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The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives. Edited by T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996. Photographs, bibliography, index. xvi + 543 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

The editors of this rich work of research and compilation have done an outstanding job in bringing together the entire huge collection of previously published and recently rediscovered Oklahoma ex-slave narratives. These accounts resulted from interviews conducted during the late 1930s by field workers of the Oklahoma Federal Writers' Project, part of a national Depression-era employment program that fortuitously appeared while the decreasing numbers of elderly former slaves were still alive to tell their stories.

The unemployed writers and schoolteachers who served as reporters were both black and white, and there is no doubt that the responses given by each interviewee depended upon the race of the person asking the questions. But other factors in assessing the narratives must also be considered. The project workers asked each person a prepared set of questions, transcribing responses onto legal pads. Later, they rewrote each interview in story form, standardizing black speech expressions, revising, and editing before sending the rewrite off to Washington, D.C.

Despite the difficulties in determining the accuracy of the slave accounts, there is much in these stories that is historically valuable,

interesting, and instructive. Reading the 130 Oklahoma narratives related by the last generation of African Americans who underwent the rigors of slavery reveals numerous patterns and recurrent experiences that cannot be dismissed by critics' objections to the ex-slaves' distant recollections or field workers' editorial interference.

Running throughout this collection is a pattern of imagery and thematic emphasis that validates the genuineness of most of the informants' memories and reporters' transcriptions. For example, three of the most repeated experiences recounted by the elderly blacks deal with the terror and humiliation of the auction block, the vicious whippings administered by harsh masters and overseers, and the cruel watchfulness of the patrollers who were described by one of the informants as "low white trash what jest wanted a excuse to shoot niggers." A common theme similarly emerging from these narratives is the feeling among many black speakers that while freedom was a blessing, life after emancipation remained difficult and continued to be marked by racial prejudice.

The sexual exploitation of slave women by their white masters becomes another frequently recalled and retold experience. Several of the women narrators spoke candidly of such incidents, their testimony confirming the belief that large numbers of mulatto children were born on slave plantations. The slave narratives also reveal that another kind of racial intermingling occurred because of the little-known fact that many Oklahoma African Americans were owned by Indian tribes, namely the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws. Native Americans in general treated their slaves better than white masters did, and a large number of blacks became full members of tribal nations, some taking Indian spouses.

Many of the slave accounts collected in the Bakers' edition make for fascinating reading in their own right besides providing a rich storehouse of historical recovery. For this we can thank the WPA field reporters and numer-

ous scholars who have preserved the ex-slaves' remembrances. But most of all we must be steadfastly grateful to those brave elderly men and women of the 1930s who painfully forced themselves to recall their experiences during a shameful era of American history.

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