

[Ella Lassiter (Life and Songs in Slavery)]

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Folklore - Sebring [Life & Songs in Slavery*1]

WPA WRITERS PROJECT OF FLORIDA

FOLKLORE [19?]; FOLKLORE. FLORIDA

INFORMANT's NAME Ella Lassiter, centenarian, [?]

INFORMANT's ADDRESS Tangerine St. Sebring, Fla.

DATE OF INTERVIEW March [?] & [?]; April 14, [1940?]

NAME OF INTERVIEWER Barbara B. Darsey [*1] approx. 5718 words approx. 22.8 pages

FORM C

TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED)

STATE FLORIDA

NAME OF WORKER Barbara B. Darsey

ADDRESS [33?] South Commerce Aven. Sebring, Florida

DATE April [18-21?]; May [?], 6-[?], [1910?]

SUBJECT LIFE AND SONGS IN SLAVERY

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Ella Lassiter, Tangerine St., Sebring, Fla.

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I had already planned my visit to Mother Lassiter, through her daughter Annie Mae Warren, whom I met in town on Saturday. Annie Mae stated that her Mother was as well as usual and would indeed be glad to see me. Said she in her precise manner.

“Mothah she suah do love to talk, and to tell of her early life it suah do give her joy.” So I told Annie Mae that I would plan to call the first [of?] the week and I [?] asked her to request her Mother to be thinking particularly of her early life in anticipation of my visit.

The day was dark and gloomy, for the sun had been hiding and sulking most of the day behind dark clouds. There was a piercing wind too, which swept the streets bare and sent the dust about in great clouds, and angrily scattered leaves and trash everywhere. I drew my coat about me securely as I started out about one-thirty to walk to [C4 12/21/40 Fla. 2 the Quarters to visit Mother Ella. Lemon Street was almost deserted and presented thus a most unusual appearance for usually it [teems?] with life. Today however the cold wind had driven almost everyone in doors. On Tangerine Street the dust was thick as fog and I was glad indeed when I reach Mother's home.

When I knocked on the door a voice called “Come in” and I immediately accepted and tried to open the door. It sagged against the floor but soon I opened it sufficiently to crowd into the hall. This hall was dark and narrow, but light showed from an open door at the right and so I made my way there. Mother Ella was struggling to arise from her large rocking chair, but when I appeared she fell back relieved. Recently she fell and hurt her hip so that now she does not move with her accustomed ease.

This room proved to be the living room, or as Mother Ella called it “de sittinroom” and here with her sat another aged darkie Aunt Ella Grant. I know them both quite well and am always glad to see them but on this particular time I would have preferred to talk to Mother Ella alone as I usually find better results obtainable that way. I thought of postponing the purpose of my visit but found that they had been expecting 3 me and I was reluctant to disappoint them for they are quite sensitive. Then too it [?] occurred to me that perhaps

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Mother Ella would be moved to [do?] her best in order to impress Aunt Ella with her days of past grandeur.

Mother was sitting near the little stove which was full of wood and humming merrily as it warmed the room. Her snuff box was near at hand and a tin can on the floor at side of her chair served as a cuspidor. Said she:

“[?] me, Mistis, suah am glad to see you. Annie Mae she done tole me you a-coming,”[?] and a smile went over her face, “she say you want to know bout mah life and do songs whut us sanged in de Slavery time, [hoe-e-e-?], a ole niggah like me,” and she giggled happily.

She did indeed seemed pleased that I had called on her. Aunt Ella sat looking rather glum, jealous ofcourse, until I told her that I would soon be asking her for her life story too, then she became pleasant and interested. Mother spoke again: “Yessum, I suah kin tell you a lot, Mistis, an I spect I member lots a songs too.”

Aunt Ella looked at me with a wide toothless grim and mumbled: “Us jus a-sittin heah a-wishin you would come so us could sing songs fo you. [?] She smoothed her skirt and then reached for the tin-can-cuspidor, for she too is addicted to snuff.

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“Now, Mistis,” said Mother, “you want dem songs fust, but I best tell you sumthin bout de Slavery days fust, den do songs dey come to me,” her gentle old voice trailed off as she became engaged in deep thought.

I was eager for the story of her life along with the songs so I tried to gently start her off by asking a few questions. She responded readily and soon was [?] voluble.

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"I wus borned in Georgia, on de McMullin Plantation near Forsythe way back in de year [1859?]. Dat make me hundred, don't hit, Mistis?" She remarked more than question so I made no comment

"Ed Mann McMullan, he wus mah pappy. Guess mebbe he belong nother massa once fur he had de name a Mann an he proud ob hit an allus kep hit. My mammy, she Rachel McMullan."

Then she looked at me and explained earnestly: "You know, Mistie, marriage didn't make no diffrunce den names, cause dey both had de same already, hee-e-e-e," she laughed. "Yessum, dey both McMullans all de time. Den my Gran-mammy she name Mary, an Gran-Pappy, he name Isiah, an dey befere McMullans too." Again she became engaged in thought and mumbled to herself, then said: "I declare, does I [?], or not, was dey on my pappy or my mammy side, just caint tell no [?], been so long ago."

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Here Aunt Ella piped in her shrill voice: "Huh, You allus a-talkin bout your Gran-Mammy, do look lak you and tell which side de famlby she belong on." But Mother couldn't remember and seemed to feel quite bad about it for a moment.

Quickly her spirits revived, however, and she said:

"We live dere on de plantation when I jus a littla girl. Den our Massa sold us to nother Massa an he brang us splang to Floridy. We live way up in de noth part bout Monticello, I reckon hit was.

"Never tooked de name e Martin, tho that our new Massa name. We proud o bein McMullen niggah, an Massa he proud o [?] buyin such, so we allus e lled a 'dem McMullen niggahs' an prud proud e hit. Both our Massas wuz good men an rich too, dey suah had plenty e slaves. Dem was good days too, wisht dey wuz back heah, deed Ah does."

