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[Negro Life on a Farm]

NEGRO LIFE ON A FARM

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WPA Area - 6

November 6, 1939

October 27, 1939

Mary Johnson (Negro)

Athens, Georgia

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Farmer and Wash Woman

I.B. Hawkes NEGRO LIFE ON A FARM

A dilapidated shanty, having wobbly bannisters, decorated with a couple of torn quilts and a worn out mattress, several chinaberry trees and some widely scattered patches of dry grass in the yard, best describes Aunt Celia's home.

As I approached that little a clove faint humming tunes of an old slavery song became quite audible. At the door I hesitated a moment then knocked. The humming stopped; Aunt Celia, with a bedraggled broom in one hand, answered.

"Lawdy me, Miss! You scairt me near to death. Is dere sumpin I can do for you?"

"Well, Aunt Ceila, it looks like you are too busy to do what I want," I answered.

"Lawd Miss! I'se done got all [dese?] flo's scoured an' de windows washed an' ev'ything out sunning. We kin sit rat here in de sunshine and you kin tell me what you want. I'se gona rest a little while now till dese flo's dry and den I'se gona fix me some dinner."

After we walked out under the tree and sat on an old bench she continued, "Tell me something ob what you want Miss."

"Well, I said, "Aunty, I would like for you to tell me something of your life."

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"All right if I kin remember sumpin to tell you dat will do some good."

I looked at Aunt Ceila as she sat down she was 78 years of age, but active and very pleasant to talk with. She was a short stout woman with a large goiter on the out side of her neck. Her hair was a little streaked with gray. Her hands were wrinkled from the strong soapy water she had been using to clean her windows. She looked at me and continued,

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“I know you think I looks a sight, Miss, but you know folks kaint stay clean doin' house cleanin' lak dis. I was born de second year after de surrender. We all was big farmers and had to work hard; us chillun would go to de field. At dinner time ma would bring our dinner and a big pail of water fo' us. We crawled up under de wagon to git in de shade. Pa would be tired, too, but he'd finally say, 'Come on out kids, lets go back to de fields now. [We'se?] done rested long enuff.’

“My school days was short 'cause we was po' folks an' had to work. Co'se Miss, us had plenty to eat and some clo's.

“We lived close to Mr. William Henry Morton. I was getting up pretty good size an' Mr. Morton had a boy workin' fo' him dat he sho did lak. He got to noticin' me. I laked him too. Mr. Morton noticed us an' he knowed I was a smart gal, so he got us married right dere in his own house. He give us a small house to live in an' a mule an' cow an' some farm tools to work with.

“I started right out to havin' babies, but I was stout 3 as a mule an' went to de fields just de same an' went side by side of Peter up dem cotton rows. We picked three hundred pounds of cotton ev'y day. I plowed, too. I would work right up till bedtime. My fust chile was born when I was thirteen; I didn't know what it was all about'till I had the baby. But Miss, we didn't stop. I had a baby ev'y nine months 'till I had twenty-five. Now don't look at me lak dat, Miss, 'cause it is de truf.

“We made good as long as Peter lived. We tried to raise all of de chilluns right. Mr. Morton tol' us dat he thought we ought to stop a while.

“Well, some of den chilluns got up big enuff to git married and they started havin' chilluns right when my las' chile was born. I was [jus'?] ready to git down an' my daughter was sick with her's. I got dere an' done all I could fo' her an' went home and mine come. I prayed then, Miss, for God to never let me have no mo' babies, an' you know I stopped right then.”

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“Was Peter good to you during all this time Aunt Cella?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, “we loved each other, only one time did he step out on me dat I knows of. A gal lived not far from us dat looked good. Mr. Morton had her there on his place to work. I was stayin' home [mo?]' now an' Peter was in de field with dis gal. When her baby was born de po' gal died and left a baby boy. Nobody could tell who de pa was. Peter was right cute about it when he come and said, ‘Ceila I'se dat baby's pa an' I want us to take him an' raise him. I asked him how come he didn't tell 4 me befo' de gal died. He said, ‘Ceila, I was afraid you would kill dat gal, an' I didn't want you to go to de gallus an' be hund.’ I don't think dey had no ‘lectrik chairs den. We jus' took de baby an' let de matter drop ‘cause we still loved each other.

“Miss, my pa and ma was slaves, but you know dey never would tell us much about it. I cain't remember who wus dere Mistess and Marster, but I remember hearin' dem say one time dat dey sho was good to 'em. Dey allus giv'em good food an' good clo's but dey wouldn't let them have any books. Dey would slip sometimes an' look at de papers an' try to read 'em.

“My grandma an' grandpa was slaves, too, Ma said. They had good white folk's and grandpa an' grandma married ‘cause dere white folks owned both of 'em. You know, Miss, I guess dat is who I takes atter, ‘cause dey had twenty-eight chilluns. Dat tickled dere white folks to death ‘cause dey didn't have to buy no mo' slaves. Long as grandpa and grandma had chilluns dey had a big farm an' dat family of niggers was all dey needed, but I'se kind o' glad I won't born in dem days.

“I'se proud o' all my chilluns an' grandchilluns, too.”

Just then a tall black negro girl came up with some sacks.

“Lawdy me, Miss, dis is my baby chile. Bless her heart; she allus thinks o' her ma.”

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She opened the sack and was surprised to find green peas and some other things. They shelled the peas and talked of some 5 things which didn't interest me so I got up to go. Then Aunt Ceila said, "Wait Miss, I got some of the old folk's pitchers. I think I can git to the old trunk now widout tracking de flo'."

She was gone only a few minutes and then she came back carrying an old album with lots of old pictures taken back when hoop skirts and bustles were in style. Some of them were made in later years. After looking at the book she said, "I don't live lak I uster 'cause my husband is dead an' gone now an' I'se getting too old to work. I washes sometimes and de chilluns help me out some."

I told her that it was getting late, that I would have to go now and that I enjoyed talking to her.

"Miss," she said, "when you go back to town go to de welfare people for me and tell dem I sho needs a coat an' some dresses 'cause I sho is necked."

I told her I would do my best and left.