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## [Tom Bird]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: TOM BIRD

Date of First Writing February 10, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mr. George Tanner

Fictitious Name Tom Bird

Address Highway 175, Rural

Place Marion County

Occupation Tenant Farmer

Name of Writer Annie Ruth Davis C 10 - [31/4?] - S.C.

Project #3613

Annie Ruth Davis

Marion, S.C.

Feb. 10, 1939 TOM BIRD

(White) MARION COUNTY

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### (Rural) SOUTH CAROLINA

In sight of the crossroads of Highway No. 175 and Highway No. 502,, three miles from the town of Marion, stands a four-room, unpainted, tenant house, which has been built in the midst of open fields. Tom Bird and his wife, Miranda, have lived on this fifteen-acre farm for the past seven years and have managed to make a fair living by sharecropping their money crop with the owner of the land.

Seldom may one pass this little home during the winter months that they cannot glimpse a curl of smoke disappearing into the air from one of the chimneys. Miranda Bird is quite deaf and can count her yearly visits on her fingers, while her husband leaves home only to attend to some necessary business or to chat with some of his country friends or neighbors about the times.

As one nears the little dwelling, it is impossible to overlook the fact that some careful hands have recently swept the yard about the house nicely. A few rose bushes grow at scattered places about the front yard, while a couple of large oak trees shade the tiny back porch. Bright pink frilled curtains adorn the windows of the two front rooms and within the house, everything is in perfect order. Two bedrooms, furnished with highly 2 polished furniture, stretch across the front of the house and behind these extend the kitchen and dining room. The house is lighted by kerosene oil lamps and a pump, standing on the end of the back porch, supplies all the water used in the home. Everything about the place gives the appearance of humble, yet thrifty living, showing that Tom Bird and his wife make the best of the little they have.

After rapping several times at the front door of the house, the door was slowly opened and from behind it stood a little old woman with tiny gray eyes, which looked up anxiously from beneath an old time sunbonnet. Without hesitating a moment, Miranda Bird explained that she was hard of hearing and could not talk to me herself, but that I might step into the next room and talk to her husband, who was just back from the hospital. Tom Bird had been

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operated on a few weeks before for the removal of a stone from his kidney. Dressed in a heavy brown shirt, he was lying in bed mainly from weakness. He seemed anxious to have company and insisted that I sit by the bed and talk awhile.

“No'm, I'm just suffering from weakness, that's all,” said Tom Bird. “I'm glad you've come for I've been wishing somebody would drop in and sit with me a spell. It don't worry me none to talk and me and my wife have 'bout talked all we know. I suffered torture for seven years with a stone in my kidney till I went over to Florence 'bout three weeks ago and got operated on. That operation done me so much good, I'm 'bout to believe all doctors are good people now. Yes'm, I's 'bout to believe that we couldn't live without them. I got to where I was so poorly and no-count, I wasn't worth nothing, but I feel a lot 3 better now. It looks like doctor's prices runs high, but don't reckon we ought to grumble being they have such a lot of expense to carry on. I stayed in the hospital eleven days and it cost me \$35.75. That looks high, but I wouldn't be back in my old shape for the same money and right smart of difference.

“Yes'm, my father was a farmer and that's what I've always been. I was born and raised down on Big Pee Dee Swamp in Marion County. I've done a little other work catching jobs in short times, but I've stuck to farming mostly and that's good a life anybody wants, I think. Cose I'm sixty-seven years old now and getting so old and poorly that if I could find something easier to do, I might like it better.

“I've sho' had to work hard for all what's come to me ever since I got big enough to handle a hoe. My mother died when I was a infant, and I lost my father when I was 'bout twelve-year old. At that time, wasn't but me one left, for my step-mother taken my half brother and went to Columbia to live. I was forced to get out and hunt my own way of getting along, so I stayed from house to house and worked like a dog for other people. You see, when I was coming up, children that lost their parents had to take it rough or tumble - worked for what I got to eat and a little something to wear. Cose the people I stayed with was good to me, but I had to do as they said do and make out on what they chose to give me. In

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those days, I didn't know nothing 'bout no money. I remember the first twenty-five cents I ever got; know how I come of it. Man come down in the river swamp to run some timber off and give me twenty-five cents to tend his stock while he was down there. Thought 4 I had some money with that quarter in my pocket, I'll tell you.

