

Black Slave Narratives – A Comparative Study

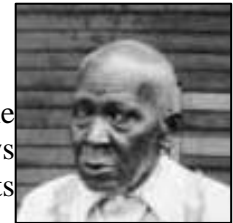


From 1936 to 1938, over 2,300 former slaves from across the American South were interviewed. These former slaves, most born in the last years of the slave regime or during the Civil War, provided first-hand accounts of their experiences on plantations, in cities, and on small farms. Their narratives remain a peerless resource for understanding the lives of America's four million slaves.

These narratives are so rich that they capture the very voices of American slavery, revealing the texture of life as it was experienced and remembered. Each narrative taken alone offers a fragmentary, microcosmic representation of slave life. Read together, they offer a sweeping composite view of slavery in North America, allowing us to explore some of the most compelling themes of nineteenth-century slavery, including labor, resistance and flight, family life, relations with masters, and religious belief.

Lesson:

An examination of Interviews from the American Slave Narratives and the American Folklore Collection Students will examine and interpret interviews obtained during the 1930s. A close study of the narratives will enable students to:



- Understand the specific tasks undertaken by men and women employed by one of the work relief programs of the New Deal.
- Obtain a more personal sense of the past by examining the lives and careers of ordinary men and women interviewed during the period of the Federal Writer's Project.
- Learn about the process and issues involved in doing oral history.

Goals: Informational Content:

Students will investigate texts of oral history narratives taken from ordinary Americans and collected by interviewers during the 1930s. As a result of their investigation students will learn:

- How unemployed journalists and writers were employed by the Federal government during the era of the Great Depression.
- How our nation's history is the compilation of the many stories that evolved from the lives of ordinary individuals.
- How historians use primary resources in their investigation of the past.



Concepts:

- New Deal programs experimented with a variety of methods for encouraging employment as a means of stimulating economic recovery.
- The stories of individual lives make up the stuff of historical investigation, but their use raises important issues and considerations for historians.

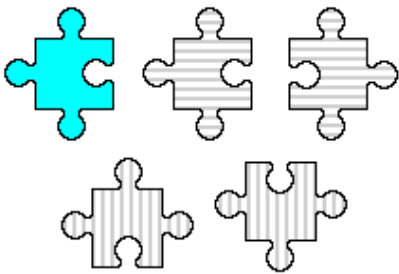
Skills:

- To read and analyze oral interviews for specific content.
- To summarize the content of individual texts for the benefit of other students.
- To understand that the process of selecting and synthesizing primary documents inevitably involves individual point of view and bias.

Materials:

Students will work with the Slave Narratives.

To prepare for this lesson, teachers may wish to preview the narratives. Lead students through the selected interview and prepare them for the uneven nature of the stories they will be reading and the language which they may encounter.

**The Jigsaw Activity:**

Select four to six of the individual narratives. After providing a photocopied manuscript for each student, ask them to use a highlighter or pen to underscore phrases or selections from the reading which they find to be particularly compelling. (Teachers may wish to focus this aspect of the activity around a particular topic or

investigation depending upon the course of study and the interests of their individual students.)

Jigsaw #1

Students who have read the same narrative should come together to discuss the main points of their reading with one another. Teachers might direct this segment of the jigsaw activity by requiring students to engage particular questions: What was the most interesting thing you discovered about this subject's life? In what ways was life for this subject both similar and different from your life or your parent's life?

Jigsaw #2

After students have had a chance to share their points of view, ask them to move to another configuration in which students who have read about different individuals will share their subject's stories with one another. Teachers may wish to ask students to propose generalizations drawn from a synthesis of their individual investigations. For example: What aspects of slavery were shared in common by these men and women? What was working life like for them? What forms of entertainment occupied their leisure lives?

Interviews

Richard Toler Cincinnati, Ohio

Interviewed by Ruth Thompson



"Ah never fit in de wah; no suh, ah couldn't. Mah belly's been broke! But ah sho' did want to, and ah went up to be examined, but they didn't receive me on account of mah broken stomach. But ah sho' tried, 'cause ah wanted to be free. Ah didn't like to be no slave. Dat wasn't good times."

