

Frank Coffee (Negro)
Bridgeport, Alabama

Jennie Sue Williams
Jackson County, Alabama

AL-84

out

FRANK COFFEE

Frank Coffee and his wife, Paralee, live in a nine-room house at Bridgeport. He is a picture of shuffling feebleness.

"We jes' use three rooms," Frank said. "We'd rent out part uv dis big house iffen we could fin' anybody wantin' to rent. We pay four dollars a month rent and ain't nobody here but me and de old mule and twenty-four chickens and Paralee.

"I wuz born in Fackler, Alabama in 1866. My father belonged to Mr. Rice Coffee. Dey wuz fo'teen uv us chilluns. Six is still livin' yet; four in Hollywood, Alabama, and one in Knoxville, Tennessee.

"I lived in Fackler fifty-one years and raised cotton on Mr. Borex's farm. De bes' I ever done wuz four or five bales in one year. Part uv de time I rented on halves with de landlord furnishin'; and part uv de time I furnished my own team and rented by de third and fo'th. I useta pick two hundred pounds uv cotton a day. My wife has picked dat much too.

"When I lef' Fackler, I went to Richard City, Tennessee, and worked fo'teen years firin' boilers at de cement plant; but i got outa work when dey put in improved machinery. When I started workin' dey employed three hundred men and now dey work eighty men and make more cement dan ever before.

"I been in Bridgeport seven years tryin' to make a livin' at any-thing I can fin' to do. Las' year, I made a small crop on Mr. Jacobs' place, but de TVA destroyed lots uv it. I had jes' enough corn lef' to feed my mule.

"Yessum, de TVA give me eighteen dollars, but dat didn' cover damages, 'cause dey ruined all my pumpkins 'sides all de corn and other stuff.

"I make gardens and mow yards, cut wood, and do other little odd jobs that I can fin'. Sometimes, I get old clothes, or stuff to eat, but I don' ever get over ten cents a hour for my work. I preach once a month. I'm a Missionary Baptist preacher. I been preachin' thirty-eight years, but I jes' preach once a month. I guess I'm too lazy, to preach more.

"Paralee, dat's my wife, does three washin's a week. We been married thirty-eight years. She's from Hollywood, Alabama, and is two years older'n me, but", Frank looked around furtively, "she ain' de boss. I has to let her think she is havin' her way part uv de time and den when her back is turned; I do as I please.

"We had six chilluns, but Ike, who is 34, is the only one livin' now. He works at de pipe foundry in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

"I work harder in the summer so I go to bed 'bout six o'clock. In de winter, I set 'round de fire with Paralee and we read de Bible and study our Sunday School lesson 'till 'bout nine. I go to Sunday School every week.

"I went to school three terms uv about three months each; jes' enough to learn to read and write. Paralee never did go to school."

I mentioned o'possum hunting to Frank and he responded with unexpected liveliness.

"Yessum," he said enthusiastically, "I caught ten 'possums and five 'coons all in one night. It ain't too many to get rid uv. Take a big fat possum and roast him with sweet 'taters and man alive! You got some mighty fine eatin'.

"We get 'em dis way; De dogs tree de possums and some uv us climb de tree and shake him down. Coons are harder to get dan possums 'cause

dey fight de dogs.

"One night three uv us niggers started out coon huntin' with four dogs. Dey treed a coon and we got permission from Mr. English, who owned de land, to cut down de tree. 'Bout dat time some white folks come up with ten dogs. When we got Mr. Coon down, he wuz mad as everything. We'd hold all de dogs 'ceptin' one and we'd let him and de coon fight. That coon whipped all fourteen uv de dogs and one uv dem won't never hunt no more coons. When he whipped de las' one and sent him howlin' off through the woods, dat coon jes' walked up to de tree and set down like he wuz wantin' more dogs to whip. Iffen we hadn' finally killed dat coon with de ax, he mighta whipped us."

Frank settled back, seemingly enjoying fond memories. I said to him "Frank, did you ever see a ghost?"

Quickly he replied: "I never seed a ghost in all mylife." His eyes rolled then, unwittingly, Frank Coffee propounded what might be taken as sound philosophy. He said: "It's this way, Missus. I never have looked for ghosts; and people have to hunt ghosts 'fore dey can see any."

I left Frank Coffee then; but I haven't forgotten what he said.

1/30/39

S.J.