

**Good Times On the Old Plantation:
 Popular Recreations Of The
 Black Slave In Antebellum South,
 1810–1860
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INTRODUCTION

The plantation was a pageant and a variety show in alteration. The procession of plowmen at evening, slouched crosswise on their mules; the dance in the quarter with contests in clogs, cakewalks and charlestons whose fascinations were as yet undiscovered by the great world; the work songs in solo and refrain, with not too fast a rhythm; . . . the torchlight pursuit of possum and 'coon, with full-voiced haloo to baying houn' dawg and yelping cur; the rabbit hunt, the log-rolling, the house-raising, the husking bee, the quilting party, the wedding, the cock fight, the crap game, the children's play, all punctuated plantation life. . .¹

Living on a Southern plantation was a very oppressive and dehumanizing experience for the black slave. He could not have survived the "peculiar" institution of slavery unscathed. Despite its brutality, however, slavery did not crush all the bondsmen's creative instincts and humanity. They were able to maintain an essential spirit and a degree of contentment through the creation of different cultural forms. This culture was reflected in the slaves family life, socialization, religion, and most importantly for this study — their recreational activities.

It is during those moments of unguarded merrymaking that man often reveals his innermost self. To be informed of the slave's recreation, then, should tell a great deal about his very nature and the character of his being. It is another vantage point, particularly for the sport historian, from which to view the slave and his community. But an examination of slave recreations, interestingly enough, has never been a subject of special attention. It is an area of study that has been generally neglected by historians. Some have written about slave recre-

ations, but in a very cursory fashion and only then as part of more general studies dealing with slavery.² There is no contemporary study that focuses on the slave and his recreational pursuits.

Therefore, the intent of this paper is to examine the popular recreations of the slave in the period beginning in 1810 and concluding in 1860, when the old plantation regime was about to fold. More specifically, this study is directed towards the following questions :

1. Were there extended periods of leisure granted the slave? What were the planters attitudes or motives behind the granting of leisure time?
2. Were there special holidays or particular days when the slave was free from plantation work?
3. What particular recreational activities did the slaves engage in? Did the planter, religion, or slave laws restrict them to certain types of recreations?
4. Did any of the slaves recreations depend on the type of work done on the plantation?

Attitude of the Planters

There was a uniform pattern to the slave's life particularly in terms of hours of labor. But each plantation was unique in terms of the attitude and personality of its planter. John Blasingame recently claimed that "there was so much variation in plantations, overseers, and masters . . . that the slave had much more freedom from restraint and more independence and autonomy than his institutionally defined role allowed."³ A central theme in most slave narratives and travel accounts was the humane treatment the slave would receive from one master versus the inhumane treatment delivered from another. Anyone "who has seen one cotton field," explained the slave Charles Ball, "has seen all other cotton fields . . . but the contrast that prevails in the treatment of the slaves on different plantations, is very remarkable."⁴

On one of the plantations visited by James Buckingham, there were "no games or recreations . . . provided, nor was there indeed any time to enjoy them if they were. There lot was one of continued toil, from morning to night, uncheered even by the hope of any change, or prospect of improvement in conditions."⁵ James Williams, while in bondage, lived on a plantation where "there was little leisure for any of the hands

on the plantation. . . . Even on Sundays there was little or no respite from toil.”⁶ Similarly, the Reverend H. B. Abbott heard of a preacher in Mississippi who forced his slaves to work on Sunday. “I am acquainted with a Baptist preacher,” explained Abbott, “who compelled his slaves to labor on the Sabbath and justified himself under the plea that, if they were not a work, they would be sporting and roving about the fields and woods.”⁷

In contrast to the fiendish planter who took delight in administering the lash and only granted limited leisure time, was the planter who dealt with his slaves in a humane fashion. Influenced significantly by sentiments of humanity and public opinion the planter in many instances appeared to show a genuine concern for their slaves. On the plantations visited by Adam Hodgson there was nothing but humanity exhibited towards the slaves.⁸ He had no doubt that many slaves experienced “as much enjoyment and as little actual suffering as their free brethren.”⁹ Mrs. Henry Schoolcraft recalled the kindly treatment that her father gave his slaves. “I so vividly remember,” she said, “the patriarchal benevolence my father’s countenance exhibited. . . . Some of them [slaves] spent the holidays in playing on the violin and other instruments, for their young friends to dance by; others went from place to place to visit their neighbors.”¹⁰ Bishop Whipple, while visiting the Georgia plantation of General Clinch, was gratified by the kind feelings that existed between the general and his slaves. “There was none of that fear,” explained Whipple, “that servile fear, that is the offspring of tyranny and cruelty. I know there are men who do not treat their slaves kindly, men whose slaves bear the looks of abject sorrow but these are the exceptions, not the general rule.”¹¹

No matter the treatment given their slaves, the planter “worked continuously to make them submissive and deferential.”¹² He attempted to obtain as much work as possible out of the slave and at the same time maintain health, strength, and reasonably good spirits. Many of the planters did resort to the lash in order to get results, but the more intelligent planter realized that the profits they derived from the labor of their slaves were in proportion to the good or bad treatment of them. The contemporary historian Alton Moody felt “It was to the interest of planters to make conditions of life for slaves such as would tend to secure their contentment.”¹³ Basil Hall, while on a tour of the United States in 1828, observed that the planters seemed “well aware of the advantage of not exacting

too much service from their slaves” and that an “intermission of one day, at the least, in the week was a source of profit rather than loss.”¹⁴ Likewise, James Avirett’s father didn’t schedule any work for his slaves after twelve A.M. on Saturdays. He was convinced that granting a half holiday each week was a wise investment. “My father was fully convinced,” stated the younger Avirett, that “he accomplished far more in five and a half days of labor than he could have done by the steady grind, grind of six unbroken days of toil,” and that “a wise and thrifty master was kind to and considerate of his servants.”¹⁵ Finally, an article in *Debows Review* in 1854 gives an opinion as to the proper management and feelings of slaves:

