FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)
Pearl Randolph, Field Worker
Jacksonville, Florida
November 35, 1936
ACIE THOMAS

Mr. Thomas was at home today. There are many days when one might pass and repass the shabby lean-to that is his home without seeing any signs of life. That is because he spends much of his time foraging about the streets of Jacksonville for whatever he can get in the way of food or old clothes, and perhaps a little money.

He is a heavily bearded, bent old man and a familiar figure in the residential sections of the city, where he earns or begs a very meager livelihood. Many know his story and marvel at his ability to relate incidents that must have occured when he was quite small.

Born in Jefferson County, Florida on July 26, 1857, he was one of the 150 slaves belonging to the Folsom brothers, Tom and Bryant. His parents, Thomas and Mary, and their parents as far as they could remember, were all a part of the Folsom estate. The Folsoms never sold a slave except he merited this dire punishment in some way.

Acie heard vague rumors of the cruelties of some slave owners, but it was unknown among the Folsoms. He thinks this was due to the fact that certain "po white trash" in the vicinity of their plantation owned slaves. It was the habit of the Folsoms to buy out these people whenever they could do so by fair means or foul, according to his statements. And by and by there were no poor whites living near them. It was, he further stated like "damning a nigger's soul, if Marse Tom or Marse Bryant threatened to sell him to some po' white trash. And it allus brung good results—better than tearing the hide off'n him woulda done."

As a child Acie spent much of his time roaming over the broad acres of the Folsom plantation with other slave children. They waded in the streams, fished, chased rabbits and always knew where the choicest wild berries and nuts grew. He knew all the wood lore common to children of his time. This he learned mostly from "cousin Ed"

who was several years older than he and quite willing to enlighten a small boy in these matters.

He was taught that hooting owls were very jealous of their night hours and whenever they hooted near a field of workers they were saying: "Task done or no done—night's my time—go home!" Whippoorwills flitted about the woods in cotton picking time chattering about Jack marrying a widow. He could not remember the story that goes with this. Oppossums were a "sham faced" tribe who "sometimes wandered onto the wrong side of the day and got caught." They never overcame this shame as long as they were in captivity.

All bull rushes and tree stumps were to be carefully searched. One might find his baby brother there at any time.

When Acie "got up some size" he was required to do small tasks, but the master was not very exacting. There were the important tasks of ferreting out the nests of stray hens, turkeys, guineas and geese. These nests were robbed to prevent the fowls from hatching too far from the hen house. Quite a number of these eggs got roasted in remote corners of the plantation by the finders, who built fires and wrapped the eggs in wet rags and covered them with ashes. When they were done a loud pop announced that fact to the roaster. Potatoes were cooked in the same manner and often without the rags. Consequently these two tasks were never neglected by the slave children. Cotton picking was not a bad job either—at least to the young.

Then there was the ride to the cotton house at the end of the day atop the baskets and coarse burlap sheets filled with the day's pickings. Acie's fondest ambition was to learn to manipulate the scales that told him who had done a good day's work and who had not. His cousin Ed did this envied task whenever the overseer could not find the time.

Many other things were grown here. Corn for the cattle and "roasting ears," peanuts, tobacco and sugar cane. The cane was ground on the plantation and converted into barrels of syrup and brown sugar. The cane grinding season was always a gala one. There was always plenty of juice, with the skimmings and fresh syrup for all. Other industries were the blacksmith shop where horses and slaves were shod. The smoke houses where scores of hogs and cows were prepared and hung for future use. The sewing was presided over by the mistress. Clothing were made during the summer and stored away for the cool winters. Young slave girls were kept busy at knitting cotton and woolen stockings. Candles were made in the "big house" kitchen and only for consumption by the household of the master. Slaves used fat lightwood knots or their open fireplaces for lighting purposes.

There was always plenty of everything to eat for the slaves. They had white bread that had been made on the place. Corn meal, rice, potatoes, syrup vegetables and home-cured meat. Food was cooked in iron pots hung over the fireplace by rings made of the same metal. Bread and pastries were made in the "skillet" and "spider."

