

11-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

King, Brennan and Hertzell, David (2014) "A Peculiar Institution Indeed: The Humanity of Indian Slave Owners," *SWOSU Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://dc.swosu.edu/jur/vol1/iss1/4>

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A Peculiar Institution Indeed: The Humanity of Indian Slave Owners

by Brennan King

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This project was undertaken to better understand the rift between the understandings of how slaves were treated in Indian Territory versus how they were treated in the Deep South. In order to complete this project research was completed at the Oklahoma Historical Society, along with primary source resources from archival materials from the now defunct Works Progress Administration. The resulting conclusion of this project is that slaves owned by Native Americans in Indian Territory were generally treated with much more humanity than were slaves in the Deep South. The main implication realized was that it is important to have a written record of slaves' interpretations of their lives in bondage.

When setting out to interpret the history of the institution of slavery in Indian Territory, this author discovered, through archival analysis, that slavery itself was a much different institution among many of the Indian tribes in Indian Territory. While Native American slave-owners certainly treated their slaves harshly at times, these instances were in much fewer number than the recorded atrocities white slave-owners committed in the Southern United States. This does not mean that many slaves did not indeed face the wrath of their Indian owners, it simply means that the severity of the altercations paled in comparison to slaves living with whites in the American South, along with the numbers presented through analyzing archival evidence.

Indian slave-owners treated their slaves better than non-Indian slave-owners. Robert Vinson Lackey, of the United States Federal Writers' Project (FWP), interviewed Mary Grayson, a Creek

freedwoman from Tulsa, during the summer of 1937. Mary's interview, along with countless others, painted a much different picture of slavery itself. Indians viewed their slaves as more than property. Mary stated:

We slaves didn't have a hard time at all before the War. I have had people who were slaves of white folks back in the old states tell me that they had to work awfully hard and their masters were cruel to them sometimes, but all the Negroes I knew who belonged to Creeks always had plenty of clothes and lots to eat and we all lived in good log cabins we built. We worked the farm and tended to the horses and cattle and hogs, and some of the older women worked around the owner's house, but each Negro family looked after a part of the fields and worked the crops like they belonged to us.¹

Mary Grayson was just one of thousands of former slaves who field workers interviewed during the mid-1930s through the early 1940s. Before the Works Progress Administration (WPA) had made efforts to get Americans back to work, no one had ever asked former slaves for their perspective on being considered property prior to emancipation in 1865.

A wealthy Creek slave trader purchased Mary's mother from a white Alabama man, and even after attempting to escape her new Indian master, the Creek slaver saw to it that Mary's mother was treated well on his plantation. Mary's new Creek master would not allow any punishment for the attempted escape. Instead, the Creek slave-trader gave Mary's mother to one of the Creek man's sons as his bride. Upon realization that Mary's mother was unable to produce offspring at that time, her master then sold her to another Creek gentleman by the name of Mose Perryman. Perryman owned both Mary and her mother, and neither went on record to state that their former master treated them harshly. Two differing slave-owners, both prominent Creeks, owned the Graysons, and both Creek men were willing to show mercy to their slaves.²

¹ Edited by Lindsay Baker and Julie Baker. WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives. 172.

² Baker and Baker. 172.

By 1935, two years after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted the New Deal, government officials proposed programs to help stave off hordes of unemployed Americans, and put Americans back to work. Harry Hopkins, the newly appointed head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), saw the need for a relief program that pertained only to those of a white-collar background. Hopkins ordered a survey to be conducted in thousands of American homes to find out which job skills his new program could utilize. What Hopkins discovered was that there were thousands of out-of-work writers, along with artists, in need of work.³ Hopkins appointed Jacob Baker as his “right-hand man” and the go-between for Hopkins and the workers he represented.⁴ Thanks to the efforts of Hopkins and Baker, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was born in June of 1935 to a ready and waiting, unemployed population. The FWP, a branch of the WPA Professional and Service Projects Division, was initially supposed to last only a year, include government encyclopedias and United States Guidebooks, and be regionally limited.⁵ Due to the FWP’s popularity, however, the project was extended into new regions, and lengthened to a broader timetable.

