

***Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation***

*Remembering Slavery* is a compilation of interviews of former slaves gathered by historians during the 1930's and 1940. The interviews were the work of the federally sponsored the Federal Writers Project after the Great Depression. The Federal Writers Project collected thousands personal stories from formers slaves in over seventeen states. Once finished, the first-hand accounts were collected by the Library of Congress where they were released in several editions.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were also broadcasted as a radio documentary by Smithsonian Productions. The broadcast included recordings from former slaves as well as readings by well known African-American actors. Remembering Slavery is divided into five sections. Each section focuses on a specific part of slave life from slave labor and culture to the post-emancipation years.

The first chapter "The Faces of Power" focuses on the relationship between slaves and their masters and mistresses. The testimonies depict a life of hard long hours of labor, separation and violence. Harriet Smith, who was interviewed by John Henry Faulk in 1941, describes the slave-owner relationship as "It's bad to belong to folks dat own you soul an' body; dat can tie you up to a tree, wid yo' face to de tree and yo' arms fastened tight aroun'; who take a long curlin' whip an' cut de blood ever' lick. Folks a mile away could hear dem awful whippings. Dey was a turrible part of livin."<sup>2</sup>

1. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), xvii

2. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 9

The mistreatment of slaves is prevalent throughout the first chapter. It also contains contradictions where some slaves like August Messersmith whose owner did not overwork his slaves nor split up families through sale, gave adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care and punished his slaves lightly if at all.<sup>3</sup>

The next three sections of *Remembering Slavery*, “Work and Slave Life: From Can to Can’t,” “Family Life in Slavery,” and “Slave Culture,” extensively studies the slaves’ daily labor routine from the long hours including their responsibilities in the fields or in the master’s house, their supervision, and most importantly their culture and religion. In his interview, Wes Brown recalls:

“Some white folks might want to put me back in slavery if I tells how we was used in slavery time, but you asked me for the truth. The overseer was ‘straddle his big horse at three o’clock in the mornin’, roustin’ the hands off to the field. He got them all lined up and then come back to the house for breakfas’. The rows was a mile long and no matter how much grass was in them, if you leave one sprig on your row they beats you nearly to death.”<sup>4</sup>

Even with the harsh labor life, slaves took pride in whatever they personally owned no matter how small. This included at times the small patch of land the “massa” gave them to till on Sundays, their family members who either lived on the plantation or close by and their religion. Still slaves recognized that their possessions were not truly theirs. A master could ficklely separate a family through sale, marry two unknowing slaves to produce offspring or deny marriage. Former slave Matthew Jarrett as well as others knew the falsehood of marriage by stating “we slaves knowed that them words wasn’t bindin’. Don’t mean nothin’ lesson you say “What God done jined, cain’t no man pull

3. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 11

4. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 75

asunder.” But dey never would say dat, Jus’ say, “Now you married.””<sup>5</sup>

God and religion played an important role in the slave-master relationship. Slaves recognized that the religion introduced by their masters was one that was molded to protect slavery and prevent rebellion. The Bible was rewritten by white preachers to enforce slavery. Beverly Jones depicts Christian services as the following, “Niggers had to set an’ listen to the white man’s sermon, but they didn’ want to ‘cause they knowed it by heart. Always took his text from Ephesians, the white preacher did, the part what said, “Obey your masters, be good servant.””<sup>6</sup> To counteract “white Christianity” slaves took it upon themselves to practice their own form Christianity. With the threat of violence from their masters and patrollers, slaves secretly gathered in clearings deep in the woods or at worshippers’ houses where black preachers prayed for their salvation and freedom.

