Reading slave narratives: The WPA interviews

BY DAVID WALBERT

During the Great Depression, the Federal Writers' Project, a program of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), collected 2,300 interviews with former slaves throughout the U.S. South. The WPA was a New Deal program designed to put people to work, but the program gave historians one of our most valuable resources for learning about slaves' experiences. Before the Civil War, the only slaves who could write down and publish their experiences were those who escaped, and after the Civil War, most freed people wanted to focus on the future. Without these "slave narratives," the only records of slavery that would exist would be those produced by white slaveholders — and they would tell a very different story than we learn from the slaves themselves.

As valuable as the interviews are, they are not easy to use. Because of the way they were transcribed, they can be difficult to read. And as with any primary source, we have to understand why and how it was created — but an interview has two creators, the interviewer and the interviewee. This means that we have to understand not only what is said but what was asked. With the WPA narratives, this can be difficult, because we don't have the questions, and we don't know much about the interviewers.

Historians face similar problems in working with any *oral history* interview, but with the WPA slave narratives, those problems are magnified. Most of the interviewers were amateurs with little experience, and they had little understanding of (or concern about) the possibilities of distortion. (Today, even students doing oral history interviews for a class usually have access to better guidelines for interviewing than the Writers Project was able to provide.)

Key questions

What questions did the interviewer ask?

The folklorist Alan Lomax developed a questionnaire for the interviews, but some interviewers followed it more clearly than others. When the interviews were transcribed, the questions were left out, so we have to infer the questions from the answers.

You can often infer, though, what prompted a particular story or answer. Most interviewers asked specifically whether the interviewee had been beaten or sold, and most asked whether they remembered Union troops coming through and about their experiences when they were freed.

How well did the interviewee remember his or her experiences?

By the time these interviews were conducted in 1937–38, more than seventy years had passed since emancipation. In addition, most of the interviewees were describing events that took place when they were children or teenagers. By now, they were at least eighty years old — sometimes more than one hundred — and they may not have remembered clearly the events they were describing. (Think about how accurately you remember what happened to you when you were five or six years old.) In addition, the interviews were conducted during the Great Depression, and most of the interviewees were living in great poverty. That fact, along with the possibility of nostalgia, may have made them look on the past with rose-colored glasses. Their childhoods may have seemed happier in retrospect than they were at the time.

Did the interviewee answer truthfully?

Some interviewees mistook the interviwer for a government representative who could get them financial assistance — many ask about their "pension." As a result, they may have exaggerated their answers to please the interviewer. Some may also have exaggerated their answers simply out of pleasure at being the center of attention.

At the same time, some interviewees may have avoided topics they found unpleasant. Cornelia Andrews[1], for example, claimed never to have been beaten until her daughter, present at the interview, told her to show the interviewer her scars.

Finally, the interview may have been very different depending on the race of the interviewer. Nearly all of the interviewees were living in the South and were subject to Jim Crow laws that subjected them to discrimination and allowed them little economic or political power. As a result, some interviewees were probably more likely to tell a white interviewer what they thought he or she wanted to hear — whether that was good or bad.

Was the interview written down and transcribed accurately?

Unfortunately, we don't have any way to know how accurately interviewers wrote down what interviewees said. We do know that they didn't write down every word that was spoken, and we also know that some writers and editors revised or censored the interviews. In some cases, editors added words that may have substantially changed the tone, impact, or meaning of the narratives. They may have done this to make the narratives more

readable or interesting, or to remove information they didn't think was particularly valuable (but which historians today might like to have!). They may also have done it for political reasons — either to highlight the abuses of slavery or to suggest that slavery was not all that bad.

The interviewers were given specific guidelines in how to transcribe what was said, and as a result, the transcriptions are often frankly racist. For example, an interviewer, following Writer's Project guidelines, might have typed "Dey said dat der wuz..." instead of "They said that there was..." In some cases the choices reflect the dialect of the speaker, but not always — everyone pronounces the word *was* as *wuz*. The transcription guidelines may have made former slaves sound quite different from the way their interviewers had heard them.

How reliable is this narrative?

After considering all of the above questions, ask yourself how reliable the narrative is as a historical source. If the interviewee mentions only the best or worst experiences, what might he or she not have mentioned? What might have been edited out? How might the answers have been different if the interviewer had asked different questions, or asked the same questions differently? What questions would you like to ask the former slave that weren't asked? And finally, what do you believe — and disbelieve — from this narrative, and why?

On the web

An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html

From the Library of Congress, this detailed introduction to the collection explains how and why the interviews were conducted and collected.

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Notes

1. See http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/5326.

About the author

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.