

THE BIOGRAPHY OF ENOCH JEFFERSON JOHNS

AS TOLD TO HIS GRANDSON MARION JOHNS

DECEMBER 26, 1942

I was born on October 30, 1859 in Washington County, Florida. My father's name was Enoch; my mother's maiden name was Elizabeth Nichols. My father was a native of Alabama; my mother, a native of Georgia; both moving to Florida before their marriage. My father's marriage to my mother was his second marriage. Five children were born to my father and mother; three boys and two girls. The girls name were Zylpha Ann and Serah Frances; the boys', Elias Davis, Alexander, and myself. My father's children by his first wife were Charles, Marion, Henry, Mary, and Ann, who were all born in the state of Alabama.

All of the children by the second marriage were born near Holmes Valley, a very fertile section for farming, located about five miles east of Vernon. My father was a farmer and blacksmith. He was also a sportsman; his principal sports being hunting and fishing. At this time game of all kinds was plentiful and my father was a crack shot with a rifle or a shot gun. One of my recollections of early childhood was seeing our smokehouse full of smoked deer meet, bear beat, and fish.

My father was a very energetic, industrious, and high-tempered man, and did not hesitate to defend himself in anything he thought was right. I cannot remember my father very well, and I learned more about him from my relatives and friends who know him well. He was conscripted into a home guard company for duty during the Civil War and was taken away from us in 1865. I remember seeing him on his big red horse riding away from home, while my mother was grieving with my youngest brother in her arms. I remember asking mother why she was crying and her telling me that my father was leaving and that he would never return to us. Her prediction came true as we never saw him again.

My mother was left alone with no means of support other than what she and her children could earn by working on the farms of other people. My father left us plenty but much of it was stolen by deserters from the Civil War. Our hogs and beeves were slaughtered and eaten by them. They took the bee hives near the house and on some occasions we could see them in the moonlight as they picked out a hive rich in honey and carried it into the woods. We lost not only the hives but the bees as well. My grandmother gave me a pair of oxen which were killed by deserters. I found their horns

and hides where they had been butchered. The most unfortunate part about it was that some of the deserters were our own kinfolks. At times we could see them and would try to tell them to leave our stuff alone, but they would only scold back at us and tell us to be quiet.

My father had a number of houses on his place which were occupied by widows and fatherless children who were no better off than we were.

Conditions were very bad as a result of the war. The money, what little there was, was held by a few wealthy people who worked the poor for almost nothing. My mother would work all day in the fields for one gallon of meal.

I remember on one occasion. Mother returning home with her day's pay of meal in her apron and all of us running to meet her. As she stooped over to greet us the meal spilled in the sand. The tragedy was great since there was no food in the house to feed her children or herself. It meant another hard day's work before we had something to eat. I will never forget mother's tears over the lost food for her hungry children.

As soon as the children would get large enough they would go with her to work in the fields and the largest of us were paid only 10 cents a day. A very small amount but was badly needed to help out my mother's small earnings.

Among the children that lived in one of our houses was a very mean boy who took delight in destroying our property. He drowned one of our hogs and my brother and I attempted to enforce the "Law of Moses", that is, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." We got him in the branch one day and tried to drown him and would have possibly done so, had it not been for the appearance of my mother. She saw us holding him under the water and called to us to stop. But she said that it was wrong to kill anyone for any reason.

Later, my brother came home saying this same boy had jumped on him and beaten him up. I took a stick and beat this boy good for mistreating my younger brother. This led to an argument between my mother and his. His mother said that she would whip me if my mother didn't. And when she said that, my mother dared her to lay a hand on me, so I went unpunished.

There were no public schools at this time and the only schooling I got was a few days when there was no work in the fields for us. I studied hard what time I was in school and learned to read a little.

I recall three men coming to our house one day who talked to our mother about binding us out which was nothing more than slavery. Mother said that were not big enough to do anything and one of them said that we could grease his boots. This caused me to dislike him the rest of his life.

Because she thought they would take us away from her, mother started with us on foot to her brother in Alabama, a distance of 65 or 70 miles. On arriving at her brother's house, he refused to let her stay with him or give her any help at all. My mother, heart broken, started back with us. In the meantime, my aunt, thinking that my mother was going to stay in Alabama, hired a man to take our things to us and on our way back we met the man bringing our things to us. He was hired to bring them to us in Alabama, and refused to bring them back to our old house. We had no help to bring them back and had to leave them at houses until we could manage to get someone to call for them and bring them to us. They were brought back piece at a time by people passing.

When we got back, we found out that my aunt had sold our loom and forty head of hogs to pay the man to take our things to 'Alabama.

The hardship of the long trip to Alabama and back proved too much for my mother. She died shortly after we returned.

I was twelve years old and small for my age, at the time of my mother's death. My brothers and sisters and I lived along until our house was destroyed by fire. We moved our things, what we had left, into an old vacant house but were driven out by the owner. Then we put our things under a tree, and it was there one of my sisters died. We went back to our old place and hired my uncle to build us a house on our old place. We built a temporary shelter to live under while our house was being built, and under this shelter another of my sisters got sick and died.

My oldest sister, Mary, by my father's first marriage had married Leonard (Bud) Finch. She took my youngest brother to her home and this left my broth Davis and I all alone. We were both sick and Aunt Jane Taylor took us to her home. When I was able to work, I went to work at anything I could get. I left my aunt and worked for Green Harell three years.

While I was working for Harell he sent me to move a carpenter and his tool to Point Washington, a distance of about 25 miles. I had two yokes of steers. I took the man to Point Washington and he was to go back with me but he "dodged" me and didn't come back with me. When I started back it was almost dark it was very dark and cold. After awhile, I ran out of food for my oxen and was almost frozen and so dark I could scarcely see anything. Suddenly, my team left the main road and pulled up in from of a house. I called and told the man in the house who I was and he took me in, fed me, and gave me a warm bed for the night. The next morning at daylight I left for home.

