Amanda McCray: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 Florida Narratives, Volume III Amanda McCray.

Mrs. McCray was sitting on her porch crooning softly to herself and rocking so gently that one might easily have thought the wind was swaying her chair. Her eyes were closed, her hands incredibly old and work worn were slowly folding and unfolding in her lap.

She listened quietly to the interviewer's request for some of the "high lights" of her life and finally exclaimed: "Chile why'ny you look among the living fer the high lights?"

There was nothing resentful in this expression; only the patient weariness of one who has been dragged through the boundaries of a yesterday from which he was inseparable and catapulted into a present with which he has nothing in common. After being assured that her life story was of real interest to some one she warmed up and talked quite freely of the life and times as they existed in her day.

How old was she? She confessed quite frankly that she never "knowed" her age. She was a grownup during the Civil War when she was commandered by Union soldiers [word?] the country and employed as a cook. Her owner, one Reddin Pamell, possessed a hundred or more slaves and was, according to her statement very kind to them. It was on his plantation that she was born. Amanda McCray is one of several children born to Jacob and Mary Williams, the latter being blind since Amanda could remember.

Children on the Pamell plantation led a carefree existence until they were about 12 years of age, when they were put to light chores like carrying water and food, picking seed from cotton lint (there were no cotton gins), and minding the smaller children. They were duly school in all the current superstitions and listened to the tales of ghosts and animals that talked and reasoned, tales common to the

Negro today. Little Mandy believes to this day that hogs can see the wind and that all animals talk like men on Christmas morning at a certain time. Children wore moles feet and pearl buttons around their necks to insure easy teething and had their legs bathed in concoction of wasp nest and vinegar if they were slow about learning to walk. This was supposed to strengthen the weak limbs. It was a common occurrence to see a child of two or three years still nursing at the mother's breast. Their masters encouraged the slaves to do this, thinking it made strong bones and teeth.

At Christmas time the slave children all trouped to "de big house" and stood outside crying "Christmas gift" to their master and mistress. They were never disappointed. Gifts consisted mostly of candies, nuts and fruits but there was always some useful article of clothing included, something they were not accustomed to having. Once little Mandy received a beautiful silk dress from her young mistress, who knew how much she liked beautiful clothes. She was a very happy child and loved the dress so much that she never wore it except on some special occasion.

Amanda was trained to be a house servant, learning to cook and knit from the blind mother who refused to let this handicap affect her usefulness. She liked best to sew the fine muslins and silks of her mistress, making beautiful hooped dresses that required eight and ten yards of cloth and sometimes as many as seven petticoats to enhance their fullness.

Hoops for these dresses were made of grapevines that were shaped while green and oured in the sun before using. Beautiful imported laces were used to trim the petticoats and pantaloons of the wealthy.

The Pamell slaves had a Negro minister who could hold services any time he chose, so long as he did not interfere with the work of the other slaves. He was not obliged to do hard menial labors and went about the plantation "all dressed up" in a frock coat and store-bought shoes. He was more than a little conscious of this and was held in awe by the others. He often visited neighboring plantations to hold his services. It was from this minister that they first heard of

the Civil War. He held whispered prayers for the success of the Union soldiers, not because freedom was so desirable to them but for other slaves who were treated so cruelly. There was a praying ground where "the grass never had a chancet ter grow fer the troubled kness that kept it crushed down."

Amanda was an exceptionally good cook and so widespread was this knowledge that the Union soldiers employed her as a cook in their camp for a short while. She does not remember any of their officers and thinks they were no better nor worse than the others. These soldiers committed no depredations in her section except to confiscate whatever they wanted in the way of food and clothing. Some married southern girls.

Mr. Pamell made land grants to all the slaves who wanted to remain with him; few left, so kind he had been to them all.

Life went on in much the same manner for Amanda's family except that the children attended school where a white teacher instructed them from a "blue back Webster." Amanda was a young woman but she managed to learn to read a little. Later they had colored teachers who followed much of the same routine as the whites had. They were held in awe by the other Negroes and every little girl yearned to be a teacher, as this was about the only professional field open to Negro women at the time.

"After de war Negroes blossomed out with fine phaetons (buggies) and ceiled house, and clothes-oh my!"

"Mrs. McCray did not keep up with the politics of her time but remembers hearing about Joe Gibbs, member of the Florida Legislature. There was much talk then of Booker T. Washington, and many thought him a fool for trying to start a school in Alabama for Negroes. She recalls the Negro poet master who served two or three terms at Madison. She could not give his name.

There have been three widespread "panics" (depressions) during her lifetime but Mrs. McCray thinks this is the worst one. During the Civil War, coffee was so dear that meal was parched and used as a

substitute but now, she remarked, "You can't hardly git the meal for the bread."

Her husband and children are all dead and she lives with a niece who is no longer young herself. Circumstances are poor here. The niece earns her living as laundress and domestic worker, receiving a very poor wage. Mrs. McCray is now quite infirm and almost blind. She seems happiest talking of the past that was a bit kinder to her.

At present she lives on the northeast corner of First and Macon Streets. The post office address is #11, Madison, Florida.

Source:
American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html