

Historical Reading: Interview with Harrieta Hill Jefferson

During the early twentieth century, Emancipation Day celebrations were an important part of the fabric of African American culture. African American communities in northern Florida commemorated May 20 as Emancipation Day, the day that the Union liberated Tallahassee, the state capital. Over time, black Floridians transformed May 20 into an important cultural event that combined the telling of black history, recreation, and pageantry. Music, good food, and speeches by elders, especially those who had survived slavery, were all part of the celebration. Harriet Jefferson grew up in rural Leon County, Florida in the 1920s. Here, she recalls the importance that May 20 held for her family and talks about why she continues to observe May 20 as Emancipation Day.

We didn't go anywhere but to church and back home. And then we always had a picnic on the 20th of May. Twentieth of May. Emancipation. There was Mama and another lady that ever since I was a little girl they used to have this big picnic on the 20th of May and my daddy and all the community would get together and they'd make this great big barrel of lemonade. And they set it up to say speeches. We would all say speeches. We would march and dance behind the drummer. Daddy had some drums and I reckon all my brothers grew up beating the drums. They could really beat them drums. I had two brothers, Carter and Henry. They would beat the drums and they would just start that morning at the sunrise. We'd have this 20th of May Day and my mama would have the May pole. She'd have a May pole wrapping with all red, white, and blue strings on the pole. And we'd practice, but we'd start practicing about April, about the first of April, the last of March, first of April. We'd start practicing how to wrap this May pole and all the children out of the community would come for miles. Would come from all up here about the church and every which way and she would practice like twice a week. Every Monday night and Friday night. And we'd learn how to wrap this pole. She'd start the small children then to wrap it about like that and then the middle set would wrap the pole. They would always wrap the pole after we rapped it.

They'd be singing and beating the drums and patting their hand and they'd have a partner and here we'd go, and we'd be, you know. Sling their partners and go back and come get another one and swing that one. They just had a big time. So we practice this up until the 20th of May. Then the 20th of May we had to really do that things and my daddy would [make] a special place down there. There's a place down there aside the road where you'll see a picnic ground at now, and [Daddy] would always whitewash his trees. All the trees in this picnic place in the picnic ground where we'd have the picnic on the 20th of May. They'd lime and whitewash the trees. And then we would all gather there for Emancipation. And then my brothers would always say the emancipation and why we having the 20th of May we was always taught that from a kid. That is from the day that people was freed. Black people was freed. When we had emancipation. And we still do that. We do that in remembrance of my mother. Every 20th of May we have a big picnic down there and the grandchildren tell the reason, you know. Te had the great-grand. They mostly, you know, they grow up now and they remember it better than I do. And we still have the wrapping of the May pole. Get all the little children and we wrap the May pole, but people won't, you know, participate. The neighbors and things won't send the children now. They teacher children better than that. "That's Old Folks. Don't teach them to remember, but we always remembered. --Harrieta Hill Jefferson

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