

Lay My Burden Down

A Folk History of Slavery

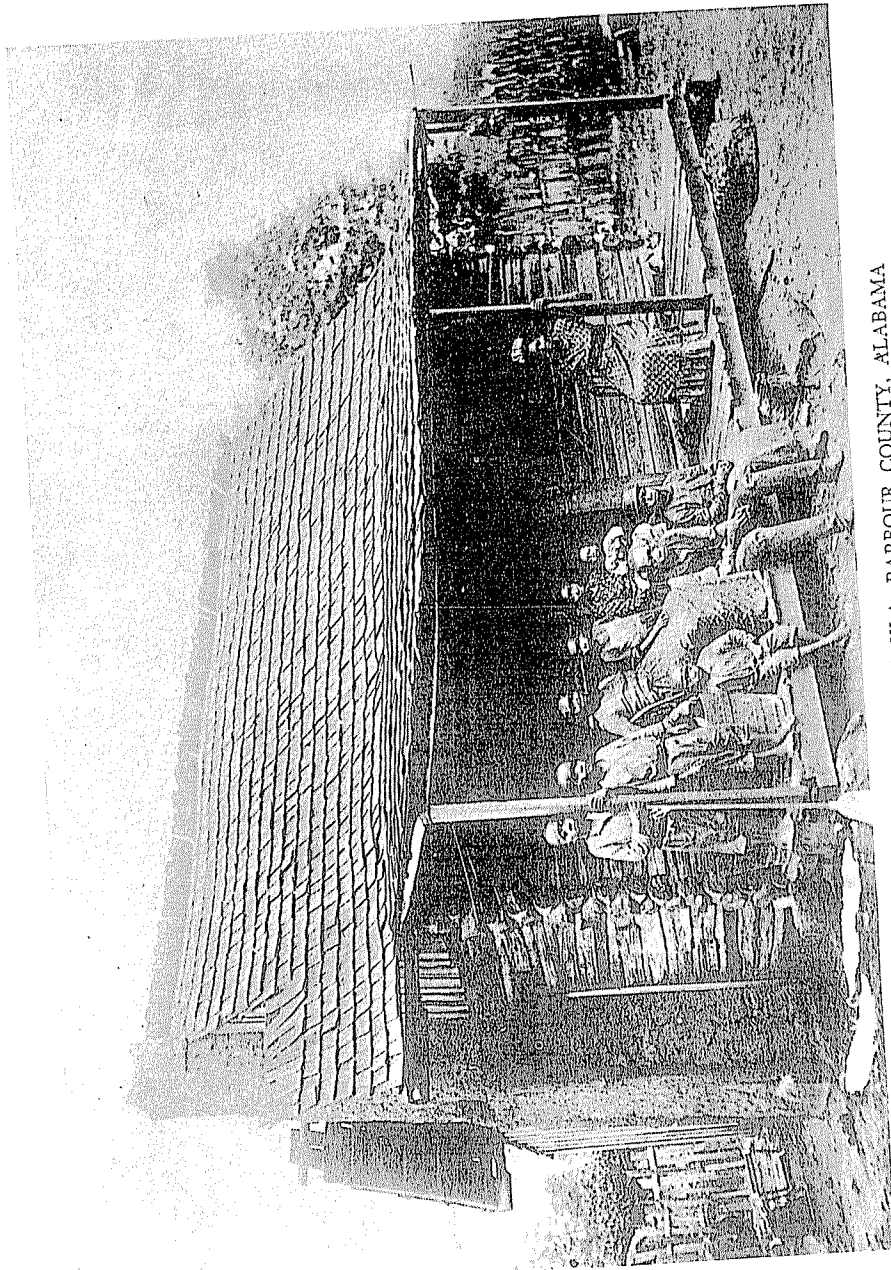
Edited by

B. A. BOTKIN



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TO THE NARRATORS

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The master said, "Let me see." He looked and seen it was a shoat. The nigger said, "Master, it may be a shoat now, but it sure was a possum while ago when I put 'im in this sack."

