

## Primary Source: Federal Writers' Project, "He never wanted land till now" <sup>[1]</sup>

*The following interview comes from the New Deal's "Federal Writers' Project." The Project was part of the Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1940. The goal of the WPA Federal Writers' Project was to document the oral history of people that lived during Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, World War I, and the Great Depression. The Project documented many important elements of American history including first-hand accounts of people who lived under or immediately after slavery (The Slave Narrative Collection <sup>[2]</sup>). To read more about the goals and achievements of the Federal Writers' Project, visit the Library of Congress' Federal Writers' Project database located at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection> <sup>[3]</sup>. Please note that the language used in the passage reflects direct quotes from the original interview. As such, some phrases or words may be considered sensitive for some audiences. Additionally, many interviewers for the project were biased in what data was collected and how. Some key information from the narratives of enslaved people were omitted. Many details were censored at a state level before published nationally, and what was published often depicted formerly enslaved people and their descendants poorly. To read more about the challenges of using information from the Slave Narratives Projects, please visit <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1500233> <sup>[4]</sup>.*

*In the following interview, William Oscar Saunders <sup>[5]</sup> collects information from A.D. Pool of Elizabeth City, North Carolina concerning tenant farming, slavery, and more.*

---

His house sat back from the road a distance of about a hundred yards. Only it wasn't his house; it was his landlord's house, for "Mose Sutton" is a tenant farmer <sup>[6]</sup>.

On the way up to the house, which was a drab, unpainted wooden frame building sadly in need of repairs, one passes a collard patch, behind which may be seen (and smelled) a hog pen and pasture. Two scrawny and not very vigorous looking mules were munching grass in the front yard. Knocking upon the front door of the unsubstantial-looking house, I resolved no answer, so I walked around to the back of the house.

Back of the house was a dilapidated <sup>[7]</sup> combination barn and cart shelter. An old pea harvester stood under the shelter. The pea harvester was second-hand when "Mose" bought it ten years ago.

A rickety farm wagon stood in the yard. It had cost \$12 at a foreclosure sale several years ago.

Two old plows and a broken down drill completed his visible farm equipment, not to mention the two forlorn looking mules that looked their abject shame of ancestry and despair of posterity.

"Mose" and his wife and two youngsters were busily engaged in going through a poor stand of cotton, plucking the white fiber from the scattered bolts <sup>[8]</sup> and depositing it, with an automatic-like movement born of long practice, into sacks which were tied around their waists.

There was something about "Mose's" appearance that reminded me of the two mules I had observed in the yard — something that suggested too much hard work in the fields and too little to eat at times. He seemed glad of the chance to stop picking cotton and talk to me.

With a little prodding and prompting, "Mose" told me how the Southern tenant farmer or sharecropper about whom the Administration evinced <sup>[9]</sup> so much concern in 1938 lives and what he lacks.

"What is your average annual income, 'Mose'?" I asked. "That is, how much money do you make off your farm in a normal year?"

"Nothin', or almos' nothin'," he replied. "If I have enough left over, after payin' for my go-ano and such, to buy flour an' meal and rise through de winter, den I calls myself lucky. I ain't made no money farming in ten or fifteen years.

"De landlord, he gets a fourth of de peas (soy beans) and de cotton and a third of de corn and sweet potatoes, and I gets de rest. He furnishes me a house, de outhouses and de land, and I furnishes de team, de work, de seed and de go-ano. He keeps all de books and accounts, and he settles up wif me at de end of de year. If I'se got anything a-tall comin' to me atter all de bills is paid, I feels lucky.

"You sees dis cotton, don't you? Two or three bolts to de stalk, where dere ought to be two or three pounds. If I had to hire hands to pick it, I'd lose money on it. I'se got a pretty fair stand of peas, but dey ain't selling for nothin'. And dem's de only two crops I got dat I can sell. I didn't raise no sweet potatoes to sell, and I jes about got enough corn to feed my team till next year."

"But how do you manage to live through the winter when you have a bad year like this?" I asked him.

"Well," he replied, gravely, "we just eats when we got anything to eat and goes hungry de rest of de time."

"Are there many days when you actually go hungry?" I asked him.

"Well," he replied, "dere ain't many days when we ain't got a little somethin' t'eat, but dere's lots of days when we ain't got nothin' but a little corn pone <sup>[10]</sup> an' maybe a potato or two."

"What do you have for Sunday dinner?" I asked.

"Lawsy, mister," he exclaimed, "Sunday dinner ain't no different from any other dinner wid us. We eats what we's got, and if we ain't got nothin', we just don't eat nothin'."

"And what would you call a good Sunday dinner?"

"A mess of collards, a piece of backbone and hot corn bread," he answered, after a moment's reflection.

