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## Florida Slave Narratives

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## FLORIDA SLAVE NARRATIVES

by GARY R. MORMINO

**I**N October 1939, the Jacksonville *Journal* published a story describing a federally-funded project going on in Florida that would have a far-reaching impact on future scholarship. "On disks that time can't destroy, a sapphire needle scratches the songs of the longshoreman and waterfront workers which, because of mechanical equipment and the juke organ, are fast disappearing."<sup>1</sup> The paper not only detailed the technology that was being utilized, it pointed out the importance of the technicians, in this case, Stetson Kennedy of Jacksonville and Robert Harrison Cook. Representatives of the Federal Writers' Project, Kennedy and Cook had honeycombed the hinterland and bayous in search of vanishing Floridians—turpentiners, muleskinners, and juke artists.

In August 1939, Kennedy and Cook took their recording caravan to Cross City. With Zora Neale Hurston, the black writer and folklorist, serving as liaison and scout, the party rendezvoused at the Aycock and Lindsey Turpentine Camp. They came to hear Cull Stacey. A North Carolinian by birth, a migrant turpentine by profession, Stacey was a drifter with a talent for remembering the sing songs of work and play.<sup>2</sup>

The August 1939 encounter has been preserved on disk. When asked to sing a song, Stacey drawled graciously, "Anything at all to help the government." He proceeded to sing such favorites as, "I'm Going to Georgia, to Work de Turpentine,"

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1. Jacksonville *Journal*, October 19, 1939, clipping in biographical file, Stetson Kennedy, Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa.
2. "Music and Songs," in the Florida Negro Manuscript collection, FHS; see also Cull Stacey, "Kerosene Charley Stays Overnight," "I'm Going to Georgia." Works Progress Administration Writers' Project, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

and “Kerosene Charley and the Chicken Roost,” and adding other tunes for good measure.<sup>3</sup>

The recorder captured everything, including the banter between the participants. The white overseer, a woodsrider, asked, “Where is that colored girl, Zora Hurston, who was here? She was a pretty smart nigger!” Stacey followed with political commentary. “If you Government men can do us any good up there in Washington we sure will appreciate it. Tell ‘em we ain’t gettin’ our chops down here. You tell Claude Pepper if he can’t do no better for us than he’s doin’, to come back home and plead the law, and let me go up yonder.”<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, uncertain whether the political salvo had been registered, interjected, “Say that again Stacey, so we can get it on the record.” Stacey strode toward the microphone, paused, and backed away. “Oh no!” he laughed. “I know better than to say anything against the Government!”

In Miami in 1939, Stetson Kennedy conducted extensive interviews at the Ex-Slave Association of Greater Miami. Located in the Liberty City district, a large black neighborhood, the club included twenty-five octogenarians and nonagenarians. “I worked hard when I was a slave,” lamented Annie Gail, “but not so hard as I do now.”<sup>5</sup>

The Cull Stacey and Annie Gail stories encapsulate the Federal Writers’ Project in Florida. Never again would so many folklorists, historians, and writers canvass the peninsula in search of ex-slaves, Cuban cigarmakers, Pensacola Creoles, and other plain folk. They assembled a collection of Floridiana, a mass of materials so abundantly rich that scholars have yet to reap its potential.

In 1935, Florida, with its 1,500,000 population, was still politically and philosophically in the nineteenth century. It was a large state with a relatively underdeveloped economy based on agriculture, tourism, and extractive industries. Tallahassee was a small town filled biannually with conservative small-town and rural-oriented legislators who politically dominated the

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3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Stetson Kennedy, “Ex-Slaves of Miami Organize,” *Opportunity* 17 (1939), 271, 287; interview with Stetson Kennedy by Gary Mormino, January 23, 1986, FP48A, University of Florida Oral History Archives, Florida State Museum, Gainesville; Stetson Kennedy to author, December 1, 1986.

state. A rigid color line stood unchanged and unchallenged. Remarkably— and all the while recognizing the constraints and restraints imposed by bureaucratic censorship, racism, and nativism— Florida's role in the Federal Writers' Project accounted for a distinctly positive record. The 1930s witnessed a flowering of Florida's creative accomplishments. The Depression served as a dynamic house of change, forcing politicians and artists to adjust to a new order.

If, as Arnold Toynbee contended, great challenges yield great responses, the New Deal offers evidence of the capacity of institutions for innovation. America's capacity for experimentation is illustrated in its response to the Great Depression. Today, the legacy of the WPA and PWA stand evident in post office murals, libraries, and bridges. No less important were the welter of artistic and cultural programs spawned by the New Deal. When asked about the wisdom of the federal government's sponsorship of the arts, Harry Hopkins, the Roosevelt administration's director of relief programs, quipped, "Hell, artists have got to eat just like other people."<sup>6</sup> The Federal Writers' Project originated in the 1935 legislation formally designated Federal Number One. Included in the Works Project Administration (WPA) bill was a call to establish four art programs. President Roosevelt approved the bill, including the Federal Writers' Project, in September 1935, authorizing the trial expenditure of \$6,288,000 and a staff of 6,500.<sup>7</sup>

