

The Federal Writers' Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source

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Historians have recently witnessed the publication of a spate of books on slavery. These books have generally served to revise upward our estimate of the slave's condition in America without defending the "peculiar institution." Some of these works have been buttressed, at least in part, by oral history work done with former slaves by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in the 1930s.

Interviews were conducted in seventeen states during the years 1936-1938 with approximately two thousand ex-slaves. Two-thirds of those interviewed were age fifteen or younger at emancipation; almost all of the remainder were in their late teens or twenties in 1865. Members of this group, therefore, were over eighty years of age when interviewed and more than seventy years removed from the events they were discussing. The ex-slaves were not randomly selected for interviewing; they were either volunteers or previously known to the interviewer. Therefore, the interviews cannot be used with statistical precision.¹ The interviewers were, for the most part, untrained, but they were given general instructions which included not influencing the viewpoint of the informant, withholding their own view of slavery, and recording all stories "as nearly word-for-word as is possible," but to avoid dialect spelling where it would confuse the reader. The interviews were recorded in the interviewer's handwriting, not via taperecorder, and later were typewritten.

A number of questions were suggested that interviewers might ask: Where and when were you born? Describe your home and the "quarters." What work did you do? What did you eat and wear? What types of recreation were there? Did you receive education, religious training, medical care? How were runaways treated? What happened on the day news came that you were free? What did you do after the war? Most of the transcripts were edited by the

¹ Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, 19 (Fall 1967), 534-35, 551-53; George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), xviii.

state officer directing the project. Editorial instructions from federal directors Henry G. Alsberg and John A. Lomax were to prepare a “faithful account of the ex-slaves’ version of his experience” in his own conversational style and dialect. In regard to the latter instruction, Alsberg recommended “that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation be secondary.” He specifically suggested that “turns of phrase that have flavor and vividness” such as “durin’ of de war,” “kinder chillish,” and “piddled in de fields” be retained. Excessive editorializing and displays of the editor’s creative writing prowess were firmly discouraged.²

Random inspection of the published transcripts indicates, however, that these instructions were not always followed. The interviewer and editor did not always quote the interviewee verbatim but summarized the answer or the entire interview in a more entertaining style than the question-and-answer format allows. Interviewers occasionally appended a description of the conditions under which the interview was conducted—physical condition of the subject, physical surroundings, other people present—which might assist the reader’s effort to evaluate the interview. However, Alsberg and Lomax feared that rewriting the transcript into the interviewer-editor’s words raises a question of accuracy.

Scholars have in fact disagreed as to the historical value of FWP oral histories of slavery. John W. Blassingame has argued that these interviews are not as valuable as the antebellum slave narratives or the interviews conducted with ex-slaves during and after the Civil War. He contends that the social context of the interview and the interviewing techniques were not conducive to candor. Blacks in the South in the 1930s necessarily concealed their feelings toward whites, and white interviewers could not expect to receive full and truthful answers to their questions. Interviewers frequently asked such leading questions as: “Was your master a good man?” or “Which was best, slavery or freedom?” The interviewers further indicated what answers they wanted to hear by not accepting the answers they received. When an ex-slave spoke of being beaten, the interviewer might counter by asking if the mistress was kind or if the children had a good time playing games. Blassingame cogently argues that the FWP interviews are not verbatim records of conversation and that there are frequent discrepancies between the recorded interview and the typed version. He also charges that the interview subjects were too young in 1865 to have experienced the harshest aspects of slavery, and that the sample is biased in favor of those slaves who received the best treatment, who were the most obsequious, and who lived in the lower South. While Blassingame believes these interviews are an excellent source for slave songs,

² Rawick, 173-78; Yetman, 550.

genealogical data, and black speech patterns, he fears that uncritical use will lead to a picture of slave life characterized by "mutual love and respect between masters and slaves."³