Leaving Harrell, I worked for widow Jenny Pippins for one month.

Leaving her, I worked for a man named Jarvis Wood for two years.

After this I worked for W. J. Yearby for two years, one for wages, and one for part of the crop. Then I worked next for Zyphia Taylor one year. Then I decided to build a home of my own. I told a friend

of mine, Colonel Horn, about my ideas. He told me how to start. I said I would work for him if he would show me some public land that was open for settlement. He said if I furnished the help to carry the chain used for surveying, he would survey it for me. I took my brother and went to Colonel Horn, who surveyed it for me. We started in the northwest corner, section 34, township 4, and north of range 13 west, and went down the middle of the section. I chose the southwest quarter of the section 34 which contains 160-19/100 acres. At this time I was living with my aunt Zyphia Taylor about three miles from the land that I was planning to make my home.

I came out to my place in August of 1885, bringing a yoke of steers weighing about 300 lbs. a piece. I had everything with me I possessed on the wagon except a hog that followed behind the wagon. The first thing I did to hitch my oxen to a hickory tree cut some poles to build a hog-pen, and put my hog in it. I then cut logs to build a house 12x14 ft., which was necessary to get a deed for the land. After completing the little house, I lived alone for three years. While living alone, I worked for other people on their farms. I also helped build the L&N and BC Railroads. I was one of the first settlers and helped other settlers build homes on their homesteads. At first, I hired my plowing done but after I was married I bought a horse and did it myself.

I was married to Martha Elizabeth Yearby, daughter of J. W. Yearby, on the 5th day of April, 1888 and brought my wife to my log cabin home. We continued to live in this same house and two girls were born, Lois Etta, and Malissie Lee, one son, Curtis Lafayette.

Then I started building the house that I am now living in. Before it was completed, I moved into it and used the log cabin as a kitchen. Four other children were born: Hattie Mae, Beth, Carlos and Arvie. In 1904, I tore down the log cabin and built the present kitchen and dining room onto the main building

In March, after my oldest son was born in October, my wife was taken helpless with rheumatism. I had to do all the work including cooking and washing, and waiting on my helpless wife, for all of my children were small.

This caused me to lose my crop; and I had to sell my horse to buy medicine for my wife. I was forced to go back to plowing an ox until my wife was better. Then I bought a horse but my wife was taken sick again and sold horse as before to buy medicine for her.

I had to carry her everywhere; nursing her at night and many times without getting any sleep at all. One hard time followed another until the children became large enough to work, which was a big help, but it was still a hard struggle to provide our own rice, potatoes and everything else possible as there was very little money to buy things with and in most cases it was either make it or do without.

One of the first things I did when I homesteaded was to set out a lot of fruit trees and a scuppernong vine which is still bearing at the age of 56 years and in the 56 years it has failed only twice to bear a crop of grapes.

The stump of the first tree I cut on my place is still in the yard, which was used for a rice mortar for years. I bought my oldest boy a small axe and to this day there are signs on the stump which he made with it.

When the children got older and some were grown, our living condition improved some but it was still hard to make a living on the little farm. We bought an organ and hired a teacher to teach the older children to play it, which brightened our home life a lot. I still look back with happy thoughts of the family at night after a hard day's work gathering around the organ and singing until bed time.

In 1907, my second oldest daughter Malissie married Ramon P. Evans. They went to live at a place called Sexton, Florida, where they lived for about three years. My oldest daughter married L. R. White and went to Bonifay, Florida. Malissie and her husband sold their place and went to Bonifay where they lived until she died in October of 1911.

In the winter of 1911-12, all of my family except myself had measles. It made my wife very sick and really never recovered from them. In early spring of 1912 she and my oldest son were summoned to Vernon as witnesses in a murder case. They were there several days and were discharged late at night. My wife was so anxious to return to her children she would not wait until daylight but started for home immediately and took all night to make the trip in horse and buggy.

The next day after she returned I took the two older girls and went to town to do some trading.

I was worried about my wife because she had had the measles and the trip back home made her condition worse. The next morning, which was Sunday, she was taken speechless and called a doctor but he couldn't do anything for her. She died the following Monday morning about daylight.

I continued to live on with my children as well as possible until my daughter Hattie Mae married G. V. Croft. She lived with him until her death, January of 1916. She left one child, a baby girl about thirteen months old.

My oldest son left me to go to school in 1916. I continued to live with my two youngest daughters and youngest boy until they all left me and went to Mobile, Alabama. After about a year my youngest son returned and lived with me until 1925. He returned to Mobile where he lived until his death in February of 1935.

In April, 1923, I married Miss Lovie Paggett, observing the same date, April 5, of my first marriage and have been living here continuously since that time.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the following article, taken from The Chipley Banner, December 22, 1932, expresses, in part, my philosophy of life:

“What Is A Friend?”

“A friend has been described as one to whom you can go with an open heart and receive sympathy in case of trouble or praise in time of triumph. He can praise but it is never flattery, for a friend never flatters. He can criticize and yet not offend, for a friend offers only helpful criticism.

A friend knows you, knows the workings of our heart and mind, knows your hurts, knows your faults, knows your weaknesses, and knows your virtues. He sees the good in that other men pass by and he appreciates it. The bad in you that other men exaggerate, he belittles.

Yet it seems that there are few who recognize the true value of friendship with another until it is gone. Too many of his kindnesses are taken for granted for friendship is intangible. We cannot examine it at will and consider its worth at any one time we may choose.

Hold fast to your friends and consider them your most sacred assets for friendship is all that makes life worth living.”

E . J .

Johns

THE END