

The Slave Drivers of Arkansas: A New View From the Narratives

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DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS, A GROWING NUMBER OF historians have presented data and have formulated interpretations which greatly modify previously held beliefs about slavery's effect upon the personality of the antebellum bondsmen. Scholars such as John W. Blassingame, George P. Rawick, Eugene D. Genovese, Sterling Stuckey, Lawrence Levine, and Julius Lester have reacted decisively against an older view of the Afro-American character which seldom credited blacks with intellectual awareness, creativity, or self-assertion.¹ This new generation of interpreters has also taken issue with the position which pictures the slave experience as having been so psychologically coercive that it created a race of submissive, dehumanized black ciphers

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¹See especially John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *Massachusetts Review*, IX (Summer 1968), 417-437; Lawrence W. Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources" in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. by Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), 99-130; and Julius Lester, *To Be A Slave* (New York, 1968).

who were wholly unable to defend their manhood against the brutalities of the system.²

The research tools used by the revisionist historians in formulating their interpretations are, as Yale University's David Brion Davis has termed them, "the evidence of slaves themselves"—the antebellum black autobiographies and memoirs, black folk tales, folk songs, religious teachings, and the thousands of transcribed oral history interviews with ex-slaves obtained during the 1920s and 'thirties by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration, as well as by several privately-sponsored efforts.³

To date, the FWP narrative accounts seem to be the most useful of the materials currently being used to describe the ways in which the slaves "triumphed over the adversities" of plantation life by appropriating to themselves the spiritual and psychological "breathing space" necessary to resist dehumanization. Recently, University of Rochester historian Eugene Genovese made extensive use of these accounts in reassessing the traditionally held view of "privileged slaves" such as house servants, Mammys, black craftsmen, mechanics, and drivers.⁴ Of this group, it is the driver who presents the most troublesome problems of interpretation and personality definition.

Genovese has aptly termed the slave drivers and slave foremen, "the men between." Occupying a precarious position within the southern labor system, black supervisory personnel were forced to maintain their own status by keeping the slaves working at a pace which would satisfy the master, but at the same time they were not allowed to forget that they too were considered chattels—living in the same quarters and experiencing many of the same depriva-

²See for example the treatment of the controversy over Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959, 1968) in Ann I. Lane, ed., *The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics* (Urbana, 1971).

³David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," *Daedalus*, CIII (Spring 1974), 7.

⁴Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 365-388.

tions as the laborers whom they supervised.

Too often, students of American Negro slavery have neglected to note the commonality of interaction and experience between the "elite" and the field hands. Historians have found it more agreeable to assume that the drivers were, in actuality, those legendary beings whose moral sensibilities were so corroded that they became a supervisory class of cruel, unfeeling sadists—alternately currying favor with the whites in order to gain petty grants of authority and then using their ill-gained power to brutalize their fellow bondsmen. The evidence of the slave narratives, as well as a correct recounting of depression era oral history collection techniques does not allow for this luxury of assumption and misunderstanding. With the insights provided by a newly-won respect for the ex-slaves' testimony, historians can arrive at a more accurate interpretation of the personality make-up and behavioral characteristics of Arkansas's slave drivers.⁵

The acceptance of the former slaves' testimony as a viable research tool has been long urged, but until recent years, seldom heeded. At the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1936, black historian Lawrence Reddick criticized the narrow scope and "traditional" treatment of existing slave studies. He felt it to be a "waste of time" for historians to continue to base their research upon plantation records, planter journals, and the "usually superficial impressions of travelers" when there was "not yet a picture of the institution as seen through the eyes of the bondsman himself." In his

⁵For a study which holds that the depression era narratives are less reliable than are the stories of slaves published before the Civil War see Margaret Young Jackson, "An Investigation of Biographies and Autobiographies of American Slaves Published Between 1840 and 1860: Based Upon the Cornell Special Slavery Collection" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1954), ii-iii, 121-122, 198. For a study which claims that the relatively rare letters from antebellum slaves to their masters lack certain of the narratives' disadvantages see Robert S. Starobin, "Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of Housescrvants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters," *Journal of Social History*, V (Fall 1971), 46-70.

