

## ["Bessie Reed"]

No. 1

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE: "BESSIE REED".

Date of first writing January 9, 1939.

Name of Person Interviewed Bessie Reed (Negro)

Place and Address Carlisle, South Carolina

Occupation Practical Nurse and Cook.

Name of Writer Caldwell Sims, Union, S.C.

Name of Reviser

Bessie has downy feather beds, white sheets, embroidered shams for her pillows and embroided spreads on the two beds in her room. Her walls are pasted with newspaper pictures cut from "The Miami Tribune" Retogravue section, of screen celebrities. Bessie wears dresses of blue denim and large white aprons with a bow knotted in the back of her plump waist. Usually a white kerchief covers her entire head and ears. A single earring dangles from one ear.

"I ain't never see'd no 'oman 'dat wuz' no miller, but me, and I ain't never hee'rd of no 'Oman runnin' a water mill. Who sed' anything 'bout wimmens' in Kerlile(Carlisle) runnin' dem'? When de' notion strikes 'em, white folks do git' de' moss' curious ideas in dey'

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heads. Cose' I is hee'rd way back yonder de' Law'd only does know when, dat' all de' mills wuz' down on de' rivers. As fer' me I ain't never fooled around C10- 1/31/41 - S.C.

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no rivers in my life, kaise' I ain't got no time fer' no water. Who ever hee'rd of wimmens paddlin' 'round runnin' water mills, I sho ain't.

When I wuz' born it wuz' down on Mr. Liphus [?] Stokes' place. Ev'ybody call dat' "Tucker Town" now. Mr. Aughtry Stokes stays in de' big house. He draps in 'round Kerlile ev'y week or so. I sees him myself. Ma and Pa had a house en dis' side of "Tucker Town". Ma and Pa allus' said "Marse' 'Liphus". But dey' won't no slaves. Slaves had done passed. I is 'round fifty now, somethin' mo' or less. Jes' here recent is niggers gittin' p'articler 'bout dey' ages. Den' dat's white folks dats' 'ergettin' dem' on to dat'.

F'it wuz' fo' of us chilluns' to play aroun' de' yard. 'Member dat' I had three little brothers. I cannot near 'member all dat' we done, it done been so long and I has been drug about so much, 'till my mem'ry done got throwed away, or sum'tin'. Us lived good tho'; I see a hard time now. Don't see how chilluns' does these days, dey' even has a hard livin' now. I ain't got no chilluns'. When me and my three little brothers wuz' chilluns' we had a fat easy time. All good white folks took care of the'y hands way back thar'. Mr. 'Liphus sho' took care of Pa and Ma and us too. I ain't so old, but it makes me feel old and feeble to dra'p my mind way back dat' fur'.

Ma said dat' Pa had it tight and rugged when he farmed for Mr. 'Liphus, but [?] she stayed at the big house a heap and when she was not up dar', she wuz' in our cabin wid' us. Pa died when I was re'al small and I never had o educatin', but if he had lived I would'n'er got non nohow, kaise' niggers did'n crave no learnin' den'. Ma allus' 'lowed dat' all gals 3 had to learn was how to follow house work. All de' niggers struggles now to git their chilluns' in school. As fer' me, Ah' ain't never worried 'bout dat', and I gits' along jes' as well as dese' Kerlile niggers dat' went to school so rotten much. Ah sho' can beat 'em all a-cookin' and

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a nursin' de' way de' white folks likes. White folks calls me a reg'lar nigger, and dat' makes me feel ra'al proud of myself.

I lives clean like Ma did and I keeps my house jes' as clean as I dose any white 'oman's. Dat keeps my practice up. I washes and starches my clothes ev'y week. Ev'y [?] Wednesday I puts' my pillows and feather beds out to air. 'Bout three of fo' times ev'y year I takes the tick covers off'n my feather beds and my mattresses and I washes them. T'aint nar'y bed bug in my house, ain't gwine' to be none dar' either. I sets over dar' in dat' chair by dat' winder' and makes my quilts, puts frills on my curtains and 'broiders (embroiders) my bed spreads. I likes clean beds, wid' pretty quilts and covers on them. Ev'y Sad'day sees me scourin' my floor boards and white washin' my hearth wid' white mud from the Kerlile spring.

