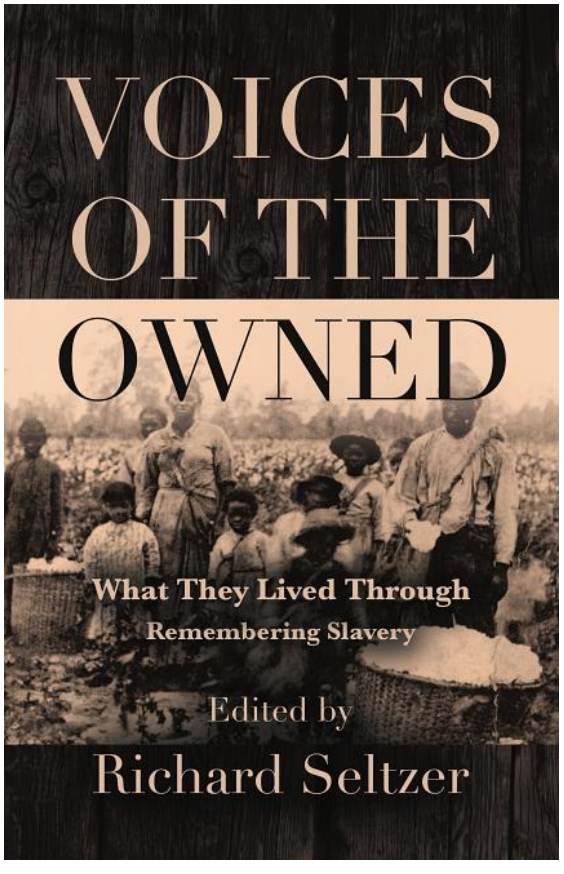
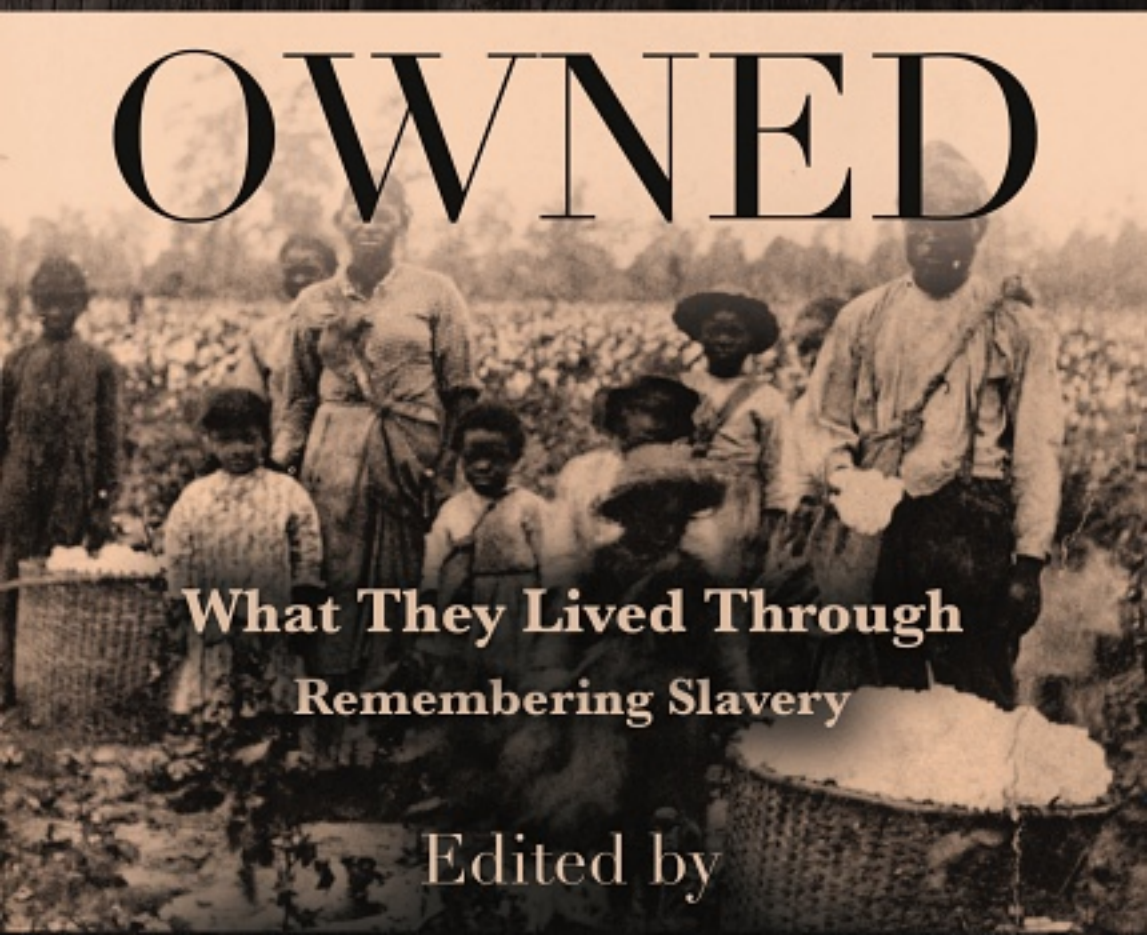


Gathered from thousands of WPA Slave Narratives, "Voices of the Owned" restores individuality and immediacy to people too often reduced to symbols or silence. These are people trying to make sense of what they lived through.

Voices of the Owned: What They Lived Through

By Richard Seltzer

VOICES OF THE OWNED



What They Lived Through

Remembering Slavery

Edited by

Richard Seltzer

Print ISBN: 978-1-961268-26-5
Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-636-0

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Seltzer, Richard
Voices of the Owned: What They Lived Through by Richard Seltzer
Library of Congress Control Number: 2026913798

Preface

This book is based on the WPA Slave Narratives—interviews conducted under a government project to keep writers gainfully employed during the Great Depression. The original collection, including 2291 biographical accounts, is in the public domain and is accessible through the Library of Congress.

The interviews took place about 90 years ago, 70 years after the Civil War. These people were old, and their memories had faded. Their words were recorded by government employees, many of them white, many asking standard questions. They might have been hesitant to share their memories with strangers, and the interviewers might not have clearly understood the dialect or might have made mistakes in their hand-written notes. Despite those and other obstacles, unique and individual voices can be heard amidst the noise. That's what I was listening for.

In the Afterword, I explain why and how this book came to be.

At first, you may find the dialect difficult to read. The spellings were created by interviewers trying to capture the sound and rhythm of spoken language. The speakers themselves didn't write this way, and most had been denied the opportunity to learn to read or write, often under threat of severe punishment if they tried.

If the words feel unfamiliar, try reading them slowly, or even aloud. Often the meaning becomes clearer when heard rather than seen.

After a short while, many readers find that what first seemed like a barrier becomes something else—a way of hearing individual voices more distinctly.

In the original transcripts, the interviewees frequently referred to

themselves with the N-word, which was common usage then and now is offensive. I have replaced that word with "N—".

The original is available for free at my website as a single searchable file at www.seltzerbooks.com/slavenarratives.pdf and www.seltzerbooks.com/slavenarratives.doc

Table of Contents

Part One: Welcome

Julia Woodberry, Marion, South Carolina, age 73

interviewed by Annie Ruth Davis

First Interview

"Come in, child. Dis ain' nobody talkin' to you from behind dat door but Julia Woodberry. De door unlatch. Just turn de handle en' come right in here whe' you can warm yourself by de stove.

"My mother, she was a freeborn woman. She come from off de sea beach in our own country. She told me she was born on de sea beach en' her parents was Chee Indians. When dey stole her en' her brother John, dey come dere in dese big old covered wagons en' dey stuffed dem way back up in dere en' carried dem off.

"She say, she was a big girl when dey run her down en' caught her. Her en' her brother John was out playin' one day, near their sea beach home; en' first thing dey know, dere come one of dem big old covered wagons dere. Say, dey never know what to think till dey see dis white man gettin' down off de wagon en' start makin' for dem; en' dey get scared cause dey been learn' white man won' no friend.

