

“When We Worked on Shares, We Couldn’t Make Nothing”: Henry Blake Talks About Sharecropping after the Civil War

In some ways, emancipation and Reconstruction broke the power of white southern planters over their labor force. Freedpeople negotiated with planters over how the land would be cultivated and how they would be compensated. African-American families worked small plots independently, sometimes obtaining land for cash or, more commonly, for a fixed share of the year’s crop; this latter practice was known as sharecropping. By 1870, sharecropping was the dominant means by which African Americans could gain access to land in the South. Still, freedpeople desired independent proprietorship. In this interview, African-American farmer Henry Blake recalls how black land ownership became an elusive goal as unequal power relations between white and black hardened and the Ku Klux Klan’s terrorist campaigns increased. Blake’s narrative and many others were recorded during an ambitious New Deal (1936–38) program of interviews with ex-slaves. Despite unfamiliar interviewers and distant memories, these first person accounts are an unparalleled resource.

I was born March 16, 1863, they tell me. I was born in Arkansas right down here on Tenth and Spring Streets in Little Rock.... My father was a skiffman. He used to cross the Arkansas river in a ferry-boat. My father’s name was Doc Blake. And my mother’s name was Hannah Williams before she married....

My father’s master was named Jim Paty. My father was a slavery man. I was too. I used to drive a horsepower gin wagon in slavery time. That was at Pastoria just this side of Pine Bluff, about three or four miles this side. Paty had two places, one about four miles from Pine Bluff and the other about four miles from England on the river.

When I was driving that horsepower gin wagon, I was about seven or eight years old. There wasn't nothin' hard about it. Just hitch the mules to one another's tail and drive them 'round and 'round. There wasn't no lines. Just hitch them to one another's tail and tell them to git up.

We ginned two or three bales of cotton a day. We ginned all the summer. It would be June before we got that cotton all ginned. Cotton brought thirty-five or forty cents a pound then.

I was treated nicely. My father and mother were too. Others were not treated so well. But you know how Negroes is. They would slip off and go out. If they caught them, he would put them in a log hut they had for a jail. If you wanted to be with a woman, you would have to go to your boss and ask him and he would let you go.

Daddy wan sold for five hundred dollars, put on the block, up on a stump, they called it a block. Jim Paty sold him. I forget the name of the man he was sold to, Watts, I think it was.

After slavery we had to get in before night too. If you didn't, Ku Klux would drive you in. They would come and visit you anyway. They had something on that they could pour a lot of water in. They would seem to be drinking the water and it would all be going in this thing, They was gittin' it to water the horses with, and when they got away from you they would stop and give it to the horses, When he got you good and scared he would drive on away. They would whip you if they would catch you out in the night time.

My daddy had a horse they couldn't catch. It would run right away from you. My daddy trained it so that it would run away from any one who would come near it. He would take me up on that horse and we would sail away. Those Ku Klux couldn't catch his. They never did catch him. They caught many another one and whipped him. My daddy was a pretty mean man. He carried a gun and he had shot two or three men. Those were bad times. I got scared to go out with him. I hated that business. But directly it got over with. It got over with when a lot of the Ku Klux was killed up.

In slavery time they would raise children just like you would raise colts to a mare or calves to a cow or pigs to a sow. It was just a business. It was a bad thing. But it was better than the county farm. They didn't whip you if you worked. Out there at the county farm, they bust you open.

They bust you up till you can't work. There's a lot of people down at the state farm, at Cummins, that's where the farm is ain't it, that's a raw and bloody. They wouldn't let you come down there and write no history. No Lawd! You better not try it. One half the world don't know how the other half lives. I'll tell you one thing if those Catholics could get control there would be a good time all over this world. The Catholics are good folks.

That gang that got after you if you let the sun go down while you were out, that's called the Pateroles. Some folks call 'em the Ku Klux. It was all the same old poor white trash. They kept up that business for about ten years after the war. They kept it up till folks began to kill up a lot of 'em. That's the only thing that stopped them. My daddy used to make his own bullets.

I've forgot who it is that that told us that we was free. Somebody come and told us we're free now. I done forgot who it was.

Right after the war, my father farmed a while and after that he pulled a skiff. You know Jim Lawson's place. He stayed on it twenty years. He stayed at the Ferguson place about ten years. They're adjoining places. He stayed at the Churchill place. Widow Scott place, the Bojean place. That's all. Have you been down in Argenta to the Roundhouse? Churchill's place runs way down to there. It wasn't nothing but farms in Little Rock then. The river road was the only one there at that time. It would take a day to come down from Clear Lake with the cotton. You would start 'round about midnight and you would get to Argenta at nine o'clock the next morning. The road was always bad.

After freedom, we worked on shares a while. Then we rented. When we worked on shares, we couldn't make nothing, just overalls and something to eat. Half went to the other man and you would destroy your half if you weren't careful. A man that didn't know how to count would always lose. He might lose anyhow. They didn't give no itemized statement. No, you just had to take their word. They never give you no details. They just say you owe so much. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their account and now, Brother, I'm tellin' you the truth about this. It's been that way for a long time. You had to take the white man's work on note, and everything. Anything you wanted, you could git if you were a good hand. You could git anything you wanted as long as you worked. If you didn't make no money, that's all right; they would

advance you more. But you better not leave him, you better not try to leave and get caught. They'd keep you in debt. They were sharp. Christmas come, you could take up twenty dollar, in somethin' to eat and much as you wanted in whiskey. You could buy a gallon of whiskey. Anything that kept you a slave because he was always right and you were always wrong it there was difference. If there was an argument, he would get mad and there would be a shooting take place.

And you know how Negroes is. Long as they could git somethin', they didn't care. You see, if the white man came out behind, he would feed you, let you have what you wanted. He'd just keep you on, help you get on your feet, that is, if you were a good hand. But if you weren't a good hand, he'd just let you have enough to keep you alive. A good hand could take care of forty or fifty acres of land and would have a large family. A good hand could git clothes, food, whiskey, whenever be wanted it.

Source: *Henry Blake, Little Rock, Arkansas* Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration; Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.