

## “Tabor & Northern” Excursion

### DEACON ADAMS' OWN STORY

Before the Civil war, lines of travel by the public from the South to Northern states was carefully avoided by the slaves escaping from the master's plantations and seeking freedom in Canada, for they could not linger even in the North. Sympathetic Northerners helped them in any way they could, even to organization of what were termed “underground railways.” These were night-hauling accommodations, mostly farm wagons, conveying the blacks under camouflaged light loads of hay or straw, from one friendly home to another upon less frequented highways. Slight publicity attended these operations and numberless blacks thus obtained freedom in remote Northern states or in Canada.

Several such lines traversed Iowa north and south, one through Des Moines, the immediate “stations” being the James Jordan home in Walnut township west on the Commerce road, the Isaac Brandt home at East 12th and Grand avenue, across the street east of the present location of the State Historical building, and the third at Uncle Tommy Mitchell's tavern home at Apple Grove near the east line of Beaver township. These night stopovers on the “underground line” that freighted their black cargo northward, were some times traversed by freedom-loving sympathizers, one often being John Brown from Kansas, who eventually lost his life in the traffic.

Another such “line” in the west section of Iowa was known as “the Tabor and Northern,” about which many tales have been written and related. One living actor in an interesting drama relating to this “line” remained a resident of Tabor for many years in the person of Deacon S. H. Adams, the town's pioneer furniture dealer, who told of an early excursion party over the

Tabor & Northern—perhaps the first of many similar ones.

In 1903, Mr. Adams related incidents of his "excursion," saying that he then was the only survivor of the trip taken on July 6, 1854, now one hundred years and more ago, when intense feeling was hourly fomenting in this country over the slavery question, and giant forces later contended in its settlement. One such event was directed by seven men who actively engaged in the plot of befriending five negro slaves by spiriting them to the Nishna river east of Tabor and from there two more taking them to another point further on in the state.

Giving individual names, Deacon Adams said that he and Jesse West were the prime movers in the enterprise. West, who ran a blacksmith shop, was the father of Arthur T. West. Assisting was John Hallam, whose widow later resided in Tabor with her daughter, Mrs. W. H. Wyant; James K. Gafton, a cousin of George B. Gafton, one of the founders of Tabor college, and Henry, a young and enthusiastic Irish lad who was an apprentice in West's blacksmith shop. These comprised the party of five. One of the two men who were to receive the slaves on the east side of the Nishna river was William Clark, a Mills county old settler who entered the land where the cemetery was later located, his son, C. W. Clark afterward in business at Randolph. The other was Cephas Case, also an old pioneer of Mills county, who resided near Patrick's mill on Silver creek.

#### THE STORY OF THE RAID

Late in the afternoon of July 4, 1854, there arrived in Tabor from the south a small immigrant train. The party consisted of a Mormon elder by the name of Dennis, his wife and daughter, and six negro slaves. They were from Mississippi and were headed for Salt Lake City. They camped just west from where the postoffice afterward stood.

While one of the blacks was at a well getting water,

he was asked if he knew he was on "free" soil and if they desired to be free. At this time the line separating the slave state of Missouri from the free state of Iowa ran through the center of Fremont county. This was only 12 miles south of Tabor—Sidney and Percival, too, being just north of the line.

The blacks desiring their liberty, a rescuing party was hastily organized that night in Jesse West's blacksmith shop. This historic structure (later partially rebuilt) was used as a portion of S. P. McCormick's barn. At that time it stood on Main street where Walling's clothing store stood later.

It was nearly one o'clock that night before the Mormon elder and family were sound enough asleep so that it would be safe to steal away with his slaves. Only five blacks were taken, a man and his wife, each aged about 40, and their little girl four years old and a nursing babe, also a bright young man about 21 years old. This lad had a splash of white blood in his veins and Dennis had proposed to shine in Salt Lake society with the boy as his colored coachman. A woman aged 50—an old family servant—was left behind as it was feared she could not be trusted with the secret.

The party drove to the Nishna river east of Tabor to a point near Randolph. Here in the dead of the night they crossed on a huge cottonwood tree that had fallen across the river, Deacon Adams carrying the two little children.

#### PILOTED BY CASE AND CLARK

On the east side of the river they were met by two men—Cephas Case and Wm. Clark, who had been previously appointed. Stealthily they made their way in a northeasterly direction, staying all night near Lewis in Cass county. Here they took breakfast on the morning of July 6th with a Methodist missionary named Hitchcock who was stationed at a place called "Injun Town."

Arriving at an old crossing point on the Des Moines river not far from Oskaloosa, the fleeing slaves were

hospitably cared for by some Quakers and Wesleyan Methodists. In the meantime Case and Clark had returned.

The blacks were next heard of in Peoria, Illinois, where a sister of the Rev. John Dodd wrote of them being at her church over Sunday. Later on they were known to have crossed Lake Erie at Detroit into Canada—the haven of runaway slaves.

#### GREAT EXCITEMENT AT TABOR

Of course there was something doing in Tabor the next day. Early on the morning of the 5th, Dennis missed his slaves. He aroused the town. As there were many sympathizers in that region, he soon had a crowd of men, boys and dogs, ready to go on a slave hunt. During the day a man arrived in Tabor who had met the fugitives. Dennis and his men set out in that direction, crossing Walnut creek only an hour behind them at the old Hawthorne. But here they lost the trail.

Dennis then went to Chicago, advertising in the papers, offering \$400 reward for the slaves and \$400 more for Case and Clark, dead or alive. He soon returned to Tabor, greatly disgusted with the treatment.

#### ONLY THE FIRST ONE

This incident was only the first of many exciting ones that followed. After that, many a runaway slave was helped on to Canada by the friendly hands of Tabor people. One day a party of slave catchers who had been up into Iowa and were returning to Missouri with their captives stopped at Tabor for dinner. While the whites were in the hotel eating, a rescuing party stole their blacks and ran them over the Nishna where they were concealed in timber for several days, finally making good their escape. At another time two girls were stolen from Nebraska City and brought across the river near Percival. Soon after, a mob of 60 men armed with hickory clubs came across and ransacked every house they came to in search of the runaways. A few weeks later the owner found the girls in a Chicago hotel, but was not permitted to take them.

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