Ricard Toler, 515 Poplar Street, century old former slave lifted a bony knee with one hnarled [sic] hand and crossed his legs, then smoothed his thick white beard. His rocking chair creaked, the flies droned, and through the open, unscreened door came the bawling of a calf from the building of a hide company across the street. A Maltese kitten sauntered into the front room, which served as parlor and bedroom, and climbed complacently into his lap.

In one corner a wooden bed was piled high with feather ticks, and bedecked with a crazy quilt and an number of small, brightly-coloured pillows; a bureau opposite was laden to the edges with a collection of odds and ends - a one-legged alarm clock, a coal oil lamp, faded artificial flowers in a gaudy vase, a pile of newspapers. A trunk against the wall was littered with several large books (one of which was the family Bible), a stock of dusty lamp shades, a dingy sweater, and several bushel-basket lids.

Several packing cases and crates, a lard can full of cracked ice, a small, round oil heating stove, and an assorted lot of chairs completed the furnishings. The one decorative spot in the room was on the wall over the bed, where hung a large framed picture of Christ in The Temple. The two rooms beyond exhibited various broken-down additions to the heterogeneous collection.

"Ah never had no good times till ah was free", the old man continued. "Ah was bo'n on Mastah Tolah's (Henry Toler) plantation down in ole V'ginia, near Lynchburg in Campbell County. Mah pappy was a slave befo' me, and mah mammy, too. His name was George Washington Tolah, and her'n was Lucy Tolah. We took ouah name from ouah ownah, and we lived in a cabin way back of the big house, me and mah pappy and mammy and two brothahs.

"They nevah mistreated me, neithah. They's a whipping the slaves all the time, but ah run away all the time. And I jus' tell them - if they whipped me, ah'd kill 'em, and ah nevah did get a whippin'. If ah thought one was comin' to me, Ah'd hide in the woods; then they'd send aftah me and they say, 'Come, on back, - we won't whip you'. But they killed some of the niggahs, whipped 'em to death. Ah guess they killed three or fo' on Tolah's place while ah was there.

"Ah never went to school. Learned to read and write my name after ah was free in night school, but they nevah allowed us to have a book in ouah hand, and we couldn't have no money neither. If we had money we had to tu'n it ovah to ouah ownah. Chu'ch was not allowed in ouah pa't neithah. Ah go to the Meth'dist Chu'ch now, everybody ought to go. I think RELIGION MUST BE FINE, 'CAUSE GOD ALMIGHTY'S AT THE HEAD OF IT."

Toler took a small piece of ice from the lard can, popped it between his toothless gum, smacking enjoyment, swished at the swarming flies with a soiled rag handkerchief, and continued. "Ah nevah could unnerstand about ghos'es. Nevah did see one. Lots of folks tell about seein' ghos'es, but ah nevah feared 'em. Ah was nevah raised up undah such supastitious believin's.

"We was nevah allowed no pa'ties, and when they had goin' ons at the big house, we had to clear out. Ah had to wo'k hard all the time every day in the week. Had to min' the cows and calves, and when ah got older ah had to hoe in the field. Mastah Tolah had about 500 acres, so they tell me, and he had a lot of cows and ho'ses and oxens, and he was a big fa'mer. Ah've done about evahthing in mah life, blacksmith and stone mason, ca'penter, evahthing but brick-layin'. Ah was a blacksmith heah fo' 36 yea's. Learned it down at Tolah's.

"Ah stayed on the plantation during the wah, and jes' did what they tol' me. Ah was 21 then. And ah walked 50 mile to vote for Gen'l Grant at Vaughn's precinct. Ah voted fo' him in two sessions, he run twice. And ah was 21 the fust time, cause they come and got me, and say, 'Come on now. You can vote now, you is 21.' And theah now - mah age is right theah. 'Bout as close as you can git it.

"Ah was close to the battle front, and I seen all dem famous men. Seen Gen'l Lee, and Grant, and Abe Lincoln. Seen John Brown, and seen the seven men that was hung with him, but we wasn't allowed to talk to any of 'em, jes' looked on in the street. Jes' spoke, and say 'How d' do.

"But ah did talk to Lincoln, and ah tol' him ah wanted to be free, and he was a fine man, 'cause he made us all free. And ah got a ole history, it's the Sanford American History, and was published in 1784. But ah don't know where it is now, ah misplaced it. It is printed in the book, something ah said, now written by hand. And it says, 'Ah am a ole slave which has suvved fo' 21 yea's, and ah would be quite pleased if you could help us to be free. We thank you very much. Ah trust that some day ah can do you the same privilege that you are doing for me. Ah have been a slave for many years. (Note discrepancy.)

