

# SLAVE NARRATIVES

*A Folk History of Slavery in the United States  
From Interviews with Former Slaves*

TYPEWRITTEN RECORDS PREPARED BY  
THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT  
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*Illustrated with Photographs*

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WASHINGTON 1941

STORIES FROM EX-SLAVES

The main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery. If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions. It should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any material collected, regardless of its nature.

It will not be necessary, indeed it will probably be a mistake, to ask every person all of the questions. Any incidents or facts he can recall should be written down as nearly as possible just as he says them, but do not use dialect spelling so complicated that it may confuse the reader.

A second visit, a few days after the first one, is important, so that the worker may gather all the worthwhile recollections that the first talk has aroused.

Questions:

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Give names of your brothers and sisters. Tell about your life with them and describe your home and the "quarters." Describe the beds and where you slept. Do you remember anything about your grandparents or any stories told you about them?
3. What work did you do in slavery days? Did you ever earn any money? How? What did you buy with this money?
4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?

5. What clothing did you wear in hot weather? Cold weather? On Sundays? Any shoes? Describe your wedding clothes.

6. Tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors.

7. How many acres in the plantation? How many slaves on it? How and at what time did the overseer wake up the slaves? Did they work hard and late at night? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you saw. Tell some of the stories you heard.

8. Was there a jail for slaves? Did you ever see any slaves sold or auctioned off? How did groups of slaves travel? Did you ever see slaves in chains?

9. Did the white folks help you to learn to read and write?

10. Did the slaves have a church on your plantation? Did they read the Bible? Who was your favorite preacher? Your favorite spirituals? Tell about the baptizing; baptizing songs. Funerals and funeral songs.

11. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? Why? What did you hear about patrollers? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another? Did you hear of trouble between the blacks and whites?

12. What did the slaves do when they went to their quarters after the day's work was done on the plantation? Did they work on Saturday afternoons? What did they do Saturday nights? Sundays? Christmas morning? New Year's Day? Any other holidays? Cornshucking? Cotton Picking? Dances? When some of the white master's family married or died? A wedding or death among the slaves?

13. What games did you play as a child? Can you give the words or sing any of the play songs or ring games of the children? Riddles? Charms? Stories about "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" or other "hants" of ghosts? Stories about animals? What do you think of voodoo? Can you give the words or sing any lullabies? Work songs? Plantation hollers? Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen.

14. When slaves became sick who looked after them? What medicines did the doctors give them? What medicine (herbs, leaves, or roots) did the slaves use for sickness? What charms did they wear and to keep off what diseases?

15. What do you remember about the war that brought your freedom? What happened on the day news came that you were free? What did your master say and do? When the Yankees came what did they do and say?
16. Tell what work you did and how you lived the first year after the war and what you saw or heard about the KuKlux Klan and the Nightriders. Any school then for Negroes? Any land?
17. Whom did you marry? Describe the wedding. How many children and grandchildren have you and what are they doing?
18. What do you think of Abraham Lincoln? Jefferson Davis? Booker Washington? Any other prominent white man or Negro you have known or heard of?
19. Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it? Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious.
20. Was the overseer "poor white trash"? What were some of his rules?

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The details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original statements. An example of material collected through one of the interviews with ex-slaves is attached herewith. Although this material was collected before the standard questionnaire had been prepared, it represents an excellent method of reporting an interview. More information might have been obtained however, if a comprehensive questionnaire had been used.

VOLUME XIII  
OKLAHOMA NARRATIVES

Prepared by  
the Federal Writers' Project of  
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for the State of Oklahoma

BETTY ROBERTSON

Age 93 yrs.

Fort Gibson, Oklahoma

I was born close to Webbers Falls, in the Canadian District of the Cherokee Nation, in the same year that my pappy was blowed up and killed in the big boat accident that killed my old Master.

I never did see my daddy excepting when I was a baby and I only know what my mammy told me about him. He come from across the water when he was a little boy, and was grown when old Master Joseph Vann bought him, so he never did learn to talk much Cherokee. My mammy was a Cherokee slave, and talked it good. My husband was a Cherokee born negro, too, and when he got mad he forgit all the English he knowed.

