

Interview with W. L. Bost

Former slave W. L. Bost, 88 years old, interviewed by Marjorie Jones, Asheville, North Carolina, September 27, 1937. From the WPA Slave Narrative Project.

As you read...

This “slave narrative” was based on an interview conducted in the 1930s as part of a federal government project to record the experiences of formerly enslaved people. These narratives can be difficult to read, but from them we can learn not only about the experience of slavery but about the time period when the interview took place.

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.

As you will note, the transcripts of the interviews with former slaves are often quite racist. Interviewers were instructed to transcribe interviews in a way that reflected white assumptions about how blacks spoke. As you read, be aware you may “hear” the person speaking in a way that is stereotypical and not necessarily accurate.

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. Bost was a child when he was a slave. How do you think his age affected his experience and what he remembered?
2. How did Bost describe slave masters?
3. What did Bost tell the interviewer about slave sales? What does his account tell us about family life under slavery?
4. How did slave sales differ for men and women?
5. Why did Bost tell the interviewer about the treatment of women under slavery? Why do you think he focused specifically on the situation for women?
6. What did Bost say about food? Was he given enough to eat?
7. What did Bost say about religion and education? What do his memories tell us about the abilities of enslaved people to create lives for themselves despite the brutalities of slavery?

8. What did Bost recall about being punished as a slave? Why was he punished and how? Why and how were other enslaved people punished, according to Bost?
9. Why might there be less dialect in the transcription of this interview than in the others you have read? (Were the interviewers the same?)

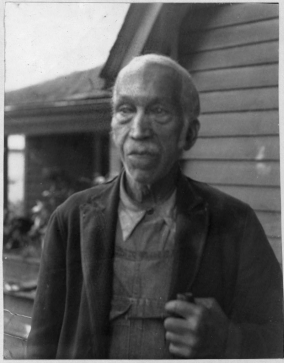


Figure 1. W. L. Bost, photographed when he was interviewed in the 1930s.

My Massa's name was Jonas Bost. He had a hotel in Newton, North Carolina. My mother and grandmother both belonged to the Bost family. My ole Massa had two large plantations one about three miles from Newton and another four miles away. It took a lot of niggers to keep the work a goin' on them both. The women folks had to work in the hotel and in the big house in town. Ole Missus she was a good woman. She never allowed the Massa to buy or sell any slaves. There never was an overseer on the whole plantation. The oldest colored man always looked after the niggers. We niggers lived better than the niggers on the other plantations.

Lord child, I remember when I was a little boy, 'bout ten years, the speculators¹ come through Newton with droves of slaves. They always stay at our place. The poor critters nearly froze to death. They always come 'long on the last of December so that the niggers would be ready for sale on the first day of January. Many the time I see four or five of them chained together. They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. Iv'e seen the ice balls hangin' on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes like sheep in a pasture 'fore they are sheared. They never wore any shoes. Jes run along on the ground, all spewed up with ice. The speculators always rode on horses and drove the pore niggers. When they get cold, they make 'em run 'til they are warm again.

The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters jes like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mournin' and prayin'. I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. Lord miss, them slaves look jes like droves of turkeys runnin' along in front of them horses.

I remember when they put 'em on the block to sell 'em. The ones 'tween 18 and 30 always bring the most money. The auctioneer he stand off at a distance and cry 'em off as they stand on the block. I can hear his voice as long as I live.

If the one they going to sell was a young Negro man this is what he say: "Now gentlemen and fellow-citizens here is a big black buck Negro. He's stout as a mule. Good for any kin' o'work an' he never gives any trouble. How much am I offered for him?" And then the sale would commence, and the nigger would be sold to the highest bidder.

If they put up a young nigger woman the auctioneer cry out: "Here's a young nigger wench, how much am I offered for her?" The pore thing stand on the block a shiverin' an' a shakin' nearly froze to death. When they sold many of the pore mothers beg the speculators to sell 'em with their husbands, but the speculator only take what he want. So maybe the pore thing never see her husban' agin.

Ole Massa always see that we get plenty to eat. O' course it was no fancy rashions. Jes corn bread, milk, fat meat, and 'lasses but the Lord knows that was lots more than other pore niggers got. Some of them had such bad masters.

Us pore niggers never 'lowed to learn anything. All the readin' they ever hear was when they was carried through the big Bible. The Massa say that keep the slaves in they places. They was one nigger boy in Newton who was terrible smart. He learn to read an' write. He take other colored children out in the fields and teach 'em about the Bible, but they forgit it 'fore the nex' Sunday.

Then the paddyrollers² they keep close watch on the pore niggers so they have no chance to do anything or go anywhere. They jes' like policemen, only worsen. 'Cause they never let the niggers go anywhere without a pass from his master. If your wasn't in your proper place when the paddyrollers come they lash you til' you was black and blue. The women got 15 lashes and the men 30. That is for jes bein' out without a pass. If the nigger done anything worse he was taken to the jail and put in the whippin' post. They was two holes cut for the arms stretch up in the air and a block to put your feet in, then they whip you with a cowhide whip. An' the clothes shore never get any of them licks.

I remember how they kill one nigger whippin' him with the bull whip. Many the pore nigger nearly killed with the bull whip. But this one die. He was a stubborn Negro and didn't do as much work as his Massa thought he ought to. He been lashed lot before. So they take him to the whippin' post, and then they strip his clothes off and then the man stan' off and cut him with the whip. His back was cut all to pieces. The cuts about half inch apart. Then after they whip him they tie him down and put salt on him. Then after he lie in the sun awhile they whip him agin. But when they finish with him he was dead.

Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know bettern than to not do what he say. Didn't have much of that until the men from South Carolina come up here and settle and bring slaves. Then they take them very same children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them. If the Missus find out she raise revolution. But she hardly find out. The white men not going to tell and the nigger women were always afraid to. So they jes go on hopin' that thing won't be that way always.

I remember how the driver, he was the man who did most of the whippin', use to whip some of the niggers. He would tie their hands together and then put their hands down over their knees, then take a stick and stick it 'tween they hands and knees. Then when he take hold of them and beat'em first on one side then on the other.

Us niggers never have chance to go to Sunday School and church. The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin' inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meetin'. Sometimes the paddyrollers catch us and beat us good but that didn't keep us from tryin'. I remember one old song we use to sing when we meet down in the woods back of the barn. My mother she sing an' pray to the Lord to deliver us out o' slavery. She always say she thankful she was never sold from her children, and that our Massa not so mean as some of the others. but the old song it went something like this:

Oh mother lets go down, lets go down, lets go down, lets go down.
Oh, mother lets go down, down in the valley to pray.
As I went down in the valley to pray
Studyin' about that good ole way
Who shall wear that starry crown
Good Lord show me the way.

Then the other part was just like that except it said ‘father’ instead of ‘mother’, and then ‘sister’ and then ‘brother’.

Then they sing sometime:

We came a while in the wilderness, in the wilderness, in the wilderness
We cam a while in the wilderness where the Lord makes me happy
And then I’m a goin’ home.

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Notes

1. A slave speculator was a man who bought and sold slaves for a profit. Speculators bought slaves from one master and resold them for a higher price. Speculators had a reputation for being cruel to slaves.
2. Paddyrollers were white men hired by a (white) community to patrol the slaves in gangs. If they found found a black person (free or enslaved) whom they believed was a runaway, they could punish him or her for being a fugitive slave.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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