

*Slavery Remembered*

son put it best by saying, "Dey was all kinds of white folks . . . some of dem dat was poor would help you . . . but now and then they was a devil on earth."<sup>38</sup>

Anthony Dawson was rightly suspicious of all whites; for he knew that around white people, the slaves had to watch out for themselves and seize any opportunity to improve their situation. The plantation was the main theater of the slaves' lives, and there, through various means of resistance, they tried to alter their lot for the better.

small  
almost  
undetected

3.

### *Improving the Conditions of Life: Forms of Slave Resistance*

to accept without a reaction

North America's slaves did not passively accept treatment dictated by their masters. In the narratives, along with descriptions of the slaves' treatment and their feelings about it, there is a wealth of information testifying to a continual battle over the ground rules of plantation life. The slaves challenged some of the master's standards openly, struggled to subvert those that they could not overturn, and seized any opportunity that offered a means to improve their lives. In a thousand ways, ranging from subtle deception to bold defiance, they fought their owners. Many options, including successful revolution, were beyond the limits of possibility in the South; so the slaves used what tools they had in the arena closest at hand. Their resistance helped to shape the conditions of life on the plantation, and their wills often forced an improvement in those conditions.

Too often historians tend to define resistance by its extremes. The question, How did the slaves resist bondage? sometimes becomes, When did they stage violent revolutions? or worse, Why did they not revolt more often? To understand the slaves' resistance and assess its scope, one must accurately judge the possibilities open to them. Most former slaves interviewed for the narratives revealed that they had exhibited both a stubborn predisposition to resist and a sensible rejection of daring but hopeless action.

The slaves built a defiant mentality upon a sober appraisal of their situation. For example, one form of resistance which the

rebellious,  
insolent



## Slavery Remembered

former slaves often mentioned was running away; yet, the narratives make clear that for the great majority of slaves this course of action seemed totally impractical. "We knew we could run away, but what then?" asked a former slave. "[We] couldn't git away," explained another. Once caught, the runaway "was subjected to very harsh punishment." The odds did indeed weigh heavily against a slave fugitive. Held in ignorance, he had to travel great distances, usually at night, through rugged, unfamiliar territory guarded by patrollers and inhabited by the suspicious white majority. As one man said, the whites "had a 'greement'—both as a matter of law and custom—"to be on the watch for runaway niggers." They also had dogs that "would track you and all you got was a beating." Consequently, many slaves concluded that there was "no use tryin run off [because] they catch you an bring you back." Speaking for countless others, John White said, "I never tried it. . . I had whippings enough already."<sup>1</sup>

Probably a <sup>large</sup> substantial portion of those who pondered flight reassessed the odds and chose, instead, to slip off and hide in the woods. The large number of reported instances of this behavior constitutes one of the important surprises of the narratives. Hiding in the woods represented a highly significant form of resistance. Part of this significance lay in the fact that it demonstrated the practical bent of the slaves. The bondsman who hid reversed the unfavorable odds confronting the runaway. Instead of journeying through strange territory, he could lurk about in his own neighborhood and use familiar paths and places of concealment. Rather than venturing out alone surrounded by enemies, he enjoyed the support of his fellow slaves, who could provide food, clothing, and information under cover of night. Masters, knowing that the odds were against them, frequently elected not to organize a search but simply waited for the slave to return or to indicate the conditions of his return. Compared to a flight for freedom, hiding in the woods was potentially less rewarding but definitely more practical, more effective, and

## Improving the Conditions of Life

more likely to succeed. In short, hiding was more appropriate to actual conditions.

The slaves designed their resistance to meet those conditions and combat the masters' actual advantages, which were formidable. The key to white control was its pervasiveness—the encompassing nature of the watchful white community. Everywhere the slave turned, a white man hemmed him in. "The white man was the slave's jail," said one former slave, who had identified an important truth. Of all the slaveholding portions of the Western Hemisphere, the American South by the nineteenth century was the largest in geographical extent and had the highest ratio of whites to blacks. The South also had a relatively small concentration of large slave holdings, which meant that from plantation to plantation a comparatively large number of whites came in contact with and watched over the slaves. The preponderance of power was overwhelmingly in white hands, so much so that some privileges could be allowed without danger. "Mos' ever plantation kep' a man busy huntin' . . . all de time," observed Charlie Davenport, but one individual's access to a firearm did not heighten the danger of mass revolt. The white population enjoyed the safety of numbers.<sup>2</sup>

Facts such as these defined the boundaries of reasonable resistance. Because radical redefinitions of their condition were impossible, the South's slaves had to wage a contest at the margins of their enslavement. They could not, in normal circumstances, destroy slavery; so they set out to weaken it. This decision should not be confused with the idea of accepting one's situation. The slaves did not accept their bondage, but external power left them few options. Knowing that they could not make themselves free, the vast majority of slaves struggled, instead, to lessen the extent of their enslavement.