"Aftah the wah, ah came to Cincinnati, and was married three times. Mah fust wife was Mannie. Then there was Mollie. They both died, and then ah was married Cora heah, and ah had six child'en, one girl and fo' boys. (Note discrepancy) They's two living yet; James is 70 and he is not married. And Bob's about thutty or fo'ty. Ah done lost all mah rememb'ance, too ole now. But Mollie died when he was bo'n, and he is crazy. He is out of Longview (Home for Mentally infirm) now fo' a while, and he jes' wanders around, and wo'ks a little. He ha'mless, he wouldn't hurt nobody. He ain't married

"After the wah, ah bought a fiddle, and ah was a good fiddlah. Used to be a fiddlah fo' the white girls to dance. Jes' picked it up. It was a natural gif'. Ah could still play if ah had a fiddle. Ah used to play at our hoe downs, too. Played all those ole time songs - Soldier's Joy, Jimmy Long Josey, Arkansas Traveler, and Black Eye Susie. Ah remembah the wo'ds to that one."

Smiling inwardly with pleasure as he again lived the past, the old Negro swayed and recited:

Black Eye Susie, you look so fine,
Black Eye Susie, ah think youah mine.
A wondahful time we're having now,
Oh, Black Eye Susie, ah believe that youah mine.

And away down we stomp aroun' the bush,
We'd think that we'd get back to wheah we could push
Black Eye Susie, ah think youah fine,
Black Eye Susie, Ah know youah mine.

Then, he resumed his conversational tone:

"Befo' the wah we never had no good times. They took good care of us, though. As pa'taculah with slave as with the stock - that was their money, you know. And if we claimed bein' sick, they'd give us a dose of castah oil and tu'pentine. That was the principal medicine cullud folks had to take, and sometimes salts. But nevah no whiskey - that was not allowed. And if we was real sick, they had the Doctah fo' us.

"We had very bad eatin'. Bread, meat, water. And they fed it to us in a trough, jes' like the hogs. And ah went in may [sic] shirt till I was 16, nevah had no clothes. And the flo' in ouah cabin was dirt, and at night we'd jes' take a blanket and lay down on the flo'. The dog was supe'ior to us; they would take him in the house.

"Some of the people I belonged to was in the Klu Klux Klan. Tolah had fo' girls and fo' boys. Some of those boys belonged. And I used to see them turn out. They went 'round whippin' niggahs. They get young girls and strip'em sta'k naked, and put 'em across barrels, and whip 'em till the blood run out of 'em, and then they would put salt in the raw pahts. And ah seen it, and it was as bloody aroun' em as if they'd stuck hogs.

"I sho' is glad I ain't no slave no moah. Ah thank God that ah lived to pas the yeahs until the day of 1937. Ah'm happy and satisfied now, and ah hopes ah see a million yeahs to come."

Tempe Herndon Durham

1312 Pine St. Durham, North Carolina

Interviewed by Travis Jordan

"I was thirty-one years ole when de surrender come. Dat makes me sho nuff ole. Near bout a hundred an' three years done passed over dis here white head of mine. I'se been here, I mean I'se been here. 'Spects I'se de oldest nigger in Durham. I'se been here so long dat I done forgot near 'bout as much as dese here new generation knows or ever gwine know.

My white fo'ks lived in Chatham County. Dey was Marse George an' Mis' Betsy Herndon. Mis Betsy was a Snipes befo' she married Marse George. Dey had a big plantation an' raised cawn, wheat, cotton an' 'bacca. I don't know how many field niggers Marse George had, but he had a mess of dem, an' he had hosses too, an' cows, hogs an' sheeps. He raised sheeps an' sold de wool, an' dey used de wool at de big house too. Dey was a big weavin' room whare de blankets was wove, an' dey wove de cloth for de winter clothes too. Linda Hernton an' Milla Edwards was de head weavers, dey looked after de weavin' of da fancy blankets. Mis' Betsy was a good weaver too. She weave de same as de niggers. She say she love de clackin' soun' of de loom an' de way de shuttles run in an' out carryin' a long tail of bright coloured thread. Some days she set at de loom all de mawnin' peddlin' wid her feets an' her white han's flittin' over de bobbins.



