

# MEMORIES OF SLAVERY DAYS IN KENTUCKY

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A complicating factor in the study of slavery in Kentucky or elsewhere is the scarcity of materials which reveal the thought of the slave himself. Most records of the "peculiar institution" depict it as the owners saw it, or as viewed by a traveler passing through the South, or as denounced by an abolitionist. Of course some slaves or former slaves wrote accounts of their servitude, but they were exceptions; most of the millions of slaves who lived in the United States left no record of their bondage.

By the 1920's the number of former slaves was dwindling rapidly, and several scholars became convinced that a systematic effort should be made to preserve their memories of a vanished era and a discarded institution. Increased interest in black culture, inspired by such scholars as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. DuBois, contributed to the growing interest in preserving such information. Fisk and Southern universities both attempted interview projects in 1929, but they were handicapped by insufficient funds, and little was accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

In 1934 Lawrence D. Reddick, then a faculty member at Kentucky State College, proposed the establishment of a comprehensive federal project to collect the information. The project could be staffed, he suggested, by unemployed graduates of Negro colleges as a part of the federal work relief program. His project was not successful, but the idea was soon adopted for a program conducted under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project, a part of the Works Progress Administration.<sup>2</sup>

The preliminary interviewing of ex-slaves under this program began in Georgia in 1936; formal instructions were issued on April 1, 1937. Before the termination of the project in the spring of 1939 some 2,000 personal interviews were collected in seventeen states. Arkansas, South Carolina and Texas supplied 1,259 of that number; Arkansas alone represented close to one-third of the total interviews. The interviews, which varied greatly in length and value, ran to over 10,000 typed

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<sup>1</sup>Norman R. Yetman, *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution"* (New York, 1970), pp. 339-344. One of the few comprehensive efforts to view slavery as the slaves saw it is Stanley Feldstein, *Once A Slave: The Slaves' View of Slavery* (New York, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>Yetman, *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution,"* pp. 344-346.

pages. Benjamin A. Botkin was placed in charge of processing the narratives, a task which was never completed. In 1941 the manuscripts were deposited in the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress where they rested, almost unknown and unused, for nearly three decades. Botkin made limited use of the narratives in his 1945 volume, *Lay My Burden Down*, but the first major use came in 1970 when Norman R. Yetman published a selection of 102 of the most interesting accounts. No Kentucky narrative was included in his selection.<sup>3</sup> The entire collection has now been published under the editorship of George P. Rawick.<sup>4</sup>

Thirty-four Kentucky narratives are included in the collection, but several are quite brief, a few deal largely with folklore, others consist only of the interviewer's digest of what he heard, and many are repetitious. But taken as a whole, they present a rare insight into the lives of people who knew better than anyone else what it meant to be a slave in Kentucky.

The information was, of course, obtained from elderly individuals whose memories were subject to error. Childhood experiences sometimes brighten across the span of seventy years, and there is always the danger in interviewing that the person being interviewed will give the responses which he thinks are desired. It is obvious, also, that the treatment of slaves varied a great deal from master to master; there were areas of sharp disagreement, for example, among the ex-slaves over such topics as punishment and the sale of slaves.

Slavery in Kentucky did not occupy the position of importance which it possessed in the cotton states of the Lower South. The Commonwealth's percentage of slaves had declined from 24.73% in 1830 to 19.5% in 1860, and the rate of slave increase for the decade 1850-1860 was only 6.9%, the lowest for any decade since statehood.<sup>5</sup> The average white Kentuckian in 1860 did not own a slave, and the average slaveholder owned fewer than ten. Kentucky's foremost authority on the peculiar institution concludes that slavery existed within the Commonwealth in its mildest form, "better than in any other slave state, with the possible exception of Maryland or Virginia."<sup>6</sup> The threat of

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 346-355.

<sup>4</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 19 vols. Vol. I consists of Rawick's own monograph, *From Sundown to Sunup, The Making of the Black Community*; vols. II-XVII contain the Library of Congress narratives; and vols. XVIII and XIX (*Unwritten History of Slavery and God Struck Me Dead*) were compiled from materials at Fisk University.

<sup>5</sup> Bureau of the Census, *A Century of Population Growth, 1790-1900* (Washington, D.C., 1909), pp. 57, 82, 133-134; William Loren Katz, ed., *Eyewitness: The American Negro* (New York, 1967), pp. 44-45, 51, 57; Wallace B. Turner, "Kentucky Slavery in the Last Ante Bellum Decade," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 58 (Oct. 1960), pp. 291-307. Kentucky's 1860 population of 1,155,651 included 919,484 whites, 225,483 slaves, and 10,684 free blacks.