Resistance, then, represented a wide variety of actions whose purpose was to improve the slave's lot. In differing ways, individual bondsmen fought to restrict abuses and improve their treatment. Many concentrated on limiting or ending the beat-



### Slavery Remembered

ings so common to slavery. Others struggled to insulate some areas of life from the master's control and gain a measure of autonomy, or to undercut slavery and cheat the master out of the full value of his human property. Resistance covered a spectrum running from subtle forms of accommodation at one extreme, through secret collective opposition and overt confrontations with the master, to outright rebellion at the other extreme.

A broad definition of resistance coincides with the view taken by nineteenth-century southern slaveowners. To them the prime advantage of slave labor over free lay in the fact that slaves could be driven—"you could command them and *make* them do what was right." The slave by definition had no mind of his own; his will followed the master's will in all things, at least in theory. Free laborers could object and argue against orders, but the slave was required to be tractable, performing whatever the master directed. Commonly planters set minimum levels for work, such as three hundred pounds of cotton to be picked per day—a demanding task. Any labor assigned had to be performed or the slave paid the penalty. "Any slave . . . didn't done task," reported Gabe Lance, "they give 'em (with lash) . . . twenty-five to fifty . . . [and] less rations to boot!" To refuse to obey readily merited punishment; thus, the slaves' persistent and ubiquitous opposition constituted resistance in the true sense of the word.<sup>3</sup>

The varieties of slave resistance reflected the determination of people who were both stubborn and flexible, courageous and sly. The subtle and perceptive members of the slave community artfully developed skills of accommodation. This means of getting along with the master might seem a poor candidate for inclusion as resistance, but the slaves turned it to their advantage and used it to better their lot. Some built an advantageous relationship with the master by playing upon his likes and dislikes. The favored slave got away with many departures from plantation regulations because he knew how to charm or amuse the master. Others took care to present their case to the most

having or showing  
keenness of insight

### Improving the Conditions of Life

sympathetic white in authority, and skill in distinguishing marginal differences among whites seems to have been widespread. Playing the master off against the overseer, one woman in Mississippi, who had recently given birth, ran off after a whipping. When she came back, she went straight to her owner "and told him all about it," knowing that his concern for her and her child would seal the overseer's doom. In ten minutes the overseer was gone, leaving under a hail of curses. Another woman said, "Us most nigh allus tell de master" when the overseer became abusive, and some slaves even carried tales to whites who were not their owners. On Hagar Lewis's plantation the mistress regularly fed hungry blacks from other plantations, and the master prosecuted some of his neighbors for beating their slaves. Later during the war, the Yankees became a potentially sympathetic source to cultivate.<sup>4</sup>

hidden or secret

Another subterranean but crucial area of resistance consisted in secret group activities of the slaves. According to some of the individuals interviewed, the interplantation slave grapevine did exist. "We used to carry news from one plantation to the other I reckon," said Phyllis Petite, "'cause mammy would tell about things going on some other plantation and I know she never been there." Cato Carter illumined some of the mechanics of this means of communication by explaining that, in his district of Alabama, slaves used "field calls and other kinds of whoops and hollers, what had a meanin' to 'em" to learn when it was safe to visit and share food.<sup>5</sup>

Special calls or codes also protected meetings among slaves on the same plantation. When blacks learned that their plans for a secret gathering had been discovered, the phrase "weevils in the wheat" spread this intelligence to the others. To protect meetings while they were in session, the slaves stationed on the path a "raid fox" or decoy—one slave, well-practiced in avoiding the patrollers, who would lead them off in the wrong direction. If the meeting was an important one, the slaves might use



"niggers in relays from the trail to the meetin' place an' when the patrollers would show up, . . . the one farthest south would whistle like a bob-cat to warn the others."<sup>6</sup>