Slaves have no respect or affection for a master who indulges them over much or who from fear, or false humanity fails to assume that degree of authority necessary to promote industry and enforce good order. At the same time, proper and suitable indulgences and privileges should be granted for the gratification and amusement of the negro.”¹⁶

Almost all planters realized that some means to deter slave insurrections and truancy was needed on the plantation. “Virtually all the plantations whose records are available suffered more or less from truancy, and the abundance of newspaper advertisements for fugitives reinforced the impression that the need for deterrence was vital.”¹⁷ Several miscellaneous practices were followed on the various plantations to halt insurrections. Many planters would give extra food and clothing to their slaves, but as the historian Ulrich B. Phillips stated: “Adequacy in the food, clothing, and shelter might prove of no avail, for contentment must be mental as well as physical.”¹⁸ Most planters, therefore, found it to their advantage to grant a few periods of leisure time to their slaves in order that their struggle for survival did not become too severe. For instance, the slaves on P. C. Weston’s plantation in South Carolina were allowed to do no work on Good Friday, Christmas Day or Sunday. . . . “The two days following Christmas day, the first Saturdays after finishing threshing, planting, hoeing and harvest, are also to be holidays.”¹⁹ Leonard Black’s master would give all the slaves a holiday on “Christmas, Whitsuntide, and Easter.”²⁰ Daniel Hundley said that from his observations the slave was not only allowed free time at Christmas, but . . . “Some masters make it a rule to give their negroes every Saturday afternoon, while nearly all masters give them established holidays such as Easter Monday, the Fourth of July, the eighth of January, and

others.”²¹ Bennett Barrow, moreover, who was a planter in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, “rewarded his slaves for faithful service by giving them frequent holidays throughout the year.”²²

Frederick Douglass, the most famous of slaves, was certain the planters granted leisure time for the purposes of social control. There was no question in his mind that the holidays kept the slaves from revolting. “I believe,” said Douglass, “those holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves.” They kept the slaves minds on such immediate pleasures as singing, dancing, eating, drinking, and playing. But for these, he determined, “the rigors of bondage would have become too severe for endurance, and the slave would have been forced to a dangerous desperation.”²³

John Pierpont of Boston, after visiting a South Carolina plantation, gives a description of Christmas that illustrates in its own way the planter’s purposes for giving holidays.

Merry Christmas met me at every corner . . . during almost the whole of the second and third afternoons, the portico was crowded with these dancers. . . . Some of them who were native Africans did not join the dance with the others but by themselves gave us a specimen of the sports and amusements with which the benighted and uncivilized children of nature divest themselves. Clapping their hands was their music and distorting their frames into the most unnatural figures and emitting the most hideous noises is their dancing. Jumping, running and climbing trees was last recourse in the interval and the whole exhibited a scene which might more than compare with the bachannal feasts and amusements of antiquity. . . . Nor was this opportunity suffered to pass unimproved ; many for awhile forgot both their sorrows and their joys, their hopes and fears.²⁴

Similarly, an overseer shows how the Christmas holiday was used as a social control when he told his employer: “I killed twenty-eight head of beef for the people’s Christmas dinner. I can do more with them in this way that if all the hides of the cattle were made into lashes.”²⁵

To Francis Fedric, a slave from Virginia, leisure time and Christmas in particular was artificially contrived “to put the seal upon the slaves own servitude.”²⁶ The planter would supply the slaves with whiskey which kept them in a continual state of intoxication. The slaves became so miserable during the holidays, according to Fedric, that they welcomed the re-

turn of the normal plantation routine.²⁷ Likewise, Henry Bibb and his fellow slaves would honestly enjoy Sunday by engaging in some kind of amusement. They would resort to the woods on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the sabbath. But these activities were often encouraged by the slaveholders, according to Bibb, for their own selfish purposes. They would make the day miserable for the slave by forcing them to get drunk, “dance, pat juber, sing and play on the banjo,” and “then get them to wrestling, fighting, jumping, running races and butting each other like sheep.”²⁸

Finally, according to Eugene D. Genovese’s recent interpretation, the planter found in his granting of leisure time to his slaves a “confirmation of his paternalistic claims to stewardship.” By granting holidays the planters enhanced their own vanity and sense of accomplishing selfless service. The planter was also:

. . . Taking solace not from the slaves self-degradation, but from their irresponsible ability to find joy in life even in slave life. . . Douglass was right in thinking that the holidays and good times undermined the revolutionary impulse of the slaves, but he was wrong, I believe, in thinking that the cause lay in the slaves being trapped into trivility and self-degradation. Rather, it lay in the double sense of community inherent in these occasions which the slaveholders more fully appreciated, however much they twisted the meaning into self-justification. The slaves developed a sense of community among themselves and to a much lesser but still vital extent, a sense of community with their white folks. Thus, the holidays weakened the slaves impulse to challenge the regime frontally while they contributed to an ability to create a healthy black community and to guarantee its survival.²⁹

Each plantation, as we have seen, was unique in terms of the attitude and personality of its planter. The planters, irrespective of their particular method in handling their slaves, attempted to make them obedient and respectful. The more intelligent planters realized that granting brief periods of leisure was a source of profit, made slave life less severe, and helped curb insurrections. The evidence indicates some planters attempted to put the stamp on the slaves own servitude by making their leisure time as miserable as possible. According to one interpretation the granting of leisure time enhanced the planter’s own vanity and feeling of performing selfless service. In addition, the holidays not only weakened the slaves impulse

to challenge the plantation regime but helped to establish and guarantee a healthy slave community.