1944 critique of the "plantation legend," Richard Hofstadter recommended that future histories of slavery be "written in large part from the standpoint of the slave." During the 1950s, Berkeley historian Kenneth M. Stampp noted that in order to achieve "proper balance and perspective," the institution of slavery had to be viewed "through the eyes of the Negro as well as through the eyes of the white master." The degree to which these suggestions for a new perspective in the writing of southern history were heeded may be perceived by noting that during the heyday of the "New Left" historians, demands for the writing of American history "from the bottom up" contained the same call for an increased use of slave testimony.⁶

Why were scholars so hesitant to make use of the FWP narratives? To some degree, the sheer bulk of the unprinted manuscript material may have discouraged extensive use of the materials. The main body of the depression era testimony, the Slave Narrative Collection, is composed of interviews with some twenty-two hundred people from seventeen states. Compiled during the years 1936-1938, the complete collection contains about 10,000 pages and roughly 3.5 million words. The Arkansas component alone fills 2,404 typewritten pages.⁷

Relative inaccessibility may also partially explain the neglect of the FWP interviews. Between 1939 and 1941 the transcripts composing the collection were assembled, bound, and deposited as non-circulating volumes in the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress. An index, which would have greatly facilitated scholarly use of the materials, was begun, but never completed. Folklorist Benjamin A.

⁶L. D. Reddick, "A New Interpretation for Negro History," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (January 1937), 20; Richard Hofstadter, "U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIX (April 1944), 124; Kenneth M. Stampp, "The Historian and Southern Negro Slavery," *American Historical Review*, LVII (April 1952), 618; and Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston, 1970), 41.

⁷See C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review*, LXXIX (April 1974), 471; and Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, XIX (Fall 1967), 534, 552.

Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down*, a compilation of excerpts from the narratives, captured the flavor of the the ex-slave testimony and apparently long satisfied the needs of American historians, but nevertheless contained only a sampling of the vast collection.⁸

A third hindrance to the widespread use of the ex-slave testimony has been the skepticism of historians as to its validity as historical source material. Over two-thirds of the respondents in the FWP project had reached the age of eighty when interviewed and 15 per cent were over ninety-three. Scholars who were accustomed to acting in a circumspect manner when dealing with personal reminiscences feared that the black narrators displayed so many lapses of memory and included in their accounts so much exaggeration, self-flattery, and contradictory testimony, as well as obvious errors of historical fact, that their views of slavery were more than slightly tainted. Historians also recognized the secondhand nature of much of the descriptive material contained in the interviews—a consequence of the youth of the respondents under slavery.⁹

Certainly, the care with which historians handled the fruit of these early oral history accounts is evidence of the profession's collective desire to produce a worthy and accurate historical record, but one still must ask why the memoirs of famous, near famous, and infamous members of white antebellum society were used in constructing modern accounts of that society to a far greater extent than was the testimony of the ex-slaves.

This slowness of the historical mind to grasp and to use the narratives may have been a symptom of the same malady which caused Ulrich B. Phillips, the reigning interpreter of the slave experience during the years in which the FWP interviews were being collected, to disregard what

*B. A. Botkin, "The Slave as His Own Interpreter," *Library of Congress Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, II (November 1944), 37, 40; Yetman, "Background," 552-553; Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York, 1970), 4-5; and Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945), vii.

*Yetman, "Background," 535; Woodward, "Slave Sources," 472-473.

he termed "reminiscences" because "the lapse of decades had impaired inevitably the memories of men." For those researchers influenced by Phillips's voluminous publications on the slave South, it was certainly not difficult to come to the conclusion that among the "impaired" memories of humankind, the Negro's was by far the most debilitated.¹⁰

Containing many erroneous, inaccurate, and dangerous preconceptions about blacks in America, Phillips's writings described the slaves as "notoriously primitive, uncouth, improvident and inconstant" workers who possessed such unenviable traits "because they were Negroes of the time." Contentedly enjoying their status as chattels, the antebellum slaves "ruled not even themselves." With "hazy pasts and reckless futures" they "lived in each moment as it flew." Given this characterization of the Afro-American personality, it is not surprising to find that historians who would accept Phillips would reject the testimony of the ex-slaves. Fortunately, this irrational, obscuring fog of racism has lifted from Clio's shoulders, and historians are now beginning to use the slave narratives in formulating their interpretations of the antebellum slave system.¹¹