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Mother heaved a sigh and rocking gently she gazed off into space as the old days unfolded in her mind. "Us all lived in a clearin off fum de big house. Us had nice little cabins too, all white washed. Ours had two room, one big room with the fiah place in hit you evah saw. Us cooked on hit too an we eat in de big room an mah pappy an mammy slept in hit too. Den we had a little shed room where was me an my sister slept."

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The wind continued to [?] howl in fury and rattle the windows in an attempt to enter the room. The room was growing chill too, and I notised the fire was dying down so I offered to put wood in the stove. This disturbed Mother Ella who [felt?] that I shouldn't have that to do. But, neither of the two old darkies were equal to it, so I insisted, and soon had the little stove roaring contentedly again.

Mother Ella rocked quietly in her huge chair and Aunt Ella sat with hands folded over the sewing in her lap, both, apparently in deep thought.

"Yes, Mistis, us had de good times in dem days Hit wasnt all hard wuk neither. Us had plenty to eat, en to wear, yes maam, plenty o wearin closes too an shoeses when us needed dem. Caint say we allus have dat much dose days atter de Wah.

"Come Crismus time, whee-e-e, dat such de big day!" exclaimed Mother happily. "Early on Crismus mawnin, Massa George, he give all de ole niggahs a aig-nog an it allus had plenty a likker in hit too, whee-e-e" literally shouted Mother. "Hit make em all feel might good too. Sometimes he give us chilluns a taste too," she licked her lips in enjoyment of past egg-nogs.

Missy Mary, she suah good to us too. She knit evah one e us a pair of socks or stockings fur Crismus. Sometimes [dey?] wuz red wool, sometimes grey. Wisht I had a pair e em right now."

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Mother Ella paused again and sighed wistfully:

“Come Crismus we all sings and dances, an sings an dances,” exclaimed she, “don't have to wuk [?] day, an don't have to wuk no hard do nex day to make hit up nuther.”

Here Aunt Ella spoke again: “You-all dun talk so much bout Crismus, huceum you caint member do song bout hit lak you-all tole me onst?” She looked at Mother Ella with suspicion as if she were with holding information on the song. Poor old Mother could not remember thought the effort was visible in her kind old face. She shook her head sadly:

“Jus haint no use. I been a-tryin [recollec?], but hit scapes mah mind.” She then returned to the Christmas theme.

“Sometimes Massa George, he let us all go [?] right up to de big house to see de Crismus tree. Hit so bright an pretty. Us niggahs, big an little, we stan aroun de room an just look an look [?] fill our eyes full of de beauty of de tree. An we nevah say a word, we jus look.” Mother shaded her yes with her hand and really seemed to be peering into the past on Christmas Day. “Sometimes Missy Mary gives us all a hanful o nuts an raisins, hee-e-e-e-, an is we proud. I [?] nevah eat all mine right up I keep em awhile I be so proud o em,” she sighed wistfully.

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Suddenly Mother Ella sat erect and a look of excitement flashed in her dark eyes. “Jus a minut now, dat song hit suah a comin in mah mind,” she exclaimed. “Hit don't mean nuthin us chillen uster git up early an jine hands an dance roun de big fish in de clearin an sing hit,” explained Mother. Then she reeked rapidly and with lifted hand beat time [?] as she appeared to be listening to faraway voices of the Christmas of long ago. In a big tremulous voice and began to sing: “Come de Crismus morn Heah de Crismus bell A ringin u-ooo, u-ooo-o A ringin u-ooo, u-ooo-o Chillen open de doah Let in de Crismus morn [???) A singin u-ooo, u-ooo-u-o A singin u-ooo, u-ooo-u-o Heah de Crismus Spirit A callin on de wind A

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callin u-ooo, u-ooo-o-o-o A callin u-ooo, u-ooo-o-o-o See de Crismus Spirit A ridin en de cloud A ridin u-ooo, u-ooo, u-o-u-o-u-o-u A ridin u-ooo, u-ooo, u-o-u-o-u-o-u.”

At the end of each verse the repetition grew more prolonged as I have endeavored to show. It was almost a wail, but was rather 9 musical and quite interesting. At this song Mother seemed tired and rested for a moment with eyes closed. No one spoke until she shook her head and opened her eyes: “Hee-e-e, how you like dat, Mistis?” she asked, and I told her that it pleased me very much. I then asked if she were tired and would want to rest but she said: “No ma'am, hit don't nevah tire me to talk bout de ole days, I loves hit!”

Then she spoke again of life in slavery.

“Us had good clothes dem days too. [?] not so fancy as what dey got now, an not so flimsy nuther. Our closes dey wuz made fur wearin an dey suah did las too. Us spun de cotton an weave our clothes. Sometimes we die em with yurbs an berries, dey wuz fur our bestes dresses us did dat. Mostly dey jus grey dey made full and to our shoe tops. Mostly us went barefoots but we had shoeses when us need em.”

She paused and lifted up the tin-can-cuspidor, then she placed a pinch of snuff in her cheek, then carefully wiped her lips with her gay handkerchief. After that she folded the handkerchief lovingly and tucked it back in the front of her dress so that its gay border made a bright splash of color on the grey calico.

“Us allus wanted store shoes, we heard a lot e em, an we saw them Missy Mary had. Den once when I got to be a-workin in de big house, Massa he brung me a pair e real store shoes, yes, Mistis, 10 real shoes. Misesy Mary, she say I was too good a girl not to have a pair,” she continued seriously, “an Mistis, dey wuz jus as shiny as a lookingglass, dey suah wuz, hee, hee, hee,” and Mother giggled like a girl.