The director of the Project, Henry G. Alsberg, brought to the program a willingness to experiment and a disposition toward innovation. Under his tutelage, the original objective of the program, the collection of material for *The American Guide* series, soon became only one part of a larger artistic-cultural

6. Quoted by Jerre Mangione, "The Federal Writers' Project: An Overview" (paper delivered at the WPA and the Federal Writers' Project conference, Fort Lauderdale, November 8, 1986). For the artistic legacy of the New Deal, see Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, CT, 1973), 306; William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, OH, 1969), 410, 465-67; biographical file, George Hill, FHS; Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, 1977); Jerrold Hirsch and Tom E. Terrill, "Some Thoughts on Reading the Federal Writers' Project Southern Life Histories," *Southern Studies* 18 (Fall 1979), 351-62.

7. Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-43* (Boston, 1972), 29-50; Ann Banks, *First-Person America* (New York, 1980), xi-xxv.

agenda. Alsberg displayed particular sensitivity toward developing a program capable of capturing the Afro-American legacy, a collection which would include folklore, institutional studies, life histories, and slave narratives. Alsberg had inherited a rudimentary program designed to interview ex-slaves as a part of the 1934 Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

The Federal Writers' Project with its panoply of programs, offered black writers opportunities to showcase their talents. Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, and Florida's Zora Neale Hurston plied their crafts at various projects during the 1930s. Racism, of course, had not dissipated. A February 1937 report disclosed that blacks constituted only 106 of the Federal Writers' Project's 4,500 employees. The Office of Negro Affairs lobbied vigorously for the hiring of more black writers.<sup>8</sup>

At the national level, Afro-American leaders, such as Sterling A. Brown of Howard University, played vital roles in the conception and direction of an Afro-American literary agenda. In June 1937, Brown complained to Alsberg, "We have noticed in much of the state copy that the Negro is either left unmentioned or inadequately treated." Lawrence D. Reddick of Kentucky State College pleaded that unemployed Negro college graduates be assisted, especially "those left out generally in the programs of recovery."<sup>9</sup>

Florida played an important role in the conception of the slave narratives. Carita Doggett Corse, the state director of the Federal Writers' Project, became convinced of the utility of slave interviews while earlier conducting research at New Smyrna and Fort George Island. She encouraged individuals in the Negro Writers' Unit to proceed with some preliminary interviews. In March 1937, Corse forwarded several of the Florida Slave Narratives to Washington for review by John Lomax, George Cronyn, and Sterling Brown. "I need scarcely add that I have enjoyed very much reading this batch of reminiscences from ex-

8. Mangione, *Dream and the Deal*, 123-27, 255-65; Penkower, *Federal Writers' Project*, 66-67, 147.

9. Sterling A. Brown to Henry G. Alsberg, June 8, 1937, Reports and Miscellaneous Records Pertaining to Negro Studies, 1936-1941, "Negro Books" folder, Federal Writers' Project, Record Group 69, National Archives, Washington, DC; Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1967), 540-42; Mangione, *Dream and the Deal*, 257; Penkower, *Federal Writers' Project*, 143.

slaves," replied Lomax, national consultant of Folklore and Folkways, in an April 6, 1937 letter. "It seems to me they are of very great value and I congratulate you on being the first to open up . . . this field of investigation." Lomax proceeded to draw up a standard questionnaire, "to get the Negro thinking and talking about the days of slavery." Corse assisted the Negro Writers' Unit, such as her June 1938 letter requesting a recording machine for Zora Neale Hurston. At its peak in 1937, Florida's Negro Writers' Unit employed ten blacks, although by late 1938, that number had been reduced to three. The composition of Florida's Negro Writers' Unit bears special interest. Black women constituted one-half of the unit in 1936-1937, an unusually high number. On a national level, Jacqueline Jones notes "that less than 20 percent of all WPA workers were female, and only 3 percent of all WPA workers were black women." In addition, Zora Neale Hurston served as the head of Florida's Folklore unit for one year, 1938-1939.<sup>10</sup>

Originally, the slave interviews and folklore collections were intended for a projected book, *The Florida Negro*. Sterling Brown, national editor of Negro Affairs, called for an ambitious program to research the black American experience. The much lauded *The Negro in Virginia* grew out of Brown's tutelage, as well as a companion volume in Georgia, *Drums and Shadows*. In spite of three revisions and the involvement of Hurston, *The Florida Negro* was never published.<sup>11</sup>

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10. John A. Lomax to Carita Doggett Corse, April 6, 1937, correspondence pertaining to Folklore Studies, 1936-1941, Florida, Federal Writers' Project, Record Group 69, Box 192, National Archives; George Cronyn to Corse, April 1, 1937, *ibid.*, Box 193; Office of Negro Affairs to Corse, Memo, October 19, 1938, Reports Pertaining to Negro Studies, 1936-1941, *ibid.*; interview with Corse by Robert E. Hemenway, February 25, 1971, transcript on file, University of Florida Oral History Archives; "Dr. Carita Doggett Corse to Direct WPA Writers' Work," Jacksonville *Times-Union*, October 13, 1935; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1986 ed.), 217. Grace Thompson, Rachel A. Austin, Viola B. Muse, Pearl Randolph, and L. Rebecca Bakey were the black female workers of Florida's Negro Writer's Unit.
11. Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, 1977), 252; the Macmillan Company to Zora Neale Hurston, May 11, 1939; the Christopher Publishing House to Hurston, May 10, 1939; Florida Negro Collection, "Zora Neale Hurston Folder"; Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative," 547-48; Mangione, *Dream and the Deal*, 259-61.



