

WPA Slave Narratives

Ohio

Events: Things Seen and Heard Tell Of

John Sepich, ed.

Susan Bledsoe OH-3

One day I was sent out to clean the hen house and to burn the straw. I cleaned the hen house, pushed the straw up on a pile and set fire to it and burned the hen house down and I sure thought I was going to get whipped, but I didn't, for I had a good 'masse'.

We always got along fine with the children of the slave owners but none of the colored people would have anything to do with the 'poor white trash' who were too poor to own slaves and had to do their own work.

Yes, I can remember when we were set free. Mr. Bull told us and we cut long poles and fastened balls of cotton on the ends and set fire to them. Then, we run around with them burning, a-singin' and a-dancin'.

Ben Brown OH-5

Mastah died an' den missie, she and a son-in-law took charge of de place. Mah sistah Hannah wuz sold on de auction block at Richmon to Mastah Frank Maxie (Massie?) an' taken to de plantation near Charlottesville. I missed mah sistah terrible an ran away to see her, ran away three times, but ev'ry time dey cum on horseback an git me jus befoh I got to Maxies. The missie wuz with dem on a horse and she ax where I goin an' I told her. Mah hands wuz tied crossways in front with a big rope so hard it hurt. Den I wuz left on de groun foh a long time while missie visited Missie Maxie. Dey start home on horses pulling de rope tied to mah hands. I had to run or fall down an' be dragged on de groun'. It wuz terrible. When we got home de missie whipped me with a thick hickory switch an' she wasn't a bit lenient. I wuz whipped ev'ry time I ran away to see mah sister.

When de wah wuz ovah, de missie nevah tell me dat I wuz free an' I kep' on workin' same as befoh. I couldn't read or write an' to me all money coins wuz a cent, big copper cents, dey wuz all alike to me. De slaves wuz not allowed any learnin an' if any books, papers or pictures wuz foun' among us we wuz whipped if we couldn't explain where dey cum from.

Sarah Woods Burke OH-6

I 'member that the slaves had a hard time getting food, most times they got just what was left over or whatever the slaveholder wanted to give them so at night they would slip outa their cabins on to the plantation and kill a pig, a sheep or some cattle which they would butcher in the woods and cut up. The wimmin folks would carry

the pieces back to the cabins in their aprons while the men would stay behind and bury the head, skin and feet."

"Whenever they killed a pig they would have to skin it, because they didn't dare to build a fire. The women folk after getting home would put the meat in special dug trenches and the men would come erlong and cover it up."

"I remembers quite clearly one scene that happened jus' afore I left that there part of the country. At the slaveholders home on the plantation I was at it was customary for the white folks to go to church on Sunday morning and to leave the cook in charge. This cook had a habit of making cookies and handing them out to the slaves before the folks returned. Now it happened that on one Sunday for some reason or tother the white folks returned before the regular time and the poor cook did not have time to get the cookies to the slaves so she just hid them in a drawer that was in a sewing chair."

"The white folks had a parrot that always sat on top of a door in this room and when the mistress came in the room the mean old bird hollered out at the top of his voice, 'Its in the rocker. It's in the rocker'. Well the Missus found the cookies and told her husband where upon the husband called his man that done the whipping and they tied the poor cook to the stake and whipped her till she fainted. Next morning the parrot was found dead and a slave was accused because he liked the woman that had been whipped the day before. They whipped him than until the blood ran down his legs."

James Campbell OH-7

"Ol' Marse John an' his family liv in a big fine brick hous'. Marse John had des chilluns, Miss Betty an' Miss Ann an' der wuz Marse Mike an' Marse John. Marse John, he wuz sorta spiled lik. He dun wen to de war an' runs 'way frum Harpers Ferry an' cum home jes' sceered to death. He get himsef a pah o' crutches an' neber goes back. Marse John dun used dem crutches 'til aftah de war wuz ovah.