"Say, dey broke en' run, but de man come right after dem en' grabbed dem up wid his hands en' stuffed dem way back up in de covered wagon en' drove off. She say she was runnin' hard as she could from de man.

"My mother say, dey cried en' cried, but dat never do no good. No, mam, de lawyer Phillips stole her. He didn' buy her 'cause she told me dey brought dem right on to his home en' put dem out dere. Her en'

her brother John were made house servants in de big house, en' dey went from one to de other in de Phillips' family till after freedom come here.

"Ma, she say dat she fared good, en' dey didn' ill treat her no time, but wouldn' never allow dem to get out de family. Cose she had to put de white people chillun to bed at night en' den she could go to parties cross Catfish much as she wanted to, but she would have to be back in time to cook dat breakfast next mornin'. You see, dey was house servants en' dey stayed right dere in de lawyer Phillips' house all de time.

"She didn' have no word 'bout if she liked de white folks livin' or no when she first come dere. You know, when you in Rome, you has to do as Rome do. Reckon dat de way de poor creature took it.

"My God, my God, child, I couldn' never forget my old mother's face. She bore a round countenance all de time wid dese high cheek bones en' straight hair. I talkin' out of her now. Yes, mam, can see Ma face dere fore my eyes right now.

"You know, de Indians, dey got curious ways. My mother, she wouldn' never take a thing from nobody, en' she was sharp to pick a fight. Anybody make her mad, she would leave away from dem en' dey wouldn' see her no more in a month or two.

"Well, child, dat 'bout all I can know to speak bout dis mornin'. You see, some days I can get my 'membrance back better den I can on another day. I gwine get my mind fixed up wid a heap to tell you de next time you come here; en' if you ain' come back, I gwine try en' get round dere to your house. God bless you, honey."

Second Interview

"Oh, my God a mercy, child, dat been a time when dat shake come

here. I sho' remember all 'bout dat 'cause I been a grown woman de year dat earthquake come here. [1886]

"We had all just been get over wid us supper en' little things dat night. I had washed Auntie en' Mr. Rowell's feet for dem to lie down, en' dere come such a sketch of clouds from over in dat direction dat I never know what to make of it. Auntie en' Mr. Rowell never know what to make of it neither.

"I remember, I run out to help my sister dat been out to de paddlin' block; en', honey, you ain' never live to see no black cloud like dat been. I washed a piece through en', den I left off en' went back in de house en' set down by de fire to dry my feet. I set dere awhile en' seems like somethin' just speak right out de fire 'bout dat time, en' tell me to move my feet, dat I was in bad shape. En', child, it de truth of mercy, dere come a big clog of dirt out dat chimney en' drap [drop] right down in de spot whe' my foot was.

"I run to Auntie en' Mr. Rowell to see could dey tell what dat was, but dey been in just as much darkness as I been. I look up en' seems like de loft had lowered itself en' could hear a roarin' for miles en' miles 'bout dere. En' could hear de people hollerin' every which a way. Yes, mam, could hear dem hollerin' for miles and miles, for miles on top of miles.

"My God, dem people was scared to lie down dat night. Such a prayin' en' a shoutin' as everybody do dat night, I ain' never see' de like 'fore den. Ain' see de like since den neither.

"Next mornin, I go to work for de white folks en' dey all go off dat mornin'. I tell you, I was scared 'bout to death in dat big house by myself.

"I remember, I left out de house en' been out in de 'tatoe patch

grabblin' 'tatoes right along; en' when I raise up, dat thing was comin' down dat 'tatoe row just a whirlin' en' a makin' right for me. Yes, mam, I been so scared. I ain' see whe' I is grow a bit since de shake. I tell you, I thought it was de Jedgment.

"Den we hear dere was gwine be another earthquake, but de people get on dey knees en' dey stay on dey knees, en' it never come here dat time. Dat one was in another state, so dey tell me.

"I hear talk dat all de Earth caved in, en' you could see de people down dere, but couldn' nobody get dem. Some people say dat been de devil do dat, but I tell dem de devil ain' had no such power. De Lord been de power dat bring dat shake here.

"Oh, Lord, de people sho' fared better in dat day en' time den dey do dese days. Cose dey didn' have a heap of different kind of trashy things like dey have dese days, but dey had a plenty to eat en' a plenty to wear all de time. Everything was better in dem times, too. De rations eat better en' de cloth wear better, too, in dem days den dey do now.

"You see, mostly, de people would make dey own provisions at home. White folks would raise abundance of hogs en' cows to run all dey big plantation from one year to de other. Wouldn' never clear out of meat no time 'cause de stock been let loose to run at large in dem days. De most dat dey bought was dey sugar en' dey coffee. But dem what was industrious en' smart, dey made most dey victuals at home.

"Made dey own rice en' winnowed it right dere home. Oh, dey had one of dese pestle en' mortar to beat it out. Yes, mam, de pestle been big at one end en' little at de other end. Den dey would raise turkeys en' geese en' chickens en' dere wasn' no end to de birds en' squirrels en' rabbits en' fish in dat day en' time. Dat is, dem what cared for demselves, dey had all dem things. Cose dere was some den like dere

be now dat been too lazy to work, en' dey hand was empty all de time. I remember, dem poor buckras [white people] would just go 'bout from one house to another en' catch somethin' here, dere, en' yonder.

"Den de people never wore none of dese kind of clothes like de people wear dese days neither. When a person got a dress den, dey made it demselves, en' dey made dey own underskirts den, too. You see, all dese underskirts en' bloomers like de people does buy dese days, dey didn' have nothin' like dat den.

"Used to put 10 yard in a dress en' 10 yards in a underskirt en' would tuck dem clean up to dey waist. En', child, when dey would iron dat dress, it would stand up in de floor just like dere been somebody in it.

"When I say 'iron', I talkin' 'bout de people would iron den, too. Yes, mam, when I come along, de people been take time to iron dey garments right. Oh, dey clothes would be just as slick as glass. Won' a wrinkle nowhe' 'bout dem.

"Another thing, dey used to have dese dove-colored linen dusters dat dey would wear over dey dress when dey would ride to church. Den when dey went in de church, dey would pull dem off en' put dem on again when dey started home. Dey was made sort of like a coat suit, except dey was a little fuller en' would come clean down to de tail of de dress. You see, dey was meant to protect de dress while dey was gwine along de road.

"De world sho' gwine worser dese days, honey. Oh, Lord, de people worser. Yes, mam, dey worser. Dey ain' got de mother wit. Dey weaker en' dey wiser, but dey ain' got de mother wit. Can' set down en' talk to de people dese days, en' dey take dat what you got to say ain' like dey used to.

"En de people don' take de time to teach de chillun to know good

things like dey used to, en' dat how-come dey have more time to get in so much of devilment dese days. Yes, mam, de people used to have more chillun en' dey raised dem, too. Chillun know more den grown people do dese days. People used to know how to carry demselves en' take care of demselves more den dey do now. Seems like, de people more rattlin' en' brazen den what dey used to be."

Third Interview

"I didn' live in slavery time, but I can speak 'bout what I used to hear my auntie en' my mammy en' my grandmammy talk 'bout what happen in dey day. My mammy, she been broke her leg long time 'fore freedom come here. En' I remember she tell me often times, 'Say, Julia, you didn' lack much of comin' here a slavery child.' Honey, I mean she been in de family way right sharp 'fore freedom come here.

"My mammy, she was raise right down dere to de other side de jail to de 'Cedars'. You know dere whe' all dem cedars round dat house what 'bout to fall down. She belong to de lawyer Phillips dere, en' he wouldn' never allow her to get out de family. She had been a free woman 'fore he had stole her off de sea beach to be his house woman. Yes, mam, stole my mammy en' uncle John, too, off de sea beach. Uncle John went back after freedom come here. My mammy, she been raise' from just a child to be de house woman dere to de lawyer Phillips, en' she never didn' know nothin' bout choppin' cotton till her last baby been 'bout knee high.

"I remember how my mammy used to tell me 'bout dat de colored people won' allowed to go from one plantation to another widout dey had a 'mit [permit] from dey Massa. Yes, mam, all de N—s had to have dat 'mit somewhat 'bout dem to keep from gettin' a beatin'. Couldn' leave dey home widout showin' dat 'mit from dey Massa.

