

## The Life of the Negro in the Old South

Finally, there were between 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 Negro slaves. On the large plantations they lived in the "quarters"—usually a double row of one-room log cabins or whitewashed frame cabins. At one end of the row might be the overseer's house; at the other, the tool sheds, gristmill, and various outbuildings. Inside the cabins family life centered about the fireplace. Cabins were almost sure to be crowded, for Negro families were large. All slept in the single room or in the garret on beds, mats, or quilts. All the activities of the household were carried on in the single cabin room.

For the field hands work was almost sure to be hard, and because of the lack of such knowledge of sanitation as we have today there was much needless illness and misery. Then, too, it was almost impossible to keep the quarters clean, for those who lived in them worked long hours in the fields and were too tired at night to do much cleaning up. On the better plantations the quarters were moved every two years to prevent too great filth from accumulating. Once a month the ground under the cabins was cleaned, and perhaps twice a year the cabins themselves were whitewashed, inside and out.

On some plantations the slaves cooked their own meals and tended their little gardens in such spare time as they had. On other plantations a cook prepared the meals for the field hands in order that the workers might have more rest and better food. Clothing, of course, was very crude—in summer, cotton jackets and trousers for the men and calico gowns for the women. In winter woolen jackets, hats, and shoes were usually added.

Among the slaves as among the whites there were social distinctions. A lady's maid, a "mammy," a butler, a coachman, and a cook held the highest positions. They had better meals, better clothing, less work, and, on the whole, better treatment than the field hands. Often they were endeared to the family and

held positions of confidence.

Many stories have been told of the harsh treatment of Negroes on Southern plantations. No doubt some of these were true. Often unintelligent and severe overseers were employed. Slaveowners sometimes found great difficulty in hiring good men to oversee their fields.

The records of the overseers themselves, however, reveal that many of them were intelligent and conscientious in their duties. Note, for example, a letter from one overseer to his employer:

**I killed 28 head of beef for the people's Christmas dinner. I can do more with them this way than if all the hides of the cattle were made into lashes.**

Accounts of visitors to the Old South vary so much that it is difficult to know the extent of ill treatment of the Negroes. We are inclined to think today that it was much exaggerated by Northern advocates of abolition. We know that some overseers were tyrannical and brutal. We know that there were runaway slaves. Probably, however, the treatment of the slaves in the South was no worse than that frequently accorded to employees in the mills and factories in the North in the two sections the conditions of the poor—either white or black were much alike

We know, furthermore, that on many plantations masters and servants lived in close touch and with warm friendliness. The wiser slave-owners—and there were many such—were considerate of the family relations of slaves. There are many records of planters who refused to sell the members of a family separately; there are other records of those who refused to buy slaves because the slaves had expressed a dislike for them as owners. One planter, for example, wrote in his diary that he had refused to purchase a slave because "entirely contrary to what I expected, Henry objected to belonging to me."

When the "old massa" or the "old missus" died, there was sure to be wailing in the quarters. The mourning was due partly to real affection and partly to the fear that the plantation would be divided and that slave families might be separated through a public sale of property. When slaves died, owners regretted their loss, not only because they were valuable property but also because many had been loved by the planter's family. One planter wrote after the death of a slave child: "He was a remarkable child of his age, a pet of us all. I feel as if I had lost some dear relative."

Harold Rugg, *A History of American Government and Culture* (Boston: Cincinnati and Co., 1931).