"We'se neber 'lowed out de cabin at night. But sum times de oldah 'uns wud sneak out at night an'tak de hosses an' tak a leettle ride. An' man it wud bin jes' too bad if ol' Marse John ketched 'em: dat wuz shure heaps o' fun fer de kids. I 'member hearin' wunce de ol' folks talkin' 'bout de way one Marse dun sum black boys dat dun sumthin' wrong. He jes' mak 'em bite off de heads o' baccer wurms; mysef I'd ruther tuk a lickin."

Fleming Clark OH-8

My parents lived very light de first year after de war. We lived in a log cabin. De white man helped dem a little. My father went to work makin' charcoal. Der wuz no school for Negroes and no land that I remember.

De overseer wuz poor white trash. His rules were you hed to be out on de plantation before daylight. Sometimes we hed to sit around on de fence to wait for daylight and we did not go in before dark. We go in bout one for meals.

Hannah Davidson OH-9

"Our folks was so cruel, the slaves used to whisper 'round. Some of them knew they was free, even if the white folks didn't want 'em to find out they was free. They

went off in the woods sometimes. But I was just a little kid and I wasn't allowed to go around the big folks.

"I seen enough what the old folks went through. My sister and I went through enough after slavery was over. For twenty-one long years we were enslaved, even after we were supposed to be free. We didn't even know we were free. We had to wash the white people's feet when they took their shoes off at night--the men and women.

"My mother was the last slave to get off the plantation. She travelled across the plantation all night with us children. It was pouring rain. The white folks surrounded her and took away us children, and gave her so many minutes to get off the plantation. We never saw her again. She died away from us.

"What I call the Ku Klux were those people who met at night and if they heard anybody saying you was free, they would take you out at night and whip you. They were the plantation owners. I never saw them ride, but I heard about them and what they did. My master used to tell us he wished he knew who the Ku Kluxers were. But he knew, all right, I used to wait on table and I heard them talking. 'Gonna lynch another nigger tonight!'

Mary Belle Dempsey OH-10

"We had our churches, too. Sometimes the white folks would try to cause trouble when the negroes were holding their meetings, then a night the men of the church would place chunks and matches on the white folks gate post. In the morning the white folks would find them and know that it was a warning if they din't quit causing trouble their buildings would be burned."

"There was a farm that joined my parents' master's place and the owner was about ready to sell the mother slave with her five small children. The children carried on so much because they were to be separated that the mistress bought them back although she had very little money to spare."

David A. Hall OH-13

"I do remember the 'night riders' that come through our country after the war. They put the horse shoes on the horses backwards and wrapped the horses feet in burlap so we couldn't hear them coming. The colored folks were deathly afraid of these men and would all run and hide when they heard they were coming. These 'night riders' used to steal everything the colored people had--even their beds and straw ticks.

Celia Henderson OH-14

"Cookin'? Yes'em, way meat is so high now, ah likes groundhog. Ground hog is good eatin. A peddler was by wid groun' hog fo ten cents apiece. Ground hog is good as fried chicken any day. You cleans de hog, an boils it in salt water til its tender. Den you makes flour gravy, puts it on after de water am drain off; you puts it in de oven wif de lid on an bakes hit a nice brown. No 'em, don' like fish so well, nor coon, nor possum, dey is too greasy. Likes chicken, groundhog an pork." Wid de wild meat you wants plain boiled potatoes, yes'em Irish potatoes, sho enough, ah heard o' eatin skunk, and muskrat, but ah ain't cookin em. But ah tells you dat groun' hog is _good eatin_ .

George Jackson OH-15

De mistress scold and beat me when I was pullin' weeds. Sometimes I pulled a cabbage stead of weed. She would jump me and beat me. I can remember cryin'. She told me she had to learn me to be careful. I remember the massa when he went to war. He was a picket in an apple tree. A Yankee soldier spied and shot him out of de tree.

I heerd some say that the overseer would take dem to de barn. I remember Tom Lewis. Then his massa sold him to our massa he told him not to let the overseer whip him. The overseer said he would whip him. One day Tom did something wrong. The overseer ordered him to de barn. Tom took his shirt off to get ready for de whippin' and when de overseer raised de whip Tom gave him one lick wid his fist and broke de overseer's neck.