De cardin' an' spinnin' room was full of niggers. I can hear dem spinnin' wheels now turnin' roun' an' sayin' hum-m-m-m, hum-m-m-m, an' hear de slaves singin' while dey spin. Mammy Rachel stayed in de dyein' room. Dey wuzn' nothin' she didn' know 'bout dyein'. She knew every kind of root, bark, leaf an' berry dat made red, blue, green, or whatever colour she wanted. Dey had a big shelter whare de dye pots set over de coals. Mammy Rachel would fill de pots wid water, den she put in de roots, bank an' stuff an' boil de juice out, den she strain it an' put in de salt an' vinegar to set de colour. After de wool an' cotton done been carded an' spun to thread, Mammy take de hanks an' drap dem in de pot of boilin' dye. She stir dem 'roun' an' lif' dem up an' down wid a stick, an' when she hang dem up on de line in de sun, dey was every colour of de rainbow. When dey dripped dry dey was sent to de weavin' room whare dey was wove in blankets an' things.

When I growed up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Marse Snipes Durham who had de plantation 'cross de county line in Orange County. We had a big weddin'. We was married on de front po'ch of de big house. Marse George killed a shoat an' Mis' Betsy had Georgianna, de cook, to bake a big weddin' cake all iced up white as snow wid a bride an' groom standin' in de middle holdin' han's. De table was set out in de yard under de trees, an' you ain't never seed de like of eats. All de niggers come to de feas' an' Marse George had a for everybody. Dat was some weddin'.

I had on a white dress, white shoes an' long white gloves dat come to my elbow, an' Mis' Betsy done made me a weddin' veil out of a white net window curtain. When she played de weddin' ma'ch on de piano, me an' Exter ma'ched down de walk an' up on de po'ch to de altar Mis' Betsy done fixed. Dat de pretties' altar I ever seed. Back 'gainst de rose vine dat was full or red roses, Mis' Betsy done put tables filled wid flowers an' white candles. She spread down a bed sheet, a sho nuff linen sheet, for us to stan' on, an' dey was a white pillow to kneel down on. Exter done made me a weddin' ring. He made it out of a big red button wid his pocket knife. He done cut it so roun' an' polished it so smooth dat it looked like a red satin ribbon tide 'roun' my finger. Dat sho was a pretty ring. I wore it 'bout fifty years, den it got so thin dat I lost it one day in de wash tub when I was washin' clothes.

Uncle Edmond Kirby married us. He was de nigger preacher dat preached at de plantation church. After Uncle Edmond said de las' words over me an' Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun: He say, 'Come on, Exter, you an' Tempie got to jump over de broom stick backwards; you got to do dat to see which one gwine be boss of your househol'. Everybody come stan' 'roun to watch. Marse George hold de broom 'bout a foot high off de floor. De one dat jump over it backwards an' never touch de handle, gwine boss de house, an' if bof of dem jump over widout touchin' it, dey won't gwine be no bossin', dey jus' gwine be 'genial. I jumped fus', an' you ought to seed me. I sailed right over dat broom stick same as a cricket, but when Exter jump he done had a big dram an' his feets was so big an' clumsy dat dey got all tangled up in dat broom an' he fell head long.

Marse George he laugh an' laugh, an' tole Exter he gwine be bossed 'twell he skeered to speak less'n I tole him to speak. After de weddin' we went down to de cabin Mis' Betsy done all dressed up, but Exter couldn' stay no longer den dat night kaze he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham an' he had to go back home. He lef' de nex day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night an' stay 'twell Sunday night. We had eleven chillun. Nine was bawn befo' surrender an' two after we was set free. So I had two chillun dat wuzn' bawn in bondage. I was worth a heap to Marse George kaze I had so many chillun. De more chillun a slave had de more dey was worth. Lucy Carter was de only nigger on de plantation dat had more chillun den I had. She had twelve, but her chillun was sickly an' mine was muley strong an' healthy. Dey never was sick.

When de war come Marse George was too ole to go, but young Marse Bill went. He went an' took my brother Sim wid him. Marse Bill took Sim along to look after his hoss an' everything. Dey didn' neither one get shot, but Mis' Betsy was skeered near 'bout to death all de time, skeered dey was gwine be brung home shot all to pieces like some of de sojers was.