Look up dar' on them rafters and see them star patterns and them scallop cuts. When them gits' yaller' I keeps fresh papers to make new cuts wid'. On Sad'day evenins' I heats my comb and uses my 'Poro' to comb out my hair straight, fer' dat' night and Sunday, when I 'tends Jeter Chapel. I greases all through the winter wid' mutton tallow to keep my face and the skin on my hands smooth. It sho' is hard to do wid' so much washin' an' scrubbin'. If you does'nt keep clean and have pretty hands nobody won't buy 4 no meal from you. I lives dat' way from day to day and I has done it all my life. I don't let no dirty, shiftless and triffin' no'count niggers come in my house a-settin' 'round on my beds and chairs. I allus bees' som'tin myself! (She throws back her head and her eyes flash.) H'its 'ristocratic niggers here in Kerlile, jes' like its' 'ristocratic white folks here too.

When Pa died, Ma sent me out to nurs' white folks' chilluns'. Pa had worked fer' Mr. 'Liphus, mose' all his life on half. We never had no money no time. Back den', money never figured in a nigger's life as much as it do' now, kaise' in de' furs' place he never had none; and in the second place his white folks handled all of dem' matters dat' had to do wid' money fer' him. Fer' dat' very reason I cannot tell you how much Pa got fer' his work. Who is dem' white folks wants to know all dat' anyhow? Whar' dey' come from? Is money

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gwine to drive ev'ybody crazy? De' Bible sho' say, long as you has raiment and food you is rich in de' sight of de' Lawd'. H'it so too, He never had laid no price en nothin'; but folks is done ruin't ev'ything by doin' jes' dat'.

No sir, back den' in the country the things we needed was 'vided fer' us by our white folks; and de' Lawd' blessed us all wid' plenty, kaise a way was 'vided wid'out money. Now a price is laid on ev'ything; on de' very furs' thing. Yes Lawd! All my victuals come from de' big house den; my clothes come from dar' also; and I took scraps and patched and darned and made quilts wid' dem'. Back den' country niggers did well to git to town on Christmas and de' Fourth Day. As fer' 5 me I do not care nothin' 'bout gwine to town yet. Evy' fall Mr. 'Liphus let Pa go to town in de' waggin' and fetch back what us needed. Maybe he would give Pa a little money den', but not much. I never got no big sight of money fer' nursin' like dese' young niggers gits now. I was jes' give things like clothes and good eatins' and all dat' along wid' a good bed and a house and wood to burn.

Ma made me leave home clean and tidy evy' day. If I got in at night all smeared up, she sho' did give me around a round; and she never would let me git' 'keerless. No, Sir. I sho' can't 'member who the furs' white lady I nursed for. All my life till I mar'red, I nursed white folks' chilluns'. Then come my turn at mar'red life, that changed things, but I learn't then to nurse sick folks. Since I ain't mar'red no more I nursed white folks dat' is sick. Sum'thin' jes' give me a hand to nursin'; I don't know what it is; but I sho' got de' hand. Nursin' and cookin' fer' white folks has been my way of makin' a livin' all my life. When I was a gal and nursed white folks' little chilluns', I had it easy kaise ev'y time the chilluns' 'et, I 'et too. DE' lady of the house give me new clothes; when mine got 'frayed. At night when I never went home, why I jes' stayed in de' "big house". I never knowed nothin' 'bout no rugged times, till I played a fool and took a black man to live wid'. If I had had a mite of sense I would a jes' stayed on wid' de' white folks a-nursin' fer dem'; wearin' dey old clothes and a-eatin' dey' rations. Dey wuzz far better than any black man ever fetched to me from any store.

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Dat' furs' man I mar' red wuz' black as dat' chiimney chimney back, over dar'. Heyward Reed wuz' his name. He wuz' a full grown man lots older than I wuz. We got mar' red one Fourth of July at a big break-down. He had been steppin' out wid' me fer' some time, but we never had been to no frolic together, till dat' night. I never left home wid' no aims to git' mar' red, kaise I wuz' nursin' de' pru'tties' little white gal a year and a half old and her Ma wuz' givin' me three square meals of victuals a day and nice clothes to wear. But me and Heyward went to dat' breakdown in Mr. Oxner's barn; and I often sets yet and it runs through my mind like dis', It sho' wuz' a breakdown fer' dis' fool nigger.