Christmas Season and Special Days

Christmas was the holiday the slaves enjoyed the most. According to the ex-slave, Solomon Northup, it was the only time the slaves looked forward to with any excitement or interest. "They are glad when night comes," uttered Northup, "because it brings them one day nearer Christmas."³⁰ The slave had more freedom during this holiday than any other time during the year. Planters were usually more liberal in issuing passes during the Christmas season. On some plantations none of the slaves *were* counted upon to do any field work several days before Christmas. In some localities even the household duties, such as washing and cooking, had to be completed by the whites.

No matter how long the Christmas holidays lasted, it was characterized by constant praying. With three to seven days available, the more kind-hearted planter would stagger to parties "so that the slaves on a given plantation could entertain slaves from neighboring plantations and then be entertained in turn."³¹ The parties featured extravagant feasts, much drinking, all night singing and dancing.³² For example, the tourist Charles Lanham said that on Christmas Eve the slaves would tune their banjos and fiddles "and devoting themselves moat heartily to the pleasures of dancing, singing and comparing notes as to the acquisitions made during the day . . . the revelry is only concluded by the approach of day."³³ To Solomon Northup, moreover, the Christmas dance was the biggest event of the year for the slave. "The Christmas dance! Oh ye pleasure seeking sons and daughters of idleness, who move with measured step, listless and snail-like, through the slow winding cotillion, if ye wish to look upon the celerity, if not the poetry of motion upon genuine happiness, rampant and unrestrained — go down to Louisiana and see the slaves dancing in the starlight of a Christmas night."³⁴

The Christmas holidays afforded an excellent opportunity for the slaves to make up for their usual sobriety. Large numbers of them would get inebriated during their visits to town. It was customary for many planters to distribute whiskey during the holiday. "Up they came trouping, men, women and children," observed the planter William Holcombe, "with every kind

of cups and bowls, glass, tin, wood, etc., wherein to receive the precious alcoholic deposit . . . an anomaly peculiar to the Christmas holidays.”³⁵ According to Daniel Hundley as Christmas time approached the planter’s wife would give the slaves “presents of extra allowances of flour, sugar, coffee, etc., while they themselves replenish their beer barrels or smuggle fresh bottles of rum or whiskey into their cabins.”³⁶ In addition to hard liquor, slaveholders often distributed liberal amounts of eggnog prepared by the planter’s family.

The slaves ordinarily had more money at Christmas season than any other time of the year because the majority of planters would distribute money as well as presents to them on Christmas morning. Sugar, flour, molasses, coffee, etc., plus a little cash would be apportioned to each slave family. Many slaves in addition to cash presents, acquired money at Christmas time by doing extra jobs or by selling their poultry goods and produce from their gardens.

By the later years of the Antebellum period the privileges of the Christmas holidays were claimed as rights by the slave. For instance, Thomas C. Clemson of South Carolina wrote to John C. Calhoun that he simply could not afford to give his slaves a four day holiday, but that his overseer had warned him that a four day holiday was the custom and that his slaves better get it.³⁷ In every part of the South the slave felt they had a right to a Christmas holiday, which had been allowed by custom for so long, that it was generally not refused by the planter.

New Year’s Day was also a special holiday for the slaves. It provided another opportunity for the slaves to have a big barbecue, visit their friends on various plantations, and dance all night long. It was not a pleasant day for many slaves, however, because this was the day when slaves were hired out to other plantations and often separated from family and loved ones.³⁸

The Fourth of July was a day looked to with a great deal of anticipation by the slave. It “was a day of merrymaking, both as a patriotic occasion and as the traditional date for laying by the crops.” The Fourth with all its usual phrases like “revolution,” “freedom,” and “independence,” must have rung loud in the ears of the slaves.³⁹

An election, a muster, and political gatherings of all kinds were exciting days for the slaves as well as the planters. Again

it was an excellent opportunity for the slave to visit town and engage in a variety of recreational activities. The attendance of slaves at these events brought many complaints from the white community. "In 1831 a slaveowner, after having attended a general muster where he noticed several intoxicated slaves lounging about . . . resolved that no servant of his should be seen on the grounds until the practice of treating on such occasions is entirely done away."⁴⁰ In 1822, moreover, "Mathew Baine of Mecklenburg, North Carolina wanted a law to prevent slaves from attending general musters and elections, and in 1860 a legislator proposed to fine masters \$100 if they gave their slaves permission to attend political gatherings."⁴¹

The slaves enjoyed other special days. Anniversaries and weddings were other opportunities for "highjinks." Planters would frequently give dinners and dances during these times. Often planters would give their slaves a holiday on Easter Monday if work on the plantation were not too pressing. If the planter celebrated Thanksgiving he would give his slaves a holiday too. During the laying by of crops, the slaves would occasionally get a day off to enjoy a big barbecue and dinner.⁴²

It should be re-emphasized that Christmas was "the holiday" for the slaves. They would spend their three to seven days of relative freedom by enjoying numerous dinners and dances, visiting friends on nearby plantations, and making excursions to the local towns. It was a tradition of most planters to distribute extra allowances of whiskey, money, and presents during this time. The Christmas holiday, significantly enough, was claimed as a right by the slave and was not generally refused by the planter. Other holidays and special days were given in which the slaves had more opportunities to visit other plantations, travel to local towns, and enjoy all night dinners and dances. But in the final analysis, it was the Christmas season that was looked forward to and enjoyed the most. Only the slaves regular weekend festivities could steadily lighten his burden of hardships and sustain his hope until the Christmas holidays arrived again.

