Simon Phillips

Interview with Simon Phillips

—J. Morgan Smith

EX-SLAVE LEADER RECALLS OLD DAYS

Simon Phillips, ex-slave, at 90 years is still as clear-thinking as a young man, and a leader among the oldsters of his race in Birmingham and Alabama. He has been for the past twenty-three years president of the union of ex-slaves which is composed of 1,500 Negroes scattered throughout Alabama. He is the only one of the Birmingham organizers of the society living today and though one of the oldest of his group, he shows but few signs of decrepitude. He walks with the aid of a hickory cane which has been in his possession for almost a half century, and his memory is not only accurate but vivid. His physical activity is shown by the fact that he had already spaded his garden and tiny stalks had pushed themselves above the ground on a plot of earth, covering approximately seventy-five yards square, on the Spring morning when he took "a little time off" to talk of the past.

Well does he recall the days when, under Alabama skies in the 1860's, he curried his master's fine carriage horses; the times old Aunt Hannah cured him of "achin's" with vegetable and root herbs; the nights he spent in the slave quarters singing spirituals with his family.

Simon Phillips was one of 300 Negroes belonging to Bryant Watkins, a planter of Greensboro, Alabama. He was a house man, which means that he mixed the drinks, opened the carriage doors, brought refreshments on the porch to guests, saw that the carriage was always in the best of condition and tended the front lawn. When asked about slave days, he gets a far-away expression in his eyes; an expression of tranquil joy.

"People," he says, "has the wrong idea of slave days. We was treated good. My massa never laid a hand on me durin' the whole time I was wid him. He scolded me once for not bringin' him a drink when I was supposed to, but he never whup me."

The old slave added that every plantation had a still and there was much brandy, but he rarely ever saw a drunk man. He says that when the men felt themselves becoming intoxicated, they would go home and lie down; now, he says, they go home and fall down.

The plantation on which Simon lived was seven miles long and three miles wide. When luncheon was served, the Negroes far off in the bottom lands had their food brought to them by the trash gang (boys and women) while those in the nearer cotton fields ate in a large mess hall. The food consisted of turnip greens, meat, peas, crackling bread and syrup, and plenty of it. "Not since those days," he states, "have I had such good food."

"What about the marriage situation, Simon?" he was asked. "How did you go about getting a wife?"

"Well, nigger jus' go to the massa and tell him that there's a gal over in Cap'n Smith's place that he want for a wife, if she happen to be there. Then the massa go to Cap'n Smith and offer to buy her. Maybe he do and maybe he don't. It depend on whether the Cap'n will sell her, and iffen she a good strong, healthy nigger. Niggers was bought mostly like hosses. I was too young to have me a wife when I was wid de massa, but I got me one later on after the war."

Simon Phillips, Birmingham, Alabama

During the War between the States, Simon served as body guard for John Edward Watkins, son of the plantation owner. Body guards went with their owners and cleaned the guns, kept the camp in order and did some cooking. Simon entered the war at the age of fourteen in Joe Wheeler's 51st cavalry. He distinctly recalls the time he stood within ten feet of the great general while he was making a speech.

Sometimes slaves were parted from their families, because when one planter bought a Negro from another planter, he did not necessarily buy his wife or children, or husband, as the case might be. The slaves were advertised around and put on a block to stand while they were auctioned. Women invariably brought more than men. He was asked, "about overseers, Simon. What sort of men were they?"

"Well," he answered, "some was mighty mean. When the massa be away, they tried to think up things to whup us for. But when the massa around, had he catch 'em gettin' ready for to beat a slave, he say, 'don't cut no blood from that Nigger!'"

Born in Hale County in 1847, Simon Phillips stayed with his master until 1886 at which time he went to live in Tuscaloosa to earn 17¢ a day, but he says he fared better on it than on three dollars now.

After the war many Negroes stayed with their masters and he remembers that some of the carpetbaggers came through his plantation and tried to make the ex-slaves stake off the land, saying that half of it belonged to them.

"One day," says Simon, "a few niggers was stickin' sticks in the ground when the massa come up.

"'What you Niggers doin'?' he asked.

"'We is stakin' off de land, massa. The Yankees say half of it is ourn.'

"The massa never got mad. He jus' look calm like.

"'Listen, niggers' he says, 'what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours. You are just as free as I and the missus, but don't go foolin' around my land. I've tried to be a good master to you. I have never been unfair. Now if you wants to stay, you are welcome to work for me. I'll pay you one third the crops you raise. But if you wants to go, you sees the gate.'

"The massa never have no more trouble. Them niggers jus' stays right there and works. Sometime they loaned the massa money when he was hard pushed. Most of 'em died on the old grounds. I was the youngest of a family of sixteen and I has one sister still livin' on the old plantation. I'm going down to see her next week, 'cause I can never tell when the Great Master is goin' to call. We's gotta be ready when he does, and both us is gettin' mighty old. I wanta be sure and see her and the old place once more."