<sup>6</sup> J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1940), pp. vii, 173.

being "sold down the river" helped secure the obedience of many Kentucky slaves.

Since Kentucky officially remained in the Union, President Lincoln's famed Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to his native state.<sup>7</sup> Nor did Kentuckians see fit to abolish slavery by state action as did some sister states.<sup>8</sup> Slavery was not ended in Kentucky until December 18, 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment became a part of the Constitution.

In their narratives the thirty-four former slaves touched upon many topics, but a few themes were especially prominent — food, clothing, housing, amusements, punishment, sale and, finally, freedom. Work was frequently mentioned but seldom discussed in detail; it was something which was apparently just taken for granted. Needless to say, their experiences showed wide variations on all of these subjects. Some of the interviewers attempted to reproduce the dialect of the ex-slaves while others did not. The quotations cited here are given as they appear in the original narratives except for a few minor changes in punctuation and capitalization to facilitate reading.

#### FOOD

Few aspects of slavery were as important to a slave as food, and its quality and quantity had much to do with his general attitude toward his servitude. Several of the former slaves recalled their slave meals with delight. "Most of the cooking was done in an oven in the yard, over a bed of coals," Dan Bogie said. "Baked possum and ground hog in the oven, stewed rabbits, fried fish and fried bacon called 'streaked meat,' all kinds of vegetables, boiled cabbage, pone corn bread, and sorghum molasses. Old folks would drink coffee, but chillun would drink milk, especially buttermilk."<sup>9</sup> Bert Mayfield also recalled nostalgically eating bacon and pone bread which had been cooked in an oven set out in the yard. He and his fellow slaves drank sweet and buttermilk but no coffee; they ate cabbage, squash, and sweet and Irish potatoes from the gardens. They supplemented their diet by possums and coons and by fresh caught fish fried in a big skillet. "We sho' had big eatins," he declared.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Proclamation freed only those "persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state the people thereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States" as of January 1, 1863.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive account of the end of slavery, see Elbert B. Smith, *The Death of Slavery* (Chicago, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Dan Bogie interview, conducted in Garrard County by Eliza Ison, p. 2. No date was given, but all of the interviews were apparently conducted during the years 1936-1938. The page references cited for each interview refer to the pages in the Library of Congress narratives which were used in microfilm.

<sup>10</sup> Bert Mayfield interview, conducted in Garrard County by Eliza Ison, p. 14.

Most masters obviously encouraged hunting and fishing both as a means of supplementing food rations and providing the slaves with a means of enjoyment. Wes Woods recalled that "My young bosses, when I lived in the Kennedy family, would take the dogs and let me go coon hunting at night with them, and what big times we had." Wes had a problem because his mistress forbade him to fish on Sunday, but he solved it by leaving his Sunday string of fish in the creek until the following day when it was safe to bring them home.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Susan Dale Sanders, born and raised near Taylorsville, Kentucky, also remembered the old days with gastronomical longing. "On my master's fa'm we killed a lot of hogs for our meat, had a big trough, that we cut the meat up in, and put the hams and shoulders together, and the middles together, then put 'em down in salt for about six weeks, and then hang them up in the smokehouse and smoke 'em with hickory chips. And leave them all the time till we used 'em up. We had a apple house we used to fill every fall with the best apples. The ole master sho' had a apple fa'm. Inside of the house there was a big hole in the ground, dug deep, and we use to fill it full of apples, then cover it over with straw, and O Lawd, we would have apples all wint'r when the snow lies deep on the ground; sure I wish them old days back."<sup>12</sup>

Household servants usually ate the same food as the master's family ate, but for most slaves their diet was inferior in quality, quantity, and variety to that enjoyed by their owners. Some slaves were venturesome enough to try to rectify their situation. Sophia Word, who was born in slavery in 1837, admitted that "We lived toibly well and didn't starve fer we had enough to eat but we didn't have as good as the master and mistress had. We would slip in the house after the master and mistress wuz sleeping and cook to suit ourselves and cook what we wanted."<sup>13</sup> Another former slave had a master who understood his desire to eat something different from the usual fare. Peter Bruner was once caught by his master as he tried to steal some sugar and flour so that he and his sister might have a pound cake. Peter was not whipped, he said, because his master knew that he did not always have enough to eat.<sup>14</sup>

Several slaveholders made maple syrup and sugar on their farms, a practice which added both excitement to the daily routine and a pleasantly different taste to the diet. "Marse Stone had a big sugar camp with 300 trees," Bert Mayfield reminisced. "We would be waked up at sun-up by a big horn and called to get our buckets and go to the sugar camps and bring water from the maple trees. These trees had

