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LeFevre J. Cranstone painted *Slave Auction, Virginia* in 1862. An English artist, creating works for an English audience, Cranstone captures a slave auction in Richmond without the grittiness in which such events typically occurred. It was in places like this where families were often split apart. The oil-on-canvas, which measures 11 3/4 x 19 1/2 inches, is now owned by the Virginia Historical Society. Click on the image for a better view.

Sarah Gudger ("Aunt Sarah") lived a LONG time. She was 121 years old when interviewed in 1937. That meant, of course, she was already "old" by the time of the Civil War.

Although outsiders initially doubted her incredible claim, many of her life's events could be (and were) independently verified. She saw, and experienced, many troubling things before emancipation. (Note that to maintain authenticity, writers transcribed the oral histories - including Aunt Sarah's autobiographic narrative - using the former slave's vernacular.)

- When slaves were sold and families were split apart:

Oh, dat wah a tebble time! All de slaves be in de field, plowin', hoein', singin' in de boilin' sun. Ole Marse he cum t're de field wif a man call de specalater. Dey walk round jes' lookin', jes' lookin'. All de da'kies know whut dis mean. Dey didn' dare look up, jes' wok right on.

Den de specalater he sees who he want. He talk to Ole Marse, den dey slaps de han'cuffs on him an' take him away to de cotton country. Oh, dem wah awful times! When de specalater wah ready to go wif de slaves, effen dey wah enny whu didn' wanta go, he thrash em, den tie em 'hind de waggin an' mek em run till de fall on de groun', den he thrash em till dey say dey go 'thout no trubble.

Sometime some of dem run 'way an cum back t' de plantation, den it wah hardah on dem den befoah. When de da'kies wen' t' dinnah de ole niggah mammy she say whar am sich an' sich. None ob de othahs wanna tell huh. But when she see dem look down to de groun' she jes' say: 'De specalater. De specalater.' Den de teahs roll down huh cheeks, cause mebbe it huh son o' husban' an' she know she nebbah see 'em again. Mebbe dey leaves babies t' home. Mebbe jes' pappy an' mammy.

Oh, mah Lawdy, mah ole Boss wah mean, but he nebbah sen' us to de cotton country.

- When Sarah's mother died she was not allowed to see her:

I 'membahs when mah ole mammy die. She live on Rims (Reems) Crick with othah Hemphills. She sick long time. One day white man cum t' see me. He say: "Sarah, did yo' know yo' mammy wah daid?" "No", "I say," but I wants t' see mah mothah afoah dey puts huh away."

I went t' de house and say t' Ole Missie: "Mah mothah she die today. I wants t' see mah mothah afoah dey puts huh away," but she look at me an' say: "Git on outen heah, an' git back to yo' wok afoah I wallup yo' good." So I went back t' mah wok, with the tears streamin' down mah face, jest awringin' mah hands, I wanted t' see mah mammy so.

'Bout two weeks latah, Ole Missie she git tebble sick, she jes' lingah 'long foah long time, but she nebbah gits up no mo'. Wa'nt long afoah dey puts huh away too, jes' lak mah mammy.

- When Sarah slept, did she have a bed?

I nebbah sleep on a bedstead till aftah freedom, no'm till aftah freedom. Jes' an ole pile o' rags in de conah. Ha'dly 'nuf t' keep us from freezin'.

Law, chile, nobuddy knows how mean da'kies wah treated. Wy, dey wah bettah t' de animals den t' us.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-TERRIBLE-TIME-Slave-Voices>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/A-TERRIBLE-TIME-Slave-Voices>

Media Stream



Sarah Grudger

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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