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SHACK THOMAS, Centenarian

Beady-eyed, grey-whiskered, black little Shack Thomas sits in the sun in front of his hut on the Old Saint Augustine Road about three miles south of Jacksonville, 102 years old and full of humorous reminiscences about most of those years. To his frequent visitors he relates tales of his past, disjointedly sometimes but with a remarkable clearness and conviction.

The old ex-slave does not remember the exact time of his birth, except that it was in the year 1834, "the day after the end of the Indian War." He does not recall which of the Indian wars, but says that it was while there were still many Indians in West Florida who were very hard for him to understand when he got big enough to talk, to them.

He was born, he says on "a great big place that b'longed to Mister Jim Campbell; I don't know just exactly how big, but there was a lot of us working on it when I was a little fellow." The place was evidently one of the plantations near Tallahassee; Thomas remembers that as soon as he was large enough he helped his parents and others raise "corn, peanuts, a little bit of cotton and potatoes. Squash just grew wild in the woods; we used to eat them when we couldn't get anything else much."

The centennarian remembers his parents clearly; his mother was one Nancy and his father's name was Adam. His father, he says, used to spend hours after the candles were out telling him and his brothers about his capture and subsequent slavery.

Adam was a native of the West Coast of Africa, and when quite a young man was attracted one day to a large ship that had just come near his home. With many others he was attracted aboard by bright red handkerchiefs, shawls and other articles in the hands of the seamen. Shortly afterwards he was securely bound in the hold of the ship, to be later sold somewhere in America. Thomas does not know exactly where Adam landed, but knows that his father had been in Florida many years before his birth. "I guess that's why I can't stand red things now," he says; "my pa hated the sight of it."

Thomas spent all of his enslaved years on the Campbell plantation, where he describes pre-emancipation conditions as better than "he used to hear they was on the other places." Campbell himself is described as moderate, if not actually kindly. He did not permit his slaves to be beaten to any great extent. "The most he would give us was a 'switching', and most of the time we could pray out of that."

"But sometimes he would get a hard man working for him, though," the old man continues. "One of them used to 'buck and gag' us." This he describes as a punishment used particularly with runaways, where the slave would be gagged and tied in a squatting position and left in the sun for hours. He claims to have seen other slaves suspended by their thumbs for varying periods; he repeats, though, that these were not Campbell's practices.

During the years before "surrinder", Thomas saw much traffic in slaves, he says. Each year around New Years, itinerant "speculators" would come to his vicinity and either hold a public sale, or lead the slaves, tied together, to the plantation for inspection or sale.

"A whole lot of times they wouldn't sell 'em, they'd just trade 'em like they did horses. The man (plantation owner) would have a couple of old women who couldn't do much any more, and he'd swap 'em to the other man for a young 'un. I seen lots of 'em traded that way, and sold for money too."

Thomas recalls at least one Indian family that lived in his neighborhood until he left it after the War. This family, he says, did not work, but had a little place of their own. "They didn't have much to do with nobody, though," he adds.

Others of his neighbors during these early years were abolition-minded white residents of the area. These, he says would take in runaway slaves and "either work 'em or hide 'em until they could try to get North." When they'd get caught at it, though, they'd "take 'em to town and beat 'em like they would us, then take their places and run 'em out."

Later he came to know the "pu-trols" and the "refugees." Of the former, he has only to say that they gave him a lot of trouble every time he didn't have a pass to leave—"they only give me one twice a week,"—and of the latter that it was they who induced the slaves of Campbell to remain and finish their crop after the Emancipation, receiving one-fourth of it for their share. He states that Campbell exceeded this amount in the division later.

After 'surrinder' Thomas and his relatives remained on the Campbell place, working for $5 a month, payable at each Christmas. He recalls how rich he felt with this money, as compared with the other free Negroes in the section. All of the children and his mother were paid this amount, he states.

The old man remembers very clearly the customs that prevailed both before and after his freedom. On the plantation, he says, they never faced actual want of food, although his meals were plain. He ate mostly corn meal and bacon, and squash and potatoes, he adds "and every now and then we'd eat more than that." He doesn't recall exactly what, but says it was "Oh, lots of greens and cabbage and syrul, and sometimes plenty of meat too."

His mother and the other women were given white cotton—he thinks it may have been duck—dresses "every now and then", he states, but none of the women really had to confine themselves to white, "cause they'd dye 'em as soon as they'd get 'em." For dye, he says they would boil wild indigo, poke berries, walnuts and some tree for which he has an undecipherable name.

Campbell's slaves did not have to go barefoot—not during the colder months, anyway. As soon as winter would come, each one of them was given a pair of bright, untanned leather "brogans," that would be the envy of the vicinity. Soap for the slaves was made by the women of the plantation; by burning cockle-burrs, blackjack wood and other materials, then adding the accumulated fat of the past few weeks. For light they were given tallow candles. Asked if there was any certain time to put the candles out at night, Thomas answers that "Mr. Campbell didn't care how late you stayed up at night, just so you was ready to work at daybreak."

The ex-slave doesn't remember any feathers in the covering for his pallet in the corner of his cabin, but says that Mr. Campbell always provided the slaves with blankets and the women with quilts.

By the time he was given his freedom, Thomas had learned several trades in addition to farming; one of them was carpentry. When he eventually left his $5 a month job with his master, he began travelling over the state, a practice he has not discontinued until the present. He worked, he says, "in such towns as Perry, Sarasota, Clearwater

and every town in Florida down to where the ocean goes under the bridge." (Probably Key West.)

He came to Jacksonville about what he believes to be half a century ago. He remembers that it was "ever so long before the fire" (1901) and "way back there when there wasn't but three families over here in South Jacksonville: the Sahds, the Hendricks and the Oaks. I worked for all of them, but I worked for Mr. Bowden the longest."

The reference is to R.L. Bowden, whom Thomas claims as one of his first employers in this section.

The old man has 22 children, the eldest of those living, looking older than Thomas himself. This "child" is fifty-odd years. He has been married three times, and lives now with his 50 year old wife.

In front of his shack is a huge, spreading oak tree. He says that there were three of them that he and his wife tended when they first moved to Jacksonville. "That one there was so little that I used to trim it with my pocket-knife," he states. The tree he mentioned is now about two-and-a-half feet in diameter.

"Right after my first wife died, one of them trees withered," the old man tells you. "I did all I could to save the other one, but pretty soon it was gone too. I guess this other one is waiting for me," he laughs, and points to the remaining oak.

Thomas protests that his health is excellent, except for "just a little haze that comes over my eyes, and I can't see so good." He claims that he has no physical aches and pains. Despite the more than a century his voice is lively and his hearing fair, and his desire for travel still very much alive. When interviewed he had just completed a trip to a daughter in Clearwater, and "would have gone farther than that, but my son wouldn't send me no fare like he promised!"

REFERENCE

1. Interview with subject, Shack Thomas, living on Old Saint Augustine Road, South Jacksonville, Florida