Norman R. Yetman has taken an opposing view. He characterizes the collection as, for the most part, "verbatim testimonies concerning antebellum slave life" which afforded ex-slaves an opportunity "to describe in their own words what it felt like to be a slave." Unlike Blassingame, Yetman believes the project "achieved a high degree of representativeness and inclusiveness" in its interviewees, including ex-slaves from plantations of all sizes and those who had been the recipients of harsh as well as benevolent treatment. While Yetman admits that the quality of work produced was "grossly uneven" and that most interviewees "were insensitive to the nuances of interview procedure" producing "stylized and superficial responses devoid of spontaneity," he concludes that the collection is an essential source of historical data.⁴

George P. Rawick, who has recently edited the entire collection for publication, agrees with Yetman that these interviews should prove an important source for scholars of American slavery. He believes that they provide major insights into the social structure of the slave community, that they contain new material on black history during Reconstruction and information about relations between blacks and American Indians, and that the interviews are rich sources of information on black folklore and black poetry. Rawick believes that these interviews will allow scholars to expand our knowledge of slavery in important ways.⁵

The resolution of these conflicting estimates of the value of the FWP slave narratives as historical sources lies in how historians use them. Eugene D. Genovese had made extensive use of these sources in his controversial *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). In this work, he compared data found in slaveholders' papers and publications, travelers' accounts, the testimony of runaway slaves, folklore materials, and the interviews conducted in the 1930s. He stated his conclusions firmly when, in his view, the sources were in agreement on what, how, and where. He hedged his conclusions when precision was not possible. Three examples will illustrate this process and demonstrate the major role that oral history played in forming Genovese's conclusions.

A major theme of revisionist writing on American slavery, including the work of Genovese, is that while blacks were the objects of slavery they were not impotent creatures of their masters—they had minds and lives of their own. Genovese advances this theme in his discussion of slave family life. He argues that house

³ John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (November 1975), 473-92.

⁴ Yetman, 534-35, 551-53.

⁵ Rawick, 163-66.

servants and field hands frequently intermarried, contravening the wishes of their masters and unhampered by the physical separation imposed by field work and house work. In spite of the fact that family units were widely separated during the working day on medium and large plantations, Genovese claims that married slaves could still “live closely as a family.” To support these conclusions Genovese cites evidence from interviews with ex-slaves in five states, secondary work based on these interviews, diaries, interviews conducted by scholars at Fisk University, and unpublished manuscript sources. Interviews were obviously not the only source for the author’s conclusions but were certainly a major aid to him in reaching those conclusions.⁶

Another thesis that Genovese challenges with the aid of oral history is that status and prestige accrued to blacks who worked in the Big House. He concludes that only on the largest plantations was there a clear-cut division between house and field servants. House servants were drawn into field work, especially at harvest time, and joined in camaraderie with the field hands. Evidence from the interviews which supports this argument took the following form:

Yessum, I was jes’ as happy bein’ a fiel’ han’ as I would’er been at de Big House; mebee mo’ so.

Mammy was a fiel’ han’. She could plow an’ wuk in de fiel’s jes lak a man, an’ my pappy, de done de same. Mammy, she hated house wuk—lak me.

I stayed with my mammy. She was a hoehand, and used to do washing around the house; she did some cooking, too. She used to pick cotton.

My mother was a great weaver. She would weave cloth for the hands on the place. Some days she would work around the house and some other days she would go out and weave. When they wasn’t any weaving or spinning to be done, she’d go out in the field. The weaving and the spinning was right in the white folks’ house.⁷

Despite this evidence, Genovese is unwilling to state firmly that slaves preferred field work to house work because such attitudes do not appear often enough in the various sources—interviews, diaries, unpublished manuscripts—he consulted.⁸

Pursuing his theme that slaves were not docile creatures, Genovese argues that large numbers of them would not submit to the

⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 736.

⁷ George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn., 1972), vol. I, no. 6, p. 326; vol. VII, no. 2, p. 158; vol. 3, no. 3, p. 185; vol. 9, no. 3, p. 364.