Nevertheless, even with this enlightening development, a major problem remains for those who seek to use the testimony of the ex-slaves in revising past interpretations of the slave experience. More disturbing than the former slaves' poor memories, their relative youthfulness under slavery, or their exaggeration and self-flattery, is the bias evidenced by those who interviewed the elderly blacks dur-

¹⁰Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor As Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge, 1966 [1918]), preface p. 2. For an evaluation of Phillips's position within the social, economic, and historiographical context of his day see William L. Van Deburg, "Ulrich B. Phillips: Progress and the Conservative Historian," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LV (Fall 1971), 406-416.

¹¹Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), 196, 199-200; Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 291, 339. Paradoxically, some historians now feel that interpreters of the slave experience may be overly sanguine in their belief that the newer studies have been cleansed of racist assumptions. See Davis, "Historians," 11.

ing the depression years. Even a cursory reading of the available narrative accounts and their often detailed scene-setting introductions reveals the sometimes insensitive, patronizing, condescending tone adopted by many of the white interrogators. Few followed completely our modern-day "objective" interviewing procedures. Certain of the questions asked the ex-slaves were leading or insulting.

Many southern whites involved in the collection of the oral accounts were not yet liberated from the societal shackles of white supremacy doctrine and Jim Crow etiquette. They referred to the black respondents as "bucks," "darkies," and "negresses."¹² On occasion, the whites became upset when the ex-slaves strayed from their expected roles. Arkansas writer Irene Robertson, who interviewed 286 former slaves for the FWP, referred to elderly Betty Krump of Helena as being "old, black, wealthy, and arrogant" because she had once told a white lady storekeeper to call her "Mrs." Krump. In Brinkley, Miss Robertson began her interview of ex-slave Molly Brown with the off-handedly pejorative observation that the black woman had "unusually nice features" for one of her race. Confronted with such an interviewer, it would not be surprising to find that blacks were often less than completely candid in their responses. As C. Vann Woodward has noted, the white interviewer "regularly got what he asked for."¹³

It is possible that had more blacks been engaged in interviewing the ex-slaves the narrative accounts of the de-

¹²Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives, A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Mississippi Narratives*, Vol. IX (Washington, D. C.: Typewritten Records Prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1941), reprinted in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, ed. by George P. Rawick, VII, 25; Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives*, Vol. IV, Pt. 1, reprinted in Rawick, *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 1, p. 17; Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives*, Vol. IV, Pt. 3, reprinted in Rawick, *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, p. 154. Future references to the interviews composing the Slave Narrative Collection will be limited to citations from the more readily accessible Rawick edition, which contains all 677 Arkansas Slave Narrative Collection narratives.

¹³Rawick, *American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*, IX, Pt. 4, p. 219; *ibid.*, VIII, Pt. 1, p. 303; and Woodward, "Slave Sources," 473-474.

pression years would reveal a great deal more than they do about the true personality make-up of the black supervisory elite. As noted by Woodward, where black interviewers were employed, the "whole atmosphere" of the accounts changed. Deference, evasiveness, and tributes to planter benevolence diminished while candor and resentment over past wrongs surfaced more frequently. As it was, however, Afro-Americans were not commonly employed on writers' projects in the southern states. Norman R. Yetman's listing of FWP interviewers by race names only one black writer as having worked on the project in Arkansas as opposed to five whites.¹⁴

The oral history materials collected by the Arkansas FWP contain certain data which could be used to support the stereotype of the slave supervisory elite as brutal, dehumanized tools of the white master class. Ex-slave Amanda Rose of Little Rock explained to her interviewer how drivers and overseers used "hobble rods" to punish the plantation slaves. The long, thin hickory switches were placed in a fire in order to "roast 'em and twist 'em." When thus prepared, the switches were used on the bodies of errant slaves. Rose recalled that she had seen the black "whipper" tie women up, "strip 'em naked to their waist and whip 'em till the blood run down their backs."¹⁵