Old Master Joe had a mighty big farm and several families of negroes, and he was a powerful rich man. Pappy's name was Kalet Vann, and mammy's name was Sally. My brothers was name Sone and Frank. I had one brother and one sister sold when I was little and I don't remember the names. My other sisters was Polly, Ruth and Liddie. I had to work in the kitchen when I was a gal, and they was ten or twelve children smaller than me for me to look after, too. Sometime Young Master Joe and the other boys give me a piece of money and say I worked for it, and I reckon I did for I have to cook five or six times a day. Some of the Master's family was always going down to the river and back, and every time they come in I have to fix something to eat. Old Mistress had a good cookin' stove, but most Cherokees had only a big fireplace and pot hooks. We had meat, bread, rice, potatoes and plenty of fish and chicken. The spring time give us plenty of green corn and beans too. I couldn't buy anything in slavery time, so I jest give the piece of money to the Vann children. I got all the clothes I need from old Mistress, and in winter I had high top shoes with

brass caps on the toe. In the summer I wear them on Sunday, too. I wore loom cloth clothes, dyed in copperas what the old negro women and the old Cherokee women made.

The slaves had a pretty easy time I think. Young Master Vann never very hard on us and he never whupped us, and old Mistress was a widow woman and a good Christian and always kind. I sure did love her. Maybe old Master Joe Vann was harder, I don't know, but that was before my time. Young Master never whip his slaves, but if they don't mind good he sell them off sometimes. He sold one of my brothers and one sister because they kept running off. They wasn't very big either, but one day two Cherokees rode up and talked a long time, then young Master came to the cabin and said they were sold because mammy couldn't make them mind him. They got on the horses behind the men and went off.

Old Master Joe had a big steam boat he called the Lucy Walker, and he run it up and down the Arkansas and the Mississippi and the Ohio river, old Mistress say. He went clean to Louisville, Kentucky, and back. My pappy was a kind of a boss of the negroes that run the boat, and they all belong to old Master Joe. Some had been in a big run-away and had been brung back, and wasn't so good, so he keep them on the boat all the time mostly. Mistress say old Master and my pappy on the boat somewhere close to Louisville and the boiler bust and tear the boat up. Some niggers say my pappy kept hollering, "Run it to the bank! Run it to the bank!" but it sunk and him and old Master died.

Old Master Joe was a big man in the Cherokees, I hear, and was good to his negroes before I was born. My pappy run away one time, four or five years before I was born, mammy tell me, and at that time a whole lot of Cherokee slaves run off at once. They got over in the Creek country

and stood off the Cherokee officers that went to git them, but pretty soon they give up and come home. Mammy say they was lots of excitement on old Master's place and all the negroes mighty scared, but he didn't sell my pappy off. He jest kept him and he was a good negro after that. He had to work on the boat, though, and never got to come home but once in a long while.

Young Master Joe let us have singing and be baptized if we want to, but I wasn't baptized till after the War. But we couldn't learn to read or have a book, and the Cherokee folks was afraid to tell us about the letters and figgers because they have a law you go to jail and a big fine if you show a slave about the letters.

When the War come they have a big battle away west of us, but I never see any battles. Lots of soldiers around all the time though.

One day young Master come to the cabins and say we all free and can't stay there less'n we want to go on working for him just like we'd been, for our feed and clothes. Mammy got a wagon and we traveled around a few days and go to Fort Gibson. When we git to Fort Gibson they was a lot of negroes there, and they had a camp meeting and I was baptized. It was in the Grand River close to the ford, and winter time. Snow on the ground and the water was muddy and all full of pieces of ice. The place was all woods, and the Cherokees and the soldiers all come down to see the baptizing.

We settled down a little ways above Fort Gibson. Mammy had the wagon and two oxen, and we worked a good size patch there until she died, and then I git married to Cal Robertson to have somebody to take care of me. Cal Robertson was eighty-nine years old when I married him forty years ago, right on this porch. I had on my old clothes for the wedding, and I aint had any



good clothes since I was a little slave girl. Then I had clean warm clothes and I had to keep them clean, too!

I got my allotment as a Cherokee Freedman, and so did Cal, but we lived here at this place because we was too old to work the land ourselves. In slavery time the Cherokee negroes do like anybody else when they is a death - jest listen to a chapter in the Bible and all cry. We had a good song I remember. It was "Don't Call the Roll, Jesus, Because I'm Coming Home." The only song I remember from the soldiers was: "Hang Jeff Davis to a Sour Apple Tree", and I remember that because they said he used to be at Fert Gibson one time. I don't know what he done after that.

I don't know about Robert Lee, but I know about Lee's Creek.

I been a good Christian ever since I was baptized, but I keep a little charm here on my neck anyways, to keep me from having the nose bleed. Its got a buckeye and a lead bullet in it. I had a silver dime on it, too, for a long time, but I took it off and got me a box of snuff. I'm glad the War's over and I am free to meet God like anybody else, and my grandchildren can learn to read and write.