Weekend Festivities

The weekend afforded the slaves a temporary release from the plantation regime. The fragmentary evidence suggests that some planters worked their slaves only a half a day on Saturday. The more charitable planters would give all of

Saturday, when not behind with plantation work. The more assiduous slaves would spend the day in performing personal chores such as washing clothes, working their gardens, cleaning cabins or earning extra money at odd jobs. "Some masters make it a rule," observed Daniel Hunley, "to give their negroes every Saturday afternoon . . . to put in their little crops, a practice almost universal with them. Those who plant no crop either work at basket making, chair making, or other similar trades, by which they make considerable money."⁴³ Similarly, a plantation observer said that the slaves "got money sometimes all day Saturday. They [slaves] used this money to buy nice things that the master did not give, such as shoes and better clothing."⁴⁴

For the more spirited slave, Saturday was an opportunity to go hunting and fishing, play games, visit the nearest town or simply visit with friends. Charles Ball said he was often able to manage his affairs in such a way as to get all of Saturday off. "This I did," explained Ball, "by prevailing on my master to set my task for the week, on Monday morning. . . Saturday was not appropriated to hunting, if I was not obliged to work all day; and I soon became pretty expert in the use of my gun."⁴⁵ The slaves also, according to the contemporary historian Guion Johnson, "angled lazily with hook and worm on a shady bank on Saturday afternoons in early spring and autumn or they set fish traps and collected about them on Saturday nights to shoot craps and sing."⁴⁶

All but the most insensate planters would give "Saturday night parties for their slaves once in awhile."⁴⁷ They gave the parties in the specific hope of keeping them home during the week. Even though the planters usually had little concern about the recreational activities in the quarters, they did not want their slaves partying all night wearing themselves out before the next day's labor. The younger slaves in particular made a habit of walking "eight or ten miles to dance all night on a neighboring plantation."⁴⁸ They thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to frolic and have a good time. "As soon as his burdens are laid down," says the traveler Timothy Flint, "or his toils for a moment suspended, he sings, he seizes his fiddle, he dances. When their days are passed in continued and severe toil, their nights — for like cats and owls they are like nocturnal animals — are passed in wandering about from plantation to plantation in visiting, feasting, and conversation."⁴⁹ The planter who allowed a Saturday night party could hopefully keep these week night excursions down to manageable proportions.

Singing and dancing marked the Saturday night parties. Most planters would furnish some whiskey and some meat for a barbecue and leave the slave alone to enjoy his dances. Often the whites on the plantation would watch the festivities and enjoy themselves vicariously. But many times the planter and his family, whether kindly received or not by the slaves, joined in the singing and dancing. On the Georgia plantation visited by Emily Burke it was customary for the slaves to assemble on the front yard of the planter's residence every Saturday night. When everyone was present they would join in a dance around some burning fagots. "It was usual," says Burke, "for the white members of the family to assemble on the piazza to witness their pastimes, and sometimes at the request of a favorite slave I have seen the white children engage in the waltz, or take their places in the quadrille."⁵⁰

It was the usual custom in the Antebellum South to give slaves freedom from work on Sunday. The Sabbath was spent in a variety of ways by the slave. Several of the more pious slaveholders tried to make Sunday an enjoyable day by arranging for a preacher to visit the plantation, teaching Sunday school, or visiting the slaves quarters.⁵¹ Planters would often give special dinners for the slave in the big house. But other planters did the slaves even bigger favors: they either left them alone or gave them permission to visit their friends on other plantations or go to town and dispose of the products grown on their gardens. "In Louisiana and the state of Mississippi," said the British traveler Isaac Holmes, "the slaves had Sunday for a day of recreation and upon many plantations they danced for several hours during the afternoon of this day."⁵² According to Daniel Hundley, "Sunday is the great gala day of the negroes, always excepting the annual festival at Christmas. At this time they interchange visits with relatives and friends on the neighboring plantations, generally bearing with them some present or other."⁵³ And Joseph Ingraham, in speaking of Sunday, said that "with the latter [slave] this day is a short jubilee and with the peculiar skill of their race, they make the most of it — condensing the occupation and the jollity of seven days into one."⁵⁴

One of the favorite diversions for the slave on Sunday, and on other holidays too, was to visit the nearest town: Visitors to Southern towns seemed especially impressed by the amusements of the slaves during holiday times. Thus Ingraham wrote of a Sunday in Natchez, Mississippi: "The streets of the

lower town were alive with boatmen, horsemen, draymen, buyers, sellers, and hacks, and scores of Negroes; some wrestling, some fighting, others running foot races, playing quoits or marbles.”⁵⁵ Sunday in Richmond was an exciting time for the slave. “The streets were filled with slaves,” wrote Edward Aaby, “who were amusing themselves by playing at marbles, walking about to exhibit their finery and enjoying the luxury of free air and leisure. This is the way they generally pass the Sunday. . . . These pastimes are their Satumalia.”⁵⁶ Flint said that on Sundays in New Orleans, “the great congo dance is performed. Everything is license and revelry. Some hundreds of negroes, male and female, follow the king of the wake. . . . They dance and their streamers fly. . . . I have seen groups of these moody and silent sons of the forest following these merry bachanalians in their dance through the streets.”⁵⁷