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“Us [?] sing a little song bout shoeses too, now lemme see dose I ricollec hit. Yessum, it go dis-a-way: “O good Massa, o,o,o, Bring my shoeses, o,o,o, Nice soft shoeses, o,o,o, Bring me shoeses, o,o,o, Den mah feets feel good, o,o,o Wif em shoeses, o,o,o,”

Another song this in a high voice also and with more of a singsong without emphasis. After this effort she shook her skirts and settled herself more comfortably in her chair. Then a soft peeping arouse and Mother started guiltily. She fumbled around with one foot and finally pushed forward from under her voluminous skirt a small box covered with a soft white cloth. This cloth moved gently and then I picked up the box and placed it in Mother's lap, knowing fairly well what it held. Mother lifted the cloth and up popped six downy yellow heads with beady black eyes. Mother talked to the chicks in a low crooning voice and covered them with her hands and them immediately became quiet.

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“Dat ole hen,” said Mother scornfully, “she not finish her wuk dis mawnin, so Annie Mae she brung in dese biddies fuh me to keep till de hen finish.” She held the box on her lap while she continued to talk.

“Mah goodness, chile, us had plenty [?] to eat in dem days. Collard greens with corn bread and side meat, [?] whuts bettern dat. We cook on de hearth, an make de corn pone an cook hit right dere too in de ashes. Hit git hard an brown an de out side but when you bus it open hit just as mealy an sweet. Mak me hungry right now a-talkin o hit,” by this time we were all rather hungry for Mother's description and her manner, both, were graphic.

“Us had plenty o fresh pork too, an sometimes us had beef-meat, but us nevah like hit as we did de pork. Den dey wuz surup. Nevah had no sugar, but whut us need hit fuh when us got de syrup!” she queried indignantly.

I had brought a small sack of candy, [?] jeelly jelly drops, fer Mother Ella, thinking it might help / her to talk, but I hesitated about presenting it for I had nothing for old Aunt Ella and

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well I knew how sensitive she was. So, those I sat grasping the back of candy and trying to decide what to do about it, and at the same time hungrily thinking of salt pork and collard greens and corn pone cooked over an open fire.

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“When us wore shoeses,” resumed Mother, “us had to wipe em off fust, den rub grease into em an roll em up in a cloth an keep em good when we took em off. Iffen we didn't wear out a pair dey went on to nother chile whut needed em.

“Us had a Church bout a mile off fum de [?] but us didn't hab no preacher much, hit too fur to come regular. Us allus pray an sing, an pray an sing. Niggahs right on de [?] plantation built [?] Church too outer logs. Hit were a good one too,” said Mother gently.

“When folks died or git married sometimes dey had to wait fur a long time fore de services held. Jus go right on an bury em, or dey git married, den mebbe long time after de preacher come an preach de ceremony. Mostest de couples jus jump over de broom stick, den dey married. Us all come out in de clearin an sing and pray an shout, den Uncle Caleb, he bring outen de broom an hole it fur de niggahs to jump, den dey married an later iffen a preacher come dey git him to give em a ceremony too.

“Coffins made right on de plantation too, nuthing fancy like dey have now, but dey good an strong an keep out de dogs an de [?] animiles,” said Mother Ella. “To de weddins an de funerls us allus weah our shoeses too jus as keerful like.”

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“Now den heah am a song we uster allus sing at de weddin or de funeral, didnt make no diffurnce which.” Said Mother, and then she [sawyed?] [swayed?] her body sideways, or from left to right, and waved both hands in time. “OH, NO. FATHER, you outer be dere To carry de ARMY ovah OH, NO, Brothah, [?] outer be dere To carry de ARMY o-o-vah OH, NO, Sister, YOU OUTER BE DERE To carry de ARMY ovah OH, NO, MY MOTHAH, YOU

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outer be dere To carry de Army O-o-Vah OH, NO, bring ALL DE FAMILY Help carry de ARMY o-v-a-h.”

Mother Ella sung this with vigor and emphasis. Certain parts she emphasized particularly as I have endeavored to show with capital letters. Aunt Ella seemed at one time about to join in the song, but after a gulp or two she gave up the struggle and merely kept time with hands and feet.

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As Mother paused a knock was heard at the back door, then the door was opened and a small darkie boy came in. He looked startled when he saw me, but stood his ground and finally blurted:

“h-h-h—whut kin I do fuh you Gramma-ma?”

Mother Ella smiled kindly and replied: “Now fust thing you fill de wood box and en tend up de fiah. Den I tells you whut else.” So then the little boy set quietly about his work, and Mother resumed her life story.

“I wuz raised a Baptist, lek us all were cause our Massa and Miesy, dey Baptist an we follered em. But now I belong to de Sanctified Christian Church an I mos happy dere.” She looked around at the window as if longing for a glimpse of her Church.

“Sometimes Massa George, he let us niggahs come to de big house when a preacher come dere. Let us right in de big room what had de bigges organ you ever saw. Misesy Mary she could play hit too an make de sweetest music,” said Mother reverently. “Us allus be so still, till once Uncle Caleb, he got so happy he jus get a-shoutin an he couldn't stop. Us all thought dat Massa be mighty mad, but he jus laught at Uncle Caleb, an gived him a big hat wid a red and yeller hat ribbon to hit too, an wuz Uncle Caleb proud den, who e-e-e-, he wuz,” exclaimed Mother, who seemed quite happy herself at the pleasant recollection.

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Just then Bubba, as the little Negro's name proved to be, reported that he had completed his work. Mother then told him: "Now you fill all de [?] buckets on de back poach, an den dis here pitcher, an den you goes home."

Then she continued, "Massa tuk good care o all his slaves, Mistis. He like em all be well, whut good wuz a sick niggah to him? He had us to wuk, so he giv us plenty to eat an wear, an Missy Mary she come roun de cabins often an give us all a dose o castor oil," said Mother Ella with a wry face. "Iffen [?] de chillens be ailin she gived dem de oil an sometimes [?] too. Hee, hee, hee, sometimes us little niggah tries git well foah she git dere wid at castor oil, but hit done wuk. Iffen dey been sick dey suah take de oil," laughed Mother.