“No, I don't remember of ever going to school a day since I've been born; didn't know nothing 'bout there was such as a school in my young days. But education's sho' a good thing and something everybody ought to have. I feel like I've missed half my share in life not knowing no learning. Ain't learned my A.B.C's yet and can't fig're no count coming up. For instance, a man that don't know a fig're, don't never know what to do or how he's done. If I hadn't been blessed with such a good mother wit, I don't know how I would've done, but I got my portion of that. My wife, she tends to my fig'ring mostly and after my three daughters got up, they helped me out till they all got married and left us. I sent my children to that big school in Marion, but all of them quit school and married while they wasn't no more than kids. I wish they'd gone on and finished, but people makes mistakes that they can't see till it's too late. Didn't none of them think they'd need a education, but there ain't nothing amiss getting one 'cause that's something can't nobody take away from you. My youngest daughter, her husband died last June and she sho' needs her learning to take cere of herself and her six-year-old youngun. Thought when she quit school and got married she was fixed, but she's got to get out and make them a living now and can't find nothing to do what ain't calling for a education. Cose some people have so little sense till if they gets a little learning, they think they know it all.

“I worked around for other people till I got married and that's been 'bout forty years ago, being I'm sixty-seven years old now. The first year we was married, I sharecropped a little piece of 5 land down next Pee Dee, so as to get something to give me a start. You see, I was set out in the world with nowhere to lay my head and nothing to do with, but folks was good to help us along till we could get a little ourselves. The second year we was married, I rented twenty-five acres of land for \$50.00 and rented a twenty-two acre farm the next year for a dollar and a quarter a acre. Both places been over next Pee Dee Swamp. We

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made pretty good them first two years, but lost 'bout everything that last one and had to start all over new. We was living down on the river's swamp and the fresh water come up in August and drowned everything we had. At that time, I was so down and out that I just worked around here and yonder for what I could get four or five years. But I couldn't make no headway in that line, so I moved over on Mr. Foxworth's place and sharecropped a couple of years to get me another start. After that, I moved up on Sheriff Blue's place, where we lived something like twelve years. I worked on Mr. Blue's plantation three years for fifty cents a day along with a little extra land to tend for my own - planted a garden, little potatoes, corn, and such as that. And when there wasn't much to do on the farm, I worked on the railroad shoveling for ninety cents a day. Then I worked in the timber woods sometimes a little along and along and drawed a dollar a day for that. Them odd jobs fitted in mighty well in short times, too, I'm here to tell you. We just rented clean out them last nine years we lived on Mr. Blue's place and spent our money like we pleased. We didn't make no money crop then but cotton, something like four or five bales a year, and it 6 never brought but five cents a pound. Still we got along pretty well to Sheriff Blue's place 'cause we made what rations we needed mostly. That's where my children got most of their raising.

“After the old sheriff died and all my children married off, me and my wife thought we could do better trying a little sharecropping again. Well, we got word that a man wanted somebody to run his fifteen-acre farm over here on shares, so we made up with him to move on this place. The man what owns this place, he furnishes the land, the manure, the house we live in, and that big corn barn out there, while I puts in all the work and carries the crop on my one horse for half what money crop we make. It used to be I farmed the whole outfit for half the crop, even the potatoes, but that didn't noways make enough for us to get along on. Cose our corn land, that's always been ours.

