

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Marching Song of the First Arkansas Regiment

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After the Emancipation Proclamation, signed January 1, 1863, newly freed black slaves were urged to join the Union Army. Almost immediately, the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) was organized, and it saw action that year and the next in Mississippi and Louisiana. This marching song, sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body,” was written for this regiment by Lindley Hoffman Miller (1834–64), lawyer, orator-poet, son of a United States Senator, and Union officer who requested assignment to a colored unit, joining the First Arkansas Regiment in November 1863. Originally written in Negro dialect, we reproduce here a version in standard English.¹

What is the spirit of the song and its singers? Why, according to the different verses, are these ex-slaves fighting? How do their reasons differ from those expressed in “We Are Coming, Father Abraham”? Can you imagine the scene of the last stanza, as the Regiment, proudly bedecked in Union blue beneath the Stars and Stripes, passes other “colored brethren,” inviting them to join their ranks? Does it move you? If so, how and why?

For a musical rendition, listen to Tennessee Ernie Ford perform the Marching Song of the First Arkansas Regiment at www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6c3dF0oATs.

Oh, we’re the bully soldiers of the “First of Arkansas,”
We are fighting for the Union, we are fighting for the law,
We can hit a Rebel further than a white man ever saw,
As we go marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory hallelujah.
Glory, glory hallelujah.
Glory, glory hallelujah.
As we go marching on.

¹ *This song is a personal favorite of the editors, who find it a supreme expression of human dignity.*

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See, there above the center, where the flag is waving bright,
We are going out of slavery; we're bound for freedom's light;
We mean to show Jeff Davis how the Africans can fight,
As we go marching on!

(Chorus)

We have done with hoeing cotton, we have done with hoeing corn,
We are colored Yankee soldiers, now, as sure as you are born;
When the masters hear us yelling, they'll think it's Gabriel's horn,
As we go marching on.

(Chorus)

They will have to pay us wages, the wages of their sin,
They will have to bow their foreheads to their colored kith and kin,
They will have to give us house-room, or the roof shall tumble in!
As we go marching on.

(Chorus)

We heard the Proclamation, master hush it as he will,
The bird he sing it to us, hoppin' on the cotton hill,
And the possum up the gum tree, he couldn't keep it still,
As he went climbing on.

(Chorus)

They said, "Now colored brethren, you shall be forever free,
From the first of January, Eighteen hundred sixty-three."
We heard it in the river going rushing to the sea,
As it went sounding on.

(Chorus)

Father Abraham has spoken and the message has been sent,
The prison doors he opened, and out the pris'ners went,

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To join the sable army of the “African descent,”
As we go marching on.

(Chorus)

Then fall in, colored brethren, you’d better do it soon,
Don’t you hear the drum a-beating the Yankee Doodle tune?
We are with you now this morning, we’ll be far away at noon,
As we go marching on.

(Chorus)

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