

The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860

*David K. Wiggins**

Most of the earliest studies done on Southern plantation life portrayed slaves as people without a culture, without philosophical beliefs, and without educational instruments of their own.¹ Historians often viewed slaves as barbarians to be civilized; as perpetual children at best, and animals at worst. As such, it was assumed that slaves held no strong values or convictions and that they were without a coherent culture or social organization of their own. To suggest that slaves were capable of molding or fashioning their own particular life-style was inconceivable. The more current research, however, has altered our perceptions of what the “peculiar institution” was really like.² Many scholars now assert that slaves were capable of creating their own “unique cultural forms” largely free from the control of whites. However dehumanizing the plantation became for slaves, their struggle for survival never became so severe that it destroyed their creative instincts or prevented them from establishing their own personal way of life. The distinguishing elements of their culture—superstitions, religion, recreation, music, folktales, and language—allowed the slaves a degree of individual autonomy and self-respect. While slaves recognized the superior power which whites held as a group, they resisted the total assimilation of white culture.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether slaves living on Southern plantations developed a sense of community among themselves or generally identified with the interests and particular customs of their master.³ More specifically, through an examination of the play of slave children between the years 1820 and 1860, this study attempts to determine whether slaves displayed an awareness of their uniqueness and separate identity as a group. Did members of the slave quarter fashion a society within a society or were they a culturally destitute group of individuals incapable of transcending such a con-

*Mr. Wiggins is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

trolled institution? What is immediately apparent from this analysis is that play was essential to slave children because it was one means through which they learned the values and mores of their parents' world. Thus play became a means by which cultural traits were preserved from one generation to the next. Like all young people, slave children liquidated some of their problems and relieved themselves of worries and anxieties by talking about and dramatizing the things which disturbed them. Through play, slave children were also able to realize a much needed sense of community not only with other children of the plantation but with the adult slaves as well. Most importantly, it is apparent from this research that members of the slave quarter community generally viewed themselves as a familial group, with similar life-styles, similar concerns and problems, and a common need to stay together no matter the circumstances. Despite individual suspicions and hostilities, as a group, slaves recognized each other as a distinct society with a common historical experience and a common philosophical approach to the world. They were not a culturally rootless people but a vibrant group of individuals who created an energetic slave quarter community characterized by black solidarity not help-less dependency.

It should be stated at the outset that the evidence for this study is based largely on the first series of slave narratives edited by George P. Radwick.⁴ This nineteen volume work, sixteen of which contain interviews prepared by the Federal Writers Project between 1936 and 1938, has some inherent problems in it. Since approximately two-thirds of the slaves were eighty or more years of age at the time they were interviewed, not only is there a concern about failing memories but also the question of whether longevity was the result of unusually good rather than typical treatment as slaves. Most of them were also recalling the experiences of their childhood, a period before the worst features of slavery were normally felt, and were likely, therefore, to give a more favorable picture of the institution. In addition, the biases, procedures, and methods employed by the predominately Southern white interviewers can be justly criticized. On the other hand, these narratives, as muddled and contradictory as they are, represent the voices of the inarticulate masses that scholars are always bemoaning. In spite of their imperfections, they are not much different from other types of historical sources. Historians simply have to use caution and discrimination when using the interviews. And naturally they should make use of all the skepticism their trade has taught them if they expect to come up with an honest interpretation. The narratives are certainly a most valuable piece of information on black history in America and should not be neglected. They contain evidence and answers for just about every kind of question that could be asked about life under slavery. For this particular study on the play of slave children they are the single best source available.

Slave children held a rather precarious position in the plantation community. For six days a week while their parents were in the fields toiling under the hot

sun or attending to chores in the “big house,” slave children were generally left alone to raise one another. Exempted from routine labor until sometimes as late as fourteen or fifteen years old, a certain portion of the slave child’s early life was spent in nurturing those younger than themselves and performing such chores as carrying water to the field hands, cleaning up the yards, fetching wood, tending the family garden, and feeding the livestock. The slave children’s existence, however, was not all work and no play. On the contrary, when not engaged in their light tasks, they spent much of their time in the simple pleasures of eating, conversing, and playing with their companions.

Hardly anything was more enjoyable for the older slave children than roaming the fields and woods within the borders of their home plantation. Like all young people, slave children loved to explore the world around them. It helped them to discover their particular strengths and weaknesses and enabled them to cope with situations and events appropriate to their size and stamina. Acie Thomas spent much of his childhood roaming over the “broad acres” of his master’s plantation with other slave children. “They waded in the streams, fished, chased rabbits and always knew where the choicest wild berries and nuts grew.”⁵ “On Sundays we’d strike out for the big woods and we’d gather our dresses full of hickory, walnuts, and berries,” recalled Fannie Yarbrough from Texas. “I was jes’ lying’ here dreamin’ ‘bout how we use to go to the woods every spring and dig the maypop roots.”⁶

The younger children did not have the privilege of wandering about the plantation. During the day parents expected their younger offspring to restrict their play activities to within the borders of the plantation nursery, slave quarters, or “big house,”⁷ Estrella Jones said the younger children on her master’s Georgia plantation were allowed to play anytime “as long as they didn’t wander away from the quarters.”⁸ It was much the same way on Ann Hawthorne’s plantation in Texas. “We done our playing around that big house,” recalled Hawthorne, “but that front gate we musn’t go outside dat.”⁹

The children frequently had the opportunity to visit their peer group on neighboring plantations. Parents usually did not mind if their children travelled to a nearby plantation, as long as they returned before nightfall. The slave children living on smaller plantations were especially anxious to make these excursions, since it was often the only chance they had to play with children of their own age group. “The patteroles never bothered the children any,” remembered the Arkansas slave Allen Johnson. “And there wasn’t any danger of them running off. It was all right for a child to go in the different quarters and play with one another during the daytime just so they got back before night.”¹⁰