These meetings performed a very important function: they reinforced the mentality of resistance and strengthened the group identity of the slaves. Often the slaves met, not to plan some unique event, but simply to reaffirm the validity of their view of reality. Even those who felt they had a good master "want[ed] to git free and talk 'bout [things] in de quarters 'mongst [themselves]." By coming together in concealment, they helped make their secret lives and thoughts real, and thus gained strength to combat the master's propaganda. Often a white-controlled meeting occasioned a later, secret meeting whose purpose was, in effect, to set the record straight. White ministers, for example, generally hammered on the theme of obedience to one's master and mistress. After such services on Douglas Dorsey's plantation, "the driver's wife who could read and write a little would tell them that what the minister said 'was all lies.'" When a minister pressured slaves on William Adams's plantation into saying that they wanted the South to win the war, they quickly scheduled a countermeeting in the hollow to discuss their hopes for a northern victory. Other former slaves told of getting together in a cabin at night to sing, pray, and share their belief that "some day this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders." In thousands of such meetings, "everybody talk 'bout freedom."<sup>7</sup>

Out of these gatherings came a solidarity that led to common activities aimed against slavery. One of the most widespread practices of resistance was theft, or what might better be called the appropriation or reappropriation of forbidden goods. Over one hundred former slaves spoke in the narratives about regular thievery, but this number probably underrepresents by a large amount the frequency with which theft took place. Reports of theft occurred proportionately more often when the interviewer was black than when he or she was white; therefore, many former slaves probably refrained from telling about an

ordinary but much criticized event. Those who did tell about stealing agreed that it was common. Mrs. M. E. Abrams said, "We n' used to steal our hog ever sa'day night and take off to de gully whar us'd git him dressed and barbequed." Another former slave commented that it was "just natural for Negroes to steal."<sup>8</sup> Plantation theft took place so often that blacks and whites alike knew a familiar song on the subject:

Some folks say dat a nigger wont steal,  
I caught two in my corn field,  
One had a bushel,  
One had a peck,  
An' one had rosenears [roasting ears],  
Strung 'round his neck.  
  
Run nigger run,  
Patteroller ketch you,  
Run nigger run,  
Like you did de udder day.

Some former slaves had witnessed stealing so often that even as children they "would get together and laff about it," knowing that the joke was on the master and realizing that they must not breathe a word about late-night feasts. Because they recognized the ubiquity of theft and the difficulty of preventing it, some masters gave their slaves no more than "a little brushin'" when they caught the culprits. The former slaves described the pleasures of eating almost every kind of plantation produce—watermelons, eggs, chickens, sweet potatoes, hams, pigs, cattle, and corn. In addition, they admitted no guilt over taking "[what] they had worked for." "I don' think I done wrong," said Carter Jackson, "'cause the place was full of 'em [chickens]. We sho' earned what we et." To prevent detection, the slaves had evolved many strategies, from putting pepper in the dog's eyes to "clomp[ing]" the pig tight "by the snoot," in the words of Richard Carruthers, "so he won't squeal . . . while you knife him." Judging from the variety of these indications, appropriating goods was probably a common method of resistance.<sup>9</sup>



### Slavery Remembered

Similar gains in welfare for the slaves at the master's expense came from various forms of deception. The slaves had many ways of evading work and practiced them as relentlessly as the master labored to extend the work they did. One common stratagem was the shamming of sickness. Isaiah Green reported that his father, who was a valuable shoemaker, "beat ol' marster out 'o' bout fifteen years work. When he didn't feel like workin' he would play like he was sick an' ol' marster would git de doctor for him." This technique, which another slave said was used "often . . . to remain away from the field," probably worked best for the most valuable hands, whether skilled craftsmen or fertile women. As for the rest of his bondsmen, a master could simply refuse to allow rest or to call a doctor until the illness had become indisputable.<sup>10</sup>