PIG-OOIE, PIG

Master John Booker had two niggers what had a habit of slipping across the river and killing Old Master's hogs and hiding the meat in the loft of the house. Master had a big blue hog, and one day he missed him and he sent Ned to look for him. Ned knowed all the time that he had killed it and had it hid in his loft. He hunted and called, "Pig-ooie, pig. Somebody done stole Old Master's big blue hog." They couldn't find it, but Old Master thought Ned knowed something 'bout it. One night he found out Ned was gonna kill another hog and had asked John to go with him. He borrowed John's clothes and blacked his face and met Ned at the river. Soon they find a nice big one, and Ned say, "John, I'll drive him round and you kill him." So he drove him past Old Master, but he didn't want to kill his own hog, so he made like he'd like to kill him but he missed him. Finally Ned got tired and said, "I'll kill him, you drive him by me." So Master John drove him by him, and Ned knock the hog on the head and cut his throat and they load him on the canoe. When they was nearly 'cross the river, Old Master dip up some water and wash his face a little, then he look at Ned and he say, "Ned, you look sick. I believe you've got leprosy." Ned row on little more and he jump in the river, and Master had a hard time finding him again. He had the overseer whip Ned for that.

MALITIS

... I remember Mammy told me about one master who almost starved his slaves. Mighty stingy, I reckon he was.

Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they ribs would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny, too, Mammy said.

They was seven hogs, fat and ready for fall hog-killing time. Just the day before Old Master told off they was to be killed, something happened to all them porkers. One of the field boys found them and come a-telling the master: "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter."

When the master gets to where at the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing round looking sorrow-eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: "What's the illness with 'em?"

"Malitis," they tells him, and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't no more meat on the place.

He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but that's because he's afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs' got malitis.

"Don't you all know what is malitis?" Mammy would ask the children when she was telling of the seven fat hogs and seventy lean slaves. And she would laugh, remembering how they fooled Old Master so's to get all them good meats.

"One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning," Mammy would explain, "long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick, but it was a uncommon 'disease,' even with hungry Negroes around all the time."

THE BOOTS THAT WOULDN'T COME OFF

One time a houseboy from another plantation wanted to come to one of our Saturday night dances, so his master told him to shine his boots for Sunday and fix his horse for the night and then he could git off for the frolic. Abraham shined his master's boots till he could see hisself in them, and they looked so grand he was tempted to try 'em on. They was a little tight but he thought he could wear 'em, and he wanted to show hisself off in 'em at the dance. They wa'n't so easy to walk in, and he was 'fraid he might git 'em scratched up walking through the fields, so he snuck his master's horse out and rode to the dance. When Abraham rid up there in them shiny boots, he got all the gals' 'tention. None of 'em wanted to dance with the other niggers. That Abraham was sure strutting till somebody run in and told him his horse had done broke its neck. He had tied it to a limb and sure enough, some way, that horse had done got tangled up and hung its own self. Abraham begged the other nigger boys to help him take the dead horse home, but he had done took their gals and he didn't get no help. He had to walk twelve miles home in them tight shoes. The sun had done riz up when he got there and it wa'n't long 'fore his master was calling: "Abraham, bring me my boots." That nigger would holler out, "Yes, sir, I's a-coming." But them boots wouldn't come off 'cause his foots had done swelled up in 'em. His master kept on calling and when Abraham seed he couldn't put it off no longer, he just cut them boots off his foots and went in and told what he had done. His master was awful mad and said he was a good mind to take the hide off Abraham's back. "Go git my horse quick, nigger, 'fore I most kills you," he yelled. Then Abraham told him: "Master, I knows you is going to kill me now, but your horse is done dead." Then poor Abraham had to out and tell the whole story, and his master got to laughing so 'bout how he took all the gals away from the other boys and how them boots hurt him that it looked like he never could stop. When he finally did stop