Henry Andrew (Tip) Williams noted that the application of 500 lashes was considered a "light brushing" on a large plantation located near his residence during the era of slavery. The owner of this particular estate had two head overseers, one white and one black. According to Williams, these two men administered so many cruel punishments to the field hands that he could hear the bondsmen "crying way to our place early in the morning and at

¹⁴The lone black interviewer was Samuel S. Taylor. White interviewers were Cecil Copeland, Beulah Sherwood Hagg, Mary D. Hudgins, Watt McKinney, and Irene Robertson. Woodward, "Slave Sources," 474; Allen Francis Kifer, "The Negro Under the New Deal, 1933-1941" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1961), 237; and Yetman, *Voices From Slavery*, 358.

¹⁵Rawick, *American Slave*, Arkansas Narratives, X, Pt. 6, pp. 80, 82.

night." To his mind, both overseers were definitely "bad men."¹⁶

As described in certain of the Arkansas FWP accounts, the degree of cooperation between similarly inclined white and black supervisors was so great that they truly could be termed "twin-terrors" of the plantation community. Seventy-six-year-old Fanny Johnson, who was interviewed at her home at Palmetto near the Arkansas-Louisiana border, told how the "niggah drivah" would lash slaves with a strap while the white overseer contributed to the victim's pain by bursting the strap-induced blisters with a bull whip. She noted that this fearsome duo whipped some slaves so viciously "they had to carry them in."¹⁷

What are we to conclude from such accounts of driver brutality and complicity in the punishment of fellow slaves? One could take these narratives at face value and forward the opinion that slavery so corroded the moral sensibilities of this leadership element within the slave community that they became the unfeeling, perquisite-seeking sadists of legend. More fruitful, however, would be an attempt to place the narrative accounts in the context of depression era race relations. When one recalls that the majority of those who interviewed the elderly ex-slaves were white, there emerges a highly probable explanation for the vivid stories of driver cruelty "above and beyond the call of duty."

As Charles S. Johnson's classic study of blacks in Macon County, Alabama, so graphically revealed, hard times in the agricultural South often meant an increased dependency upon "white friends" whose friendship was ever in danger of alienation through careless conversation.¹⁸ If danger was to be avoided, the ex-slave narrators had to absolve their former masters of initiating the recognized

¹⁶Henry A. Williams was interviewed at Biscoe, Arkansas. He was born a slave of Jason Williams who owned a small plantation about three and a half miles from Jackson, North Carolina. Williams was describing the adjoining Jim Johnson plantation. *Ibid.*, XI, Pt. 7, pp. 166-167.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, IX, Pt. 4, pp. 84-85.

¹⁸Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago, 1934), 27, 35-36, 98, 197.

cruelties of slavery. Thus, the blame for slavery's wrongs would have to fall upon two other immediately recognizable plantation authority symbols—the white overseer and the driver. To the degree that the black narrator felt that an extensive critique of the behavior of *any* white person would be unwise, the onus would then fall increasingly upon the black foreman.

While it is impossible to ascertain how many of the ex-slaves interviewed during the 1930s were hesitant to expose the more heinous cruelties inflicted by their former owners, it is likely that the compelling need to polish the planter's image at the expense of the black foreman has caused driver depravity, selfishness, and dehumanization to be over-represented in the Slave Narrative Collection. Interviewed in Little Rock, ex-slave Lucretia Alexander noted: "Some niggers would catch you and kill you for the white folks and then there was some that wouldn't." It was the driver "that wouldn't" who successfully resisted the character-deforming pressures of the slave experience. Their number and spiritual vitality may have been more prevalent and resolutely active than historians have been led to believe.¹⁹