Den de massa sold Tom to a man by de name of Joseph Fletcher. He stayed with old man Fletcher til he died.

Rev. Perry Sid Jemison OH-16

"My grandmother wuz named Snooky and my grandfather Anthony. I thought der wasn't a better friend in all de world den my grandmother. She would do all she could for her grandchildren. Der wuz no food allowance for chillun that could not work and my grandmother fed us out of her and my mudders allowance. I member my grandmudder giving us pot-licker, bread and red syrup.

"I knowed one colored boy. He wuz a fighter. He wuz six foot tall and over 200 pounds. He would not stand to be whipped by de white man. Dey called him Jack. Des wuz after de surrender. De white men could do nothin' wid him. En so one day dey got a crowd together and dey shoot him. It wuz a senation[TR: sensation?] in de country, but no one was arrested for it.

"I married Lizzie Perry, in Perry County Alabama. A preacher married us by the name of John Jemison. We just played around after de weddin' and hed a good time til bedtime come, and dat wuz very soon wid me.

Julia King OH-17

"My mother's mistress--I don't remember her name--used to come and take Mary with her to market every day. The morning my mother ran away, her mistress decided she wouldn't take Mary with her to market. Mamma was glad, because she had almost made up her mind to go, even without Mary.

"Mamma went down to the boat. A man on the boat told Mamma not to answer the door for anybody, until he gave her the signal. The man was a Quaker, one of those people who says 'Thee' and 'Thou'. Mary kept on calling out the mistress's name and Mamma couldn't keep her still.

"When the boat docked, the man told Mamma he thought her master was about. He told Mamma to put a veil over her face, in case the master was coming. He told Mamma he would cut the master's heart out and give it to her, before he would ever let her be taken.

"Mamma said the Ku Klux was against the Catholics, but not against the Negroes. The Nightriders would turn out at night. They were also called the Know-Nothings, that's what they always said. They were the same as the Nightriders. One night, the Nightriders in Louisville surrounded a block of buildings occupied by Catholic

people. They permitted the women and children to exscape, but killed all the men. When they found out the men were putting on women's clothes, they killed everything, women and children, too. It was terrible. That must have been about eighty years ago, when I was a very little girl.

Kisey McKimm OH-19

Marse Jacob was good to his slaves, but his son, Clay was mean. Ah remembah once when he took mah Mammy out and whipped her cauz she forgot to put cake in his basket, when he went huntin'. But dat was de las' time, cauz de master heard of it and cussed him lak God has come down from Hebbin.

De great day on de plantation, was Christmas when we all got a little present from de Master. De men slaves would cut a whole pile of wood fo' de fiah place 'n pile it on de porch. As long as de whole pile of wood lasted we didn't hab to work but when it was gone, our Christmas was ovah.

Our Master was what white folks call a "miser". I remembah one time, he hid \$3,000, between de floor an' de ceilin', but when he went fur it, de rats had done chewed it all up into bits.

One time, dey sent me down de road to fetch somethin' 'n I heerd a bunch of horses comin', ah jumped ovah de fence 'n hid behind de elderberry bushes, until dey passed, den ah ran home 'n tol' 'em what ah done seen. Pretty soon dey come to de house, 125 Union soldiers an' asked fo' something to eat. We all jumped roun' and fixed dem a dinnah, when dey finished, dey looked for Master, but he was hid. Dey was gentlemen 'n didn't botha or take nothin'. When de war was ovah de Master gave Mammy a house an' 160 acre farm, but when he died, his son Clay tole us to get out of de place or he'd burn de house an' us up in it, so we lef an' moved to Paris.

John William Matheus OH-22

"I remember the Yankee Soldier, a string of them on horses, coming through Springfield, W. Va. It was like a circus parade. What made me remember that, was a colored man standing near me who had a new hat on his head. A soldier came by and saw the hat and he took it off the colored man's head, and put his old dirty one on the colored man's head and put the nice new one on his own head."