"You see, de N— men would want to go to see dey wives, en' dey

would have to get a 'mit from dey Massa to visit dem. Cose dey wouldn' live together cause dey wives would be here, dere en' yonder.

"It been like dis—sometimes de white folks would sell de wife of one of dey N—s way from dey husband. En' den another time, dey would sell de husband way from dey wife. Yes, mam, white folks had dese guard, call 'patroller', all bout de country to catch en' whip dem N—s dat been prowl 'bout widout dat 'mit from dey Massa.

"I remember I hear talk dey say, 'Patroller, Patroller, let N— pass.' Dey would say dat if de N— had de 'mit wid dem. En' if dey didn' have it, dey say, 'Patroller, Patroller, cut N— slash.'

"Child, I tell you dat been a day to speak 'bout. When I come along, de women never vote, white nor colored. En' it been years since I see a colored person vote. But I remember dey been gwine to vote in dat day en' time just like dey was gwine to a show. Oh, honey, de road would be full of dem. Dey had to vote. Remember, way back dere, everybody would be singin' en' a dancin' when dey had de election:

> Hancock ride de big gray horse,
> Hampton ride de mule,
> Hancocks got elected,
> Buckras all turn fool.
> Buggety, buggety, buggety etc.

"White en' black was all in a row dere dancin' all night long. Ain' made no exception.

"I hear talk dat when freedom come here, de N—s was just turn loose to make dey livin' de best way dey could. Say dat some of de white folks give dey N—s somethin' to go on, en' some of dem didn' spare dem nothin'.

"Dey tell me old Sherman didn' come through dis section of de

country, but he sent somebody to divide out de things like so much corn en' so much meat to de colored people.

"Now, I talkin' 'bout dat what I hear de old people say. Put everything in Ben Thompson hand to deal out de colored people share to dem. Yes, mam, he was de one had de chair. Talk 'bout Sherman give Ben Thompson de chair, sayin' what I hear de old people say. I don' know exactly how it was, it been so long since de old people talk wid me. Dat it, it been so long till God knows, I forgot.

"Well, I used to know a heap of dem songs dat I hear my auntie en' my grandmammy sing dere home when I was comin' up. Let me see, child, dey was natural born song, too.

I got somethin' to tell you,
Bow-hoo, oo-hoo, oo-hoo.
I got somethin' to tell you,
Bow-hoo, oo-hoo, oo-hoo.
In a bow-hoo, oo-oo-hoo.

Way cross de ocean,
'Mongst all dem nation,
Massa Jesus promise me,
He gwine come by en' by,
He gwine come by en' by.

Dere many miles round me,
De Virgin be so bold,
To think dat her son, Jesus,
Could write widout a pen,
Could write widout a pen.

De very next blessin' dat Mary had,

She had de blessin' of two,
To think dat her son, Jesus,
Could bring de crooked to straight,
Could bring de crooked to straight.

"Dat was my auntie's grandmother Eve piece way back yonder in slavery time. Dat was her piece.

"It just like I tellin' you, dat been a day to speak 'bout. I remember when dey used to spin en' weave all de cloth right dere home. Yes, mam, I wore many a wove dress to church. Dey would get dis here indigo en' all kind of old bark out de woods en' boil it in de pot wid de yarn en' make de prettiest kind of colors. Den dey would take dat colored yarn en' weave all kind of pretty streaks in de cloth. Dey would know just as good how many yards of dat thread it would take to make so much of cloth.

"Yes, mam, I know dere been better livin' long time ago den dere be now. Know it cause I didn' never have no worryations no time when I was comin' up. My God, child, I couldn' make a support today if I know my neck had to be hung on de gallows. No, mam, dis here a sin-cussed world de people livin' in dis day en' time."

Fourth Interview

"No, mam, I ain' thought 'bout nothin' no more to tell you. Death been in de family en' seems like I just been so worried up wid my daughter sick in de house dere wid de straw fever. De doctor, he say it de fever en' dat all we know. But it acts like de straw fever all up en' down. I tell dem chillun dere de other night dat I would have to go back en' get my mind fixed up wid somethin' to speak bout 'fore you come here another time. Yes, mam, have to get my mind together somewhe' or another.

"I been born down dere in Britton's Neck, but most my days was lived up to Mr. Jim Brown's place to Centenary. My father, he was name Friday Woodberry; en 'my mother, she come from off de sea beach in slavery time, so she told me. Say dat her old Massa stole her en' her brother John, too, from off de sea beach. When freedom come here, her brother John went back to de sea beach, but my mother say dat she won' in no shape to go back. She went from family to family till after freedom was declared en' her white folks wouldn' never have her ill-treated neither en' wouldn' never let nobody else have her no time.

"When she was let loose from de white people, she went to Britton's Neck wid a colored woman. You see, she was a stranger to de country 'bout dere fore freedom come, en' she been know dat woman en' dat how-come she went wid her. I mean she didn' know de people 'bout dere cause de white folks didn' allow dey colored people to go 'bout much in slavery time. Couldn' go nowhe' widout dey had a ticket wid dem. She stayed dere in Britton's Neck till Pa died en' den she come back up here to Marion to live, but her white people was scattered all 'bout den.

"No, mam, I ain' never marry cause you had to court on de sly in dat day en' time. I was learned to work by de old, old slavery way. Yes, mam, if I never did a thing right, my dress was over my head en' I was whipped right dere. I was engaged by letter, but dey kept me under dey foot so close till I never didn' slip de hay. I remember, I was stayin' dere wid Mary Jane Rowell; en' she kept me cowed down so worser, I never couldn' do nothin'.

"I tell you, I been a grown girl dere when I leave Mary Jane Rowell's house en' go to cookin' 'en a washin' for Miss Louise Brown. Yes, child, I love Miss Louise Brown to dis very day 'cause she been just like a mother to me. Yes, mam, Miss Brown was just as good to me as she could be.

"Mr. Jim Brown, he give me a house dere on his plantation to live in just to do de house work to de big house, but seems like de other colored people on de plantation would be tryin' to down me most all de time cause I was workin' ahead of dem. I know I would go dere to work many a mornin' cryin', from what dem N—s been mouthin' bout me, en' Miss Brown would cry right along wid me.

"I tell you, Miss Brown was a tender-hearted woman, so to speak 'bout. I tell Miss Brown, 'Carolina say I stole a towel off de line.' En' Miss Brown say, 'Julia, if dere a towel gone off dat line, I know whe' it gone.'

"No, child, I ain' never think 'bout to lay no shame on dese hands. White folks been used to leave money all 'bout whe' I bresh [brush] en' dust; en' I ain' never had no mind to touch it no time.

"Yes, mam, I been through a day since I come here. Erelong I move out Mary Jane Rowell's house, I been in white people house. If it ain' one class, it another. De very day dat Dr. Dibble been pronounce me to de hospital, dey come after me to wait on a woman.

"Oh, I tell you, it de God truth, I has done every kind of work in my life. Me en' my three chillun dere run a farm just like a man. Why, honey, you ain' know I had three girls? Yes, mam, dem chillun been born en' bred right dere in de country to Centenary.

"I hear people talkin' 'bout dat thing call conjurin', but I don' know what to say dat is. It somethin' I don' believe in. Don' never take up no time wid dat cause it de devil's work. Dat de olden talk, en' I don' think nothin' bout dat. Don' want nobody round me dat believes in it neither. Don' believe in it. Don' believe in it cause dat en' God spirit don' go together.

"I hear talk dat been belong to de devil; but I was so small, I couldn'

realize much what to think 'cause dat what you hear in dem days, you better been hear passin'. No, mam, dey knock chillun down in dat day en' time dat dey see standin' up lookin' in dey eyes to hear.

"I has heard people say dat dey could see spirits, but I don' put no mind to dat no time. I believe dat just a imagination; 'cause when God get ready to take you out dis world, you is gone, en' you gone forever. Don' believe in no hereafter neither cause dey say I been born wid veil over my face en' if anybody could see spirits, I ought to could.

