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## The Sarah Gudger Interview: An Analysis

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## The Sarah Gudger Interview: An Analysis

### Abstract

During the Great Depression, a New Deal project intended to create jobs was the Federal Writer's Project. One aspect of this project, the Slave Narrative Project, involved the interviews of over 2,000 former slaves and culminated in a federal collection of information on the lives of enslaved people. This paper focuses on the interview of Sarah Gudger, a 121 year-old former slave from North Carolina. It includes an overview of the content included and excluded from the interview in addition to an analysis of the interview including factors that may have positively or negatively impacted the interview's content, as well as its continued value and usefulness to historians and scholars.

### Keywords

Sarah Gudger, Federal Writer's Project, Slave Narrative Project, Analysis

### Disciplines

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

### Comments

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## The Sarah Gudger Interview: An Analysis

### Introduction

During the Great Depression, one of the New Deal projects intended to create jobs was the Federal Writers Project. This project, which involved interviews of over 2,000 former slaves, culminated in a federal collection of information on the lives of enslaved people. While there were several interviews, the one I chose to focus on was that of Sarah Gudger, a 121 year-old former slave who lived in North Carolina.

### Content of the Interview

Throughout her interview Sarah Gudger talked about many negative and positive aspects of her experience as a slave. The most prominent negative aspect of slavery in Gudger's interview involved beatings. She went into great detail about how she was beaten or whipped often, even saying "I's tuk a thousand lashins in my day. Sometimes mah poah ole body be soah foah a week"<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, she talked about how the master would not only beat the adults, but also the children. She stated "yo nebbah too big t' git de lash "<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly, another prevalent negative aspect in her interviews were the conditions to which they worked and lived. According to Gudger, the slaves were sent out "in any kine ob weathah, rain o' snow, it nebbah mattah"<sup>3</sup>, and if they did not go out into the weather they were beaten<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the living conditions were deplorable. Sarah had to sleep on a pile of rags,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Gudger, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project* (1936) 353

<sup>2</sup>Gudger, *Federal*, 35)

<sup>3</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 353

<sup>4</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

was only given “a lil’ cawn bread an’ ‘lasses”<sup>5</sup> to eat, and got very little sleep<sup>6</sup>. In fact, she even went as far as saying “dey wah bettah t’ de animals den t’ us’ns”<sup>7</sup>.

One of the most detailed parts of this interview is the story of when Sarah’s mother died. Sarah’s mother lived on another plantation, therefore she was not able to go see her when she was sick and had to find out that her mother was dead from another man. When she asked her mistress for permission to go see her mother’s body before it was buried, her mistress said ““git on outen heah, and git back to yo’ wok afoah I wallup yo’ good””<sup>8</sup>, and did not let her see her mother.

One of the last negative aspects of slavery addressed in this interview was the splitting up of families. Although she said it never happened on her plantation, Sarah recalled that other plantations had been visited by “de specalater”<sup>9</sup> who would pick out the slaves that he wanted and then “tak [them] away to de cotton country”<sup>10</sup>. She also recounted that if the slaves did not want to go they were beaten and tied behind the wagon until they agreed to go without trouble<sup>11</sup>. This was very detrimental to slave families “cause mebbe it [was] huh son o’ husban’ an’ she know she nebbah see ‘em again”<sup>12</sup>.

While the majority of the aspects of slavery Sarah talked about were negative, there were also a few positive ones. Several times throughout the interview, Sarah mentioned how the old

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<sup>5</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>6</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 353-354

<sup>7</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 354

<sup>8</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 356

<sup>9</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 354

<sup>10</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>11</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>12</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

mistress would read to both the black and white children. She also stated that the slaves “lak Ole Missie ”<sup>13</sup> because she wasn’t “lak uthah white folks”<sup>14</sup>.

Another positive aspect of slavery addressed in the interview was that the master was kind to them. There were several instances where Sarah stated that her old master “wah a good ole man”<sup>15</sup>. She was grateful that he never sold his slaves to the specalater and into the cotton country.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, she said that he treated his sick slaves well, putting them in a house closer to the big house and making sure that someone took care of them while they were sick<sup>17</sup>. The last line “jes’ ben sick once; dat aftah freedom”<sup>18</sup>, suggests that she was healthy during her time as a slave.

