

[Sam Lewis]

Revision Code No. 51 B Revised by Author [?]

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE: SAM LEWIS

Date of First Writing Feb. 28, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Sam Lewis (Negro)

Place and Address Spartanburg, S.C.

Occupation [Butler?] ?

Name of Writer R.V. Williams

Name of Reviser, Date Elmer Turnage, Mar. 28, 1939

"I was born on February de twenty-fust, but I don't know what year. I was born on Major Hart's place in York County. My folks belonged to Major Hart in slavery time, and dey stayed on dere atter de war was over. I could find out from my sistah over dere jus' how old I is. She got it writ down in de Bible. All I knows is dat I'm in de sixties.

Gnarled as a fire-blackened old pine stump , Sam scratched his grey head. "I jus' don't 'member how dey worked de money mattahs in dem days, but us allus had plenty to eat. When I got old enough to work, us jus' kinda rented from de Harts. Dey furnished us wid mules and groceries and clothes, and us work on de farm. When lay-by time come, dey tuck out for de rent and what dey done give us. Sometimes, us raised 'nough cotton and

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corn to come out ahead wid some cash, and sometimes us come out in de hole if de crops be bad.

“Dere's one thing I sho' 'members well, and dat was de earthquake in 1886. I'se a pretty big boy. De Harts had jus' bought me new shoes. Shoes in dem days had brass around de toes of 'em. I sho' was proud of dem shoes. C10 - 1/31/[41?] - S. C.

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Us walked seven miles to York to see what de 'quake had done dere. I 'members us saw two stories wid de roofs caved in.

“Dat 'quake was a bad thing. When it come, I run out de house and got under it. Dat was a crazy thing to do, but I was so scared dat I didn't think 'bout de 'quake might shake de house down on me.

“When I fust come to Spartanburg in 1887, I went to work as a cook for Miss Webber, but she moved away right atter I come here. Den I got a job cooking for Dr. Rigby. De next job I had was when I went to Millwater, N.J. I worked for a German up dere who raised flowers and plants for a living. He didn't pay me but three dollars a week and my board, but I sho' learned a lot 'bout flowers from him. I'se been growing flowers ever since, and I'se made good money working in people's flower gardens. I think it was 'bout 1901 when I was dere, 'cause I knows it was atter de Spanish-American War.

“I 'members de day that de Spartanburg companies left for Flordia. I tried to jine, myself, but dey turned me down for some reason or 'nother. I sho wanted to go to dat war. Long time befo' de troops left, I went to de officers and I told dem I was a good cook. Dey tuck my name and where I was staying and told me dat I'd git a lettah telling me when to come. I was working for Judge Nicholls on his farm, and I told dem to send de lettah out dere. I looked ever day for my lettah, but it nevah did come.

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“De day befo' de troops left, I found out dey was going. I axed Miss Nicholls to git off so I could go to town and see de officers, and she brung me in de buggy. Den dey tell me I can't go, but I nevah find out how come. I sho' was one sad man when dat train pulled out from de C.&W.C. depot.

“Judge Nicholls tole me atter dat, dat he was going to 'vestigate, but I reckon he was too busy to pay 'tention to dat. Judge was 'bout de best man I evah know'd. He had two sons dat I had to take care of. Dey was Sam and Montague. You know dat Sam got to be Congressman befo' he died, 3 and dat Montague was killed in de war. Dey tell me he was de fust man killed from Spartanburg in de World War. He fought with de Canadians long befo' us evah got into dat war; and he got killed befo' us got into de war. He was de one dat allus was so crazy 'bout being so dress-up all de time. He allus had to have de best clothes of any boy in town. Dem boys got what dey call a 'lowance, and dey give me some money evah week for keeping dere shoes shined and looking atter deir clothes. Sometimes it was jus' a few cents, den sometimes it was much as a dollar.

“I worked for Judge Nicholls till de farm was sold and de family moved back to deir home here. Den I went to work for Mistah Walter Montgomery, and I reckon I worked for him for about five years, I jus' don't 'member how long. I kept up de garden and done jus' 'bout anything dat come up to do. One day, he tole me dat he would give me a good 'commendation for de library job, and he say it would pay me mo' money dan he was paying me. I made jus' six dollars a week and my dinner every day when I was working for him. I got de library job.

