

None of the interviews in this section were preserved with mechanical recording devices. Unlike later sound recordings, in the nineteenth century the accuracy of an interview depended on the interviewer and how well he or she listened and transcribed. Accuracy also depended on the interviewer's intent: sometimes it seemed important to reproduce exact words and speech patterns; in other cases interviewers paraphrased the spoken narrative. When reading the interviews in this section, the reader should always keep in mind that the very words the narrator "speaks" come to us literally through the interviewer as that person decides how to write down the narrator's words. The selections that follow introduce the reader to various choices made by interviewers about how they present the reminiscence.

### Race Relations

In the South, federally imposed Reconstruction following the Civil War intended to give four million ex-slaves political and civil rights. In 1865 General William T. Sherman granted economic independence, represented by land and the means to cultivate it—the famous "forty acres and a mule"—to black families on the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. But Andrew Johnson revoked the provision when he became president after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. As a result, few ex-slaves were able to withstand the violence and coercion of the Ku Klux Klan and economic pressures from landowners, who quickly established the labor system known as sharecropping. Although no longer enslaved, African Americans were forced to sign contracts with white landowners for land and tools, and in return paid the owner a share of each year's crop. Many soon found themselves in debt to their landlords. White southerners claimed that former slaves were too ignorant and indolent to survive without this strict control. In the decades after Reconstruction ended in 1877, whites established a system of segregation (Jim Crow), and denied voting rights to African Americans as well.

In the lands that the United States had conquered from Mexico, two groups came under American control: the Mexicans in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas; and American Indians. The Mexicans lost their lands and influence, and few were able to become U.S. citizens, although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo technically guaranteed citizenship. American Indians, overwhelmed by Euro-American settlers and the United States military, were confined to reservations. In effect, both groups were racially marked as inferior. When most Americans thought about Mexicans and American Indians at all, they echoed journalist John O'Sullivan, who claimed that it was "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted [to us] by Providence," ignoring the rights of the people who were already there.