In 1936, FWP fieldworkers began looking into the realm of black studies. One subsidiary effort fieldworkers toiled over was ex-slave interviews throughout the United States. Work began in parts of Oklahoma and Arkansas, along with sections of the Northeast, but due to lack of workers, the project was tabled. After some time, the project found new life in the Deep South, and writers were penning floods of “human interest” stories, all of which pertained to the lives of freedmen, and their stories of bondage.⁶ Fieldworkers asked former slaves about their lives before and after bondage, and how former master treated their slaves during bondage.

FWP Fieldworkers were finally giving freedmen in America

³ Penkower, Monty. Federal Writers’ Project. 1.

⁴ Penkower, Monty. P. 10. Baker served as Hopkins’s assistant in directing Work Relief and Special Projects.

⁵ Penkower. Federal Writers’ Project. 27.

⁶ Penkower. Federal Writers’ Project. 144.

a chance to have writers record their stories, and have a first-hand written history of the lives as slaves. Some historians argue that, though these accounts provided a much-needed record of slavery in America, the validity of the slave narratives remains questionable. Traces of biased, interpolated interviews plagued the initial sequence of narratives. By 1937, some workers were asking former slaves only questions that they wanted answers to, and workers asked questions in ways in which the answer would prove to benefit the writer's own styles. Racial tension also arose during the initial stages of the slave narratives. White interviewers would skew sentences and mix up words order to ensure slaves' speech fit the "darky dialect" needed for a good interview.⁷ Ben Botkin, who took over the writing of the questionnaires given to fieldworkers, saw need for action, and "altered the first questionnaire to remove traces of bias and forestall the artistic flourishes reminiscent of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris."⁸

Amidst the thousands of narratives from the Deep South, fieldworkers in Oklahoma began interviewing former slaves who had either moved to Indian Territory⁹ with their white masters before the Civil War, or former slaves who had been owned by Native Americans inhabiting Indian Territory. Fieldworkers interviewed freedmen and women from Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Alabama and Tennessee, just to name a few. Writers asked their subjects to open up about the evils of slavery, along with the details of daily life in Indian Territory. Interestingly enough, former slaves of Indians showed a much greater degree of loyalty and camaraderie with their owners than did those freedmen once owned by whites.

Though limited in number, tribal slave interviews showed that amongst most of the major slave-owning Indian tribes, masters treated their slaves with a much higher degree of humanity and respect than white-owned slaves. Many narratives cited extremely harsh treatment from white masters, while Indian-owned slaves

⁷ Davidson, James W. *After the Fact*. 160.

⁸ Penkower. 145. Page and Harris were both American writers during the late nineteenth-century.

⁹ *Modern-Day Oklahoma*

exhibited much more reserve when discussing discipline and treatment on their farms and plantations. Phoebe Banks of Muskogee told her interviewer in October of 1938, that her owner, who was also Mose Perryman, encouraged education among his slaves, unlike many other slave-owners who feared that a slave who could read and write was nothing but trouble waiting to happen. That Perryman was willing to allow his slaves to educate themselves showed a certain trust between Perryman and his slaves. This trust could only go so far, however. As the Civil War escalated in Indian Territory, Banks and her family sought to join the Creeks who were loyal to the Union. Though Perryman treated his slaves with a much greater degree of leniency and allowed more privileges on the Creek plantation, forced bondage still played a definitive part in spurring Perryman's slaves to flee.¹⁰

The hardships that Mary Grayson and Phoebe Banks endured as Creek-owned slaves were certainly difficult, as was any and all forced bondage of slavery, but in comparison, Mary and Phoebe had a much better experience than many white-owned slaves. Annie Hawkins, who was ninety years old when her fieldworker interviewed her on August 16, 1937, told her story of hardship in vivid detail. After her master transported her and her family to Texas, Annie told of the ferocity and macabre with which her and her fellow slaves were treated. Annie claimed that days on her plantation were "...constant misery..." and that she and her family "...done as much work as a dozen niggers-we knowed we had to." ¹¹

Interestingly enough, after the Civil War, Annie married Sam Love, a former slave who had been owned by an Indian man. Sam stated that his owner "...was one of the best men that ever lived." And Sam refused to relocate a considerable distance from where his master had enslaved him, as opposed to Annie who "...moved jest as far away..." as she could from her former masters.¹²

The connection between the Perryman slaves and Sam Love is astounding. These three individuals, two of whom the same Creek

¹⁰ Baker and Baker. WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives. 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 191.