⁸ Genovese, 331, 735, 736-37.

whip. Citing interview transcripts, diary entries, and other contemporary accounts, he asserts that resistance to whipping existed in every part of the South. The evidence he cites from both masters and slaves leaves little doubt that there was resistance. One master wrote, "I yesterday undertook to correct Big Jim and he resisted me, bit the fore finger of my hand and ran off." An overseer told Frederick Law Olmsted, "Some negroes are determined never to let a white man whip them and will resist you, when you attempt it; of course you must kill them in that case."⁹

More than seventy years after the events occurred, interviewers for the Federal Writers' Project gleaned these accounts which were useful to Genovese and which corroborate the contemporary sources:

Dat massa couldn't keep a overseer, 'cause de niggers wouldn't let 'em whip 'em, and dis Clem, he say, "I'll stay dere," and he finds he couldn't whip dem niggers either, so he jus' kilt 'em. Dat nigger raise de ax to come down on Polk's head and de massa stopped him jus' in time, and en Polk shoots dat nigger in de breast with a shotgun.

Dey wouldn't take no whippin off dy Massa an dat how-come dey got rid of em. My gran'pappy been worth \$1,000 en it de Lord's truth I tellin you, he drown fore he let em whip him.

She was to be whipped because she had not completed the required amount of hoeing for the day. Grandmother continued hoeing until she came to a fence; as the overseer reached out to grap her she snatched a fence railing and broke it across his arms.¹⁰

Based on this and other evidence, Genovese justifiably concludes that the slaves' resistance was a "high point of . . . assertion" that reminded all slaves that "the Man's power could effectively be challenged."¹¹

Relying primarily on interviews conducted in the 1930s, George P. Rawick has joined Genovese in revising our notions of slavery. His interpretive essay, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, argues that there was a black community under slavery in which there were distinct behavior patterns and resistance to harsh treatment. He also argues that there were regional differences in slavery. He shows that Texas interviews document the individual autonomy of the black cowboy and the black slave cowboy, and that Oklahoma interviews are rich sources of informa-

⁹ Genovese, 620, 619.

¹⁰ Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 213-14.

¹¹ Genovese, 620.

tion about black-American Indian relations, topics unexplored by historians.¹²

An example of how Rawick uses his oral history sources to modify older arguments about slave culture is found in his description of the slave family. He challenges the views of E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth Stampp, and John Hope Franklin that the slave quarters were not centers of an active, stable family life. Rawick believes, based on his reading of the interviews, that the Negro family under slavery was a distinct, stable unit centered on a strong male figure. He attacks Stampp for relying on only white sources and for failing to see that black behavior does not have to imitate white behavior. He attacks Frazier for relying on materials written by literate slaves, members of the black bourgeoisie, who were likely to have accepted the negative assessments of the black family. Rawick believes that the ex-slaves who were interviewed offered a different view because they were unlettered and had not read and accepted the negative view.¹³

For the purpose of this essay, it does not matter who is right—Frazier, Stampp, and Franklin or Rawick. What is important is that, as Rawick notes, the interviews allow the ex-slaves themselves, most of whom could not have left written accounts, to speak and present another viewpoint for historians to consider.

That the evidence which led Genovese and Rawick to revised views of American slavery was found through oral history is not the significant point, nor would such an assertion be totally accurate. The important point is that a pattern of similar evidence was obtained through a number of separate, independent interviews, and that this evidence was largely confirmed (certainly by Genovese, but to a lesser extent by Rawick) by other primary and secondary sources. It would seem likely that the evidence acquired from these interviews is, as C. Vann Woodward has argued, no more or no less reliable than other types of historical data, for all sources can be confusing and contradictory, biased and misleading.¹⁴ By giving voice to the inarticulate the corpus of interviews with former slaves, despite limitations and imperfections, is—and Blassingame, Vetman, Rawick, and Genovese would agree—an important complement to other sources for the history of American slavery.¹⁵ They are also a useful reminder to historians that advanced age and the passage of time do not automatically cancel the potential usefulness of an interview.

¹² Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 163-66.

¹³ Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 77-79, 92-93. Rawick refers to Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939); Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956); and Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1967).

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review*, 79 (April 1974), 470-81.

¹⁵ Blassingame, 490; Yetman, 553; Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 164-66; Genovese, 657-76.