

Solomon Northup, once a slave on a Louisiana plantation, left a detailed record of what slave life was like in his book, Twelve Years a Slave. From this book comes his account of a slave's Christmas:

The only respite from constant labor the slave has through the whole year is during the Christmas holidays. My master, Mr. Epps, allowed us three days. Other plantation owners allowed four, five, and six days, according to their generosity. The holiday season is the only time to which the slaves look forward with any interest or pleasure. They are glad when night comes, not only because it brings them a few hours rest, but because it brings them one day nearer Christmas. The holiday is hailed with equal delight by the old and the young. It is the time of feasting and frolicking and fiddling. It is carnival season for the children of bondage. These are the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty, and heartily 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. Usually from three to five hundred slaves are assembled. They come together on foot, in carts, on horseback, and on mules.

They dress in their best attire. The cotton coat has been washed clean and candle wax has been applied to their shoes. If they are so fortunate as to possess a hat, it is placed jauntily on the head. They are welcome with equal cordiality, however, if they come bare-headed and bare-footed. As a general rule, 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, it is sure to be worn on such occasions. Red—the deep blood-red—is decidedly the favorite among the enslaved ladies of my acquaintance. If a red ribbon does not encircle the neck, you will be certain to find all the hair of their 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. At such times the everyday fare of bacon and cornmeal is dispensed with. Sometimes the cooking is performed in the kitchen on the plantation. At other times it is done in the shade of wide branching trees. In the latter case, a ditch is dug in the ground. Wood is laid in and burned until it is a bed of glowing coals over which chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigs, and sometimes a whole wild ox are roasted. The cooks are furnished with flour, from which biscuits are made, and often with peach and other preserves, and with every manner and description of pies. Only the slave who has lived all his years on a scanty allowance of meal and bacon can appreciate such suppers.

When the food has disappeared and the hungry mouths of the workers are satisfied, then next in order of amusement is the Christmas dance. My business on these gala days always was to play the violin. There were many among my fellow bondsmen whose musical talents were strikingly developed, and who could thumb the banjo with great expertise.

On the particular Christmas I have now in mind, Miss Lively and Mr. Sam, the first belonging to the Stewart plantation, the latter belonging to the Roberts household, started the

ball. It was well known that Sam cherished an ardent admiration for Lively, as also did one of Marshall's slaves and one of Carey's; for Lively was lively indeed. It was a victory for Sam when, rising from the dinner, she gave him her hand for the first "figure" in preference to either of his rivals.

Pride swelled in the heart of Samuel as his legs flew like drumsticks down the outside and up the middle of the dance line by the side of his bewitching partner. The whole company cheered them. Excited by the applause, they continued "tearing down" after all the others had become exhausted and halted a moment to recover their breath. Sam's superhuman exertions finally overcame him, leaving Lively alone, yet whirling like a top. Thereupon one of Sam's rivals, Pete, dashed in and leaped and pranced and threw himself into every conceivable dance shape. He was determined to show Miss Lively and all the world that Sam Roberts was of no account.

One couple off, another takes its place. He or she remaining longest on the floor receiving the most uproarious commendation, and so dancing continues until broad daylight. It does not cease with the fiddle. In that case they set up a music popular among themselves. This is called "patting," accompanied with one of those meaningless songs composed rather for

its adaptation to a certain tune or beat than for the purpose of expressing any distinct idea. The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.

During the remaining holidays after Christmas Day, slaves are provided with passes and permitted to go where they please within a limited distance. They might also remain and labor on the plantation, in which case they are paid for it. It is very rarely, however, that the latter alternative is accepted. The slaves may be seen at these times hurrying in all directions, as happy-looking beings as can be found on the face of the earth. They are different creatures from what they are in the field. The temporary relaxation, the brief deliverance from fear, and from the lash, produces a complete change in their appearance and behavior. In visiting, riding, renewing old friendships, or pursuing whatever pleasure may suggest itself, the time is occupied.

Such is "southern life as it is," three days in the year, as I found it. The other three hundred and sixty-two days being days of weariness, and fear, and suffering, and unremitting labor.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **Samuel Northup worked as a slave**
 - A on a Louisiana plantation
 - B at New Orleans harbor
 - C Both A and B

2. **At Christmas the slaves had the chance to**
 - A travel wherever they wished
 - B work for their freedom
 - C Neither A nor B

3. **At Christmas a planter would give a party for**
 - A all his slaves
 - B the neighbor's slaves
 - C Both A and B

4. **The slaves' feelings toward the Christmas party are best described as**
 - A smoldering resentment and fear
 - B anticipation and interest
 - C fear and loathing

5. **The slaves' everyday diet consisted of**
 - A bacon and cornmeal
 - B groat cakes
 - C steak and eggs

6. **When the dinner was over, the slaves would**
 - A go back to work
 - B start the dance
 - C go to sleep

7. **The author's role at the party was to serve as**
 - A violinist
 - B cook
 - C Neither A nor B

8. **A synonym of *slave* used by the author is**
 - A chattel
 - B indentured servant
 - C bondsman

9. **The rhythms of "patting" were made by striking**
 - A pots and pans
 - B a hollowed tree
 - C different parts of the body

10. **During the holidays, the slaves underwent a complete change in their**
 - A attitudes toward their masters
 - B appearance and behavior
 - C Both A and B