

Ike May

Early Settlers' Personal History Questionnaire, WPA

Interviewed by Sarah R. Scott Yell County, Ark September 16, 1940

"Early Negro Life in Dardanelle"

Transcribed by Andrea E. Cantrell, University of Arkansas Libraries, 2003. [See transcriber's notes](#)

NOTE: This interviewer recorded answers in groups as shown here.

- 1-12. Though Ike May is one of Dardanelle's older negroes[sic], he has a remarkably keen memory and is one of the few negroes of the town who knows his exact age and in recalling early events can give the approximate date of the happening.
He was born in Dardanelle in 1873, one of fourteen children. Just prior to the Civil War his mother and father were living in Pope County at or near a settlement known as Dwight's Mission. They had three children when a band of slave traders came through, kidnapped the mother and three children and carried them to Texas. Luckily the mother was sold to one owner and the man on the adjoining farm bought the children. In the meantime, the father had joined the Union Army and when the war was over a negro from the farm on which the children were in Texas happened to meet up with the father and told him where his wife and children were. Freed now, he arranged for their passage back to Arkansas, came to Dardanelle and settled.
13. Most of the early homes and all the negro houses in Dardanelle were made of hewn logs. Many of these were later weather boarded, added to, and painted and assumed the appearance of plain wooden buildings. After these thick log walls were weatherboarded on the outside and finished on the inside, the houses were warm in winter and cool in summer.
14. For ordinary week night lighting the mother put some hog lard in a skillet, twisted a yarn rag, let it soak in the grease a little while and lighted it. However, on Sundays and when company called candles were brought out and lit.
15. [skipped]
16. Although a few of the more prosperous white families had heating stoves as far back as the Civil War, until after the turn of the century all the negro families depended on fireplaces for heat. In the late spring and summer after crops were laid by, the men in the family began cutting and hauling logs from the woods. Such wood was free for the clearing and hauling away.
17. Fish and game were plentiful here then. The father kept the table well supplied with coon, opossum[sic], deer, turkey, wild geese, and ducks. The negroes had another name for opossum[sic]—"sanx." An hour or two's hunting at night would provide the whole community with "sanx" roasted with sweet potatoes the next day. Ike remembers his father bringing in a snow white opossum[sic] one night. Every family had a hog to kill for winter meat then. There was no stock law then and hogs roamed the streets coming home for feeding each night. Every family in a community didn't kill their hogs at the same time, however. The first cold spell in November one family would have a hog killing which all the men in the community attended. All the neighborhood was supplied with fresh meat from this "killing" and

the next cold spell another family killed and the process was repeated. In this manner the whole community was supplied with fresh meat all winter.

A day's "nigger" [sic] fishing with a pole, cord, and worms in nearby creeks and bayous netted plenty fish for the family and enough to "pass out," but if one wished to buy fish, buffalo, drum, and catfish were brought in in wagon loads by regular fishermen from the Petit Jean and Arkansas rivers. One could buy four or five big fish for a quarter.

Ike says the winters were much colder then than now. He has seen the Arkansas river frozen over solid enough to drive a four house team and wagon over.