Paul Diggs wrote for the Federal Writers' Project. He lived in Lakeland, where, in August 1936, he interviewed Georgia Love, an ex-slave. He sketched this portrait of Georgia, whom he noted was "reputed to have the power to remove pain with her hands." From "The Florida Negro," Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

"The Florida Negro" represents only a fraction of a voluminous collection of Afro-American documents. Today, the collection is in the archives of the Florida Historical Society in the University of South Florida Library in Tampa. In some ways, the most interesting and potentially valuable materials were not included in "The Florida Negro," and they are filed in neatly organized manila envelopes. Approximately 2,000 pages of materials are organized around various topics such as "Games," "Sanctified Church," and "the Turpentine," by Zora Neale Hurston. Other subjects include "Biography," "Negro Customs," "Slaves of Seminole Indians," "Literature," "Occupations," and "Reconstruction." The collection offers much promise for research and writing. For instance, contemporaries criticized Zora Neale Hurston for ignoring the underside of the black experience, such as the 1920 Ocoee massacre, which occurred just a few miles from her home in Eatonville. And yet a typewritten copy, apparently signed by Hurston but never published, graphically details the riot and its aftermath.<sup>12</sup>

The enslavement of Florida's blacks ranks as one of the major events in the state's history. Yet the story has not been easy to tell. No Florida slave left behind a diary, and few accounts of planters and mistresses have survived.<sup>13</sup> In order to understand the tragedy and triumph of the freedmen, historians need to examine sources reflecting the views of masters and slaves. The slave narratives constitute the single greatest source capturing the personal experiences of the ex-slave. Compiled in seventeen states between 1936-1938, the Slave Narrative Collection consists of 2,358 interviews. Nearly three percent of the interviews were conducted in Florida, although, only one percent of the interviewees experienced slavery in Florida. The others had moved to the state after Reconstruction. The vast source of documentation, once the three crudely-typed transcripts had been assembled in 1941, were filed in the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress. For three decades, the slave narratives languished there.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Topical folders, Florida Negro Collection; Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 219.

13. "The Florida Negro" MSS, bound draft with comments, April 2, 1937, FHS.

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



Prompted by the Civil Rights Movement, the debate over Vietnam, and campus protest, an increasing number of American historians in the 1960s and 1970s began chronicling the lives of immigrants, laborers, women, and minorities. Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, Kenneth Stampp, Joel Williamson, Charles Joyner, Winthrop Jordan, Leon Litwack, and George Rawick applied their considerable talents toward the study of slavery. Reconstructing the lives of black slaves would prove particularly challenging, simply because so few written sources are available.

Greenwood Press in 1972 published nineteen volumes of Ex-Slave Narratives, which included the seventy-two Florida interviews.<sup>15</sup> The publication of the slave narratives was no guarantee of their immediate acceptance; indeed, few sources have generated such emotional debate over bias, validity, and legitimacy. Traditionally, historians had borrowed heavily from conventional sources, such as plantation diaries, slave autobiographies, newspapers, and census records. Interviews posed new problems.

The slave narrative collection is not an unfiltered perspective. Over two-thirds of the Florida respondents were at least eighty years old when the interviews occurred. Nearly one-half the ex-slaves had been children (ten years and younger) prior to emancipation. The interviews were conducted during the Great Depression, a period in which aged spokesmen might look back at the more prosperous plantation South with a special fondness. Thus the interviews reveal much about the problems of the 1930s. The nature of the interview process was another issue that generated questions and criticism. Paul Escott has amply illustrated the differing responses ex-slaves gave to white, as opposed to black, interviewers.<sup>16</sup>

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and *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 601-79; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 14; Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narratives," 553. Florida historians have ignored the ex-slave narratives in general and the Florida Negro Collection in particular. See Julia Floyd Smith's *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860* (Gainesville, 1973).

15. George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, CT, 1972). The Florida Narratives are in volume seventeen.
16. Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 11, 193.

The director of Georgia's program reflected, years later, that her project's "greatest loss" was that whites conducted the interviews. Such was not the case in Florida. Throughout the South, except for Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida, whites conducted the preponderance of the slave interviews. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama, for instance, employed a total of one black interviewer, whereas Florida employed ten. It was likely uncomfortable for many ex-slaves to be queried by southern whites about their lives before they became freedmen. Many southern whites held firm opinions as to the benevolence of the slave institution. A Jim Crow/caste system pervaded the South in the 1930s, a way of life which imposed serious inhibitions upon black-white discussion. Southern whites, for example, commonly addressed adult blacks by their first name, and described them as "boy."<sup>17</sup> Throughout this period, evidence of peonage, sharecropping, and lynching served notice as to the nature of power in the lower South. Between 1931 and 1935, more than seventy blacks were lynched in the South. Given such a system, the thoughtful ex-slave often preferred to opt for silence or modify what he or she wished to remember.<sup>18</sup> Martin Jackson, an ex-slave, reflected upon these problems when he observed, "Lot of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery."<sup>19</sup> Few field workers had been trained in interviewing techniques. Since the sessions were almost never sound-recorded, the working copies reflect the fresh memories of interviewers and editors, and were often not verbatim accounts. Still another problem was transcribing Afro-American dialect.