The final chapter, “Slaves No More”, is the most important chapter of all. “Slaves No More” gives a first-hand account of the atmosphere during and after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. It guides the reader through the feelings of apprehension and jubilation of a finally free large labor class. Former slaves chronicled their personal journey to freedom from their masters’ plantation to the front lines of battle serving Union regiments. For example, Thomas Cole remembers escaping from Alabama and joining the Union soldiers located in Tennessee. While serving Union soldiers, Cole saw the brutality of war on both sides. Cole prayed “I jes’ promises de

5. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 126

6. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 192

good Lawd if he jes' let me git out dat mess, I wouldn't run off no more, but I didn't know den he wasn't gwine let me out with jes dat battle. He gwine give me plenty more, but dat battle ain't over yet, fer nex' mornin' de Rebels 'gins shootin and killin' lots of our men.”<sup>7</sup> While some welcomed freedom and saw Union soldiers on their plantations and in the countryside, some masters took it upon themselves to prevent freedom by moving their slaves to Texas where the enforcement of emancipation didn't take place until after the official surrender of the Confederate Army. Katie Rowe's master promised his slaves that he would violently free his slaves. He promised, “Dem Yankees ain't gwine git dis fur, but iffen dey to you all ain't gwine git free by 'em, 'cause I gwine free you befor' dat...I gwine line you up on de bank of Bois d'Arc Creek and free you wid my shotgun!”<sup>8</sup>

*Remembering Slavery* can be used as a supplemental aid for the study of the causes of the Civil War. While Lincoln's original intention was to prevent secession of the Southern states and protect the Union, his Emancipation Proclamation recognized that the institution of slavery was the primary cause of the war. For students to understand Lincoln's justification for war against the South there needs to be a study of slavery, its effects on the slave labor class and its brutality.

The written testimonies as well as the recordings give a first-hand account of life in the South. They do not sugarcoat the treatment of slaves. The brutality endured was

7. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 224

8. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), 236

common practice. One can gloss over the treatment of slaves and most textbooks do not graphically describe it, therefore, hearing about the violence from someone who experienced it personally yields anger, disbelief, sympathy and absolution of the institution. *Remembering Slavery* can be used to study the social and economic aspects of slavery. The majority of the testimonies recount the ways in which slave masters protected slavery not only using violence to prevent rebellion but also by stripping the slaves of their identities.

When reading the book, the common theme is the lack of identity the former slaves had. Most of the interviews begin with general questions concerning age, birthplace, names of parents and siblings. What is interesting is that most of the interviewees answer these questions with some doubt. Most of the former slaves do not know their actual age or birth date. Their last names are not their own as well. It is the last name of their owner or their parents' owners. Marriage and sale split not only families but dealt with troublesome slaves by selling them. Their sale to the Deep South was seen as a punishment and threat to others. Therefore, the splitting the family and prevented the spread of family history and connections.

While it is difficult to read, linguistically the interviews along with the recordings can be used not only in Social Studies but collaboratively in English. The language spoken by many slaves was far different than common English used in the North and

today. It is a blend of Southern accented words that sometime can be difficult to understand. One has to take the context of the passage and infer the meanings of some words. For example, “massa” represents master while “chillum” signifies children. The lack of education created words that only Southern slaves and their masters could understand.<sup>9</sup>

*Remember Slavery* can be seen as a primary source but with flaws. This question can be posed to students. Why is *Remembering Slavery* not a primary source? When looking at the source one can not ignore the age of each person. Most are as young as 80 years old and as old as 100. Dementia, forgetfulness and illness can deteriorate the validation of the information presented. Some of the stories can also be considered hearsay. These stories could be passed down from one person to the next. Information might have been changed for dramatic reasons. Information could have also been omitted to present a family member or friend with an aura of innocence.

The accounts within *Remembering Slavery* as well as the included CD can be used as an introduction to the subject of slavery. Each interview gives specific details about slavery. Gathered as a whole, one can get a full history of life in the South. There is no one focus but a wide range of topics from slave labor, slave culture, the slave/master relationship, religion, and life after emancipation. A teacher can pick different sections for the class to explore with some caution. Lastly, students can also use these documents to argue the historiography and validity of the text in the context of history.

9. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007), xxiii

## Works Cited

Berlin, Ira et.al. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. Washington D.C.: The New Press, 2007