<sup>11</sup> Wes Woods interview, conducted in Calloway County by L. Cherry, pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Dale Sanders interview, conducted in Louisville by Byers York, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Sophia Word interview, conducted in Clay County by Pearl House, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Bruner interview, conducted in Estill County by Evelyn McLemore, p. 88.

been tapped and elderwood spiles were placed in the taps where the water dripped to the wooden troughs below. We carried this water to the big poplar troughs which were about 10 feet long and 3 feet high. The water was then dipped out and placed in different kettles to boil until it became the desired thickness for 'Tree Molasses.' Old Miss Polly would always take out enough of the water to boil down to make sugar cakes for us boys. We had great times at the 'stirrin' offs' which usually took place at night."<sup>15</sup>

The Christmas holidays often added variety to the slaves' diet, for a number of masters tried to provide something special then for their slaves. "On Christmas and New Year's day we would go up to the house and they would give us candy and fruit and firecrackers," George Henderson said. "We were given some of all the food that the white folks had, even turkey." The older slaves sometimes got drunk, he reported.<sup>16</sup> Harriet Mason remembered almost identical experiences: "At Christmas and New Years we sho did have big times, and General Gano and Miss Mat would buy us candy, popcorn, and firecrackers and all the good things just like the white folks."<sup>17</sup>

Over-all, it would appear that food was reasonably good and plentiful for most of the Kentucky ex-slaves who were interviewed. Most of the masters probably issued basic rations of such staples as pork, meal, and molasses which the slaves were expected to supplement by raising a garden and by hunting and fishing. Good business sense dictated a diet that was adequate, regardless of any humanitarian considerations, for a healthy slave represented a considerable capital investment.

### CLOTHING

Clothing did not have the same significance in the ex-slaves' memories as did food; several who dwelt upon food in fond detail made no mention of clothes. As usual, the household slaves fared better than the field hands. Belle Robinson lived in "the big house with my mistress," and she "wore the same kind of clothes" as the whites did. In many instances, the clothes were probably hand-me-downs from the white family.

<sup>15</sup> Bert Mayfield interview, p. 14. Dan Bogie gave a very similar account of sugaring. Bogie interview, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> George Henderson interview, conducted in Garrard County by Eliza Ison, p. 6. Since Henderson was born in 1860, some of his recollections probably extended into the early years of freedom. This appears to be true of some of the other narratives as well.

<sup>17</sup> Harriet Mason interview, conducted in Garrard County by Eliza Ison, p. 10. Richard Montgomery Gano, born in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in 1830, practiced medicine after graduating from medical school in Louisville. He moved to Texas in 1859, but during the Civil War he fought in John Hunt Morgan's command and was colonel of the 7th Ky. Cavalry before being transferred to the Trans-Mississippi theatre. His appointment as brigadier general was dated March 17, 1865. Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray* (Baton Rouge, 1959), p. 96.

Most of the other ex-slaves who mentioned clothing at all told of rough but serviceable garments, most of them made at home. "We wore tow linen clothes in summer and jeans in winter," Dan Bogie recalled. "Sister wore linsey in winter of different colors, dyed from herbs, especially poke berries; and wore unbleached cotton in summer, dyed with yellow mustard seed." He could remember his mother singing in the evenings as she "carded the wool and spun yarn on the old spinning wheel." His grandfather, Jim Embry, "mended shoes and made fairly good ones."<sup>18</sup> Sophia Word's recollections were much the same. "Our clothes wuz made from cotton and linsey," she said. "Cotton wuz used in the summer and linsey for the winter. Sometimes our clothes wuz yeller checked and most time red. Our stockings wuz made of coarse yarn for winter to wer with coarse shoes. We had high topped shoes for Sunday."<sup>19</sup> Will Oats told the interviewer that "The family all wore home made clothing, cotton shirts, heavy shoes, very heavy underwear; and if they wore out their winter shoes before the spring weather they had to do without until the fall."<sup>20</sup>

Mary Wright, a resident of Hopkinsville when interviewed, recalled the work involved in keeping clothing clean. "I remember wen we uster wash cloes with a paddle. You wet dese cloes en put soft soap in dem, the soap war made outer ash lye en grease. Den dese cloes war spread on a smooth stump an beat wid paddles till dey war clean. Den come de wooden wash board, hit war jes a piece of wood wid rough places or ridges chiseled in hit." When they washed quilts, she said, "us chilluns would git in de tubs in our bare foots and tramp de dirt out."<sup>21</sup>

## HOUSING

Household servants often lived in the "big house," but most slaves stayed in nearby quarters, close enough to the whites that their activities and presence could be checked on easily and frequently. The typical slave quarters consisted of a one-room log cabin with a loft, a structure which was identical with those lived in by many of the poor whites of that era. Uncle Dan Bogie described a typical cabin except that the loft was apparently not used for sleeping since there were only four members in the family.