Still, the slave interviews constitute the greatest untapped source for the study of slavery in Florida. In all, seventy-two interviews were published as part of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Florida Narratives*. Many narratives, such as "Interviews with Old Colored People in Pensacola," were never published, and are catalogued in the files of the Florida Negro

17. Ibid., 188-91; Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 481-85; Yetman, "Background of the Slave Narrative," 547-49; Penkower, *Federal Writers' Project*, 145.

18. Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana, 1972), 95-107, 183.

19. Quoted in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976 ed.), 123-24.

Collection.<sup>20</sup> Most significantly, Florida blacks employed in the Negro Writer's Unit conducted most of the interviews.

If one expects a reading of the slave narratives to offer an unambiguous dialogue with uncluttered answers, one is mistaken. The source reflects the sources. Ex-slaves remembered lives of uncomplicated pleasure and unmitigated hell; memories of moonlight and magnolias and the overseer's lash. The question that has provoked much debate relates to the harshness of slavery, more precisely the roles of "de good massa" and "de bad massa." Ex-slaves in Florida answered this question ambivalently. "Slavery," contends Charles Joyner, "can be made to appear either benign or barbaric from ex-slaves' testimonies, depending upon what evidence is emphasized and what evidence is suppressed."<sup>21</sup> Lindsey Moore, for instance, a Jacksonville resident, was never asked to perform strenuous work as long as he reigned as marbles champion.<sup>22</sup> Douglas Parish, born a slave at Monticello, Florida, in 1850, recalled being an outstanding runner and being rewarded for his mastery of sprints.<sup>23</sup> Willis Williams, an ex-slave born at Tallahassee in 1856, recounted playing baseball as a young boy on the plantation.<sup>24</sup> Frank Berry, who claimed Seminole blood along with his African heritage, quipped, "Even in slavery we were treated better than we are now by the white people. . . . Even the white people didn't kill Negroes then as they do now. Anybody can kill a Negro now because they ain't worth a cent to nobody."<sup>25</sup> A blind ex-slave told a white interviewer, "Those were the good old days."<sup>26</sup> Bolden Hall, born in Jefferson County in 1853, felt that his master "was very good to his slaves and never whipped them unless it was absolutely necessary."<sup>27</sup> Blacks remembered the Creole attitudes in Pensacola as especially enlightened. "I was brought up in the Spanish way," remembered a ninety-six year old veteran.

20. "Interviews with Old Colored People in Pensacola," folder, Federal Writers' Project, Florida Negro Collection.

21. Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, 1984), xvi.

22. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 229-30.

23. *Ibid.*, 257-58.

24. *Ibid.*; 348.

25. Interview with Frank Berry by Pearl Randolph, August 18, 1936, FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 5.

26. Jules Frost, "Born Blind: Stories of Florida," FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 1.

27. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 165.



A black family living in south-central Florida, 1895. From the Stokes Collection, University of South Florida Library.

“The Spanish were very good and kind to the colored folks. . . . Pensacola in those days was one big happy family.”<sup>28</sup>

But if ex-slaves residing in other states opted for silence on the harsher side of slavery, Florida respondents were not so reticent. Scarcely a participant failed to conjure up some atrocity, often in graphic terms. Florida blacks recalled inquisitorial punishments: the “buck-and-gag” where the slave was doubled about a hoe and forced to sit in the sun, or the “bell-and-stocks,” where the slave would be placed in an iron halter with a bell attached to it.<sup>29</sup> Alex Thompson described his master, Judge Henry of west Florida: “He gave us all we wanted to eat, but he cowhided us. He had a cowhide and used to take us in a little room to whip us. Did you every know of a master *not to cowhide* a nigger? [And] His wife wuz meaner to us than he wuz.”<sup>30</sup>

28. “Creoles in Pensacola,” FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 8; interview with Thomas Moreno by Modeste Hargis, June 1, 1937. “Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida,” *ibid.*, 2; Pensacola *Gazette*, April 4, 1857: “The exodus . . . [of] thirty-five free colored persons took their departure from this city for Tampico and in a few days the balance who are remaining will also leave. . . . It was a painful sight to see them departing.”
29. “Slave Days in Florida,” FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 13; See also “Slavery: Atrocities,” *ibid.*
30. “Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida,” Florida Negro Collection, 2.

