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## Evaluation of the Federal Writers' Project

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## Evaluation of the Federal Writers' Project

### Abstract

This essay examines an interview with a former slave, Sarah Graves. The interview is a product of the Federal Writers' Project, a government funded program created during the Great Depression. I address the possible problems that arise when working with this type of memory source (an interview), and how to work around them. This essay also ponders the reasoning why certain bits of information were included in the interview, and why others were excluded.

### Keywords

Civil War memory, slavery, interview

### Disciplines

Oral History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | United States History

### Comments

Written for FYS 184-4: Civil War Memory from 1865 to the Age of Black Lives Matter

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“My master was not so bad as some was to their slaves.” This quote comes from a woman named Sarah Graves who was formerly a slave in Missouri from 1850 to 1865. Sarah is quoted saying this in an interview conducted by a worker for the Federal Writers’ Project. This project was a federally funded project which went on during the 1930s and resulted in over 2,000 interviews with formerly enslaved African Americans. These interviews are very valuable to historians and the general public alike as they give a glimpse into what it was like to be a slave in America through first hand accounts.

Despite these interview’s immense value, it needs to be noted that there are some problems that arise with this type of memory source. The possible misremembering of events or the amount of time in between the events and the retelling are examples of these issues, which I will go into further detail about later on. These complications don’t make the interviews unusable, it just creates more of a challenge while working with them.

For now I would like to shift the attention back to Sarah Graves. Sarah was only fifteen years old in 1865 when she and her mother were freed (they were too afraid of the return of slavery to leave in 1863, so they stayed with their master until the war was over). Sarah and her mother were separated from her father when she was just six months old. Her father had been allotted, or hired out, to a man in Kentucky while Sarah and her mother were moved to Missouri. The masters purposefully made sure Sarah’s mother and father did not know where each other were with the hopes that Sarah’s mother would remarry and have more kids (so they could have them as slaves). The splitting up of families is an aspect of slavery often overlooked, but arguably, it’s one of the most heart breaking. Sarah’s recount contributes to our collective memory of slavery by emphasizing that the splitting up of families was just one of the many horrible aspects of slavery. Sarah’s mother eventually ended up remarrying, but only because it was to a sickly man she knew would be unable to have kids. This meant that Sarah and her mother ended up working extra hard to make up for her step father’s inability to work. Both of them worked in the fields planting and harvesting corn; Sarah also carried water buckets to the field hands because she was still considerably young during her time in slavery.

A topic Sarah shares a notable amount about during her interview is being whipped. During this portion of the interview is when she is noted saying “My master was not as bad as some was to their slaves.” She mentions that her mother’s master whipped his slaves for fun, but her master only whipped her when she “deserved” it or when she was blamed for stuff the master’s children did. When comparing these two masters it’s more understandable as to how Sarah came to the conclusion that her master “was not as bad as” other masters. Another could-be factor into why this account was made by Sarah Graves is the possibility that her words were twisted or edited by the interviewer. These interviews were conducted in the 1930s when racism in America was still running rampant under Jim Crow laws. There would be many different motivations as to why the interviewer would want to tamper with Sarah’s words, but one is so they could down play the terrible realities of slavery. This happened in the case of Charlie Moses when state editors reading Charlie’s interview decided to add the following statement: “If all marsters had been good like some, the slaves would all a-been happy.”<sup>1</sup> The intended purpose of this addition was to create the narrative that only slaves with bad masters were unhappy with their lives, and if all slave masters had been good like the majority of them were, there wouldn’t have been any outcry for freedom from slaves. Obviously we know this to not be true, and there were no “good” slave masters. Even though the changing of the interviews’ content was not something super typical, it is still something we should note as a possibility.

