

Josh Miles, 78, was born in Richmond, Virginia enslaved by the Miles family. In 1862, the Miles family moved to Franklin, Texas. At the time of his interview, Miles lived in Mart, Texas.



Josh Miles, Age 78

“I was born in Richmond, in Virginy, back in 1859, and my mammy and pappy was slaves to a man named Miles, what lived in Richmond but owned three plantations out a few miles, and ‘bout fifteen hundred niggers. Pappy was de fam’ly coachman and druv de li’l surrey when Massa gwine [going] see he plantations.

“Well, dat de way us lives jes’ befo’ de war. When de presidents calls for volunteers, Virginy goes for de Rebels, and dey moves de capitol to Richmond. So Old Massa sees he’ll be right in de thick of de war a nd he ‘cides to come to Texas. He gits he slaves and he folks and hosses and cattle and he household things in de covered wagon and starts. Course, de hosses and cattle walks, and so does us n-----. But massa take he time and stops wherever he wants. It takes two years to make de trip. He stay de whole winter one place, and stops in Nashville and Memphis and Vicksburg. All dese places he trade de hosses and mules and oxen and n----- and everything else he have. But he wouldn’t trade he personal slaves. Dey have de big warehouse in places like Memphis, and take de n----- de day befo’ de sale and give his plenty to eat to make him look in good humor. Dey chain him up de night befo’ de sale, and iffen he am de fightin’ n-----r, dey

handcuffs him. De auctionneer say, ‘Dis n-----r am eighteen year old, sound as de dollar, can pick 300 pounds of cotton a day, good disposition, easy to manage, come up ‘xamine him.’ Dey strips him to de waist and everybody look him over and de good ones brung \$1,500 sometimes. I seed de old mammy and her two boys and gals sold. One man buys de boys and old mammy cry, but it don’t do no good. ‘Nother man bids de two gals and mammy throw such a fit her old massa throws her in, ‘cause she too old to be much ‘count.

“De war ends and in de few months old massa sot he slaves free. He give my pappy some money and he starts out for heself. He goes to Milligan and rents land and raises he fam’ly. Old Massa never goes back to Richmond. De Yanks gits what he left so dey no use gwine back dere. He lives in Franklin till 1914. It ain’t like Old Virginy, but dey’s plenty wild game and hawgs and he raises a bale of cotton to de acre, so he have money once more.

“Dey’s folks comin’ to Texas all de time from de old states. It am de new world and dey likes it. Dey has de Juneteenth cel’brations after ‘while, and de white folks gives us beeves and hawgs to barbecue, so Texas am de good place to stay.

“When I’s ‘bout growed, I starts workin’ on de I. & G. H. railroad and helps build it from Houston into Waco. I works for it for years and years, and allus lives near de Brazos River. I’s lived here in Mart forty years.

SOURCE: *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis-Ryles*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material.

Image: *Josh Miles, Age 78*. United States Texas, 1936. Between 1936 and 1938. Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesnp163079/>.

A Note on Language of the WPA Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938

These oral histories reflect both the experiences of formerly enslaved people and the historical moment in which the interviews were recorded. Interviewers often tried to record the interviewee’s spoken language as they heard it. But this process was not as straightforward as it seems. Historians recognize that “what most interviewers assumed to be ‘the usual’ patterns of speech of their informants’ speech was unavoidably influenced by preconceptions and stereotypes.”

For more information: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/note-on-the-language-of-the-narratives/>