

*Sometimes the reward is the journey itself, not the destination. That was true for historian Tom Morain when he tried to connect the dots between two events in early Ringgold County. The arrival of a strongly antislavery family coincided with a confrontation with a slave owner on Iowa territory.*

*Were the incidents connected? Morain uncovered a fascinating drama unfolding on the prairies of southern Iowa, but not necessarily the plot that he had hoped to document.*

*In this case, how the project progressed is a worthy story in itself.* —The Editor

## A History Mystery in Ringgold County

by Tom Morain

**R**amsey Farm is a living history attraction at Lesanville in Ringgold County, about five miles east of Mt. Ayr on Highway 2. The farm used to be the home of George and Jennie Vance. Their nephew, Paul Ramsey, has fond memories of the childhood summers he spent there, and today he wants to provide children some of the same rural experiences. He acquired the farm with its historic barn and added a country schoolhouse, church, and general store. Lamoni, home of Graceland University, is some 15 miles south and east. Wondering if there would be internship opportunities for my Graceland students, I visited Ramsey Farm.

That meeting turned out to be Chapter 1 of a history mystery. Out of curiosity, I began to explore the history of Lesanville, a stop on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy (CB&Q) railroad line with a post office and a few stores. The town was named after numerous Lesan families who settled the area.

At this point in the adventure, I had not discovered how many Lesans and Lesan-in-laws and Lesan-in-laws-in-laws I was dealing with. That deficiency was soon rectified. With the help of Paul Ramsey, now 87 and living in Newport Beach, California, I came to a new appreciation for the vital importance of family ties on the frontier—and of the incredible potential of the internet to uncover those connections.

When I started my internet search, luck was with



Settlement was sparse in Ringgold County in 1857. The county lies on the border with Missouri.

me. I quickly located a very complete Lesan family tree (Paul's mother was a Lesan) dating back to 1702 in Maine with occasional anecdotes about individual family members. I learned, for example, that the silver bell in the spire of their church had been cast in Paul Revere's workshop in the 1790s. And in 1825, Paul's great-great-something-grandfather "was crossing near the upper bridge in Belfast Harbor, Maine, in a boat laden with wood." The boat capsized in the winter water and Edmund "became so chilled by exposure that he survived but a few moments after being rescued."

To identify the first Lesans to settle in southern Iowa, I started with Paul Ramsey's generation and worked backward through the family tree. Paul's mother, Madge Adelia Lesan, had married Theodore Ramsey. She and her eight siblings were the children of Burrirt and Molly (McLaren) Lesan. Burrirt's father (Paul's great-grandfather) was George W. Lesan, the first Lesan in Ringgold County, or so I thought at the time.

George had ridden out from Illinois in December 1854 to locate farmland. He stopped back at the land office in Chariton to enter tracts for his own family, his brother David's, and sister Harriet's. The three families and some unmarried younger brothers moved together to Ringgold County the following spring, in 1855.

There were lots of Lesans, and keeping track of the various family lines presented its challenges. Brothers George and David Lesan married two sisters, Me-

lissa and Sybil. The sisters were also named Lesan as they were the brothers' first cousins. Including sister Harriet Lesan Lee and her husband, Carlos, the three families lived together while they helped build each other's houses and get in a first crop. The Lesans were not frontier loners; they formed a closely knit family unit. I was just beginning to learn how extensive and cohesive that family network really was.

Scanning the various lists of Lesan children, I spotted a name that brought me up short. Owen Lovejoy Lesan was born in Ringgold County in 1859, the son of David and Sybil. Bells went off in my mind. Was the Lovejoy name significant? You bet!

The original Owen Lovejoy was a fiery abolitionist congressman from Illinois. Owen was the brother of martyred newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, killed by a mob in 1837 in Alton, Illinois, for his outspoken antislavery views. I wondered: Why did Sybil and David name their infant son in Iowa after an outspoken abolitionist in Illinois?

**What does the name say about parents living only four miles north of the border with slave state Missouri in 1859, when sectional tensions were about to pull the nation apart? Today, that would be like naming a baby Nancy Pelosi in Montgomery, Alabama, or Sarah Palin in Berkeley, California. Just who were these Yankee Lesans on the Missouri border?**

Returning to other Lesan sources, I made two quick discoveries that confirmed my suspicions about Lesan family politics. The family had migrated to southern Iowa from Stark County in northwest Illinois, part of the district from which Rep. Owen Lovejoy was first elected to Congress in 1856. They certainly must have known who Lovejoy was and what he stood for.

I found another piece of evidence on the genealogy sheets. George and David Lesan's father had verifiable antislavery credentials. Several sources mentioned that a mob in Elmira, Illinois, broke into his home on a June night in 1860 and "threatened to lynch him because he was operating a station on the Underground Railroad." Probably fearing for his safety, John cleared out of Illinois shortly after the attack to join the growing Lesan clan in Ringgold County.

**N**ow here is where the story begins to get complicated. At the same time I was researching Ramsey Farm material, I was reading an excellent new book on Iowa history, Leslie Schwalm's *Emancipation Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper*

*Midwest*. The author explores the impact of former slaves migrating to Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota during and after the Civil War. In a chapter leading up to the outbreak of the hostilities, Schwalm touches very briefly on an incident in Ringgold County.

