

'Better to Be Dead in Hell Than on the Chain-Gang'



Before a chain-gang prisoner died of torture—this is a mild form of punishment used in a Southern "prison camp." An investigator tries on a barrel in which prisoner was forced to work, naked. Later the prisoner died in a sweat-box.

Story of Murder and Daily Torture Told by Negro Who Worked Eight Years in Chains— What Georgia Has in Store for Herndon

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth of a series of articles by Sasha Small, editor of the Labor Defender, written after a trip to Georgia and Tennessee. Sasha Small visited chain-gangs, interviewed important officials, saw the relatives of the Scottsboro boys and observed at first hand the conditions of the Southern workers. In this article she repeats what was told her by an ex-convict, a former victim of the Georgia chain-gangs.)

By Sasha Small

ATLANTA, Ga.—"Yes'm, I was on a chain-gang for eight years and four months, and if they ever get me again, I'm gonna make them kill me. I'd rather be dead in hell."

The horrors of the memories this middle-aged Negro was recalling moved like shadows across his face. He winced as he spoke, suffering the pain of re-opened wounds.

"The day begins in misery. They wake you at three in the morning. Yes'm, I know they tell you they only work us from sun-up to sun-

down, but the sun comes up mighty early in Fulton County, and you got to get up and eat and git out in

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the truck and be on the job with your pick in your hand by the time the sun comes up. At about four o'clock you gets your breakfast. Bacon meat and something you can call coffee. That meat ain't fit for no dog to eat. It's bacon all right, but the only lean meat you find on it is no bigger than a hair.

Ask Permission to Wipe Face

"From the minute you get on the job till you quits for dinner you can't stop working, not for a second. Everything you do, you got to call out to the guard. When the sweat gets running in your eyes and your mouth, stinging like hot needles, and you want to wipe it off your face, you got to sing out, 'Wiping it off!' right loud, so the gun man can hear you, before you dare to wipe it off your face.

"The same thing when you take a chew of tobacco. You got to call out 'Taking a chew!' Yes'm, they got drinking water there in an old bucket, but it don't take long under that sun before it's hot enough to cook your supper in, or take a bath, and full of dust and flies and things. Everybody has to drink from the same tin dipper, sure.

Bruises From Chains

"Chains? Everybody has chains on, except the trusties. First, there's a chain about a foot-and-a-half long between your legs. That's fastened onto two iron cuffs. Here, I'll show you what they do to you." He rolled up the trousers of his tattered overalls to show me two discolored circles, about two inches wide, around the middle of the calves of both legs, permanent purple bruises.

"You can't let this things hang down around your ankles; they'd saw right through the bones of your legs. You got to push them up as far as they'll go, and fasten them to two leather straps that goes right below your knees. They don't pain so much that way.

"Then from the middle of this leg chain, comes a long end of chain that comes up between your legs and gets fastened to the belt of your trousers round the back. What's that for? To chain you in for the night.

Made to Wear Dog Collar

"No, they don't put you in spikes except for punishment. You don't work so good with spikes on. It's hard to move around with them things poking out from front and back about a foot both ways. But I had a collar around my neck like an old dog for four years. Yes'm, every single day for four years, because I talked back to a guard. All I said was, 'Can't you see I'm working?' That was plenty. It ain't so heavy, you get used to that, but it gets so burning hot under the sun while you're swinging away with your pick-axe.

"At twelve you stop to get your dinner. Another mess that even hogs wouldn't eat, all served up on one old tin plate, meat and greens and all. They say it's cooked. But that ain't cooking. It's just put over a fire and made hot. No salt in it or nothing, but plenty of bugs and worms and everything that feeds on greens. They don't pick it over. They just sling it into the cooking pot. And you better not ask for more than you get. Or you get something else in the face or over the head.

"After about thirty minutes, you get back on the job and swing away till sundown. Then you eat again and by that time it's eight o'clock and you go to bed.

Chained in at Night

"You get chained in at night, too. That's what the long chain is for. Across the whole length of the room, there's one long chain about as thick as your arm. That goes through the ring on the end of your chain, and all that sleeps on one side of that room is strung along on that big chain. Even at night you can't do nothing without calling out to the guard. All night long you hear them calling. 'Turn-in' over.' Then the next day it begins all over again, excepting Sunday. You don't work on Sunday, and that's the one day you get biscuit bread to eat.

"Yes, I've seen men die on the chain-gang. And I've seen them killed. About seven of them that I can remember now. One was a young boy, no more than about 18. He was sitting in the truck that was taking us to work, right next to me, like you are. As we went down the road he saw a friend, a girl he used to know. He turns his head to look at her. All the prisoners sit, facing the same way on the truck, and the gun man, he stands up in front of them with his back to the cab of the truck. He waves his shotgun at the boy and hollers: 'Turn back here, you god-dam. . . .'

Murder of Prisoners

"I was just. . . ."

"Shut your damn black mouth!"

"I was just—the boy kept trying to say and off went the gun, and the boy fell forward, filled with buckshot. He lay there in the bottom of that truck, and, after they put us off at our work, they carried him back to camp. None of us ever saw him after that, and none of us dared to ask what become of him.

"Another man I saw killed was working a little ways off from me. The guard got a-shouting at him for not working hard enough. He started to tell him how he was working the best he could, and doin' all he could. That guard went crazy mad, and picked up his pick-axe and started beating him over the head with the handle till he mashed it to a pulp. 'Scuse me, ma'am, that's just how it happened.

"And I've seen men die on the chain-gang. Just die. No matter how sick you are, if they can get you onto your feet you have to go out on the road. I've seen men roll over in the truck and stretch out dead. I've seen a man swing his pickaxe into the ground and fall down after it, dead. What happens to them? If nobody don't claim them, they burn the body up. What happens after someone gets killed? The gang he worked on gets a talking-to with a gun a-waving in your face. 'Remember now, you tell that judge he tried to take my gun away from me,' and if you know what's good for you, that's just what you tell the judge—if he ever comes to ask.

Torture Instruments

"Stocks? Everybody gets put in the stocks, and in the sweatbox, too. Plenty of men have been in the stocks for hours on end. I have. They're not allowed to keep you hanging in them for more than an hour on end, but they take you out, pour some water over you, and after an hour they put you back in again.

"I can't tell you how it feels. You just hang there about so high (he indicated six inches) from the ground, by your hands and feet, and soon you're just the same as dead. You don't feel nothing. Only, you know how a wrench is when you tighten it? Every time you turn it, it gets tighter and tighter? Well, every time you move your finger just a little bit like that—it goes tearing down your arm like flames of fire. When they take you out, you don't feel nothing. They could stick a spike in your arm or leg, and you wouldn't feel it."

It had been very hard to get this man to talk about his experiences. It was only after I told him why I wanted to hear his story that he began to talk.

"Fight for Herndon"

"Sure, I know Angelo Herndon. He used to come around here often. He was a fine boy. Yes, ma'am, a fine boy, and, if anything I say will keep him off that chain-gang, I'll say plenty. And if anything I say will help my people in any way, and all working men, I'll say more. Some things that happen on the chain-gang I can't tell nobody. I don't want to remember them. But tell all the people all over that there ain't nothing worse than a Georgia chain-gang. Tell them nobody lives on it much longer than I did. Tell them to fight to keep Angelo Herndon up there where he is. Tell them it's better to be dead in hell than living on a Georgia chain-gang!"