"Collards is mighty good eatin' when dey is cooked right," he explained. "When you cooks a piece of fat meat in de pot wid de collards, den you ain't got much. But when you fries de meat sep'rate and den pours de grease from it over your collards, den you got somethin' fitten."

At this point our conversation was interrupted by a hullabaloo <sup>[11]</sup> on the other end of the cotton patch. A dog was yelping excitedly and one of the boys was shouting at the top of his voice. We found out what all the excitement was about in a few minutes when the boy run to his granddaddy proudly exhibiting a rabbit which the dog had scared up in the cotton patch and had succeeded in catching.

"Mose" turned to me and said, "We'll have meat on de table today."

"I should imagine that the boys could provide you with quite a bit of game during the fall and winter months," I said.

"Mebbe dey could," said "Mose", sadly, "if we could afford to buy a huntin' license an' shells for de shotgun. But it's been two or three years since we was able to do that. So we jes has to make out de best way we can. De dog, he catches a rabbit now and den, like he done jes now, an' de boys have dar rabbit guns; sometimes de boys catches a 'possum in a steel trap dey's got in de woods, but outside of dat we don't get hold of much meat except what I can get from my few hogs.

"And speakin' of 'possum, dere ain't many things dat's any better to eat den a baked 'possum an' sweet potatoes. Man, dat's shonuff good eatin'."

Still pursuing the subject of diet, I asked "Mose" if his family liked fish.

"We likes 'em all right," he answered, "but we don't eat fish much. Dere ain't no water close by where we can catch any, and I jes can't afford to go to town an' buy fish. De few times dat I felt able to buy any fish at all, I had to buy nanny shad, and you know what that is — it's about de sorriest fish dere is.

"No, we don't get much fish, and we don't get much game. We eats mostly out of de garden in de summer and out of de collard patch and de hog pen in de winter."

Turning the subject away from food, I asked "Mose" how long it had been since he had purchased a new suit of clothes.

"I'se got one suit of clothes," he said, "and it's eleven years old. It might have to last me another eleven years, so I don't wear it no more den I has to. I wears it 'bout three or four times a year, such as when I goes to a funeral or to some big doings in town."

"And what about shoes?"

"Last year," "Mose" said, "I wore these gum boots that I'se got on right now from de last of September right smack through till the last of May. Then I went to town and bought a pair of shoes from a second-hand store for twenty-five cents. Dat's de only pair of shoes I'se had in two years.

"And you sees dat dress my wife is wearing? Well, that's an old calico dress a white woman down the road guv her about two years ago. I ain't been able to buy her a new dress in seven or eight years, maybe ten. When you ain't got nothin', you jes has to do widout. Dat's one thing we'se had to learn."

"Have you got a phonograph or a radio?" I asked him next, seeking to find out if "Mose's" family had any means of entertainment in their home.

"No, suh," the old Negro replied, "I couldn't never afford nothin' like that. We did have a graphophone one time, but it got broke and I never was able to have it fixed. But I reckon it's jest as well that I wasn't, because if it was working now I wouldn't be able to buy records for it, when you has to work as hard as I does, when night time comes on you don't want to sit up and listen to no music; you don't want to do nothin' but go to bed and try to get some rest."

"By the way, 'Mose,' how, old are you?" I asked, noting that his moustache was white and that he looked a little tired and weary.

"I'se seventy years old, and my wife is sixty-five," he told me. "I tried to get some of dis here old age help from de govermint, but dey told me a man what lives on a farm can grow all de sumpin t'eat dat he needs and he don't need no help from de govermint. But I knows white folks with nice houses and automobiles and a lot more to eat than I got what's drawing money from de govermint every month.

"I can't get along much longer without some help. Me and my wife ain't got no children of our own here to home, but we's raising four grandchillun, one four years old, one seven, one eleven and one fourteen. The fourteen-year-old boy does most of de plowing for me now, 'cause I just ain't able to do hard work any more. But he'll soon be getting big enough to go off somewhere and work for somebody else, and den I reckon I'll jes have to give up farming. Folks jes don't want a tenant dat's wore out and can't make somethin' for them."

"But what in the world would you do if your landlord decided to rent the farm to somebody else?" I asked, realizing that such an occurrence was not beyond the realm of probability.

"Well, I'se thought about that," "Mose" replied, thoughtfully. I'se goin' to ask de landlord won't he let me have a little piece of land — about an acre — and if he'll do it I'se going to build me a little house on dat piece of land and plant me a garden and try to git along somehow till I dies. Course, it won't be much of a house. Jes a floor and a shingle roof and some weatherboarding, but it ought to keep out de rain and de sun and de wind."

"What makes you think your landlord might give you an acre of land, 'Mose'?" I asked.

"I ain't right sure he'll do it," "Mose" answered, "but I'se got strong hopes dat he will. You see, I has been working dis farm for him for forty-one years, and before I came here with him I was with his brother for three or four years. Dat's a long time to stay on one man's farm, and I don't think he'll turn me out with no place to go when I gets so I can't work his land no more."