The presence of great numbers of slaves in towns during Sundays and other holidays led to many complaints and disapproving editorials from the white population. The custom in the South of keeping ladies off the streets on Saturday afternoon came about because of slaves being in town at that time. Emily Burke said that a street in Savannah was “always so thronged by sailors, slaves, and rowdies of all grades and color, that it was not safe for ladies to walk there alone.”⁵⁸ A group of citizens in Clinton, Louisiana “adopted a resolution asking that planters keep their negroes out of town during Christmas week, adding that if they do allow their slaves to come to town, a pass from sunrise to sundown shall be the extreme limit for such a pass.”⁵⁹ The commissioners of Fayetteville, North Carolina told the town constables to give fifteen lashes to “negroes, that shall make a noise or assemble in a riotous manner in any of the streets on the Sabbath day; or they may be seen playing ball on that day.”⁶⁰ The Baton Rouge Gazette “complained of crowds of negroes . . . congregated about a ten pin alley near the steamboat landing.”⁶¹ In 1816, moreover, an assemblage of laborers, artisans, and mechanics of New Bern, North Carolina “complained to the legislature of the intemperence and disorder which the local slaves exhibited . . . in our streets every Sabbath.”⁶²

The weekend, as has been shown, gave the slaves a brief yet recurring release from the plantation regime. A small number of planters would give the slaves all of Saturday off, some would give half of Saturday, and almost all of them gave Sunday as a day of rest. The more zealous slaves would spend

the weekend in doing personal chores and working at odd jobs. Many spent their weekend, as they did other leisure hours, in visiting friends on other plantations, traveling to the nearest town or participating in particular recreational activities. The one big social event for the slaves was the occasional Saturday night party given by the planter. These parties, given in the specific hope of keeping down weeknight excursions, were often mixed affairs with both the planters' family and slave taking part. Sunday, like other holidays, afforded the slave an excellent opportunity to visit the nearest town. Many complaints and disapproving editorials were written concerning the presence of large numbers of slaves in town. Many of these complaints, it is important to note, were directed to the sporting activities of the slave. But the periodic grievances were never significant enough to crush the slaves desire to play.

Their Sporting Activities

There were thousands of slaves who played every day of their lives and seemed to honestly enjoy the experience. The periods of recreation were too important for the slave culturally to be abandoned.

With few exceptions planters did not attempt to limit the slaves pastimes as long as they did not conflict with the plantation routine. If the slaves were ready to work when called upon, the planter would not concern himself with the types of diversions they engaged in. Elijah Marrs said his master "allowed us generally to do as we pleased, after the work was done, and we enjoyed the privilege granted us."⁶³ Similarly a South Carolina planter told Basil Hall that "We interfere as little as possible with their domestic habits, except in matters of police. We don't care what they do when their tasks are over — we lose sight of them till next day."⁶⁴

The slave engaged in a variety of recreational activities either as a participant or spectator. Often the slaves pastimes took on almost entirely the nature of a gainful pursuit. But many of their diversions had all the unique elements characteristic of "sport." The slave took part in a couple of amusements that were rather exceptional to his own culture. It was not uncommon, furthermore, for planter and slave to share in the general excitement of sport.

The slave narratives and white autobiographies are replete with examples of slaves taking part in sport. Frederick Doug-

lass said the majority of slaves spent the holidays in “ball-playing, wrestling, boxing, running foot races, and dancing.”⁶⁵ Josiah Henson felt that at fifteen years of age there was no one who could compete with him at work and sport. “I could run faster,” stated Henson, “wrestle better, and jump higher than anybody about me.”⁶⁶ Harper Twelvetrees said that John Anderson’s slave life did not appear to have been an unhappy one. “He was fond of athletic sports, such as running, jumping, and wrestling.”⁶⁷ William Wells Brown stated that many slaves would attend the numerous religious revivals given during the holidays but some spent “their time at the dances, raffles, cockfights, foot races, and other amusements that presented themselves.”⁶⁸ Erving Lowery explained that on Sunday the younger slaves on the plantation would journey to an adjoining plantation and spend “the day in wrestling, jumping, boxing, and running foot races.”⁶⁹ On James Avirett’s plantation the slaves would have a two hour break each day in which they would take part “in pitching quoits . . . sometimes they will engage in a game of all in the throwing or batting of which they discover as much dexterity in some cases as can be found on the modern baseball ground.”⁷⁰ Emily Burke, while visiting a plantation in Georgia, observed that after the tasks had been finished the slaves would enjoy recreations. Some would be trundling the hoop, some would dance, and others would go out on hunting and fishing excursions.⁷¹

Informal boxing matches between slaves was a common occurrence on the individual plantations. Also planters would frequently organize formal boxing contests and pit their slave champion against other slave champions from different plantations of the community. Many times more money was won on wagers during these fights than on the horses. Legend has it that extremely good “boxer-slaves, after earning fortunes in bets for their masters, were given their freedom and moved away from the South so they could ply their fistic trade to better financial advantage for themselves.”⁷²

Horse racing was a sport enjoyed by the slave. Very informal and spontaneous horse races between slaves frequently took place on the plantation. Slaves would also accompany their masters to other plantations to share in the excitement of horse racing. Often they went simply as spectators but frequently “were the trainers or the jockeys who actually took part in the contests.”⁷³ The slave William Greene was a jockey for several years on Edward Hamilton’s plantation. “I remained

with him [Hamilton] from nine years old until I was twenty,” explains Greene. “He then took me to be a race rider. He kept a number of fine noble horses, with a number of race horses; and being of the right size for a rider he took me to ride races.”⁷⁴ Similarly Jacob Stroyer, while living on a plantation in South Carolina, was first employed as a trainer of race horses and then later became a jockey.⁷⁵

Most contemporary sources felt the slave was more interested in gambling than all other diversions. Frederick Law Olmstead, while on one of his trips through the slave states, observed that police had broken into a gambling cellar of a nearby town, “and found about twenty negroes at high play, with all the usual accessories of a first class hell.”⁷⁶ Despite strict laws forbidding slaves from gambling, they would lay a wager with white men at horse races and cock fights. Most states in the early Antebellum period had no specific laws concerning the gambling of slaves. But by 1830, for example, the legislature of North Carolina “prohibited slaves from playing at any game of cards, dice, nine-pins, or any game of hazard or chance, for any money, liquor, or any kind of property, whether the same be staked or not upon pain of receiving thirty-nine lashes.”⁷⁷ A subsequent act in 1838 attempted to reinforce the edict by punishing a white man for gambling with a slave.⁷⁸ However, gambling continued to remain popular among the slaves no matter what restrictions were placed upon it.

