

Interview with Fountain Hughes

As you read...

This interview was recorded in 1949 as part of a federal government project to record the experiences of formerly enslaved people. Because it is transcribed as an interview, and because it was done more than ten years after the other WPA interviews, it is easier to read than the interviews done during the 1930s. It's still important, though, to consider the time period in which the interview was created.

Before beginning, please read this guide to reading slave narratives (page). Then explore a single narrative in depth with this guided study before exploring this one on your own.

Oral history interviews are complicated sources. The person who was interviewed was remembering events that happened years earlier. The interviewer and interviewee made assumptions about each other, which affected the questions that were asked and the answers that were given. Interviews are not just memories; they are conversations shaped by beliefs and attitudes of the time period in which the interview was recorded.

Despite their difficulties and problems, the interviews with former slaves are one of the few sources we have about the lives of enslaved people from their own perspective, and we can learn a great deal from them about the experience of slavery.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Hughes was a child when he was a slave. How do you think his age affected his experience and what he remembered?
2. What limits were put on Hughes' abilities to socialize with other people in his neighborhood?
3. What did Hughes tell the interviewer about slave sales? What does his account tell us about family life under slavery?
4. What happened to Hughes and his siblings after slavery?
5. According to Hughes, what difficulties to newly freed people face? Why was it so difficult for former slaves to make money or live comfortably?
6. The interviewer asked Hughes who he worked for; Hughes told him "he belonged" to someone. Why did Hughes make that distinction?
7. Listen to the way Hughes spoke and compare this transcript with the others you have read. What does the audio recording of Fountain Hughes tell you about the way formerly enslaved people spoke?

Please upgrade your Flash Player and/or enable JavaScript in your browser to listen to this audio file.

Figure 1.

Fountain Hughes

My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belong to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was a hundred and fifteen years old when he died. And now I am one hundred and, and one year old.

Hermond Norwood

Who did you work for Uncle Fountain when ... ?

Fountain Hughes

Who'd I work for?

Hermond Norwood

Yeah.

Fountain Hughes

When I, you mean when I was slave?

Hermond Norwood

Yeah, when you were a slave. Who did you work for?

Fountain Hughes

Well, I belonged to, uh, B., when I was a slave. My mother belonged to B. But my, uh, but, uh, we, uh, was all slave children. And after, soon after when we found out that we was free, why then we was, uh, bound out to different people. [names of people] and an all such people as that. And we would run away, and wouldn't stay with them. Why then we'd just go and stay anywheres we could. Lay out a night in underwear. We had no home, you know. We was just turned out like a lot of cattle. You know how they turn cattle out in a pasture? Well after freedom, you know, colored people didn't have nothing. Colored people didn't have no beds when they was slaves. We always slept on the floor, pallet here, and a pallet there. Just like, uh, lot of, uh, wild people, we didn't, we didn't know nothing. Didn't allow you to look at no book. And then there was some free born colored people, why they had a little education, but there was very few of them, where we was. And they all had uh, what you call, I might call it now, uh, jail centers, was just the same as we was in jail. Now I couldn't go from here across the street, or I couldn't go through nobody's house without I have a note, or something from my master. And if I had that pass, that was what we call a pass, if I had that pass, I could go wherever he sent me. And I'd have to be back, you know, when uh. Whoever he sent me to, they, they'd give me another pass and I'd bring that back so as to show how long I'd been gone. We couldn't go out and stay a hour or two hours or something like. They send you. Now, say for instance I'd go out here to S.'s place. I'd have to walk. And I would have to be back maybe in a hour. Maybe they'd give me hour. I don't know just how long they'd give me. But they'd give me a note so there wouldn't nobody interfere with me, and tell who I belong to. And when I come back, why I carry it to my master and give that to him, that'd be all right. But I couldn't just walk away like the people does now, you know. It was what they call, we were

slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that. Have a auction bench, and they'd put you on, up on the bench and bid on you just same as you bidding on cattle you know.

Hermond Norwood

Was that in Charlotte that you were a slave?

Fountain Hughes

Hmmm?

Hermond Norwood

Was that in Charlotte or Charlottesville?

Fountain Hughes

That was in Charlottesville.

Hermond Norwood

Charlottesville, Virginia.

Fountain Hughes

Selling women, selling men. All that. Then if they had any bad ones, they'd sell them to the nigga traders, what they called the nigga traders. And they'd ship them down south, and sell them down south. But, uh, otherwise if you was a good, good person they wouldn't sell you. But if you was bad and mean and they didn't want to beat you and knock you around, they'd sell you what to the, what was call the nigga trader. They'd have a regular, have a sale every month, you know, at the courthouse. And then they'd sell you, and get two hundred dollar, hundred dollar, five hundred dollar.

Hermond Norwood

Were you ever sold from one person to another?

Fountain Hughes

Mmmm?

Hermond Norwood

Were you ever sold?

Fountain Hughes

No, I never was sold.

Hermond Norwood

Always stayed with the same person.

Fountain Hughes

All, all. I was too young to sell.

Hermond Norwood

Oh I see.

Fountain Hughes

See I wasn't old enough during the war to sell, during the Army. And uh, my father got killed in the Army, you know. So it left us small children just to live on whatever people choose to, uh, give us. I was, I was bound out for a dollar a month. And my mother used to collect the money. Children wasn't, couldn't spend money when I come along. In, in, in fact when I come along, young men, young men couldn't spend no money until they was twenty-one years old. And then you was twenty-one, why then you could spend your money. But if you wasn't twenty-one, you couldn't spend no money. I couldn't take, I couldn't spend ten cents if somebody give it to me. Because they'd say, "Well, he might have stole it." We all come along, you might say, we had to give an account of what you done. You couldn't just do things and walk off and say I didn't do it. You'd have to, uh, give an account of it. Now, uh, after we got freed and they turned us out like cattle, we could, we didn't have nowhere to go. And we didn't have nobody to boss us, and, uh, we didn't know nothing. There wasn't, wasn't no schools. And when they started a little school, why, the people that were slaves, there couldn't many of them go to school, except they had a father and a mother. And my father was dead, and my mother was living, but she had three, four other little children, and she had to put them all to work for to help take care of the others. So we had, uh, we had what you call, worse than dogs has got it now. Dogs has got it now better than we had it when we come along.

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Figure 1 (page 0)

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