



___The Plantation Community___

Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See "A Note on the Language of the Narratives" at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

■ On the plantations the slaves usually had a house of their own for their families. They usually built their houses in a circle, so you didn't have to go out doors hardly to go to the house next to you. If you wanted your house away from the rest of the houses, they could build you a house away from the others

The slaves used to dance or go to the prayer meeting to pass their time. There were also festivals we went to, during the Christmas vacation. There was always a big celebration on Christmas. We worked until Christmas Eve and from that time until New Year's we had a vacation. We had no such thing as Thanksgiving, we had never heard of such a thing.

In August when it was the hottest we always had a vacation after our crops were all laid by. That was the time when we usually had several picnics, barbecues, or anything we wanted to do to pass our time away.

CLAYTON HOLBERT, enslaved in Tennessee ■

■ All we knowed was work from one en' of de year to de yuther, 'ceptin' on holidays. Den we'd have to go to church or set around de fire an' lis'en to de old folks tell stories. The grownups would go to a dance or do sumpin' else for indertainment. Cose us younguns got a heap of pleasure outten dem fairy tales dat was tol' us by de older ones. I know ma an' dem use to tell some of de awf'lest tales sometimes. I'd be 'fraid to go from one part of de house to de yuther wid outten somebody wid me. Us younguns would had to play some sort of a game for indertainment. Dere was a whole lot of games an' riddles to be played dem days. . . I 'members a song or two an' a few riddles what ol' Caleb use to tell us. De song goes sumpin' like dis:



William Henry Towns, ca. 1937

"All we knowed was work from one en' of de year to de yuther, 'ceptin' on holidays."

Saturday night an' Sunday, too,
Had a yaller gal on my mind.
Monday mornin', break of day,
White folks had me gwine [going].

De riddles was like dis;

Slick as a mole, black as a coal,
Got a great long tail like a thunder hole.

(Skillet)

Crooked as a rainbow, teeth lak a cat,
Guess all of your life but you can't guess dat.

(black berry bush)

Grows in de winter, dies in de spring,
Lives wid de root stickin' straight up.

(icicle)

Der was anudder song what Caleb use to sing. It goes like dis;

Whar you gwine buzzard? Whar you gwine crow?
Gwine down to de river to do jes' so.

WILLIAM HENRY TOWNS, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ After de day's wuk was done there warn't anything for de slaves to do but go to bed. Wednesday night they went to prayer meetin'. We had to be in de bed by nine o'clock. Ever' night de drivers come 'roun' ter make sho' dat we was in de bed. I heerd tell of folks goin' to bed an' den gittin' up an' goin' to yuther plantation. On Sat'day de han's [hands (slaves)] wukked 'twell noon. Dey had de res' of de time to wuk dey gardens. . . .

De only games dat I played when I was young was marbles an' ball. I use to sing a few songs dat I heard de older folks sing lak:

"Cecess [Secession, i.e., Southern] ladies thank they mighty grand
Settin' at de table, coffee pot of rye,
O' ye Rebel union band, have these ladies understan'
We leave our country to meet you, Uncle Sam."

MINGO WHITE, enslaved in South Carolina and Alabama ■

■ Sometimes dey'd let us have a party. Saturday nights, de white people give us meat and stuff. Give us syrup and we'd make candy, out in de yard. We'd ask our frien's and dance all night. Den go to work next day. We'd clean off de yard and dance out dere. Christmas come, dey give us a big eggnog and give us cake. Our white folks did. White folks chillen had bought candy. We didn' git any, but dey let us play wid de white chillen. . . .

We had to steal away at night to have church on de ditch bank, and crawl home on de belly. Once overseers heared us prayin', give us one day each 100 lashes.

ELVIRA BOLES, enslaved in Mississippi and Texas ■

■ When we prayed by ourse'ves we daren't let the white folks knows it and we turned a wash pot down to the ground to catch the voice. We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sing them at night it jus' whispering so nobody hear us. One went like this:

My knee bones am aching,
My body's rackin' with pain,
I 'lieve I'm a chile of God,
And this ain't my home,
'Cause Heaven's my aim.

