

Interview with Willis Cozart

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Former slave Willis Cozart, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks in Zebulon, North Carolina, May 12, 1937. From the WPA Slave Narrative Project.

As you read...

This “slave narrative” was based on an interview conducted in the 1930s as part of a federal government project to record the experiences of formerly enslaved people. These narratives can be difficult to read, but from them we can learn not only about the experience of slavery but about the time period when the interview took place.

Before beginning, please read this guide to reading slave narratives (page). Then explore a single narrative in depth with this guided study before exploring this one on your own.

As you will note, the transcripts of the interviews with former slaves are often quite racist. Interviewers were instructed to transcribe interviews in a way that reflected white assumptions about how blacks spoke. As you read, be aware you may “hear” the person speaking in a way that is stereotypical and not necessarily accurate.

Oral history interviews are complicated sources. The person who was interviewed was remembering events that happened years earlier. The interviewer and interviewee made assumptions about each other, which affected the questions that were asked and the answers that were given. Interviews are not just memories; they are conversations shaped by beliefs and attitudes of the time period in which the interview was recorded.

Despite their difficulties and problems, the interviews with former slaves are one of the few sources we have about the lives of enslaved people from their own perspective, and we can learn a great deal from them about the experience of slavery.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Cozart was a child when he was a slave. How do you think his age affected his experience and what he remembered?
2. How did Cozart describe slave masters? What differences did he notice? What did he say about his different masters?
3. What did Cozart say about food? How much was he given to eat? Was he given enough to eat?
4. What type of work was Cozart or his family asked to perform?
5. What does Cozart recall about being punished as a slave? Why was he punished and how? Why and how were other enslaved people punished according to Cozart?
6. What did Cozart tell the interviewer about slave sales? What does his account tell us about the family life under slavery?

7. Did Cozart recall any fond memories of his life before freedom? What do these memories tell us about the abilities of enslaved men and women to create lives for themselves despite the brutalities of slavery?
8. What limitations were put on Cozart's abilities to socialize with other enslaved people in the neighborhood?

I wuz borned on June 11, 1845 in Person County. My papa wuz named Ed an' my maw wuz named Sally. Dar wuz ten of us youngins, Morris, Dallas, Stephen, Jerry, Florence, Polly, Lena, Phillis, Carolina, an' me. Mr. Starling Oakley of Person County, near Roxboro wuz my master an' as long as him an' ole mistress lived I went back ter see dem.

He wuz right good to de good niggers an' kinder strick wid de bad ones. Pusonly he ain't never have me whupped by two or three times. You's hyard 'bout dese set down strikes lately,¹ well dey ain't de fust ones. Onct when I wuz four or five years old, too little to wuck in de fiel's, my master sot me an' some more little chilluns ter wuck pullin up weeds roun' de house. Well, I makes a speech and I tells dem le's down wuck none so out we sprawls on de grass under de apple tree. Atter awhile ole master found us dar, an' when he fin's dat I wuz de ring-leader he gives me a little whuppin'.

Hit wuz a big plantation, round 1,200 acres o' land, I reckon, an' he had 'bout seventy or eighty slaves to wuck de cotton, corn, tobacco an' de wheat an' vege'bles. De big house wuz sumpin to look at, but de slave cabins wuz jist log huts wid sand floors, and stick an' dirt chimneys. We wuz 'lowed ter have a little patch o' garden stuff at de back but no chickens ner pigs. De only way we had er' makin' money wuz by pickin' berries an' sellin' 'em. We ain't had much time to do dat, case we wucked frum sunup till sundown six days a week.

De master fed us as good as he knowed how, but it wuz mostly on bread, meat, an vege'bles.

I 'members seberal slave sales whar dey sold de pappy or de mammy 'way frum de chilluns an' dat wuz a sad time. Dey led dem up one at de time an' axed dem questions an' dey warn't many what wuz chained, only de bad ones, an' sometime when dey wuz travelin' it wuz necessary to chain a new gang.

I'se seed niggers beat till de blood run, an' I'se seed plenty more wid big scars, frum whuppin's but dey wuz de bad ones. You wuz whupped 'cordin' ter de deed yo' done in dem days. A moderate whuppin' wuz thirty-nin or forty lashes an' a real whuppin' wuz an even hundred; most folks can't stand a real whuppin'.

Frum all dis you might think dat we ain't had no good times, but we had our co'n shuckin's, candy pullin's an' sich like. We ain't felt like huntin' much, but I did go on a few fox hunts wid de master. I uster go fishin' too, but I ain't been now since 1873, I reckon. We sometimes went ter de neighborhood affairs if'n we wuz good, but if we wuzn't an' didn't git a pass de patter-rollers² would shoes git us. When dey got through whuppin' a nigger he knowed he wuz whupped too.

De slave weddin's in dat country wuz sorta dis way: de man axed de master fer de 'oman an' he jist told dem ter step over de broom an' dat wuz de way dey got married dem days; de pore white folks done de same way.

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Notes

1. The 1930s saw strikes and labor disputes across the United States. Cozart is making a joke by referencing these strikes, but he's also reminding the interviewer that slaves sometimes resisted their slave masters.
2. Paddyrollers were white men hired by a (white) community to patrol the slaves in gangs. If they found a black person (free or enslaved) whom they believed was a runaway, they could punish him or her for being a fugitive slave.

About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.