

Rabb Castles' Memories of Sherman's Invasion

When an interviewer working for the W. P. A. in 1938 went to the home of an 80-year-old widow in Winnsboro he found her with only a radio to keep her company. Nina Rabb Castles wished for young people to liven the house and to play her "sweet-toned old piano." She wanted girls who could play and men and boys to sing the old songs like "Silver Threads among the Gold," "In the Gloaming," and "Juanita."

W. W. Dixon, the interviewer, asked what it was like when she was young. Nina told him she was born in 1858 on her father's plantation and grew up. She was the youngest of 8 children. Three older brothers enlisted in the Confederate army and the oldest was killed.

What Nina remembered best was the raiding of her house by Sherman's troops. Her father was a highly successful farmer and had stored large quantities of cotton, meat, corn, molasses, wheat, oats and other farm products. At the time (February 1865) there were on the plantation "eight mules, five mares, a herd of cows, droves of hogs, and flocks of sheep, ducks, geese, turkeys, guineas, pea fowls, and chickens." Over 50 smoked hams hung in the attic.

When the army and the camp followers took all the animals except an ancient carriage horse too old to work. One ham was saved when Nina's governess stopped the soldier carrying the last ham downstairs. "Miss Betreville, with an old maid's sternness and precision, seized the ham that was in the hands of the soldier and said loudly, 'You shall not have the last one.' The soldier hesitated and then laughingly relinquished it to her hands."

All of the house furnishings were either destroyed or taken away except the two beds that she and her brother, both with measles, slept on. No one had even a change of clothes left.

Nina's mother, whom she described as a woman of energy and good judgment, was a skilled weaver and seamstress. She had woven cloth for the Confederacy throughout the war. When jute bagging (used to cover bales of cotton) was scarce, her mother found a substitute. Water was dammed on a branch and long green poplar poles were submerged in the water until the bark could be peeled off. The inner bark was wound into balls from which the shuttles could be filled. She made hundreds of yards of bagging for the cotton lint. The gin house and 25 bales of cotton wrapped in poplar bark bagging were destroyed by the Union troops.

Her mother (Nancy Kincaid Rabb) raised silk worms and obtained silk from the cocoons. Nina and her brother gathered mulberry leaves to feed the worms. The silk thread was spun into cloth for the making of silk mitts for the soldiers.

In spite of the hard times there were some good memories of the war and post-war period. Nina could remember quilting parties, sewing bees and candy pulls. Before the war the girls wore hoop skirts. She thought it took 14 to 16 yards of material for a dress. The hoop skirts were for parties. Special long riding skirts were designed for riding horseback.

Nina thought it a good thing she and her brothers had had the measles when the Union troops came for else the house might have been burned as so many were.

There was a large barn and a log house on the opposite side of the plantation that escaped. U. S. Army wagons carried off much of the corn but there was so much they could not take it all. She thought that the army expected other wagons to remove the remainder before setting fire to the buildings. Other wagons never showed up.

“From the remainder of that corn, my father supplied many neighbors. Since the grist mills had been destroyed and no meal could be ground, our family and others subsisted only on hominy for a long time.”

By Louise Pettus