Charlotte Martin reminisced of life in Sixteen, Florida, as the property of Judge Wilkerson. "Wilkerson was very cruel." She recalled her oldest brother whipped to death for staging an illicit church service. She also recalled the judge's frequent visits to the slave quarters for sexual favors.<sup>31</sup> Mental cruelty posed another form of punishment. Margrett Nickerson, born in Leon County, recollected: "I never saw a nigger sold, but dey carried dem from our house and I never seen 'em no mo'. . . . Master Carr . . . wuz always tellin' me he wuz gonna sell me . . . he sold my pa's fust wife."<sup>32</sup> Acie Thomas's owner in Jefferson County threatened to sell his slaves to "po white trash," which Acie remembered with terror.<sup>33</sup> Sarah Rhodes of New Smyrna recalled the post-war trauma: "Ku Klux Klan! Doan talk about them devils. Kill the colored people. Cut off 'yo ears. Done everything to us."<sup>34</sup>

Analyzing the slave narratives, Eugene Genovese notes: "It would be wrong, not merely pointless, to seek in the slave narratives a precise measurement of the character of masters— to try and balance the testimony of those slaves who said they had good masters against those who said the opposite."<sup>35</sup>

The Florida slave narratives suggest a series of relationships developed over time, based upon power and fear, dreams and nightmares, illusions and anxieties. Although Florida had relatively few large plantations, the typical ex-slave interviewed had resided on such plantations, where a hierarchy of skills and personalities existed. Beyond "massa" and the Great House loomed a variety of individuals who affected slaves' lives on a day-to-day basis. Victims recalled fear in encounters with the dreaded driver and overseer. "When dey got tired of whippin' de dar-kies," remembered Kate Golden, "dey made a place dey called hell. Dey tied up a nigger in a croka sack an' put him on a rope over an open fire an' smoke an' burned him somethin' awful."<sup>36</sup> According to Lucius Douglas of Madison County, " 'De overseer wuld git you if you didn't eat 'nuf. You was working for him

31. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 166-67.

32. *Ibid.*, 250-56.

33. *Ibid.*, 327-33.

34. Interview with Sarah Rhodes by Mary Roberts and Zelia Sweet, August 3, 1937, FWP, Florida Negro Collection.

35. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 676.

36. Interview with Kate Golden by Pearl Randolph, May 18, 1937, FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 3.

and he meant for you to be healthy. . . . Dey [overseer] all had a little hell in 'em."<sup>37</sup>

Poor whites occupied a nefarious niche in the slave memory. William Sherman of Chaseville recalled that lower class whites generally rode patrol, and woe to any slave caught without a pass. He especially remembered the "nigger dogs, that were used specifically for catching runaway slaves." Samuel "Parson" Andrews remembered how his Uncle Umphrey outwitted the patrollers by throwing hot ashes in their faces, thus allowing slaves to escape. In Jefferson County, poor whites helped slaves escape, and then recaptured them for sale to itinerant slave traders.<sup>38</sup> Sarah Brown, born outside Tampa, told how her mother was hitched to a plow and whipped until she died.<sup>39</sup> Acie Thomas, born on the Folsom plantation in Jefferson County, blamed " 'po' white trash" for excessive violence.<sup>40</sup>

Yet the interviews put forth a variety of situations and contexts. Christine Mitchell, who was born in St. Augustine in 1853, discussed plantations run by Minorcans, where the slaves were known as "Turnbull's darkies."<sup>41</sup> Mary Biddis, born in 1833, recalled life in Columbia County, where her master, Lancaster Jamison, ran a small farm and boarding house. Mary worked in the boarding house assisting Mrs. Jamison.<sup>42</sup>

One of the cherished memories retained by ex-slaves related to their faith in the black church. The Afro-American church was a syncretic evolution of southern traditions, Christian theology, and African customs, constituting a social world for the slave. "All lies!" insisted Douglas Dorsey, who remembered the white preacher telling slaves to honor their master and mistress.<sup>43</sup> "We had church once or twice a month," recollected

37. Interview with Lucius Douglas by Lott Allen, May 18, 1936, *ibid.*, 2.

38. Interview with William Sherman by Pearl Randolph, August 28, 1936, *ibid.*, 32; "Slave Days in Florida," 12.

39. "Reminiscences of Old Aunt Sarah," Tampa Bay Area interviews, n.d., Florida Negro Collection, 1.

40. Interview with Acie Thomas by Pearl Randolph, November 25, 1936, FWP, *ibid.*, 56.

41. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 226-27; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 184-85, 247-48.

42. Interview with Mary Biddis by Zora Neale Hurston, n.d., "Notes on Conditions among Negroes," Florida Negro Collection, 1.

