

MEMORANDUM

July 30, 1937

TO: STATE DIRECTORS OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

FROM: Henry G. Alsberg, Director

The following general suggestions are being sent to all the States where there are ex-slaves still living. They will not apply *in toto* to your State as they represent general conclusions reached after reading the mass of ex-slave material already submitted. However, they will, I hope, prove helpful as an indication, along broad lines, of what we want.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS:

1. Instead of attempting to interview a large number of ex-slaves the workers should now concentrate on one or two of the more interesting and intelligent people, revisiting them, establishing friendly relations, and drawing them out over a period of time.

2. The specific questions suggested to be asked of the slaves should be only a basis, a beginning. The talk should run to all subjects, and the interviewer should take care to seize upon the information already given, and stories already told, and from them derive other questions.

3. The interviewer should take the greatest care not to influence the point of view of the informant, and not to let his own opinion on the subject of slavery become obvious. Should the ex-slave, however, give only one side of the picture, the interviewer should suggest that there were other circumstances, and ask questions about them.

4. We suggest that each state choose one or two of their most successful ex-slave interviewers and have them take down some stories *word for word*. Some Negro informants are marvellous in their ability to participate in this type of interview. *All stories should be as nearly word-for-word as is possible.*

5. More emphasis should be laid on questions concerning the lives of the individual's since they were freed.

SUGGESTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS:

The interviewer should attempt to weave the following questions naturally into the conversation, in simple language. Many of the interviews show that the workers have simply sprung routine questions out of context, and received routine answers.

1. What did the ex-slaves expect from freedom? Forty acres and a mule? A distribution of the land of their masters' plantation?

2. What did the slaves get after freedom? Were any of the planta-

tions actually divided up? Did their masters give them any money? Were they under any compulsion after the war to remain as servants?

3. What did the slaves do after the war? What did they receive generally? What do they think about the reconstruction period?

4. Did secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan exert or attempt to exert any influence over the lives of ex-slaves?

5. Did the ex-slaves ever vote? If so, under what circumstances? Did any of their friends ever hold political office? What do the ex-slaves think of the present restricted suffrage?

6. What have the ex-slaves been doing in the interim between 1864 and 1937? What jobs have they held (in detail)? How are they supported nowadays?

7. What do the ex-slaves think of the younger generation of Negroes and of present conditions?

8. Were there any instances of slave uprisings?

9. Were any of the ex-slaves in your community living in Virginia at the time of the Nat Turner rebellion? Do they remember anything about it?

10. What songs were there of the period?

The above sent to: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Ga., Kentucky, La., Md., Mississippi, Mo., N. Car., Okla., S. Car., Tenn., Texas, Virginia, W. Va., Ohio, Kansas, Indiana

STORIES FROM EX-SLAVES

The main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery. If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions. It should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any material collected, regardless of its nature.

It will not be necessary, indeed it will probably be a mistake, to ask every person all of the questions. Any incidents or facts he can recall should be written down as nearly as possible just as he says them, but do not use dialect spelling so complicated that it may confuse the reader.

A second visit, a few days after the first one, is important, so that the worker may gather all the worthwhile recollections that the first talk has aroused.

QUESTIONS:

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Give names of your brothers and sisters. Tell about your life with them and describe your home and the "quarters." Describe

the beds and where you slept. Do you remember anything about your grandparents or any stories told you about them?

3. What work did you do in slavery days? Did you ever earn any money? How? What did you buy with this money?

4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?

5. What clothing did you wear in hot weather? Cold weather? On Sundays? Any shoes? Describe your wedding clothes.

6. Tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors.

7. How many acres in the plantation? How many slaves on it? How and at what time did the overseer wake up the slaves? Did they work hard and late at night? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you saw. Tell some of the stories you heard.

8. Was there a jail for slaves? Did you ever see any slaves sold or auctioned off? How did groups of slaves travel? Did you ever see slaves in chains?

9. Did the white folks help you to learn to read and write?

10. Did the slaves have a church on your plantation? Did they read the Bible? Who was your favorite preacher? Your favorite spirituals? Tell about the baptizing; baptizing songs. Funerals and funeral songs.

11. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? Why? What did you hear about patrollers? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another? Did you hear of trouble between the blacks and whites?

12. What did the slaves do when they went to their quarters after the day's work was done on the plantation? Did they work on Saturday afternoons? What did they do Saturday nights? Sundays? Christmas morning? New Year's Day? Any other holidays? Cornshucking? Cotton Picking? Dances? When some of the white master's family married or died? A wedding or death among the slaves?

13. What games did you play as a child? Can you give the words or sing any of the play songs or ring games of the children? Riddles? Charms? Stories about "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" or other "hants" or ghosts? Stories about animals? What do you think of voodoo? Can you give the words or sing any lullabies? Work songs? Plantation hollers? Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen.

14. When slaves became sick who looked after them? What medicines did the doctors give them? What medicine (herbs, leaves, or roots) did the slaves use for sickness? What charms did they wear and to keep off what diseases?

15. What do you remember about the war that brought your freedom? What happened on the day news came that you were free? What did your master say and do? When the Yankees came what did they do and say?

16. Tell what work you did and how you lived the first year after the war and what you saw or heard about the Ku Klux Klan and the Nightriders. Any school then for Negroes? Any land?

