Ole Missie: "Mah mothah she die tofay. I wants t' see mah mothah afoah dey puts huh away," but she look at me mean an' say: "Git on outen heah, an' git back to yo' wok afoah I wallup yo' good." So I went back t' mah wok, with the tears streamin' down mah face, jest awringin' mah hands, I wanted t' see mah mammy so. 'Bout two weeks latah, Ole Missie she git tebble sick, she jes' lingah 'long foah long time, but she nebbah gits up no mo'. Want long afoah dey puts huh away too, jes' lak mah mammy.

I 'membahs de time when mah mammy wah alive, I wah a small chile, afoah dey tuk huh t' Rims Crick. All us chilluns wah playin' in de ya'd one night. Jes' arunnin' an' aplayin' lak chillun will. All a sudden mammy cum to de do' all a'sited. "Cum in heah dis minnit," she say. "Jes look up at what is ahappenin'", and bless yo' life, honey, de sta's wah fallin' jes' lak rain.* Mammy wah tebble skeered, but we

*(One of the most spectacular meteoric showers on record, visible all over North America, occurred in 1833.)

chillun wa'nt afeard, no, we wa'nt afeard. But mammy she say evah time a sta' fall, somebuddy gonna die. Look lak lotta folks gonna die f'om de looks ob dem sta's. Ebbathin' wah jes' as bright as day. Yo' cudda pick a pin up. Yo' know de sta's don' shine as bright as dey did back den. I wondah wy dey don'. Dey jes' don' shine as bright. Wa'nt long afoah dey took mah mammy away, and I wah lef' alone.

On de plantation wah an ole woman whut de boss bought f'om a drovah up in Virginny. De boss he bought huh f'om one ob de speculators. She laff an' tell us: "Some ob dese days yo'all gwine be free, jes' lak de white folks," but we all laff at huh. No, we jes' slaves, we allus hafta wok and nevah be free. Den when freedom cum, she say: "I tole yo'all, now yo' got no larnin', yo' got no nothin', got no home; whut yo' gwine do? Didn' I tell yo'?"

I wah gittin along smartly in yeahs when de wah cum. Ah 'membah jes' lak yestiddy jes' afoah de wah. Marse William wah atalkin' t' hes brothah. I wah standin' off a piece. Marse's brothah, he say: "William, how ole Aunt Sarah now?" Marse William look at me an' he say: "She gittin' nigh onta fifty." Dat wah jes' a lil while afoah de wah.

Dat wah awful time. Us da'kies didn' know whut it wah all bout. Ony one of de boys f'om de plantation go. He Alexander, he 'bout twenty-five den. Many de time we git word de Yankees comin'. We take ouh food an' stock an' hide it till we sho' dey's gone. We wan't bothahed much. One day, I nebbah fo'git, we look out an' see sojers ma'chin'; look lak de whole valley full ob dem. I thought: "Poah helpless crittahs, jes' goin' away t' git kilt.- De drums wah

beatin' an' de fifes aplayin'. Dey wah de foot comp'ny. Oh, glory, it wah a sight. Sometime dey cum home on furlough. Sometime dey git kilt afoah dey gits th'ough. Alexander, he cum home a few time afoah freedom.

When de wah was ovah, Marse William he say: "Did yo'all know yo'all's free , Yo' free now." I chuckle, 'membahin' whut ole woman tell us 'bout freedom, an' no larnin. Lotta men want me t(go t' foreign land, but I tell 'em I go live wif mah pappy, long as he live. I stay wif de white folks 'bout twelve months, den I stay wif mah pappy, long as he live.

I had two brothahs, dey went t' Califonny, nebbah seed 'em no mo', no' mah sistah, nuther. I cain't 'membah sech a lot 'bout it all. I jes' knows I'se bo'n and bred ^{here} head in dese pa'ts, nebbah been outten it. I'se well; nebbah take no doctah med'cine. Jes' ben sick once; dat aftah freedom.