"We lived in a one-room cabin, with a loft above, and this cabin was an old fashioned one about hundred yards from the house. We lived in one room with one bed in the cabin. The one bed was an old

<sup>18</sup> Bogie interview, pp. 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Word interview, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Will Oats interview, conducted in Mercer County by Hazel Cinnamon, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Wright interview, conducted in Hopkinsville by Mamie Hansberry, p. 62.

fashioned, high post carded bed where my father and mother slept. My sister and me slept in a trundle bed, made like the big bed except the posts were made smaller and was on rollers, so it could be rolled under the big bed. There was also a cradle, made of a wooden box, with rockers nailed on, and my mother told me that she rocked me in that cradle when I was a baby."<sup>22</sup>

Uncle Wes Woods provided more detail about the cabin in which he grew up in Garrard County. His master owned three or four hundred acres of land and about twenty slaves, including the children. "There were three or four cabins for the slaves to live in, not so very far from the house. The cabin where my mother and father lived was the closest to the house, for my mother did the cooking. Our cabin was one long room, with a loft above, which we reached with a ladder. There was one big bed, with a trundle bed, which was on wooden rollers and was shoved under the big bed in the daytime. The oldest boys slept in a big wooden bed in the loft. The cabins were built of logs and chinked with rock and mud. The ceilings were of joists, and my mother used to hang the seed that we gathered in the fall to dry from these joists. Some of the chimneys were made with sticks and chinked with mud, and would sometimes catch on fire. Later people learned to build chimneys of rock with big wide fire places, and a hearth of stone, which made them safer from fire."<sup>23</sup>

Slaves were expected to go to bed early to facilitate early morning rising, but even in the absence of such directions, lighting facilities would not have encouraged late hours. "We uster use grease lamps," Mary Wright reported, "dese war made outer iron, wid a piece of cotton rope down in de grease and dis jis send out a puny smelly light. Den de brass lamp come erlong, hit war a little lamp wid a wick wid a handle in er stem, no burner or nuthin. Hit burned coaloil but had no chimney."<sup>24</sup>

#### AMUSEMENTS

Despite the hard labor usually associated with slavery, most slaves were able to find some opportunity for fun and amusements in their lives. Hunting and fishing were good sport, in addition to supplying food for the slave household, but as one former slave complained, "I never got to do any uv it except on Saturdays and Sundays."<sup>25</sup> And it was a rare occasion when a slave was trusted to do any hunting which involved the use of a gun or took him far from home.

<sup>22</sup> Bogie interview, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Woods interview, pp. 24-25.

<sup>24</sup> Wright interview, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> George Dorsey interview, conducted in Jefferson County by John Farsee, p. 54.

Working itself sometimes provided an excuse for congenial get-togethers, as it had on the American frontier since the founding of the colonies. "We did not work on Saturday afternoon," Dan Bogie said. "The men would go fishing, and the women would go to the neighbors and help each other piece quilts. We used to have big times at the corn shuckings. The neighbors would come and help. We would have camp fires and sing songs, and usually a big dance at the barn when the corn was shucked. Some of the slaves from other plantations would pick the banjo, then the dance."<sup>26</sup> Another former slave reported that upon such festive occasions "old Marse would always have a jug of licker."<sup>27</sup> Such generosity was not too common, for some masters considered it dangerous to allow slaves to drink while others were opposed to liquor on moral grounds. Some masters tried to minimize slave contacts among plantations and farms as a means of preventing rebellions and cooperative escapes, but other owners, aware of their beneficial effect upon the slaves' morale, encouraged parties and dances within the community.<sup>28</sup>

Several Negroes interviewed remember singing as a favorite mode of amusement, although most of them had difficulty recalling the specific songs which were sung. One remembered singing during the dances:

"Who's been here since I'se been gone,  
Ah, that gal with the blue dress on."<sup>29</sup>

Another ex-slave repeated a somewhat different version:

"Who ting-along? Who ting-along?  
Who's been here since I've been gone?  
A pretty girl with a josey on."<sup>30</sup>

Singing and playing such instruments as the banjo and guitar were not only popular with the slaves; such performances often drew appreciative white audiences as well.