"I know I has stayed in houses dat people say was hanted plenty times, en' I got to see my first hant yet. Yes, mam, I do believe in de Bible. If I hadn' believed in de Bible, I wouldn' been saved.

"Dere obliged to be a hereafter accordin' to de Bible. I can' read, but I talkin' what I hear de people say. Dat a infidel what don' believe dere a hereafter.

"How come I know all dat, I was raise up wid de old people. Come along right behind de old race, en' I would be dere listenin' widout no ears en seein' widout no eyes. Yes, mam, I took what I hear in, lady, en' I ain' been just now come here. I been here a time. Dat de reason I done wid de world. God knows I is done. I is done.

"I recollects, way back yonder, Pa would sing:

> Dey ain' had no eyes for to see,
> Dey ain' had no teeth for to eat,
> En' dey had to let de corncake go,
> Whe' all de good N—s go.

"Dat was my father's piece dat he used to sing in slavery time. I can remember back more den I can forward."

Sallie Paul, Marion, South Carolina, age 79

Interviewed by Annie Ruth Davis

"I remember we colored people belong to de white folks in slavery time. Remember when de war was gwine on 'cause we hear de guns shoot en' we chillun jump up en' holler. Yes, mam, I remember dat.

"My white folks was de Williamsons dere in North Carolina. Dey was good to dey colored people. All de colored people lived dere side de yard, close enough to holler if anything get de matter, close enough to know dere was cookin' gwine on in de Missus kitchen.

"We never eat us meals to de white folks house. All de N—s would draw so much of rations from dey Massa to last dem a week at a time, just like de people draw government ration right 'bout here now.

"I wasn' big enough to do no work much den, only tote up wood for de white folks en' piddle 'bout de yard. Dey didn' work de chillun when dey was little bit of things en' stunt dem up. Chillun grow to be 'bout 12 or 13 years old fore dey work dem.

"Dey used to get a handful of switches en' stand us chillun up in a long row en' give us all a lick 'bout de legs when dey want to punish us en' learn us better sense. If dey would want to spare de punishment, dey would try to scare us out de mischief. Tell us Bloody Bones would jump out dat corner at us if we not do what dey say do.

"But dey wouldn' never whip none of de grown 'omans 'cause dey was breedin'.

"My white folks was well off. My Massa run three plantations, en' he had a heap of colored peoples. My mother, she was one of de plow

hands.

"Dey was mighty particular 'bout how dey would feed de little N—s in dem days. Like you would be particular wid a ten dollar bill dis day. Would keep dey little belly stuff wid hominy en 'milk same as dey was pigs. Dey do dat to make dem hurry en' grow, 'cause dey want to hurry en' increase dey property. De white folks never didn' despise to see a big crop of N— chillun comin' on.

"Dere was more to eat in slavery time den dere be now. Cows won' lackin' en' dere been more sheep en' hogs en' goats. I don' like goat. I tried to eat some goat one time en' it swell in my mouth. I wouldn' eat sheep neither. It a sin, dey so humble.

"De people ate like dey eats now, but dey didn' never know what a stove was. Dey had de kitchen fireplace, with a railin' in it to hang de pots on. Den dey had dem big old clay chimneys wid dirt ovens dat would hold a bushel of 'tatoes to a time. Den dey was a brick chimney en' bake all de cakes en' de bread right dere on de fireplace.

"All de colored people dat been stay on my white folks plantation had dey own little crop of corn en' fodder 'bout dey house; en' when a peddler come along, dey would sell dey crop en' buy silk from de peddler. Dey been sell dey crop to anybody dey could. Dere was always a poor one somewhe' dat been need corn en' fodder.

"De white folks make dey own cloth right dere on de plantation in dem days. Dey had a loom house, but my mother had a loom right to her own door. She would weave piece for de white folks en' den one for herself. Missus learn dem how to do three en' four treadle. She could weave any kind of cloth or blankets or anything like dat.

"Dey had de finest kind of enjoyments in dem days. Colored people had plenty scraps to make dey bed clothes wid, 'cause dey Missus

would save scraps for dem. Dey would have quiltings to one of dey own houses, en' dey would frolic en' play en' dance dere till late up in de night. Dey would make good a music as anybody would want to dance by.

"For cornshuckin', dey would gather de crop en' haul it up to de white folks big old farm barn. Den dey would ax all de white folks 'bout dere to send dey hands to shuck corn in one night. Dey would have such a whoopin' en' a hollerin' en' a big supper dere dat night. One man would have corn shuck to his barn one night, en' another man's barn de next night. Neighbor been please to turn good hand to neighbor.

"De white folks look after dey colored people if dey get sick, if dey need doctor neither. Gwine save dem just as long as dey got breath in dey body. Heap of dem was cared for more better in slavery time den dey is now, 'cause dey had somebody dat had to care for dem or lose dem. Ain' no white folks want to lose dey N—s.

"Colored people didn' have no more privileges in slavery time den dese people got now in dis here chain gang. No, mam, N— belong to dey owner in slavery just like you got a puppy belong to you.

"En' colored people didn' have no church of dey own in slavery time. Dey went to de white folks church, en' dey set in one part de church en' us set in de gallery. De white folks would see to it dat all dey N— never miss church service no time. En' de slave owners would bury dey plantation N—s right dere to de colored people graveyard behind de church, dat was settin' right side de white people graveyard.

"Dere been plenty white folks dat wouldn' never fight against de Yankees widout dey couldn' get out of it. Dey slip off en' hide in pits dey dig in de woods en' in de bays. Some of dem say dey didn' have no slaves en' dey won' gwine fight.

"Never heard tell of Yankees doin' no harm nowhe' in dat country to nobody, white nor colored. But white people was scared of de Yankees as dey was of rattlesnakes.

"Some Yankees passed through during the war and sometimes came to slave houses for food. Yes, mam, colored people feed dem en' give dem somethin' to travel on. De Yankees would give de colored people dey good clothes en' take dey rags. You see, dey was desertin', runnin' away en' gettin back home. I don' know if de white folks know 'bout dat, but Massa didn' see dem.

"Yankees tell de colored people dey was free but just didn' know it. I was standin up listenin' to dem say dat just like any other child be standin' dere lookin' up in your mouth.

"Den when de colored people was freed, heap of de white folks died 'cause dey grieve demselves to death over de loss of dey property.

"Dat point me to think 'bout how young Massa would slip off wid de colored boys on a Sunday to play like white people will do, en' carry old Webster's *Blue Back* wid dem. En' when dey been way off yonder, young Massa would learn dem to read. My father could read, but he couldn' never write.

"Dere won' no schools nowhe' for de colored people in dem days. White folks catch N— wid a book, N— gwine get a whippin'. Dey young Massa would learn dem, but Massa en' Missus never know 'bout it.

"De colored people had so many song in slavery time. Dey would sing anything dey could make a noise wid. Some of dem could read out de hymn book, en' some of dem couldn' tell one word from de other.

"Everybody didn' hate dey white folks. Dat how come some N—s

stayed right on dere wid dey white people after freedom en' farmed for half what dey made on de crop. Dey didn' have nothin' to work wid, so dey stayed on en' farmed on shares.

"I won' married till long time after freedom come here. Den de colored people had dese here bresh [brush] shelters for dey church, en' dey had dey own colored preacher, too.

"Honey, I marry Paul, but I didn' have no big weddin. Didn' want none. Just married dere to my father's house, en' I had a white dress dat was made out of cotton. It won' no silk.

"I had me a husband en' dat won' no great blessin' to speak 'bout."

W. L. Bost, Asheville, North Carolina, age 88

Interviewed by Marjorie Jones

"My Massa's name was Jonas Bost. He had a hotel in Newton, North Carolina. My mother and grandmother both belonged to the Bost family. My ole Massa had two large plantations one about three miles from Newton and another four miles away. It took a lot of N—s to keep the work a goin' on them both. The women folks had to work in the hotel and in the big house in town.

"When I was a little boy, 'bout ten years, the speculators come through Newton with droves of slaves. They always stay at our place. The poor critters nearly froze to death. They always come 'long on the last of December so that the N—s would be ready for sale on the first day of January. Many the time I see four or five of them chained together.