"Sometimes my Mammy she go out in de woods in dig de yurbs an she bile em up on we all take dat. Hit such a bittah dose but hit help us. Wouldn't be so ailin mahself now could I git to de woods an fine dem yurbs an fix em up. Whut kind e yurbs wuz dey? Well now I cant zactly remember ceptin de sassafra root. But dey wuz others an my Mammy she bile em all up together." Mother carefully explained.

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"Some ob de niggahs allus hab de haid-ache. Nothin much to do bout that cause dey done throwed out dey [hair?] where de birds fine hit an line [?] a nest, no wunder dem niggahs haid ache, Deno nevah do dat, Mistis," Mother cautioned me seriously.

"Lot o times we know - visitor comin cause de ole roosters dey walk roun de house an crow. Iffen one o em stan on de front step an crow jus at daylight den we know bad-luck an trouble is a comin in a hurry. Caint do nuthin neither jus be a watchin an a waitin. Some de niggahs say to burn a little grease, hog grease, or better, butter iffen you kin git hit, right on de stove [??] smoke scare de bad luck away, but my Mammy she say dat dont do no good, but us allus try hit when de ole rooster crow on de step at daylight."

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Mother paused, reached for the cuspidor, then [too?] took another pinch of snuff. I then asked about the War, and at its mention she was instantly alert:

“Whut dey wanter make dat Wah fur? All us niggahs happy an had good care. Bettern whut we had since dat time. Dat Wah hit demed an ruint everything. Massa George he went, and Little Massa George, he went. He got shot though an [atter?] while he comed home to stay fur he so thin an weak an sick an a-spittin blood where de Yankee shot him in de side, he caint hardly go.”

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She paused and her eyes flashed, “Jus fore Ole Massa lef, he [tole?] Missy Mary, ‘Don let dem Yankee sogers git de chillen. Lock em all up, black an white, cause dem sogers suah take on iffem dey see em’ I’s a big girl den but hit suah scared me, us all thought dem Yankee sogers eat de chillen, hee, hee, hee.

“One day a whole band of Yankee sogers rode right up to de [gate?]. Missy done hid de bes silver under de foil smoke house, but us all scaired. Des right niec [?] and polite too. Dey [?] said dey hungry an ask Missy Mary feah food. So she tell em she feed em, an den she went to de kitchen an tole Aunt Jimpsy to cook a lot o biscuit an fry ham an aigs. Aunt Jimpsy she mad as a wet hen an [?] she wont do hit. Nevah did talk like dat to Missy befeah an dat scaired us too. Den Missy Mary she get mad too an said, ‘You want us all kilt, you do whut I tells you right now.’ Den pore ole Aunt Jimpsy she cried an she grumble but she go ahaid an cook foah dem Yankee sogers.

“When de meal ready, Missy Mary, said to em jus as polite: ‘[?] you Yankee men come into de dinin room?’ Dey all come in wif dey [?] caps off an dey suah did eat. After dey eat all dey want dey thanked Missy Mary an rode away.” Mother sighed and a 18 “Us uster sing a little song durin de Wah bout de Yankee sogas, les see now iffem I can recollect hit,” she mumbled to herself for a few moments, made several false starts, then she sang: “Be good chile, O de Yankee git you Whup, de whup, de hup Whup, de whup, de hup He got

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hoofs an horns Catch you suah you [?] Whup, de whup, de hup Whup, de whup, de hup
See he ridin down de big road Catch you suah you [?] Whup, de whup, de hup Whup,
de whup, de hup Be good chile O de Yankee git you. Whup, de whup, de hup Whup, de
whup, de hup.”

“Dat allus scare de chillens an make em behave dey self,” explained Mother Ella proudly.
“Dem maynt be all de zac words, but dey mighty neah like hit.”

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After a minute or two Mother Ella resumed her story. All this while Aunt Ella had been
sitting spell-bound apparently, and had even forgotten the sewing in her hands.

“Massa George come home sometimes durin de Wah. He allus be so tired and look so
thin an hungry, an his cloes so ragged, hit allus make Missy Mary cry. Massa George say
Missy Mary makin out fine wid de plantation while he away. Sometimes he sit out on de
gallery an all us niggahs walk by an bow an scrape befeah him an dat please him too.

“When de Wah wuz ovah, he comed home an tole us we is all free niggahs an can go
where we please, or we kin sta with him. Most of us stayed right there, where else we go,
we got no other home,” exclaimed Mother. “Jus bout de close ob de Wah, I got married
an went back up in Georgy to live. Missy Mary say I Make a good wife cause I a good
girl an learnt whut she wanted me to. I learnt to sew real neat and good, an to cook an
clean house, den too I took care o Missy Mary, an brush her hair till hit shine, an fix up
her close an hep her dress too. She cried when I married and moved away an she say,
'Elly,' she allus call me Elly, 'member now chile you allus get a home heah long as I lives.
Iffen it so be dat dat dere Jives done treat you right you come right back heah,' I laugh an
tell her 'Yessum' but I knew Jives 20 an he a good niggah too. He died after we married
awhile and den I married, now lemme see, had so many, caint member whichun next,”
said Mother with laughter. “Oh yes, den I married Louie Davis, an den Ed Brown,” she
counted them solemnly on her slim brown fingers. “Ed, he was a suah nuff good niggah,

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but atter awhile us jus couldn't git long so he went off. No, wait, now I got dat wrong, next to Louie, I married Henderson Martin, he a long tall black man with a face what nevah laughed none, but he was a fair husband alright. Den I married Ed Brown, an after he went off along came dat wuthless Sherman Lassiter, an course I married him," said Mother.

