



My Folks Don't Want Me To Talk About Slavery: Personal Accounts of Slavery in North Carolina (Real Voices, Real History)

Belinda Hurmence

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In the midst of the Great Depression, the Federal Writer's Project assigned field workers to interview ex-slaves. More than 2,000 former slaves contributed their personal accounts and opinions, and their oral histories were deposited in the Library of Congress.

The former slaves describe the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the houses they lived in, the type of work they did, and the treatment they received. They tell their impressions of Yankee soldiers, the Klan, their masters, and their newfound freedom.

Because the interviews were conducted during the Great Depression, some of the narratives provide insights that are at times surprising. These interviews have preserved a valuable source of information about the institution of slavery in the United States and the effect it had on the people involved.

“One day Grandpappy sassed Miss Polly White, and she told him that if he didn't behave hisself that she would put him in her pocket. Grandpappy was a big man, and I ask him how Miss Polly could do that. He said she meant that she would sell him, then put the money in her pocket. He never did sass Miss Polly no more.”

—Sarah Debro

“Slavery was a bad thing, and freedom, of the kind we got, with nothing to live on, was bad. Two snakes full of poison. One lying with his head pointing north, the other with his head pointing south. Their names was slavery and freedom. The snake called slavery lay with his head pointed south, and the snake called freedom lay with his head pointed north. Both bit the nigger, and they was both bad.”

—Patsy Mitchner

These eloquent words come from former slaves themselves—an important but long-neglected source of information about the institution of slavery in the United States. Who could better describe what slavery was like than the people who experienced it? And describe it they did, in thousands of remarkable interviews sponsored by the Federal Writers' Project during the 1930s.

The words quoted above represent only two of the more than 2,000 slave narratives that are now housed in the Library of Congress. More than 170 interviews were conducted in North Carolina. Belinda Hurmence pored over each of the North Carolina narratives, compiling and editing 21 of the first-person accounts for this collection.

These narratives, though artless in many ways, speak compellingly of the joys and sorrows, the hopes and dreams, of the countless people who endured human bondage in the land of the free.

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