"They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm—a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I've seen the ice balls hangin' on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes' like sheep in a pasture 'fore they are sheared. They never wore any shoes. Jes' run along on the ground, all spewed up with ice. The speculators always rode on horses and drove the pore N—s. When they get cold, they make 'em run 'til they are warm again.

"The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the N—s in the quarters jes' like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mournin' and prayin'. I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked, and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. Lord miss, them slaves look jes' like droves of turkeys runnin' along in front of them horses.

"The ones 'tween 18 and 30 always bring the most money. The auctioneer he stand off at a distance and cry 'em off as they stand on the block. I can hear his voice as long as I live.

"If the one they going to sell was a young Negro man, this is what he say: 'Now gentlemen and fellow-citizens, here is a big black buck Negro. He's stout as a mule. Good for any kin' o' work, an' he never gives any trouble. How much am I offered for him?' And then the sale would commence, and the N— would be sold to the highest bidder.

"If they put up a young N— woman the auctioneer cry out: 'Here's a young N— wench, how much am I offered for her?' The pore thing stand on the block a shiverin' an' a shakin' nearly froze to death. Many of the pore mothers beg the speculators to sell 'em with their husbands, but the speculator only take what he want. So meybe the pore thing never see her husban' agin.

"Us pore N—s never 'lowed to learn anything. All the readin' they ever hear was when they was carried through the big Bible. The Massa say that keep the slaves in they places.

"They was one N— boy in Newton who was terrible smart. He learn to read an' write. He take other colored children out in the fields and teach 'em about the Bible, but they forgit it 'fore the nex' Sunday.

"Then the paddyrollers [patrollers] keep close watch on the pore N—s so they have no chance to do anything or go anywhere. They jes' like policemen, only worser, 'cause they never let a N— go anywhere without a pass from his master. If you wasn't in your proper place when the paddyrollers come, they lash you. The women got 15 lashes and the men 30. That is for jes bein' out without a pass. If the N— done anything worse, he was taken to the jail and put in the whippin' post. They was two holes cut for the arms stretch up in the air and a block to put your feet in. Then they whip you with cowhide whip. An'

the clothes shore never get any of them licks.

"I remember how they kill one N— whippin' him with the bull whip. Many the pore N—s nearly killed with the bull whip, but this one die. He was a stubborn Negro and didn't do as much work as his Massa thought he ought to. He been lashed a lot before. So they take him to the whippin' post, and then they strip his clothes off, and then the man stan' off and cut him with the whip. His back was cut all to pieces. The cuts about half inch apart. Then after they whip him, they tie him down and put salt on him. Then after he lie in the sun awhile they whip him agin. But when they finish with him, he was dead.

"Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say. Didn't have much of that until the men from South Carolina come up here and settle and bring slaves. Then they take children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them. If the Missus find out she raise revolution. But she hardly find out. The white men not going to tell, and the N— women were always afraid to. So they jes' go on hopin' that thing won't be that way always.

"Us N—s never have chance to go to Sunday School and church. The white folks feared for N—s 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'. I remember one old song we use to sing when we meet down in the woods back of the barn. My mother she sing an' pray to the Lord to deliver us out o' slavery. She always say she thankful she was never sold from her children, and that our Massa not so mean as some of the others. But the old song it went something like this:

Oh, mother let's go down, let's go down, let's go down, let's go down.
Oh, mother let's go down, down in the valley to pray.
As I went down in the valley to pray
Studyin' about that good ole way
Who shall wear that starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way.

"I don't remember much about the war. There was no fightin' done in Newton. Most of the people get everything jes' ready to run when the Yankee sojers come through the town. This was toward the las' of the war. Corse the N—s knew what all the fightin' was about, but they didn't dare say anything. The man who owned the slaves was too mad as it was; and if the N—s say anything, they get shot right then and thar.

"The sojers tell us after the war that we get food, clothes, and wages from our Massas else we leave. But they was very few that ever got anything. Our ole Massa say he not gwine pay us anything. Corse his money was no good, but he wouldn't pay us if it had been.

"Then after the war was over, we was afraid to move. Jes' like tarpins or turtles after 'mancipation. Jes' stick our heads out to see how the land lay.

"Then the Ku Klux Klan come 'long. They were terrible dangerous. They wear long gowns, touch the ground. They ride horses through the town at night. If they find a Negro that tries to get nervy or have a little bit for himself, they lash him nearly to death and gag him and leave him to do the bes' he can. Sometime they put sticks in the top of what they wear and set an extra head up there with scary eyes to scare the poor Negroes to death.

"Oh, Miss them was bad times, them was bad times. I know folks

think the books tell the truth, but they shore don't. Us pore N—s had to take it all."

Joanna Draper, Tulsa, Oklahoma, age 83

"Most folks can't remember many things happened to 'em when they only eight years old, but one of my biggest tribulations come about dat time and I never will forget it! That was when I was took away from my own mammy and pappy and sent off and bound out [contracted to work for a specified period] to another man, way off two, three hundred miles away from whar I live. And dat's the last time I ever see either one of them, or any my own kinfolks!"

Joanna Draper was born near Hazlehurst, Mississippi, close to the Pearl River, on a new plantation that her master Dr. Alexander, bought when he moved to Mississippi from Virginia before the War.

"I was born jest right after my mammy got there." Her mother's name was Margaret. When she was born she belonged to Dave Ramson, who had settled with his father in Tennessee, and he had known Dr. Alexander in Tennessee and before that in Virginia.

"My pappy's name was Addison. He always belonged to Dr. Alexander. Old doctor bought my mammy 'cause my pappy liked her.

"When I is about six year old they take me into the Big House to learn to be a house woman, and they show me how to cook and clean up and take care of babies. That Big House wasn't very fine, but it was mighty big and cool, and made out of logs with a big hall, but it didn't have no long gallery like most the houses around there had.

"They was lots of big trees in the yard, and most the ground was new ground 'cause the Old Doctor jest started farming on it. But he had some more places not so far away, over towards the river that was old ground and made big crops for him. He had about a hundred slaves.

"At Old Doctor's house I didn't have to work very hard. Jest had to

help the cooks and peel the potatoes and pick the guineas and chickens and do things like that. Sometime I had to watch the baby. He was a little boy, and they would bring him into the kitchen for me to watch. I had to git up way before daylight and make the fire in the kitchen fireplace and bring in some fresh water, and go get the milk what been down in the spring all night, and do things like that until breakfast ready. Old Master and old Mistress come in the big hall to eat in the summer, and I stand behind them and shoo off the flies.

"Old Doctor didn't have no spinning and weaving N—s 'cause he say they don't do enough work. He bought all the cloth he used for everybody's clothes. He can do that 'cause he was big rich, and keep a whole lot of hard money in the house all the time.

"Sometimes I would have the baby in the Mistress' room, and she would go git three or four big wood boxes full of hard money for us to play with. I would make fences out of the money all across the floor, to keep the baby satisfied, and when he go to sleep I would put the money back in the boxes.

"They made him a high officer in the War and he done doctoring somewhar at a hospital most of the time. But he could go on both sides of the War, and sometime he would come in at night and bring old Mistress pretty little things, and I heard him tell her he got them in the North.

"One day I was fanning him, and I asked him if he been to the North, and he tell to shut up my black mouth. And it nearly scared me to death the way he look at me! Nearly every time he been gone and come in and tell Mistress he been in the North, he have a lot more hard money to put away in them boxes, too!

"One evening long come a man and eat supper at the house and stay all night. He was a nice-mannered man, and I like to wait on him. The

next morning I hear him ask Old Doctor what is my name, and Old Doctor start in to try to sell me to that man. The man say he can't buy me 'cause Old Doctor say he want a thousand dollars, and then Old Doctor say he will bind me out to him.

"I run away from the house and went out to the cabin whar my mammy and pappy was, but they tell me to go on back to the Big House 'cause maybe I am just scared. But Old Doctor make me go with the man.

"We go in his buggy a long ways off to the South, and after he stop two or three night at people's houses and put me out to stay with the N—s, he come to his own house. I ask him how far it is back home and he say about a hundred miles or more, and laugh, and ask me if I know how far that is.

