Charlotta Pyles

by Galin Berrier

Not many of the freedom seekers stayed in Iowa. Among those who settled here were Charlotta and Harry Pyles, with 11 of their 12 children. Their story was told many years later by the daughter of Mary Ellen Pyles, their youngest child.

Harry Pyles, fair-skinned and blue-eyed, was a free man. His wife, Charlotta (*above*) with high cheek bones, copper complexion, and straight black hair—perhaps resembling her Seminole Indian mother—was a slave on the plantation of a Mr. Gordon, near Bardstown, Kentucky. In such marriages, a child's status was determined by that of the mother, so all 12 of their children were also slaves.

When Gordon died in 1853, he willed Charlotta and her children to his daughter with the understanding that, consistent with the principles of their Wesleyan Methodist faith, she would set them free. But her two brothers, who did not share their sister's religious views or antislavery convictions and were jealous of her inheritance, kidnapped Charlotta's son Benjamin and sold him to a slave trader.

This treachery convinced Gordon's daughter that Charlotta and her other children would be safe only if they were taken from Kentucky to a free state.

With the aid of a white clergyman from Ohio, a Rev. Claycome, Gordon set out in the early fall of 1853 in an old covered wagon drawn by six horses. The party also included, besides Charlotta and Harry Pyles, their 11 remaining children; a small daughter and son belonging to their eldest daughter, Julia; and three small sons of another daughter, Emily. Julia's and Emily's husbands were slaves on other plantations so had to be left behind.

Gordon's party rode to Louisville and then boarded a steamboat for St. Louis. There a white man named Stone offered to guide them north to freedom for $100. No sooner were they on their way than Stone demanded an additional $50, threat-

John Ross Miller

by Galin Berrier

Dozens of runaway slaves from Missouri came through Iowa, lived among us only briefly, and then moved on, leaving behind no evidence they had ever been here. Only occasionally do we know that their first names were John and Archie, or Aunt Polka. Names of couples, like John and Mary Walker or Sam and Dorcas Fulcher, are even less likely to be known. So you can imagine my excitement when I came upon the story of one fugitive slave in Iowa with no fewer than three different names.

John Ross Miller was born a slave in Kentucky and known as "John Graves" in Missouri, where his master, a Mr. Graves, had moved from Kentucky in 1854. In 1861, John and three other young men—Aleck Nichols, Andy Hayes, and Henderson Hays "borrowed" two horses and two mules from the Graves plantation near Maryville, Missouri, and headed north to Iowa. They traveled at night and hid in the daytime; two days' riding brought them to Winterset in Madison County at about one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in late October. When some men in town tried to apprehend them, a crowd of sympathizers freed them, gave them something to eat, and sent them off the next evening to Indianola.

John and his companions even-