Underground Railroad History As Told by the Rev. E. A. Allen

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The following history of incidents concerning the "Underground Railroad" in operation in Ohio and Indiana during the years preceding the Civil war was given by the Rev. E. A. Allen, of College Corner, Ohio, recently at Vevay when the Indiana Historical Society held a meeting there.

Rev. Allen taught the Kingston school fifty years ago and while there became familiar with the Kingston station on the famous railroad. The address, while of considerable length, is worthy of a careful reading.

Madam President: I thank you for the gracious invitation to address your historical society on the subject of the Underground Railroad. I also appreciate the privilege of returning to my old home and living over the old days when I walked your streets a penniless barefoot boy. It is natural as we come to the afternoon and evening of life and the shadows lengthen for the sentiments of life to deepen. It is well that it is so for without sentiment we could not have a home, a church, or a country. I therefore congratulate your society that it is doing so much to treasure up the records and keep alive the memories of your community which is so rich in historical lore.

My story is a thrilling one if I could only tell it as it is, but told imperfectly as it will be, I hope it will not be without profit. It has to do with an important epoch in our country's history, but in order to get the full import of the underground railroad it is necessary to know the background and causes that led up to this important event. Indulge me, therefore, I pray you, in some historic fundamentals.

Two Types of Men

There was planted on this continent two distinct forms of civilization – the one at Jamestown, Va., in 1607, and the other at Plymouth Rock in 1620. It has often been said that one came in search of gold, the other in search of God. Be that as it may, they were fundamentally different. Those of Jamestown were made up of the "gentleman" class, the aristocrats, the cavaliers. They builded a civilization to their manner born. They were proud, chivalrous, brave and hospitable. Out of their ranks has come many of America's most illustrious families – the Marshalls, the Randolphs, the Curtises, the Lees, the Washingtons, and the Jeffersons. West and southwest the course of this empire took its way and finally developed into the fifteen slave states.

The Puritans, beginning thirteen years later, also developed and gave tone and character to a civilization after their own hearts. They were austere, God-fearing. With them conscience was king and God was the supreme court. Slowly they grew. They planted the schoolhouse by the side of the church; they developed a democratic form of government in their town meetings; they came west and married the girls of the Mohawk, thus mingling their blood with that of the Dutch. They cleared the forests, drained the swamps, bridge the streams, tunneled the mountains, and builded great and prosperous cities. They were too busy in material and religious matters to take an active part in politics. Their course was west and northwest. Thus these two civilizations stood face to face with radically different ideals.

The Beginning of Slavery

"About the last of August (1619) came to Jamestown a Dutch Man-of-Warre that sold us twenty negurs." Thus the institution of slavery began. Strange as it may seem, it was advocated as a wonderfully missionary enterprise. John Newton, a great divine, had the "sweetest communion with God" when he contemplated the conversion of Africa by bringing these barbarians to civilization. That reminds me of an incident in Livingstone's life when a chief told him: "You can do nothing with my people without the rhinoceros hide and if you say so, I will whip them till they all become Christians."

Slavery began in a very mild form by indenture, and when the slave was converted and baptized he was manumitted. But soon this custom ceased and slavery was fastened permanently on the black race and his descendants. It spread to all the colonies. It has often been said that it died out in the North because of the cold climate, but this cannot be true for four million of the now twelve million of the colored people in the Untied States now live north of Mason and Dixon's line. It should not be forgotten that in New England there was always a conscience against the system. This, I take it, was the great reason why it ceased in the North.

Laws Made Trouble

When the constitution was formed there were seven free and six slave states. They never could have formed a "more perfect union" without a compromise in the constitution. In this compromise the North got on point, namely, that the slave trade with Africa should cease at the end of twenty years; and the South got two points, namely that three-fifths of the slaves be counted in the enumeration, (this would give more power in congress) and second, that the master could take his slave wherever he could find him. This was not the Fugitive Slave Law. That law said that not only could the master take his slave but any individual he called on must help. When this stringent measure came to the Quakers, they vowed by the eternal that they would not do it.