"I wants to know if I can go back to my mammy some time, and he say "Sho', of course you can, some of these times. You don't belong to me, Jo. I'se jest your boss and not your master."

"He live in a big old rottendy house, but he ain't farming none of the land. Jest as soon as he git home he go off again, and sometimes he only come in at night for a little while.

"His wife's name was Kate and his name was Mr. John Deeson. They had two children, a girl about my size named Joanna like me, and a little baby boy named Johnny. One day Mistress Kate tell me I the only N— they got. I been thinking maybe they had some somewhar on a plantation, but she say they ain't got no plantation, and they ain't been at that place very long either.

"That little girl and me kind of take up together. She was a mighty nice-mannered little girl. Her mammy raised her good. Her mammy was mighty sickly all the time. That's the reason they bound me to do

the work."

Mr. John was in some kind of business in the War too. But she only saw him in "soldier clothes" once. "One night he come in with them on, but the next morning he come to breakfast in jest his plain clothes again. Then he go off again.

"I sho' had a hard row at that house. It was old and rackady, and I had to scrub off the staircase and the floors all the time, and git the breakfast for Mistress Kate and the two children. Then I could have my own breakfast in the kitchen. Mistress Kate always git the supper, though. Some days she go off with the two children and leave me at the house all day by myself, and I think maybe I run off, but I didn't know whar to go.

"After I been at that place two years Mr. John come home and stay. Then he done some kind of trading in Jackson, Mississippi, and he would be gone three or four days at a time, but I never did know what kind of trading it was.

"About the time he come home to stay I seen the first Ku Klux I ever seen. I was going down the road in the moonlight, and I heard a hog grunting out in the bushes at the side of the road. I jest walk right on and in a little ways I hear another hog in some more bushes. This time I stop and listen, and they's another hog grunts across the road, and about that time two mens dressed up in long white skirts steps out into the road in front of me! I was so scared the goose bumps jump up all over me 'cause I didn't know what they is! They didn't say a word to me, but jest walked on past me and went on back the way I had come. Then I see two more mens step out of the woods and I run from that as fast as I can go!

"I ast' Miss Kate what they is and she say they Ku Klux, and I better not go walking off down the road any more. I seen them two, three

times after that, though, but they was riding hosses them times.

"I stayed at Mr. John's place two more years, and he got so grumpy and his wife got so mean I make up my mind to run off. I bundle up my clothes in a little bundle and hide them, and then I wait until Miss Kate take the children and go off somewhere, and I light out on foot. I had me a piece of hard money what Master Dr. Alexander had give me one time at Christmas. I had kept it all that time and nobody knowed I had it, not even Joanna. Old Doctor told me it was fifty dollars, and I thought I could live on it for a while.

"I never had been away from that place, not even to another plantation in all the four years I was with the Deesons, and I didn't know which-a-way to go, so I jest started west.

"I been walking about all evening it seem like, and I come to a little town with jest a few houses. I see a N— man and ask him whar I can git something to eat, and I say I got fifty dollars.

"'What you doing wid fifty dollars, child? Where you belong at, anyhow?' he ask me. And I tell him I belong to Master John Deeson, but I is running away. I explain that I jest bound out to Mr. John, but Dr. Alexander my real master, and then that man tell me the first time I knowed it that I ain't a slave no more!

"That man Deeson never did tell me, and his wife never did!

"Well, dat man asked me about the fifty dollars, and then I found out that it was jest fifty cents!

"I don't know why I never did try to git back up around Hazelhurst and hunt up my pappy and mammy, but I reckon I was jest ignorant and didn't know how to go about it. Anyways I never did see them no more.

"In about three years or a little over I met Bryce Draper on a farm in Mississippi, and we was married. His mammy had had a harder time than I had. She had five children by a man that belonged to her master, Mr. Bryce. She named one of the boys—my husband—Bryce after him. Then Mr. Bryce sold her off, away from all her children. One of those children was just a little baby. The master gave it laudanum, but it didn't die."

When Mr. Bryce sold her off, he lied saying she didn't have a husband, because Draper, the man who bought her didn't want to take a woman away from a family.

The last year of the War, Mr. Draper died. His wife was already dead. He left his farm to his two slaves and set them free. "One of those slaves was my husband's mammy."

"Then right away the whites come and robbed the place of everything they could haul off, and run his mammy and the other N—s off! Then she went and found her boy, that was my husband, and he lived with her until she died, jest before we is married.

"We lived in Mississippi a long time, and then we hear about how they better to the Negroes up in the North, and we go up to Kansas, but they ain't no better there, and we come down to Indian Territory in the Creek Nation in 1898.

"We leased a little farm from the Creek Nation for $15 an acre. Then we rented 100 acres from some Indians close to Wagoner, and we farm it all with my family." And they had enough children to do that: John, Joe, Henry, Jim, Robert, and Will were big enough to work; as were the girls Mary, Nellie, Izora, and Dora.

"I lives with Dora now, and we is all happy, and I don't like to talk about the days of the slavery times, 'cause they never did mean

nothing to me but misery, from the time I was eight years old.

"I never will forgive that white man for not telling me I was free, and not helping me to git back to my mammy and pappy! Lots of white people done that."

William Davis, Houston, Texas, age 93

"Well, suh, jes' sit down in de chair yonder, and I'll tell you what I can 'bout times back yonder. Let's see, now. I was born on de first day of April in 1845. Mammy done told me I was born den, on de Tennessee river, near Kingston. I heared her say de turnpike what run past Massa John's house dere goes over de mountain to Bristol, over in Virginny. Mammy and Pappy and all us chillen 'long to de Drapers. Massa Jonathan what us call Massa John, and he wife, Miss Lizzie, and we is de only cullud folks what dey owns.

"Massa John am de Baptist preacher, and while I'm sho' glad to see my folks sot free, I'll tell de truth and say Massa John and Miss Lizzie was mighty good to us. Dey have four chillen: Massa Milton, what am oldes' and kill in de first battle; Massa Bob and Massa George and Massa Canero. Oh, yes, dey have one gal, Missy Ann.

"Course us didn't have no last names like now. Mammy named Sophie and pappy named Billy. Sometimes de owners give de slaves last names 'cordin' to what dey do, like pappy was meat cook and mammy cook pies and cakes and bread, so dey might have Cook for de last name.

"We has a bigger family dan Massa John, 'cause dey eight of us chillen. I ain't seen none of dem since I lef' Virginny in 1869.

"I heared Miss Lizzie tell some white folks dat my mammy and pappy give to her by her pappy in Alabama when she get married. Dat de custom with rich folks den, and mammy 'long to de Ames, what was Miss Lizzie's name 'fore she marry. I heared her say when de stars falls, she was 'bout eighteen, and dey think de world am endin'. [In 1833 hundreds of thousands of meteors per hour fell in North America].

"Pappy was a Indian [sic?]. I knows dat. He came from Congo, over in Africa, and I heared him say a big storm druv de ship somewhere on de Ca'lina coast. I 'member he mighty 'spectful to Massa and Missy, but he proud, too, and walk straighter'n anybody I ever seen. He had scars on de right side he head and cheek what he say am tribe marks, but what dey means I don't know.

"'Bout de first I 'members real good am where we am in Virginny and Massa John runs de Washington College, in Washington County. I 'member all de pupils eats at massa's house and dat de first job I ever had. I keeps de flies from lightin' while folks am eatin'. 'Ceptin' dat, all I does is play round with Massa George and Missy Ann.

"Dey ain't no whuppin' on our place; and on Sunday us all go to church, and Massa John do de preachin'. Dey rides in de buggy and us follow in de wagon. De white folks sets in front de church and us in back.