Much of the evidence contained in the Arkansas component of the Slave Narrative Collection complements those modern interpretations which assert that the slaves had both the ability and the tenacity to retain their humanity under the buffeting of the harshest day-to-day plantation adversities. Depression era narrators sometimes characterized the driver in terms which do not jibe with the bestial-driver stereotype. Charles Dortch, interviewed in Little Rock, said his father, Reuben, was a "boss" on the Archie Hays farm in Dallas County. Even though he never labored in the field, was never mistreated by the white overseer, and, indeed, "seemed to have been more of a pet than a slave,"

¹⁹Rawick, *American Slave*, Arkansas Narratives, VIII, Pt. 1, p. 36. For a revisionist view of white supervisory personnel on the plantation, see William Kauffman Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1966).

there was no unfriendliness shown him by those bondsmen more harshly treated. According to his son, Dortch was "well liked." He never experienced "any trouble with the other slaves any more than he had with the white folks."²⁰

Fanny Alexander's narrative describes another driver whose relationship with the field hands was surprisingly cordial. She noted that on one occasion a white overseer was "going to whoop one of the women 'bout sompin' or other," but before he could commence the disciplinary procedure "all the women started with the hoes to him and run him clear out of the field." Angered at the overseer's strict policies, they would have "killed him if he hadn't got out of the way." Following this incident, a number of the female field hands refused to "do their part." The plantation owner eventually bowed to their demands and replaced the white supervisor with a black foreman. Alexander's account is only one example of many contained in the FWP Collection which illustrate the fact that the antebellum plantation laborers "don' min' bein' bossed by er cullud man if he's smart an' good to 'em."²¹

Also estranged from the stereotyped image of the driver were those members of the supervisory "elite" who possessed marketable skills other than the ones needed to brutalize their fellow bondsmen. Slave foremen, who were often gifted with a powerful physical presence, also possessed talents and capacities which do not square well with the stereotypical characterization of the sullen, inhuman being who was selected for his job on the basis of intimidating strength and accommodating personality.²² Even though Milton Ritchie's father, George, was a foreman, he also "tanned the cow hides and made shoes for all the

²⁰Rawick, *American Slave*, Arkansas Narratives, VIII, Pt. 2, pp. 169-170.

²¹*Ibid.*, Pt. 1, p. 30; and Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story* (Indianapolis, 1931), 217.

²²Reuben Dortch's stature was described in his son's narrative account. "He was an octoroon I guess. He looked more like a Cuban than a Negro. He had beautiful wavy hair, naturally wavy. He was tall, way over six feet, closer to seven." Rawick, *American Slave*, Arkansas Narratives, VIII, Pt. 2, p. 169.

hands" on two plantations. Ex-slaves Minnie Hollomon and Malindy Maxwell told of black "bosses" and overseers who also served as wagoners, carriage drivers, and stockmen. Uncle Alf, a "head man" described by former slave Eliza Jones, was so competent that "he managed the business" for his widowed owner.²³

That these drivers had apparently acquired the skills and knowledge necessary to perform tasks more complex than sounding the horn to awaken the slaves in the morning, flogging errant field hands during working hours, and checking the cabins for runaways in the evening does not necessarily mean that the black foremen were a pampered elite, coddled by their owners because of their "educated" status and their supposedly compatible views on proper slave discipline. Black supervisory personnel often worked as hard as the laborers whom they directed. Many experienced the cruelties and deprivations meted out by masters who were far less concerned about the social distinctions existing within the slave community than they were with exhibiting their own personal power over all members of their labor force.

The immediate post-Civil War period was an especially trying time for the slave foremen. Had they been a true "pampered elite," accustomed to working hand-in-glove with the planters in the often brutal business of disciplining the field hands, the drivers should have expected better treatment from their employers. While some were fairly well provided for by their masters after the war, others complained that the arrival of freedom was immediately followed by an order to "git off the plantation." As John Goodrum, son of a black overseer in Des Arc noted, sometimes driver and field laborer alike were "just turned out

²³The slaves referred to in this paragraph were interviewed at the following locations: Milton Ritchie, R.F.D., Brinkley; Minnie Hollomon, R.F.D., Biscoe; Malindy Maxwell, Madison; and Eliza Jones, Pine Bluff. *Ibid.*, X, Pt. 6, p. 49; *ibid.*, pt. 5, p. 60; *ibid.*, IX, pt. 3, p. 285; and *ibid.*, Pt. 4, p. 143.

