

"Remembering Slavery" (Excerpt)

Tonea Stewart, 1930

[Excerpt from Smithsonian Productions and the Institute of Language and Culture: Remembering Slavery: Those who survived tell their stories]

[music]

I asked my grandfather what happened to his eyes.

My name is Tonea Stewart. When I was a little girl about five or six years old, I used to sit on the garret, the front porch. In the Mississippi Delta the front porch is called the garret. I listened to my Papa Dallas. He was blind and had these ugly scars around his eyes. One day, I asked Papa Dallas what happened to his eyes.

"Well daughter," he answered, "when I was mighty young, just about your age, I used to steal away under a big oak tree and I tried to learn my alphabets so I could learn to read my Bible. But one day the overseer caught me and he drug me out on the plantation and he called out for all the field hands. And he turned to 'em and said, 'Let this be a lesson to all of you darkies. You ain't got no right to learn to read!' And then daughter, he whooped me, and he whooped me, and he whooped me. And daughter, as if that wasn't enough, he turned around and he burned my eyes out!"

When I was a slave and tried to learn to read, the overseer blinded me.

At the instant, I began to cry. The tears were streaming down my cheeks, meeting under my chin. But he cautioned, "Don't you cry for me now, daughter. Now you listen to me. I want you to promise me one thing. Promise me that you gonna pick up every book you can and you gonna read it from cover to cover. You see, today daughter, ain't nobody gonna whip you or burn your eyes out because you want to learn to read. Promise me that you gonna go all the way through school, as far as you can. And one more thing, I want you to promise me that you gonna tell all the children my story."

Promise me you will read every thing.

Papa Dallas survived slavery and I kept my promise. I'm now a university professor, a Ph.D., and an actress. He and many others deserve to have their story told. *I did.*