"He wus no good, nothin but a tramp so I glad when he run off and lef me." Mother looked at me with mischief showing in her eyes and the quirk of her mouth, and explained with a loud sigh: "Suah hopes to git me nutter one fore I leaves dis hear worl!" That was too much for Aunt Ella, who dropped her work stamped her feet and shouted: "Praise de Lawd," with much viger.

Having finally decided to divide the candy between the two old crones, but to wait until I was about ready to leave before presenting it, I slipped some leaves from my note book and wrapped a small portion of the candy with them. I think Mother Ella saw me do this but she made no comment. Aunt Ella was again intent upon her sewing. The wind continued to howl angrily about the house and the day was growing darker as the afternoon advanced. I thought perhaps Mother was really more tired than she [??] would admit, even though she did not look at all fatigued, so I decided to give the candy then as it might rest and refresh her to eat it. So I presented each with their little package, and each old darkie solemnly accepted it, wrapped it carefully in handkerchiefs and placed it carefully in the front of their dresses. Then each thanked me kindly, and Mother resumed her talk:

" [?] Spect I done tole, you all I kin think bout right now Mistis, iffen I ken think up enny more songs an [?], I'll [?] sent Annie Mae in to tell you so you kin come an heah dem. Hee, hee, hee, de idea you interested in de life eb a ole niggah lak me," and again she laughed delightedly.

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I thanked Mother Ella most sincerely for her kindness, then I made plans to call on Aunt Ella soon for her life history. I had risen from my chair and was about to leave when Mother spoke again:

“Chile,” said she in evident excitement. I got nuther song in my haid. Sit down now iffen you wanten heah hit.” Of course I was glad, and got out my note book again.

“Now dis one us mster sing a-wakin in de field an I believe hit went jus this way:”

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“A hoein' in de cahn field A [row-o-er?], a [hoe-o-er?] Whoop-pa-la-hup, e-er A choppin in de cotton A chop-o-er, a hoe-o-er Whoop-pa-la-hup, e-er.”

This little song, conveyed in Mother's [?] old high voice had a bird-like quality of tone that was pleasing. No part was particularly accented but the letters so separated were long drawn out.

After this effort, Mother really did seem tired. She yawned hugely and sighed deeply, but begged me to return soon to see her.

“I be a thinkin up dem songs, and de life when I was a slave, to tell you Mistis,” said she.

Then, after making sure that the little stove had wood and that the two old darkies were comfortable, I left them, colorful reminders of that long lost era of our Southland, and made my way out into the wind and dust of the late afternoon to [?] my way homeward eager to transcribe my notes on this interesting Life and Songs of Slavery.

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FOLKLORE, [L9?]: FOLKLORE, FLORIDA

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INFORMANT's NAME Ella Lassiter, col.

INFORMANT's ADDRESS Tangerine St., Sebring, Fla.

DATE OF INTERVIEW [?]/26-28 & 4/4/1940

NAME OF INTERVIEWER Barbara B. Darsey [approx. '3677?] " [1-5 pages?]

FORM D.

EXTRA COMMENT

STATE FLORIDA

NAME OF WORKER Barbara B. Darsey

ADDRESS 33 South Commerce Avenue, sebring, Florida

DATE Typing completed on manuscript, May 9, 1940

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Ella Lassiter, centenarian, colored Tangerine St., Sebring, Florida

SUBJECT LIFE AND SONGS OF SLAVERY

INTERMEDIARY:

No intermediary was required as worker had known Mother Ella for a number of years. However as Mother has not been real well for some time, worker first questioned her daughter, Annie Mae Warren, regarding the feasibility of interviewing Mother. Annie Mae was pleased that her Mother was considered of such importance and stated that her Mother would be happy to see worker. Then a definite time was set for the calls. TEXT OF INTERVIEWS:

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Text is given verbatim. Three calls were made, the last two were of minor importance with regard to text, being merely the recheck on dates and other points for accuracy, therefore subject 2 matter is treated as one interview, without reference to the minor calls.

Songs are [?] written just as they were sung, with an attempt at realistic spelling of syllables as they sounded when sung and which were used in songs in place of some words. To show emphasis, capital letters are used, also hyphens to indicate a slurring or long drawn out sound of letters.

Worker had endeavored to use true Negro dialect, just as Mother Ella spoke. This is rather hard to transcribe at times, therefore if any doubt or misunderstanding should arise over words as spelled here in LIFE AND SONGS OF SLAVERY, worker will be glad to give additional information in order to clarify matters. Mother Ella offered to think over her life and to have ready soon other [?] experiences and song therefore it might be well to follow up this case with a call at a later date.

..... 26673 Florida - Folklore - Sebring - Life & Songs in Slavery

WPA FLORIDA Writers' PROJECT

First Form C. submitted 5/10/40

[ADDENDA?]:

FOLKLORE, 19: FOLKLORE, FLORIDA

INFORMANT's NAME Ella Lassiter, centenarian. col.

INFORMANT's ADDRESS Tangerine St., Sebring, Florida

DATE OF INTERVIEW June [16?], 1940

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NAME OF INTERVIEWER Barbara B. Darsey.

FORM C.

ADDENDA: [?] Form C Previously submitted.

TEXT OF INTERVIEW (Unedited)

STATE FLORIDA

NAME OF WORKER Barbara B. Darsey

ADDRESS 33 S. Commerce Ave., Sebring, Florida.

DATE June 18, 1920, 1940

SUBJECT ADDENDA: LIFE AND SONGS IN SLAVERY

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Ella Lassiter, Tangerine St., Sebring, Fla.

On the occasion of my previous interviews with Mother Ella she had promised to “mind” other songs, stories, and experiences of her life in slavery, and as she took much an interest in my work of recording her life story, and much pride in her life in slavery I felt that perhaps sometime when I saw her again she might have something in mind. Several other informants have so promised, but when I called upon them again could not recall anything therefore I had not hastened to visit Mother Ella for this purpose, though her interesting personality and colorful history are often in my mind.

