

Introduction

Benjamin Drew, a Boston abolitionist acting in cooperation with officers of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society, visited various towns of Upper Canada around the middle 1850's, interviewing scores of refugees from the slave states and copying their words soon after they were spoken. For reasons of safety, he protected the identity of his informants and used fictitious names. There were about 30,000 Negroes at that time in Upper, Canada, mostly adults who had once been slaves. John P. Jewett, the prominent abolitionist-minded publisher of Boston who had unexpectedly reaped a fortune from printing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, vouched for the integrity and intelligence of Drew.

The testimony tends to stress well-known gross abuses, but some of the ex-slaves offer fresh insights into the working of the plantation system.

Testimony of William A. Hall

I was born seven miles from Nashville, Tenn., Davidson county. I lived one year in Mississippi. I saw there a great deal of cotton-growing and persecution of slaves by men who had used them well in Tennessee. No man would have thought there could have been such a difference in treatment, when the masters got where they could make money. They drove the hands severely. My mother and brothers and sisters, when they changed their country, changed their position from good to bad. They were in Mississippi the last I heard of them, and I suppose they are there yet. It makes me miserable to consider that they are there: for their condition has been kept fresh in my memory, by seeing so much suffering and enduring so much. I went from Mississippi to Bedford county, Tenn. My master died here, and I was in hopes to go to see my mother. The doctor who attended my master had me sold at auction, and bought me himself, and promised he would never sell me to anybody; but in six months he tried to sell me. Not making out, he sent me to his father's farm in Tennessee, where I was treated tolerably well.

I remained there one year, then he took me horse-driving to Louisiana and back.

I saw some of the dreadfulest treatment on the sugar farms in the sugar-making season. The mill did not stop only to gear horses. People would come to my master and beg money to buy a loaf of bread. I saw them chained. I saw twelve men chained together, working on the levees. I saw three hundred that speculators had, dressing

them up for sale. The overseers were about the mills, carrying their long whips all the time and using them occasionally. When they wanted to whip severely, they put the head and hands in stocks in a stooping posture.

The last two years I was in Tennessee, I saw nine persons at different times, made fast to four stakes, and whipped with a leather strap from their neck to their heels and on the bottoms of their feet, raising blisters: then the blisters broken with a plaited whip, the overseer standing off and fetching hard blows. I have seen a man faint under this treatment. I saw one about eighteen years old, as smart as you would see on the foot, used in this way: seven weeks after he fainted in consequence; his nerves were so shattered that he seemed like a man of fifty.

The overseer tied me to a tree, and flogged me with the whip. Afterwards he said he would stake me down, and give me a farewell whipping, that I would always remember. While he was eating supper, I got off my shoe, and slipped off a chain and ran: I ran, I suppose, some six hundred yards: then hearing a dog, which alarmed me, I climbed a hill, where I sat down to rest. Then I heard a shouting, hallooing, for dogs to hunt me up. I tried to understand, and made out they were after me. I went through the woods to a road on a ridge. I came to a guide-board-in order to read it, I pulled it up, and read it in the moonlight, and found I was going wrong-turned about and went back, travelling all night: lay by all day, travelled at night till I came where Duck River and Tennessee come together. Here I found I was wrong,-went back to a road that led down Tennessee River, the way I wanted to go. This was Monday night,-the day before they had been there for me. A colored man had told them, " God's sake to tell me not to get caught, for they would kill me:" but that I knew before. I got something to eat, and went on down the river, and travelled until Saturday night at ten, living on green corn and watermelons. Then I came to a house where an old colored man gave me a supper: another kept me with him three days. My clothes were now very dirty: I got some soap of a woman, and went to a wash-place, and washed my clothes and dried them. A heavy rain came on at daybreak, and I went down to the river for a canoe-found none-and went back for the day,-got some bread, and at night went on down the river; but there were so many roads, I could not make out how to go. I laid all day in a corn field. At night I found a canoe, 12 feet long, and travelled down the river several days, to its mouth. There I got on an island, the river being low. I took my canoe across a tongue of land,-a sand-bar-into the Ohio, which I crossed into Illinois. I travelled three nights, not daring to travel days, until I came to

Golconda, which I recognized by a description I had been given on a previous attempt,-for this last time when I got away was my fourth effort. I went on to three forks in the road, took the left, travelled through the night, and lay by. At two, I ventured to go on, the road not being travelled much. But it seemed to go too far west: I struck through the woods, and went on till so tired I could walk no further. I got into a tobacco-pen, and stayed till morning. Then I went through the woods, and came to where a fire had been burning-I kindled it up, roasted a lot of corn, then travelled on about three miles completely lost. I now came to a house, and revolved in my mind some hours whether to go or not, to ask. At last I ventured, and asked the road-got the information-reached Marion: got bewildered, and went wrong again, and travelled back for Golconda, -but I was set right by some children. At dark I went on, and at daybreak got to Frankfort-13 miles all night long, being weak from want of food. A few miles further on I found an old friend, who was backward about letting me in, having been troubled at night by white children. At last he let me in, and gave me some food, which I much needed. The next night he gave me as much as I could carry with me.