43. Interview with Douglas Dorsey by James Johnson, January 11, 1937, *ibid.*, 5-6.

Mary Biddis. "De white preacher, he wasn't no good. All he preach about was to serve de white boss, not God. De white boss paid him. . . . If dey had let de colored preachers do all de' preachin' we'd of had good services all de time."<sup>44</sup> Margrett Nickerson observed, "We had church wid de white preacher and dey told us to mind our masters and missus and we would be saved; if not, he say we wouldn't. Dey never tole us nothing 'bout Jesus."<sup>45</sup>

The ex-slave narratives offer much information concerning the social fabric of plantation life. Interviewers were instructed to ask questions about the slave diet and customs. Respondents painted a portrait of self-sufficient plantations which produced ample foodstuffs. Few ex-slaves recalled hunger. Willis Williams of Leon County was fortunate in that his mother cooked at the big house and "saw to it that her children were well fed. We were fed right from the master's table." Williams recalled the master providing his slaves with chickens and green vegetables.<sup>46</sup> Claude Wilson described a diet familiar to antebellum Floridians, black and white; corn bread, beans, sweet potatoes, and collard greens constituted the principal food sources.<sup>47</sup> Acie Thomas of Jefferson County recalled: "There was always plenty of everything to eat. We had white bread that had been made on the place, [also] corn meal, rice, potatoes, syrup, vegetables, and home-cured meat."<sup>48</sup> Stetson Kennedy remembered former slaves telling how they used wood chips from the smokehouse floor to season greens.<sup>49</sup>

Several slaves recounted the distinctive way of baking cornbread and making coffee. "The corn meal, after being mixed," remembered Claude Wilson, "was wrapped in tannion leaves and placed on hot coals. The leaves would parch to a crisp and when the bread was removed it was a beautiful brown and unburned. Sweet potatoes were also roasted on the hot coals."<sup>50</sup> Coffee was a luxury, and slaves adopted substitutes.

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44. Biddis interview, *ibid.*, 1.

45. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 252.

46. *Ibid.*, 348.

47. Interview with Claude Augusta Wilson by James Johnson, November 6, 1936, Florida Negro Collection, 2.

48. Thomas interview, *ibid.*, 4.

49. Stetson Kennedy to Mormino, February 19, 1987.

50. Wilson interview, Florida Negro Collection, 2.

Hot water was poured over parched kernels of corn, making a potable hot beverage.<sup>51</sup>

Physicians were rare in Florida, and few slaves ever recalled seeing a doctor. Instead, blacks generally drew upon their own resources. "I didn't fool with all those doctors," said Thomas Moreno. "Tain't good for nothing all those medicines. If I can get my roots, I'll get 'em. I gather Queen's Delight, wild sage, sassafras, catnip, peppermint, and prickly pear. Prickly pear, it's good to make the hair grow."<sup>52</sup> Rebecca Hooks recalled folk medicines brewed by the plantation midwife. For whooping coughs, a tea made from sheep shandy (manure) and catnip was concocted.<sup>53</sup>

The making of soap constituted a laborious but critical task on the plantation. Shack Thomas remembered the women "burning cockle-burrs, blackjack wood, and other materials, then adding the accumulated fat for the past few weeks."<sup>54</sup> Margrett Nickerson recalled: "My pa made soap from ashes when cleaning new ground— he took a hopper to put the ashes in, made a little stool, put the ashes in and poured water on it to drip: at night after getting off from work, he'd put in the grease and make soap."<sup>55</sup>

Clothes-making reflected the self-sufficiency of antebellum Florida life. Shack Thomas hardly remembered anyone wearing white, because slave women would take white cotton duck dresses and "dye 'em almost as soon as they'd get 'em . . . they'd boil wild indigo, poke berries, walnuts [for dye]."<sup>56</sup> At age ten, Patience Campbell learned to spin and weave at the plantation loom. She remembered indigo plants rotting in the water in preparation of dyeing clothes.<sup>57</sup>

The plantation was a community. Slaves would probe the system and learn the subtleties of servitude and gratitude. Al-

51. Interviews with Willis Williams by Viola B. Muse, March 20, 1937, *ibid.*, 2-3; Wilson interview, *ibid.*, 2.

52. "Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida," *ibid.*, 1.

53. Interview with Rebecca Hooks by Pearl Randolph, January 14, 1937, FWP, *ibid.*, 4-5.

54. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 336. See also "All Dye Together," in "Slave Days in Florida," FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 7-8.

55. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 253.

56. *Ibid.*, 338.

57. Interview with Patience Campbell by James Johnson, December 15, 1936, FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 2.



though educating a slave was a crime throughout the South, a number of ex-slaves recalled learning to read and write. In Suwannee County, Colonel Martin's children secretly taught Douglas Dorsey the rudiments of reading. When Mrs. Martin discovered the secret, she struck Douglas across the face, vowing to cut off his right ear.<sup>58</sup>

Margrett Nickerson of Leon County explained how her Uncle, George Bull, was beaten "til de blood run out of him," because he had learned to read and write.<sup>59</sup> Alex Thompson knew a slave named Lizzie who had learned to write, and often forged passes for friends.<sup>60</sup> Squires Jackson taught himself to read and write. One day his master caught him, but Jackson cleverly turned the paper upside down, announcing, "It says, 'Confederates done won the war'." The master laughed and walked away.<sup>61</sup> In a twist to the poor white syndrome, Lucius Douglas recalled, "some ob de poor whites taught der colored folk to read and write when de only had two or three slaves."<sup>62</sup>