..... C14 12/21/40 Fla.

Though it was no later than seven o'clock in the morning the sun was already shining and its heat was intense too, when a 2 a rather timid knock sounded on my door. Opening it I

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saw a tiny negro boy with ragged cap in hand. His big brown eyes, as he looked up at me, held freight, nevertheless he stood his ground stanchly and stammered:

“[Mis-sie- i-d-o-oney, -er-er-er Gram-mer-ma, she s-a-a-y come ovah soon. s-s-she g-g-got moah songs foah you?].”

I could not place him as the grandson of any of my old negro friends in the Quarters and his face was not familiar, so I reluctantly asked him name. (I say reluctantly because I do not like to ask the negroes their names it always seems to hurt their feelings that I do not remember all of them from the days of [?] for they all seem to know me at all times). This boy's name proved to be Binny but that was as far as we got and it did me little good. Then I asked his Grandmother's name but all he could tell me was:

“[Jus Gran-mer,ma, maam?].”

He was so tiny the it did seem incredible that he had been chosen for such an errand, and still more incredible that he had been able to successfully make the long trip from the Quarters down Lemon Street and then through the intricate right-angle [?] and semicircular turns of the other streets until he reached my apartment on South Commerce and upstairs too.

However here he was and we stood looking at each other 3 in speculative silence for a few seconds. Then, like a flash, it came to me that on my last visit to Mother Ella a little boy, somewhat larger had run in asking:

“What kin I do fuh you Grammer-ma?”

and knowing that probably few children knew her name, all would know her daughter Annie Mae, I asked Binny if Gram-mer-ma had a daughter named Annie Mae. He grinned from ear to ear with a display of fine large white teeth and said:

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“[??] she suah hab.”

I knew then it was Mother Ella, true to her promise, who had sent for me. I thanked Binny and gave him a penny which he clasped gratefully and tightly in a grimy paw and then told him to tell Mother Ella that I would see her during the afternoon. Binny then turned and ran and almost down stairs in his haste to spend the penny, I suppose.

Time pressed however for I had several engagements in line of other phases of my work, and these always require lots of time and much patience for people rarely are [?] regarding such appointments. I was indeed eager to call on Mother Ella for she had promised to “mind” more songs and stories, and she is indeed an interesting character. The very fact that she had taken the time and trouble to remember other facts, and to send me word [presaged?] well for interesting information.

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The day indeed dragged, everyone [?] to keep me waiting an illimitable while, but finally with [patience?], I found that work accomplished, and then though it was almost five oclock I made my way over to Mother Ella.

Though the sun was crawling down the western sky, it was still very warm and Lemon Street was unusually quite, its length almost deserted. Even the broad front gallery, in front of the grocery, at Lemon and Tangerine Streets/ which is usually crowded with a good-natured, laughing, singing, throng of darkies, was empty, save for a couple of negroes intent on entering and leaving the store. The Quarters, in its entirety seemed hushed, and the [?] hung like a pall or thick blanket everywhere.

As I came near Mother's cottage, I thought of the little front veranda partly shaded by the great oleander trees and I wondered if it would be cool there and if Mother would be able to be sitting on the porch. Involuntarily I quickened my steps despite the heat. As I entered the gate I saw Mother Ella sitting cool and comfortable on the porch cutting and fitting

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quilt squares. She welcomed me gladly and graciously as is her manner. This time she was able to stand and walk to the screen door of the porch. She bade me be seated in a comfortable old chair and then resumed her seat but she laid aside the quilting to talk more readily.

Dressed in her usual costume of stiffly starched grey calico with white apron and bertha, long full sleeves, and high tight neck, along with heavy stockings high shoes, and tightly wound faded silk bandanna, one would think she might have felt the heat. However she really looked cool and she remarked that she felt the hot weather very very little. Old Mother was pleased that I came so quickly and she happily opened the small bag of cookies which I brought her and [?] daintily [?????] to talk.

“Hee, hee, hee, [?] I told you I ‘mind’ some moah dem ole songs an games an de like. Today I benn a-sittin right heah on dis gallery a turin dem times ovah in mah mind, jus lak I did las night too.. Seem lak sometimes I member dem things happen so long ago bettern whut I does in dese days.”

She rolled her eyes and fluttered her hands. Then she reached over and ejected a brown stream of tobacco juice straight into the tin-can-[?].

“I suah am glad Binny foun youh house al right, we say he know where you liv. I seen him a-runnin by and I called him an [?] him to tell you to come ovah when you could. He come right back too an tole me you be heah dis afternoon. [Whoo-o-a-a?], he suah was proud o that penny you give him, hee, hee, hee,” and Mother Ella threw back her head in a [real?] of silvery laughter.

Then suddenly serious she said:

“Well now, Mistis, I [?] that o a game us uster play in de slavery days. I [???], it mus be wuy yonder mornin fifty year ago. Here! Whut I talking about!” She exclaimed, “it morein seventy five year. I wuz jus a little chile dem days.”

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Mother Ella seemed [?] [?] slightly bewildered and I wondered if she had forgotten what she wanted to tell me, but I made no comment, merely waited for her to speak. She yawned twice, [???] 6 then shook her head sharply as if to rattle her brain into action, and then she began talking again.

“Dis heah game, I member, wuz called ‘Little Chicken.’ Us all line up an chose two cap’ins, den us count all de boys an girls one foh each side. After dat us all grag a-hole o skirts or shirt-tails and de be himm our cap’in. Dan da two cap’ins day face each other an dey sing: ‘I wants a chick, I wants a chick.’ Den de first say: ‘I will hav a chick’, and de other say,:

‘wel you caint hab mine.’ Den de fust Cap’in say:

‘Well I will hab one.’ an den de other say too:

‘Well I will hab one.’ den dey both say to dey chike: ‘Little chick you huah me Keep close behine Nothin kin ketch you Keep on de line.’