De' night run on, and Heyward keps on abringin' me some red lemonade dat' I drunk 'till my head started gwine' 'round. 'Den Heyward took me out into the cool night air and rid' me around a good while in a buggy, dat he had done borrowed. We stopped at Mr. Aughtry's house, and Heyward say, "Bessie, I done fetched you here so as Mr. Aughtry could marry us. I needs a woman like you, Bessie, and I sho' is gwine to make life fine fer' you, so you won't have to wear yourself out a-nursin' white chilluns' no mo'." I never had no mind fer' nothin' and afo' I knowed it, Mr. Aughtry had done said, "Now you is man and wife." From dat' very minute on my whole life wuz' changed. I had'nt nursed two week at'ter dat', 'fo Heyward done gone and told de' white folks dat' he needed me to work in his water melon patch, so dey' scused' me from de' "big house", for de' res' of dat' week.

Nursing I got sum'tin' like a uarter or fifty cents now and den'. I could save it up if I wanted too. De' entire 7 worle' knowed, except me, dat' when you mar're's a black nigger all you gits fer' waitin' or him and workin' fer' him, in his crops, is jes' mo' work, till lay-by time. If you don't keep your very eyes peeled, he'll fer' git to let you in den'.

I had to cook fer' dat' black man, cornbread and salad. Dat' had to go on twice a day ev'y day. Time to gather crops come 'round, and he went up to the "big house" and 'lowed he needed me in the field all de' time. I never knowed nothin' 'bout this till Mistus 'lowed one mornin', "Well, Bessie, I sho' does hate dat' you is mar' red and can't work fer' me no mo'". I told her I wuz' gwine on workin', but she 'lowed, "Heyward is done axed' fer' you and,

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Bessie, you know dat' you is his wife now, and it is your duty to make your husband a good wife and help him with his crop." From den' on, fer' years, I wuz' jes' a wages hand, dat' never got no pay, but mo' hard work. Heyward stayed wid' me for 'bout thirty years. He 'lowed, I never did have no mind fer' nothin' but settin' aroun' wid' white folks.

We had done moved wid' Mr. Will Jeter then. Miss Maggie axed' me to help her wid' her chilluns' and I had done tole' her I would. Heyward never liked it, but I laid my foot down on it, dat' I was not gwine' to be no fiel' hand dat' year. I tole' him dat' all I wuz' gwine to do was help Miss Maggie nurse and dress dem' chilluns. I tole' dat' black nigger I wuz' no fiel' hand, but a born nurse. Miss Maggie had done said dat' Heyward could eat in her kitchen. But dat' nigger 'lowed dat' he won't gwine to eat in Mr. Will Jeter's kitchen. I tole' him he wuz' crazy, kaise he'd git a heap better there, than he could fetch to our'n fer' me to cook. He held 8 to it I had to fix him a mess of victuals at our house ev'y mornin' and evenin'. I never done it tho'.

A young gal of Mike Dawkins' about three shades lighter in complexion than I is, started fetchin' Heyward milk and cornbread, afo I could git through wid' Miss Maggie's chilluns' and git home, at night. Some nights when I was gwine up my front walk, I would see her slippin' out'n the back way. When I would git' in the house, Heyward would be settin' thar' wipin' his mouf'. I axed' him over and over what he doin'. He lowed' ev'y time, "Jes' lickin' out my tongue, kaise I so hungry and tired a-waiting fer' you to come fetch my supper, and you won't never cook me none, you lazy nigger, you!" Dat made me so mad, when he knowed as well as I did, dat' it wuz' me hwo had done got it fixed so dat' he could eat from de' white folks' table, de' good rations dat' I allus; fetched him. I wuz' livin' hard then, anyhow, and den' I never had had no man to 'buse me. One night when I got in the house, she was leavin'. I aked Heyward who dat' wuz' gwine out de' do'? He looked up at me real sly and rech' over and pulled me down to him and low', "Honey yOu sho' muster been dreamin', kaise I wuz' jes' settin' here a-waitin' on you to fetch my victuals, and I wants you to cook me some cornbread." He had done rubbed his mouf' across my cheek and I felt sum'tin' on my mouf' and I wiped my mouf' wid' my hand. When I did I see'd crumbs on my

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hand. Dat' made me so mad, I jumped off'n Heyward's lap. I reched' over and picked up my skillet and lifted it over his head and come down. He ducked his head so quick dat' the skillet jes' grazed his shoulder. He hollered and run out'n de' do'.