In addition to the many aspects of slavery that were covered in the interview, there were a few that were not discussed by Sarah Gudger. Throughout the interview we do not hear if she had a husband or any children, either on the same plantation as her or a different plantation. In fact, we do not hear about her relationships with anyone except her mother or her former owners. Additionally, she does not talk about what life was like during the war. She briefly talks about how the slaves “didn’ know what it wah all ‘bout”<sup>19</sup>, as well as the fact that one of her master’s sons fought in the war<sup>20</sup>; however, she does not talk much about how life changed during the war or if any of the slaves went with the master’s son to war. Other topics that were not discussed in the interview include how she felt about freedom (both before and after she got it),

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<sup>13</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>14</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>15</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 354

<sup>16</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>17</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 355

<sup>18</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 358

<sup>19</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 357

<sup>20</sup> Gudger, *Federal*, 357

if the slaves were allowed to practice any religion or celebrations on the plantation, or if she or others had ever been raped.

Throughout the interview, Sarah Gudger included and excluded many aspects of slavery. She included both negative and positive aspects of life as a slave and how she was treated by her master. She also excluded many aspects about what life was like during the war or any relationships she had with people other than her masters and her mother. Overall, what is included or excluded in this interview can give us an insight as to Sarah's experiences as a slave and how they differ from others experiences as enslaved people.

### Analysis of the Interview

When looking at sources such as this, it is important to think about what factors could shape the account of the interviewee. In the case of Sarah Guder there are several factors that could negatively or positively impact her account and memory of life as a slave.

The first factor that could negatively impact this account is time. It has been over 70 years since Sarah was enslaved and most of her memories from that time have faded or been lost completely. Unfortunately, Sarah is not a unique case among these interviewees as "more than two-thirds of these men and women were at least 80 years old when questioned in the 1920s and 1930s, and they were all asked to recall enslavement during childhood"<sup>21</sup>. Along the same lines, memory is another factor that could negatively impact the account. Sarah was 121 years old when she was interviewed, and she likely doesn't remember everything that happened to her during her childhood.

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<sup>21</sup> Donna Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 252

Two other important factors are location and the person interviewing her. Sarah was living in North Carolina in the 1930s when this interview happened and, unfortunately, she may not have said everything she wanted to due to fear of repercussions. Lynchings and racial terrorism were common during this time and she may not have wanted to draw any negative attention toward herself. Similarly, who was interviewing her may have impacted what she said during the interview. She did not know the interviewer, or their beliefs, so she may have altered her story so she didn't offend the person interviewing her. In the case of Minnie Davis, "every word was carefully weighed before it was uttered"<sup>22</sup>, showing that the interviewees often took into account the views of the person who was interviewing them.

Another large factor that could have impacted the interview's content, actually happened after the interview had taken place. In some states, the interviews were edited before they were sent to the national database. These editors, who were usually southern white men or women, would take out or add sections to accomplish three goals: first, to "Illustrate that ex-slaves remembered slavery as having been a paternalistic institution; second, they sought to create texts that appeared to be authentic; and finally, they strove to write stories that would be entertaining and eminently readable"<sup>23</sup>. In some cases, such as that of Mr. Moses from Mississippi, they would replace key sentences or phrases so that the interviews made "the narrative conform more closely with the accepted version of proper race relations of the time"<sup>24</sup>. Unfortunately, this practice of editing the interviews makes it hard for readers to distinguish what was actually said by the interviewee versus what was added by the editors.

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Stewart, "Rewriting the Master(s) Narrative: Signifying in the Ex-Slave Narratives," *Long Past Slavery* (n.d.):197

<sup>23</sup> Sharon Musher, "Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection." *American Quarterly* vol. 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 14

<sup>24</sup> Musher, "Memories of Ex-Slaves", 2

In contrast to the abovementioned factors, there were other factors that could have positively impacted this interview. The first of these factors is Sarah's age. Because she was 121 years old when she was interviewed, Sarah had spent much more of her life as an enslaved person than many others who had been interviewed. This means that she likely has more insight as to what slavery was like during multiple stages of life, and not just a childhood in slavery. Additionally, because she spent most of her life as a slave, she is more likely to remember what life was like generally as an enslaved person.

