

Every Aspect of Slave Life Involved Work: Woman Recalls Great-grandmother's Tales

By: Karla Price

"Freedom, in poverty and trials and tribulations, even amidst the most cruel prejudices, is sweeter than the best fed or the best clothed slavery in the world. -- Former slave H. C. Smith in Alwyn Barr's Black Texans

Vivid images spark 59-year-old Frances Todd's memories of her great-grandmother's stories about life in slavery in the community of McGregor.

"My great-grandmother and grandfather were freed slaves of the Caufield's," she said. "The Caufield's had a large ranch on the South Bosque. My great-grandmother was a cook at the Caufield ranch."

Her great-grandmother, who took the name Harriet Caufield, was not born into slavery. At age 14, she was sold into it.

"She came from [the] East Coast in Virginia. Her mother was an Indian who married an African man. When she was 14 and living in an Indian camp, she was sold into slavery. The soldiers came and captured them and made them slaves," Todd said. "Her first master got into a poker game and lost his money, and then he was going to auction off Harriet to pay his debts," Todd continued. "So he just sold her. She had to leave her mama and her daddy and go on the slave block. And then Mr. Caufield owned her. She said Mr. Caufield was kind."

Caufield brought the slaves he owned with him to McGregor.

Civil War Breaks Out

"When the War between [Between] the States came, Mr. Caufield went off with the Confederate Army and Mrs. Caufield stayed there with the slaves as they ran the ranch. Mrs. Caufield was mean. My great-aunt Amy had a scalp infection when she was a baby and Mrs. Caufield wouldn't let her go to the doctor."

After the Civil War ended, Union soldiers came to speak to the Caufield slaves, said Todd.

"The Union soldiers came June the 19th and told them they were free and they were entitled to seven acres and a mule, and they decided to leave and come into Waco to work," she said.

It wasn't a hard decision for her great-grandmother, Todd said.

Longing to Be Free

"They wanted their freedom," Todd says. "They wanted to go."

Many slaves may have had the same sentiment. While some were content, if not happy, with their lives, many had a strong yearning for freedom.

Life for slaves in Texas varied according to a number of factors: whether the slave worked on a plantation or a small farm, whether they worked in the fields or in the master's household, and whether they lived in the city or the country.

"A plantation by definition required the labor of at least 20 slaves, so a planter was a farmer who owned at least 20 slaves," said Baylor University history professor Stanley Campbell. "Thus the distinction is between the larger plantation and the small independent farmer, who might have anywhere from one to 10 slaves. The small farm slave worked in the field with his owner."

Life in the Household

Plantations also had a contingent of household slaves, said Campbell.

"They could have been cobblers, skilled workers like carpenters, blacksmiths," he said. "The life of the household servant was in many ways better than for the field hand, but they had less freedom, less autonomy, because they were under the eye of the mistress or the master all the time. The food probably would have been better, the clothing would have been better. Whether they were actually treated better would depend on the individual situation."

As Campbell notes, the treatment of slaves varied from place to place and depended on the temperament of the owner. For example, historian Patricia Wallace writes that Sarah Walker, who owned land on the east bank of the Brazos River, once became enraged when her son sold the cook who made her favorite "knife blade thin" pancakes.

"Sarah's son, George, without consulting his mother, sold the cook for \$2,000. When the new cook's pancakes did not satisfy Sarah, she whipped both the cook and her son who insisted on still another slave for a cook," Wallace writes.

Caring for 'Investment'

However, many owners saw treating slaves well as protecting an investment. "If you have a field hand who was worth \$2,000, are you going to maim him? So there were certain economic, if not humane considerations that had to be taken into account," Campbell said.

Those slaves who rebelled either escaped, never to be seen again, or were punished, usually by whipping or branding. However, most owners were relatively kind to their slaves because their social standing would fall if neighbors found out about severe mistreatment, according to Alwyn Barr's *Black Texans*

Slaves were routinely denied two privileges: the right to read and write, and the right to practice the religion they chose.

Harrison Switch resident John Holder says his parents and grandparents, born into slavery, told him they were forbidden to read and write.

Forbidden to read, write

"They said they told them if they caught them writing, they would cut their finger off, and if they caught them reading they would cut their tongue out. They wanted to read and write, but they were scared, you know?" he said.

"In law generally, it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write," says Campbell. Some did anyway. After the Nat Turner rebellion, it was harder to teach reading and writing. The owners were afraid that it would permit them to read abolitionist literature and it might also lead to slave rebellion."

Turner, a slave and preacher in Virginia, led a revolt involving 60 to 70 slaves who killed about 60 whites. He and about 20 slaves were hanged.

Religion was a troublesome area for slaves and their owners, said James Sorelle, assistant professor of history at Baylor University.

"On the one hand, the owners wanted to Christianize people who they considered to be heathenistic," he said. "What troubled masters, obviously, about Christianity was that the slaves, if they listened to a lot of sermons, would also learn about Moses, and they didn't want any Moses rising up among the slaves.

"Masters were very concerned about slaves controlling their own religious life; and this doesn't really apply only to religion, it applies to fraternization of slaves in a group," added Sorelle.

A Life of Work

Every aspect of slave life involved work. Most slaves picked cotton or sugar or plucked corn from 7 a.m. to sundown Monday through Saturday, with an hour off for lunch. An adult slave could usually pick 150 to 200 pounds of cotton a day. They also cut wood, built fences, cleared land and dug wells, according to author Barr. Some owners hired out their slaves to work for others for pay. Older slaves who could no longer work in the fields cared for slave children too young to work in the fields.

Todd says her great-grandmother told her that no matter how well treated they were, freedom was always uppermost in the minds of the slaves.

"Blacks were not happy; they were not singing and dancing," she says. "They were oppressed, and they always wanted to stand tall and be free."