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I hollered back and tole' him if he ever stuck his black kinky head back in it again, I would kill him. So dat's the way he jes' walked off, dat' night atter' thirty years. He's up in Jonesville now wid' a family and dey' all is fiel' hands. I jes' worked on fer' Miss Maggie, de' res' o' dat' year. Livin' wuz' easy at'ter Heyward lef'; but when night come I seemed to have a cravin' for sum'tin' nother, dat' I never had felt befo'.

Jack Sartor had a grist mill and he lived on Mr. Jeter's place. Jack walked wid' a stick and he 'plained mi' ni' all the time wid' de' rheumatiz'. I felt sorry fer' Jack, he lived by his'self' and did'n no body pay him no 'tention. So one evenin' I tuck' some cake home wid' me and I made some coffee. Den' I went to Jack's do' and called him and axed' him to step over my way. He come at'ter dark and set and 'et and I never felt lonesome. He kept a-cumin', kaise he liked the things I fetched him from Miss Maggie's kitchen. He bragged on me, and dat' made me feel good.

Miss Maggie's chilluns' had done got to big to nurse. Her cook 'plained all de' time wid' a misery in her side. She got so she axed' me real often to carry things on in de' kitchen fer' her. Mr. Will 'et his breakfast at six o'clock, ne'mind what come or what went. He 'et and I waited on him. He wuz' a great tease. Somehow he found out'bout Jack drappin' in at my house. He see'd it and so he jes' let in to teasin' me. He'low, "Bessie you is a-baitin' dat' nigger to marry him". I 'lowed, "Mr. Will I ain't never gwine to marry a black nigger no mo' 'long as I lives." Mr. Will laugh and 'low,

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"Well Bessie, I don't see what you gwine' to do fer' Jack is as black as the see of spades!  
"Well, Jack kept cumin' to my house. [???] He got down, so I run his grist mill fer' him and tuck' him in wid' me so as I could wait on him good. I nursed him 14 years. All de' niggers

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got to callin' me "Bessie Jack". Den' he got a gasoline engine to run de' mill and Mr. Will and Miss Maggie moved up in Kerlile.

Mr. Will got to stud'in a lot and settin' on his front porch and de time. One evenin' he come in from de' fiel' wid' his shot gun and sot' down on de' front steps to res'. He drapped dat' gun betwix' his knees and rested his head on de'end of the barrel and pulled de' trigger and dat' gun blowed his brains out.

Me and Jack moved up to Kerlile and fetched the mill and gasoline engine. I wanted to be near Miss Maggie too, so I could help her. We burnt kerosene in de' engine when we could kaise it wuz' cheaper. Jack died, but I never tuck' his name, no mo' dan' his furs'ore. Ev r since den' I jes' goes by "Bessie Jack" Reed.

Then I quit workin' fer' Miss Maggie when she went off to North Carolina. And I moved in Miss Ida's house and lived by my self again. Ev'y Sad'day and Monday I run Jack's mill. Arthur English come to be my toll man. When the 'pression come along white folks started to sayin' dat' dey' could git' meal and hominy cheaper in Union and all of 'em had cars to git' up thar' quick in. Niggers got towhar' they did'n make no corn. Times wuz' already tight and now they got rugged. I never had nothin' to grind and no toll to sell and I could not pay Miss Ida no rent. She live up dar' in dat' big hotel.