Older slave boys, and less frequently the girls, willingly contributed to the

welfare of their family by hunting and fishing with their fathers during the evening hours. Exemption from field labor at night gave fathers and their children an opportunity to augment their diet by trapping small game and catching fish in nearby streams. They realized a much needed feeling of self-worth by adding delicacies to the family table. Often precluded by their masters from contributing to their families material welfare, slaves relished the chance to hunt and angle for food. Maybe most importantly, slave men found these two activities particularly satisfying because it allowed them the opportunity to teach their children the intricacies involved in hunting and fishing. There were not many activities in the plantation community where slave fathers and their children could share in the excitement of common pursuits. They both enjoyed the camaraderie and spirit that characterized these occasions. There was nothing quite like sitting around a blazing fire relating the tales of the phantom-like raccoon or the sixteen-foot catfish that got away. "My old daddy partly raised his chilluns on game," remembered Louise Adairs of North Carolina. "Mighty lot of fun when we could go with em."¹¹

Like that of most young people, the play of slave children consisted of both traditional games passed down from the older to younger children and those improvised on the spot. Phyllis Petite of Texas said they used to play a game called "skeeting" when the lake would freeze over in the winter time. "No, I don't mean skating," recalled Petite. "That's when you got iron skates and we didn't have them things. We just get a running start and jump on the ice and skeet as far as we could go, and then run some more."¹² An ex-slave from Tennessee remembered playing a game they called "Smut." "We played it just like you would with cards only we would have grains of corn and call them hearts and spades, and so forth and go by the spots on the corn."¹³ Charlie Davenport played a variety of the more traditional games on his Mississippi plantation. "Us played together in de street what run de length o' de quarters," remembered Davenport. "Us tho'owed horse shoes, jumped poles, walked on stilts, an' played marbles."¹⁴ Chana Littlejohn played mumble peg, hop skotch, and "jumpin' de rope" when she was growing up on her small North Carolina plantation.¹⁵

The most popular group activities of the slave children, especially the girls, were "ring games" or "ring dances," accompanied by a variety of songs and riddles. There were infinite variations in these games, but the general procedure was to draw a ring on the ground, ranging from fifteen to thirty feet in diameter; depending on the number of children engaged in the dancing ring. The participants would congregate within the ring and dance to different rhythmic hand clappings.¹⁶

Often during their ring games the children would berate the whites in song:

My old mistress promised me,

Before she dies she would set me free.
Now she's dead and gone to hell
I hope the devil will bum her well.¹⁷

Or they would comment on their particular fears and anxieties:

Run nigger, run.
De patteroll git you!
Run nigger, run.
De patteroll come!
Watch nigger, watch.
De patteroll trick you!
Watch nigger, watch.
He got a big gun!¹⁸

Many of the games played by children of the, slave quarters had definite educational implications. Through the playing of games, slave children were often able to learn simple skills of literacy. "I learned some of the ABC's in playing ball with the white children," remembered Mattie Fannen of Arkansas.¹⁹ Anna Parkes, who lived on a large plantation in Georgia, remembered nothing about special games except "Ole Hundred." "Us would choose one and that one would hide his face against a tree while he counted to a hundred. Then he would hunt for all the others. They would be hiding while he was counting. We learned to count a playing Ole Hundred."²⁰

Much of the life of slave children consisted of role-playing and re-enacting those events which were most significant for them. Like all young people they wished to be grown-up and yearned to be wanted, needed, and a useful part of the grown-up world. It was natural for them to recreate that world using themselves as the leading characters. There were several distinguishing features about the imitative play of slave children. First, they did not necessarily re-enact those events found most enjoyable by the adult slaves. Second, they normally re-enacted events they had witnessed and heard of rather than experienced. Third, they usually imitated the social events of their own people and not those of the planters' family. Last and perhaps most important, the evidence strongly suggests that slave children attempted to relieve particular anxieties and fears through the medium of imitative play. By re-enacting certain events they attempted to master specific problems which they were not able to resolve realistically.

Slave children were not necessarily unique in their imitative play, but rather in the social events they chose to emulate. The frequency with which they conducted simulated church activities, funerals and auctions, subtly shows the importance that slaves attached to these three "cultural affairs." Benny Dillard, who lived on a Georgia plantation that contained over fifty slaves, remembered "the best game of all was to play like it was big meeting

time . . . We would have make believe preachin' and baptism'. When we started playing like we were baptizing them we threwed all we could catch right in the creek, clothes and all, and ducked them."²¹ Dinah Perry of Arkansas remembered how they made arrangements for a grand funeral. "We marched in a procession singing one of our folks funeral hymns," recalled Perry. "We stopped at the grave under the big magnolia tree by the gate, and my sister Nancy performed the ceremony."²² Abe Livingston of Texas remembered playing the game of "Auction" on his "Massa's" plantation. One of the children would become the auctioneer and conduct a simulated slave sale.²³

Two games which were played repeatedly by slave children were different variations of "Hiding the Switch" and "No Bogeyman Tonight." In the first activity the players hunted for a switch that had been concealed by one of the children. Whoever finds it runs after the others attempting to hit them. In the latter game one of the children assumes the role of an evil spirit and attempts to frighten the others. The girls found these games as popular as the boys. Julia Banks of Texas said they used to "get switches and whip one another. You know after you was hit several times it didn't hurt much."²⁴ Rachel Harris of Arkansas remembered playing "No Bogeyman Tonight" with the white children. "One would catch the others as they ran from behind big trees. Then whoever he caught would be the boogerman, till he caught somebody else."²⁵