¹² Baker and Baker. 191.

man owned, all expressed a degree of respect towards their captors, a respect that Annie Hawkins and her family had little need for in regards to their masters. Annie even stated that upon arriving at her master's funeral, she and her sister could not help but openly chuckle at the corpse of the man who had treated them so badly.

Though these cases are few, the correlation between them is distinct. Perhaps it was race that played a part in staying the hands of Indian slave-owners from punishing their slaves with brutality. Since Indians seemed to define slavery differently than whites, slavery as an institution had not been at such a level of brutality and hopelessness prior to emancipation. The fact that white slave-owners saw their slaves as the bottom rung of the societal hierarchy, many whites saw Indians as beneath their status as well. The FWP showed that the disdain for white slave-owners was almost universal between black slaves and Indians in the narratives they collected.

Race has been a topic of focus for generations. While some historians focus on the negative aspects of racism, others study emphasize the binding affects race can have on a people. An interesting note on race comes from Duke graduate Celia E. Naylor-Ojurongbe, whose dissertation cites how similarities in culture, language, and blood made those slaves owned by Indians much more comfortable with their masters. Naylor cites intermarriage among Indians and their slaves, and the resulting relationships that blossomed from generations of enslaved peoples being related to their masters.¹³ Judging from first-hand accounts, this principle of treating slaves more like brethren holds true amongst the numerous slave narratives fieldworkers collected from those of mixed-blood.

Perhaps it was too difficult for Indian slave-owners to be particularly rash and ungenerous to those whom they themselves sired. Another possibility is that the issue of color was mostly lost amongst the numerous Indian tribes in America. Upon first meeting with white European settlers, Indians did not show the same animosity towards individuals of a different racial background, rather they saw an opportunity for trade and intermingling with

¹³ Naylor-Ojurongbe, Celia E. *More at Home With the Indians*. 6.

these new tenants of the North American continent. Due to the unique nature of Indian adoption, the majority of Indians that encountered peoples of a different race simply did not care about color. Indians were welcoming to those of a different race to tribal membership without any real test of cultural differences.¹⁴ This principle quite possibly played a role in helping Indians decide how to treat their slaves. Though Indians did believe that African Americans were beneath them, this was perhaps the result of assimilation into an Anglo culture where the mistreatment of slaves was the norm.

Throughout the numerous farms and plantations that littered Indian Territory in the mid nineteenth-century, many Indian slave-owners had relationships with their slaves that went beyond that of a master-slave sentiment. FWP fieldworker Jessie Ervin interviewed mixed-blood freedwoman Kiziah Love in 1937. Love's owner, Frank Colbert, had owned Love and her mother during the days of slavery's prominence, and Love alluded back to her life as the slave of a full-blooded Choctaw Indian. Kiziah stated regarding her days as a slave that she and the rest of Colbert's slaves "...was about as well off as the best of 'em." To Kiziah Love, being the slave of a Choctaw master was actually enjoyable, and she even showed a great amount of affection towards her master and her mistress, noting that Frank and Julie Colbert "...was the best folks that ever lived." She continued, "All the niggers loved Master Frank, and knowed jest what he wanted done, and they tried their best to do it, too."¹⁵

Frank Colbert's brother, Holmes Colbert, was another prominent slave-owning Indian who showed a unique attachment to his slaves. Polly Colbert, who belonged to Holmes, had an astounding interview at the age of eighty-three in the town that is ironically named Colbert, Oklahoma. Polly stated that even after her parents died, her masters took her and her siblings into their homes, and their masters also gave them rooms within the main

¹⁴ Katz, William L. Africans and Indians: Only In America. <http://williamlkatz.com/africans-indians-only-america/>.

