

Plantation Life

(http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/plantation/ps_stone.html)

All Have Suffered

Kate Stone grew up on a large cotton plantation, Brokenburn, in northeastern Louisiana. Only twenty years old when the Civil War broke out, the well-educated young woman kept a journal describing her experiences, including her flight to Texas during the worst days of the war. The two entries excerpted below contrast her life of privilege before the war with her existence afterward, in a very different world.

May 23, 1861

Mamma was busy all the morning having the carpets taken up and matting put down and summer curtains hung. Of course the house was dusty and disagreeable. Mr. Newton and the children were shut up in the schoolroom and so escaped it, but Uncle Bo wandered aimlessly around, seeking rest and finding none. I retired to the fastness of my room with a new novel and a plate of candy was oblivious to discomfort until Frank came to say dinner was ready and "the house shorely do look sweet and cool."

In the afternoon Mamma lay down to rest as she was tired out. Mr. Newton and Uncle Bo rode out to Omega [Landing] for the mail and to hear the news. The boys, Little Sister, and I all went down the bayou for a walk with a running accompaniment of leaping, barking hounds, ranging the fields for a scent of deer or maybe a rabbit. The boys are so disgusted if the dogs race off after a rabbit. They think it ruins them for deer dogs. How pleasant to have the smooth, dry ground underfoot again after so many months of mud. It has been such a long, muddy winter and spring. No one knows what mud is until he lives on a buckshot place and travels buckshot roads.

Tonight a little fire was pleasant and we all gathered around it to hear Mr. Newton read the papers. Nothing but "War, War" from the first to the last column. Throughout the length and breadth of the land the trumpet of war is sounding, and from every hamlet and village, from city and country, men are hurrying by thousands, eager to be led to battle against Lincoln's hordes. Bravely, cheerily they go, willing to meet death in defense of the South, the land we love so well, the fairest land and the most gallant men the sun shines on. May God prosper us. Never again can we join hands with the North, the people who hate us so. We take quite a number of papers: *Harper's Weekly and Monthly*, the *New York Tribune*, *Journal of Commerce*, *Littell's Living Age*, the *Whig and Picayune* of New Orleans, and the *Vicksburg* and local sheets. What shall we do when Mr. Lincoln stops our mails?

The Northern papers do make us so mad! Even Little Sister, the child of the house, gets angry. Why will they tell such horrible stories about us? [Horace] Greeley is the worst of the lot; his wishes for the South are infamous and he has the imagination of [Edgar Allen] Poe. What shall we do when our mails are stopped and we are no longer in touch with the world?

September 22, 1867

A long silence and a year of hard endeavor to raise a crop, reconstruct the place with the problem of hired labor, high water, and cotton worms. Mamma had little trouble in getting advances in New Orleans to plant. Cotton is so high that merchants are

anxious to advance to put in a crop, and there is much Northern capital seeking investment in that field. Mr. Given became Mamma's merchant. Col. Cornelius Fellowes, her old friend, has not resumed business, or only in a small way. The Negroes demanded high wages, from \$20 to \$25 for men, in addition to the old rations of sugar, rice, tobacco, molasses, and sometimes hams. Many of the old hands left, and My Brother went to New Orleans and brought back a number of ex-Negro soldiers, who strutted around in their uniforms and were hard to control. I was deadly afraid of them. During the spring while Mamma and I were in New Orleans (Mamma on business and she took me for my pleasure), and Uncle Bo and My Brother and Jimmy were away for a few hours, Johnny had a fight with a young Negro in the field, shot and came near killing him, and was mobbed in return. Johnny would have been killed but for the stand one of the Negroes made for him and Uncle Bo's opportune arrival just as the Negroes brought him to the house--a howling, cursing mob with the women shrieking, "Kill him!" and all brandishing pistols and guns. It came near breaking up the planting, and it is a pity it did not as it turned out. Johnny had to be sent away. He was at school near Clinton [Miss.] and the Negroes quieted down and after some weeks the wounded boy recovered, greatly to Johnny's relief. He never speaks now of killing people as he formerly had a habit of doing. He came home when school closed and there was no further trouble.

Then the water came up and we were nearly overflowed. The cotton planted was very late, and when it was looking as luxuriant and promising as possible and we saw ease of mind before us, the worms came. In a few days the fields were blackened like fire had swept over them. We made about twenty bales and spent \$25,000 doing it. What most distresses me is that none of that money went for our personal comfort. All of it went to the Negroes. Mamma would buy only bare necessities for the table and plainest clothes for the family. Not a luxury, no furniture, carpets, or anything. We are worse off for those things than even in Texas and such a sum spent! But Mamma said it was not honest to spend the money on anything but making the crop. All in this section have suffered in the same way, and for awhile they seemed stunned by their misfortunes. But now the reaction has come, and all are taking what pleasure offers.

Old neighbors and new ones have come in and all seemed to be anxious to be together and talk over their trials and tribulations. There has been much visiting and various picnics and fish fries. I would not go at first. I felt like I did not want to see anybody or ever dance again. I felt fully forty years old, but Mamma made me go after a good cry. Once there, I was compelled to exert myself, and soon I was enjoying it all. The burden of some of the years slipped from my shoulders, and I was young again. It was pleasant to talk nonsense, to be flattered though one knew it was flattery, and to be complimented and fussed over. So since then, Mamma, the boys, and all of us have been going to everything and have found even poverty in company more bearable than when suffered alone.

Excerpt from John Q. Anderson, ed. *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.