Ringgold County? My radar went up. The Littleton P. ("Tune") Allen family from North Carolina purchased land just north of the Missouri border and brought two teenage slaves, a brother and sister, with them onto Iowa "free soil." Schwalm writes: "Local residents persuaded Allen to sell the two slaves to a Missouri buyer in 1853."

That is about all she wrote, but the timing connected with my Ramsey Farm research and raised more questions. Who were those "local residents" in Ringgold County? How did they "persuade" Allen to sell his slaves? Could the antislavery Lesans have in some way been part of this effort?

Although I was compiling a convincing case for the antislavery persuasion of these New England transplants, I had as yet nothing to connect them to the confrontation with the slaveholding Allen family. Tune Allen sold his slaves in 1853, but I had no evidence of any Lesans in the county before 1855. Was there a link? I was hooked.

Another Google search for George W. Lesan took me to a page on a Ringgold County history Web site. Lesan was briefly mentioned in a short biography of Civil War veteran Andrew J. Imus, but there was nothing very substantial. It related that Imus had been working as a teenager on the Lesan farm before he enlisted at age 22 in 1862 in Company G, 29th Iowa Infantry.

The biography also reported that tragedy struck Andrew's family on the way out to Ringgold County. His father, Horatio Imus, drowned when he was thrown from a wagon and became entangled with the horses while crossing a swollen creek in Marion County. The current swept Horatio's wife, Mary, and a younger son downstream for a quarter-mile before they were rescued. The family also lost their team in the accident, a frontier tragedy indeed. Mary Imus, now a widow, continued on and settled on the tract that Horatio had purchased. Eventually, seven of her sons and a daughter would settle in Ringgold County.

"Imus" is not a common last name, and I thought I had seen it somewhere before. I returned to the Lesan genealogy site. Thanks to the wonders of the computer, with a click of the "Find" button, the word "Imus" instantly appeared highlighted. Martha Imus, the daughter of the ill-fated Horatio, was married to John A. Lesan, the older brother of George and David. John A. Lesan had come out from Illinois with his wife's family in 1854, the year

before his two younger brothers and sister. That meant that I could document that there was at least one Lesan in Ringgold County within only one year after the 1853 sale of Allen's slaves. Maybe I could yet find that link that connected the Lesans to the Allen incident.

To my great fortune, I discovered online a remarkably detailed Imus family tree with some intriguing new leads. Horatio's younger brother Hiram was helping with the move when the drowning occurred. Single at the time, he would marry the next year and settle on his own farm. Another brother also set up a household in the neighborhood close to his mother, brother Hiram, and niece Martha Imus Lesan and her husband's relatives.

**WARNING! Every family has that one great aunt known to launch, for no apparent reason, into extended soliloquies on the family tree recited in remorseless detail. If memory of her from your childhood days is too painful, you may skip the next two paragraphs. They merely document this assertion: Family connections remained strong and influenced eastern Ringgold County settlement patterns.**

I discovered still another Imus connection. Early records show that a close neighbor to these families was Levi Terwilliger. With the help of the family tree, I discerned that the Terwilligers were yet another branch of the Lesan-Imus clan. Levi's wife was Lucy Minerva Imus, a sister of the late Horatio. I had thus reconstructed a rural neighborhood of (at least) four Imus households and three Lesan families. Those family trees explain a lot about the settlement of eastern Ringgold County. George Lesan's selection of his land was not random. When he rode out in 1854 to locate land for Lesan families, he was moving into a supportive family web.

Within the next few years, a second wave of Lesans and Imuses arrived. Charles Lesan, the widowed father of Sybil and Melissa, came with more of his children. In 1860, as noted earlier, Charles's brother John, also widowed, left the Illinois mob behind as he came to Ringgold County with yet more of his children. The Imus clan grew as well and they all settled near each other. Family history was proving to be perhaps the key factor in the settlement of eastern Ringgold County.

Family history also explains early legal decisions. In the summer of 1855 a local government was formed for Ringgold County. The first case of the Ringgold County court was to probate the estate of Horatio Imus and to assign a guardian for the children. George Lesan was appointed executor and guardian for the minor Imus children. George, the brother of Horatio's son-

in-law, was apparently sufficiently "family" to take responsibility for the children's legal affairs, including Andrew Imus, whom we met earlier as a farm hand working for George. Without the benefit of the family data, we would not have known that Andrew was not just a hired hand alone on the Iowa frontier. He was living with his guardian surrounded by several families of relatives.

Still hoping to find some connection between the Lesan-Imus network and the intruding slaveholder, my heart beat faster when I discovered a political angle. In the first election for county offices in the summer of 1855, Hiram Imus was elected sheriff. (Why not run for office if you're related at least once, sometimes twice, to every voter in your precinct?) Had his victory come a few years earlier, Hiram would have been the natural spokesperson to inform the Allens that Iowa law did not recognize slavery. But alas, the incident happened two years before the election.