Slave children found endless fascination with their games. Marbles was a favorite pastime, especially for the boys, and they played several varieties of ball. One version called "sheep-meat" was played with a yarn ball, and a player was put out when he was hit by the ball.<sup>31</sup> The children also enjoyed "ring dancing," in which they danced within a circle drawn on the ground. Another favorite game was the "free for

<sup>26</sup> Bogie interview, p. 3. Mary Wright also mentioned quilting, with a dance often following the work session. Wright interview, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Henderson interview, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Sanders interview, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Mayfield interview, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; Oats interview, p. 19.

all" which could involve a large number of contestants. Each participant was equipped with a bag which was stuffed tightly with cotton and rags until it weighed about ten pounds. Everyone entered a circle some 15-30 feet in diameter, depending upon the number playing. Then, upon the signal to start, each contestant would try to drive his opponents out of the ring or beat them into submission until only he remained. Such elaborate games were often staged on Saturday afternoons and were sometimes "the scenes of much controversial conflict, gambling, excessive inebriation and hilarity." Hurdle racing was also one of the amusements likely to create excitement, particularly when high hurdles were used and the contestants used hurdling poles some twelve feet long to surmount the obstacles.<sup>32</sup>

#### RELIGION

Although some masters had little interest in religion either for themselves or their slaves, others viewed it as an important element in the lives of their bondsmen. In many instances there was a sincere belief that a master was committed to extending the blessing of Christianity to those in bondage. Indeed, this belief provided one of the major justifications for the existence of slavery. Other masters more cynically saw in the teachings of Christianity a defense against possible slave insurrections, the great haunting fear of any slave community. Surely, a slave should be willing to accept earthly slavery in return for the possibility of life eternal in the hereafter.

Most of the ex-slaves who mentioned religion had become accustomed to attending church while they were still in bondage. "There was no church for slaves," Uncle Dan Bogie recalled, "but we went to the white folks church at Mt. Freedom. We sat in the gallery."<sup>33</sup> Another former slave said that "We had church on the plantation but we went from one plantation to another to hear preaching. . . . A meeting of the Baptist Church resulted in the first baptizing I ever saw. It was in Mr. Chillers pond. The preacher would say I am baptizing you in Mr. Chillers pond because I know he is an honest man."<sup>34</sup> Bert Mayfield reminisced: "We had no church, but the Bible was read to us on Sunday afternoons by some of the white folks." Bert was apparently a favorite with his owners, for they took him to church with them. Mayfield saw his first baptizing "on Dix River near Floyd's Mill. Preacher [Burdette Kemper] did the baptizin' and Ellen Stone, one of our slaves, was baptized there with a number of others—whites and

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with Tinie Force and Elvira Lewis, conducted in Ballard County by J. R. Wilkerson, pp. 113-115.

<sup>33</sup> Bogie interview, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Henderson interview, p. 6.

blacks too. When Ellen came up out of the water she was clapping her hands and shouting. One of the songs I remember at this Baptizing was:

"Come sinners and Saints and hear me tell  
The wonders of E-man-u-el,  
Who brought my soul with him to dwell  
And give me heavenly union."<sup>35</sup>

Most whites who encouraged religion among their slaves considered it inadvisable to allow the slaves to conduct their own services without supervision; such a meeting made plotting too easy. As a consequence, most slaves who attended services did so in the whites' churches or had their services supervised by at least two whites who watched for any suspicious sign of unrest.

#### PUNISHMENT

The usual punishment for slaves consisted of whippings. Since slaves possessed little or no personal property, fines were out of the question, and a jail sentence deprived the master of his slave's services while giving the offender a vacation of sorts from his usual labors. Branding with a hot iron or cropping of ears were used more as a means of identifying runaways or other troublemakers than as punishments *per se*. Corporal punishment was, of course, commonly used for white children. A lazy or insubordinate hired hand could be fired; it was more drastic and more difficult to sell an intransigent slave.

By selecting cases carefully, it is possible to prove almost anything one wishes about slave punishments. State laws provided some theoretical protection for the slave; in practice they were of little value for the testimony of a slave was rarely admitted against a white. A slave's major protection was his economic value. Only a very foolish master would inflict such punishment as would incapacitate a slave for work or leave him crippled. The treatment of slaves, including punishment, depended primarily upon the individual master, and it included wide variations in practice.<sup>36</sup>

A number of the former Kentucky slaves declared that they had had no personal knowledge of punishments. "There was no jail on the place and I never saw a slave whipped or punished in any way," Harriet Mason asserted.<sup>37</sup> "I never saw a slave whipped or in chains," said Wes Woods. "My boss didn't believe in that kind of punishment. If the children needed whipping, it was done like all other children are

<sup>35</sup> Mayfield interview, pp. 15-16.

