

AGED SLAVE TELLS VIVID STORY OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Rapidly approaching the years of an octogenarian, yet still hale and hearty and active for his 95 years, William Franklin Dawson, colored, ex-slave and Civil War veteran, lives a quiet life of satisfaction and content at his home at 807 West Ninth street, in New Albany. With his wife, he shares a substantial government pension on his little hillside farm under the protecting brow of Silver Hills. Mr. Dawson seldom comes into the city except once a month to secure his pension from the post office, so that relatively few know of his interesting personality and his more interesting life story.

Mr. Dawson was born a slave, moved to Bloomington, Ind., after the war and a few years ago came to New Albany to reside. He lives with his wife while his children reside on a farm near the city. He related this interesting story of the war to a *Ledger* correspondent.

Living peacefully a life of quiet yet active old age in a land which more than once he has seen torn asunder by the ravages of war only to be restored to progressive peacefulness William Franklin Dawson, of New Albany, 95-year-old ex-slave and Civil war veteran, takes keen delight in living again the days of his youth.

Dawson was born in Montgomery county, Maryland, almost 95 years ago. He was born a slave; born to know nothing but plantation drudgery and the sting of the taskmaster's lash until one of the greatest figures in the history of the world, Abraham Lincoln, issued his historic proclamation emancipating the slaves.

Dawson was first the property of Susan Dawson. On her plantation he labored from the time when he was first able to go to the fields until he was nineteen years of age. At that time he was sold to George Dawson, a slave owner of Logan county, Kentucky.

A Slave Is Sold. The old negro chuckled as he told this writer the conversation which passed between himself and his new master when he was first informed that he had been sold. Approaching the slave as he was at work drawing tobacco plants preparatory to planting them, George Dawson said, "Well, Franklin." "Suh?" "I just bought you from Susan." "How much did you pay for me, Suh?" "\$1,200." "Suh, I'll never do you a nickel's worth of good."

And he did not. Soon afterward he ran away from his new master to join the forces of the Union army. That was February 10, 1864. The price paid for him, according to Dawson was not high. Young men and women in good health usually brought \$2,000 or more. But the slave owners hard pressed by the Civil war, were forced to take what they could get and many, foreseeing that the time would come when they would be deprived of their human property, sold the slaves for small amounts.

A slave auction was held every Monday morning and the negroes were sold from the block to the highest bidder.

Scouted for Recruits. Dawson's first task after joining the Union army was to aid in "beating up" negro volunteers in Kentucky. When the colored forces were organized and called into action he was sent to Fort Harrison, Va., and was placed under the command of General Grant.

The battles at Petersburg and at Nashville, Tenn., were the biggest in which Dawson participated. At Petersburg, Dawson said, "We fought four days and four nights without a command to cease firing. At Nashville we used up all our ammunition and used our gun butts as clubs to beat the enemy to death."

Describing the manner of attack, Dawson stated that when a fort was to be taken the cavalry always made the first rush and the infantry of which he was a member came into battle.

"When we attacked we could pay no attention to our fallen comrades. Men, privates and field generals alike fell on all sides but we had to keep going on with our eyes up, stumbling over the bodies of men and horses. After the first few rounds had been fired we could not see the enemy but fired blindly in their direction and kept pressing on. When the enemy had enough they would raise a white flag and the command would be given to cease firing. We never raised a white flag. General Hood was a fighting man and he had a bunch of fighters."

"Life a Living Hell." When we went into the war we did not care for anything but to fight. Life on the plantation had been a living hell. We would rather have been in the war 99 years, than to have been a slave one day. Throughout my service in the army I never once thought of dying."

Dawson described in detail one of the most fearsome weapons used in the war. It consisted of two large iron balls, one fastened to each end of an iron log chain. When these were fired from the cannon they spread out and mowed down anything in their path. At one time, Dawson said, the Union army employed these to mow a path through a pine forest five miles long in pursuit of the enemy.

Grapeshot, round iron balls about the size of an egg, were also used. A bushel of grape shot was poured into a gun at one time and when the gun was fired, "the grapeshot really did some work" as Dawson put it.

When on the march the soldiers carried a knapsack, a gun, a canteen, and 40 rounds of ammunition. For meals they received two hardtacks, one-half cup of coffee, one-half cup of beans, and a small piece of meat. They did not

have to be told when a fight was expected for then their rations were cut down to one and one-half hardtacks.

One Hardtack Enough. One of these hardtack was good according to Dawson, but it was necessary to soak the other in the coffee and then peel it off like peeling a potato.

"I never suffered for want of food while in the war," Dawson said, "but I did suffer from want of water. We would drink the water from a horse track."

The clothing furnished the men was good and they did not suffer a great deal from the elements except on a few occasions. "At Nashville," Dawson said, "it was so cold that my lips froze together and I had to keep wiping my hands across my eyes to keep the eyelids from freezing."

Plenty of Whiskey. Whiskey was furnished the men by the government and according to Dawson, "When you drank that whiskey you would fight your own mammy."

On numerous occasions, Dawson's outfit, Company G, 115 Kentucky Regulars, passed in review before Lincoln, his family and the members of his staff and at one time Dawson talked to Lincoln. That conversation, which Dawson can recite as if it transpired only yesterday, was started by Lincoln.

He said, "Do you know how it happens that you are here?" Dawson replied, "Suh, I suppose it is because you called us." "It is because you boys know every rabbit path in the world and we know we could not win the South without you."

Dawson still has in his possession many souvenirs of the war, among them the gun that he carried. "That gun helped make the United States and I would not part with it," he said.