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Rewrite: Feb. 1, 1938.

Craig Vollmer

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INTERVIEW WITH CHARLOTTE JOHNSON WHITE

Slave born, age 88
Rt. 1, Box 107,
Fort Gibson, Oklahoma.

Near as I ever know, I was born in the year of 1850, away back in them hills east of Tahlequah; the Cherokee folks called it the Flint District and old master Ben Johnson lived somewheres about ten miles east of the big Indian town, Tahlequah. Never did know just where his farm was, and when the new towns of this country spring up it make it that much harder for me to figure out just where he lived and where at I was born.

Don't know much about own folks either, excepting that my mother's name was Elasey Johnson and my pappy's name was Banjo Lastley, who one time lived around where Lenapah now is. There was one brother name of Turner Whitmire Johnson, and a half sister name of Jennie Miller Lastley, who is still living down in Muskogee, but brother Turner been dead most 40 year I guess. Pappy was belonging to another master, that's how come my folks' name was different, but I kept the old Johnson name, even though the old ~~mater~~ ^{master} was the meanest kind of a man.

His wife, Mistress Anna, died when one of their children was born; maybe that's why he was so mean, just worried all the time. The master lived in a double log house, with a double fireplace in the middle of two rooms, and I was one of the girls who stayed in the house to take care of their children. How many childred they had I never remember and I don't remember their names, but they was all pretty mean, like the master and the overseer that drive the folks who work in the field.

The cabin where I live with my mother was a two room log house having two doors that open right into the yard. There was no gallery on the slave cabins and no windows, so the corners of the rooms get dark early and sometime I get pretty scared before mother got in from the fields in the evening. She be gone all the day and always leave me a big baked sweet potato on the board above the fireplace and that I eat about noon for my dinner.

That was before I got big enough to work in the master's house and take care of the children. She always work in the fields; she was sick all the time, but that didn't keep her out of the fields or the garden work. Sometimes she be so sick she could barely get out of the old wood bunk when the morning work call sound on the farm.

One day my mother couldn't get up and the old master come around to see about it, and when he yelled, 'Get out of there and get yourself in the fields,' she tried to go but was too sick to work. She got ^{to} the door alright; couldn't hurry fast enough for the old master though, so he pushed her in a little ditch that was by the cabin and whipped her back with the lash, then he reached down and rolled her over so's he could beat her face and neck. She didn't live long after that and I guess the whippings helped to kill her, but she better off dead than just living for the whip.

Time I was twelve years old I was tending the master's children like what they tell me to do, and then one day somehow I drop one of them right by where the old master was burning some brush in the yard. 'What you do that for?' He yelled, and while I was stooping to pick up the baby he grabbed me and shoved me into the fire! I went into that fire head first, but I never know how I got out. See this old drawn, scarred face?

That's what I got from the fire, and inside my lips is burned off, and my back is scarred with lashings that'll be with me when I meet my Jesus!

Them things help me remember about the slave days and how once when I got sick of being treated mean by everybody after mother died, I slipped off in the woods to get away and wandered around until I come to a place folks said was Scullyville. On the way I eat berries and chew bark from the trees, and one feed I got from some colored people on the way.

But the old master track me down and there I is back at the old farm for more whippings. Then I was give away to my Aunt Easter Johnson, but she was a mean woman - mean to everybody. She had a boy six years old. That boy got to crying one day and she grabbed up a big club and beat her own child to death. Then she laughed about ! Like she was crazy, I guess. And the only thing was done to her was a locking up in the chicken house, ending up with a salt and pepper whipping!

All the slaves wore cotton clothes in summer, wool jackets in the winter and brass toed shoes made from the hide of some old cow that wasn't no good milker anymore. I lost the first pair of shoes they give me and had to go barefoot all that winter. Out in a thicket I had seen a rabbit so I started after it, but took off my shoes and set them down so's I could sneak up without making noise. Then I miss the rabbit and go back for the shoes but they was nowhere I could find them. When Master Johnson find out the shoes was lost I got another whipping.

I hear about the slaves being free when maybe a hundred soldiers come to the house. They was a pretty sight setting on their horses, and the men had on blue uniforms with little caps. 'All the slaves is free!' one of the men said, and after that I just told everybody, 'I is a free

negro now and I ain't going to work for nobody!"

A long time after the war is over and everybody is free of they masters, I get down to Muldrow (Okla.) and that's where I join the church. For 58 year I belong the colored Baptists and I learn that everybody ought to be good while they is living so's they will have a better resting place when they die.

In 1891 I met a good man, Randolph White, and we got married. I still got some of the pieces or scraps of my wedding dress, a cotton dress it was, with lots of colors printed on it - wild colors like the Indians use to wear.