Boating, a popular sport among all classes of people in the South, was a favorite pursuit of the bondsmen. “Slave boat crews developed into a coastal institution with their rhythmical boat songs and the vying in skill and speed of one plantation crew against another.”⁷⁹ It was a widespread practice of Southern coastal planters to pit their slave crews against other slave crews. Though not the formal type of regattas engaged in by the organized boat clubs of the South, these customary races were highly competitive. They also afforded an excellent opportunity for the planters and their families to place bets on their favorite crews.⁸⁰

Certainly one of the slaves favorite amusements was dancing. The more clement planters permitted their slaves to dance almost anything they pleased. Besides the holiday seasons, they often allowed dancing on Saturday nights, Saturday afternoons, and Sunday. Robert Anderson said they “could get together almost any time they felt like it, for little social affairs. . . . During the slack times the people from one plantation

could visit another by getting permission and sometimes they would slip away and make visits anyway.”⁸¹ The slave was “known to walk five or six miles after a hard days work,” according to the British traveler John Bernard, “to enjoy the pleasure of flinging about their hands, heads, and legs to the music of a banjo, in a manner that threatened each limb with dislocations.”⁸²

Often the slaves would imitate the whites in their dances, but “apparently the European reels, minuets, and schottishes were too sedate and formalized” for them. “In the quarters the dance was more often a test of physical endurance, a means of winning praise and expressing the slave’s inner feelings.”⁸³ Their dancing was a sort of shuffle which animated the whole body, and was ordinarily performed individually rather than with a partner, as Anderson said:

We danced some of the dances the white folks danced . . . but we liked better the dances of our own particular race in which we tried to express in motion the particular feelings within our own selves. These dances were individual dances, consisting of shuffling of the feet and swinging of the arms and shoulders in a peculiar rhythm of time developed into what is known today as the double shuffle, heel and toe, buck wing, juba, etc. The slaves became proficient in such dances and could play a tune with their feet, dancing largely to an inward music, a music that was felt, but not heard.⁸⁴

When the slave was unable to secure musical instruments for their dances they would engage in “patting juba.” They would create exciting rhythmic patterns by clapping their hands. According to the slave Solomon Northup, “the patting is performed by striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other — all the while keeping time with the feet.”⁸⁵ Many times the rhythmic patterns used in juba were quite extraordinary. John Blasingame, quoting a traveler from Rhode Island, said “that, while the slaves were patting juba, it was really astonishing to witness the rapidity of their motions, their accurate time, and the precision of their music and dance. I have never seen it equalled in my life.”⁸⁶

The slave’s love for dancing was repeatedly affected by religious revivals. Three British travelers give a clear picture of the relationship between dancing and practical piety. “Many of you have heard of the negro songs,” stated W. E. Baxter,

“of their dances to the banjo, and of their noisy merrymakings . . . but such rejoicings pertained to a state of society past away ; now you hear, instead, the striking language of the colored preacher, the murmur of domestic prayer, and the loud swell of voices joining in an anthem of Christian praise.”⁸⁷ Similarly Fredrika Bremer explained that “Whenever the slaves become Christian they give up dancing, have preacher meetings instead and employ their musical talents merely on psalms and hymns.”⁸⁸ Charles Lyell, moreover, stated that on the “Hope-ton” plantation twenty violins were silenced by Methodist missionaries. They were permitted, noticed Lyell, “to move round rapidly in a ring, joining hands in token of brotherly love, presenting first the right hand and then the left, in which maneuver . . . they sometimes contrive to take enough exercise to serve as a substitute for the dance.”⁸⁹

Despite the selected instances of religious opposition, dancing was too popular to be discontinued. The situation was also quite bearable for the planter as long as the slave gave up dancing voluntarily. But provisions were likely to be taken against its becoming coercive. A planter, James H. Hammond, for instance, “penciled a memorandum in his plantation manuel: Church members are privileged to dance on all holiday occasions and the class leader or deacon who may report them shall be reprimanded or punished at the discretion of the master.”⁹⁰

Hunting and fishing were two of the pastimes most enjoyed by the plantation slave. They engaged in them for pure enjoyment and as a supplement to their monotonous diet. The slave was severely restricted in the equipment they could use for these activities. Many state laws were passed forbidding slaves to carry guns. A North Carolina statute of 1831 made it unlawful “for any slave to be in possession of a gun, sword, club, or other weapon or to hunt or range with a gun in the woods upon pain of receiving twenty lashes.”⁹¹ According to the traveler Amos Stoddard, no planter of Louisiana could have more than two slaves hunt for him at the same time, and after they returned from the hunt were obligated to give up their guns.⁹² A similar law was enacted in Tennessee restricting the rights of slaves to hunt. This act said that “At the request of the master, the county courts would permit one slave only to hunt with a gun from each plantation. . . It was necessary for him [slave] to have a license to keep from being arrested.”⁹³ Despite these strict laws many slaves had guns, and many did hunt. They were expert in the shooting of rabbit, ducks, deer,

squirrel, and turkey. Some hunting did not require the use of the gun and the slaves would set traps for small animals. They were especially fond of taking their dogs out at night to hunt the raccoon and possum.

