Charles Davenport
Interviewed at Natchez, Mississippi
Interviewed by Edith Wyatt Moore
Age at interview: About 100

Like all de fool niggers o' dat time I was right smart bit by de freedom bug for awhile. It sounded powerful nice to be told: "You don't have to chop cotton no more. You can throw dat hoe down and go fishin' whensoever de notion strikes you. And you can roam 'round at night and court gals just as late as you please. Ain't no marster gwine to say to you, "Charlie, you's got to be back when de clock strikes nine."

I was fool 'nough to believe all dat kind o' stuff. But to tell de honest truth, most o' us didn't know ourselves no better off. Freedom meant us could leave where us'd been born and bred, but it meant, too, dat us had to scratch for us ownselfs. Dem what left de old plantation seemed so all fired glad to get back dat I made up my mind to stay put. I stayed right with my white folks as long as I could.

My white folks talked plain to me. Dey say real sadlike, "Charlie, you's been a dependence, but now you can go if you is so desirous. But if you wants to stay with us you can sharecrop. Dey's a house for you and wood to keep you warm and a mule to work. We ain't got much cash, but dey's de land and you can count on havin' plenty o' victuals. Do just as you please."

When I looked at my marster and knowed he needed me, I pleased to stay. My marster never forced me to do nary thing about it. . . .

Lord! Lord! I knows about de Klöo Kluxes. I knows a-plenty. Dey was sure 'nough devils a-walkin' de earth a-seekin' what dey could devour. Dey larruped de hide off de uppity niggers an' drove de white trash back where dey belonged.

Us niggers didn't have no secret meetin's. All us had was church meetin's in arbors out in de woods. De preachers would exhort us dat us was de chillen o' Israel in de wilderness an' de Lord done sent us to take dis land o' milk and honey. But how us gwine-a take land what's already been took?

I sure ain't never heard about no plantations bein' divided up, neither. I heard a lot o' yaller niggers spoutin' off how dey was gwine-a take over de white folks' land for back wages. Dem bucks just took all dey wages out in talk. 'Cause I ain't never seen no land divided up yet.

In dem days nobody but niggers and "shawlstrap" folks voted. Quality folks didn't have nothin' to do with such truck. If dey had a wanted to de Yankees wouldn't let 'em. My old marster didn't vote and if anybody knowed what was what he did. Sense didn't count in dem days. It was powerful ticklish times and I let votin' alone. . . . [O]ne night a bunch o' uppity niggers went to a entertainment in Memorial Hall. Dey dressed deyselfs fit to kill and walked down de aisle and took seats in de very front. But just about time dey got good set down, de curtain dropped and de white folks rose up without a-sayin' a word. Dey marched out de buildin' with dey chins up and left dem niggers a-sittin' in a empty hall.

Dat's de way it happen every time a nigger tried to get too uppity. Dat night after de breakin' up o' dat entertainment, de Klöo Kluxes rode through de land. I heard dey grabbed every nigger what walked down dat aisle, but I ain't heard yet what dey done with 'em.
6. A Freedman Recalls a Visit from the Ku Klux Klan, 1871