A good deal of resting went on in the fields, however. Many slaves gained a brief respite by "lyin' in de corn row," but they had to remain alert for the return of the overseer. At cotton-picking time, those who felt overworked might avoid a whipping by sprinkling "the white sand of the fields on the dew soaked cotton and at the time it was weighed they were credited with more pounds than they had actually picked." Who can doubt that the careless, unintelligent labor by slaves, on which many travelers commented, was another way to lighten work's burden? Without much trouble the slaveowners could make their hands spend long hours at assigned tasks, but it was impossible to supervise each worker at all times and compel him to do his job skillfully. One planter admitted that slaves would "never do more than just enough to save themselves from being punished, and no amount of punishment [would] prevent their working carelessly and indifferently." By working below their peak efficiency, slaves were forcing a small improvement in the grueling, day-to-day pattern of labor.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of functional realism—a concentration on mundane but meaningful issues of plantation life—ran through the entire repertoire of resistance. It was the central theme of the

→ common, ordinary  
[78]

### Improving the Conditions of Life to take advantage of

slaves' relations with their masters. For the great majority of bondsmen, physical abuse stood out as the most galling and intolerable aspect of their exploitation. Again and again the former slaves evaluated owners in terms of whether they "whipped and slashed" or were prone to engage in other kinds of abuse. Accordingly, they directed most of their resistance toward stopping or limiting physical cruelty. Bitter arguments, tense contests of will, threats, physical violence—all served to deter whippings and beatings. Confronting their masters along an ascending scale of violence, the slaves directed their most vigorous resistance at the most oppressive slaveowners. As Beverly Jones put it, "Good masters had good slaves 'cause they treated 'em good," but "whar the ole master was mean an' ornery," his slaves proved also to be a troublesome and dangerous property.<sup>12</sup>

Though most resistance was directed against physical cruelty, a few slaves simply refused for personal reasons to take certain treatment and risked their lives in support of their determination. Many former slaves had heard of at least a few bondsmen who would not submit to the lash. The master stepped into unsafe territory or stood to lose valuable property if he tried to whip them. Other individuals sometimes reached a point at which they could not endure oppression any longer. Assailed by the patrollers, one young slave decided "dey was one time to die and he sta't to fight. He say he tired standin' so many beatin's, he jus can't stan' no mo." This man chose violent resistance but died as a result. Another former slave, Lewis Bonner, reported that his father, who had been whipped by the whites for laziness, suddenly broke and "just killed all of 'em he could."<sup>13</sup>

If harnessed and concentrated, such hatred could lead to revolt, but conditions in the South militated against it. The most notable insurrectionary incident described in the narratives focused, revealingly, on the alteration of plantation realities. A community of much abused slaves in Texas overturned the status quo on their own plantation. According to one of the slaves, William Moore, the master was "a terrible mean man"



who "jus' 'bout had to beat somebody every day to satisfy his cravin'." After a mounting quarrel with the owner, Moore and his mother ran to the woods and hid for two or three months. Then the other bondsmen learned that the Civil War had begun and that whites were "fightin' over us niggers." Promptly they "'clared to Marse Tom they ain't gwine be no more beatin's and we could come up and stay in our cabin and they'd see Marse Tom didn't do nothin.'" Armed with shotguns, the two biggest men on the plantation forced the master to send away five whites whom he had hired to come and restore order. From that point on the slaves were in control: "Marse Tom cuss and rare, but the niggers jus' stay in the woods and fool 'way they time. They say it ain't no use to work for nothin' all them days." When emancipation came, all the slaves left.<sup>14</sup>

Aggregate data drawn from the narratives can supplement the suggestive information provided by incidents like the one above. The former slaves either spoke about resistance in which they themselves engaged or described the actions of other slaves on the plantation. As table 3.1 shows, the various reports provide a large body of data on slave resistance. This listing almost certainly is incomplete, for the former slaves discussed resistance more freely with black interviewers than with white; but it remains substantial enough to be helpful.

For a number of reasons table 3.1 should not be regarded as a precise count of the relative frequency of different types of resistance. One hundred sixty-six of the events listed involved resistance by former slaves themselves. Since most of the people interviewed had been quite young during bondage, their actions would not cover the full range of activity by adult slaves. Furthermore, conditions in the South changed radically from the 1850s to the 1860s. Successful flight became both more possible and more attractive; thus, the overall reports of runaways were pushed upward by the unusual wartime situation. To reduce these sources of bias, table 3.2 has been constructed to focus

Table 3.1 Types of Resistance

Types of Resistance	Percentage	Number
Ran away	41.2	340
Hid in woods	20.3	168
Stole	15.5	128
Struck master, stayed	8.4	69
Struck master, ran	1.0	8
Verbal confrontation	5.0	41
Fought patrollers or other whites	3.6	30
Killed overseer or other whites	2.4	20
Revolted or planned revolt	0.6	5
Committed suicide	0.8	7
Other	1.2	10
Total	100.0	826

more carefully on the actions of adults and on types of resistance likely to occur in normal times.

