Florida Slave Narratives: Berry, Frank

Federal Writers' Project

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Frank Berry, living at 1614 west Twenty-Second street, Jacksonville, Florida, claims to be a grandson of Osceola, last fighting chief of the Seminole tribe. Born in 1858 of a mother who was part of the human chattel belonging to one of the Hearnses of Alachua County in Florida, he served variously during his life as a State and Federal Government contractor, United States Marshal (1881), Registration Inspector (1879).

Being only eight years of age when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, he remembers little of his life as a slave. The master was kind in an impersonal way but made no provision for his freedmen as did many other Southerners—usually in the form of land grants—although he gave them their freedom as soon as the proclamation was issued. Berry learned from his elders that their master was a noted duelist and owned several fine pistols some of which have very bloody histories.

It was during the hectic days that followed the Civil War that Berry served in the afore-mentioned offices. He held his marshalship under a Judge King of Jacksonville, Florida. As State and Federal Government Contractor he built many public structures, a few of which are still in use, among them the jetties at Mayport, Florida which he helped to build and a jail at High Springs, Florida.

It was during the war between the Indians and settlers that Berry's grandmother, serving as a nurse at Tampa Bay was captured by the Indians and carried away to become the squaw of their chief; she was later re-captured by her owners. This was a common procedure, according to Berry's statements. Indians often captured slaves, particularly the women, or aided in their escape and almost always intermarried with them. The red men were credited with inciting many uprisings and wholesale escapes among the slaves.

Country frolics (dances) were quite often attended by Indians, whose main reason for going was to obtain whiskey, for which they had a very strong fondness. Berry describes an intoxicated Indian as a "tornado mad man" and recalls a hair raising incident that ended in tragedy for the offender.

A group of Indians were attending one of these frolics at Fort Myers and everything went well until one of the number became intoxicated, terrorizing the Negroes with bullying, and fighting anyone with whom he could "pick" a quarrel. "Big Charlie" an uncle of the narrator was present and when the red man challenged him to a fight made a quick end of him by breaking his neck at one blow.

For two years he was hounded by revengeful Indians, who had an uncanny way of ferreting out his whereabouts no matter where he went. Often he sighted them while working in the fields and would be forced to flee to some other place. This continued with many hairbreadth escapes, until he was forced to move several states away.

Berry recalls the old days of black aristocracy when Negroes held high political offices in the state of Florida, when Negro tradesmen and professionals competed successfully and unmolested with the whites. Many fortunes were made by men who are now little more than beggars. To this group belongs the man who in spite of reduced circumstances manages still to make one think of top hats and state affairs. Although small of stature and almost disabled by rheumatism, he has the fiery dignity and straight back that we associate with men who have ruled others. At the same time he might also be characterized as a sweet old person, with all the tender reminiscences of the old days and the childish prejudices against all things new. As might be expected, he lives in the past and always is delighted whenever he is asked to tell about the only life that he has ever really lived. Together with his aged wife he lives with his children and is known to local relief agencies who supplement the very small income he now derives from what is left of what was at one time a considerable fortune.

Source:

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