One historian of slavery feels these two particular games were means through which children assisted themselves in coping with their fear of "whippings" and evil spirits.²⁶ This is certainly a plausible explanation. Slave children who had witnessed the "floggings" of their parents or heard the frightening stories of ghost-like "spirits" could be expected to engage repeatedly in these games if it assisted them in lessening their fears. But this is only one of the possible interpretations. In these two games the children appeared to represent to themselves concretely those puzzling events they did not actually experience. The children may have been exploring their innermost feelings and emotions through a graphic representation. Or they may have been overtly "going over" two bewildering events in an attempt to confirm a vague memory. In other words, there was a need to physically re-enact "whippings" and "ghost stories" in order that their obscure features could be remembered more easily. Finally, slave children possibly participated in these two games simply for the excitement and sudden fear they wrought. Like most children they found a certain satisfaction in voluntarily exposing themselves to dangerous situations and inflicting what Roger Callois calls "a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind."²⁷

Slave children played a variety of different ballgames. One of the distinctive features of these games was their simple organization; which was no doubt part of the reason why children of the slave quarters found them so popular.

Like their white counterparts, there were very few rules in their ballgames. Simplicity of this type was necessary because of the slave children's personal level of social maturity and their inability to continually acquire "sporting" accoutrements. "Shinny was de thing dat I like best," reminisced Hector Godbold of South Carolina, "just had stick wid crook in de end of it en see could I knock de ball wid dat."²⁸ Tom Johnson, also of South Carolina, "played lots of games, like roly hole. There are two holes and you try to roll a ball in one hole."²⁹ Hanna Davidson of Kentucky remembered playing the game of "Anti-Over." Six of us would stay on one side of the house and six on the other side," recalled Davidson, "then we'd throw the ball over the roof. If you'd catch it you'd run around to the other side and hit somebody then start over."³⁰

Older slave boys often mentioned playing "baseball." The available evidence does not specify the rules that were used or the number of players that made up a team. In all probability the games they usually played were the various modifications of "rounders" and "townball" engaged in by white Southerners.³¹ The most popular game of these boys throughout the South was marbles. It was a game that required very little playing gear. A match could be arranged anytime two boys came together who were anxious to demonstrate their "shooting" abilities. The playing of marbles, furthermore, appeared to be one activity in which slave boys could experience a temporary feeling of "power." The collection of marbles was one instance in which they could acquire objects of material worth; no matter their monetary value. "Us boys played marbles," recalled James Southall of Tennessee. "I got to be a professional. I could beat em all."³² Charles Coles of Maryland said that he "had many marbles and toys that poor children had then" and that his "favorite game was marbles."³³

Slave boys, and less frequently the girls, challenged members of their peer group to impromptu contests that would test their physical prowess. They delighted in seeing who could run the fastest, jump the highest, throw the farthest, swim the longest, and lift the heaviest objects. "Athletic" accomplishments were a source of great pride for slave children. The ability to perform well in physical contests usually guaranteed them the respect of their impressionable young playmates. One of the fastest ways for them to attain a degree of status and the recognized leadership of their peer group was to be successful on the playing field. "Because of my unusual strength and spirit I would let none of them beat me at any game," remembered Robert Ellett of Virginia. "I was best of the young boys on the plantation."³⁴ Sam Stewart, who lived on a large plantation in North Carolina, recalled that the little boys "near my own age were playmates and companions and accepted me as their natural leader and chief. By the time I was eight years old, I could shoot, ride, fish, and swim with anyone."³⁵

The more sportive slave boys enjoyed placing a wager or two in their game playing. They were especially fond of shooting craps and playing cards, but would place bets on just about any activity that was conducive to gaming. To elude the eyes of their virtuous parents as well as those of their concerned master they often had to resort to the woods or some other secluded spot. Not having much to gamble with their stakes consisted of any objects they attached special importance to. William Ballard and the other slave children used to play hide-the-switch, marbles, and several other games on their South Carolina plantation. But “later on some of de nigger boys started going to the woods to play cards and gamble.”³⁶ “De only game I ever played wuz marbles,” remembered John Smith of North Carolina. “I played fer watermelons. We didn’t hab any money so we played fer watermelons.”³⁷

The play of slave girls differed in some respects from that of the boys. There were very few games the girls did not play or at least attempted to play during their childhood.³⁸ The activity they most frequently played was “jump rope.”³⁹ A great deal of their time was spent playing with “dolls” and keeping “house.”⁴⁰ Maybe most importantly, slave girls had a particular fondness for dances, parties, and other social entertainments. They repeatedly expressed, like other members of the slave quarters, a desire to be among their own people engaged in group activities. In examining the girls’ various play activities, there comes through a sense of mutual affection and kinship-like spirit among all the slaves. Phoebe Anderson of Georgia remembered that she would “go fishin down on the creek and on Saturday night we’d have parties in the woods and play ring plays and dance.”⁴¹ Caroline Bevis of South Carolina said that when she was a little girl she “would play any over in the moonlight but enjoyed most the parties and dances on the plantation.”⁴²

