

### Folklore History': Ex-Slave Interviews Reveal Both Common And Varying Experiences

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## Review

### 'FOLKLORE HISTORY'

#### Ex-slave interviews reveal both common and varying experiences

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**Baker, Ronald L. and Federal Writers Project.** *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana.* Indiana University Press, 2000-10-01. ISBN 253338034

In 1936, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project initiated a program to collect oral biographies and reminiscences from former slaves. Field workers solicited and edited thousands of slave narratives, some of which were sent to the Library of Congress, while others went to libraries in various states. In 1972, George P. Rawick published the Library of Congress's collection in 19 volumes, supplemented in 1977 and 1979 with two series from state libraries, making 41 volumes in all. The Indiana interviews deposited with the Library of Congress are in Volume 6 of Rawick's original series, while those at Indiana State University appear in Volume 5 of the first supplement. In **Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless**, Ronald L. Baker includes the interviews found in both of these volumes, as well as eight additional interviews from Indiana that had escaped Rawick's notice.

The slave narratives must be used with caution. Rather than reproducing exactly what the former slaves related, field workers customarily edited the interviews. Most of the field workers were white, and it is impossible to know how accurately the former slaves recounted unpleasant episodes to white questioners. Finally, there remains an ill-defined but genuine gap between what former slaves thought about their lives and circumstances and what white field workers understood them to have said.

Baker sees folklore as the primary value of the slave narratives, showing greater interest in overall patterns than in the historical detail the former slaves described. The folklore value is evident and substantial, but details from the individual lives ought not be ignored. They often confirm historical evidence

from law courts, official reports, and census forms, and are thus emblematic of the general historical reality.

The narrative of Hettie McClain, related by her daughter-in-law, Adah Isabelle Suggs, contains two anecdotes that illustrate the impact of slavery upon free states. Hettie was the daughter of a slave, Hulda, and her owner, William McClain. To ensure that Hulda and Hettie would not be separated, McClain took them across the freedom line from Kentucky to Indiana, bought them a cottage, and emancipated them. Many owners took their slave mistresses and children to a free state, a practice which often led to lawsuits, some with constitutional implications. Suggs further related how her mother later was kidnapped and sold back into slavery, another scenario that was sufficiently widespread to have occasioned legal recourse.

Confirming for Kentucky what Carl Schurz related about the Deep South in his 1865 Report to President Andrew Johnson, former slave John Rudd "recalled seeing seven ex-slaves hanging from one tree...just after the close of the war." But the accounts also reflect a variety of experiences. Robert J. Cheatham stated that Dr. Farmer, his former owner, neither bought nor sold slaves, and "all of his slaves were pure black" (which suggests that Dr. Farmer did not sire a second family, a frequent practice to which census reports give mute witness).

The collective memory of slavery contrasted monstrous cruelty with genuine care. Ellen Cane described her owner as a "mean man" who only fed his slave "now and then." Belle Butler remembered her mother's account about being owned by a "a mean old devil" who "whipped his slaves for the slightest infraction and often he whipped them for nothing at all. He just enjoyed seeing them suffer." Interviews with Mittie Blakely, Frank Cooper, Mattie Jenkins, and a dozen others confirmed hideous treatment. But James Childress recalled he was "well fed, well clothed, and lived in good cabin." Cheatham remembered being taught to read by Dr. Farmer, who did not beat his slaves, and Mrs. Robert Smith insisted that her relatives were sorry to "leave their owners." Still, several slaves remembered families broken up by owners, and John W. Fields related that: "Twelve children were taken from my mother in one day!" The final word belongs to Thomas Lewis: "There was no such thing as being good to slaves."

Ronald Baker has done an excellent job of editing the WPA interviews, bringing those scattered in Rawick into a single edition and adding interviews that Rawick had not found. A good introduction and several useful appendices

add to the value of the work. Both scholars and the interested reader will find this volume fascinating to read and easy to use.

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