I went on to within five miles of Mount Vernon. At 4 A.M., I lay down, and slept till about noon. I got up and tried to walk, but every time I tried to stoop under the bushes, I would fall down. I was close to a house, but did not dare to go to it; so I laid there and was sick -vomited, and wanted water very bad. At night I was so badly off that I was obliged to go to the house for water. The man gave me some, and said, "Are you a runaway?" I said, "No-I am walking away." "Where do you live?" "I live here now." "Are you a free man?" "Why should I be here, if I am not a free man?-this is a free country." "Where do you live, anyhow?" "I live here, do n't you understand me?" "You are a free man, are you?" "Do n't you see he is a free man, who walks in a free country?" "Show me your pass -I s'pose you've got one." "Do you suppose men need a pass in a free country? this is a free country." "I suppose you run away-a good many fugitives go through here, and do mischief." Said I, "I am doing no mischief-I am a man peaceable, going about my own business; when I am doing mischief, persecute me,-while I am peaceable, let no man trouble me." Said he, "I'll go with you to Mount Vernon." "You may go, if you have a mind to: I am going, if it is the Lord's will that I shall get there. Good evening;" and I started out of the gate. He said, "Stop!" Said I, "Man, do n't bother me,-I'm sick, and do n't feel like being bothered." I kept on: he followed me,-"Stop, or I'll make you stop!" "Man, did n't I tell you I was sick, and do n't want to be bothered." I kept on,-he picked up a little

maul at a wood-pile, and came with me, his little son following, to see what was going on.

He walked a mile and a quarter with me, to a neighbor of his called-there came out three men. He stated to them, "Here's a runaway going to Mount Vernon: I think it would be right to go with him." I made no reply. He said, "We'll go in with him, and if he be correct, we'll not injure him,-we'll not do him no harm, no- how." I stood consulting with myself, whether to fight or run; I concluded to run first, and fight afterward. I ran a hundred yards: one ran after me to the edge of the woods, and turned back. I sat down to rest,-say an hour. They had gone on ahead of me on horses. I took a back track, and found another road which led to Mount Vernon, which I did not reach until daybreak, although he said `t was only five miles. I hastened on very quick through town, and so got off the track again: but I found a colored friend who harbored me three days, and fulfilled the Scriptures in one sense to perfection. I was hungry, and he fed me; thirsty, and he gave me drink; weary, and he ministered to my necessities; sick, and he cared for me till I got relieved: he took me on his own beast, and carried me ten miles, and his wife gave me food for four days' travel. His name was Y----.I travelled on three nights, and every morning found myself close to a town. One was a large one. I got into it early,-I was scared, for people was stirring,-but I got through it by turning to my right, which led me thirty miles out of my way. I was trying to get to Springfield. Then I went on to Taylorville. I lay out all day, two miles out, and while there, a man came riding on horseback within two feet of me. I thought he would see me, but he wheeled his horse, and away he went. At dark I got up and started on. It rained heavily. I went on to the town. I could discover nothing-the ground was black, the sky was cloudy. I travelled a while by the lights in the windows; at last ventured to ask the way, and got a direction for Springfield. After the rain the wind blew cold; I was chilled: I went into a calf-lot, and scared up the calves, and lay where they had been lying, to warm myself. It was dark yet. I stayed there half an hour, trying to get warm, then got up, and travelled on till daybreak. It being in a prairie, I had to travel very fast to get a place to hide myself. I came to a drain between two plantations, and got into it to hide. At sundown I went on, and reached Springfield, as near as I could guess, at 3 o'clock. I got into a stable, and lay on some boards in the loft.

When I awoke, the sun was up, and people were feeding horses in the stable. I found there was no chance to get out, without being discovered, and I went down and told

them that I was a stranger, knowing no one there; that I was out until late, and so went into the stable. I asked them if there was any harm. They said "No." I thanked them and pursued my way. I walked out a little and found a friend who gave me breakfast. Then I was taken sick, and could not get a step from there for ten days: then I could walk a little, and had to start.

I took directions for Bloomington,-but the directions were wrong, and I got thirty miles out of my way again: so that when I reached Bloomington, I was too tired to go another step. I begged for a carriage, and if they had not got one, the Lord only knows what would have happened. I was conveyed to Ottawa, where I found an abolitionist who helped me to Chicago. From about the middle of August to the middle of November, I dwelt in no house except in Springfield, sick,-had no bed till I got to Bloomington. In February, I cut wood in Indiana,-I went to Wisconsin, and staid till harvest was over; then came to a particular friend, who offered me books. I had no money for books: he gave me a Testament, and gave me good instruction. I had worn out two Testaments in slavery, carrying them with me trying to get some instruction to carry me through life. "Now," said he, "square up your business, and go to the lake, for there are men here now, even here where you are living, who would betray you for half a dollar if they knew where your master is. Cross the lake: get into Canada." I thanked him for the book, which I have now; settled up and came to Canada.

I like Canada. If the United States were as free as Canada, I would still prefer to live here. I can do as much toward a living here in three days, as there in six.