<sup>36</sup> An interesting discussion of the slaves' reaction to slavery is Kenneth M. Stampp, "Rebels and Sambos: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXVII (Aug. 1971), pp. 367-392.

<sup>37</sup> Mason interview, p. 10.

whipped when they need it."<sup>38</sup> The testimony of Dan Bogie was identical. "Bob Wheeler and Arch Bogie were our masters," he told his interviewer. "Both were good and kind to us. I never saw a slave whipped, for my boss did not believe in that kind of punishment. My master had four boys, named Rube, Falton, Horace, and Billie. Rube and me played together and when we acted bad old Marse always licked Rube three or four times harder than he did me because Rube was older."<sup>39</sup> Ann Gudgeal said that the only time she was ever whipped was when she and her young mistress tried to rob some bees and both got stung.<sup>40</sup> Another former slave explained why she was well treated: "I'se was neber once treated as a slave cause my Massa was my very own Daddy."<sup>41</sup>

Most of the ex-slaves apparently accepted some punishment as reasonable and just if orders were not obeyed or work done properly. Uncle Edd Shirley said that "Some slaves were treated good, and some were treated awfull bad by the white people; but most of them were treated good if they would do what their master told them to do."<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Amelia Jones, who was sixteen years old when she became free, thought that "Master White was good to the slaves, he fed us well and had good places for us to sleep, and didn't whip us only when it was necessary. . . ."<sup>43</sup>

Other slaves remembered vividly cases of severe punishment and inhumane treatment. Although Edd Shirley thought that most slaves were treated well if they obeyed orders, he recalled that "I onced saw a light colored gal tied to the rafters of a barn, and her master whipped her until blood ran down her back and made a large pool on the ground. And I have seen negro men tied to stakes drove in the ground and whipped because they would not mind their master; but most white folks were better to their slaves and treated them better than they are now."<sup>44</sup> Joana Owens belonged to a Mr. Nolan Barr who lived in Hawesville. "He had a big farm," she recalled, "and owned lots of slaves, and when the old master got mad at his slaves for not working hard enough he would tie them up by their thumbs and whip the male slaves till they begged for mercy."<sup>45</sup> Susan Sanders related with some

<sup>38</sup> Woods interview, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Bogie interview, pp. 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Ann Gudgeal interview, conducted in Anderson County by Mildred Roberts, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Nannie Eaves interview, conducted in Hopkinsville by Mamie Hansberry, pp. 60-61.

<sup>42</sup> Edd Shirley interview, conducted in Monroe County by Kenneth Jones, p. 23. A note on the interview indicated that Edd Shirley at the age of ninety-seven was still employed as a janitor by the Tompkinsville Drug Co. and Hospital.

<sup>43</sup> Amelia Jones interview, conducted in Laurel County by Perry Larkey, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Shirley interview, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Joana Owens interview, conducted in Louisville by [not given], p. 47.

sense of pride that she "was a mischevious gal when I was growin' up. I'se would get a lickin' most everyday. . . . I was bad and I'se got my whipp'n." She apparently accepted such punishment as fair and she longed for a return to "them old days" with her "good ole Master." But "Some of the other old Masters, who had lots of slaves on fa'ms close by, was so mean to the slaves they owned. They wo'ked the women and men both in the fields and the children too, and when the ole Master thought they was'n't do'n 'nuf wo'k, he would take his men and strip off their shirts, and lash them with cowhide whips until you could see the blood run down them poor niggers backs." But, she added, her master was never "hard or mean like that."<sup>46</sup>

Sophia Word, ninety-nine years old when interviewed, was delighted to claim that "the white folks said I was the meanest nigger that ever wuz." When she refused to go into the house one day, her mistress dragged her inside. "Then I grabs that white woman, when she turned her back, and shook her until she begged for mercy. When the master comes in, I wuz given a terrible beating with a whip but I didn't care fer I give the mistress a good 'un too."

Yet, Sophia continued, "My master wuzn't as mean as most masters. Hugh White wuz so mean to his slaves that I know of two gals that killt themselves. One nigger gal Sudie wuz found across the bed with a pen knife in her hand. He whipped another nigger gal most to death, for fergiting to put onions in the stew. The next day she went down to the river and for nine days they searched fer her and her body finally washed upon the shore. The master could never live in that house again as when he would go to sleep he would see the nigger standing over his bed. Then he moved to Richmond and there he stayed until a little later when he hung himself."<sup>47</sup>

Peter Bruner, born in Winchester, Kentucky, in 1845, endured nearly twenty years of slavery. He was often whipped, he said, "because his mistress said the washing was not clean, when it was. On one occasion when he was beaten his master took a piece of sole leather about 1 foot long and 2 inches wide, cut it full of holes and dipped it in water that was brined. He then took the leather and lashed the poor slave's back." Peter finally attempted to escape, but he was caught in Lexington and jailed until his master came after him. On his next effort he reached Xenia, Ohio, before being apprehended. "This time he was severely beaten for three hours." Other escape attempts also failed, and finally Peter "was chained each night to a chair." When at last he succeeded in escaping during the Civil War, Peter joined the Union Army.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Sanders interview, pp. 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> Word interview, pp. 66-67.