Slave children spent very little of their leisure time in combative activities. There are occasional references to boxing and wrestling in the slave narratives, but the children generally preferred to engage in more gentle pursuits.⁴³ Physical abuse of one child by another was considered unjustifiable and a veritable threat to the general well-being of the group. Like their parents, slave children apparently viewed themselves as a distinct body with common concerns, problems, and life styles. They recognized the need to remain together as a familial group no matter the particular circumstances. The point here is not that slave children never fought each other, but rather that they understood that their mutual advantage required them to care for each other and to refrain as much as possible from foolish “skirmishes.”⁴⁴ John Brown stated that he and his friends saw no wrong in cheating, lying, and fighting “so long as we were not acting against one another.”⁴⁵ Susan Davis Rhodes, who lived as a slave in North Carolina said that “People in my day didn’t know book learning but dey studied how to protect each other, and didn’t believe in fightin’ each other.”⁴⁶

One of the significant features about the play of slave children is the apparent absence of any games that required the elimination of players. Even the various dodge ball and tagging games played by the children contained designed stratagem within their rule structure that prevented the removal of any participants. Despite the personal animosities and jealousies that individual slave children might have had towards one another, there seemed to be a mutual affection between the mass of children that precluded the elimination of any players in their games. One of the fears in their daily life was that members of their family—father, mother, brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews—could be indiscriminately sold or hired out at anytime. Possible separation from their loved ones was frequently a source of great uneasiness and apprehension for those slave children who were old enough to realize their social position in the plantation community.⁴⁷ Their “frivolous” play life was one area of their existence in which they could be assured that their companions would not be suddenly removed or excluded from participating. The lack of elimination in the slave children’s games, moreover, can possibly be accounted for by some basic values generally held by members of the slave quarter community. A “survival of the fittest” or “natural selection” mentality did not normally characterize slave society. At the center of the slaves’ social philosophy was a necessary belief in cooperation and community spirit. There was little room in the slaves’ world for ruthless rivalry, unrestrained competition, and unprincipled domination. Personal conquest and individual success was certainly prevalent in their society but was considered much less important for survival than the belief in group solidarity and a sense of loyalty to fellow members of the slave quarter. Ma Eppes of Alabama remembered playing “Snail Away Rauley” all the time. “Us would hol’ han’s an’ go ‘roun’ in a ring, gittin’ faster an’ faster an dem fell down was not outa de game but would have, tah ge’ back in line.”⁴⁸ Moses Davis of Arkansas recalled that in playing “Ant y Over” they “would get six on one side of de house and six on de other. When somebody got hit we would just start the game over again.”⁴⁹

Occasionally the slave children were permitted to continue their play at night. They longed for the close of day because it meant they could frolic with their parents and the other adult slaves—free from the continual surveillance of the planter and his family. The children loved to congregate outside of the cabins and listen to some “learned” old slave relate tales of Africa; gather around a blazing fire to dance and sing songs; accompany the more gamesome men on raccoon and possum hunts; travel with their family to a nearby plantation for a dance or corn-shucking’ or simply stay around the slave quarters and “cut capers” with the other children. Pet Franks of Mississippi remembered playing “Hide-de switch” and “Goose and Gander” in the day time. “Den at nighttime when de moon was shinin’ big an’ yaller, us’d play ole molly bright. Dat was what us call de moon. Ud’d make up stories ‘bout her.”⁵⁰ Jane Simpson, who lived on a small plantation in Missouri, recalled that “de

white folks didn't want to let de slaves have no time for der self, so de old folks used to let us children run and play at night, while de white folks sleep and dey watch de stars to tell about what time to call us in and put us to bed, 'fore de white folks know we was out."⁵¹

Slave children also eagerly looked forward to Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and various holidays because it was an opportunity for them to participate in family and community activities or merely play with their friends and relatives. These moments were prized by all members of the slave quarter not simply as periods free from labor but as times when slaves could be with one another. These were the most ideal times for children to become familiar with the structure, the style, and the leading personalities of their community. Through their mutual experiences they learned the ways in which their community operated, how it made common decisions, organized secretive events, provided for common recreational needs, and generally organized itself to be as independent as possible from the personal whims and strictures of their overseer or master. Unable to spend extended periods of time with the children because of a heavy work schedule, slave parents took advantage of these moments to play with and talk to their children. These interactions provided special meaning to the children because it was extremely important in determining their personality and their particular way in which they viewed the world. "One of de recreations us chilen had in dem days was candy pullings at Christmas times," reminisced Hemp Kennedy of Mississippi. "We all met at one house an' tol' ghost stories, sung plantation songs, as' danced de clog while de candy was cookin'."⁵² "Christmastime was when slaves had their own fun," said the Georgia slave Jefferson Franklin Henry. "They frolicked, danced, run races, played games, and visited around, calling it a good time."⁵³

Slave children not only played among themselves but frequently participated in the same games and played together in a relative degree of social equality with the white children of the plantation. Some planters did attempt to prevent their children from playing with the children of the slave quarters for fear that they would be "corrupted."⁵⁴ Their attempts to circumscribe the play of their children, however, usually proved futile. The white children of the plantation earnestly sought the friendship of the slave children their own age and thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to frolic in the quarters. In fact, through the playing of games, slave and white children would often develop friendships that lasted a lifetime (although those relationships usually only existed between the white children and one or two blacks who became body servants or occupied some special station in the plantation community.) "I belonged to ole Massa Harry ebber sin' he was married," recalled an ex-slave from Virginia. "He an' me was jes' about of an age, n' tended him all his life. I allers 'tended to him when he was a boy, am' went out hunting, shooting, and trapping wid him all over the place."⁵⁵ "I hunted and fished with the slave chil-

dren,” responded Edward Pollard, the son of a Virginia slaveholder. “I have wrestled on the banks of the creek with him, and with him as my trusty lieutenant I have filibustered all over my old aunts dominion.”⁵⁶