Still, this listing does not reproduce exactly the character of resistance on the plantation. The former slaves probably tended to recall the unusual but striking events instead of giving a careful and proportional account of every kind of resistance. Arguments with the overseer might have been weekly or daily occurrences; yet, less frequent occasions when someone ran away probably lodged more firmly in the mind. When former slaves like Adeline Marshall told of a suicide who "done hang himself to 'scape he mis'ry," they probably came closer to giving a complete and exhaustive account of that type of resistance than did those who spoke about stealing, which a variety of evidence suggests was very common.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the most frequent kinds of resistance are probably underrepresented, and one must use these tables sensibly and carefully.

What, then, can be learned from table 3.2? One salient fact



*Slavery Remembered*

Table 3.2 Reported Resistance by Others

Types of Resistance	Percentage	Number
Ran away	28.3	117
Hid in woods	25.2	104
Stole	10.7	44
Struck master, stayed	12.3	51
Struck master, ran	1.5	6
Verbal confrontation	7.5	31
Fought patrollers or other whites	6.2	26
Killed overseer or other whites	4.1	17
Revolted or planned revolt	1.2	5
Committed suicide	1.7	7
Other	1.2	5
Total	100.0	413

Note: This list excludes those who ran away during the Civil War to join the United States Army.

is the close balance between running away and hiding in the woods. The frequency of reports of these types of resistance helps us gauge their significance. Although running away to seek freedom usually seemed futile to bondsmen, historians have correctly noted that it loomed large in the slaves' consciousness as a vital option, a course which always remained open if circumstances grew intolerable. Even those who never fled from the master knew well the tricks a fugitive should use. Rubbing pungent substances like turpentine, graveyard dirt, red pepper, or Indian turp on one's feet was supposed to irritate the nose of the bloodhounds and throw them off the trail. "No bloodhound could trail a bit further after smelling it," Gus Smith confidently asserted, reciting well-established plantation lore.<sup>16</sup> Yet, hiding in the woods evidently held as important a place in the slave's mind, a fact which historians have not adequately recognized. In fact, running off to hide in the woods was probably more

*Improving the Conditions of Life*

common than the table suggests, for the former slaves discussed it with more familiarity and probably omitted mention of many specific instances.

The practice of slipping off and hiding nearby played a key role in the slaves' struggle to improve conditions on the plantation. It was their most effective tool to goad the master into lessening his demands and loosening requirements. Some bondsmen simply ran off "to get a rest" from the burdens of work, but for most this act was far more purposeful. When a slave hid in the woods, he or she could count on ready support from the rest of the black community. As one informant described it, whenever slaves ran off, "next day Aunt Suke would be sho to go down to de spring to wash so she could leave some old clothes dar for 'em to git at night." Others testified that these slaves often came back "at night for to eat sumpin."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the slave who hid in the woods had the capacity to maintain himself in reasonable comfort for an indefinite period and simultaneously deprive the master of his labor. While continuing to maintain the slave, at least partially, the master derived no benefit from his investment and expenses. This situation placed the bondsman in a strong bargaining position, and the narratives testify that the slaves used their advantage, regularly and successfully.

For the individual who encountered trouble, slipping off to the woods opened a way out and an escape from punishment. A foreman named Robert Scott, for example, jumped between his wife and the master to save her from a whipping. Enraged, this slaveowner ran to the house to get his gun; so Scott elected to "get out of the way for a day or two." Later, after passions cooled, the master realized that he needed his slave's skills, Scott returned without retribution, and his defense of his wife succeeded. Similarly, when a cook concealed herself in the canebrake for a couple of weeks, she escaped serious punishment on her return. Her master "was glad to get her back," just as most masters were. Frequently, the formalities of bargaining had even become explicit, for masters wanted their slaves at work and



could not counter this kind of resistance. One man who ran off and hid several times described the routine: "Ah'd hide in the woods; then they'd send afah me, and they say, 'Come on back—we won't whip you.'"<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the individual could bargain over the terms of his treatment. The technique of hiding in the woods afforded leverage against the master without serious inconvenience, and the narratives show that slaves clearly understood their advantage and exploited it effectively. On some plantations the bondsmen even managed to use this tool collectively to win benefits for the group rather than for a few individuals. "If we had an overseer that was bad," explained one informant, "the slaves would run away so's he'd have to get another one." By a form of strike these slaves served notice that their treatment was unsatisfactory and that "they wouldn't suffer it." The master relented.<sup>19</sup>