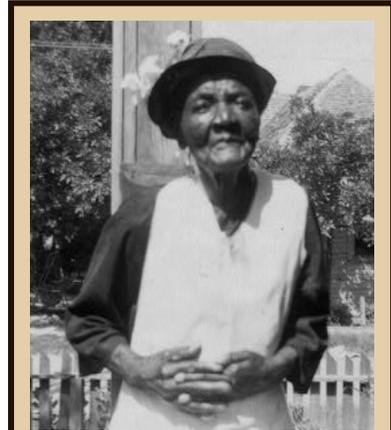
ANDERSON EDWARDS, enslaved in Texas ■

I have heard it said that Tom Ashbie's father went to one of the cabins late at night, the slaves were having a secret prayer meeting. He heard one slave ask God to change the heart of his master and deliver him from slavery so that he may enjoy freedom. Before the next day the man disappeared, no one ever seeing him again. . . When old man Ashbie died, just before he died he told the white Baptist minister, that he had killed Zeek for praying and that he was going to hell.

SILAS JACKSON, enslaved in Virginia ■

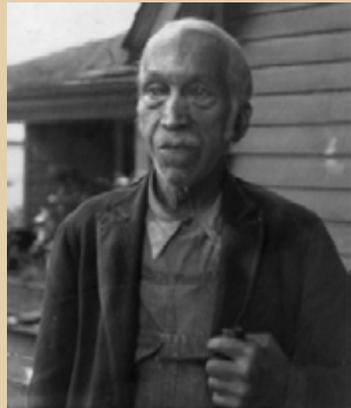
You know we was neber 'lowed to go to chu'ch widoutten some of de white folks wid us. We wan't even 'lowed to talk wid nobody from anudder farm. Iffen you did, you got one of de wus' whuppin's of your life. Atter freedom Massa Jim tol' us dat dey was 'fraid we'd git together an' try to run away to de No'th, an' dat dat was w'y dey didn' wan' us gittin' together talkin'.

MARY ELLA GRANDBERRY, enslaved in Alabama ■



Millie Williams, ca. 1937

" . . . we starts murmerin' out loud, 'Patter de pat, patter de pat.' . . . We allus do dat to let everybody know de padder roller 'round."



W. L. Bost, ca. 1937

"Sometimes the paddyrollers catch us and beat us good but that didn't keep us from tryin'."

When de nigger leaves de plantation without no pass, and de padder rollers¹ kotched him, dey gives him 39 licks with de bullwhip. When we's in de fields and sees de padder roller ride by, we starts murmerin' out loud, "Patter de pat, patter de pat." One after 'nother took it up and purty soon everybody murmer-in'. We allus do dat to let everybody know de padder roller 'round.

MILLIE WILLIAMS, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

Then the paddyrollers they keep close watch on the pore niggers so they have no chance to do anything or go anywhere. They jes' like policemen, only worsen. 'Cause they never let the niggers go anywhere without a pass from his master. If you wasn't in your proper place when the paddyrollers come they lash you til' you was black and blue. The women got 15 lashes and the men 30. That is for jes bein' out without a pass. . . .

Us niggers never have chance to go to Sunday School and church. The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin' inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meetin'. Sometimes the paddyrollers catch us and beat us good but that didn't keep us from tryin'.

W. L. BOST, enslaved in North Carolina ■

When I wuz a boy, dere wuz lotsa Indians livin' about six miles frum de plantation en which I wuz a slave. De Indians allus held a big dance ever' few months, an' all de niggers would try to attend. On one ob dese osten'tious occasions about 50 of us niggers conceived de idea of goin', without gettin' permits frum de Mahster. . . [After slave patrollers arrive at the party, the slaves are able to escape and run home.] We hadn' no more'n got in bed, when de mahster begin knockin' on de door. "Jim," he yell, "Jim, open up de doah!" Jim gets up, and opens de doah, an de mahster, wid several more men, comes in de house. "Where's all de niggers?" he asks. "Dey's all heah," Jim says. De boss walks slowly through de house, countin' de niggers, an'

sho' nuf dey wuz all dere. "Mus' hab been Jim Dixon's negroes," he says finally.

Yes, suh, Cap'n, dey wuz a lot happen in dem times dat de mahsters didn't know nuthin' about.