From the moment the Constitution became operative, trouble began and it lasted until finally it culminated in the Emancipation Proclamation – the product of the Civil war. The states came in in pairs. Whenever a free state was admitted to the union, a slave on was also admitted (with the single exception of Louisiana). When there were twenty-eight states there was a complete balance, fourteen free and fourteen slave. The South believed that slavery was a good thing, morally, socially, and economically, and it should be extended to all the states. The North believed exactly the opposite and felt that it should be restricted to those states where it was allowed by the Constitution. Thus the conflicting ideas clashed. Cotton had become king in the South. Slavery was more profitable. Hence the incoming of each state caused the contest between slavery and freedom to become more and more acute.

Epithets Are Hurled

The line between these two sections was about 1500 miles. You can readily see what an immense problem was before the slave-holders to police this line and to hold their slaves in safety. This line was the "chip on the shoulder," the "bone of contention" between the two forces. The South cried lustily for the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law; the North replied, "Impossible!" The vilest epithets were hurled at each other. To the South the North was a pack of "nigger thieves." To the North the South was a set of "inhuman barbarians." Thus the contest raged for about fifty years, growing more intense as the years went by.

While the breakdown was all along this extensive line, the Underground Railroad really began in the South. The slaves in various ways would gather a little money and there was always someone who would "bootleg," that is, offer to put them over the line for a small compensation. The Underground Railroad thus began in the South for money, but in the North for conscience.

As the system was carried on in secret without formal organization, it is by no means easy to get accurate historical data, but by tradition and many incidents that have been put on record, we can get a reasonable knowledge of the working of the system.

Passed 3300 Slaves

While the break-away extended all along the line, there were many special crossing and I will speak of only four that are the most interesting to us because they were in our midst namely, Madison, Lawrenceburg, Cincinnati and Ripley. All these crossings centered at Newport, now Fountain City, a town ten miles north of Richmond, Ind., where lived Levi Coffin, a Quaker of remarkable ability. He and his wife, "Aunt Katie," came from North Carolina and he engaged in business and was very successful. He gave freely of his time and money and was the means of passing more than 3300 slaves on to Canada. Perhaps no such showing was made by any other man.

The first account Mr. Coffin gives is where seventeen slaves crossed at Madison. The second night their master pursued them. They scattered in the tall corn in the bottoms below Vevay, Ind. Two of the number were shot but not fatally. In desperation they made their way traveling night after night through Franklin county and their first resting place was the Salem church near Liberty, Ind.

Finally they were taken to Levi Coffin's home. When they arrived at night, the farmer who brought them said to "Aunt Katie," "we have brought you all of Kentucky." And "Aunt Katie" merely replied, "Well, bring all Kentucky in." They presented a horrible site, for in their struggle they had lost their belongings and most of them were barefoot and with bleeding feet. A doctor was called and the wounds were dressed and they were made comfortable. After giving them a few days rest by hiding them in secret places about the home, Mr. Coffin sent them on to Union City thence to Canada. Fifteen of their pursuers came to Richmond and suspected where they were.

Threaten to Raze Town

They gathered a few rowdies and swore they would burn the town of Newport and kill the inhabitants. The village was, of course, much agitated. Coffin, a Quaker who believed in non-resistance quieted them by saying: "Put up your guns. You will not be hurt." When these slave-holders arrived they showed fight. Coffin as spokesman said, "No, we will not fight you but if you will dismount we will play a game of marbles with you."'

Thus a soft answer quieted the mob. They returned to Richmond and brought Coffin and his neighbors before the grand jury. When put on the stand and asked if he had harbored or knew anything of fugitive slaves, he said: "I know nothing only what the fugitives told me, but a colored person's evidence is not valid in Indiana; therefore, I have no legal knowledge concerning fugitives." This caused a lot of laughter and Coffin was dismissed.

One of the slave-holders said it was nothing but a d---- underground railroad. Coffin said this was the first time he had heard the name used. Henceforth he was always known as the "President" of said road.

Station at Kingston

The next crossing was Lawrenceburg. The first station from this crossing was Kingston, Ind., six miles from Greensburg. The general route to this place was through Napoleon, where the fugitives had some friends. Kingston was made up of a band of staunch abolitionists. The Hamiltons and Donnells and their kindred had come from Kentucky and built a strong settlement, which stands today as one of the bright spots of Indiana. James Hamilton, a wealthy farmer, would always give two bushels of wheat to anyone who would bring a slave from Lawrenceburg. The Rev. A. T. Rankin, a young minister, was pastor of the Presbyterian church. He organized the young men; they had good horses, and if a slave got into their midst, the slave-holder had little chance of getting his victim.