Much of the leisure time of slave and white children was spent in getting into mischief and helping each other out of difficult situations. Hand in hand they would go about pilfering the plantation hen house and performing no small amount of reciprocal trading. There are also numerous examples of white children helping their slave playmates avoid punishments or assisting them in a variety of subtle ways. “Me and young master had the good times,” recalled Jack Cauthern of Texas. “He was nigh my age and we’d steal chickens from old Miss and go down in the orchard and barbecue ‘em.”⁵⁷ Matilda Daniel said they sure did some “devilish” things on her Alabama plantation. “We hid red pepper in old Black Bob’s chewin’ bacca, an’ you ought to seed de faces he made. Den we tuken a skunk dat us little white an’ black debils katched an’ turn him loose in de slave quarters.”⁵⁸

Notwithstanding those occasional friendships, a caste system frequently operated within the “play world” of the slave and white children just as it did in the everyday affairs of the plantation community. Older slave children in particular were often forced to assume a subservient position in their game playing. Many of the white children of advanced age were anxious to assume their position as “superiors.” Candis Goodwin of Virginia remembered that when the war first started they would “play Yankee an’ Federates, ‘course de whites was always the ‘Federates. They’d take us black boys prisoners an’ make b’lieve dey was gonna cut our necks off; guess dey got dat idea f’om dere fathers.”⁵⁹ Amelia Thompson Watts, who lived on a relative’s Louisiana cotton plantation in the summer of 1832, described a scene that also illustrates the cast distinction between slave and white children:

One of the negro boys had found a dead chicken and we arranged for a funeral. The boys made a wagon of fig branches, and four of them as horses. We tied a bow of black ribbon around the chicken’s neck and covered him with a white rag and then marched in a procession singing one of the quaint negro hymns, all the white children next to the hearses marching two by two, and the colored children following in the same order.⁶⁰

Many white children loved nothing better than to torment the slave children, and even adults, by simulating the role of an overseer or master of a large plantation in their imitative play. Solomon Northup, who labored on a number of Southern plantations, recalled the ten or twelve-year-old son of a despotic slaveholder who had no trouble in picking up all his father’s habits. “Mounted on his pony,” said Northup, “he often rides into the field with his whip, playing the overseer, greatly to his father’s delight.”⁶¹ Frederick Law Olmstead, while traveling through Texas, observed the play of a planter’s son which illustrates this point:

This gentleman had thirty or forty negroes and two legitimate sons. One was an idle young man. The other was already at eight years old a swearing tobacco chewing young bully and ruffian. We heard him whipping his puppy behind the house and swearing between the blows, his father and mother being at hand. His tone was an evident imitation of his fathers mode of dealing with his slaves. 'I've got an account to settle with you; I've let you go about long enough; I'll teach you who's your master; there; go now God damn you, but I haven't got through with you yet.'⁶²

Slave children were not always on the receiving end of such foolish mockings and harassments. Those children of the slave quarters who were clever enough to outwit the white children did not hesitate to return personal insults. Some planters even encouraged these rebukes, because they didn't always appreciate seeing their children become tyrants. A slave from Tennessee recalled how they "teased" the white children:

They didn't allow us to even look at the white chillen. I 'member we used to slip and play with 'em anyway. About a mile from the house there was a lane, and we would git all the chillen together and play with them down in that lane where our white folks couldn't see us' then we would make 'em skit home! We say 'ya'll gwan now, here come the white folks; he, he, he. We would drive 'em home and tell 'em ole master would whip them if they saw us with 'em . . . Next morning we would go and get 'em and play with 'em again. We would tell 'em we was better'n than they was, he, he, he.'⁶³

This feeling of confidence which shows through the account, was a theme throughout the slave narratives and the other black folklore. In fact, slave children normally thought of themselves not only as morally superior to white children but as superior on a physical level as well. Whereas most slave children thought of themselves as skillful "athletes," their white counterparts were generally felt to be less competent physically, unable to dance, run, jump, or throw! The white children were so inept they were hardly able to tie their own shoes or comb their own hair. "We was stronger and knowed how to play, and the white children didn't," recalled Felix Heywood of Texas.⁶⁴ Remembering life under slavery in South Carolina, Josephine Bauchus concluded that "white folks couldn' dance no more den dey can dance dese days like de colored people can."⁶⁵

One of the most striking differences between the play of slave and white children was the type of equipment used in their game playing. In contrast to the planters' children who were normally able to purchase their own toys, the children of the slave quarters either made their own playthings, obtained various toys that their fathers handcrafted, or acquired "hand-me-downs" that the white children no longer found useable. Hanna Davidson of Kentucky said that "the kids nowadays can go right to the store and buy a ball to play with. We'd have to make a ball out of yarn and put a sock around it for cover."⁶⁶ Sam McAllum of Mississippi didn't "recollect any playthings" they had " 'cept a ball my young marster gimme."⁶⁷ Letita Burwell, the daughter of a Kentucky planter, remembered they "early learned that happiness consisted in dispensing it, and found no greater pleasure than saving our old dolls, toys,

beads, bits of cake, or candy for the cabin children, whose delight at receiving them richly repaid us.”⁶⁸