PRESTON KYLES, enslaved in Arkansas ■

¹ padder rollers: patrollers, slave patrols — groups of white men who patrolled the countryside for escaped slaves and those traveling without passes.

One reason Marse Morgan thought so much o' me, dey say I was a right part young'n an' caught on to anything pretty quick. Marster would tell me, "Loosanna, if you keep yo' ears open an' tell me what de darkies talk 'bout, dey'll be somp'n' good in it for you." (He meant for me to listen when dey'd talk 'bout runnin' off an' such.) I'd stay 'roun' de old folks an' make lak I was a-playin'. All de time I'd be a-listenin'. Den I'd go an' tell Marster what I hear'd. But all de time I mus' a-had a right smart mind, 'cause I'd play 'roun' de white folks an' hear what dey'd say an' den go tell de Niggers. Don't guess de marster ever thought 'bout me doin' dat.

ANNA BAKER, enslaved in Alabama ■

I kep' a eye on the niggers down in the cotton patch. Sometime they lazy 'round and if I see the overseer comin' from the big house I sings a song to warn 'em, so they not git whupped, and it go like this:

"Hold up, hold up, American Spirit!
Hold up, hold up, H-O-O-O-O-O-O!"

RICHARD CARRUTHERS, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

People in my day didn't know book learning but dey studied how to protect each other, and save 'em from much misery as dey could.

SUSAN RHODES, enslaved in North Carolina ■

Many de time a nigger git blistered and cut up so dat we have to git a sheet and grease it wid lard and wrap 'em up in it, and dey have to wear a greasy cloth wrapped around dey body under de shirt for three-four days after dey git a big whipping!

KATIE ROWE, enslaved in Arkansas ■

I so often think of de hard times my parents had in dere slave days, more than I feel my own hard times, because my father was not allowed to come to see my mother but two nights a week. Dat was Wednesday and Saturday. So often he came home all bloody from beatings his old nigger overseer would give him. My mother would take those bloody clothes off of him, bathe de sore places and grease them good and wash and iron his clothes, so he could go back clean.

MARY A. BELL, enslaved in Missouri ■

One day Miss Caroline went up town, an' come back mad. She made mother strip down to her waist, and then took a carriage whup an' beat her until the blood was runnin' down her back. Mother said she was afraid she would kill her, so she ran for the woods and hid there, and stayed three weeks. She made up her mind she wasn't comin' back. . . .

The niggers on different plantations fed mother by carrying things to certain hidin' places and leavin' it.

HANNAH PLUMMER, enslaved in North Carolina ■

And I knowed a woman name Tishie, Miss Mollie's house sarvant. She run away 'case dey so mean to her, I reckon, and de cullud folks harbored her and hid her up in de grain house wid de peas and sech lac', steddin' down in de corn crib. And who ever 'twuz 'trayed her I ain't sayin' but a crowd uv dem Patterrollers come and got 'er one night, and tuck her away, and I ain't nebber seed Tishie no mo'.

MARTHA JACKSON, enslaved in Alabama ■



Katie Rowe, ca. 1937

"Many de time a nigger git blistered and cut up so bad dat we have to git a sheet and grease it wid lard and wrap 'em up in it"



Martha Jackson, ca. 1937

". . . de cullud folks harbored her and hid her up in de grain house"

■ They carried news from one plantation by whut they call relay. Iffen you was caught, they whipped you till you said, “Oh, pray master!”

DOC DANIEL DOWDY, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ We used to carry news from one plantation to the other I reckon, 'cause mammy would tell about things going on some other plantation and I know she never been there.

PHYLLIS PETITE, enslaved in Texas ■

■ My mother found out by the “Grapevine telegraph” that I was going to be carried to Kentucky. She got permission and came to see me before they carried me off.

ROBERT GLENN, enslaved in North Carolina and Kentucky ■

■ Niggers on Marse Elbert’s place never knowed nothin’ ’bout no North: if dey did dey wouldn’t tell it to chilluns little as I was den. Dere was some sort of uprisin’ a good piece f’um Ruckersville, but I can’t tell you ’bout it ’cause I just heard de old folkses do a little talkin’, what warn’t enough to larn de whole tale. Chillun back dar didn’t jine in de old folkses business lak dey does now.