<sup>48</sup> Bruner interview, pp. 88-89.

Annie B. Boyd's problem was with her mistress. "My marster was a good man but my missus wont no good woman. She uster box my ears, stick pin in me and tie me ter de cedar chest and whoop me as long as she want. Oh, how I did hate dat woman." Her mistress would jab her with a pin, Annie declared, to keep her from falling asleep as she knitted on into the evening. Upon one occasion Annie was called away for a few minutes from her task of watching the white children. During her absence the baby bit into an Indian turnip. The mistress was so enraged that she made Annie eat the rest of the turnip, "en my face enall swolled up en my eyes war closed fah days."<sup>49</sup>

### SALE

The sale of slaves was perhaps the most detested aspect of slavery, and many a slaveholder who had no scruples about owning slaves refused to sell any of his people. Thus a number of the ex-slaves interviewed could declare that they had never seen a slave sold or auctioned off.<sup>50</sup> But as the century wore on and the initial tasks of opening up the frontier were completed, Kentucky, along with other slave states in the Upper South, developed a surplus of slaves. At the same time, there was a growing demand for more bondsmen in the Lower South, and the result was a sizeable export of Kentucky slaves. Between 1830 and 1860 the Commonwealth exported an estimated 82,000 slaves, and the income from the trade constituted an appreciable part of the state's financial resources during that era.<sup>51</sup>

Several of the former slaves who were interviewed had had personal experiences with the slave trade, although most of them were sold within the state, not "down the river." Belle Robinson was sold twice while still a child; one of her mistresses "always said she paid \$400 for me."<sup>52</sup> Edd Shirley, a mulatto, was the property of three different masters; the third one was his father.<sup>53</sup> "My mother and me war put on de block in front of de Courthouse in Hopkinsville and sold to Mr. Newt Catlett," Annie B. Boyd asserted, "and we brung \$500.00."<sup>54</sup> Sophia Word was

<sup>49</sup> Annie B. Boyd interview, conducted in Hopkinsville by Mamie Hansberry.

<sup>50</sup> Mason interview, p. 10; Mayfield interview, p. 15. Ann Gudgel stated matter-of-factly that "None of us was eber sold, cause we belonged to the Balls for always back as far as we could think." Gudgel interview, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> See Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, especially chapters V-VII, his "Lexington's Slave Dealers and Their Southern Trade," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (Jan. 1938), pp. 1-23, and T. D. Clark, "The Slave Trade Between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXI (Dec. 1934), pp. 331-342. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York, 1959; first published 1931), pp. 388-392, calculated conservatively and arrived at the figure of 82,525. Some other historians have felt that this figure was too low.

<sup>52</sup> Belle Robinson interview, conducted in Garrard County by Eliza Ison, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Shirley interview, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Boyd interview, p. 57.

apparently never sold although her master must have been sorely tempted to dispose of her upon many occasions, but she recalled that her owner did sell some of his slaves. "When he started to sale one of us he would go out and talk to the old slave trader like he wuz g'wine to sale a cow or sometin and then he would come back to git the slave he wanted. This wuz the way my mother's brother and sister wuz sold. When the other masters at other places sold a slave they put the slave on the auction block and the slave trader had a long whop that he hit them with to see if they could jump around and wuz strong. The largest and strongest brought the money."<sup>55</sup>

Mary Wooldridge and her twin sister were born in Washington County. When they were fourteen they were sold in Lexington; the twins never saw each other again. Mary's master, a Mr. Lewis Burns of Washington County, sold her five or six years later to a slave trader. According to her memory, it was several years before she was sold to a Thomas McElroy who remained her master until she became free.<sup>56</sup>

Although Mrs. Amelia Jones considered her master to be a good one, he "didn't hesitate to sell any of his slaves. He said, 'You all belong to me and if you don't like it, I'll put you in my pocket,' meaning of course that he would sell that slave and put the money in his pocket. The day he was to sell the children from their mother he would tell that mother to go to some other place to do some work and in her absence he would sell the children. It was the same when he would sell a man's wife, he also sent him to another job and when he returned his wife would be gone. The master would only say, 'Don't worry you can get another one.'"