Much work was needed to supply the demands of so large a plantation but the slaves were often given time off for frolics (dances), (quilting-weddings). These gatherings were attended by old and young from neighboring plantations. There was always plenty of food, masters vying with another for the honor of giving his slaves the finest parties.

There was dancing and music. On the Folsom plantation Bryant, the youngest of the masters furnished the music. He played the fiddle and liked to see the slaves dance "cutting the pigeon wing."

Many matches were made at these affairs. The women came "all rigged out in their best" which was not bad at all, as the mistresses often gave them their cast off clothes. Some of these were very fine indeed with their frills and hoops and many petticoats. Those who had no finery contented themselves with scenting their hair and bodies with sweet herbs, which they also chewed. Quite often they were rewarded by the attention of some swain from a distant plantation. In this case it was necessary for their respective owners to consent to a union. Slaves on the Folsom plantation were always married properly and quite often had a "sizeable" wedding, the master and mistress often came and made merry with their slaves.

Acie knew about the war because he was one of the slaves commandeered by the Confederate army for hauling food and ammunition to different points between Tallahassee and a city in Virginia that he is unable to remember. It was a common occurrence for the soldiers to visit the plantation owners and command a certain number of horses and slaves for services such as Acie did.

He thinks that he might have been about 15 years old when he was freed. A soldier in blue came to the plantation and brought a "document" that Tom, their master read to all the slaves who had been summoned to the "big house" for that purpose. About half of them consented to remain with him. The others went away, glad of their new freedom. Few had made any plans and were content to wander about the country, living as they could. Some were more sober minded, and Acie's father was among the latter. He remained on the Folsom place for a short while; he then settled down to share-croping in Jefferson County. Their first year was the hardest, because of the many adjustments that had to be made. Then things became better. By means of hard work and the co-operation of friendly whites the slaves in the section soon learned to shift for themselves.

Northerners came South "in swarms" and opened schools for the ex-slaves, but Acie was not fortunate enough to get very far in his "blue back Webster." There was too much work to be done and his father trying to buy the land. Nor did he take an interest in the political meetings held in the neighborhood. His parents shared with him the common belief that such things were not to be shared by the humble. Some believed that "too much book learning made the brain weak."

Acie met and married Keziah Wright, who was the daughter of a woman his mother had known in slavery. Strangely enough they had never met as children. With his wife he remained in Jefferson County, where nine of their thirteen children were born.

With his family he moved to Jacksonville and had been living here "a right good while" when the fire occurred in 1903. He was employed as a city laborer and helped to build street car lines and pave streets. He also helped with the installation of electric wiring in many parts of the city. He was injured while working for the City of Jacksonville, but claims that he was never in any manner remunerated for this injury.

Acie worked hard and accumulated land in the Moncrief section and lives within a few feet of the spot where his house burned many years ago. He was very sad as he pointed out this spot to his visitor. A few scraggly hedges and an apple tree, a charred bit of fence, a chimney foundation are the only markers of the home he built after years of a hard struggle to have a home. His land is all gone except the scant five acres upon which he lives, and this is only an expanse of broom straw. He is no longer able to cultivate the land, not even having a kitchen garden.

Kaziah, the wife, died several years ago; likewise all the children, except two. One of these, a girl, is "somewhere up Nawth". The son has visited him twice in five years and seems never to have anything to give the old man, who expresses himself as desiring much to "quit die unfriendly world" since he has nothing to live for except a lot of dead memories.

"All done left me now. Everything I got done gone—all 'cept Keziah. She comes and visits me and we talk and walk over there where we uster and set on the porch. She low she gwine steal ole Acie some of dese days in the near future, and I'll be mighty glad to go ever yonder where all I got is at."

REFERENCE

1. Personal interview with Acie Thomas, Moncrief Road Jacksonville, Florida