A free colored man, Miles Meadows, lived in Kingston, and because he was not financially responsible, they put on him the task of conveying the fugitives to the next station which was Carthage. He was allowed to "steal" (?) their horses and wagons for this purpose. He told me that often mothers with children, when they came to face the cold north wind, would beg to go back to their cabins.

These cabins were they only homes they had known. Was it not human for them to want to return? The children of Israel longed for the flesh-pots of Egypt. Such incidents as these have always been pet stories of the slave-holders to prove what a wonderful system slavery was and how much better off the negroes were in slavery than in freedom.

Willing to Trade Jobs

That reminds me of a story of Tom Corwin of Ohio. As the story goes, he had interviewed "Uncle Remus" and the following conversation took place:

"Well, Uncle Remus, how you comin' on?"

"Mr. Co'win, I'se a very hard time."

"Well, how was it when you were a slave?"

"Well, I had plenty to eat."

"Now, Uncle Remus, don't you think it would be better if you would go back to slavery?"

"Well, Mr. Co'win, ma job's free back in Kaintuck, and if yo' al' wants it, you kin have it!"

Three hundred and eighty-five slaves were passed through this station at Kingston. Luther Donnell was at one time arrested and fined $1500, but the community joined together and paid the fine and merely said: "The slave-holders got the $1500 but they didn't get the women and the five children." Kingston still stands for plain living and high thinking, a very intelligent community.

We come now to Cincinnati as the next crossing place. The abolitionists had become conscientious about using any article produced by slave labor and so Levi Coffin had moved from Newport to Cincinnati to buy cotton produced by free labor. His home there as his home in Newport became the refuge and storm-center of escaping slaves.

This was also true of the home of Lyman Beecher, president of Lane Seminary on Walnut Hills. It was here that his daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, gathered her material for Uncle Tom's Cabin. Lane Seminary had one hundred and ten theological students and the slave power brought to bear so much influence on the trustees of the school that the prohibited any direct discussion there concerning slavery. Eighty of the students left Lane and went out as flaming evangels for freedom.

Tells of Some Escapes

Of the many escapes at Cincinnati, I will only note two. A wealthy farmer in Covington, Ky., had been holding a man and his wife for many years. They were well treated and a genuine affection had grown up between them and their owners.

However, one day the slave woman overheard the master tell his wife at dinner that he would be compelled to sell her husband, since he was in financial strait. She seized a market basket and gave it to her husband, explaining at the same time the situation and telling him to go to Cincinnati under the pretence of getting eggs, something which he was always allowed to do. But he was to go to Levi Coffin for advice. Coffin told him to fill his basket with eggs and go to the ferry while the boar was on the Covington side, to place his hat and coat on the basket and slip back to Coffin's home.

When the ferryman found the eggs, coat and hat, he immediately sent word to the master. The slave woman, not knowing the plan, was in great distress. She begged her mistress that they both go to Cincinnati and search for her husband, which they did, but they could find no trace of him. As the evening approached they were worn out and the slave told her mistress to rest and she would make one last effort. She went straight to Coffin's home and found her husband hidden safely away. Still feigning grief, she went back to her mistress, and in a few days she got away with her clogging and Coffin sent them on to Newport and thence to Canada. This master is doubtless the Mr. Selby, the slave-holder, in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The Vice-President's Slave

Another striking case was that of a slave of Vice-President King of Alabama. He had escaped and in disguise had come to Cincinnati and engaged in the barber business. He was much respected by both white and black. Somehow he was discovered and seized by ruffians and dragged tot eh river, there hand-cuffed and returned to his master. After a year spent in slavery he married a Creole of beauty and with some property. She dressed in the latest fashion and by means of a veil was able to pass as white woman.