The slave would many times accompany his master on the hunt. When fox hunts occurred during the day only the planter, their sons and guests would take part in the popular diversion. But when the hunt took place at night, "the chase was joined by the negroes on foot with halloos which rivalled the music of the hounds."⁹⁴ The slave would also accompany the planter at night to participate in deer hunting with fire. A party of hunters well armed with guns would ride into the woods preceded by a slave carrying lighted charcoal in a pan. The victims were so captivated by the light "that they always stared at it transfixed, while its reflection on their eyeballs gave the sportsmen an unerring aim" and the deer was easily shot.⁹⁵

The slave enjoyed fishing as much as hunting. It was not only a source of simple recreation but of extra spending money. The slaves on Charles Ball's plantation had the privilege of selling whatever they caught. Some of them "sold as many fish . . . as enabled them to buy coffee, sugar, and other luxuries for their wives."⁹⁶ William Hayden obtained extra spending money by fishing on his plantation in Kentucky. "I applied myself," stated Hayden, "during my leisure moments to fishing, at which I was generally successful. These fish I conveyed to market, and obtained a considerable sum of spending money."⁹⁷ In fact, the slave was so successful in fishing that white commercial fishermen often complained they were monopolizing all the fishing holes and putting them out of business. In 1831, for example, fifty-six petitioners of New Bern, North Carolina asked the legislature for a law to prevent slaves from fishing unless in the company of a white person. "The petitioners declared themselves to be much injured both in their advocations, and in the management of their farms and negroes, by the large gangs of slaves, who come up from the town of New Bern and the neighborhood thereof, in boats . . . to sell, buy, traffick, and fish."⁹⁸

It is evident, from what we've seen, that the slaves participated in a variety of sporting activities. Their periods of recreation were too meaningful culturally to be discarded. The planters usually did not restrict the slaves pastimes as long as they were ready to work when called upon. The slaves engaged in such activities as wrestling, running foot races, playing ball,

pitching quoits, boxing, horse racing, gambling, cockfights, boating, hunting, fishing, dancing, and patting juba. Most of the slaves diversions were very informal and spontaneous affairs. But they were often the spectators or actual participants in some of the more organized activities sponsored by the planter. Stringent slave laws and numerous religious revivals many times restricted the numbers of activities the slave could engage in. They certainly were not restricted, however, in their many recreational activities which combined the elements of fun and labor. For the planter, these occasions were too important to be discontinued.

Recreation and Labor

Much of the recreational life of the slave was closely linked with rural institutions and was significantly influenced by the type of work done on the plantation. For the slave, corn shuckings, log rollings, and hog killings were joyous occasions. These special activities were a combination of recreation and labor. Planters were clever enough to make these occurrences great social events where work was dissembled in the form of fun and gaiety. As a consequence these herculean tasks were finished without any sense of real physical exertion. Instead, the slaves found these activities to be a source of physical pleasure and emotional release.

The rural custom of corn shucking was one of the biggest events of the farming season. The corn yielded by the harvest was brought in from the fields and deposited in two piles in preparation for the shucking. "Then the night is set for the corn shucking," explains Lowery, "for usually it was had at night so that the slaves from the adjacent plantations could come and enjoy the sport. Invitations were sent far and near, and they were readily accepted. Great preparations were made in food and drink. The only drink allowed at the corn shucking was coffee, but it was customary on some of the plantations to have whiskey at corn shuckings, but Mr. Frierson never allowed it."⁹⁹

To add enjoyment to the work, the element of competition was ushered in. Two companies of shuckers, each headed by a "captain," were pitted in a race to see who could shuck the corn the fastest. Each captain seated himself on top of his pile of corn with his shuckers surrounding him, and at a given signal they began to shuck as if their lives depended on it.

The uncertainty as to who would win the contest made the occasion great fun for the slave. They also knew that an enormous feast awaited them after finishing the work. The planter would give them a dinner afterwards with plenty of whiskey to drink. The slaves would then match their strength and agility in wrestling, foot races and jumping contests, or would organize a dance.¹⁰⁰ "When the work of the evening was over," explained William Cullen Bryant, "the negroes adjourned to a spacious kitchen. One of them took his place as musician, whistling, and beating time with two sticks upon the floor. Several of the men came forward and executed various dances, capering, prancing, and drumming with heel and toe upon the floor, with astounding agility and perseverance, though all of them had performed their daily tasks and had worked all the evening and some had walked from four to seven miles to attend the corn shucking."¹⁰¹

Another task that combined recreation and labor was log-rolling. For the slaves, a log-rolling meant lots of food and much gaiety. On an assigned day, the planters of the community would send their most robust slaves to a designated place for the big event. Squads were chosen, each headed by a captain, who would divide his men into pairs according to size and weight. "Each pair had a hand stick. These sticks, six of them, were placed under a huge log. At a given word, the twelve men, each with one hand grasping the stick and the other steadying the log, would rise with a grunt and a groan and bodily lift the timber . . . and dump it into the pile."¹⁰²

At twelve o'clock the slaves would quit work and enjoy dinner. After a two hour rest they would return to the field and finish the work. After a few days the women and children would gather up the limbs or the fallen trees and bum them.¹⁰³

Hog killing, surprising as it may seem, was no less a gala occasion for the slave. It was laborious, exacting work, but was looked forward to with great expectation. The women were in charge of making the sausage. They sat at blocks in a large room, seasoning the chopped meat and frying it in the frying pan, filling the cases with white oak splints. The children would be busy collecting hog bladders to make balloons. It was a day that brought smiling faces to the door of every cabin, "faces alight with anticipation of the backbones and spareribs to come."¹⁰⁴