The ease and success of this means of fighting slavery led some to see further potential in it. One man whose master came to Texas when it was still frontier built up a close relationship with the Indians, put holes in his nose and ears, and occasionally "run off from his massa and stay with the Indians for weeks." Hiding had developed into an alternate form of life for him. Even without connections to another supportive culture like the Indians', some slaves chose to live in the woods semipermanently or permanently instead of existing in bondage. After digging a cave in a hillside, a South Carolina slave kept up contact with his friends and accumulated "a hog, two geese, some chickens and two middles of meat" before the whites caught him five months later. The whites never caught some of these woods dwellers, and several narratives tell of people who stayed in hiding until the war was over and then emerged "thout no clothes on an' hair growin' all over [their] bod[ies]." Leah Garrett told of a man who established a real home for his wife in a cave complete with a stove that had a hidden flue: "He ceiled de house wid pine logs, made beds and tables out of pine poles, and dey lived in dis cave seven years [until freedom]."

Durin' dis time, dey had three chillun." One former slave asserted that a man from his plantation lived fifteen years in hiding. Such a person might arm himself with "a scythe and a bulldog for protection," and the patrollers, despite their best efforts, could not catch him. The patrollers, as Walter Rimm explained, "wants him bad, 'cause it 'spire other slaves to run away if he stays a-loose."<sup>20</sup>

Not all bondsmen would choose this avenue, even if others had demonstrated that success was possible. Living in the woods meant a life of isolation and stealth. The fugitive gained freedom from slavery at the price of another kind of bondage, a life of many restrictions and unending fear of discovery. But the example of those few who left the plantation permanently served as a source of strength for those who stayed behind. It was possible to reject slavery entirely, even if most chose to endure bondage while fighting daily to change the routine on their plantation.

As table 3.2 suggests, the fight was often vigorous. Disagreements escalated at times into physical battles; slaves threatened and even struck their owners, which indicates how open the contest of wills became and how much ground the slaves had won for themselves. It is especially notable that the former slaves spoke more often of those who stayed after striking the master than those who ran. The slave who struck back did not suffer a paralysis of fear; it was not unthinkable to stand up to the master and fight. Mrs. Susan Hamilton recalled an eloquent cursing administered by one urban slave to her mistress. Outraged because her daughter, who had recently married, was sold away, this woman went into the street and shouted curses at "dat damn white, pale-faced bastard [that] sell my daughter who jus' married las' night." Beyond venting anger, such verbal confrontations could carry a threat. In Texas a field hand whose good work had kept him from whippings found one day that the mistress was approaching, determined to teach him that he was not immune to the lash. After arguing his case, the slave com-



menced "to wave he hoe in de air" and drove her from the cornfield. A venerable mammy on a Mississippi plantation reacted to a whipping by the young master by taking a pole out of the loom and beating him "nearly to death." As she flailed away she shouted, "I'm goin' to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and you come out here to beat me." Other narratives told of a female field hand who fought back during a whipping and beat the master into unconsciousness and of a man who choked the master to death for raping his wife.<sup>21</sup>

Violence commonly grew out of confrontations in the field over the amount and pace of work. Between the field hands and the overseer or master, a continual tugging and pulling took place. Some masters openly sanctioned this contest by requiring the overseer to establish his own dominance over the hands and never punishing a slave for hitting the overseer. Thus, when a new overseer took charge or when the regular overseer announced new standards, the slaves quickly tested him and, if they intimidated him, won. In Georgia an overseer "attempted to whip one of the women but when she refused to allow [it] he never tried to whip any of the others." Isaam Morgan described another incident in these terms: a new overseer "tried to fight an' whip us slaves, an' one night six big nigger men jumped on him an' scairt him mos' to death."<sup>22</sup>