like you turn a hog out the pen and say go on I'm through wid you."²⁴

Prior to the war there were other planter-initiated actions which must have served to divest the black supervisory personnel of any delusions which they may have entertained as to their lack of commonality of status with the other slaves. The depression era narratives speak both of the physical and of the psychological distance which separated the "supervisory elite" from their white overlords. In many instances, black foremen were separated from their families—as were other slaves whose continued residence upon the home plantation was no longer an economically desirable option. Lee Guidon of Union County evidenced the result of such family separation when he could not give the FWP interviewer detailed information about the plantation where his father, Pompey, had supervised a gang of plow hands before the war. His inability to answer the interviewer's queries stemmed from the fact that he had been "raised at my mama's master's place."²⁵

Perhaps it was well that some foremen were separated from their wives and children, for on many antebellum plantations their proximate residence would have given them an opportunity to view the "disciplining" of their loved ones. Close relatives of the drivers were not immune to hard work nor did they escape the overseer's lash. Adrianna Kerns, interviewed at Little Rock, whose father was a driver on a plantation near Fordyce, told an FWP interviewer of her introduction to the slaves' work routine. She and her young sister, Viney, were "the smallest children in the field" and thus, were assigned to gather and burn brush, to pick up chips, to harvest peas, and to help the older laborers with their cotton rows. When the girls were strong enough, they were put to work in the field "picking cotton and pulling corn as high as we could reach." Shortly

²⁴*Ibid.*, Pt. 3, p. 56; *ibid.*, VIII, Pt. 2, p. 348. See also, *ibid.*, X, Pt. 5, p. 343 and *ibid.*, VIII, Pt. 2, pp. 300-301.

²⁵*Ibid.*, IX, Pt. 3, pp. 120-121. See also, *ibid.*, X, Pt. 5, pp. 338-339 and *ibid.*, Pt. 6, pp. 47, 49.

thereafter, they were taught to weave and spin so that they could be engaged in productive activity during rainy spells. Adrianna recalled that when her master caught the girls playing when they were supposed to be spinning, he would give each of them "two or three switches and we would stand up and whip each other." Later, this type of chastisement, like the type and amount of labor performed in the field, became more "adult." When the driver's daughter fell behind in her work, the white overseer would "come by and give me a lick with the bull whip he carried with him." She told the interviewer that she was subsequently "whipped many a time."²⁶

Perhaps the narrative which best summarizes the type of data which can be used to construct a new, more accurate interpretation of the character of the slave driver is the account given by eighty-six-year-old ex-Camden slave, Mittie Freeman. She recalled that her father, Harry Williams, was a "stern man, and honest . . . a gentleman." He was skilled enough to be assigned the job of plantation "manager" by his often-absent physician master. When Williams's owner died, the slave supervisor's family was "passeled . . . out" among the doctor's children. Placed upon a farm which was presided over by a white overseer who seemed to be "the meanest devil ever put foot on a plantation," Williams rebelled when the overseer whipped him "for sompin' he never done." As a penalty for striking his superior, Williams was sent "down to New Orleans to be sold," but was returned to Arkansas when the auctioneers could find no one to purchase the aging slave. Later, while fishing with his daughter, the bondsman heard the cannon-fire which signaled the imminent destruction of the plantation regime. Acting wholly unlike the pampered, perquisite-seeking, dehumanized foreman of legend, Williams jumped up from the riverbank, threw "his pole and everything . . . and starts flying towards the house" yelling, "It's victory. It's freedom.

²⁶*Ibid.*, IX, Pt. 4, pp. 191, 193.

Now we 'es gwine be free."²⁷ Harry Williams's physical freedom was soon to arrive, but the student of the slave narratives can readily see that, spiritually and psychologically, Arkansas drivers such as Williams had already "triumphed over the adversities" of slave life by appropriating to themselves the "breathing space" necessary to resist dehumanization.

²⁷Mittie Freeman was interviewed in North Little Rock. *Ibid.*, VIII, Pt. 2, pp. 346-348, 350.