WPA Alabama Writers Project
Short Stories by:
Emma Cather, Bullock County

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Miss Fannie Nichols

After crossing the Central of Georgia railroad on the east side of Union Springs you enter the mill village and feel as though you are in a world apart because you are stared at by any who are on the porches and any you meet. The homes are owned by the mill and the ones owned by private individuals either work in the mill or have worked in the mill and are atill living in the village. I went to the "Square Deal Grocery Company" to locate the home of an old woman I had known some years ago. Miss Fannie Nichols at one time took orders for flavoring from people in Union Springs and was one of these individuals everyone feels an interest in.

Miss Fannie invited me into the front bedroom which appeared to be the guest room too since the furniture is very modernistic and speaks loudly of suits advertised for so much down and so much a month. From where I was sitting I could see into the next room which contained three large iron beds and on into the next I could see the cook moving around preparing the noon meal. On the mantle were two Easter baskets with the bunnies peeping over the side. In the center of the mantle was a clock that looked as if it had been telling the same time for several years.

Miss Fannie had on a hat and I found out that she was almost blind and the hat kept the glare out of her eyes, a scar under the right eye showed that an abscess had been lanced and had impaired the sight of her only good eye. Miss Fannie is very small and her face is a mass of wrinkles, she has no teeth and when she is not talking she looks as though she had swallowed her lips. When I asked Miss Fannie if she had always lived in the mill village she told me about her life in the country and the early years when she was able to work.

Miss Fannie is the next oldest of five children and since she is seventy-two and is the oldest living member of the family now and she feels that she has

not long to live. She peered at me out of almost sightless eyes and said," You know Pa and Ma married in 1861 and then Pa left and went all through the war. Ma was just fourteen years old when she married but she had a lot of grit and when Pa was wounded in Columbus Ma went over and stole him out of the hospital, she tuck him out at night and they walked as fur as Seale, Alabama, then they come as fur as the train run and caught a ride on to town(Union Springs). He went to Troy and reported to his Major and the Major tole him that he was expecting surrender and if it didn't come in three days to report to him but the surrender come and Pa stayed home. We sho' had a hard time too just like all the rest of the folks, didn't have nothing, and folks trying to cheat us maybe things woulda got better if Pa had lived but he died when I was about twelve years old. I never will forget that day, we wuz a-setting under the tree and Pa was a-setting on a little box, we kept that box a long, l ong time after that; and he says ter Ma, he always called Ma "Gal" well he says, 'Gal,somethin' tells me I ain't a-going to live very long and the one thing I do hate to leave you for is that I'm a-leaving you 'thout a home." Ma want well, she was, you know, not long 'fore my youngest sister was born and Ma didn't say nothing but pretty soon Pa got up to take the mule to the man he had borrowed it from, and that mule always was scary, but Pa just jumped on him sideways and just before he got to the lot the mule shied at something and threw Pa off and drug him a long piece 'fore anybody could stop him, Pa died before they could get him ter the house. And do you know, Miss Emma, the day after the burying Mr. Tripp sont his wagin ' and taken all our rations didn't leave us a mouthful t'eat and told Ma to git her things together and sont us to her brother's.

We stayed there tell the baby was born then we got us a farm and me and my brother made the living for the family, we would do anything to turn an honest penny, sometime we would have to hoe for another man to git him to let us use his mule. Ma she tuck in sewing and doing fancy work, she couldn't do much with a young baby. My brother was a good man he stayed right with us and if'n they's having a frolic somewhere he allys tuck us and seed that we had a good time. But if'n it was going to be a rough crowd there he wouldn't let us go and he didn't go neither. The last year we farmed a man owed us forty dollars for some work we done and my Ma's brother was going to sue him for some he owed him too and he'suaded Ma ter let him put hers in too, well she did and do you know that when they come to have the trial the man had made his wife "free dealer" and we didn't get nair cent, that's how cheat he was, well we lost that money. Ma had been suffering with a distress in her breast for some time and after my brother married we thought it would be better for us ter come to town and see if we could get work in the mill and Ma could get more for her sewing. Me and my two sisters was old enought to work but we thought it better that the other stay home and help Ma with the baby and clean house. When we went ter work I made $.40 a day, went ter work at six, we would have to get up at four 4:30 and get breakfast and git ter the mill at quarter before six, we worked from six till six, and in the spring and summer afternoons when I come in at six I'd brush a little lint outer my hair git my order book and go around and take orders from the other folks who lived in Union Springs, I allys got home 'fore night and Ma would have supper ready and some cutting out on hand and I'd sew and

stitch until nine or ten o'clock. Taking orders for flavoring and creams sho' hoped me a lot 'cause the people in town got ter know me and saw that I was willnter work so they did all they could ter throw work our way. If it hadn't a-been for the folks in this town I donna what in the world we'd a-done, they sho' have been good ter me I reckin' one reason they saw we tried ter do right and they'swillin' ter help anybody that'd try ter do half way. Sometimes they'd send us milk and heap a-times they'd make us free ter come in their garden fer vegetables. They's a family lived clost ter the mill and they had chillun mos' as old as us and they give their old clothes lots of times.

