

## THE TALE OF 109-YEAR-OLD ROBINSON CRUSOE BUCK

By Emily Sells

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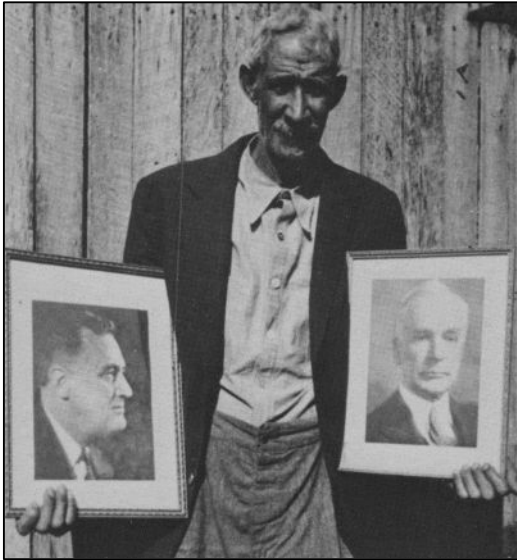
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Buck, an ex-slave from Putnam County, had a faithful relationship with his master and an interesting friendship with Cordell Hull.

Old newspaper articles have provided me with some interesting material to write about from time to time. A good example is the following story taken from some clippings saved by the late Dellas (Peterman)

McCormick. The article, written by Celia Cullom, date unknown, begins with the headline "Friend of Cordell Hull." Underneath that headline is says, "Livingston's Robinson Crusoe Buck cherishes the photograph of the statesman and memories of a trip to Washington aided by his friend." The article then begins:



"Besides a brightly glowing fire in a little stucco house a short walk from the public square at Livingston, Tenn., sits Robinson Crusoe Buck, 103-year-old ex-slave and friend of Cordell Hull. On a winter day the fire glints dully on Crusoe's heavy, white-thatched head and deep reddish tan skin, smooth as the hickory of the old homemade rocking chair in which he sits. Crusoe is six foot two with square, wide shoulders and amazingly large hands. He got his finely chiseled features and aquiline nose from his mother, who was three-fourths Cherokee. Robinson Crusoe Buck looks more Indian than Negro.

(Pictured: Robinson Crusoe Buck, a slave who was well known in Putnam County. He holds pictures of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Cordell Hull. He was a slave of Abraham Buck. He was born 15 October 1844 – d. 14 September 1954 at the age of 110, buried in the Algood Cemetery for the black population. It is located past the Senior Citizen's building in Algood near the railroad tracks, go north on the same road – go beyond road marked "Quinland Lake Road", the cemetery is just beyond this road. Photo courtesy of Jim Heard, Pictorial of Putnam County Tennessee by First American Bank, pg. 115).

"Sometimes the talk in Crusoe's little stucco house (which you can reach by a crooked, rock path through the neat little yard) is of faith, for the people around Livingston have come to look upon Crusoe as a faith healer. "Faith in yourself and in God. Then everything's all right." Sometimes the talk is of the war, and bushwhackers and hiding out in the woods with his Mass'r.

"Buck was born Oct. 15, 1844, on a pleasant 1,000-acre farm three miles south of Cookeville. The farm and its 40 slaves belonged to an old German settler named Abraham Buck, for whom Crusoe's mother cooked. Robinson Crusoe is the name given him by his owner. A grandson was born to the owner the day after Crusoe was, and Crusoe's mammy nursed them both and they slept in the same crib until they were big enough to walk.

"Buck was 19 when the war ended, but refused to accept the freedom won him in that war, staying on at the farm with his Mass'r. It wasn't long before Abraham Buck died in Crusoe's arms, a broken man, and Crusoe soon left for Cookeville, did odd jobs there for a while, and then became interest in the Algood project. 'You might say I started the town,' said Buck. (Buck helped to haul the first planks that went into the town). In 1870 he took him a wife and y 1902 he had saved enough money to start a livery stable in

Algood. It was there he first met Cordell Hull, then a schoolboy and son of Billy Hull, whom Buck used to drive around. The friendship between Hull and Crusoe grew, and when Hull became a circuit judge, Crusoe drove him on his judicial rounds. After Hull went to Washington, he once remarked to some friends in Congress: "When I start a campaign in Washington, I know that old Crusoe Buck is starting another one for me back in Tennessee."

"Crusoe remained in the livery stable business 19 years, and then started a grocery in Algood that thrived for nine years. His wife died in 1935, leaving him two daughters, four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren, and he married again in 1943 at the age of 99.

"It was in 1941 that Crusoe got the biggest thrill of his long life. Hull and ex-Congressman Ridley Mitchell sent him a round-trip train ticket.

"Mister Hull was wonderful to me," Buck said softly. "He took me all through the White House and made sure I saw every other sight in Washington. Why, I even got to go to that old theater where Lincoln was shot and sit in the same place he did."

