

Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: the WPA Interviews With Former Slaves Living in Indiana

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The Plains Indian Photographs of Edward S. Curtis brings together 91 of the photographer's images with his original captions and four scholarly essays. Contributors Martha H. Kennedy, Martha A. Sandweiss, Mick Gidley, and Duane Niatum encourage readers to look beyond the image of Curtis as a manipulative artist who exploited hapless Indians. Instead, they urge us to explore the complexities of the artist, his mission, and the historical context in which he worked. Niatum portrays the photographer as a would-be ethnographer whose desire to create accurate documents was often compromised by his need for self-expression. Through strict control of composition, tone, and contrast, Curtis produced romantic images that expressed his generation's nostalgia for the vanishing natural world. Curtis also sought to control the messages his images conveyed through the use of didactic captions that were as carefully composed as his photographs. Gidley points out, however, that the sheer magnitude of Curtis's project, which included teams of photographers, ethnographers, and assistants working over a period of several decades, makes it subject to a variety of interpretations. Both Sandweiss and Gidley attribute part of this ambiguity to the fact that Curtis's Indian subjects sometimes moved beyond the role of mere willing models to become active collaborators. The resulting photographs sometimes supplied Indians with powerful images to which they could affix their own narratives and occasionally helped individuals attain a status from which they could present their stories to the broader American culture.

Unfortunately, the impact of these insightful essays is compromised by the poor quality of the book's photo reproductions. Many of Curtis's artful compositions appear to have been "squeezed" and "stretched" to fit into the format of the book's pages, making them appear laughably like panoramic scenes from a "B" western movie that have been shown on a narrow television screen. This casts another—albeit unintentional—layer of meaning on the artist's work and mars what is otherwise a very worthwhile publication.

Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana, by Ronald L. Baker. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xx, 341 pp. Illustration, appendixes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Valerie Grim is associate professor of African American Studies at Indiana University–Bloomington. Her research interests concern the rural and agricultural experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century.

In *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless*, Ronald Baker has assembled testimonies of former slaves whose accounts of their lives give readers

invaluable insights into the thoughts and behavior of African Americans in the antebellum South and the postbellum Midwest. In this volume are stories of ex-slaves who moved to Indiana during and after Reconstruction to search for social, political, and economic opportunities. Drawing on the WPA interviews, Baker's narrative selections represent a powerful voice, one that is usually underappreciated or entirely overlooked as American history is told. Although the former slaves represented in the Indiana collection resided in the Hoosier State at the time the interviews were conducted, their stories revealed a variety of existences among African Americans who lived as slaves in eleven different states from Mississippi and Missouri to Georgia and the Carolinas.

Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless is organized into two parts. In part one, "A Folk History of Slavery," Baker provides historical descriptions of slavery's past and analyzes how slaves were treated and the struggles they encountered attempting to escape. Using a thematic and conceptual framework, Baker also explains how education, religion, and folklore functioned within the context of American slavery.

In part two, "The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves," Baker introduces readers to 137 individuals, each describing aspects of their experiences as slaves. Their stories clearly indicate the complexities and ambiguities of slavery. Some slaves describe very pleasant situations in which they lived, while others offer graphic descriptions of the horrors of slavery. All, however, suffered when death or separation occurred. This section, the strongest part of the volume, relates stories of faith, accounts of belief in the power of spirits, advice for a healthy life, and views on education.

For comparison, Iowans would be especially interested in those testimonials that illustrate how the Midwest became a haven for former slaves, many of whom, between the Civil War and the Great Depression, became landowners, entrepreneurs, educators, physicians, journalists, newspaper owners, preachers, and politicians. This book supports other works that suggest that the Midwest was a progressive place where African Americans experienced freedom following the Civil War. *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless* should be read alongside such texts as *Black Neighbors: Negroes in a Northern Rural Community, 1850-1970*; *Rural Black Heritage between Chicago and Detroit, 1850-1929*; *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765-1900*; and *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000*.

Laypersons, high school learners, and college students will benefit greatly from reading *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless*, and educators

and scholars interested in methodology and pedagogy will appreciate the emphasis it places on oral, local, regional, and national history and the role each has played in creating an African American identity in the United States.

Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality, by Eric Arnesen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001. 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Andrew E. Kersten is associate professor of history and social change and development at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. The author of *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941–46* (2000), his research interests include the history of labor and fair employment.

Eric Arnesen deserves a lot of credit for writing this exceptional book, which examines the overlooked but significant history of black railroad workers. From the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century, in any given year, the major railroads employed tens of thousands of African Americans. The jobs they held were mostly hot, hard, and dangerous. But for many African Americans, railroad employment translated into economic security, a moderate level of prosperity, and a brighter future. Yet despite the benefits, black railroad workers were subjected to virulent racism and employment discrimination. Arnesen analyzes the plight of black railroaders and argues that their struggle for justice—although incomplete—achieved dramatic breakthroughs that influenced not only their working conditions but the civil rights and labor movements as well.

Black railroad workers were an essential labor force, particularly in the South after the Civil War. Managers hired African Americans to build roadbeds, lay track, and perform many other service jobs. Working conditions were poor. For example, black porters on passenger trains were made to sleep in the baggage car or on dining car tables. Furthermore, nearly all high-paying skilled jobs were for whites only. The four big railroad unions (the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Order of Railway Conductors of America, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen) were lily white and worked tirelessly to aid their members to the detriment of black workers. Arnesen carefully points out that railroad managers as well as federal government officials willfully participated in creating unfair employment practices. In fact, railroad employers played off white racism and hired black brakemen, firemen, and switchmen to forestall union agitation. Thus, for African Americans, the work environment was hostile, threatening, and violent.

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