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FC

Marjorie Woods Austin

Charlie Bell, colored, was born at Poplarville, Pearl River County, Mississippi, in 1856 on the plantation of a Mr. Moore. Charlie does not recall his master's given name nor initials as he himself was only nine years old when he was transferred to another owner. But he remembers that Mr. Moore had four hundred slaves and upwards of six hundred acres in cultivation and that there were four sons and three daughters in the Moore family.

Just at the close of the Civil War, one of Mr. Moore's daughters was married to "the Mr. Long-Bell-Lumber Company Bell" and Charlie was one of the nine darkies, including his own parents, "who just stayed on," as a part of Little Miss's "setting-out." Hence his surname became Bell by which he is still known.

Bell, at his present age of eighty-one, is hale and erect, in color medium brown (as browns in this sense go) set off by a growth of closely kinked benevolent-looking white wool covering his head, cheeks, chin and most of his neck. He is five feet, six inches, tall and weighs one hundred sixty-five pounds. His upper teeth present a solid gold front which condition, be it noted, is less disfiguring to

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the negro face than to the white; in fact, the color scheme is rather good, which may account for the pride most negroes take in the possession of gold teeth.

Bell's story offers the rather unique item that at the age of eighty-one, he is still earning his living by his own labor, being now employed as handiman at the McQuillan Distributing Agency for Fehr's Beer, No. 245, 24th Ave., Meridian, Miss. It is not to be assumed, however, that Bell sympathized with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. On the contrary, he has a very poor opinion of the practice, rising from the observation of a long life, declaring "can't no man beat John Barleycorn because he whups ever man that jumps on him."

The suggestion was made to Bell that probably he had never been ill since he looked so strong and healthy. To this he replied modestly that he hadn't "been sick any too much;" "aint took a dose of Epsom Salts since 1914."

Interest was felt in how and why Bell left Pearl River County to take up his abode in Meridian. He supplied this information politely but appeared slightly embarrassed by the questioner's ignorance. "Taint no piece over there;

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I can walk there in a day. I just come to Meridian. Of course when I was a little feller, our largest city was Mobile or maybe Biloxi." The inference is obvious, we believe?

On the subject of his domestic affairs, Bell was inclined to be reticent. "Me and my wife is separated. I just lives with a family in Royal Alley" (this is near St. Luke's Street on South Side, Meridian, a section more or less given over to the daughters of joy, regardless of color). "Yes'm, I has chullen but they aint no good." When pressed to give the number of his offspring: "About fourteen head of 'em." It was then suggested that he must have many grandchildren and he agreed that he probably had "a right smart of 'em" but did not know how many as all his children were grown and living in other parts of the country.

Bell posed for his photograph with the dignity native to his race and was in no wise deflected from the business in hand by the excited comments and antics of the ring of colored gamins who instantly gathered from nowhere to see the thing well done.

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(The information herein was from Charlie Bell himself on July 5, 1937, at Meridian, and verified at some points by Mr. Casper Phillips, Attorney, Meridian, Mr. Phillips having known Bell for some years.

Accompanying photographs by James Butters.

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Charlie Bell
Royal Alley
Meridian, Miss.

Age, 81 years
Height, 5 feet, 6 inches
Weight, 165 pounds
Color, medium brown
Hair, kinky white
Beard, kinky white

Photo. by James Butters
July 6, 1937

"I b'longed to Mr. Mo' frum Poplarville in Pearl River County. They was 'bout fo' hund'ed slaves an' up'ards of six hund'ed acres in cultivation; hit aint no tellin' how many acres they was in all. I disremembers his fus' name 'cause I wasn't but nine year old when de Surrender come in sixty-five an' Mr. Mo's oldest girl mar'ied, an' me an' my mama an' my daddy an' six others was part of her settin'-out. So we jes stayed on. She mar'ied Mr. Long-Bell-Lumber Company Bell, an' that's how come my name is Bell 'stead of Mo'.

"My mother was bornd between Poplarville an' Picayune an' my father was bornd at Red Church forty mile below New Orleans. I have heard say my gran'father was bornd there too.

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My father was a carpenter an' a blacksmith, could make a whole wagon, go out an' cut him a gum tree an' make a whole wooden wagon, an' hubs an' ever'thing. That's how come they didn' take him to de War; leave him at home ter make mule shoes an' things. He was a powerful worker.

"I 'tended de cows an' calves - give 'em water - an' fed de chickens what roos' in de big hen-house. But 'fo I got big enough ter do that, I stay in de 'long house' with de other little fellers. It was jes hewed out er logs. They was notched ter fit - like this - an' dobbed with mud an' pine straw - wouldn't never wash out. Three of de old women 'tended ter de chullun an' cooked they sompin'-t'eat. They'd po' syrup in ever'one of 'em's plate an' ever'one of 'em had a tin cup ter theyse'f fer they milk. They had a big oven like a frog-stool house, made out er mud. In de summer they moved hit out in de yard 'cause de chullun didn' stay in de 'long house' 'cep' in de winter. Hit was plum full then, though, an' Miss Mo' she come out ever' day an' teached us out'n a Blue Back Speller.

