

The slaves remember

The following excerpts come from *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, a new oral history edited by James Mellon (Weidenfeld & Nicolson). Culled from thousands of interviews done by members of the Federal Writers' Project in the mid-'30s, these ex-slaves' remembrances resonate all too powerfully today. These real-life tales of horror offer a chilling counterpart to the easy amnesia of the '80s and the resurgent racism of this mean decade. If we forget who we are, who can we be?

MY MOTHER, SHE DIDN'T WORK IN THE field. She worked at a loom. She worked so long and so often that once she went to sleep at the loom. Her master's boy saw her and told his mother. His mother told him to take a whip and wear her out. He took a stick and went out to beat her awake. He beat my mother till she woke up. When she woke up, she took a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it. He hollered, "Don't beat me no more, and I won't let 'em whip you." She said, "I'm goin' to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me." And when she left him, he wasn't able to walk.

And that was the last I seen of her until after Freedom. She went out and got an old cow that she used to milk—Dolly, she called it. She rode away from the plantation, because she knew they would kill her if she stayed. —Ellen Cragin

MY HUSBAND SAID THERE WAS A FAMILY named Gullendin which was mighty hard on their niggers. He said ole Missis Gullendin, she'd take a needle and stick it through one of their nigger women's lower lip and pin it to the bosom of her dress, and the woman would go roun' all day with her haid drew down thataway, and slobberin'. Ole Missis Gullendin done her that-away lots of times. There was knots on her lip where the needle had been stuck in it. Me, I don't b'lieve I coulda stood that no time, without goin' crazy. —Mrs. Thomas Johns

IHAVE HEARD A HEAP OF PEOPLE SAY THEY wouldn't take the treatment what the slaves took, but they woulda took it or death. If they had been there, they woulda took the very same treatment. —Anonymous

MY MOSTER WOULD PUT SLAVES IN A calaboose at night to be whipped de next morning. He always limited de lashes to five hundred. After whipping dem, he would rub pepper and salt on deir backs,

where whipped, and lay dem before de fire until blistered, and den take a cat, and hold de cat, and make him claw de blisters, to burst dem. —Robert Burns

INEVER HAD NO WHITE FOLKS THAT WAS good to me. We all worked just like dogs, and had about half enough to eat, and got whupped for everything. Our days was a constant misery to us. I know lots of niggers that was slaves and had a good time, but we never did. Seems hard that I can't say anything good for any of my white folks, but I sho' can't.

Old Master stayed drunk all the time. I reckon that is the reason he was so fetched mean. My, how we hated him! He finally killed hisself drinking, and I remember Old Mistress called us in to look at him in his coffin. We all marched by him slow-like, and I jest happened to look up and caught my sister's eye, and we both jest natchelly laughed. Why shouldn't we? We was glad he was dead. It's a good thing we had our laugh, fer Old Mistress took us out and whupped us with a broomstick. She didn't make us sorry, though. —Annie Hawkins

AT DEM SALES, DEY WOULD PUT A NIGGER on de scales and weigh him, and den de biddin' would start. If he wuz young and strong, de biddin' would start round a hundred and fifty dollars, and de highest bidder got de nigger. A good young breedin' oman brung two thousand dollars easy, 'cause all de marsters wanted to see plenty of strong healthy chillun comin' on, all de time. Cyarpenters and bricklayers and blacksmiths brung fancy prices, from three thousand to five thousand dollars, sometimes. A nigger what warn't no more'n jes' a good field hand brung 'bout two hundred dollars. —Willis Cofer

IMEMBERS WHEN THEY PUT ME ON THE auction block. They pulled my dress down over my back to my waist, to show I ain't gashed and slashed up. That's to show you ain't a mean nigger. —Lu Perkins

IHAD A BROTHER, JIM, WHO WUZ SOLD TER dress young Missus fer her weddin'. De tree am still standin' whar I set under an' watch 'em sell Jim. I set dar an' I cry an' cry, specially when dey puts de chains on him an' carries him off. An' I ain't neber felt so lonesome in my whole life. I ain't neber hyar from Jim since, an' I wonder now, sometimes, iffen he's still livin'. —Ben Johnson

MY MOTHER WAS SOLE AND TOOK FROM my father when I was jes' a few months old. I never seed him till I was six. I had to be tole who he was. He saw

Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember



my mother for de first time in six years in de fiel's where we was a-working. Dey didn't know how to ac' or what to say. Dey seemed kinda let down, lak. You see, he had married ag'in, an' my mother had, too. —Foster Weathersby

IWUZ TOO LITTLE TO HAVE ANY SENSE. When dat man bought me—dat Mr. Henry—he put me up in de buggy to take me off. I kin see it all right now, and I say to Mama and Papa, "Good-bye, I'll be back in de mawnin'." And dey feel sorry fer me and say, "She don't know what happenin'." —Janie Satterwhite

SOMETIME, NIGGER FOLKS GIT SO MIXED up about who kin to who, they marry their own sister or brother. Sometime, when a nigger marry his sister, they find out this way. One night, they gits to talking. She say, "One time, my brother had a fight and he get a awful scar over his left ear. It long and slick, and no hair grow there." He say, "See this scar over my left ear? It long and slick, and no sign of a hair." Then, she say, "Lawd God, help us po' niggers. You is my brother." It happen like that. Many a time I see it, and that the gospel truth. —Richard Carruthers

ONE BOY WAS TRADED OFF FROM HIS mother when he was young, an' after he was grown, he was sold back to de same marster an' married to his own mother. —Wesley Burrell

A new oral history presents the ugly side of the way we were.

THE LAST WHIPPING OLD MIS' GIVE ME SHE tied me to a tree and—oh, my Lord!—she whipped me that day. That was the wors' whipping I ever got in my life. I cried and bucked and hollered, until I couldn't. I give up for dead, and she wouldn't stop. I stop crying and said to her, "Old Mis', if I were you and you were me, I wouldn't beat you this way." That struck Old Mis's heart, and she let me go, and she did not have the heart to beat me anymore. —Sarah Douglas

IMET MANY RUNAWAY SLAVES. SOME WAS trying to get north and fight for de freeing of they people. Others was jes' runnin' 'way 'cause dey could. Many of dem didn't had no idea where dey was goin', and told of havin' good marsters. But, one and all, dey had a good strong notion to see what it was like to own your own body. —Edward Lycurgas

From the book *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, edited by James Mellon. ©1988 James Mellon. Reprinted by arrangement with Weidenfeld & Nicolson.