However far the stream flows, a Yoruba proverb promised, it never forgets its source.<sup>63</sup> Some African customs were retained by the slaves long after ancestors had been snatched from the continent. Many respondents remembered "jumpin' de broom," an African marriage rite. Josephine Jones, born a slave in Baker County, explained the significance of the broom in African folklore: "Brooms keep haunts away. When mean folks dies, de old debbil sometimes don't want 'em down dere in de bad place, an' he make witches out of 'em and sends 'em back. One thing 'bout witches, dey gotta count everything 'fore dey can git 'crost it. You put a broom 'crost yer door at night, and ol' witch gotta count evr'y straw in dat broom 'fore she kin come in."<sup>64</sup> Douglas Dorsey detailed that in the evenings, "when the slaves left the field, they returned to their cabins [gathering] around a cabin to sing and moan songs seasoned with African melody."<sup>65</sup> Shack

58. Dorsey interview, *ibid.*, 3-4.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 253.

61. "Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida," Florida Negro Collection, 2.

62. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 178.

63. Douglas interview, Florida Negro Collection, 4-5.

64. Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, xiii.

65. Jules Frost, "Haunts," October 20, 1937, FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 1-2.

Thomas, born near Tallahassee in 1834, recalled his father, after the lights had been extinguished, telling him about life in Africa before captivity, how sailors captured the family by waving bright red handkerchiefs and attracting them to the boat.<sup>66</sup>

Festivals punctuated the agrarian lifestyles of Southerners, both the black and white. Slaves retained cherished memories of these festive traditions. Christmas, by all accounts, allowed for an extended period of rest and merriment. "Christmas time?" pondered Lucius Douglas, born in Madison County, "Yes, yes, de Old Man sure give somethin' extra den. He give de woman folk all new dresses made out of calico or somethin'. . . . You see, de Old Man had a factory and made clothes for all his colored people up in Monticello."<sup>67</sup>

Africa lived also in southern dance, language, and cuisine, passed from generation to generation. But if few ex-slaves in the 1930s had actually experienced the life of an Ibo or Yoruba hunter, virtually all of them vividly remembered their emancipation. Few events in American history so lend themselves to the mythology of folkstory as does the emancipation: hysterical blacks exulting in their new freedom in the Jubilo; the liberated, following the classical sequel of bondage, embark on an exodus putting distance between themselves and their oppressors; faithful ol' retainers refuse to leave beloved "massa." If the Florida slave narratives are to be believed— and they reinforce the most recent findings— the legends of the Jubilo, exodus, and faithful servants are more myth than reality. Leon Litwack summarized his findings of the impact of emancipation upon the slave community: "Uncertainty, skepticism, and fear marked the initial reaction of many slaves to the Yankee invaders."<sup>68</sup> The experiences in Florida, as amplified in the slave narratives, support Litwack's thesis.

Ex-slaves carried with them memories of that precise moment that freedom was conveyed. Sarah Ross recalled that her master at first refused to acknowledge the emancipation orders, and for several months she and her fellow slaves were confined and forbidden to mention freedom.<sup>69</sup> Mary Biddis remembered

66. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 97.

67. *Ibid.*, 336.

68. Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 119.

69. *Ibid.*, 117-18; Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 168-69.

a Negro on a mule telling her owner about the new order: "Mr. Jamison, master, broke down and cried."<sup>70</sup> Douglas Dorsey was fourteen when the driver called the plantation's eighty-five slaves together and told them of their freedom.<sup>71</sup> Other slaves recalled that throughout the war, they had been told to await the sounding of a loud gun to signify freedom. A slave on one Alabama plantation mirrored the emotions of many freedmen. "We didn't hardly know what he means. . . . Folks dat ain't never been free don' rightly know de feel of bein free."<sup>72</sup>

For many, freedom meant mobility. Ex-slaves, eager to express their new-found freedom, thronged Florida roads and trails following the war. Many sought to reconstitute broken families; others searched for a new home, a job, economic security; still others were just curious to see a world that had been so long forbidden to them. Ambrose Douglas of Harnett County, North Carolina, recalled: "I was twenty-one when freedom finally came, and that time I didn't take no chances on 'em taking it back again. I lit out for Florida and wound up in Madison County."<sup>73</sup> Jacksonville, which was a base for Federal troops, became a magnet for hundreds of freedmen. "The town was full of colored soldiers all armed with muskets," reflected Claude Wilson, who had arrived from Dexter's plantation in Lake City. "Horns and drums could be heard beating and blowing every morning and evening. The colored soldiers appeared to rule the town."<sup>74</sup> Sarah Ross recalled all the ex-slaves on her plantation leaving.<sup>75</sup>

Earlier accounts of post-war Florida noted the fluid character of the freedmen. Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia University and his students wrote accounts of this period, generally regarded as unsympathetic to Afro-Americans. William Watson Davis, a Dunning student, wrote: "When they learned that they were free many thousands of the approximately 70,000 Florida negroes deserted their homes to flock into the

70. Ibid., 36.

71. Ibid., 98.

72. Quoted in "Not So Freed Men," *New York Review of Books*, August 16, 1979, 9.

73. Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 103.