"While in Washington, Robinson Crusoe Buck, who was born into slavery, got to do and see wonderful things (even appearing on a radio show called 'We the People'), and he came back a wiser man. Also in his valise when he returned were two autographed pictures, one of President Roosevelt and other of Mrs. Roosevelt. (But he is proudest of the picture he received long ago from Hull and inscribed 'With best wishes.')

"Crusoe moved to Livingston two years ago. His little stucco house on the state highway to Celina is sought out by the people who have heard that he can help them with their problems, and when they come, Crusoe speaks to them softly of faith. Crusoe never learned to read or write, but that is of no consequence; he occupies himself with the radio and with visitors.

"I've found that kindness to people and helping others is about the greatest happiness there is in life," he said.

"Crusoe is spry and in good health and still boasts four good teeth. His daily chores around the house come easily, and his step is sure although a little slow. Sometimes he goes in to Livingston to visit around. News of Mr. Buck also reached the Chicago Tribune, and an article was published in that famous newspaper. It reads:

"Mr. Buck, a former slave, was getting ready to go over to Cookeville to ride a horse and lead the centennial parade. He is only 109 years old. His wife, Ollie, a mere kid of 72, knew better though. She knew he was going to ride in an auto, despite the fact he had his picture taken on a horse.

"You have to watch him every minute," said Mrs. Buck. "The other day I forgot to lock the lawn mower in the shed. He got out and mowed the yard before I knew what he was doing."

"There is some doubt about Mr. Buck's age. For instance, Uncle Ed Bilbrey over in Cookeville, himself 92, does not believe Crusoe is 109. 'He has to be at least 115,' said Uncle Ed, 'because I used to buy things from him. He was an old man when I was a boy.'

"Mr. Buck a lean six feet, white of hair and moustache, distinguished in appearance, and with more than a trace of Cherokee blood, sat in front of his open fireplace, talked of Civil war days and of the man he worked for, Abraham Buck, whose name he took. 'I saved \$7,000 in gold and silver for Mr. Abraham Buck all through the Civil War.' Said Robinson Crusoe Buck, 'When I gave it back to him, he said, 'well done thou good and faithful servant.'

'Buck smiled at the recollection, and said Mr. Abraham Buck also said at that time, 'You will live to a ripe old age.' Apparently Mr. Abraham Buck was a man who knew what he was talking about.

"When the Yankees came to kill Mr. Abraham Buck during the Civil War, Mr. Abraham Buck, being a pretty sharp cookie, went and hid in the woods. 'I took him food' said Robinson Crusoe Buck. 'I wrapped it in a handkerchief in fodder, and I carried it over my shoulder on the end of a long stick.' He said he did this right under the noses of the Yankees. 'I loved Mr. Buck,' he said, 'and he loved me.'

"Once Buck worked for Cordell Hull, and in 1936, went down to Washington with Mr. Hull and met Franklin D. Roosevelt, and both their autographed pictures hang in his living room. 'Mr. Hull kept saying, tell them what it was like when I was young,' said Buck. 'And I would tell them that we used to tie logs together and ride the 110 mile to Nashville on the river. That was the only way to get there then. I told all them Democrats "I am a died in the wool Democrat," and you should have heard them Democrats yell.'

"Buck attributes his long life to the fact that he always has tried to be good to everyone. 'I have a lot of friends,' he said. Buck said he thought the old days were the best, and the south was the greatest place in the world, and Gen. Robert E. Lee, whom he had seen, was a fine man and a gentleman. When he was asked about Abraham Lincoln, he just shook his head and smiled a little.

"And what did he think is wrong with the world, if anything, at the present time?"

'Well,' said Buck, 'in the old days they meant their religion. They say a lot of words about religion now, but they don't seem to mean them.'

On August 21, 1936, the Livingston Enterprise had this story on the front page:

Former slave, 91, marries woman, 66, in north Livingston:

The marriage of Mrs. Ollie Cullom McDonald, colored, and Robinson Crusoe Buck, colored, which occurred on Friday, Aug. 14, 1936, at the residence of the bride in North Livingston, was one of wide interest among their many friends. The Rev. W. M. Hunboard, colored, of Lebanon, performed the ceremony in the presence of a number of their relatives and friends. The bride was the daughter of Eliz Cullom, a former slave of the late Judge Alvin Cullom and had twice married, first to Webb Copeland, colored, and secondly to Bud McDonald, colored. She was 66 years old, owned her own home, and bore a good reputation. The groom was 91 years old and lived on his own farm in Algood, Putnam County. He talks interestingly about slave time and things occurring during the War between the States. He was a former slave of Abraham Buck near Cookeville, who operated a farm there during the years preceding the war, before the abolition of slavery. He says that his master was a native of Germany but came to the States with his parents and finally settled in Putnam County. Crusoe, as he is commonly called, is strong and active physically and mentally and his appearance would indicate his age to be 88. He is well to do for one of his race and has many friends wherever he is known regardless of race or color. They will reside at Algood. (Writer's note: Evidently the couple at some point decided to remain in Livingston where they lived on North Church Street for several years.)