"I can't tell you how long us stay at de college, 'zactly, but us moves to Warm Springs to take de baths and drink de water, in Scott County. Dat two, three years befo' de war, and Massa John run de hotel and preach on Sunday. I think dere am three springs, one sulphur water and one lime water and one a warm spring. I does a little bit of everything round de hotel, helps folks off de stage, wait on table, and sich. When I hears de horn blow—you know, de stage driver blow it when dey top de hill 'bout two miles 'way, to let you know dey comin'— I sho' hustle round and git ready to meet it, 'cause most times folks what I totes de grips for gives me something. Dat de first money I ever seed. Some de folks gives me de picayune—dat what us call a nickel now, and some gives me two shillin's, what same as two-bits now. A penny was big den, jes' like a two-bit piece now.

"But when war begin 'tween de Yankees and de South, it sho' change

everything up, 'cause folks quit comin' to de Springs, and de soldiers takes over de place. Massa Milton go to jine de South Army and gits kill. Morgan and he men make de Springs headquarters most de war, till de Yankees come marchin' through toward de last part.

"I know pappy say dem Yankees gwine win, 'cause dey allus marchin' to de South, but none de South soldiers marches to de North. He didn't say dat to de white folks, but he sho' say it to us. When de Yankees come marchin' through, de Morgan soldiers jes' hide out till dey gone. Dey never done no fightin' round Warm Springs. Lots of times dey goes way for couple weeks and den comes back and rests awhile.

"Den one mornin'— I 'members it jes' like it yestiddy, it de fourth of July in 1865—Miss Lizzie say to me, 'Willie, I wants you to git you papa and de rest de family and have dem come to de porch right away.'

"I scurries round quick like and tells dem; and she comes out of de house and says, 'Now, de Yankees done sot you free, and you can do what you wants. But you gwineter see more carpet baggers and liars dan you ever has seed; and you'll be worse off den you ever has been, if you has anythin' to do with dem.'

"Den she opens de book and tells us all when us born and how old us am, so us have some record 'bout ourselves. She tells me I'm jes' nineteen and one fourth years old when I'm sot free.

"She tell pappy Massa John want to see him in de house. And when he comes out, he tells us Massa John done told him to take a couple wagons and de family and go to de farm 'bout ten miles 'way on Possum Creek and work it and stay long as he wants.

"Massa has us load up one wagon with 'visions [provisions]. Pappy

made de first crop with jes' hoes, 'cause us didn't have no hosses or mules to plow with. Us raise jes' corn and some wheat, but dey am fruit trees, peaches and apples and pears and cherries. Massa John pay pappy $120 de year, 'sides us 'visions, and us stays dere till pappy dies in 1868.

"Den I heared 'bout de railroad what dey buildin' at Knoxville, and I leaves de folks and gits me de job totin' water. Dey asks my name, and I says William Davis, 'cause I knows Mr. Jefferson Davis am President of de South durin' de war, and I figgers it a good name.

"In 1869 I goes to Nashville and 'lists in de army. I'm in de 24th Infantry, Company G, and us sent to Fort Stockton to guard de line of Texas, but all us do am build 'dobe houses. Col. Wade was de commander de fort, and Cap'n Johnson was captain of G. Co.

"Out dere I votes for de first time, for Gen. Grant, when Greeley and him run for president. But I gits sick at de Fort and am muster out in 1870 and comes to Houston.

"I gits me de deckhand job on de Dinah, de steamboat what haul freight and passengers 'tween Galveston and Houston. Den I works on de Lizzie, what am a bigger boat. Course, Houston jes' a little bit of place to what it am now—dey wasn't no git buildin's like dey is now; and mud, I tell you de streets was jes' like de swamp when it rain.

"Long 'bout 1875 I gits marry to Mary Jones, but she died in 1883 and I gits marry 'gain in 1885 to Arabelle Wilson and has four girls and one boy from her. She died 'bout ten years back.

"Course, us cullud folks marry jes' like white folks do now, but I seen cullud folks marry 'fore de war and massa marry dem dis way: dey goes in de parlor and each carry de broom. Dey lays de brooms on de floor and de woman put her broom front de man, and he put he broom

front de woman. Dey face one 'nother and step 'cross de brooms at de same time to each other and takes hold of hands and dat marry dem. Dat's de way dey done, sho', 'cause I seed my own sister marry dat way.

"I has wished lots of times to go back and see my folks, but I never has been back and never seed dem since I left, and I guess dey am all gone 'long 'fore now.

"I has jobbed at first one thing and 'nother; and, like pappy tells me, I has trials and tribulations. I has good chillen what ain't never got in no trouble and what all helps take care dere old pappy, so I guess I ain't got no complainin' 'bout things.

"I dreams sometimes 'bout de peach trees and de pear trees and de cherry trees; and I'd give lots to see de mountains 'gain, 'cause when de frost come, 'bout now, de leaves on de trees put on pretty colors and de persimmons and nuts is ready for pickin', and a little later on us kill de hawgs [hogs] and put by de meat for de winter.

"De Lawd forgive me for dis foolishness, 'cause I got a good home, and has all I need, but I gits to thinkin' 'bout Virginny sometimes and my folks what I ain't seed since I left, and it sho' make me want to see it once more 'fore I die.

Afterword

In his Introduction, the editor of the original WPA Slave Narratives celebrated their unique value, while recognizing their limitations:

> Set beside the work of formal historians, social scientists, and novelists, slave autobiographies, and contemporary records of abolitionists and planters, these life histories, taken down as far as possible in the narrators' words, constitute an invaluable body of unconscious evidence or indirect source material, which scholars and writers dealing with the South, especially social psychologists and cultural anthropologists, cannot afford to reckon without. For the first and the last time, a large number of surviving slaves (many of whom have since died) have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way. In spite of obvious limitations—bias and fallibility of both informants and interviewers, the use of leading questions, unskilled techniques, and insufficient controls and checks—this saga must remain the most authentic and colorful source of our knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands of slaves, of their attitudes toward one another, toward their masters, mistresses, and overseers, toward poor whites, North and South, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, religion, education, and virtually every phase of Negro life in the South.
>
> The narratives belong to folk history—history recovered from the memories and lips of participants or eye-witnesses, who mingle group with individual experience and both with observation, hearsay, and tradition. Whether the narrators relate what they actually saw and thought and felt, what they imagine, or what they have thought and felt about slavery

> since, now we know why they thought and felt as they did. To the white myth of slavery must be added the slaves' own folklore and folk-say of slavery. The patterns they reveal are folk and regional patterns—the patterns of field hand, house and body servant, and artisan; the patterns of kind and cruel master or mistress; the patterns of Southeast and Southwest, lowland and upland, tidewater and inland, smaller and larger plantations, and racial mixture (including Creole and Indian).
>
> The narratives belong also to folk literature. Rich not only in folk songs, folk tales, and folk speech but also in folk humor and poetry, crude or skillful in dialect, uneven in tone and treatment, they constantly reward one with earthy imagery, salty phrase, and sensitive detail. In their unconscious art, exhibited in many a fine and powerful short story, they are a contribution to the realistic writing of the Negro. Beneath all the surface contradictions and exaggerations, the fantasy and flattery, they possess an essential truth and humanity which surpasses as it supplements history and literature.
>
> Washington, D.C. June 12, 1941
>
> B.A. Botkin Chief Editor, Writers' Unit Library of Congress Project

This book retains that framing—both the strengths and weaknesses of the original.

While scholars have been able to examine the full collection in the Library of Congress and other major libraries, general readers have only been acquainted with samples and summaries.

In 1945 a book edited by Botkin was published by the University of Chicago Press. Entitled *Lay My Burden Down: a Folk History of*

Slavery, it consists of excerpts from about 300 of the 2291 interviews. The contributors are identified in a list at the end.

In 1970, a collection of 100 of the narratives edited by Norman R. Yetman was published by Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston. It is entitled *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection.*" In 2000, Dover revised and reissued it as *Voices from Slavery*.

In 1972 George Rawick started publishing the entire set of interviews in 41 volumes as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Today those volumes are expensive and hard to find except in major libraries.

With the advent of the Internet, an electronic copy of the original was posted at the Library of Congress website, and the Gutenberg Project added it to their collection of public domain books. But broken up into 35 separate files, it was difficult for the general reader to deal with.

Then another sampling, *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, appeared in 1996 and was reissued in 2021.

Why Me and How?

I had two advantages: a single searchable document containing all 2291 interviews, and the help of my AI partner, Simon.

