

# Narrative of a Slave Owned by Joseph Spence

This should be read after "Letter to My Grandchildren" of Margaretta Deaderick Wendel Spence

This is a pretty vivid account of the journey from Murfreesboro, considering Martha Spence couldn't have been more than 3 or 4 at the time. But maybe she was really older – Jan. 1 was and is a common date for blacks who aren't sure of their exact birth date. Or perhaps her sisters told her more about the trip.

Martha Spence Bunton, 81, was born a slave on January 1, 1856, on the John Bell cotton plantation in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Bell sold Martha, her mother and four sisters to Joseph Spence, who brought them overland to Texas. Spence rented a cotton plantation at Montopolis, now a suburb of Austin. Martha's father, Abraham Spence, was owned by William Burrows of Murfreesboro, and was not allowed to accompany his family to Texas. Burrows died shortly after this incident, and Joseph Spence purchased Abraham, who rejoined his family in Texas. Hester Bell, Martha's mother, died of diphtheria shortly after coming to Texas. Martha was reluctant to relate incidents concerning her slavery days because she hated to even "think about dem awful days". On December 27, 1880, when Martha was 24, she married Andy Bunton, a renter-farmer. They had nine children, of whom three are living. Martha is a devoted student of the Bible and now is thankful that, after slavery she took the chance to go to school, "up to the sixth grade" when she quit to go to work, so she could help her father, who was getting "drunk all ob de time". Martha and her sister, Susan Spence, live in two small houses on twelve acres of land which their father purchased for \$25.00 an acre. Their farm is picturesquely located on a thickly wood red bluff, about six miles east of Austin, on Route 1, Box 120. Martha receives a monthly pension of \$11.00 from the State.

Her Story:

"I was bawn on Mawster John Bell's cotton plantation at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, dis was on January 1, 1856, right on New Year's day. We belonged to Mawster Bell, but he sold us to Joseph Spence. Dat's why later, I got de name ob Spence, Martha Spence.

"Now here, I remembah how when Mawster Spence bought us, we come on down to Texas in wagons, in dem big covered wagons. I kin remembah how we crossed de big Mississippi River on a steamboat. I didn't even have sense enough to be scared ob dat steamboat.

"We knowed when we hit Texas, 'cause de mawster was a tellin' us all times, 'We had better git off ob de road and pull up alongside ob dem trees and brushes, 'cause a nawther is on de way.'

"When dat nawther struck, weeds and leaves would jes' staht a rollin' along de land. Yo' might not believe me when dem weeds got to tumblin' along dat way, us poor, ignorant little niggers thought dat dey was rabbits. We sure did. We never saw no rabbits in Tennessee, but we had heard dat dere was a lot ob 'em in Texas.

“Mawster Spence rode his hoss, and sometimes he’d let us git three days ahead ob hem and den he’d catch up wid us. I believe Mistress Spence come along in a richer way, in a coach, or a stagecoach, I believe. I know dat she didn’t come along wid us.

“Mawster’s nephew, William Hamilton, rode along wid us in de covered wagons. De chillun had to walk in de mawnin’s while de older folks rode, in de afternoons, de older folks walked and us chillum rode. Ob course, de littlest chillum rode all ob de time. Sometimes we took de wrong road and had to turn back and find de main road.

“We come through Louisiana into East Texas. Here sistah Nancy took sick and had a baby. She was married to a slave, John Spence. He was along wid us. They called de little baby girl Anna. Mothaw, my other sistahs, Hester, Parthenia, Susan, and me come on down to Austin, where Mawster Spence rented a cotton farm.

“When I was a child, I had to help de other chillun bring de dinner pails to de workers in de fields. We toted buckets dat had meat, cabbage, biscuits and milk in ‘em. About twelb o’clock de men would unhitch de mules, and wait fo’ us. Dey was hungry an dey got plenty to eat. All ob us got enough to eat.

“Fathaw wasn’t out in dem fields, ‘cause he was owned by Mawster William Burrow ob Murphreesboro, Tennessee, and he warn’t allowed to come along. But when maswter Burrows died, Mawster Spence bought father, and he came on down to Texas. He den worked out in de fields ob Mawster Billingsley. Mawster Spence had enough hands, so he allowed fathaw to work out.

“But fathaw was near us. Den mothaw got a cold and diphtheria, and died. We was lak little orphan niggers, but fathaw den come over and took care ob us. He was fathaw and mothaw to us. Muh, dat’s what we called mothaw in dem early days, wasn’t wid us no more.

“Fathaw, poor soul, was a big bodied man. I remembah how on Sunday mornin’s when we didn’t have nothin’ to do, he’d git out ob bed in our log cabin, make a big fire, and tell us:

“ ‘Jiminy-cripes! Yo’ chillun stay in yo beds, I’ll make de biscuits.’

“He would, too. I still laugh when I think about dem big rye biscuits dat was so lage, dat we called ‘em ‘nigger Heels’. Dey sure was big biscuits, but dey was good. Some ob dem big biscuits was made out ob black shorts, but dey was good, too.”

---

From: *Slave Narratives*, Alfred E. Menn, Travis County W. P. A. District No. 9, 1937 (unpubl.)

(Book notes that these copies of slave narratives were transcribed from original transcripts in the Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library – originals in storage under the same number – AM)

Call no. A/301.4493 SL, Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library, Austin Tex.