¹⁵ Edited by Patrick Mingos. 97.

house on the plantation, which was unheard of. Polly also alluded to her experience with treatment as a young woman, saying that she "...never had much work to do." And that she and her fellow slaves always had homespun clothing and shoes on their feet.¹⁶

Perhaps a contributing factor to slaves working hard to remain loyal to their masters was a mentality of mutual respect amongst Indian masters and their slaves. Tulsa native Nellie Johnson stated in her FWP interview that her master, "Old Chief" Rolley McIntosh of the Lower Creeks always treated his slaves well, and "...never did act towards us like we was slaves, much anyways." Old Chief even went as far as to allow his slaves to cultivate his/her own acreage to farm on weekends when Old Chief allowed his slaves free reign to grow whatever he or she wanted, as long as it did not interfere with their work. Old Chief also allowed his slaves to essentially decorate and renovate the slaves' quarters in order to make them more aesthetically pleasing, and to emulate poor Creek housing of the day. Nellie Johnson made sure to include in her interview, which WPA worker Robert Lacky penned in 1937, that her master treated her and her fellow slaves "...like they was just hired hands..."¹⁷

The importance of these narratives lies in the perspective in which workers wrote them. It is clear that fieldworkers interviewed former slaves, men and women, but what of the Indians themselves? Life in Pioneer Oklahoma was not only difficult for slaves, but for everyone trying to live in what was known as the "Great American Desert." The FWP and its workers had covered their bases from the perspective of slaves: thousands of freed people were interviewed. FWP workers also saw to it that Indians across the United States were interviewed in a compendium of narratives that historians call the *Indian-Pioneer Papers*.

Alabama native A.J. Grayson, an American Indian, was the overseer on his mother's plantation. Grayson stated that he and his mother owned mostly black workers, many of whom returned to service in the form of paid employment after freedom had

¹⁶ Edited by Terri Baker and Connie Henshaw. 87.

¹⁷ Mingos. 74.

reached the south.¹⁸ Ninnian Tannehill, an Indian born in 1854 in Monroe County, Missouri stated in his April, 1938 interview with WPA worker Nannie Burns, that Tannehill's father did not believe in slavery, but Tannehill's mother owned around forty slaves. What makes Tannehill's interview so compelling is that the slaves Tannehill's mother Susan owned returned to their enslavement even after men from Kansas City, KS had granted the slaves their freedom. Susan Tannehill's slaves were loyal, even when they looked freedom in the eye and had tasted it.¹⁹ It is clear that slaves in Indian Territory, for the most part, had relationships with their masters that were more than what white-owned slaves faced. Using both the slave narratives FWP fieldworkers collected from slaves and Indians in pioneer America, one can surmise that a mutual respect was evident.

Several assumptions rise from the collected narratives that the FWP compiled. The way slaves were treated might possibly have unknown meaning beyond that of just the definition of slavery. It is certainly not safe to assume Indian-owned slaves in their entirety had masters who treated them better than white-owned slaves, but, judging from the collected works of the FWP, those slaves who were willing to elaborate on their captivity were more than willing to be liberal in their opinions of their former masters. This begs the question: if slavery really had been as brutal to freedmen Indians owned than it was for white-owned slaves, would these freed people even consider uttering a syllable of any word that might get them back into trouble?

To these former slaves, slavery was most definitely still fresh in their minds. Though their bondage had ended, many freedmen and women still bore the scars of the evils of slavery. In what can only be described as brilliant, these freed people, of whom Indians mostly owned, allowed workers to question them on the evils of the darkest days of their very lives. Though many were quick to

¹⁸ University of Oklahoma: Western History Collections. "Indian-Pioneer Papers." <http://digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/pioneer/search.asp?term=slaves&type=0&name=Go>.

¹⁹ University of Oklahoma: Western History Collections. <http://digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/pioneer/search.asp?term=slaves&type=0&name=Go>.

give their names, some still hesitated. The memories in their minds were too great, and they could not go on. An unnamed Choctaw freed woman born in 1852 was just old enough to remember her experience as a slave. She stated that her and her fellow slaves had "...plenty to eat, good horses to ride and plenty of good whiskey to drink. Our masters were kind to us here in the Indian country and there were no restrictions."²⁰