(De Yankees wuzn' so bad. De mos' dey wanted was sumpin' to eat. Dey was all de time hungry, de fus' thing dey ax for when dey come was sumpin' to put in dey stomach. An' chicken! I ain' never seed even a preacher eat chicken like dem Yankees. I believes to my soul dey ain' never seed no chicken 'twell dey come down here. An' hot biscuit too. I seed a passel of dem eat up a whole sack of flour one night for supper. Georgianna sif' flour 'twell she look white an' dusty as a

miller. Dem sojers didn' turn down no ham neither. Dat de onlies' thing dey took from Marse George. Dey went in de smoke house an' toted off de hams an' shoulders. Marse George say he come off mighty light if dat all dey want, 'sides he got plenty of shoats anyhow.

We had all de eats we wanted while de war was shootin' dem guns, kaze Marse George was home an' he kep' de niggers workin'. We had chicken, geoses, meat, peas, flour, meal, potatoes an' things like dat all de time, an' milk an' butter too, but we didn' have no sugar an' coffee. We used groun' pa'ched cawn for coffee an' cane 'lasses for sweetnin'. Dat wuzn' so bad wid a heap of thick cream. Anyhow, we had enough to eat to 'vide wid de neighbors dat didn' have none when surrender come.

I was glad when de was stopped kaze den me an' Exter could be together all de time 'stead of Saturday an' Sunday. After we was free we lived right on at Marse George's plantation a long time. We rented de lan' for a fo'th of what we made, den after while we bought a farm. We paid three hundred dollars we done saved. We had a hoss, a steer, a cow an' two pigs, 'sides some chickens an' fo' geese.

Mis' Betsy went up in de attic an' give us enough goose feathers to make two pillows, den she give us a table an' some chairs. She give us some dishes too. Marse George give Exter a bushel of seed cawn and some seed wheat, den he tole him to go down to de barn an' get a bag of cotton seed. We got all dis den we hitched up de wagon an' th'owed in de passel of chillun an' moved to our new farm, an' de chillun was put to work in de fiel'; dey growed up in de fiel' kaze dey was put to work time dey could walk good.

Freedom is all right, but de niggers was better off befo' surrender, kaze den dey was looked after an' dey didn' get in no trouble fightin' an' killin' like dey do dese days. If a nigger cut up an' got sassy in slavery times, his Ole Marse give him a good whippin' an' he went way back an' set down an' 'haved hese'f. If he was sick, Marse an' Mistis looked after him, an' if he needed store medicine, it was bought an' give to him; he didn' have to pay nothin'. Dey didn' even have to think 'bout clothes nor nothin' like dat, dey was wove an' made an' give to dem. Maybe everybody's Marse and Mistis wuzn' good as Marse George and Mis' Betsy, but dey was de same as a mammy an' pappy to us niggers."

Walter Calloway

Birmingham, Alabama

Interviewed by W.P. Jordan

"OLE JOE HAD REAL 'LIGION"



Walter Calloway lives alone half a block off Avenue F, the thoroughfare on the southside of Birmingham on which live many of the leaders in the Negro life of the city. For his eighty-nine years he was apparently vigorous except for temporary illness. A glance at the interior of his cabin disclosed the fact that it was scrupulously neat and quite orderly in its arrangement, a characteristic of many ex-slaves. As he sat in the sunshine on his tiny front porch, his greeting was: "Come in, white folks. You ain't no doctor is you?"

To a negative reply, he explained as he continued, "Fo' de las' past twenty-five years I been keepin' right on, wukkin' for de city in de street department. 'Bout two mont's ago dis mis'ry attackted me an' don't 'pear lak nothin' dem doctors gimme do no good. De preacher he come to see me dis mornin' an' he say he know a white gemman doctor, what he gwine to sen' him to see me. I sho' wants to get well ag'in pow'ful bad, but mebbly I done live long 'nuff an' my time 'bout come."

Quizzed about his age and antecedents, he began his story: "Well, Sir, Cap'n, I was born in Richmond, Virginnny, in 1848. Befo' I was ole 'nuff to 'member

much, my mammy wid me an' my older brudder was sold to Marse John Calloway at Snodoun in Montgomery County, ten miles south of de town of Montgomery.