Life could prove dangerous for the master or overseer. During the war some slaves in Texas caught and killed "de old overseer [who] tried himself in meanness." Others met death in normal times as slaves turned their heavy hoes into dangerous weapons. The narratives tell of field hands who raised their hoes to protect the women from beatings or to fight back themselves. Some slaves knocked the overseer's brains out or "took an ax and cut off his hands and feet." Near New Orleans an overseer beat a woman "till the blood run off her on the ground. She fall at his feets like she passed out and he put up the whip and she trips him and gits the whip and whips him till he couldn't stand up. Then some the niggers throwed him off a cliff and broke his

neck. . . . There warn't no more overseers on the place after that." On a Georgia plantation the slaves killed two overseers who had used the whip too freely. Thus resistance sometimes reached its extremes.<sup>23</sup>

Who engaged in the various forms of resistance? What were the characteristics of those who fought back? Tables 3.3 through 3.6 attempt to answer these questions on the basis of information supplied in the narratives. These tables show that the typical resister was an adult male who was married and worked in the fields. Though the young took action occasionally, parents and grown slaves shouldered the burden of opposing the master, and men assumed part of the women's share. In regard to the occupational background of resisters, table 3.6 demonstrates that no particular group held a monopoly on courage or pluck. Since field hands formed the majority of plantation workers, it is not surprising that they also represented the main source of opposition. But house servants and artisans were active in rough proportion to their numbers.

The primary purpose of overt resistance was to prevent physical cruelty or to strike back after it had taken place (see table 3.7). Verbal confrontations, fighting, and hiding in the woods—all might have this purpose. The runaways usually sought their freedom, and most theft had the object of bringing a better or more satisfying diet to the slaves. In addition, the slaves acted to protect members of their families, to stop sales, or to resist sexual advances by whites.

Slave women often enjoyed protection by their men, but, when successful resistance appeared possible, they were not backwards or hesitant in defending their own virtue. From the South Carolina narratives came a story about women defending their honor. The overseer, a "wicked man" who took "vantage of all de slaves when he git half chance," followed two of the women who had been sent to pick blackberries, and demanded sex. "Finally he got down off'n his hoss and pull out his whip and low if dey didn't submit to him he gwine to beat dem half to



*Slavery Remembered*

*Table 3.3 Age of Reported Resisters (N = 413)*

Age	Percentage
Child	0.3
Youth	8.0
Young adult under 25	3.5
Adult	80.6
Older adult	5.7
Young and old in group	1.9
Total	100.0

*Table 3.4 Sex of Reported Resisters (N = 315)*

Sex	Percentage
Male	58.7
Female	32.4
Both sexes in group	8.9
Total	100.0

*Table 3.5 Marital Status of Reported Resisters (N = 193)*

Marital Status	Percentage
Unmarried	13.0
Married	83.9
Both in a group	3.1
Total	100.0

*Improving the Conditions of Life*

*Table 3.6 Occupations of Reported Resisters (N = 127)*

Occupation	Percentage
House servant	22.8
Field hand	57.5
Artisan	18.9
Child's chores	0.8
Total	100.0

*Table 3.7 Purpose of Reported Resistance (N = 413)*

Purpose	Percentage
To avoid or protest whipping	55.9
To seek freedom	20.6
To supplement diet	9.0
To protect family	3.4
To avoid or protest sale	3.1
To repel sexual advances	1.9
Other	6.1
Total	100.0

death. . . . Finally dey act like dey gwine to indulge in wickedness wid dat ole man. But when he tuck off his whip and some other garments, my mammy and ole lady Lucy grab him by his goattee and further down and hist him over in de middle of dem blackberry bushes." Then the women ran to the mistress and offered evidence of their experience. Acting promptly even though her husband was in town, the mistress fired the overseer and sent him packing.<sup>24</sup>



As this incident implies, the differing roles of the sexes in resistance merit further attention. Table 3.8 specifies the male and female involvement in the major categories of resistance. Men, the evidence shows, proved more likely to participate in those areas of resistance that required strength and endurance; they predominated in running away, hiding in the woods, and joining in fatal confrontations with a white man. Women took more than a negligible part in these actions, however, and approached parity in the area of theft. In two categories—verbal confrontations and striking the master but not running away—the women predominated. Apparently, they were not afraid to argue their case or to strike out if provoked.