We allys tried ter go to Sundayschool and church as much as possible too and the folks there would allys help us, they'd give us books to read and at Christmas time there's allys something for us. This was when the people in town owned the mill and they tuck such as interest in their workers, the superintendent was nice too. Now they have a Sunday school here but I don't think many go they are alls so tired when Sunday comes they want to go fishing or something else. Me and my sister made $.90 a day and we had to pay $1.00 a week for house rent, my brother allys brought us wood from the country so we got along fine. It t'want long fore my sister married and my other sister hoped us in the mill all the time Ma was still taking in sewing and we was doing the best we could. We started saving up money to buy us a little house by that time my sister was making $1.25 for running one frame and we was doing fine but she up and married and that left me with my youngest sister. We tried to make her learn in school butthen they didn't have to go ter school and there wan't much learning she got, Ma was getting a lot of sewing then and

we was getting along fine. My youngest sister married when she was seventeen and that left me and Ma. Lena(my youngest sister) married a man that was nothing but a pull back and they went to the country ter live but,Miss Emma, you know he want good ter her he'd gather his crap and take all the things over ter his mother's and keep them there. This went on for several years, finally one morning Lena decided that she could not put up with his doings no longer, so she left the two oldest boys with the father and she come to town. It was just before her youngest daughter was born and she come right ter our house so while she was there I went back to work in the mill. When she was strong enough my sister went ter work too and Ma looked after the baby, she was a good spinner and made good money. I thought at one time that I would leave the mill because the work was so hard and the hours so long, I wanted to work in the telephone office but one of the ladies in town come to me and said for me not to put myself in an unprotected position, she said that as long as I worked in the mill I's protected in a way but in a telephone office I made myself liable to advances, telephone operators were not thought of as they are today.

We finally saved enough money to buy the little house and I had some in the bank. When Ma tuck sick nine year ago it tuck all my savings and after she died I had to sell my little house to pay the burying and the medicine it taken while she was sick. It want long after that Mr. Comer bought the mill and my sister bought this house, then it had two rooms and a shed and my sister taken the two rooms and taken the men who worked on the mill to board and she was able to finish paying for the house. She started to work again when the mill opened and I come to live with her. Now I gets a little old age pension and it hopes me some.

The other members of the family came in the other room and went on to the kitchen, from where I was sitting I could see the cook moving about as though she were serving the meal. It was a very silent meal and in about ten minutes I could hear them leave the room. The man went on the porch to read the paper. Mrs. Nobles was in the room adjourning and was moving about, she soon came into the room where I was and introductions followed. She was dressed in a large flowered pique dress that came almost to her ankles, she was large of frame and very angular and thelong dress made her appear a young giantess. From the conversation I found that her daughter was living in the house with them, she, her daughter and her daughter's husband were all working in the mill, the two children were in kindergarten, and stayed there until the mill closed, or until they returned from work which was two o'clock. I asked Mrs. Nobles if her husband worked too and she answered;"If'n I knowed where he was I sho' would have him sued, after my first husband and I parted and my children was all grown, Mr. Nobles started paying attention to me, he knowed I was a good worker and he was too then, he was a slick talking somebody too and 'fore I knowed it had talked me into marrying him. It want long after we married that he started sitting around the house and letting me work.I put up with it a long time and when wages went up and we had shorter hours I made him up and git, he thought he had married a support and before he left in some way he had got all my money and I ain't heard from him since I had two men now and they were both pull backs. All I want now is to be able to save some money for my old age. It won't be long before I will have to stop working and the way we have things now we are

getting long fine. This is my house and my daughter pays the grocery bill so all I have to do is to get myself things, I don't never go nowhere so I don't need ~~any~~ no clothes. I ain't been to the picture show here in I couldn't name the day. When they first had "jack pot" I did sign up for that but I soon quit going. On Sunday I'm so tired I don't never go to church, we have preaching at the community house once in awhile, but don't nobody never go and the churches in town some of the children go to Sunday school but they go go much. They're going to have a weiner roast this afternoon and Mrs. Brabham was after me to go but I don't feel like it. We have to work so hard with no rest that I'm too tired ever to do anything. Mrs. Brabham begged me to come said I'd be the life of the party cause I can make folks laugh but all I want of life is to be able to work and save my money. Since I let Lee Nobles get away with all my saving I ain't a-trusting no man anymore."

I asked Miss Fannie if she ever wanted to go back to the country, she said,"Lord,Miss Emma, if'n I could just see a little better there's nothing I would like any better but I expect it has been mighty nigh three years since I have been outside the front gate, I don't get out in the yard much cause I can't see ter git up and down the steps but very little, all I can do is to sit here and wait and thank the Lord I ain't altogether helpless."