In the Oct. 30, 1953, issue, a story on the front page includes this information: "Robinson Crusoe Buck, a former slave, who celebrated his 109th birthday on Thursday, Nov. 15, is without doubt the oldest person living in Overton County.

"Uncle Crusoe,' as he affectionately known by a wide circle of friends, was born Nov. 15, 1844, four miles south of Cookeville. He was one of the 40 slaves belonging to Abraham Buck, a German master, who was kind to his slaves. He well remembers the days of the Civil War and when he helped his master take care of \$7,000 in gold and silver by hiding it in a hollow apple tree to keep it from being stolen and also aiding this master by carrying food when he was hiding from his enemies. One of his favorite recollections is a trip he made to Washington, D. C., when he visited with Secretary of state Cordell Hull and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and appeared on a radio program. He moved to Livingston in 1946 after marrying the second time at the age of 99 years. He attributes his long life to "trying to live right and treat everyone right."

On May 14, 1954, *The Livingston Enterprise* had another front page story: "Robinson Crusoe Buck, 109-year-old Negro and ex-slave of Livingston, has been selected to lead the parade in Cookeville on May 19, 1954, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of both Cookeville and Putnam County. 'Uncle Crusoe,' as he is known to his many friends in Overton County, was born and reared in Putnam County, and came to Livingston several years ago when he married for the second time. He was 10 years old when Putnam County was formed from parts of adjoining counties."

On Sept. 17, 1954, the front page of *The Livingston Enterprise* contains Robinson Crusoe Buck's obituary. It reads:

"Robinson Crusoe Buck, age 109, the oldest person in Overton County, died at his home in Livingston on Tuesday, Sept. 14, at 11 a.m., after an illness of only a few weeks. 'Uncle Crusoe,' as he was affectionately known by a wide circle of friends, a gray-haired Negro who was born in slavery, spent his life in the Upper Cumberland section of Tennessee. He was one of 40 slaves of Abraham Buck, a German settler near Cookeville who owned one thousand acres of land. When the War Between the States was in progress, he aided his master when the Federal troops were near, and he often told of taking care of \$7,000 in gold and silver for his master, hiding it in the hollow of a large apple tree until his master needed it. He later moved to Algood where he worked in a livery stable for many years, and many times furnished Judge Cordell Hull with a rig to drive from town to town where he was holding court. He went to Washington in 1941 at the invitation of Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Congressman Ridley Mitchell, and while there met President F. D. Roosevelt and brought his back home with him pictures of Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Hull, autographed, which he kept in his living room. In 1946, he moved to Livingston after marrying Mrs. Ollie McDonald, where he lived since. He attributes his long life to 'trying to live right and treating everybody right.'

Surviving besides his wife are two daughters, Mrs. Daisy Finley and Mrs. Winnie West of Algood, and several grandchildren. Funeral services were held at the Algood Colored Church on Sept. 17, 1954, at 10 a.m. with burial in Algood Colored Cemetery. Speck-Hyder Funeral Home was in charge of the arrangements."

Emily Sells lives in Livingston and writes a weekly column, "Josephine's Journal," in the *Overton County News*.

"Cumberland Tales" column is a monthly publication. It is a service of the Cookeville Museum. Editors are W. Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell.

\*See more Cumberland Tales and other related stories and information at:  
<http://www.ajlambert.com>

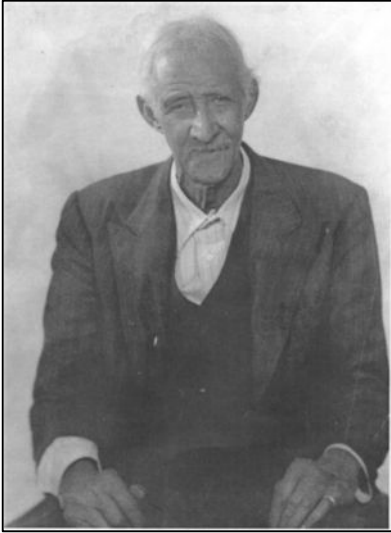
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(Picture: Courtesy of Ronald Dishman).

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The home where Robinson Crusoe Buck lived here in Livingston has long been torn down, but it once stood across from Tom's Welding on North Church Street. If it had been preserved, it would surely qualify to be placed on a list of historic sites for Livingston and Overton County. Maybe the words on a sign that might have been placed out in front of the house would read: "Home of Robinson Crusoe Buck, born into slavery on November 15, 1844; died September 14, 1954; at age 109 years. While living a good, long life, he once traveled to Washington, D.C. where he stood beside President Franklin D. Roosevelt to be photographed. The Town of Livingston is proud to have had Mr. Buck make his home here for the last several years of his life."

<http://www.josephinesjournal.com/rcb.htm>

**Josephine's Journal**, a newspaper column published in The Overton County News in Livingston, TN.

#### FORMER SLAVE, 91, MARRIES WOMAN, 66:

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Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN: 20 August 1936.

\*See more history files at <http://www.ajlambert.com>