The white children of the plantation engaged in many of the same activities as their slave counterparts. For example, Lanty Blackford, the son of a wealthy Virginia planter, played with his friends in a variety of activities that Brian Sutton-Smith refers to as central-person games.⁶⁹ These are games in which one child plays against the rest of the group. Some of the more popular ones among slave and white children were different variations of “Goosie, Goosie, Gander,” “Pig in the Pin,” “I Spy,” “Base,” “Hide-and-Seek,” “Blind Man’s Bluff,” and “Fox and Hounds.” In addition to these games the white children in Blackford’s neighborhood also engaged in some organized activities as boating, swimming, fishing, hunting, and wrestling. The children, furthermore, often reenacted different situations from Southern life in their play. They were particularly fond of participating in mock “military drills,” “court trials,” and “political debates.”⁷⁰ Interestingly enough, what was apparently lacking in the white children’s play world were any games of chance. Assuredly, the admonitions they received from their parents quite possibly discouraged the children from playing these games or at least discussing them openly. Still, in comparison to the slave children they seemed to favor those games which principally required the skill and effort of the performers.⁷¹ The emphasis on these particular kinds of games seems to reflect the particular cultural focus of the white Southerners more than anything else. The research on play has shown that games which emphasize physical prowess are usually found in those cultures which recognize that effort and individual initiative are the main determinants in achieving success.⁷² The planters of the Old South certainly embraced these values. Consequently, through the playing of those games that required a degree of physical prowess the white children of the plantation were possibly learning that the outcome of particular endeavors was a result of the amount of effort that was expended and that other factors were basically superfluous. On the other hand, slave children could be expected to find gambling and other games of chance particularly enticing. Survival to the slave was not necessarily contingent upon the skill and effort one put forth, but rather on a variety of other uncontrollable factors—not the least of which was indiscriminate luck.⁷³

The white children of the plantation not only placed a great deal of emphasis on the amount of effort expended in their games, but were also concerned about the specific manner in which they were played. In many instances they seemed more interested in the mode of play rather than in the outcome of the game itself. In contrast to the slave children, the limited goals of their games were often subordinated to the means by which they were to be achieved. In other words, white children were not simply concerned about the effort expended in their games, but found it necessary that they achieve their desired results in a deliberately stylized way.⁷⁴

It is evident that slave children, like their parents, viewed themselves as a special kind of people and took pride in expressing their peculiar style in many of their play activities. It was often a way to assure themselves of their own self-worth, the medium through which they established life-long friendships, and the manner in which their individuality was asserted and maintained. Their play life consisted almost solely of informal and often times improvised games that could be arranged any time two children came together who were anxious to have some fun. Whether deliberate or not slave children often learned from each other how to play games. Generally left alone to raise each other, slave children typically had ultimate control as to what they did or did not play. Despite occasional attempts to restrict them from playing with their own children, Southern slaveholders did not normally concern themselves with the types of activities played by slave children. The majority of "proprietors" did allow their slaves a somewhat extended childhood in hopes they would attain the degree of health necessary to become "efficient" workers. However, this prolonged infancy did not include any formal program of games or exercise designed to improve the fitness of the slave children. In fact, the majority of planters generally did not pay much attention to the slave children's physical well being until they were old enough to join the regular plantation work force. In their way of thinking, freedom from strenuous labor was all that was needed to insure a "hearty" adult slave. Paradoxically, exemption from work and opportunities for play were probably more influential in providing the ground work for a potentially more self-reliant and spirited adult slave.

Like most young people, slave children realized a great deal of pleasure from participation in various play activities. It was often the medium through which they learned the values and mores of the adult world. By simulating those events characteristic of the grown-up world slave children were able to understand the complicated world about them and capable of perceiving the patent differences that normally existed between a master and his servants. The evidence also suggests that through various play activities slave children were able to relieve themselves of the fear and anxiety that normally characterized the lives of most of the children. By participating in certain "amusements" they apparently attempted to overcome particular problems which they were not able to resolve realistically.

A theme that frequently appeared in the narratives was the feeling of black supremacy exhibited by many slave children in their various play activities. Apparently, only at a certain point in their lives did slave children come to realize fully that they were "servants" and that their white companions held a more exalted position in the plantation community. Many did not recognize the difference until they were separated from their white playmates and sent out to the fields or up to the "big house" to begin their life of labor. On some plantations the slave children learned when one of their family members was

suddenly sold or hired out; or when the planter or overseer precluded their parents authority in some way. Many slave children learned almost immediately because they might be forced to call a white baby “Young Massa” or “Young Misses.” Still others immediately recognized the difference when they were forced to assume an obsequious position in their game playing or were excluded from participating altogether. Quite possibly then, prior to their realization that they occupied an inferior position in the plantation community, slave children were unaware of the usual decorum that normally existed between the races and therefore were probably more inclined not to comply with the desires of their white playmates. Of course, simply sharing in the excitement of various play activities probably did much to create temporary feelings of equality and fellowship between the children. It is when people are mutually involved in uninhibited merrymaking that intrinsic differences are most often disguised. The joy and pleasantry of the moment possibly helped erase some of the disparities that existed between the children. Furthermore, slave children could assume almost any attitude they wished considering there were very few adults around to keep watch over their every move. In any event, whatever the reasons for the slave children’s feelings of superiority, they frequently thought of themselves as being more energetic dancers, better hunters, faster runners, and more imaginative in all their game playing. The white children were often portrayed simply as clumsy fools who were decidedly prosaic in their play activities.

Not only did slave children often exhibit a marked feeling of superiority but also realized a much needed sense of community with other slave members through various play activities. In fact, the joy they found in play seemed to be accounted for, more than anything else, by the group solidarity and fraternal spirit this activity brought forth. Their numerous play experiences were eagerly looked forward to by the slave children because it gave them opportunities to frolic and socialize with their peer group under conformable conditions. The fellowship attained during these occasions seems especially significant because it furnished individual slave children with a feeling of security they might not experience under any other circumstances. Moreover, the constant reinforcement, common language, and strong positive sanctions that normally characterized these events helped to succor the slave children in their struggle to discover their personal identities.