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She knowed I never had no money, so she 'low, "Bessie if you will wash the hotel sheets fer' me I'll let you live on in my house?" So I got to doin' up her sheets ev'y other day. Aunt Sarah Wedlock, wuz' Miss Ida's maid and she fetched them sheets to me. Aunt Sarah and Miss Ida wuz' both old. Aunt Sarah say dat' she and Miss Ida had the same birth date. Aunt Sarah would wall her eyes and shake her gold earrings when she talk about Miss Ida. Miss Ida give aunt Sarah dem' big gold earrings. Aunt Sarah would git' mad wid' Miss Ida and deY' would fuss, but Aunt Sarah never 'lowed nobody else to say nothin' to Miss Ida. She would drap' by my house and say, "Bessie I ain't never gwine back up to dat' hotel,

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kaise Miss Ida gittin' to demandin', and it ain't nobody can please her, no'mo'. W Den' I look straight at Aunt Sarah and say, "[?] say, Miss Ida gittin' mean?" "Well she gittin' old enough to be mean and so s you, she oughta git' rid of you anyhow". Aunt Sarah couln' stan' no mo' and she would jump off'n her chair and 'low, "Bessie Jack, who is you, nothin' but a black nigger, ig'nant at dat', an you knows' nothin' 'bout me and Miss Ida's business, and if you opens your mouf' 'agin' her, I sho' is gwine to tell her and she will have de' chief right down on you, you good fer' nothin' nigger".

Wid' dem' words Aunt Sarah would go toddlin' off on her stick, mouthin' under her bref' at me. I watch her and ev'ytime she went to de' side do' of de' hotel to Miss Ida's room. I set and study and think how easy Aunt Sarah lived. She and Miss Ida both so old, dat' all dey' do while Aunt Sarah fix Miss Ida's hair, wuz' fuss. But Aunt Sarah wo' a gold ring also. Her hair wuz' white, but her skin wuz' black as my furs' husband's. Dat' jes' make dem' gold jewels shine 12 out on her. All de' niggers wuz' scared of Aunt Sarah, kaise she so big and strong. Anybody dat' sassed her, who would hit 'em wid' her big heavy walkin' stick. When Mr. Smith died, Miss Ida give Aunt Sarah dat' stick.

1937 come along and Miss Ida had done tu'ck down wid' a stroke. Dem' banks up in Union had done all busted. Ev'ybody 'lowed dat' Miss Ida never had no mo' money. Folks drapped off from comin' to de' hotel, 'cep'n on dem' two nights trains when deY' had to stay dar' or out doors one. Aunt Sarah told me dat' Miss Ida gwine to close the hotel dining room and let Ike and Cornelia go. Andrew had already done gone; kaise nObody never got off'n dem' trains wid' no valises fer' him to tote no mo'. I got to whar' I never washed sheets but twice a week. My mill settin' up doin' nothin' but rustin'. One day the junk man come along and I sold the whole thing to him fer' three dollars cash. Dat' evenin' Aunt Sarah come by wid' some sheets. She set down heavy in her chair at the same time holdin' tight to her stick, and when she got her bref' she 'low, "Law'd Jesus, Have Mercy on Me." I ax' her what ail her; kaise I see'd misery in her face. She say, "Bessie, whar you gits dem' sheets washed, fetch dem' on up to the hotel and give dem' to Miss Ida. My back got sech' a misery in it dat' I can't climb dat' hill wid' a passel o' hotel sheets". I wondered who gwine

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to wait on Miss Ida when Aunt Sarah' back give out sho' nuf'. I knowed dat' all de' Kerlile folks wuz' livin' hard; but the ones dat' had done busted dem' two banks dar' and the mail rider; dey' peered' to be livin' sweller'. Dese' Kerlile folks had had things swell in times pas', mo' so than anybody else in dis' County. Us lived to 13 ourselves and let others be.

All dat' done lef' dese' parts now, 'cept we still lives to ourselves. Wid' dese' two banks here bustin' and dem' banks in Union; it jes' lef' our white folks flat; when dey' is flat why we niggers is in de' very same fix. Sum'tin' else takes money away 'sides folks don't ride on trains no mo' and banks bustin' is all dese' paved roads runnin' 'round Kerlile. Cars don't make no stop gwine north on dis' side of Spartanburg: and dey' rolls right into Columbia gwine' south. Dat' leaves our hotel behind and it sho' don't leave a thing fer' Kerlile folks to git no money from. 'Course us still eats; us allus' has done dat'; kaise we raises plenty on dem' flat fiels'. Us don't raise no money dar' no mo'; kaise you can't plant enuf' cotton to count at dese' low prices now[?] While I lives a little harder now; yet it ain't rugged like it was when I had a black man.