Den us all run and dodge each other, an try to catch de chicks of de other cap’in. As we catch em we brang em to our cap’in who done mark a big circle on de groun wif a stick and we put em inde circle an de hafta stay ‘here too,” exclaimed Mother with a sparkle in her eyes. Here she paused for a generous pinch of snuff before resuming the game.

“When us catch a chick us sing a little song: ‘Chick-ee-e, chic-ee-e, chic-ee-e, chick-e-e-e- Dis mah chick. Chick-ee-e, chick-ee-e, chick-ee-e, chick-e-e-e Ain't yuah chick.’

Den us carry ouah chick to de cap’in and put it in de big ring. After mos all ben caough, de Capins take a stick and rub on each chick neck and say dey killin dat chick. De las one to git his head cut off is de [?????????????] 7 chile want be de capin. Den us count out again dis da way us count: ‘Chickee, one, chickee two, chickee, three

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You my little chickee be.' Dn whoever de count fall on dat one he is chick [?], Fust one [?] and den de other count. Den fore us catches chicks de nex time us all sing: Chick, Chickee, Chickee-ee I'll hav me a chickee foah mah dinnah Chick, chickee, chickee-ee I'll catch me a chickee foah mah dinnah." Mother Ella sang this in a sort of sing-song manner almost impossible to describe, and in a high shrill voice. "Chillen right heah on dis street try to play dat lak I tell em but dey done git it right. Deem chillen wont play with de spirit and life lak day uster. Guess mebbe day id hongry. We nevah hongry in dem days. Us allus had plenty to eat an all de things what a niggah loves too lak corn pone, an side meat, an syrup, an batter cakes, an collard greens. Lawsy makes me hongry right now." It had the same effect on me too! Mother Ella's thoughts quickly returned to play: "Dont seem like de way we played lak I tel you, Mistis. It [?] harder than I though it would be to tel it right. It right in mah mine, but de words dont come out right." I hastened to assure her that it was alright for she [??] really worried. "Did us uster dance?" she questioned, "Whose-e-e-e, us [?] did dem days. An dey called me 'dat dancin gal'. When some plantation niggahs give a frolic day sent de word arounbout three weeks ahaid time 8 so us all be ready an git Massa to say we kin go. Sometimes us walk fifteen miles to da frolic but us done win dat. I never git tired, nevah know what it meant dem days to be tired, often uster wonder how folks felt when dey say dey is tired." Mother heaved a great sigh as if she might now be tired. Then she wiped her face with a cloth and ate another cookie. The afternoon was growing a little cooler and a few children came into the street to play. "I carry mah shoes ovah mah shoulder with the strings tied I thought too much of them shoes to walk de road in dem. Den jus fore we gits to de frolic I put em on an walk into de house as I much was proud. Didn't wash em long at de frolic either, suah caint dance in en. Just want de other niggahs to be jealous, hee, hee, hee," Mother laughed in appreciation of her own vanity. Then she looked down at her heavy clumsey shoes and hastily drew her feet back under her chair as if ashamed of them, exclaiming: Fore goodness! Mistis, I forgit where I is, a minit, an feels lak I'm back at de frolic ad dese ole shoes, I [?] be shamed if I had to wear dem. Suah had bettah shoes dan dese here in dem days." Again she sighed deeply but bolstered her feelings with a generous pinch of snuff. "We plaed a dancin game like

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dis. We all git pahtners at de frolic, ceptin one or two without no pahtners. Den us line up an de Master O Ceremony, he call out: 'You-all got pahtners?' an us all stomp our foots an holler: 'Us all get pahtners.' Den he shout: 9 WPA FLORIDA Writers' PROJECT FOLKLORE, 19; FOLKLORE, FLORIDA ADDENDA: FORM C. TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED) PAGE 9 Ella Lassiter, informant Barbara B. Darsey, Sebring

'You steel mah pahtner, an I steal back again.' Den us all break hands and run round de room and git nother pahtner. An always somebody lef that dont hab one. Den us all swing up an down de room while de fiddle play, den us swing roun in a circle an stomp our [?] foots and holler:

'Us all got pahtners.' Den de master he calls again:

'You-all got pahtners? Well steal aroun and done slight none.' Den us break hands again and steal pahtners. An den us swing down de line an roun an roun while de fiddle play.'

Mother rested a moment, and a dreamy look came into her kind old eyes, [??????] frolic dancing "up an down de lines an roun an roun." Children raised shrill voices in the street, a baby screamed lustily, and we could hear the mother crooning gently to it. A small flock of chickens [?] in the fence corner and took [?] dust baths in the hot sand, idly picking at each other.

After Mother had rested a few minutes she resumed her talk eagerly:

"Suah heap o fun, frolics wus. An sometimes folkes git mad too. Nevah was no liquor, cause [?] make us [?] de frolic if de liquor brought, but sometimes [?] git [?] on, or some pahtner stole dat a boy think a heap of, den dey is a suah fight. I member once dey is a fight, when [?] dancin in the kitchen at da big house, an us gals all run up to de back gallery up stairs. Den day drug a niggah out in de yard dey thought dead, an de niggah what hit him started to run. De daid niggah (only he not daid, jus [?]) be de brother of de

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fightinest [woman?] I ever did see. [?] be most six feet tall and a high yaller niggah, her name [Sis Cally?]. Then Sis Cally saw her brothah 10

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ADDENDA: FORM C. TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED) page 10

Ella Lassiter, informant

Barbara B. Darsey, Sebring

Mother stopped to eat another cookie. How she managed this with all the snuff she had taken in her lip, I do not know, but she did and gracefully too.