"Mr. Mo' built a log church for his labor on de plantation. A white preacher come twice a month ter speak ter us. His tex' would always be 'Obey yo' marster an'

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mistress that yo' days may be lingerin' upon God's green earth what he give you. We didn' have no nigger preachin' ter us when I was little.

"Some of de colored folks was pretty sociable. Some of 'em was pretty good scholars, could read well enough ter go anywhere an' enjoy theyse'fs. De niggers on de plantation danced a heap - seemed ter me like hit was mos' ever' night. You takes a coon skin an' make a drum out of hit, stretch hit over a keg - a sawed-off one - dat make a fine drum. An' banjos an' fiddlers! Didn' have no mandolines an' gui-tars then.

"I've heard say they didn' never buy medicine. Whenever one of 'em got sick, they give 'em peach-tree leaves fer chils an' fever an' biliousness; hit was boiled an' steeped. An' they give 'em red-oak bark fer dysentery; put hit in a glass an' po' cold water over hit an' drink off er hit all day. Fer jes plain sprains, they'd make a poultice out er okra leaves; hit ud show draw you! You know what they'd put on a bad sprain? Put a dirt-dobber's nest an' vinegar. When de chullun had dem bad colds like they has now, they give 'em hic'ry bark tea, drink hit kinder warm, drink hit night an' mornin'. Hit kep' dat

cough frum botherin' 'em.

"Mr. Mo' went ter de War an' come back all right. Found things on de plantation jes like he lef' 'em. You see, when you has servants arouns yo' house, they keeps hit whether yo' presence er yo' absence is there. I show you what I means, madam. After Mr. Mo' come back frum de Civil War, he had all de barns overhauled an' banked ever-thing, turnips an' ever'thing, so he'd be able ter take care er all his labor he had on de place. Didn't but a few niggers leave. They all stayed wid him till he died. After he died, they scattered.

"When de Yankees come down endurin' of de time of de War, I remembers 'em comin' by an' givin' us candy. They mus' er been a hundred small chullun of us there. I say ter de old colored woman what looked after us, I say 'Look here, they aint got no wagons like we got.' They wagons wasn't made like ours. The Yankees didn' trouble nothin' on de plantation. After I got grown, I found out why they didn' bother us: 'cause Mrs. Mo' was a Eastern Star sister an' de Gen'l wouldn' let 'em bother us. I tell you in a minute what his name was. He was a small-like stout man, had a little beard jes like dis er-way . . . I'd know him

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right now if I was ter see him. Name Sherman - that was hit.

"I fus' come ter Mer-ree-dian when I was a grown boy. Hit aint no piece over ter Poplarville frum here. I could walk hit in a day. Of co''se, when I was a little feller, our larges' city was Mobile or maybe B'loxi, but hit's diffrent now. Hit took eight days ter go ter Mobile in er ox wagon th'ough de country. Hit was de cotton market. We'd bring back coffee an' cloth an' shoes an' things.

"Miss Bell went ter Arkansas ter live after she mar'ied an' tuck us nine niggers with her. Mr. Bell raised me frum then on right frum his table. They'd go north ter spen' de summer, er to California sometimes, an' I go with 'em wheresoever they go. I shined his shoes an' put his clothes in de pressin' club ever'day. I was with him thirty some years befo' he died. I had three thousan' dollars worth er stock in de Long-Bell Lumber Company. After while de lumber bus'ness got mighty bad an' ever'body los' they money, white folks an' niggers too. I got these here gold teeth after I come ter Mer-ree-dian. Hit's been my head-quarters off an' on like you know you has headquarters in a big place.

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"I'se worked fer my bread an' meat all my life. I works now fer Mr. McQuillan Beer 'Stributin' Company. But John Barleycorn, he's a bad feller. Can't no man beat John Barleycorn 'cause he whups ever' man that jumps on him. Heap er folks is sick fer that an' if hit aint that, hit's sompon' else. I aint been sick any too much - aint took a dose er Epsom Salts since 1914.

"Me an' my wife is sep-er-rated. She spent all de money I had an' when de lumber bus'ness got bad an' I couldn't get no mo', she tol' me I wasn't any good. So I jes walk off an' lef' her. I jes lives with a fam'ly in Royal Alley. I has chullun - 'bout fo'teen head of 'em - but they aint no good. They all grown an' livin' away frum here. I 'spec' I got a right smart er gran'chullun."