"Do you subscribe to a newspaper?" I asked him.

"Naw suh," he replied; "Ain't much of a hand at readin' nohow; ... didn't get much eddycation when I was comin' along.

"I tuk a farm paper once; white man cum up to me in town an said Mr. Poe had tole him to make me a present of a Blue Back Speller. I sho thought that was mighty nice of Mr. Poe. I'd always wanted to own one of them Blue Back spelling books. My pappy laid a lot of store by it.

"I tuk de book and de white man wrote somethin' on a piece of paper and gin it to me. I tuk the paper and he said that would be 98¢. En he said it in a way dat didn't seem to leave no room for argymint. I didn't have but one lone dollar to my name, but I just went down in my pocket and hauled it out and guv it to him. He gin me back two cents change and left me standin' there wonderin' how come. That farm paper had been comin' ever since. We find it handy startin' fires.

"De chillun wants me to take a paper for de funny paper dat comes wid it, an' Roscoe, (dat's de oldest boy) he's right smart wid his letters; he o'n read right along, an' write and figger too. My ole 'oman sez he's goin' to be a preacher, but I doan think Roscoe has made up his mind whether he'd rather be a perfesser in a schoolhouse or get a job drivin' a truck for somebody. Ev'y time a ottermobile goes by Roscoe he jes quit anything he happen to be doin' and jes watch it till it's plum out o' sight."

"Mose" has never owned an automobile and he says he is too old to aspire to ownership of one now. But Roscoe, that oldest grandson of his, is "jes plum sot on 'em," he says.

Effen somebody cum along and offer him a ottermobile I reckon he'd hire out to 'em for his keep for the rest of his life," said Mose with a shake of his head.

"Mose" carries small industrial life policies on his four grandchildren, at a cost of five cents a week. "I don't want de county to have to bury 'em if dey dies," he says; "about de biggest thing poor cullud folks get out of dis life is a funeral at de end of it, and when de county has to foot de funeral bill it ain't much of a funeral I'm a tellin' you."

"Mose Sutton" is seventy years old; his wife sixty-five. And they don't own a foot of land. All their wordly possessions exclusive of the two mules would hardly bring forty dollars at the court house door and the mules have seen their best days.

And not in all the years of his life has "Mose" aspired to ownership of a farm. He was born of slave parents who stayed on the plantation of their master after they were freed, and ended their days in the selfsame quarters they had occupied in slavery. His pappy taught him that white folks were the owners and bosses of the earth and that the best way "... to get along" was to stick by his white folks. "Stand by your white folks and they won't let you starve," was the slave philosophy that he had been taught from childhood. Never used to much, he never wanted much, and his simple wants were vouchsafed him so long as he performed the tasks his white folk assigned to him. He never aspired to ownership of land until now. Now, with his sun low in the west, with hoary <sup>[12]</sup> head, bent shoulders and rheumatic <sup>[13]</sup> joints, he hopes that he may spend his remaining winters in a clapboard <sup>[14]</sup> cabin with a mud and stick chimney on a single acre of land in a clearing, where he may have a little garden with its rows of collards, corn, beans and potatoes, and, possibly, a pig in the pen. He will take his houn' dogs with him, and maybe they will stir up a rabbit for him now and then, or tree a coon or opossum by the light of a winter moon.

**From:**

[ANCHOR: A North Carolina History Online Resource](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

**Copyright Date:**

2009

**People:**



<sup>[5]</sup>

[Saunders, William Oscar](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

**For Teachers:**

[Lesson Plans. Grades 9-12: WPA Slave Narratives: Whose story is being told?](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

from Stockton University

**Related Topics:**

[Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938](#) <sup>[17]</sup>

from Library of Congress

---

[Representations of Speech in the WPA Slave Narratives of Florida and the Writings of Zora Neale Hurston](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

from JSTOR

---

Ex-Slave Narratives: The WPA Federal Writers' Project Reappraised<sup>[18]</sup>

from JSTOR

**Primary Sources:**

Folder 739: Saunders, W. O. (interviewer): He Never Wanted Land Till Now<sup>[19]</sup>

from the Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

3 January 2018

---

**Source URL:**<https://ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-federal>

**Links**

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-federal> [2] <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/> [3] <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/> [4] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1500233> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/saunders-william-oscar> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/tenant-farmer> [7] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/dilapidated> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/boll> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/evinced> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/pone> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/hullabaloo> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/hoary> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/rheumatic> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/glossary/clapboard> [15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/anchor-north> [16] <https://blogs.stockton.edu/humanities/files/2016/05/WPA-Slave-Narrative-lesson-plan.pdf> [17] <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/> [18] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179473> [19] <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/03709/id/1203/rec/1>