17. Whom did you marry? Describe the wedding. How many children and grandchildren have you and what are they doing?

18. What do you think of Abraham Lincoln? Jefferson Davis? Booker Washington? Any other prominent white man or Negro you have known or heard of?

19. Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it? Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious.

20. Was the overseer "poor white trash"? What were some of his rules?

The details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original statements. An example of material collected through one of the interviews with ex-slaves is attached herewith. Although this material was collected before the standard questionnaire had been prepared, it represents an excellent method of reporting an interview. More information might have been obtained however, if a comprehensive questionnaire had been used.

*Notes by an editor on dialect usage in accounts
by interviews with ex-slaves. (To be used in
conjunction with Supplementary Instructions 9E.)*

Simplicity in recording the dialect is to be desired in order to hold the interest and attention of the readers. It seems to me that readers are repelled by pages sprinkled with misspellings, commas and apostrophes. The value of exact phonetic transcription is, of course, a great one. But few artists attempt this completely. Thomas Nelson Page was meticulous in his dialect; Joel Chandler Harris less meticulous but in my opinion even more accurate. But the values they sought are different from the values that I believe this book of slave narratives should have. Present day readers are less ready for the overstress of phonetic spelling than in the days of local color. Authors realize this: Julia Peterkin uses a modified Gullah instead of Gonzales' carefully spelled out Gullah. Howard Odum has questioned the use of goin' for going since the g is seldom pronounced even by the educated.

Truth to idiom is more important, I believe, than truth to pronunciation. Erskine Caldwell in his stories of Georgia, Ruth Suckow in stories of Iowa, and Zora Neale Hurston in stories of Florida Negroes get a truth to the manner of speaking without excessive misspellings. In order to make this volume of slave narratives more appealing and less difficult for the average reader, I recommend that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary.

I appreciate the fact that many of the writers have recorded sensitively. The writer who wrote "ret" for right is probably as accurate as the one who spelled it "raght." But in a single publication, not devoted to a study of local speech, the reader may conceivably be puzzled by different spellings of the same word. The words "whafolks," "whufolks," "whi'folks," etc., can all be heard in the South. But "white-

folks" is easier for the reader, and the word itself is suggestive of the setting and the attitude.

Words that definitely have a notably different pronunciation from the usual should be recorded as heard. More important is the recording of words with a different local meaning. Most important, however, are the turns of phrase that have flavor and vividness. Examples occurring in the copy I read are:

durin' of de war
 ourman my daddy (good, but unnecessarily put into quotes)
 piddled in de fields
 skit of woods
 kinder chillish

There are, of course, questionable words, for which it may be hard to set up a single standard. Such words are:

paddyrollers, padrollers, pattyrollers	for patrollers
missis, mistess	for mistress
marsa, massa, maussa, mastuh	for master
ter, tuh, teh	for to

I believe that there should be, for this book, a uniform word for each of these.

The following list is composed of words which I think should not be used. These are merely samples of certain faults:

1. ah	for	I
2. bawn	for	born
3. capper	for	caper
4. com'	for	come
5. do	for	dough
6. ebry, ev'ry	for	every
7. hawd	for	hard
8. muh	for	my
9. nakid	for	naked
10. ole, ol'	for	old
11. ret, raght	for	right
12. snaik	for	snake
13. sowd	for	sword
14. sto'	for	store
15. teh	for	tell
16. twon't	for	twan't
17. useter, useta	for	used to
18. uv	for	of
19. waggin	for	wagon
20. whi'	for	white
21. wuz	for	was

I should like to recommend that the stories be told in the language of the ex-slave, without excessive editorializing and "artistic" introductions on the part of the interviewer. The contrast between the directness of the ex-slave speech and the roundabout and at times pompous comments of the interviewer is frequently glaring. Care should be taken lest expressions such as the following creep in: "inflicting wounds from which he never fully recovered" (supposed to be spoken by an ex-slave).

Finally, I should like to recommend that the words *darky* and *nigger* and such expressions as "a comical little old black woman" be omitted from the editorial writing. Where the ex-slave himself uses these, they should be retained.

This material sent June 20 to states of : Ala., Ark., Fla., Ga., Ky., La., Md., Miss., Mo., N.C., Ohio, Okla., Tenn., Texas, Va., and S. Car.

Negro Dialect Suggestions
(*Stories of Ex-Slaves*)

Do not write:

<i>Ah</i> for I	<i>Gwainter</i> for gwineter (going to)
<i>Poe</i> for po' (poor)	<i>Oman</i> for woman
<i>Hit</i> for it	<i>Ifn</i> for iffen (if)
<i>Tuh</i> for to	<i>Fiih</i> or <i>fiab</i> for fire
<i>Wuz</i> for was	<i>Uz</i> or <i>uv</i> or <i>o'</i> for of
<i>Baid</i> for bed	<i>Poar</i> for poor or po'
<i>Daid</i> for dead	<i>J'in</i> for jine
<i>Ouh</i> for our	<i>Coase</i> for cose
<i>Mah</i> for my	<i>Utha</i> for other
<i>Ovah</i> for over	<i>Yo'</i> for you
<i>Othuh</i> for other	<i>Gi'</i> for give
<i>Wha</i> for whar (where)	<i>Cot</i> for caught
<i>Undah</i> for under	<i>Kin'</i> for kind
<i>Fuh</i> for for	<i>Cose</i> for 'cause
<i>Yondah</i> for yonder	<i>Tho't</i> for thought
<i>Moster</i> for marster or massa	