

REMEMBERING SLAVERY – FOUNTAIN HUGHES

Here are the words of an actual slave, born in 1840 and interviewed in Baltimore in 1941.

My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was a hundred and fifteen years old when he died. And now I am one hundred and one year old.

Interviewer: You talk about how old you are, Uncle Fountain. How far back do you remember?

Well, I'll tell you. Things come to me in spells, you know. I remember things more when I'm laying down than I do when I'm standing or when I'm walking around. Now in my boy days, boys lived different from the way they live now. Oh, oh you wore a dress like a woman till I was, I believe ten, twelve, thirteen years old.

So you wore a dress?

Yes. I didn't wear no pants, and of course didn't make boys' pants. Boys wore dresses. The women's wearing the pants now and the boy's wearing the dresses. Still ... [laughs]

Who did you work for, Uncle Fountain, when...?

When I, you mean, when I was slave?

Yeah, when you were a slave. Who did you work for?

Well, I belonged to, uh, Burney, when I was a slave. My mother belonged to Burney. But we didn't know nothing. They didn't allow you to look at no book. And there was some free-born colored people, why, they had a little education, but there was very few of them where we was. And they all had uh, what you call, I might call it 'sentence' now, uh, 'jail sentence', it was just the same as we was in jail. Now I couldn't go from here across the street or I couldn't go through nobody's house without I have a note or something from my master. And if I had that pass – that was what we call a 'pass' – if I had that pass, I could go wherever he sent me. And

I'd have to be back, you know, whoever he sent me to, they, they'd give me another pass an' I'd bring that back so as to show how long I'd been gone. We couldn't go out and stay a hour or two hours or something like... But they'd give me a note so there wouldn't nobody interfere with me and tell who I belong to. And when I come back, why, I carry it to my master and give that to him, that'd be all right. But I couldn't jus' walk away like the people does now, you know. It was what they call, we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses an' cows an' hogs and all like that. Have a auction bench, an' they'd put you on, up on the bench and bid on you just the same as you bidding on cattle, you know.

Was that in Charlotte that you were a slave?
Hmmm?

Was that in Charlotte or Charlottesville?
That was in Charlottesville.

Charlottesville, Virginia.

Selling women, selling men. All that. Then if they had any bad ones, they'd sell them to the nigger traders, what they called the nigger traders. And they'd ship them down south, and sell them down south. But, uh, otherwise if you was a good, good person they wouldn't sell you. But if you was bad and mean and they didn't want to beat you and knock you around, they'd sell you to what, to what was called the nigger trader. They'd have a regular... have a sale every month, you know, at the courthouse. And then they'd sell you, and get two hundred dollars, a hundred dollars, five hundred dollars.

1. INSIDE-OUTSIDE CIRCLE ©

Tell each other what you imagine it is like to be a slave.

2. LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Fountain Hughes doesn't speak standard English. Find some examples.

The Inside-Outside Circle is presented on page 70.