Mrs. Jones had a sister living with her when the interview was held who was sold at auction in Manchester when she was twelve. Despite her age, she brought an unusually high price of \$1220.00. She was taken south to a plantation, but in some fashion she managed to return to Kentucky after becoming free. Their father was also sold at auction, handcuffed into a long line of other slaves, and marched away to the South. His daughter never saw him again. "The Auction block at Manchester was built in the open, from rough-made lumber, a few steps, and a platform on top of that [for] the slave to be sold. He would look at the crowd as the auctioneer would give a general description of the ability and physical standing of the man. He heard the bids as they came in wondering what his master would be like."<sup>57</sup> George Scruggs had been hired out to a Lexington doctor when he saw a coffle

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<sup>55</sup> Word interview, p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Wooldridge interview, conducted in Christian County by Mamie Hansberry, p. 106.

<sup>57</sup> Jones interview, pp. 38-39.

of slaves for the first time. ". . . I saw droves ov colud folks gwine by wid two white men ridin in front, two ridin in de midel, and two ridin behind. De colud folks wuz walkin, gwine downtown to be sold. When I fust seen em comin I got scared and started to run but de white man said 'Stop, boy, we is not gwine to hurt you.'"<sup>58</sup>

### FREEDOM

A number of the former slaves were small children when they became free, but several of them were old enough to recall the joy with which they greeted the welcome news. Few of them had received any preparation for their new status, and making a living presented a problem. Will Oats remembered well the mingled joy and apprehension with which his people had received the news of their deliverance. "They were all very happy," he said, "but they were wondering what they were going to do without a home, work, or money."<sup>59</sup> The former masters, however, still needed field hands and household help, and a number of the new freedmen continued to work for at least a time for their previous masters.

"When the news came we were freed every body was glad," George Henderson recalled, but his family stayed on with Master Cleveland for the first year after the war.<sup>60</sup> Harriet Mason was about eighteen years old in 1865 and very proud of her position as nursemaid for the Gano children, as well as of her ability to read and write. The family had moved to Texas a few years earlier, but they returned to Kentucky after the war. "When the news came that we were free General Gano took us all in the dining room and told us about it. I told him I wasn't going to the cabins and sleep with them niggers and I didn't." This independent soul worked for the Gano family for several years before leaving to get married.<sup>61</sup> Wes Woods also remembered that "We were glad when the news came that we were free, but none of us left for a long time, not until the Woods family was broken up. My father hired me out to work for my vituals and clothes, and I got \$25.00 at the end of the year."<sup>62</sup>

During her last few years as a slave Susan Dale Sanders worked for her master's married daughter who lived "down the road from his farm." Their relationship was a pleasant one which continued for some time after the war. "She told me I was free after the war was over. I got happy and sung but I didn't know for a long time, what to be free was,

<sup>58</sup> George Scruggs interview, conducted in Calloway County by L. Cherry, pp. 29-30.

<sup>59</sup> Oats interview, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Henderson interview, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Mason interview, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Woods interview, p. 26.

as after the war she hired me and I stayed on doin' all the cookin' and washin' and all the work, and I was hired to her for four dollars a month." This arrangement apparently ended when Susan married William Sanders, a veteran of the Union army.<sup>63</sup>

Mary Wooldridge was an independently-minded woman even as a slave, and this trait remained a part of her personality in her old age. Her reaction to a question about freedom was contrary to the prevailing sentiments of her peers. Perhaps the depression years through which she was living helped influence her memories of slavery; perhaps her pleasant recollections outlasted the less happy ones. At any rate, "Nigger aint got no business being sot free," she declared, "niggers still oughter be slaves. Us niggers did not hev to bother about de victuals sor nuthin."

"Wen my Missis called us niggers gether and told us we was free I was as happy as a skinned frog but you seed I didn't have any sense. . . . Now she says, she did, you can all stay here en work en we will pay you foh your work, er you can work foh some body else, but I hev raised you honest, and don't you steal, and work foh nuf money so you wont hev to steal it. If youse gits hongry and haint got no money to buy vittals jus you ask de white folks foh hit and dey will giv hit to youse. Oh how I miss my Missis and Massa so much. Wish I had dem now."<sup>64</sup>

Despite their tribulations in old age during the Great Depression, few of the other ex-slaves would have approved Mary Wooldridge's sentiments. Kentucky's brand of slavery may not have been as harsh as that found elsewhere in the Old South, but freedom was a hard-won thing, and it was cherished by most of those who had obtained it.

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<sup>63</sup> Sanders interview, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> Wooldridge interview, p. 108.