*"Credulous." Definition: "Ready to believe, especially on slight or uncertain evidence."*

I confess: I had grown credulous when I finally came across a local account that identified one "Milton Trullinger" as the man who confronted Allen and "persuaded" him to give up his Iowa slaves. Well, everyone knows how casual people were about spelling back then, even with family names. Of course, wasn't it obvious? Wasn't "Trullinger" just a loose spelling of "Terwilliger," and that this Milton Trullinger/Terwilliger must have been an early-arrived brother of Lucy Minerva Imus Terwilliger? Eureka! I had reached my goal of connecting the extended Lesan family with the Allen incident.

Alas! That hope went down in flames. Milton Trullinger proved to be a real person with his own distinct pedigree. The Trullinger/Terwilliger connection was a dead end. It seemed that the trail had ended: Neither Lesan nor Imus nor Terwilliger had played a part in the confrontation with Allen. Like many a history venture, my quest did not confirm my hypothesis. To the best of my data, the ancestors of Ramsey Farm played no part in the Allen slave controversy.

**And then it happened—"amazing grace, how sweet the sound"—a new angle that "saved a dead-end historian like me." Gentle reader, if you have persevered to this point, please push on a short while more, that you may yet be rewarded for your long-suffering.**

From some accounts of pre-Civil War incidents in Ringgold County, I had jotted down a note about four early settlers who were believed to have been connected with the underground railroad. One was Mil-

ton Trullinger, the settler who had confronted Allen. (I had still not forgiven him for *not* being an orthographically challenged Terwilliger.) G. K. Grimes and Charles Grimes were cited as two more. The fourth was one Stanberry Wright, who lived just north of the Lesan-Imus neighborhood and whose house was designated as the polling place in early elections.

To make a connection between the underground railroad and the Lesan family, we need to step back and look at some developments at the national level. In the Compromise of 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law that made assisting runaways a federal crime with stiff penalties. In Ringgold County, as in other frontier locations of the time, that statute depended for its enforcement primarily on the locally elected law enforcement officials.

**In 1855, the sheriff was Hiram Imus—whose extended family included a baby named after a fiery abolitionist and a man attacked by an Illinois mob for his antislavery views. I think it is safe to assume that the underground railroad in Ringgold County could safely operate without fear of interference from Sheriff Hiram Imus.**

However, while I had successfully documented the antislavery perspectives of the Lesans of Ringgold County, I had discovered no concrete steps by the family on behalf of African Americans. John Lesan Sr. had been attacked by a mob in Illinois for alleged support of the underground railroad, but there was no mention of any connection to it in Iowa.

But then I found it. It was not the Allen incident; it was better. Not only did the Lesans oppose slavery on a philosophical level, but they were willing to become personally involved in the welfare of African Americans, a radical position in that era.

**A** local history relates that toward the end of the Civil War, five blacks came north into eastern Ringgold County from Albany, Missouri, and were given their freedom, a wagon, and an old team of horses by one Mrs. Murphy. They were Sam and Sarah, their two children, Tom and Martha, and another man named George.

While we know almost nothing about them, what we do know sheds light on their new neighbors, the Lesans. The account states that the five blacks lived in a log cabin "near the Lesan school" where "the children attended school while the adults worked for families in the neighborhood." Many white farmers were willing to hire black workers during the war years when

labor was in short supply, but integrating a school in that era denotes racial attitudes far in advance of the norms of the times. In many Iowa communities, black children were shut out of public schools or segregated into inferior classrooms. In Lesanville, black and white children learned together.

Something tragic seems to have happened to the black men; the account does not explain. Whatever it was, a frightened Sarah turned to David Lesan for protection. "After Sam and George's deaths, Sarah and the children were afraid to spend the night in the cabin. They slipped into David Lesan's barn where they slept in the haymow. Upon discovering the situation, David gave them permission to live in a cabin near his home. Eventually Sarah and her children moved to Mt. Ayr." The family of Owen Lovejoy Lesan was not only philosophically antislavery but also personally committed to the welfare of African American neighbors.

**T**he research had been a long and convoluted path. I had wanted to know more about the background of Ramsey Farm and Lesanville, but I was lured away by the siren call of a Lesan baby named Owen Lovejoy and an incident (unrelated, as it turned out) of a family who had crossed the line into Iowa with slaves. On the journey, however, I discovered a fascinating saga of an extended family migrating together to new Iowa homes and shaping an early settlement with their antislavery views.

In the process, I also strengthened my appreciation for the value of family in history. Putting the facts together would have been impossible without charts of family connections of a brother's brother marrying a sister's sister, of cousins marrying cousins, and of family resources stretching to nurture children in times of tragedy. Family history greatly enriches the study of local and even national events. Thanks to the miracle of the internet, now we historians and genealogists often have access to the "who-married-who's" without hours of driving, charges for photocopies, and motel bills for trips to distant archives and libraries.

It takes patience to map those relationships, but their value is clear. And it gives us a new appreciation for those great aunts who chanted by memory the sacred sagas when we were only pretending to listen. It is in those family narratives that so much history is rooted. ❖

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