"Marse John hab a big plantation an' lots of slaves. Dey treated us purty good, but we hab to wuk hard. Time I was ten years ole I was makin' a reg'lar han' 'hin de plow. Oh, yassuh, Marse John good 'nough to us an' we get plenty to eat, but he had a oberseer name Green Bush what sho' whup us iffen we don't do to suit him. Yassuh, he mighty rough wid us be he didn't do de whippin' hisse'f. He had a big black boy name Mose, mean as de debil an' strong as a ox, and de oberseer let him do all de whuppin'. An', man, he could sho' lay on dat rawhide lash. He whupped a nigger gal 'bout thirteen years old so hard she nearly die, an' allus atterwa'ds she hab spells of fits or somp'n. Dat make Marse John pow'ful mad, so he run dat oberseer off de place an' Mose didn' do no mo' whuppin'.

"Same time Marse John buy mammy an' us boys, he buy a black man name Joe. He a preacher an' de marster let de slaves buil' a bresh arbor in de pecan grove over in de big pastur', an' when de wedder warn't too cold all de slaves was 'lowed to meet dar on Sunday fo' preachin'.

Yassuh, ole Joe do purty good. I speck he had mo' 'ligion dan some of de hifalutin' niggers 'tendin' to preach nowadays. De white folks chu'ch, hit at Hope Hill over on de stage road, an' sometimes dey fetch 'dere preacher to de plantation to preach to de slaves. But dey druther heah Joe.

"Nawsuh, we didn't git no schoolin' 'cep'in' befo' we got big 'nough to wuk in de fiel' we go 'long to school wid de white chillun to take care of 'em. Dey show us pictures an' tell us all dey kin, but it didn't 'mount to much.

"When de war started 'mos' all I know 'bout it was all de white mens go to Montgomery an' jine de army. My brudder, he 'bout fifteen year ole, so he go 'long wid de ration wagon to Montgomery 'mos' ebry week. One day he come back from Montgomery an' he say, 'Hell done broke loose in Gawgy.' He couldn't tell us much 'bout what done happen, but de slaves dey get all 'cited 'caze dey didn' know what to 'spect. Purty soon we fin' out day some of de big mens call a meetin' at de capitol on Goat Hill in Montgomery. Dey 'lected Mista Jeff Davis president an' done busted de Nunited States wide open.

"Atter dat dar warn't much happen on de plantation 'cep'in' gangs of so'jers passin' th'ough gwine off to de war. Den 'bout ebry so often a squad of Confederate so'jers would come to de neighborhood gatherin' up rations for Gin'ral Lee's army dey say. Dat make it purty hard on bofe whites an' blacks, takin' off some of de bes' stock an' runnin' us low on grub.

"But we wuk right on 'twell one day somebody seen a runner sayin' de Yankees comin'. Ole mistis tell me to hurry ober to Mrs. Freeman's an' tell 'em Wilson's Yankee raiders was on de way an' comin' lak a harrikin. I hop on a mule an' go jes' as fas' as I can make him trabel, but befo' I git back dey done retch de plantation, smashin' things comin' an' gwine.

"Dey broke in de smoke house an' tuk all de hams an' yuther rations dey fin' what dey want an' burn up de res'. Den dey ramshack de big house lookin' fo' money an' jewelry an' raise Cain wid de wimmin folks 'caze dey didn't fin' what dey wanted. Den dey leave dere ole hosses an' mules an' take de bes' we got. Atter dey don dat, dey burn de smoke house, de barns, de cribs an' some yuther prop'ty. Den dey skedaddle some place else.

"I warn't up dar but I heern tell dey burn up piles an' piles of cotton an' lots of steamboats at Montgomery an' lef' de ole town jes' 'bout ruind'. Twarn't long attar dat dey tell us we'se free. But lawdy, Cap'n, we ain't nebber been what I calls free. 'Cose ole marster didn' own us no mo', an' all de folks soon scatter all ober, but iffen dey all lak me day still hafter wuk jes' as hard, an some times hab less dan we useter hab when we stay on Marster John's plantation. "Well, Cap'n, dat's 'bout all I know. I feel dat misery comin' on me now. Will you please, suh, gimme a lif' back in de house. I wisht dat white gemman doctor come on iffen he comin'."