Lucy Kimball

Interview with Lucy Kimball

—Francois Ludgere Diard, Mobile, Alabama

THE FULFILLED WISH OF MAMMY LUCY KIMBALL

I made two visits to the home of Mammy Lucy Kimball. The first was during the month of April, 1937; the next was nearly a month later. On the first trip I had a very successful talk with the old Negro woman, but on the last, she wasn't at home, and so the information I sought had to wait. I was very disappointed that I couldn't see her on my second venture, but it was impossible.

Mammy Lucy had not grown very feeble when I last saw her, and her methodical mode of living can be attributed to her consciousness of the venerable age of eighty-five years which she had reached. She was born into slavery in 1851 at Swift's Landing near the town of Blakeley, in Baldwin County. She was a slave in the Charles Hall family of that county before and during the War between the States. In 1907, she came to work for the T.S. Fry and Santos Rubira families of Mobile.

Following the War between the States, Mammy Lucy Kimball worked in various families at the summer resorts of Baldwin County.

When a young girl, Mammy Lucy performed the duties of a children's nurse, and worked as a dining room servant. She had some education, and as she had worked in families of refinement and culture all her life, her manner was that of a well educated person. However, like the average educated Negro, she still displayed the characteristics of the Negro of the ante-bellum days. She said that she strictly adhered to old fashioned methods, such as: going to church twice a week, not believing in doctors, and always taking home-concocted remedies.

I asked her if she believed in carrying a rabbit's foot for luck, to which she responded:

"Honey, you don' think I'm like these other Negroes, who still believe in that old nonsense? I might tell the children that a rabbit foot brings good luck because it is an old custom for superstitions persons to carry one, but, honey, you'd have just as good luck if you carried brick-bats in your coat. My white people in Baldwin County never brought me up to believe in such things."

"Well, Mammy Lucy," I asked, "do you remember any strange or weird things that happened during the Civil War?"

"Yes," she answered slowly, "I remember during the Civil War some of the mischievous Sibley boys who were kin to the Hall family over in Baldwin County, tied a strange long black thread to the ankle of a black boy named Slow Poke.

"Some Negroes were going to town that night to fetch supplies and among them was Slow Poke. The boys jokingly asked him if he had his rabbit foot with him as he might need it to keep the rattling noises

away at night. Slow Poke showed them his rabbit foot and, displaying his glistening teeth in a broad grin he said that there 'warn't goin' to be no ghosties atter him.' The boys deftly tied a string to Slow Poke's ankle while some of their friends held his attention. On this string were attached three cow bladders. Slow Poke hadn't gone far when he heard the bladders rattling at his heels. He immediately decided that there was a whole troop of ghosts after him, and so began to hit his fastest gait down the middle of the dark road. He ran till he reached Montgomery Hill some miles distant, where the string finally wore out. His people didn't find him till three days later. Then they took him home and gave him a sound whipping for running away."

Mammy Lucy talked of the Hall and Sibley families and of the wealth that they once had, and what happiness she found in being slave to such good people. She remembered all the summer resorts on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay when they were in their glory before the Civil War, and how the Mobile ferries landed bringing over all the fashionable Mobile families to their summer homes on the bay. She remembered hearing father Ryan, the poet-priest of the south, preaching at the dedication of the Catholic Church at Montrose and the storm in the '70's which almost demolished Alabama City (now Fairhope). She recalls the landing of the Confederate troops at Hollywood for wood when they left Mobile at the outbreak of the war on their way to Fort Pickens, Florida, to enter active service.

I found Mammy Lucy to be neat and prim as she must have been thirty years ago, when she first went to work for the Fry and Rubira families. She still walks with the agility of a young person, and her mind is fertile with fresh thoughts and with the deeds of the past. "I have found happiness," she said. "People have been good to me and I, in return, have tried to be kind to those around me. I have lived a plain life and have been rewarded with a ripe age that still finds me feeling young. I shall never grow old in my thoughts and actions, but always keep a place in my mind to welcome something new. I will have had a complete life if I can live only two weeks longer. There is something I'd like to see."

After a few more minutes I left her and returned home. There was something I wanted to ask Mammy Lucy; something that preyed on my mind for days. I wanted to ask her what the thing was that she wanted to see. She was so gentle and courteous; my interest seemed officious prying into her affairs. Someday I shall go to see her again, I decided, and bring up the subject casually. Then she'll never know of my unworthy curiosity.

Three weeks later I walked to the door of Mammy Lucy's cabin and on the porch stood a Negro girl watering a few pots of flowers.

"Is Mammy Lucy at home?" I asked.

The girl was silent for a moment, then she spoke in a high-pitched whining voice: "Mammy Lucy, she died."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "When did she die?"

"Fo' days ago," was the reply.

I walked down the path of pebbles toward the bay. The question would never be answered, but I knew that Mammy Lucy died content