



Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery: Narratives from the 1930s Wpa Collections

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No one knew the truths of slavery better than the slaves themselves, but no one consulted them until the 1930s. Then, recognizing that this generation of unique witnesses would soon be lost to history, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project acted to interview as many former slaves as possible. In a continuation of the project's interest in the life histories of ordinary people, writers interviewed over two thousand former slaves, over a third of them in Arkansas. These oral histories were first published in the 1970s in a thirty-nine-volume series organized by state, and they transformed America's understanding of slavery. They have offered crucial evidence on a variety of other topics as well: the Civil War, Reconstruction, agricultural practices, everyday life, and oral history itself. But some former Arkansas slaves were interviewed in Texas, Oklahoma, and other states, so their narratives were published in those other collections. And more than half of the testimonies in the Arkansas volume were interviews with people who had moved to Arkansas after freedom. Folklorist George Lankford combed all of the state collections for the testimonies properly belonging to Arkansas and deleted from this state's collection the testimony of later migrants. This new collection brings together all 176 of the Arkansas slave narratives for the first time. Lankford's introduction describes how the Arkansas Writer's Project worked. He also evaluates how twenty-first-century readers might encounter the 1930s of interviews and the 1860s of memories. Challenges include the facts that the interviews were transcribed in dialect and that the circumstances of the interviews, including the race of the interviewers, might have shaped testimonies. Appendices include an alphabetical index of the former slaves and a list matching interviewers with narrators, noting the race of the interviewers.

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