They came to my door and they said "Hey!" I was asleep. They called, "Hey, hey!" My wife says, "Lewis, listen." "What are you doing there?" I says; and they said, "By Christ, come out; I will show you what I am doing." . . . and I got up and sat on the bed, with my legs hanging out, and peeped out. . . . They says, "Lewis, by Christ, arn't you going to get up and open the door?" . . . I spoke and said, "What do you want; do you want to whip me? I have done nothing to be whipped." . . . Says he, "How did you vote?" I says, "I voted the radical ticket." "You has, sir?" he says. I says, "Yes, sir." "Well, by Christ," says he, "Ain't you had no instructions?" I says, "I can't read, and I can't write, and I can't much more than spell." . . . I says, "How can a black man get along without there is some white gentleman or other with them? We go by instructions. We don't know nothing much." "O, by Christ," says he, "you radicals go side by side with one another, and by Christ us democrats go side and side with one another." I says, "I can't help that." . . . He says . . . "Get in the road and march," and in the road I went. They took me up the road pretty near to the edge of the woods. . . . Says he, "Off with your shirt." I says, "What do you all want to whip me for; what have I done?" "By Christ," he says, "Off with your shirt; if you don't you shall go dead.["] . . . He says, "Now Lewis, by Christ, you get down on your knees." I says, "It is hard to get down on my knees and take a whipping for nothing." Then I dropped down. He says, "By Christ, don't you get up until we get done with you." They set to work on me and hit me ten or fifteen licks pretty keen, and I raised up. "Get down," he says; "if you ever raise up again you'll go dead before we quit you." Down I went again, and I staid down until they got done whipping me. Says he, "Now, by Christ, you must promise you will vote the democratic ticket?" I says, "I don't know how I will vote; it looks hard when a body thinks this way and that way to take a beating." . . . "You must promise to vote the democratic ticket, or you go dead before we leave you," he says. Then I studied and studied. They gathered right close up around me. "Come out with it—come, out with it, by Christ." Then I says, "Yes, sir, I reckon so."
Interviewed at Burleson, Alabama
Interviewed by Levi D. Shelby, Jr.
Age when interviewed: 85–90.

De day dat we got news dat we was free, Mr. White called us niggers to the house. He said: “You are all free, just as free as I am. Now go and get your- self somewhere to stick your heads.”

Just as soon as he say dat, my mammy hollered out: “Dat's 'nough for a yeardin'.” She struck out across de field to Mr. Lee Osborn's to get a place for her and her to stay. He paid us seventy-five cents a day, fifty cents to her and two bits for me. He gave us our dinner along with de wages. After de crop was gathered for that year, me and my mammy cut and hauled wood for Mr. Osborn. Us left Mr. Osborn dat fall and went to Mr. John Rawlins. Us made a sharecrop with him. Us'd pick two rows of cotton and he'd pick two rows. Us'd pull two rows of corn and he'd pull two rows of corn. He furnished us with rations and a place to stay. Us'd sell our cotton and open corn and pay Mr. John Rawlins for 'feedin' us. Den we moved with Mr. Hugh Nelson and made a sharecrop with him. We kept 'mevin' and 'makin' sharecrop' till us saved up 'nough money to rent us a place and make a crop for ourselves.

Us did right well at dis until de Ku Klux got so mad, us had to move back with Mr. Nelson for protection. De Klux threat to whip Mr. Nelson, 'cause he took up for de niggers. Heap of nights we would hear of de Ku Klux comin' and leave home. Sometimes us was scared not to go and scared to go away from home.

One day I borrowed a gun from Ed Davis to go squirrel huntin'. When I taken de gun back I didn't unload it like I always been doin'. Dat night de Ku Klux called on Ed to whip him. When dey told him to open de door, he heard one of 'em say, “Shoot him time he gets de door open.” “Well,” he says to 'em, “Wait till I can light de lamp.” Den he got de gun what I had left loaded, got down on his knees and stuck it through a log and pull de trigger. He hit Newt Dobbs in de stomach and kilt him.

He couldn't stay round Burleson any more, so he come to Mr. Nelson and got 'nough money to get to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The Ku Klux got bad sure 'nough 'den and went to killin' niggers and white folks, too.

Review Questions:
1. According to Davenport, what did Freedom mean for African Americans?
2. Why did he stay with his "white folks"?
3. What do you think Davenport means when he says "uppity niggers"?
4. Who voted according to Davenport? Why didn't he vote?
5. Why did Mingo White have to move back to Mr. Nelson?
6. What role did Nelson play for free blacks?
7. How does White describe the Klan at the end?
8. Why is Lewis beaten?
9. What did he have to promise to do?
10. Do you think he will vote again? Explain.
11. Relate Davenport's point about voting with Lewis' experience as a voter.