Table 3.9 presents the occupational background of the women who used force against the master. Since most of the women who dared to strike the master were field hands, not house servants, their boldness cannot be attributed to the liberties that grew from a personal, familiar relationship between the master and his house servants. Female slaves, with the assistance of their men, seem to have succeeded in winning some respect for their sex. Table 3.10 indicates that these women, like most field hands, meant their resistance to deter whippings or retaliate for prior physical abuse. They also, more frequently than the aggregate of resisters, acted from a purpose of defending either their virtue or a member of their family.

A final analysis addresses the question of what influence occupation had on resistance. The slave's work definitely affected his experience, defining the tone of his daily life and the quality of his relationship with the master. For field hands the continuing contest of wills over the plantation's routine was frequently open and harsh; for house servants it was generally more subtle and entangled in the nuances of personality. Artisans enjoyed the most freedom from supervision in their work and, thus, a degree of independence in their daily lives. Table 3.11 categorizes several kinds of resistance according to the slaves' occupations. Although the small number of cases permits only inferences

Table 3.8 Sex of Reported Resisters—Selected Types of Resistance

Type of Resistance	Percentage		Number
	Male	Female	
Ran away (including Civil War)	80.9	11.6	215
Ran away (excluding Civil War)	63.6	21.6	88
Hidden in woods	69.6	24.3	115
Killed overseer or other white	61.1	27.8	18
Stole	53.3	26.7	30
Verbal confrontation	48.5	51.5	33
Struck master, stayed	35.3	62.7	51



*Slavery Remembered*

Table 3.9 Occupations of Female Slaves Who Struck Master and Stayed (N = 19)

Occupation	Percentage
House servant	31.6
Field hand	68.4

Table 3.10 Purpose of Resistance by Female Slaves Who Struck Master and Stayed (N = 31)

Purpose of Resistance	Percentage
To avoid or protest whipping	74.2
To repel sexual advances	12.9
To protect family	6.5
To avoid or protest overwork	3.2
Other	3.2

rather than conclusions, some general patterns emerge from these data. Field hands exhibited the largest amount of resistance along the spectrum of opposition, while house servants took action as frequently, in rough terms, as their numbers on the plantation would predict. The behavior of artisans appeared more erratic, moving from one extreme to another. Relatively few engaged in verbal battles or challenged the master physically, but substantial numbers of artisans chose serious modes of resistance such as running away or becoming involved in violence directed at whites. Among the plantation's resisters, the artisans were most volatile, probably because their world embraced greater extremes of experience and therefore greater tensions. Compared to the rest of the slaves, they were 'marginal

*Improving the Conditions of Life*

Table 3.11 Occupations of Reported Resisters—Selected Types of Resistance (N = 175)

Type of Resistance	Percentage			Number
	House Servant	Field Hand	Artisan	
Verbal confrontation	13.3	80.0	6.7	15
Ran away (including Civil War)	17.0	47.2	35.8	53
Ran away (excluding Civil War)	25.0	39.3	35.7	28
Hid in woods	32.4	51.4	16.2	37
Struck master, stayed	25.0	71.4	3.6	28
Killed overseer or other white	0.0	78.6	21.4	14

men," permitted to taste more of autonomy yet held down indefinitely in slavery.

Thus, through various kinds of resistance the slaves endeavored to affect plantation discipline in their favor and increase the amount of living space for themselves. Concentrating on the restriction of physical abuse, bondsmen tried to compel the master to alter his methods of control. Evidence presented in chapter 2 indicates that they partially succeeded. Though most masters whipped at least occasionally, a majority of the former slaves rated their masters favorably in the matter of physical abuse. Although a few slaveowners depended heavily on the lash, most supplemented punishment with other techniques, such as surveillance and the encouragement of spying. Quite a few former slaves reported that their master had largely dispensed with whipping, relying instead on the threat of sale. "If Massa Jim had a hand he couldn't control, he sold him," said one woman. This threat, with its frightening implications for family ties, carried weight, but it also placed the master in a position that allowed him to act decisively only against major offenses.<sup>25</sup>



*Slavery Remembered*

Slave resistance was both continual and shrewdly practical. In a variety of creative ways, the slaves developed tactics that could exploit what advantages they possessed. Concentrating on what was possible, the South's bondsmen kept up an unrelenting pressure that forced their masters to permit small but meaningful improvements in the conditions of life. Through such improvements they won significant ground in their contest with the master, ground on which they could build more firmly the foundations of a black community.