18. Ike's mother made all the clothes for the family by hand. The father bought "jeans" cloth by the bolt for the winter clothes and blue denim for the summer clothes.
19. [skipped]
20. Food was much cheaper in those days than now. Butter sold for 10 cents per lb., steak was 10 cents per lb. 3 lbs. For 25 cents, eggs were 5 cents a dozen, large frying size chickens sold for \$1.00 per dozen, flour was 80 cents or 90 cents for a 50 lb. sack, sugar sold for 22 lbs. for a dollar. Coffee was bought green then, roasted at home, and ground in the small coffee mill with which every kitchen was equipped. Coffee was less than 10 cents per lb.
There was none of the present day cereal. Mush and rice were the breakfast foods.
21. Cows were cheap then and most of the families had a milk cow. When a family's cow went "dry" they were supplied with milk by neighbors until their cow "freshened." There was much sharing of food, stock feed, etc.
22. The principal crops cultivated in those days were cotton, corn, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, sorghum molasses, peas, and Irish potatoes. Oxen or steers were the work animals used. Wagon ruts in roads became very deep and to pull a heavily loaded wagon over these roads in wet weather as many as eight yokes of oxen were hitched to one wagon. The only tomato Ike had seen until he was grown was a "plum" tomato, a small, pink species little larger than a plum. This was used for cooking, making chow-chow, etc.
23. A large majority of the farm implements, and practically all those belonging to the negroes, was home made. Ike's farming implements were a turning plow, a "Georgia" stock, and a double shovel. There were no stalk cutters. To clear a corn patch of stalks, he used a "big-eyed" hoe. However, he remembers prices of "store bought" implements from working as chore boy around stores. A light turning plow cost approximately \$2.50, a two-horse turning plow six or seven dollars, and a "Georgia" stock, \$1.25 or \$1.50.
24. [skipped]
25. Poke salad was still is a favorite Spring "greens" food. For many years there was a large grove of paw-paw bushes on the river above the Dardanella Rock. Looking and tasting much like bananas, they were free to all who could pick them. There are still a few bushes in this spot but not of the same volume as then. Ike remembers some men coming over from Russellville once or twice and gathering wagon loads. They sold them in Russellville and surrounding communities for as high as two for a nickel.

He adds further that paw-paws are one thing a hog won't eat.

26. Negro children weren't allowed to run the streets of Dardanelle in those days. Ike was born and raised in town but he remembers that when he was ten or twelve years old, he knew the location of only one store on Main Street. Dardanelle also had its curfew bell. When it rang at nine o'clock all persons under the age of sixteen, negro and white, had to be off the streets.

The earliest street lights were large candles in glass enclosures. These were later replaced by kerosene lights. These lights were placed on poles five or six feet high, one on each block on Front Street. It was the Marshal's job to go around every evening at dusk and light them.

27. One of Ike's earliest recollections of the activities of the Dardanelle Fire Department is seeing the bunch of volunteer firemen with their little two-wheel hose cart, plentifully supplied with rubber buckets, rushing to a fire and getting stuck in the deep sand which was the bane of existence in Dardanelle.

28. [skipped]

29. Steamboats plied the river by Dardanelle on schedule in those days. Ike remembers that one steamboat called every Sunday afternoon between two and three o'clock. This was a usual Sunday afternoon activity for practically every Dardanelle citizen—colored and white—to go up to the wharf to watch the boat come in. It often took twenty four hours or more to load the cotton seed alone which was being shipped away.

Ike worked some as odd-job boy around Tittle's Hotel, one of the earlier hotels in Dardanelle. This hotel burned many years ago, but it was a very pretentious, at that time, two-story white frame building with wide winding stairs, covering one-half a block.

The town's ice supply in those days was secured by cutting large blocks of ice from the bayou and river in winter when they were frozen over and storing them in an ice house. Ike says you could get a big "chunk" for a nickel. The negroes used ice only for lemonade, the popular drink of the day, and occasionally for ice cream.

A stage coach operated between here and Russellville being \$1.00 each way. It was ferried across the river on a steamboat, the "Martha." Two teams of horses were used to it. A passenger often spent a large part of his traveling time at the prizing end of a long pole extricating the stage coach from the deep mud.

30. Ike started to school "about 1880" in a one story wooden frame negro school which was located across the street from where the present white Grammar school is located. The building was unpainted and benches were used for seats. There were six grades and one teacher, Dave Cunningham, negro, taught them all. Ike went to the fourth grade and studied "McGuffey's Fourth Reader" and the old Blue Back Speller. He quit school when he was sixteen. He and his wife had 11 children, 7 of whom are living, 9 grand children[sic], and 2 great-grandchildren.

- 31-59 [No answer]