74. Wilson interview, Florida Negro Collection, 2.

75. Interview with Sarah Ross by Alfred Farrell, FWP, Florida Negro Collection, 5.

Federal military camps and into the towns. . . . Summer-time had come, 'baptizing time,' water-melon time, berry time. . . . Responsibility lay lightly on their shoulders. They shed husbands, children, wives, and other dependents with an ease and rapidity which makes even a modern divorce court in comparison seem a conservative institution."<sup>76</sup> Davis also maintained, "The drunken negro in the little towns became insistently insolent and invited killing."<sup>77</sup>

Yet black reminiscences paint a different portrait of freedom in Florida. Richard Edwards, a black minister, preached to a gathering near the Lester plantation in Leon County, "You ain't, none o'you, gwinter feel rale free till you shakes de dus' ob de Ole Plantashun offen yore feet an' goes ter a new place whey, you kin live out o'sight o'de gret house. . . . Take your freedom, my brudders an' my sisters. . . . Go whey you please."<sup>78</sup>

The uncertainties of emancipation soon gave way to the certainties of the new, post-war order. Restrictions and reprisals followed. For some ex-slaves, the Union Army proved to be no savior. Reverend Squires Jackson escaped from his Madison, Florida, plantation during the war, eventually reaching Federal lines. Repulsed, however, by the treatment which he received he ran away again.<sup>79</sup> Alex Thompson of Pensacola recalled learning to read and write, "until they made a big fuss about it."<sup>80</sup> The Ku Klux Klan was singled out for special acerbity. Frank Berry accused the Klan of using force to scare Negroes away from the polls.<sup>81</sup>

The slave interviews offer insights into chapters of Florida history, such as the early cattle industry and farming. Stephen Harville, born 1840 in Alachua County on the northside of Payne's Prairie, remembered, "There was no Gainesville when I lived there. It was a farm." He maintained that on the central Florida frontier, farmers "lived a different way. There was not

76. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 341-42.

77. *Ibid.*, 601-02.

78. Quoted in Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 296.

79. Interview with Reverend Squires Jackson by Samuel Johnson, September 11, 1937, Florida Negro Collection, 2-3.

80. "Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida," *ibid.*, 2.

81. Interview with Frank Berry by Pearl Randolph, August 18, 1936, FWP, *ibid.*, 3.

so many colored folk. . . . They raised some cotton and corn, peas and potatoes, but not so much as in the other places. They planted for home use, not to ship off. . . . There were not many orange trees then . . . yard trees, but not groves." Harville rode the open range, assisting his master in cow herding. "I used to be in the woods horseback two or three weeks at a time. . . . I kept his stock mostly. All over the country there was cattle. [We] had 500 or 600 in the woods. They called the cattle pineywoods cattle . . . shipped from Tampa."<sup>82</sup>

Historians interested in the slave experience in general, or antebellum Florida in particular, should read the *Florida Narratives*. The interviews suggest a number of compelling themes. First, a principal tenet emerging from the interviews is that the source of Afro-American culture sprang principally from within the slave community. The narratives offer a rich testimony to the emotional texture of slave life, reinforcing the importance of a slave community.<sup>83</sup> The *Florida Narratives*, with its pitfalls and biases, adds to the continuing dialogue as to the nature of slavery. Ex-slaves, in general, described plantation life as both benign and barbaric. The presence of black interviewers helped create an atmosphere conducive to frankness; witness the number of candid narratives detailing beatings and punishment. The *Florida Narratives* invite inquiry by historians who want to compare Florida to the rest of the South. In general, the ex-slaves paint a way of agrarian life familiar to the Deep South—large plantations, ample diet, the ominous presence of the driver and overseer, the reliance upon King Cotton. Yet there exists fascinating differences. Ex-slaves from Pensacola, St. Augustine, and New Smyrna provide glimpses of a deeply ingrained Creole society. The slave narratives will enrich and amend previously-held notions of Florida's peculiarities and particularities.

The decade of the 1930s profoundly altered individual and institutional relationships with the federal government. The American artist keenly felt these changes. The popular phrases

82. Interview with Stephen Harville by Jules Frost, July 8, 1937, Tampa Bay Area interviews, folder, FWP, *ibid.*, 2-3.

83. See also John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York, 1972); Al-Tony Gilmore, ed., *Revisiting Blassingame's the Slave Community: The Scholars Respond* (Westport, CT, 1978).

“Art for the Millions” and “People’s Art” reflected these new-found relationships.<sup>84</sup> The Federal Writers’ Project represented one wing of a phenomenon Lewis Mumford called the “cultural rediscovery of America.”<sup>85</sup> Warren Susman has argued that “the most persistent theme to emerge from the bulk of the literature of the period . . . was ‘the people’.”<sup>86</sup> The slave narratives thus emerge from a milieu which also introduced the documentary, the photo essay, and *Life* magazine. Ex-slaves in Florida, previously regarded as marginal men and women, were seen as part of the fabric of American history, part of the spirit of James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>87</sup>

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84. Jane De Hart Mathews, “Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy,” *Journal of American History* 62 (September 1975), 335.

85. Lewis Mumford, “Writers’ Project,” *New Republic* 92, October 20, 1937, 306-07.

86. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History* (New York, 1984), 178.

87. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York, 1941).