Another factor that positively impacts the interview is the fact that Sarah remembers many accurate details about her life and the lives of the people who owned her. In the prologue to the interview it is stated that she accurately recalls both the death of Joe Gudger and Alexander Hemphill's enlistment in the Confederate army. This is likely because, according to Donna Spindel, "people are likely to recall 'events that took place at critical junctures in their lives,' and thus that the ex-slaves would have been able to remember the details of their most important life experiences"<sup>25</sup>.

There were many different factors, both negative and positive, that could have affected Sarah Gudger's interview. Some, like age and memory, could have both good and bad impacts on the information included in the interview. It is important to keep these factors in mind while reading the article to ensure that we get the full picture of what was (or wasn't) said and the reasoning behind that decision to include or exclude information.

Despite the many factors that impacted the information in the interview, it is still a very valuable resource for historians and scholars of Civil War and slavery memories. This interview, and the many others like it, are extremely valuable to historians because they give first hand accounts about what it was like to be an enslaved person, both before and during the Civil War. It

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<sup>25</sup> Spindel "Assessing Memory", 254

also provides a different perspective than the majority of documents about the Civil War and its memory, as most of them were written by literate white men. Similarly, it is important for scholars of memories about the Civil War and slavery as it provides readers with first hand knowledge of the thoughts and emotions of those who were enslaved, as well as their experiences as enslaved people during the antebellum period and the Civil War. Overall, these interviews are invaluable important documents that allow us to understand new perspectives and memories about the Civil War and slavery, as told from those who were enslaved themselves.

### Lingering Questions

While I found this interview invigorating to read, I was left with a few questions I would have liked to ask Sarah Gudger myself. Firstly, I would have asked her if she had a husband or any children. I believe that this question could have given us insight as to what it was like to be married to a slave from another plantation. Additionally, it could have illuminated what it was like to have children who are also enslaved, or why some people did not want to have children while they were enslaved.

The next question I would have asked was: What worried her the most while she was enslaved? I feel as though this question could have illuminated some of the problems that slaves feared and faced on a daily basis. I feel as though some of the most common answers to this question would have been beatings, being sold to the cotton country, or having family members being taken away from you.

The third question I would have asked Ms. Gudger was why she didn't go to California with her brothers once she was free. I believe that this question could explain some of the complicated reasons that newly freed slaves left or stayed in the South following their

emancipation. I also believe that this question could expose any remaining fears that still existed among ex-slaves during the 1920s and 1930s.

Another question I would have asked during the interview was a question of how she felt and what she did once she heard she was free. I think that the answer to this question could give us some insight as to what former slaves initially did when they were freed. Were there any celebrations? I feel as though, if there were celebrations there would not be many documented records about them, as many former slave owners would not want to write about how their former slaves were celebrating being freed from their ownership, and many of the slaves who participated in them did not know how to write.

The fifth and final question I would have asked Sarah Gudger during her interview was: how would she like to be remembered? Her answer to this question could have given us knowledge of how ex-slaves viewed themselves and their roles pre- and post- Civil War. Whether she considered herself as an ex-slave or just an old woman who had lived through slavery and the Civil War could have told us a lot about how formerly enslaved people viewed themselves and their roles in society, as well as how they wanted to be remembered by the larger world.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this interview with Sarah Gudger can give us lots of new information and knowledge about the lives of enslaved people. What information she included or excluded was likely determined by a variety of factors, but ultimately culminated in the interview found in the national records. This interview, and others like it, are very important to scholars and historians as they give us new perspectives in a period where much of the surviving written documents

were created by literate white men. While there were still some lingering questions that could have illuminated us a bit more on the subject, Sarah Gudger's interview gives us valuable insight into life as an enslaved person throughout the antebellum and Civil War eras.

Honor Code: I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

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