"Mary Blue had two daughters, both a little older than me and I played with them. One day they went to pick berries. When they came back they left the berries on the table in the kitchen and went to the front room to talk to their mother. I remember the two steps down to the room and I came to listen to them tell about berry pickin'. Then their mother told me to go sweep the kitchen. I went and took the broom and saw the berries. I helped myself to the berries. Mary wore soft shoes, so I did not hear her coming until she was nearly in the room. I had berries in my hand and I closed my hand around the handle of the broom with the berries in my hand. She says, 'John, what are you doin'? I say, 'nothin'. Den she say, 'Let me see your hand! I showed her my hand with nothin' in it. She say, 'let me see the other hand! I had to show her my hand with the berries all crushed an the juice on my hand and on the handle of the broom."

"Den she say; 'You done two sins'. 'You stole the berries!, I don't mind you having the berries, but you should have asked for them. 'You stole them and you have sinned. 'Den you told a lie! She says, 'John I must punish you, I want you to be a

good man; don't try to be a great man, be a good man then you will be a great man! She got a switch off a peach tree and she gave me a good switching. I never forgot being caught with the berries and the way she talked bout my two sins. That hurt me worse than the switching. I never stole after that."

William Nelson OH-23

"How'd I cum North? Well, one day I run 'way from plantashun and hunted 'til I filled a bucket full turtl' eggs den I takes dem ovah on river what I hears der's sum Yankee soljers and de soljers buyed my eggs and hepped me on board de boat. Den Marse Ben, he wuz Yankee ofser, tol 'em he take cair me and he did. Den Marse Ben got sick and cum home and brung me along and I staid with 'em 'til I wuz 'bout fo'ty, when I gets married and moved to Wyllis Hill. My wife, was Mary Williams, but she died long time 'go and so did our little son, since dat time I've lived alone."

Catherine Slim OH-24

I wuz bound out by de court to Marse Barley and Miss Sally. I had to git up fore daylight and look at de clock wid de candle. I held up de candle to de clock, but couldn't tell de time. Den dey ask me if de little hand wuz on three mark or four mark. Dey wouldn't tell me de time but bye and bye I learned de time myself.

I asked de mistress to learn me a book and she sez, "Don't yo know we not allowed to learn you niggers nothin', don't ask me dat no more. I'll kill you if you do." I wuzn't goin' to ask her dat anymore.

De feed us plenty. We had pork, corn, rabbit, dey hed eberythin' nice. Dey made us stan' up to eat. Dey no low us sit down to eat. Der wuz bout twenty or thirty slaves on de farm an some ob dem hed der own gardens. Anythin' dey gib us to eat I liked. Dey had bees and honey.

Anna Smith OH-26

She remembers the baying of blood hounds at night along the Ohio River, trying to follow the scent of escaping negroes and the crack of firearms as white people, employed by the plantation owners attempted to halt the negroes in their efforts to cross the Ohio River into Ohio or to join the Federal army.

Nan Stewart OH-27

"Marse an' missus, mighty kind to us slaves. I lurned to sew, piece quilts, clean de brass an' irons an' dog irons. Most time I set with de ol' ladies, an' light deir pipes, an' tote 'em watah, in gourds. I us' tu gether de turkey eggs an' guinea eggs an' sell 'em. I gits ten cents duzen fo' de eggs. Marse and Missus wuz English an' de count money like dis--fo' pence, ha' penny. Whut I do with my money? Chile I saved it to buy myself a nankeen dress."

"Yes mam we always had plenty to eat. What'd I like bes' to eat, waffl's, honey and stuffed sausage, but I spise possum and coon. Marse Hunt had great big meat hous' chuck full all kinds of meats. Say, do you all know Marse used to keep stuffed sausage in his smoke hous' fo' yeahs an' it wuz shure powahful good when it wuz cooked. Ouah kitchin wuz big an' had great big fiah place whur we'd bake ouah bread in de ashes. We baked ouah corn pone an' biskets in a big spidah. I still have dat spidah an' uses it."