One day Aunt Sarah tuc'k down wid de' awfulles' misery in her stomach. She woke her daughter Net up, one mornin' 'bout three o'clock, hollerin'. They n'used on her all dey' knowed to do, but Aunt Sarah fell in a trance. Net sent fer' me to go over to the hotel dat' mornin' and fix Miss Ida her breakfast. She never 'et, jes' set and shake her head and sip a little coffee. She raised her head and say, "BEssie, go see 'bout Sarah fer' me". I come back at fo' o'clock and told Miss Ida dat' Aunt Sarah had'n never come out'n dat' trance and dat' she wuz' seein' angels. Miss Ida say, "Well Sarah is dyin'". Aunt Sarah died at fo' o'clock nex' mornin' afo' day broke. Dey buried her at Jeter's Chapel the third day. Mi' ni' all de' white folks went. Net, laid her Ma away in one of Miss Ida's wool dresses, and tuc'k her earrings 14 and her gold ring off. Dey' fetched the earrings over to Miss Ida. When Miss Ida see'd dem' she broke down and cried so hard dat' me and Net broke over too. Miss Ida told Net to keep dem'. Net give one earring to her daughter, Matt; t'other one she give to me. See it here in my lef' ear. It done cured my neuralgy. Matt got her'n on and she got

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one fer' her other ear, but it done turn't brass. Net, wear her Ma's ring on her middle finger so it will drive rheumatiz away.

Miss Ida son't to Union and got a bunch of flowers from dat' sto' up dar' where you gits' flowers in de' winter. De' sto' is on Main Street whar' ev'ybody can see when dey' passes along. They laid dem' on Aunt Sarah's coffin, till dey let it down in de' grave. Den' dey' tuc'k 'em off and laid 'em on top her grave when it wuz' done 'kivvered wid' red dirt. Next mornin' de frost had done turn't 'em black. Aunt Sarah's grand chilluns seed' dem' so dey' 'cided to put some flowers on dey' grand Ma's grave de'self. Dey' tuc'k red mantle paper (crepe paper out of the mantle board) and made a little bunch of flowers. DE' African Aid Ladies made a circle of pine needles and put dem' on aunt Sarah's grave along wid' dem' paper flowers. The pine needles lasted de' longest.

I stayed wid' Miss Ida, while de' preacher preached Aunt Sarah's funeral dat' lasted longer dan' anybody's funeral had ever lasted in Fish Dam Township. After he had done preached in dat' church fer' two hours and a half; three other preachers kept 'em two hours at her graveside. I sho' hated to miss it, but me and Miss Ida could'n keep our eyes from gettin' wet all day long. Fer' de' nex' two years I cooked and nursed Miss Ida.

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Den' Miss Johnnie Willie Cousar Jeter, one of Mr. Smith's cousins, come and 'suaded Miss Ida to let her come and live wid' her. Miss "Johnnie's" las' husband had done loss his plantation home, and Miss "Johnnie" sed' she never had no place to go. So Miss Ida tuc'k Miss "Johnnie" and Mr. Jeter in and she had let dem' sta' on her ever since. Dey' don't pay her no rent and no board; but jes' feeds her.

Miss Ida give me three dollars ev'y week I nursed her. I stayed all day and when she wuz' sick I would stay at night. She give me my house rent right on and what I ate. I always wo' blue cotton dresses and big white aprons at Miss Ida's.

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One year I nursed on the WPA in Union. The lady wanted me to nurse white folks up dar' dat' never had no quality, so I quit and come back to Kerlile. Arthur English helped me to clean out this mill house and partition it off into dese' two rooms. I opened the fire place and scoured it and moved in. I have lived here ever since. It belongs to me and I am gwine' to keep it. I is cookin' fer Miss Eva Jeter now. In the spring she is goin' back on her plantation. Its jes' two miles and a half from here. I gwine to leave here ev'y mornin' at five o'clock and walk down dar' and git Mr. Jeter's breakfast fer' him and Miss Eva by six-thirty. They pays me two dollars and a half and feeds me and I ain't worryin' 'bout makin' my way, kaise it'll be a way."