

JOHN RUDD

District #5, Vanderburgh County

Interviewed by Lauana Creel

“Yes, I was a slave, and I'll say this to the whole world; slavery was the worst curse ever visited on the people of the United States.”

John Rudd is a negro, dark and swarthy as to complexion but his nose is straight and aquiline, for his mother was half Indian.

The memory of his mother, Liza Rudd, is sacred to John Rudd today and her many disadvantages are still a source of grief to the old man of 83 years. John Rudd was born on Christmas day 1854 in the home of Benjamin Simms, at Springfield, Kentucky. The mother of the young child was housemaid for Mistress Simms and Uncle John remembers that mother and child received only the kindest consideration from all members of the Simms family.

While John was yet a small boy, Benjamin Simms died and the Simms slaves were auctioned to the highest bidders. If you want to know what unhappiness means, said Uncle John Rudd, just you stand on the Slave Block and hear the auctioneer's voice selling you away from the folks you love. Uncle John explained how mothers and fathers were often separated from their dearly loved children, at the auction block, but John and his younger brother Thomas were fortunate and were bought by the same master along with Liza Rudd, their mother. An elder brother, Henry, was separated from his mother and brothers and became the property of George Snyder and was thereafter known as Henry Snyder.

When Liza Rudd and her two little sons left the slave block they were the property of Henry Moore who lived a few miles away from Springfield. Uncle John declares that unhappiness met them at the threshold of Moore's estate.

Liza was given the position of cook, housemaid, and plow-hand while her little boys were made to hoe, carry wood, and care for the small children of the Moore family.

John had only been at the Moore home a few months when he witnessed several slaves being badly beaten. Henry Moore kept a white overseer and several white men were employed to

whip slaves. A large barrel stood near the slave quarters and the little boy discovered that the barrel was a whipping post. The slaves would be strapped across the side of the barrel and two strong men would wield the cat of nine tails until blood flowed from gashed flesh, and the cries and prayers of the unfortunate culprits availed them nothing until the strength of the floggers became exhausted.

One day, when several Negroes had just recovered from an unusual amount of chastisement, the little Negro, John Rudd, was playing in the front yard of the Moore's house when he heard a soft voice calling him. He knew the voice belonged to Shell Moore, one of his best friends at the Moore estate. Shell had been among those severely beaten and little John had been grieving over his misfortunes.

"Shell had been in the habit of whittling out whistles for me and petting of me", said the now aged negro. "I went to see what he wanted with me and he said 'Goodbye Johnnie, you'll never see Shellie alive after today.'" Shell made his way toward the cornfield but the little Negro boy, watching him go, did not realize what situation confronted him. That night the master announced that Shell had run away again and the slaves were started searching fields and woods but Shell's body was found three days later by Rhoder McQuirk, dangling from a rafter of Moore's corn crib where the unhappy Negro had hanged himself with a leather halter.

"Shell was a splendid worker and was well worth a thousand dollars. If he had been fairly treated he would have been happy and glad to repay kindness by toil. Master Henry would have been better to all of us, only Mistress Jane was always riling him up", declared John Rudd as he sat in his rocking chair under a shade tree.

"Jane Moore, was the daughter of Old Thomas Rakin, one of the meanest men, where slaves were concerned, and she had learned the slave-driving business from her daddy."

Uncle John related a story concerning his mother as follows: "Mama had been working in the cornfield all day 'till time to cook supper. She was just standing in the smokehouse that was built back of the big kitchen when Mistress walks in. She had a long whip hidden under her apron and began whipping Mama across the shoulders, without telling her why. Mama wheeled around from where she was slicing ham and started running after old Missus Jane. Ole Missus ran so fast Mama couldn't catch up with her so she threw the butcher knife and stuck it in the wall up to

the hilt. I was scared. I was afraid when Master Henry came in I believed he would have Mama whipped to death. 'Where's Jane?' said Master Henry. 'She's upstairs with the door locked', said Mama. Then she told old Master Henry the truth about how Mistress Jane whipped her and show him the marks of the whip. She showed him the butcher knife sticking in the wall. 'Get your clothes together', said Master Henry.

John then had to be parted from his mother. Henry Rudd [TR: 'Moore' written above in brackets.] believed that the Negroes were going to be set free. War had been declared and his desire was to send Liza far into the southern states where the price of a good negro was higher than in Kentucky. When he reached Louisville he was offered a good price for her service and hired her out to cook at a hotel. John grieved over the loss of his mother but afterward learned she had been well treated at Louisville. John Rudd continued to work for Henry Moore until the Civil War ended. Then Henry Snyder came to the Moore home and demanded his brothers to be given into his charge.

Henry Snyder had enlisted in the Federal Army and had fought throughout the war. He had entered or leased seven acres of good land seven miles below Owensboro, Kentucky, and on those good acres of Davies County farmland the mother and her three sons were reunited.

John Rudd had never seen a river until he made the trip to Owensboro with his brother Henry. The trip was made on the big Gray Eagle and Uncle John declares "I was sure thrilled to get that boat ride". He relates many incidents of runaway Negroes. Remembers his fear of the Ku Klux, and remembers seeing seven ex-slaves hanging from one tree near the top of Grimes-Hill, just after the close of the war.

When John grew to young manhood he worked on farms in Davis County near Owensboro for several years, then procured the job of portering for John Sporree, a hotel keeper at Owensboro, and in this position, John worked for fifteen years.

While at Owensboro he met the trains and boats. He recalls the boats; Morning Star, and Guiding Star; both excursion boats that carried gay men and women on pleasure trips up and down the Ohio River.

Uncle John married Teena Queen, his beloved first wife, at Owensboro. To this union was born one son but he has not been to see his father nor has he heard from him for thirty years, and his

father believes him to have died. The second wife was Minnie Dixon who still lives with Uncle John at Evansville.

When asked what his political ideas were, Uncle John said his politics is his love for his government. He draws an old age compensation of 14 dollars a month.

Uncle John had some trouble proving his age but met the situation by having a friend write to the Catholic Church authorities at Springfield. Mrs. Simms had taken the position of Godmother to the baby and his birth and christening had been recorded in the church records. He is a devout Catholic and believes that religion and freedom are the two richest blessings ever given to mankind.

Uncle John worked as a janitor at the Boehne Tuberculosis Hospital for eight years. While working there he received a fall that crippled him. He walks by the aid of a cane but is able to visit with his friends and do a small amount of work in his home.