"By the way you knows Squire Gellison wuz sum fishahman an' shure to goodness ketchd lots ob fish. Why he'd ketch so many, he'd clean 'em, cut 'em up, put 'em in half barrels an' pass 'em 'round to de people on de farms."

"Most de slaves on Marse Hunt's place had dir own garden patches. Sumtimes dey'd have to hoe the gardens by moonlight. Dey sell deir vegetables to Marse Hunt."

"I 'member very well de day de Yankees cum. De slaves all cum a runnin' an' yellin': "Yankees is cumin', Yankee soljers is comin', hurrah". Bout two or three clock, we herd bugles blowing' an' guns on Taylah Ridge. Kids wuz playin' an' all 'cited. Sumone sed: "Kathrun, sumthin' awful gwine happen", an' sumone else sez; "De' is de Yankees". De Yankee mens camp on ouah farm an' buyed ouah buttah, milk an' eggs. Marse Hunt, whut you all call 'billionist [HW: abolitionist] an' he wuz skeered of suthern soljers an' went out to de woods an' laid behind a log fo' seben weeks and seben days, den he 'cided to go back home. He sez he had a dream an' prayed, "I had bettah agone, but I prayed. No use let des debils take you, let God take you." We tote food an' papahs to Marse while he wuz a hidin'."

Samuel Sutton OH-28

Run a way slaves?_ No'em nevah know ed of any. Mars. Ballinger neighbor, old Mars. Tye--he harbor culled folks dat cum ask fo sumpin to eat in winter--n' he get 'em to stay awhile and do a little wuk fo him. Now, he did always have one or two 'roun dere dat way,--dat ah recollects--dat he didn't own. Maybe dey was runaway, maybe dey wuz just tramps an didn't belong to noboddy. Nevah hear o' anybody claimin' dem--dey stay awhile an wuk, den move on--den mo' cum, wuk while then move on. Mars. Tye--he get his wuk done dat way, cheap.

"No'em, don't believe in anything lak dat much. We use to sprinkle salt in a thin line 'roun Mars. Ballinger's house, clear 'roun, to ward off quarellin an arguein' an ol' Miss Ballinger gettin a cross spell,--dat ah members, an then too;--ah don believe in payin out money on a Monday. You is liable to be a spendin an a losin' all week if you do. Den ah don' want see de new moon (nor ol' moon either) through, de branches o' trees. Ah know' a man dat see de moon tru de tree branches, an he were lookin' tru de bars 'a jail fo de month were out--an fo sumpin he nevah done either,--jus enuf bad luck--seein a moon through bush."

Richard Toler OH-29

"They nevah mistreated me, neithah. They's a whipping the slaves all the time, but ah run away all the time. And ah jus' tell them--if they whipped me, ah'd kill 'em, and ah nevah did get a whippin'. If ah thought one was comin' to me, Ah'd hide in the woods; then they'd send aftah me, and they say, 'Come, on back--we won't whip you'. But they killed some of the niggahs, whipped 'em to death. Ah guess they killed three or fo' on Tolah's place while ah was there.

"Some of the people I belonged to was in the Klu Klux Klan. Tolah had fo' girls and fo' boys. Some of those boys belonged. And I used to see them turn out. They went aroun' whippin' niggahs. They'd get young girls and strip 'em sta'k naked, and put 'em across barrels, and whip 'em till the blood run out of 'em, and then they would put salt in the raw pahts. And ah seen it, and it was as bloody aroun' em as if they'd stuck hogs.

"I sho' is glad I ain't no slave no moah. Ah thank God that ah lived to pas the yeahs until the day of 1937. Ah'm happy and satisfied now, and ah hopes ah see a million yeahs to come."

William Williams OH-32

I was too young to remember anything about the slave days although I do remember that I never saw a pair of shoes until I was old enough to work. My father was a cobbler and I used to have to whittle out shoe pegs for him and I had to walk sometimes six miles to get pine knots which we lit at night so my mother could see to work.