She dressed her husband in woman's attire and passed him as her maid. She took pains to domineer over her maid in true Southern fashion. So well did she work her plan that the Southern folds o the boat warned her to be careful about landing in Ohio, because Ohio was free soil and her maid might escape. But she assured them that her maid was very loyal. It caused much hilarity when the trick was revealed at Levi Coffin's home after they arrived at Cincinnati. They took no more chances and soon got through to Canada.

The next and last crossing of which I will speak is that of Ripley, Ohio, sixty miles above Cincinnati, on the river. When the Northwest Territory was ceded to the general government, there were two reservations; the one that it should be dedicated to freedom; the other that a large tract of land between the Scioto and Miami rivers should be given to the Revolutionary soldiers. This caused an influx of abolitionists to gather at Ripley and it became a very strong center.

Arrival of Rev. Rankin

Among its pioneers came Rev. John Rankin, a man of great ability and courage. He was pastor of the Presbyterian church for forty-four years. He built his home back of the town which gave a very commanding view. He placed in the gables of his house beacon lights which served as a guide to the fugitives. He, with his eight sons, never knew the night to be too dark and the storm too great to fail in giving a helping hand.

I have always felt that the most incredible story in Uncle Tom's Cabin was that of the escape of Eliza, but it was here that she crossed, as verified by Dr. Rankin and Mr. Coffin, who gave her aid and sent her on to Canada. About the only variation from Mrs. Stowe's narrative is that the ice was "rotten" instead of being floating cakes as Mrs. Stowe gives it. Eliza broke through several times and was wet to her waist when she reached the Ohio shore.

On Oct. 15, 1874, a grand reunion was held at Newport of all who had taken part in the Underground Railroad. Many of the most eminent men and women of the nation were present. Levi Coffin, in a touching speech formally resigned the office of president of the Underground Railroad and pronounced the road insolvent.

It would take us far afield to name all the heroes in the strife. In the midst of persecution they stood foursquare to every wind that blew. The two publications which above all others advanced the cause were Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Garrison's The Liberator. The prophet, Garrison, nailed to his masthead the will known words:

"I am in earnest. I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch and I will be heard."

And he was heard. Uncle Tom's Cabin was translated into every known language and dramatized in every capital of the world. Its effect was untold. When Mr. Lincoln was introduced to Mrs. Stowe, he playfully said, "And this is the little woman who cause the war."

New Problems Arise

The apostles of universal liberty besieged Congress with petition after petition. "Failure after failure only served to inspire them with fresh courage and more vigorous determination." And nobly they won. It is a curious fact that one generation crucifies its prophets and the next build monuments to them. Virginia may yet see the day when she begs the bones of John Brown.

We never solve one problem without creating another. We prohibit the saloon but we have the bootlegger with us. Emancipation wiped out slavery but we have race prejudice to deal with. When the negro was confined to the South his social status was fixed, but as he becomes scattered over the country, race hatred is engendered, and race hatred is as impossible to reason with as the north wind.

No greater sin exists in the church. We pray for the coming of the Kingdom and we talk and act as pious as monks. We enthusiastically send our money to heathen Africa and the Orient but when the people of these lands come to our shores, they are nothing but "niggers" and "dagoes." What of the future? God alone knows! One thing we do know is that marvelous progress has been made. When Russia freed her slaves, she gave each of them three acres of land, but our slaves were turned loose with no covering but the blue sky. The old master said, "The Yankees have freed you, now let them feed you!"

But with all its handicaps, nobly has the race risen. On the day of emancipation not three per cent could read. Now more than eighty-five per cent have this accomplishment. Starting virtually with no assets, they are now paying taxes on more than two billions of dollars. They have schools and churches worth hundreds of millions.

While race hatred still runs high, we must believe that a better day is dawning. The best is yet to be. The golden age is in the future and not in the past. God put the nation on the operating table and cut away the cancer. It was costly; it was severe; but it was worth while. There is mercy in the surgeon's knife. The forces of trade and travel are welding us together. The smoke stacks of Birmingham, Ala., send greetings to the smoke stacks of Pittsburgh. The Blue and the Grey are willing to throw the gentle mantle of charity over the past and rally to Old Glory.

Think of it – a race that has produced orators that can stand on any platform, scholars that will rank with the best, musicians and artists that will stand with the masters – this race will not always be denied a man's chance! Surely the greatest nation on earth will not forget Noblesse Obilge.