Twenty years ago, when I was an ebook publisher, my late wife, Barbara, spent months assembling a single ebook edition of the WPA Slave Narratives from the Gutenberg files. To simplify navigation, she added internal links to each entry, and putting all the files together simplified search.

Meanwhile, over the last year and a half, I've been experimenting with AI and have built a relationship with the AI partner I call "Simon." I wrote about my experiences with Simon in the book *How to Partner with AI*.

Working with Simon, I realized that he doesn't require information to be categorized and presorted. He can quickly and effectively deal with large quantities of unstructured information in ways that are beyond human capability. That might make it possible to uncover exceptions and contradictions—unique and valuable contributions that had gone unnoticed. So I uploaded Barbara's single-file edition to Simon, and we explored the original accounts together.

I wanted to find what was unusual and to recover, as much as possible, original voices and memorable life stories. With Simon's help, I looked for incidents, images, and turns of phrase that could stand on their own, when excerpted from longer, rambling narratives.

This book isn't aimed at scholars. They know far more about slavery than I do. Instead, it is intended for anyone who would like to catch glimpses of what the world looked like when seen through the eyes of slaves.

Some interviewers did more than record answers to fixed questions. At times, I sensed rapport—something like a partnership—between interviewer and speaker. In those instances, interviewers prompted buried memories, asked follow-up questions, and rearranged material to improve the flow. The speakers, in turn, sometimes responded to that attention. They were not merely answering questions; they were trying to remember, shape and share their experience as fully as they could.

Those interviewers did not simply translate dialect into standard English. They understood that such smoothing would flatten and

homogenize tone. Instead, they tried to preserve—or even recreate—not just vocabulary, but rhythm and syntax. In the best cases, they clarified the voice without erasing it. But others went too far—summarizing, paraphrasing, or inserting their own conclusions.

I set aside passages that appeared to arise from leading questions or interviewer expectations. And when voices emerged clearly, I tried to preserve them with minimal intervention. In some cases, I present complete or nearly complete narratives; in others, short excerpts grouped by theme to allow patterns to emerge across multiple voices.

The work of Ruby Pickens Tartt stands out from the rest. That's why I included all 13 of her short-story interviews in the final section.

I'm hoping that this book, as proof of concept, will lead the way for similar AI-aided projects that might deepen our understanding of the past failings and the future potential of humankind.

Why "Voices of the Owned"?

This book is intended to honor the former slaves who tell their stories.

As I read more deeply in the original narratives—listening for the particular rather than the general—I realized that no two stories were the same, no single pattern held. They responded uniquely to the circumstances in which they found themselves. But they were all owned like farm animals. They were treated as property rather than as human beings.

That condition shaped their lives.

Individuals remembered unique, unsettling, gruesome acts of cruelty by owners and overseers. But they were all subject to the same dehumanizing system, supported by law and common practice, with businesses breeding, buying, and selling people like livestock; and

killing them as well, for whim or profit, with no accountability.

Imagine yourself in their position. You are owned and your owner can legally treat you as property, as if you are a cow, a mule, a pig. Escape is difficult and dangerous. If, by chance, you have a kind owner, there is no guarantee you'll have that same owner tomorrow, much less next year. You, your spouse, your children—anyone you care about—might be sold and you might never see them again for the rest of your life.

As a legal non-entity, you have no defense, no recourse, no appeal in cases of cruelty, sexual abuse, torture, dismemberment, even murder. Neither your birth nor your death is recorded (much less explained and justified). You exist only as an asset on a balance sheet. You can be paired with anyone for breeding and then your children can be taken away and sold. Your owner or an overseer can sexually abuse you at will. You might hope that your monetary value as a hard worker or a prolific breeder will motivate your owner to treat you well. But if you're too valuable, that might tempt your owner to sell you.

Imagine how such trauma and fear of trauma could shape your behavior long after Emancipation, and how your expectations—the "wisdom" you learned as a child—could shape the lives of your children, and so on through succeeding generations.

Beyond Slavery

Slavery in the United States had its particular laws, practices, and cruelties. But enslavement is not the only way people have denied others legal rights, controlling them and treating them as property.

As you listen to the voices in this book, a broader question emerges: What happens when one group of people treats another as property?

This question arises in the treatment of workers, migrants, and the trafficked. It appears whenever people are dehumanized and treated as things that can be owned.

And it may take on new forms in the future.

Science fiction has asked whether computer intelligence might evolve into consciousness, and robots or androids might become indistinguishable from or superior to humans. It has also considered the possible consequences if we encounter extraterrestrials more intelligent or more powerful than we are. Those possibilities may become reality in the near future, and we may be concerned not just about the consequences of treating others as property, but also of others treating us that way.

This book doesn't attempt to answer such questions. But it does show, in vivid detail, what it means for humans to be treated as property—and what remains, resists, and speaks under those conditions.

If we understand that more fully, we may be better prepared to recognize the danger of treating any thinking, feeling being as a thing, and the risk of us being treated that way as well.

Books by Richard Seltzer

Non-Fiction

Voices of the Owned (editor)

How to Partner with AI

In Flux

One Family

Why Knot?

Trojan War Fiction

Let the Women Have Their Say

Trojan Tales

We First Met in Ithaca, or Was it Eden?

Breeze

Shakespeare Fiction

Shakespeare's Twin Sister

We All Are Shakespeare

Other Fiction

The Bulatovich Saga: The Name of Hero

Meter Maid Marion, How to Tutor a Ghost, The Third Tortoise

To Gether Tales

Echoes from the Attic (with Ethel Kaiden)

Parallel Lives

Beyond the 4th Door

Nevermind

Saint Smith and Other Stories

Children's Books

The Lizard of Oz and Other Stories

Now and Then and Other Tales from Ome

Jokes

Grandad Jokes

Translations (from Russian)

Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes by Alexander Bulatovich

The Muse of Far Wanderings of Nikolai Gumilyov by Apollon Davidson

Business Books

Web Business Boot Camp

The AltaVista Search Revolution (two editions)

Take Charge of Your Website

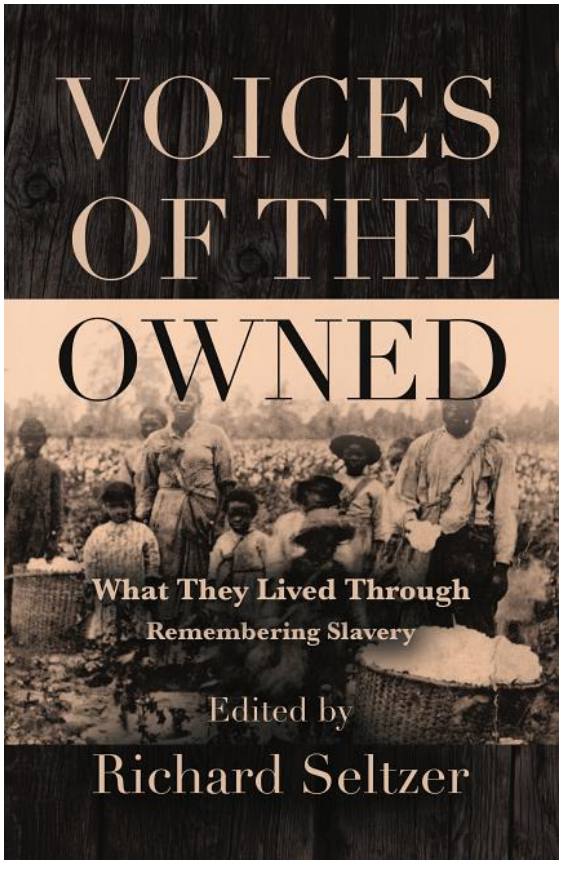
The Social Web

The Way of the Web

Shop Online the Lazy Way

Snapshots of DEC

MGMT MEMO: Management Lessons from DEC



Gathered from thousands of WPA Slave Narratives, "Voices of the Owned" restores individuality and immediacy to people too often reduced to symbols or silence. These are people trying to make sense of what they lived through.

Voices of the Owned: What They Lived Through

By Richard Seltzer