“Sometimes us all line up roun de room an day boys or da gals, choose da pahtners. Day take a ribbon and go on to de one they choose and sing: ‘One yard, O, baby, I I-oo-o-ve you Two yard, O, baby, I I-oo-o-ve you Three yard, O, baby, I loo-o-ve you [Teeny dee, teeny dee, teeny dee?].’ Den day rise an dance.” Mother tore off a piece of cloth about a yard long which she [?] grasped at each end, then held on right shoulder and left hip, then visa versa, as she sang.

“Us [?] lov frolics at Christmas time. We go early on Saturday night an dance an frolic until good bright daylight Sunday morning. Sometimes us havin such a good time us shut de doah and windah tight so us not know when da sun shine an can keep on a-dancin awhile longer. Sometimes dey hav a big dinnah at de frolic. Our Old Massa, he always let us have food, but some too didnt. We put all de food on a long table an let everybody march by and take whut dey want. We have chicken, and ham, and cakes, [?] whoooo-e-e, great big cakes too an puddin.”

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FOLKLORE, 19; FOLKLORE, FLORIDA

ADDENDA: FORM C. TEXT OF INTERVIEW, (UNEDITED) PAGE 11

ELLA LASSITER, INFORMANT

Barbara B. Darsey, Sebring.

I believe that we both smacked our lips in thinking of such food, and Mother Ella [??] her cookie.

“I could fill a glass clear to de brim with watah and place it on my haid and dance all roun de room withut spillin drop,” said Mother Ella seriously, and patted her head gently in [?], and sighed deeply.

“When us had frolics at [?] plantation often Massa [Lindsey?] who visit our Massa, he come out an watch us and he always give me a quartah to dance roun with de glass on mah haid. I nevah git tired I just dance all de night through, seem lak I nevah git nouf.”

She looked at me steadily for a moment then:

‘Us dance de ole [?] dance too, none of dat foolish prancin lak dey do nowadays. We had a fiddlah what could call de set wif his bow too, chile, I mean he could do dat. He just draw his bow and stom his feet. Fust he stomp real loud, den he draw his bow an just mak dat fiddle talk.

“Us had nice white dresses fo de frolic too. Some niggahs didnt hab good close, but we did and us took good care o em too. They mad outer bleachin or muslin an when us wear em us take em of an bleach em out nice and white agin an starch em so stiff day stan alone.

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When we go to de frolic us carry dem just like we did our shooes, only us wrop em up careful.:

Mother looked about her and even [?] out the door as if she expected trouble then she said in a slightly lowered voice:

“Sometimes when us goin to de frolic on nuther plantation, dere be de pat-ter-role (patrol) on de road to catch de run-away 12 niggahs. Us McMullins nevah run away, us too proud and glad to be slaves. De pat-ter-role stop us an ask who us is, day knows us McMullins alright but dey ask us all da same, when when we say:

“Us is McMullin niggahs,’ de pat-ter-role say: ‘Well do on den.’ Sometimes other niggah with us make like dey is McMullins too, or de pat-ter-role catch dem. Den de Pat-ter-role say: ‘For de Lawd! Is all de niggahs in de worl McMullins! ‘but dey lay dem go long wif us. Dem suah wus de good ole days, I ruther be a slave with my white folks right now, Mistis, den livin lak I is. Dem days we had plenty to eat and plenty to wear and nuthin to worry bout; now all us got is worry, and a few ole rags and a little food. Sill I be proud an thankful to git what I does, an special so as I done havta work fur it neither.”

Mother again used her tin-can-cuspidor, then wiped her lips daintly on a quilt scrap and resumed her story:

“Us like to go to Church too an sometimes a preacher come right to our plantation. Lemme see now,” and she crooned to herself a moment and beat time withnand and foot, “dis here song us uster sing: Some time I'll d—i—e Some time I feel like, feel like, feel like, I'm goin, cause I'm ole and worn. Oum-oum-oum-um-um-um Keep a preach-i-n Ole man, he preachin, preachin, preachin, Make me feel my time aint long. oum-oum-oum-um-um-um Keep a roll-i-n Ole hearse arollin, rollin, rollin, gimme me dat graveyard feelin Oum-oum-oum-um-um-um Keep a pull-i-n 13

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Keep a pull-i-n Ole horse keep a-pullin, pullin, pullin Somebody down to de graveyard
Oum-oum-oum-um-um-um Time aint l-oo—o-n-g Make me feel lak mah time aint long
Then I'll die cause I'm ole and worn Oum-oum-oum-um-um-um-ooo-ee-ee/”

This song closed with a long drawn wail. The entire song was sung in a deep mournful voice with a dirge-like strain that had a most uncanny effect.

Said Mother Ella: “Us user sin dat at all de funerls an in da Churchhouse all de time. Iffen we didnt have no preacher for de funerl us sang dat song anyway. Now heahs one more us sang: Sister Mary done know trouble lak I sent it No body knows but God Don't nobody know my trouble, only me and No body knows but God all dat I kin tell you, lots o trouble o, No body knows but God [?] on I'll try to tell you No body knows but God Forget all mah troubles now in religion No body knows but God Ride and you'll hear de angels singin No body knows but God.”

As Mother Ella sang she kept time with both hands, and patty her right foot on the floor. This last song was very sweet but she did not always keep to the same tune, and though she sung it twice for me, it was impossible to show much infleeties.

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After these songs and stories Mother Ella rested again and then spoke:

“Mistis, I did have nother song but it [?] scaped mah mine now. I'll try an mind it soon an git Annie Mae to word it down , den I'll be suah to have it. I suah do than you foah da cookies, jus what I wanted an like so much.”

I, in turn thanked Mother Ella for her kindness about the songs and stories, then I told her goodbye and left her sitting on her little porch quietly matching quilt scraps.