CARRIE HUDSON, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ Chilluns didn’t know nothin’ ’bout gittin’ no money of dey own ’til atter de war. Mammy, she made her little money knittin’ socks, and patchin’ clothes at night, and she had done saved up night \$40.00 in Confederate money. Dey called it Confederate shucks atter de war ’cause it warn’t no good no more den, and she let us chillun play wid it.

EASTER HUFF, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ We were never given any money, but were able to get a little money this way: our Master would let us have two or three acres of land each year to plant for ourselves, and we could have what we raised on it. We could not allow our work on these two or three acres to interfere with Master’s work, but we had to work our little crops on Sundays. Now remind you, all the Negroes didn’t get these two or three acres, only good masters allowed their slaves to have a little crop of their own. We would take the money from our little crops and buy a few clothes and something for Christmas.

OCTAVIA GEORGE, enslaved in Oklahoma ■

■ Christmas time everybody got a present and Marse Bob give a big hawg to every four families. We had money to buy whiskey with. In spare time we’d make cornshuck horse collars and all kinds of baskets, and Marse bought them off us. What he couldn’t use, he sold for us. We’d take post oak and split it thin with drawin’ knives and let it git tough in the sun, and then weave it into cotton baskets and fish baskets and little fancy baskets. The men spent they money on whiskey, ’cause everything else was furnished. We raised our own tobacco and hung it in the barn to season, and a’body could go git it when they wanted it.

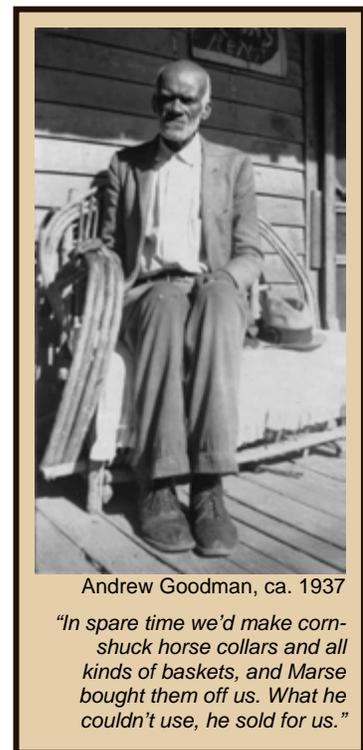
ANDREW GOODMAN, enslaved in Texas ■

■ We didn’ have no little garden, we never had no time to work no garden. When you could see to work, you was workin’ for him. Ho!

You didn’ know what money was. He never paid you anything, you never got to see none. . . .

On Saturday nights, we jes’ knocked ’round the place. Christmas? I don’ know as I was ever home Christmas. My boss kep’ me hired out. The slaves never had no Christmas presents I know of. And big dinners, I never was at nary one. They didn’ give us nothin, I tell you, but a grubbin’ hoe and axe and the whip.

AUSTIN GRANT, enslaved in Mississippi ■



Andrew Goodman, ca. 1937

“In spare time we’d make cornshuck horse collars and all kinds of baskets, and Marse bought them off us. What he couldn’t use, he sold for us.”

De grown folks used to have big times at log-rollings, corn-shuckings and quiltings. Dey'd have a big supper and a big dance at night. Us children would play ring plays, play with home-made rag dolls, or we'd take big leaves and pin 'em together wid thorns and make hats and dresses. We'd ride saplings, too. All of us would pull a sapling down and one would climb up in it near de top and git a good hold on it, and dey would turn it loose. It took a purty good holding to stay wid it, I can tell you.

DELLA FOUNTAIN, enslaved in Louisiana ■

In de evening when we was through wid our work dey would gather at one of de cabins and visit and sing or dance. We'd pop corn, eat walnuts, peanuts, hickory nuts, and tell ghost stories. We didn't have any music instruments so de music we danced by wasn't so very good. Everybody sang and one or two would beat on tin pans or beat bones together.

JAMES SOUTHALL, enslaved in Tennessee ■

After work was done, the slaves would smoke, sing, tell ghost stories and tales, dances, music, home-made fiddles. Saturday was work day like any other day. We had all legal holidays. Christmas morning we went to the big house and got presents and had a big time all day.