This did not mean that slave children ever felt any sense of community with the white children and their family. It is true that mutual enjoyment of various play activities did much to develop friendships among the children. But simply sharing in the excitement of popular pastimes was never influential enough to erase the intrinsic differences that existed between the children. To develop a true feeling of community requires at least a common life-style, common interests and problems, or a common philosophical approach to the world. It would be historically misleading to say that participating in several

of the same play activities was responsible for developing these sentiments between the children—even for a brief period of time. This is not to argue that mutual participation in play activities did not temporarily eliminate the usual propriety between the races; only that play was incapable of developing a sense of community between two people whose view of this world was so alien.

Finally, the singular style of the slave children's various games cuts deep into the heart of one of the basic differences between slave and white society—specifically their differing notions about the concepts of work and play. Planters seemed to think of play primarily in contrast to work, whereas the dichotomy between these two activities was not quite as discernable in slave society. Relatively speaking, Southern slaveholders, like many people in today's world, frequently judged the worthiness of individuals by the amount of effort they expended in their work. They viewed labor as being both necessary for survival and as a virtue in its own right. This did not mean that the Protestant work ethic characterized the Southern planters' personal value scheme. On the contrary, they realized that hard work was inevitable to achieve success but not if it meant the indiscriminate acquisition of wealth, excessive abstinence, or an unrealistic devotion to "one's calling." The Southern slaveholders certainly did enjoy "living it up." Their reputation as a fun loving and frolicsome society is basically an accurate one. On the other hand, most planters considered play as generally trifling in the sense that it was immaterial to survival, should be engaged in by gentlemen only in the most organized and refined fashion, and ought to be exclusive in nature and devoid of any frivolous public displays.

Slaves seem to have had a much different view of work and play than their masters. They certainly did not place the same kind of emphasis or judge the personal worth of individuals by the successful completion of their regular plantation tasks. The slaves' sense of accomplishment was identified with the family unit and measured primarily by the successful maintenance of the familial order of the household. They realized the necessity of working long and difficult hours during planting and harvesting seasons, but expected to work considerably less during other seasons. They did not understand the incessant need for labor and resisted what they felt was senseless work. In other words, work was generally not the basis for evaluating one's personal integrity and character of his being. Conversely, play was one activity where slaves could realize a certain degree of dignity and could affirm and sustain their unique existence. They could withstand bondage much more easily when allowed to participate with fellow slaves in a variety of different play activities.

Notes

1. See for example: Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Chase C. Mooney, *Slavery in Tennessee* (Westport, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1971); Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1918); James B. Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1964); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956); Charles S. Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933).
2. See for example: John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House, 1976); Leslie H. Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978).
3. The term "community" is defined in this study as a group of people who shared a common set of values and attitudes, familial social structure, and displayed a unique identity as a group.
4. George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 Vols., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).
5. Rawick, ed., Vol. XVIII, *Florida Narratives*, p. 328.
6. Rawick, ed., Vol. V, No. 4, *Texas Narratives*, p. 226.
7. If the younger children did not have older siblings mature enough to take care of them, they were looked after either by older cousins; one or two slaves too old to work in the fields, or some younger woman who was appointed the job. See for example: Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The Southwest By a Yankee*, 2 Vols. (London: Fisher and Company, 1842), II, p. 28; Nancy B. De Saussure, *Old Plantation Days: Being Recollections of Southern Life Before the Civil War* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1909), pp. 38-39; Louis B. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave. From Bondage to Freedom, The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: M. E. Maferkorn, 1897), p. 44; Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the years 1827 and 1828*, 3 Vols. (Edinburgh: Cadell and Co., 1829), III, p. 179; Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1856) p. 424; *John Houston Bills Diary*, July 30, 1853; Ralph J. Jones and Tom Landess, ed., "Portraits of Georgia Slaves," *Georgia Review*, 22:1 (1968), 126; *Plantation Book of 1857-58* in the James H. Hammond Papers; William H. Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston: Burnham, 1863), pp. 274-275.
8. Rawick, ed., Vol. XII, No. 2, *Georgia Narratives*, p. 34.
9. Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 2, *Texas Narratives*, p. 120.
10. Rawick, ed., Vol. IX, No. 4, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 64.
11. Rawick, ed., Vol. XIV, No. 1, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 245.
12. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 1, *Texas Narratives*, p. 239.
13. Fisk Collection, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945), p. 15.
14. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 2, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 36.
15. Rawick, ed., Vol. XV, No. 2, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 58.
16. The narratives are replete with examples of slave children engaging in "ring" dances. See for example: Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 2, *Texas Narratives*, p. 120; Vol. XIV, No. 1, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 95; Vol. X, No. 5, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 162; Vol. IV, No. 2, *Georgia Narratives*, p. 136; Vol. VII, No. 1, *Oklahoma Narratives*, pp. 98-99; Vol. III, No. 4, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 168; Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), p. 203.
17. Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), p. 447.
18. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 1, *Oklahoma Narratives*, p. 65.
19. Rawick, ed., Vol. XIX, No. 2, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 267.
20. Rawick, ed., Vol. XIII, No. 3, *Georgia Narratives*, p. 155.
21. Rawick, ed., Vol. XII, No. 1, *Georgia Narratives*, pp. 289-290.
22. Rawick, ed., Vol. X, No. 5, *Arkansas Narratives*, pp. 320-321,
23. Rawick, ed., Vol. V, No. 3, *Texas Narratives*, p. 24.

24. Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 1, *Texas Narratives*, p. 97.
25. Rawick, ed., Vol. IX, No. 3, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 181.
26. See Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community*, p. 184.
27. Caillois uses the term "ilinx" to describe these types of games. Interestingly, he suggests that as civilizations mature, these games, "lose their traditional dominance, are pushed to the periphery of public life, reduced to roles that become more and more modern and intermittent, if not clandestine and guilty, or are regulated to the limited and regulated domain of games." See Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), p. 97.
28. Rawick, ed., Vol. II, No. 2, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 146.
29. Rawick, ed., Vol. III, No. 3, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 62.
30. Rawick, ed., Vol. XVI, No. 5, *Kentucky Narratives*, p. 29.
31. For an excellent discussion and analysis of the evolution of baseball, see Robert K. Henderson, *Ball, Bat, and Bishop: The Origin of Ballgames* (New York: Rockport Press Inc., 1947), pp. 132-195.
32. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 1, *Tennessee Narratives*, p. 308.
33. Rawick, ed., Vol. XVI, No. 3, *Maryland Narratives*, p. 2.
34. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, p. 84.
35. Rawick, ed., Vol. XV, No. 2, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 322.
36. Rawick, ed., Vol. II, No. 1, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 28.
37. Rawick, ed., Vol. XV, No. 2, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 273.
38. See for example: Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 2, *Texas Narrative*, p. 120; Vol. VI, No. 1, *Alabama Narratives*, p. 211.
39. See for example: Rawick, ed., Vol. XV, No. 2, *North Carolina Narratives*, p. 68; Vol. III, No. 4, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 168; Vol. VIII, No. 2, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 248.
40. See for example: Rawick, ed., Vol. V, No. 4, *Texas Narratives*, p. 147; Vol. IV, No. 2, *Texas Narratives*, p. 223; Vol. VIII, No. 1, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 11.
41. Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 2, *Georgia Narratives*, p. 136.
42. Rawick, ed., Vol. II, No. 1, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 55.
43. See for example: Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interview with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, p. 84; John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, p. 641.
44. See for example: Israel Campbell, *Bond and Free: Or Yearnings for Freedom, From My Green Briar House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage and My Life in Freedom* (Philadelphia: By the author, 1861), p. 38; James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, An American Slave, Who was for Several Years a Driver of a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), p. 66; Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1831), pp. 160-163.
45. John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life; Sufferings and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave Now in England* (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), p. 83.
46. Rawick, ed., Vol. XI, *Missouri Narratives*, p. 284.
47. See for example: Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), p. 15; Benjamin Drew, Ed., *A North-Slide View of Slavery, The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), p. 30; Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (Lewiston, Pa.: 1836), pp. 15-22; Shippee, Lester B., ed., *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary, 1843-1844* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1968), pp. 69, 88-89; Elkanah Watson, *Men and Times of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1857), p. 69.
48. Rawick, ed., Vol. XI, No. 1, *Alabama Narratives*, p. 120.
49. Rawick, ed., Vol. IX, No. 3, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 167.
50. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 1, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 57.
51. Rawick, ed., Vol. II, No. 7, *Missouri Narratives*, p. 313.
52. Rawick, ed., Vol. VII, No. 2, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 85.
53. Rawick, ed., Vol. XII, No. 2, *Georgia Narratives*, p. 187.
54. Rawick, ed., Vol. VI, No. 1, *Alabama Narratives*, p. 103; Vol. VII, No. 2, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 26;

Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in American in 1798, 1799, and 1800* 2 Vols. (London: J. Harding, 1805), I, p. 436.

55. Catherine C. Hopley, *Life in the South: From the Commencement of the War. By a Blockaded British Subject*, 2 Vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1863, I, p. 54.

56. H. H. Farmer, *Virginia Before and During the War* (Henderson, Kentucky: By the Author, 1892), p. 63.

57. Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 1, *Texas Narratives*, p. 212.

58. Rawick, ed., Vol. VI, No. 6, *Alabama Narratives*, p. 103.

59. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, p. 109.

60. Amelia Thompson Watts, "A Summer on a Louisiana Cotton Plantation in 1832," in *Louise Taylor Pharr Book*.

61. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in January 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near Red River in Louisiana* (Buffalo: Derby, Orton, and Mulligan, 1857), p. 261.

62. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas: Or a Saddle Trip on the Southwestern Frontier: With a Statistical Appendix* (New York: Dix, Edwards, and Company, 1857), pp. 116-117.

63. Fisk Collection, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*, pp. 21-22.

64. Rawick, ed., Vol. IV, No. 2, *Texas Narratives*, p. 134.

65. Rawick, ed., Vol. II, No. 1, *South Carolina Narratives*, p. 22.

66. Rawick, Vol. XVI, No. 5, *Kentucky Narratives*, p. 29.

67. Rawick, Vol. VII, No. 2, *Mississippi Narratives*, p. 101.

68. Letita M. Burwell, *Plantation Reminiscences* (Kentucky, 1878), p. 4.

69. Launcelot Minor Blackford Diary, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid

72. John M. Roberts, Malcolm J. Arth, and Robert B. Bush, "Games in Culture," *American Anthropologist*, 61 (1959), 597-605; Stephen N. Miller, "The Playful, the Crazy, and the Nature of Pretense," in *The Anthropological Study of Human Play*, ed., Edward Norbeck (Houston: Rice University Studios, 60, No. 4, Summer 1974), 36; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, p.27.

73. For examples consult any volume of George P. Rawick's, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.

74. See for example: Letita M. Burwell, *Plantation Reminiscences*, p. 2; James B. Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How we Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (New York: F. Tennyson), p. 91; Nancy B. DeSaussure, *Old Plantation Days: Being Recollections of Southern Life Before the Civil War* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1909), pp. 38-39; Edward A. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York: Pudney and Russell, 1859), p. 50; John J. Wise, *The End of an Era* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1902), pp. 153-154.