“I don't know exactly what I make on this land, but I've a pretty good idea of what it comes to. I made something like \$500.00 money crop last year, including tobacco and cotton, but cose that had to be divided half with the other man. Then I know I raised 125 bushels

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of corn and I think that will be just bare enough to carry us through. Made 'bout fourteen bushels of potatoes in all, 'bout enough to run us to spring, I reckon. Potatoes will sho' surprise you though - might think you've got a lot, but when they's measured up, seems like there ain't none hardly. We have 'bout twenty head of chickens and four hogs what I raises mostly for home use. Always try to have a little hogs, so as to eat a little hog and hominy as the old saying is. We sell a right smart of eggs along and along and have a nice gentle cow that furnishes us in 7 milk and butter. I wish we could raise turkeys and guineas, but we can't keep them here because of living so close to the highway. We can't watch them all the time and they will wander out on the road and get run over. Yes'm, we commonly uses what we makes a year on this place for what we're obliged to get.

“Like all these farmers 'bout here, I don't plant such money crop these days because of all this government control. It looks like it ain't right to what we've been raised, planting what cotton and tobacco we pleased, but still it ain't near like it used to be. Yes'm, I'd rather have tobacco control myself for it gives us poor farmers a better chance, but it ain't all dealt right. I believes in some of this farmer business and if they'd treat everybody right, I'd rather have government contracts. But some gets more acres to plant than others and that just ain't fair. I think everybody ought to get so many acres to the horse. Said that time the racket of it started.

“I'll tell you what's my opinion of this government 'lief work, too, if you want to hear it. In some sense of the way, it's hurting us; don't see where it's doing us much good. In fact, I know lots of people get help that don't need it and a heap of them that needs it ain't getting none. Take a big strapping Nigger man, he can draw forty cents a hour a fooling around on a government job doing nothing. That's how-come people can't get no labor hardly these days to make a crop on the farm. Yes'm, this government work, it's giving the black man more independence and making the white man more dependent every day that comes. Well, I just don't know what to make of 8 the times nohow - just can't see into this 'lief work.

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“My idea of voting's just like this, people vote to be a voting. Then again you mighty apt to have friends you want to vote for and while you voting, think mighty as well vote clean round. I used to vote pretty regular for a spell and then I'd hit up with bad luck and quit off for two or three years. It's like this, if a man votes, he'll have plenty friends, but he ain't counted much if he don't vote. I know I have as much right to vote as another fellow and if I don't do it, I'm throwing away part of my rights. Then I vote because I think the man running is a good man for the place. But you can't tell for true if he'll be a good one or a bad one for the place 'cause when a man's running for office these days, he's everybody's friend. After all, it's just a chance of hiting on the right one, I reckon.

“We belong to the Baptist Church in Marion, but me and my wife don't go much now. Fig're we can live just as good staying home and behaving like we ought to on a Sunday, for things ain't like they was a time back. People used to go to church for the good they got out of it, but the church is more of a s'ciety now than anything else. A man joins the church these days and if you don't watch him; he's liable to do you dirty. People take the church for a kind of a blind nowadays - used to go to church to worship the Lord, but now the most of them goes for big looks. I've been noticing and watching around a heap and things sho' have changed up since I come along. When people got home from church in the old days, they'd eat dinner and set around and talk, but now they hurry home from church to get to some big-to-do.

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That's what ails the world now; I think. Ain't no rest nowhere. I used to drive my horse and buggy to town to church every Sunday and if a notion struck me to go these days, like old style, I'd travel that way again. But we've both just got out of the habit of going mostly 'cause old people can't get along like young folks, you know.

“I'll tell you, people just ain't healthy like they used to be and it's nothing but the rush they lives in and what they eats now that's causing it. Old people used home vittels altogether and they was heap healthier and lived longer than people of this day and time. And can't

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nobody stand this ripping and a tearing like most people goes these days. Like when tobacco time comes, I don't get no rest. Yes'm, all the objections I have to tobacco, it works you instead of you working it. Sometimes I have to work all night and all day in rushed tobacco time. Then right after it's over, cotton picking's a staring you in the face. Life on the farm sho' keeps you stirring, but I don't reckon nothing else would suit me, being that was my raising."