At corn shucking all the slaves from other plantaions would come to the barn, the fiddler would sit on top of the highest barrel of corn, and play all kinds of songs . . .

When we wanted to meet at night we had an old conk [conch shell], we blew that. We all would meet on the bank of the Potomac River and sing across the river to the slaves in Virginia, and they would sing back to us.

JAMES V. DEANE, enslaved in Maryland ■

Us never have much joyments in slave time. Only when de corn ready for huskin' all de neighbors comes dere and a whole big crowd am a-huskin and singin'. I can't 'member dem songs, cause I'm not much for singin'. One go like dis:

“Pull de husk, break de ear;
Whoa, I's got de red ear here.”

When you finds de red ear, dat 'titles you to de prize, like kissin' de gal or de drink of brandy or somethin'. Dey not 'nough red ears to suit us.

CHARLEY HURT, enslaved in Georgia ■

After breakfas' in de mornin' de niggers am gwine here, dere and everywhere, jus' like de big factory. Every one to he job, some a-whistlin', some a-singin'. Dey sings diff'rent songs and dis am one when deys gwine to work:

“Old cotton, old corn, see you every morn,
Old cotton, old corn, see you since I's born.
Old cotton, old corn, hoe you till dawn,
Old cotton, old corn, what for you born?”

PAULINE GRICE, enslaved in Georgia ■

I wuk in field on Maussa Johnnie Fripp plantation. Sometime we sing w'en us wuk. One song we sing been go lak dis:

“Go way, Ole Man
Go way, Ole Man
W'ere you bin all day
If you treat me good
I'll stay 'till de Judgment day,
But if you treat me bad,
I'll sho' to run away.”

SAM POLITE, enslaved in South Carolina ■



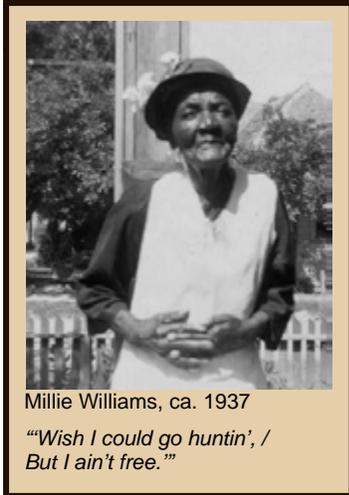
Charley Hurt, ca. 1937

“Us never have much joyments in slave time.”



Pauline Grice, ca. 1937

“jus' like de big factory”



Millie Williams, ca. 1937

*“Wish I could go huntin’, /
But I ain’t free.”*

■ We has parties and sings

“Massa sleeps in de feather bed,
Nigger sleeps on de floor;
When we’uns gits to Heaven,
Dey’Il be no slaves no mo’.”

Den we has de song ’bout dis:

“Rabbit in de briar patch,
Squirrel in de tree,
Wish I could go huntin’,
But I ain’t free.

“Rooster’s in de henhouse,
Hen’s in de patch,
Love to go shootin’,
But I ain’t free.

MILLIE WILLIAMS, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

■ “Mammy, is Ol’ Massa gwine sell us tomorrow?

Yes, my chile.

Whar he gwine sell us?

Way down South in Georgia.”

Dat was one of de saddest songs we sung endurin’ slavery days. It always did make me cry.

EMMA HOWARD, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ [On learning of Lee’s surrender] Glory! Glory! yes, child the Negroes are free, an’ when they knew dat dey were free dey, Oh! Baby! began to sing:

“Mamy don’t yo’ cook no mo’,
Yo’ ar’ free, yo’ ar’ free.
Rooster don’t yo’ crow no mo’,
Yo’ ar’ free, yo’ ar’ free.
Ol’ hen, don’t yo’ lay no mo’ eggs,
Yo’ free, yo’ free.

Sech rejoicing an’ shoutin’, you never he’rd in you’ life.

FANNIE BERRY, enslaved in Virginia ■

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View at Mill’s plantation, Port Royal Island, South Carolina, April 1862 (detail), photograph by Timothy H. O’Sullivan