“De library kinda small when I come to work dere. I reckon I could haul all de books dey had in a two-horse wagon. I kept de place and de grounds cleaned up. Dat was in 1908. I couldn't read or write at dat time, but I could read numbers. All de books had jus' numbers on dem den. I'd take de books and put 'em back where dey belongs. Dem was de books what people tuck out to read. Den I 'menced to mem'rize de names of de books by de color on de binding and de size of de books. I got so I could mos' find any book what

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anybody wanted, even if I couldn't read or write. Den I started to night school, and I kinda learned how to read and write. Miss Baughm, she my boss, she tell me to go to de school. And I listened to how people talk when dey come to de library. Dat's how come I 'nounce some words bettah dan others.

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"I sho' is glad I ain't no librarian. Dey got to know something 'bout ever'thing. People all de time coming in and ax'ing 'bout something. You jus' ax Miss Baughm 'bout dat. She busy from morning till night trying to find out something for somebody.

"De library sprung up fast. Sometimes, somebody die and leave dem some books. Sometimes folks would jus' give dem books. Times come on to gitting better, so de library could buy some books. It got so big dat dey changed de ole system from dem plain numbers to a kinda code system. I nevah could figure it out. Dey had to take on extry help, and so many people started coming dat it tuck up all my time to keep de building in shape. Lots of dem flowers and shrubbery what you see down dere come from me. I jus' give it to 'em.

"When I fust started working dere, sometimes de streets was so muddy in de winter time dat it would take me 'bout an hour to git to de library. 'Course I had to come 'bout a mile. I'd leave home at five o'clock in de morning, so I would have time to git de fire started up good. I'se never late to work de whole time I was dere. And I was never out 'count of being sick 'cept one time. Dat was in 1929. I got de chills, and I didn't work except off and on for 'bout three months. Sometimes, I made good money dere, and den sometimes I didn't.

"De depression sho' hurt us. De city and county cut down on what dey had been giving to keep up de library. Dat cut me down, too. But during de war, lots of dem soldiers from New York used to come down [?] dere . Some of dem give me tips. Jus' hard to say what I did make down dere, but I reckon I made 'round nine dollars a week for the whole time I was dere.

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"I sho' had tough luck in 1933. My wife died dat year. She been sick mos' all de time since our baby was born. Dat was 'bout 1902, as I 'members. De baby was born dead, and I'll allus believe it was 'cause dat nigger doctor didn't know what he was doing. Little while befo' de baby 5 was born, a man come to me and say he is a doctor, and dat he handle de case cheap. He say he's jus' come to town, and dat he wants to build up a reputation. I don't know much 'bout dem things, but folks tole me he sho' messed things up when de baby come. I wish I had got me a white doctor. I had been working for Dr. Blake in spare time, and he told me later dat he would have done it for nothing. I reckon dat's 'bout de worst thing ever come over me.

"I left de library in 1938 'cause de board hired a man who couldn't do as much as I could, and dey was paying him more dan I was gitting. I don't want to talk 'bout dat. But even today, I goes over dere and does odd jobs for dem.

"My next job was wid de beautification people. I got dat job 'cause I knows so much 'bout flowers and plants and things. Miss Shiver was my fust boss an de W.P.A. work, den Miss Moore took it up. I liked dat gov' ment job jus' fine, 'cause dey sho' was good to me. Then I was transferred to de county project, though — dat's when I quit. Dat work was jus' too rough for anybody, and I know'd I couldn't do it. Dat's de way I lost my gov'ment job, I jus' didn't go to it when dey changed me. 'Course de president ain't got nothing to do wid dat; he done his part. I'se 'bliged to give him credit.

"I likes dis job I got now. See dat big garden back dere. De boss done let me have dat to grow stuff in. De work ain't hard. I does a little of all kind of things 'round here. I keeps de grass and de hedge cut and looks atter de shrubbery, and I helps keep de house clean. I gits through 'bout three o'clock — dat gives me time to work in de garden, or to work in other people's gardens. I 'spect I'se pretty lucky. I ain't making so much right now in dis cold weather, but when warm weather comes, I'se hoping to make more money dan I ever have befo'.

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“I’se always believed in de Presbyterian ruling and I went to dat church when I was young. I’se ’tending de Trinity Methodist now, though, ’cause our church done gone under. Somebody misplaced some money and dey had to turn de church over to Mr. Ravenel — he took de deeds and everything. Dat’s what turned de church over. I believes in going to church, and I’se going back to de Presbyterian if dey ever git things straightened out.

“If you come back here in de spring, I’se going to give you a bunch of flowers. I want you to see what kind of flowers I can raise.”