Despite sharing many negative aspects of slavery, Sarah shifts to focus a bit of her interview on the positive things that have gone on in her life since being released from slavery. She married another former slave she had known her whole life and they had a son together. Her and her husband purchased a 120 acre farm which they had been living on since they were married. Sarah seems to be content with her life after slavery and has moved on from that former phase of her life: “Things is changed. We workin’ for ourself now, an’ what we get is our’n, an’ no more wippin’s.” The change in her attitude while talking about her life in slavery versus her life after slavery helps contribute to the collective memory that slavery

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Ann Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2001): pp. 1-31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2001.0009>, 2.

was in fact a negative thing and African Americans were better off being freed. It's possible that her contentedness with her life after slavery could have caused her to subconsciously down play the accounts of her life during slavery. She was still young when slavery ended in the United States and she got to live her entire adult life as a free woman. If Sarah had been older when she was freed and had spent a longer period of her life in slavery, and didn't get to experience the life she ended up living after slavery, it is quite possible her narrative of slavery would have been very different. It is likely she would have held a much more negative attitude towards slavery, one that would have been much harder to forgo. Another way her age plays a role in what narrative she told about slavery, was as a child in slavery, she did not have to do as much work as adults. If she was subject to do the harder labor adults did (for example after working in the fields all day her mother had to go inside and continue to do work around the master's house), this could have shaped her accounts of slavery in the interview.

While Sarah highlights some of the negative aspects of slavery as well as some of the more positive aspects of her life after slavery, she fails to include many additional aspects of what life in slavery was like. She only briefly touches on her living situation during her enslavement stating she lived in a room in a log house that was attached to her master's house. She does not address the actual living conditions within their living space, the food they had, or the level of personal care they were able to have. In almost all cases, slaves had horrendous living conditions, barely edible food, and little access to the personal care they would have wanted/needed. There's many explanations for why Sarah omitted these critical aspects of slavery. One reason may be because she simply did not remember them. Sarah was eighty seven years old at the time of the interview; seventy-two years had elapsed from the time of her emancipation to the time of when the interview was conducted. It's a part of human nature to have our memories worsen as time goes on, so this easily could have been the case.<sup>2</sup> With that said, it is important to examine the interview as a whole with this concept in mind. It very easily could be the case that Sarah genuinely misremembered aspects about her life which she did include in the interview, thus creating a

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<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): pp. 247-261, <https://doi.org/10.2307/205156>, 3.

narrative that is not fully accurate. But this is not grounds for dismissing the entire interview, it just means we need to exercise a bit of caution as we read and take everything with a grain of salt. Despite the possible flaws that come with using this type of memory source, it's worth it to work around them, as this type of primary source is tremendously valuable to historians of slavery.

As a whole the interview with Sarah Graves is somewhat puzzling. Throughout the interview, Sarah shares many terrible aspects of slavery. However, she also includes accounts that almost dull down the reality of what being a slave was like, making it seem not as bad as we know it to have been. The narrative she creates through this interview is likely to contradict the collective memory of slavery many people hold today. To get a better understanding of where Sarah was coming from whilst sharing her sentiments, I would ask her these questions: "How content are you with your life after slavery?", "Do you think your attitude towards your former master has changed over time?", "Why did you decide to take on your master's last name?", "Hypothetically, if you were never subject to slavery, do you think you would have lived a better life?", and "How would you rate your memory on a scale from one to ten?" Sarah has a content tone while she talks about her life after slavery. The first question would help to clear up if this was actually the case or not. If she said she was content with her life, I would recommend reading the interview with a little more awareness, as she could have softened her view of her time in bondage as a result. Regarding the second question, a softened attitude towards her master could contribute to why Sarah's interview was not a full out condemnation of slavery, which is what a lot of people would assume would be the case coming from any former slave. Even if Sarah honestly did not think her attitude towards her master had changed over time, it's still a viable possibility it had. In the interview Sarah mentions that she and her husband both take on the last names of their former masters upon their emancipation, suggesting that slavery was not as bad as people made it seem, because if it was, why would she take on her former master's last name? It's possible there was a logical reason Sarah decided to do this, so I would just like to try and better understand her decision, which is why I would ask the third question. Most people would assume the immediate answer to question four would be "yes", however, I think it would still be worth asking Sarah. This question would assist in clarifying some of the contrasting

sentiments she shared throughout her interview. As for the last question, obviously rating your own memory on a scale is not an accurate assessment of someone's memory, but it would be interesting to see how Sarah would rate herself. The interview should still be read with caution regardless of Sarah's answer, but if she gave her own memory a poor score, perhaps an extra bit of caution should be taken. Unfortunately there's no way to go back in time and ask Sarah these questions. But even without her answers, we can still appreciate the value of the interview and the contributions it has made to our collective memory on slavery.

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