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## OUR GIANTS SPEAK "Twelve Years As A Slave" A Slave Christmas

The curiosity concerning the daily activities in a slave's life made ex-slave narratives extremely popular in the late 1800's. The details and adventures of the narratives themselves were an eloquent abolitionist statement, especially just before the Civil War.

Solomon Northrup, a free Black from New York, was kidnapped and sold as a slave into Louisiana. Nearly 12 years later, he was freed. His narrative sold nearly 27,000 copies in two years. Usually the slaves worked "from sun up to sundown." Few holidays were allotted to them to break the drudgery and routine. But Christmas was usually a special feast—slaves frequently were allowed two or three days rest and passes to visit with neighboring relatives or nearby plantations. Northrup, in the following excerpt records the holiday festivities on his plantation.

The only respite from constant labor the slave has through the whole year, is during the Christmas holidays. Epps allowed us three—others allow four, five and six days, according to the measure of their generosity. It is the only time to which they look forward with any interest or pleasure. They are glad when night comes. Not only because it brings them a few hours repose, but because it brings them one day nearer Christmas. It is hailed with equal delight by the old and the young; even Uncle Abram ceases to glorify Andrew Jackson, and Patsy forgets her many sorrows, amid the general hilarity of the holidays. It is the time of feasting, and frolicking, and fiddling—the carnival season with the children of bondage. They are the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty, and heartily indeed do they enjoy it.

It is custom for one planter to give a "Christmas supper," inviting the slaves from neighboring plantations to join his own on the occasion; for instance, one year it is given by Epps, the next by Marshall, the next by Hawkins, and so on. Usually from three to five hundred are assembled, coming together on foot, in carts, on horseback, on mules, riding double and triple, sometimes a boy and girl, an old woman. Uncle Abram astride a mule, with Aunt Phebe and Patsy behind him, trotting towards a Christmas supper, would be no uncommon sight on Bayou Boeuf.

Then, too, "of all the days i' the year," they array themselves in their best attire. The cotton coat has been washed clean, the stump of a tallow candle has been applied to their shoes, and if so fortunate as to possess a rimless or a crownless hat, it is placed jauntily on the head. They are welcomed with equal cordiality, however, if they come bare-headed and bare-footed to the feast. As a general thing, the women wear handkerchiefs tied about their heads, but if chance has thrown in their way a fiery red ribbon, or a cast-off bonnet of their mistress' grandmother, it is sure to be worn on such occasions. Red—the deep bloodred—is decidedly the favorite color among the enslaved damsels of my acquaintance. If a red ribbon does not encircle the neck, you will be certain to find all the hair of their woolly heads tied up with red strings of one sort or another.

The table is spread in the open air, and loaded with varieties of meat and piles of vegetables. Bacon and corn meal at such times are dispensed with. Sometimes the cooking is performed in the kitchen on the plantation, at others in the shade of wide branching trees. In the latter case, a ditch is dug in the ground, and wood laid in and burned until it is filled with glowing coals, over which chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigs, and not unfrequently the entire body of a wild ox, are roasted. They are furnished also with flour, of which biscuits are made, and often with peach and other preserves, with tarts, and every manner and description of pies, except the

mince, that being an article of pastry as yet unknown among them. Only the slave who has lived all the years on his scanty allowance of meal and bacon, can appreciate such suppers. White people in great numbers assemble to witness the gastronomical enjoyments . . . .

When the viands have disappeared, and the hungry maws of the children of toil are satisfied, then, next in the order of amusement, is the Christmas dance. My business on these gala days always was to play on the violin. The African race is a music-loving one, proverbially; and many there were among my fellow bondsmen whose organs of tune were strikingly developed, and who could thumb the banjo with dexterity.

On that particular Christmas I have now in my mind, Miss Lively and Mr. Sam, the first belonging to Stewart, the latter to Roberts, started the ball. It was well known that Sam cherished an ardent passion for Lively, as also did one of Marshall's and another of Carey's boys; for Lively was lively indeed, and a heart-breaking coquette withal. It was a victory for Sam Roberts, when, rising from the repast, she gave him her hand for the first "figure" in preference to either of his rivals. They were somewhat crest-fallen, and shaking their heads angrily, rather intimated they would like to pitch into Mr. Sam and hurt him badly.

But not an emotion of wrath ruffled the placid bosom of Samuel as his legs flew like drum-sticks down the outside and up the middle, by the side of his bewitching partner. The whole company cheered them vociferously, and, excited with the applause, they continued "tearing down" after all the others had become exhausted and halted a moment to recover breath. But Sam's superhuman exertions overcame him finally leaving Lively alone, yet whirling like a top. Thereupon one of Sam's rivals, Pete Marshall, dashed in, and, with might and main, leaped and shuffled and threw himself into every conceivable shape, as if determined to show Miss Lively and all the world that Sam Roberts was of no account . . . .

One "set" off, another takes its place, he or she remaining longest on the floor receiving the most uproarious commendation, and so the dancing continued. See *Slave Page 19*

### Fire damages home on Doolittle Avenue

A Las Vegas home sustained an estimated \$15,000 in damage Tuesday when a fire broke out in a teenager's bedroom, authorities said.

Firefighters responded to the 12:08 a.m. fire at 1100 Doolittle Ave. and extinguished the blaze within minutes, a fire dispatcher said.

The smell of smoke awakened the 15-year-old sleeping in the bedroom. The teenager alerted other family members, who escaped from the house without injury.

Fire officials had not determined the cause of the fire. An investigation is continuing.

### RUSSIAN CLASS CONTINUES

The Division of Communication and Fine Arts of Clark County Community College will offer Russian 112, a continuation of the Beginning Russian language course offered this fall.

The class will begin on Jan. 28, 1985 with the last class meeting in May. The hours of instruction are from 7:30 to 8:50 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday evenings at Valley High School.

The instructor, Mr. Maurice Horwitz, is a graduate of the U.S. Marine Institute of Foreign Languages in Washington, D.C. and served, for many years, as a Russian language interpreter and interrogator for numerous government agencies. The basic Russian languages course will feature an introduction to Russian, pronunciation of Russian sounds, simple structure and use of Russian script, syntax necessary for correct oral and written expression, practice in speaking, reading and writing and information on Russian customs and manners.

For information concerning this first year Russian II course, please call the CCCC at 643-6060, ext. 259.

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