

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

Slave Auction: '50 Prime Negroes for Sale'

(Third of 10 articles)

"FIFTY PRIME NEGROES FOR SALE. Consisting of Fellows, Wenches, Boys and Girls taken together. These Negroes are sold free from all incumbrances, with warranted titles, and are sold on account of their present owner's declining the Planting Business, and not for any other reason ..."

Slave auction ad, Charleston, S.C.

By **BETTY DeBOLD**

Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

Just like the car "driven only by a school teacher on Sundays," Negroes were craftily advertised before their sale.

After the importation of slaves was outlawed in 1808, the domestic slave trade flourished in the South, with states like Virginia exporting as many as 10,000 per year to Mississippi and Gulf Coast ports. Fortunately, the property reproduced on the owners premises, replenishing the limited merchandise.

"Auctions" on the open market were at least as grim as abolitionist melodramas painted them.

One ex-slave recalled what it was like to be in an auction.

"In the first place," he said, "we were required to wash thoroughly. We were then conducted into a large room . . . to be properly trained before the admission of customers. We were exercised all day in the art of 'looking smart.' After being fed in the afternoon, we were again paraded and made to dance . . . and run and jump to show our endurance.

"As customers examined (us), Freeman (the auctioneer) was very loquacious, dwelling at length on our several good points and qualities. He made us hold our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers felt of our hands, arms and bodies, turned us about, asked what we could do, and made us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse. We were stripped and inspected for scars, too . . . they were considered evidence of a rebellious spirit."

There was, too, the agony of seeing slave families separated. Josiah Henson, considered the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom," recalled how his "brothers and sisters were bid off . . . one by one . . . until my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came and she was bought. Then I was offered. My mother fell at his feet (her buyer's) feet, entreating him to buy me as well as herself and spare at least one of her little ones.

"Can it be believed that he not only turned a deaf ear . . . but disengaged himself from her with brutal blows? 'Oh Lord

Jesus, how long shall I suffer this way!' my mother cried. I must have been five or six years old, but I seem to see and hear her now. This was one of my earliest observation of men; an experience which I only shared with thousands of my race, the bitterness of which . . . is dark enough to overshadow the whole after-life with something blacker than a funeral pall."

In 1860, when cotton comprised 57 percent of U. S. exports, "King Cotton" demanded ever more cheap labor. There were 4,441,830 Negroes in the United States. More than four million were slaves. "Freedmen" were in constant danger of being kidnaped and sold back into slavery.

'Mudsill' Theory

The rationales for what was called the South's "peculiar institution" were many. Not the least interesting was the "mudsill" theory of wealthy South Carolina planter John Henry Hammond, expounded before the U. S. Senate in 1858.

"In all social systems there must be a class . . . to perform the drudgery of life . . . a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility and fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization and refinement.

"It constitutes the very mudsill of society and political government, and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air as one or the other, except on this mudsill. Fortunately for the South, we found a race adapted to that purpose at hand."

Negroes, forbidden to learn to read or write, were informed by whites that God made them for the mudsill. A law required a white man to be present at all their religious services. (In the North, freemen attended some white churches, but even among the liberal Quakers they were forced to take a back seat on the bus to heaven, occupying separate pews.)

Caste Structures

"They wasn't no church for the slaves," an ex-Alabama slave named Jenny Proctor remembered. "We went to the white folks' arbor on Sunday evening, and a white man he gits up there to preach to the niggers. He say, 'Now I takes my text, which is, Nigger, obey your master and your mistress, 'cause what you git from them here in this world am all you ever going to git, 'cause you like the hogs and the other animals—when you die, you ain't no more. We believed . . . we didn't see no Bibles.'"

Other owners conceded that slaves had



These slaves on a South Carolina plantation were deserted by their master as the Yankees approached during the Civil War.

souls, for while God meant them meekly to mind white folks' business Downstairs, they could look for a better deal Upstairs.

City slaves were considered more fortunate than country slaves. Caste structures varied from plantation to plantation, but generally the "elite" was composed of the house domestics—mammies and footmen, etc. — who identified themselves with the house and its owners. The rest were sent to the fields in "gangs."

A white overseer, and his "trustworthy" Negro aide ("driver"), supervised field hands. Laggards and the rebellious were punished brutally; most often with lashings and salt baths. Heads got kicked in occasionally, and there were murders, but planters were not called into account. Negroes couldn't testify in white men's courts, so corroborative witnesses were always strangely missing.

Field hands were housed in wooden huts and cabins, described as having no windows (chinks between the boards let in light and air) and nothing but a dirt floor. Beds were non-existent. Slaves slept on the ground with one well-guarded blanket. Children went nude well into puberty, to save on clothing allowances.

Sing and Dance

Diet was limited. It consisted of cornmeal. Period. Only on larger plantations, or in rare individual households, was a

slave given meat; this was usually during his only holiday, at Christmas.

It was then the custom to give a festival where slaves could eat, sing and dance for two or three days. Visits were exchanged with slaves from other plantations. "Court ships" often bloomed, but to little avail. Masters generally exercised the breeding selection (sometimes personally, as evidenced by a growing mulatto population). When two chattels seemed likely to produce good stock, he allowed them to "jump the broomstick." This was a ritual where an older woman slave held a broomstick at the door of a cabin and pronounced, "Now, jump three times and you is married!"

This was the South . . . the romantic ante-bellum South where, popular novelists indicate, "Happy black faces glowed as they sang at their work in the fields."

Fortunately, some observers of the time could see beyond the "happy mask" the Negro wore. Mrs. A. M. French, a Northern school teacher who traveled thru the South in 1862, observed that "owners never understood their slaves. They were accomplished tragedians, the dullest of them. The slave . . . conceals. He is never off his guard. He is perfectly skilled in hiding all his emotions. The downcast eye, dull when he wills it, conceals his opinions; the hearty laugh his grief. Masters knew them not, except what would subdue them. They chose what they should see, nothing more."

(NEXT: "The Abolitionist Movement.")