Other special times on the plantation were at corn thinning time, at fodder-pulling time, ice-getting time, threshing-wheat time and at "harvest."¹⁰⁵ Harvest time, in particular, was a festival for the slave. The most fatiguing labor of the year was looked upon eagerly by the hands. According to Thomas Page, "It was the test of the men's prowess and the women's skill; for it took a man to swing his cradle through the long June days and keep up with the . . . leader as he strode and swung his cradle ringing through the heavy wheat. The young men looked forward to it as the young bucks looked to the war path."¹⁰⁶

Indeed, much of the recreational life of the slave was strongly attached to rural institutions and the type of work done on the plantation. For the slave, corn shuckings, log-rollings, hog killings, corn-thinning time, fodder-pulling time, ice-getting time, threshing-wheat time and harvest were all gala occasions. The planter turned these laborious tasks into great social events. Slaves from nearby plantations would often travel several miles to participate in the activities. A lavish dinner and dance would normally accompany these pursuits.

Comments

Even with all its inhumane characteristics the plantation community was not without its lighter side. It did not, as we've seen, become too oppressive or severe enough to overwhelm the slaves natural instincts to play and compete in physical contests. Indeed, the slave probably engaged in recreation with much more intensity and emotion because of his persecution and sufferings. It was a way to sustain hope, it served to lighten his burden of hardships, it heightened his self worth, and it encouraged group interests. As John Blasingame put it, both religious and recreational activities:

. . . broke the monotony of daily toil and permitted the slave to play roles other than that of the helpless, dependent, driven to his tasks. During his leisure hours the slave could take out his anger towards whites in physical contests with other slaves or seek relief in religious devotion by turning to one more powerful than his earthly master. Religious and recreational activities and the differences between the slaves and the masters customs prevented his total identification with the slaveholders interests and gave him some respite from constant toil.¹⁰⁷

FOOTNOTES

¹Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), pp. 202-3.

²See for example: John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 41-75; Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: *The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 566-84; Guion G. Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), pp. 550-59; Winston J. Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), pp. 67-80; Joe G. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Thomas Morans Sons, Inc., 1963), pp. 125-52.

³John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 154.

⁴Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of Charles Ball* (Lewiston: John Shugert, 1836), p. 284.

⁵James S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher, Son, and Company, 1842), p. 132.

⁶James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams: An American Slave* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), p. 47.

⁷C. G. Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: Or A Tour Among the Planters* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), p. 256.

⁸It is important to note here that this essay is only concerned with the slaves living on larger plantations. The recreational pursuits of slaves on the smaller farms may be somewhat different.

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¹⁰H. B. Schoolcraft, *Letters on the Condition of the African Race in the United States; By a Southern Lady* (Philadelphia: T. K. and P. G. Collins. Printers, 1852), p. 13.

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¹²John W. Blasingame, *The Slavery Community*, p. 160.

¹³Alton V. Moody, *Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1976), p. 87.

¹⁴Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (3 Vols., Edinburgh: Cadell and Company, 1829), III, p. 180.

¹⁵James B. Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House* (New York: F. Tennyson Neely, Company, 1901), p. 90.

¹⁶*Debows Review*, "Management of Slaves," 27 (1854), p. 425.

¹⁷Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), p. 305.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹P. C. Weston, "Management of Southern Slaves," *Debows Review*, 22, (1857), p. 40.

²⁰Leonard Black, *Life of Leonard Black* (Brooklyn, 1851), p. 54.

²¹Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), p. 355.

²²Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 61.

²³Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), pp. 253-4.

²⁴Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, p. 578.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 579.

²⁶Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky, or Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1863), p. 28.

²⁷*Ibid.*

- ²⁸ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* (New York: Menrosyne Publishing Company, 1857), p. 40.
- ²⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, pp. 579-80.
- ³⁰ Soloman Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 213.
- ³¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, p. 574.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Charles Lanham, *Haw-Ho-Noo; or Records of a Tourist* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Company, 1850), p. 141.
- ³⁴ Soloman Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, pp. 217-8.
- ³⁵ William H. Holcombe, "Sketches of Plantation Life," *The Knickerbocker Magazine*, 57, No. 6, (1861), p. 625.
- ³⁶ Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, pp. 359-60.
- ³⁷ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, p. 575.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 576.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 577.
- ⁴⁰ Guion G. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), p. 551.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 552.
- ⁴² Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, pp. 576-7.
- ⁴³ Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations In Our Southern States*, p. 355.
- ⁴⁴ John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Slaves," *Journal of Negro History*, 20, (1935), p. 332
- ⁴⁵ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of Charles Ball* (Lewiston: John Shugert, 1836), pp. 270-1.
- ⁴⁶ Guion G. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, p. 556.
- ⁴⁷ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, p. 569.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 571.
- ⁴⁹ Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in Occasional Residences and . . . Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Company, 1826), p. 139.
- ⁵⁰ Emily P. Burke, *Reminiscences of George* (Oberlin: James M. Fitch, 1850), p. 121.
- ⁵¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, p. 567.
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- ⁵⁴ Joseph H. Ingraham, *The Southwest: By A Yankee* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), p. 54.
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- ⁵⁶ Edward S. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United State of North America from April 1833 to October 1834* (London: John Murray, 1835), p. 252.
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- ⁵⁸ Emily P. Burke, *Reminiscences of Georgia*, p. 64.
- ⁵⁹ Joe G. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Thomas Morans Sons, Inc., 1963), p. 131.

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- ⁶² Guion G. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, p. 551.
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- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
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- ⁸⁶ John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 55.
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⁹⁷ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden* (Cincinnati, 1846), p. 25.

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