

WPA Alabama Writers Project
EX SLAVES TALES
Coosa County #3

Ready for filming: 4-18-1977

Filmed: 5-4-1977

JAW

Gibson

Stephen Varner was born on the plantation of Sherman Varner. His mother and father were sold as children to Mr. Varner and so do not remember their families. Ary and Wilsie Varner grew up together on the plantation and when they were old enough they decided to get married. The slaves did not have a preacher to marry them. The only kind of service that they had was to place a straw broom on the floor and step over it together and then they were married. The slaves would gather around and sing and dance for the bride and groom. When they had finished this ceremony they were given a log cabin to themselves. These cabins that the slaves lived in consisted of one room with one door and one window. The most part of one end was taken up by a huge fire place made of mud and sticks. There was a homemade bed and a chair or two. These were made by the slaves. The bed was made of wood with a grass rope bottom. The mattress was of straw. The chairs were makeshift affairs made of wood.

All of the slaves were required to go to the field and had their dinner in a cabin that was set aside for that purpose. Their breakfast and supper was eaten in their own cabins before day and after dark. Sometime they did not have all they wanted to eat and they would break into the "smoke house" and cut some meat and when everybody was asleep they would have a second supper. When they were caught at this they were chained to a tree and whipped. The overseer was a hard man and would whip the slaves severely. Other things that they were punished for was trying to run away to the north, and not working as hard as the overseer thought they should.

Ary and Wilsie Varner had four boys, Stephen, Joe, Scott, and Colfax, and one girl, Mary Ann. With the exception of Stephen all of these are dead. The mother was freed to return to the field as soon as she was able and leave her children. They all stayed under a big oak tree and played if they were old enough. While the older ones played they had to watch over the baby brother or sister. The "mammy" would come around to see about them and give them milk. The older slaves wore muscorg clothes, and the children wore only little shirts. They were not given anything else to wear until they were old enough to go to school. They went to school in the same building that they went to church. They were allowed to go to school only until they were old enough to go to the field. They were taught to read and write.

The Varner plantation consisted of about five hundred acres. The house that the owner lived in was a big house made on the box style. Mules and oxen were used to cultivate the land. The plows that were used were called "turn-shovel plows". The overseer had a big red horse that he rode over the plantation to see that everything was alright. He was feared and disliked by the slaves. This plantation was located near what is now Rockford, Cosa County, Alabama. There were about fifty slaves in all on the plantation.

The only thing that Stephen can remember about the patrollers was the little chant that his mother used to frighten the children: "Run nigger run, run nigger run, the 'pat-er-rollers' will get you if you dont look out." The only game that Stephen played was marbles. He was too young to go hunting but he did get to go fishing. Fish and wild game was plentiful and they had all they wanted of it to eat. Other things that they had to eat was green vegetables in summer and dried vegetables and fruit in winter.

News was carried from one plantation to another by horse-back. The slaves seldom traveled but when they did they went by mule. When any of the slaves became sick the master sent for the doctor. Steve cant remember any of the medicine used

by the women slaves.

Stephen's father was one of the slaves who made the shoes for the slaves to wear. When there was time to make them after he had finished the shoes his master wanted he was allowed to make some for sale. The money that he made in this way was used to buy the things that was needed by his family.

The Varner plantation was not near any of the battles of the war but some of the Yankee soldiers would pass that way sometime. When the slaves saw any of these men they would hide. Steve never saw any of the important men of the war. When asked what he thought of Abraham Lincoln he said: "They told me he was the 'head man'. He must have been a great man though." He says that there were good and bad points to slavery. It is good to do as you please, but before the war they didn't have to make money to buy what they had to eat. Also "there were not as many bad 'niggers' then as now. This life is just to get ready for the next and every body should be good so they will go to Heaven." He joined the church so the "Lord would let him in when he died."

After the war Steve's father and mother stayed on to work for Mr. Varner. Steve was married twice and was the father of nine children. He is eighty-five years old and has thirty-six grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. He does not know where they all are but he has one son he is very proud of. He is a porter in a railroad station in West Virginia.

COOSA COUNTY

District 3