The Federal Writers' Project may have began as a simple government program designed to allow white-collar workers a chance at employment, but the project's workers unknowingly aided in the penning of an entire history that was lost to the world prior to the slave narratives. No such project had been able to grasp just how daunting a task it was to be a slave in the United States. For the first time in American history, freed people had a compendium of the events that transpired during, and prior to, the Civil War, and life as free people. The significance of these writers' works is incredible. During the 1930s-40s, former slaves still faced a great deal of adversity, but those involved with the FWP gave freed people their chance to talk of the evils of slavery. Upon completion of this analysis, an understanding of differential stories remains in narratives that pertained to Indian-owned slaves, as opposed to white-owned slaves.²¹ Indian slave-owners treated their slaves, of any descent, better than did white slave-owners. Though this statement is bold, the evidence speaks for itself. The freed people saw the interviews as a chance to give thanks and praise to their former Indian masters because they wanted to, not because they were forced to.

The definition of slavery was completely different between

²⁰ Edited by Terri Baker and Connie Henshaw. 68.

²¹ Slaves, freed people, freedmen, freedwomen, and former slaves mentioned in this analysis all encompass those of full-blooded African descent, those of mixed-blood (African and Indian), and those of full-blooded Indian descent. Slaves owned by Indians in the mid nineteenth-century to post-emancipation were a melting pot of Indians, Africans, and mixed-bloods. Many descended from their masters, while many were born of slave parents on their respective master's plantation. Inter-marriage among Indians and slaves was extremely common, and many slaves were often given freedom in the form of them being gifted to a neighboring plantation owner.

Anglo-Americans and American Indians. Indian culture provided a chance for captives to become more than just property, but become what can almost be construed as a member of the tribe. The Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and Chickasaws all saw the need to treat their slaves in a better manner simply because that was what they believed in their culture. There were undoubtedly dark periods for Indian-owned slaves, but when comparing the narratives FWP workers scribed, the case for better treatment among Indians owners is evident. Eliza Whitmire, a mixed-blood Cherokee freedwoman, stated that, though slavery was difficult, having an Indian owner and living in Indian Territory made all the difference.

While these old slave days were trying, and we went through many hardships, our Indian masters were very kind to us, and gave us plenty of good clothes to wear, and we always had plenty to eat. I can't say that I have been happier and contended, [contented] since I was free, than I was in those good old days when our living was guaranteed, even though we had to work hard to get it...It is true that there were a few hard masters, and I have heard of a few who whipped their slaves unmercifully, but they were few. Most of us slaves fared well, and many did not know what to do when set free, and they went back and worked for their old masters for several years, rather than to try and make a living, after being set free. The slaves who belonged to the Cherokees fared much better than the slaves who belonged to the white race...²²

The hardships slaves' faced during slavery's reign were most definitely unjust and trying for everyone involved, but, as history has shown, just when humanity is at the brink of the abyss, it pulls itself out through sheer force of will. Slaves had no choice but to make the best of their situations, and some, one could believe, had relatively comfortable lives as slaves, especially when being

²² Minges. 30.

compared to the horrors of the American South and the stories of death, lynching, and brutality that make up a dark section in the history of this young nation. It is ironic that, during some of the darkest days the United States had faced, the Federal Writers' Project's workers brought themselves through the muck of the Great Depression by doing the only thing they knew how: simply write. While the project was littered with controversy and had its fair share of problems, it bolstered historians to take a closer look at slavery as an institution of not only masters, but also the slaves themselves. It is unfortunate that these narratives were collected so late in these peoples' lives. So many slaves' stories were lost to history decades before a freedman project would even see the light of day. Indians and African Americans still have a unique relationship even today, and perhaps the relationships built during the mid nineteenth-century were a contributing factor. It is the hope of this student that these stories of bondage, unity, friendship, and love can serve as a guide for future generations to see the error of mankind's ways, and the shred of humanity Indians showed to what many others saw simply as property. Hopefully these narratives will live to see the future because, as they say, history repeats itself.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wonderful professors who saw me through this project with much patience and understanding. If not for them, this paper would not be possible. I want to thank those from the Oklahoma Historical Society for access to their records, and prompt, courteous service. I would like to thank my family who has always believed that I am capable of great things. I thank God for this opportunity to be listed as a published historian. And, lastly, I would like to thank my beautiful wife, Sarah, for her constant support, and for listening to me read this paper aloud countless times.

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