

In 1959 Jeannette Mather Lord wrote down her childhood memories of an African American who had escaped slavery and later made Springdale, Iowa, his home.

Thomas W. Jenkins

by Jeannette Mather Lord

UnCLE Tom [Jenkins] was the only colored person among my friends. To me he stood for the whole oppressed black race who had suffered through the cruelty of the white people. I had to expiate those wrongs. Although I saw Uncle Tom probably every day of my childhood, never did I lose my sense of wonder and awe.

Each year Uncle Tom would come to school with his black and tan terrier, Dinah, to tell us children the story of his life. Each child that day brought special things begged at home for him: a glass of jelly, an apple, a warm muffler, or a gay kerchief. No memory of my childhood is more vivid than that of this kindly old man trying to make this group of primary children understand the suffering of the mind of the slave even when there was no suffering of body. Dinah, looking up in his master's face, would punctuate the tale with whines, for his master was in distress and to Dinah that was beyond canine endurance.

Uncle Tom's first memory was of hiding in the bushes and seeing the foreman flog his father who was tied to a post. Taking refuge with his mother, he begged to know why white people were masters and the blacks were slaves. She hushed his cries and with tragic earnestness tried to drive all hate and thought of revenge out of her son's heart. They were slaves; acceptance of their lot was a necessity; hatred, rebellion, thoughts of revenge only brought more trouble and suffering, not only to themselves but to their loved ones.

"Mammy," he said, "when I get to be a man I'll not be a slave. I'm bound to run away and be a free man."

Sadly his mother answered, "My child, if you have such thoughts as those never let anyone know it."

This was in Culpepper County, Missouri. After being forty years a slave, Uncle Tom escaped. It was

in the fall of the year. He slept in the daytime and traveled at night, following the North Star. Twice he ventured to approach a farmhouse to beg for food. The first time the woman set the dogs on him, and it was difficult to shake them off his trail. The second time the housewife invited him into the kitchen, set a chair for him and went ostensibly for food but in reality to call the men.

Uncle Tom, sensing danger, ran out just as the husband with a gun, accompanied by his son, came around the corner of the house. The man shot several times before Uncle Tom reached the shelter of a cornfield in which he eluded them. After that he kept away from people.

How he found Springdale, I have often wondered. Only when he reached the community where the women wore gray gowns and bonnets and the men broad-brimmed hats did he dare show himself. Rumor, traveling by grapevine in Missouri, had said there would he find safety and be helped on his way.

He arrived late in the year, having had nothing to eat but the raw field corn since leaving his master in Missouri three months before. He had suffered much from the cold. His feet were frozen and in such condition that his boots had to be cut off. Some time was



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spent in recuperating. He worked as he could to pay for his board and when fit to travel went on his way to Canada and freedom.

It was after the war that Uncle Tom returned to Springdale to live, buying the house just east of the schoolhouse. Of his family I know nothing except that at intervals a daughter would come to live with him. She so vigorously cleaned house and as vigorously used her tongue that before long Uncle Tom would decide that he was happier by himself and the daughter would leave until next summoned. Except for these visits, Uncle Tom lived alone with his cow, sometimes a calf, his chickens, ducks and Dinah. The house was used in common by all. I cannot say that I ever saw the cow in the house, but I have seen the calf in the kitchen drinking from a dish placed on a chair. In the summer the door stood open and the fowls and animals crossed the threshold at will.

On Sabbath, or First Day, Uncle Tom went to Quaker Meeting. Dinah is the only dog I have seen attend divine worship, but inseparable from his master, he would follow him into the pew and never cause any disturbance beyond the excitement among the children as he and Uncle Tom entered. Being prompt was not one of Uncle Tom's virtues. Just as the minister (for by this time the Friends in Springdale had grown progressive enough to have a minister) reached sixthly, or perhaps lastly, when we children had given up hoping for an end and were sure the clock had stopped, Uncle Tom and Dinah would make their way to the empty pew nearest the door. From our family pew we lost no detail of this entrance. Uncle Tom was always a person of romance. We delighted in his kindly face and picturesque figure in his silver gray suit, bright bandanna, soft broad-brimmed gray hat, showing beneath it a fringe of white hair. He never took off his hat in meeting except during a prayer, not even in the long silence following the sermon.

At the time of the early Friends in England, to remove a hat in the presence of others was an act of servility or, at least, a recognition of inferiority. Believing that all men are equal in the sight of God, the early Friend wore his hat in the presence of all people, even the king and other high officials. He wore it in court and in meeting, but he removed it when he prayed. It was definitely Quakerly for Uncle Tom to wear his hat during the service and symbolic of his recognized equality with his neighbors. Here no one wished Uncle Tom to pay "hat honor."

When my mother had typhoid fever, every morning before breakfast Uncle Tom, having walked a mile and a half to our home, known as Evergreens, would appear at the kitchen door to inquire how the "missus" was. Mother gave orders to the cook to invite him into the kitchen for breakfast, but he refused even a cup of coffee.

On our way to town, we frequently found Uncle Tom out on the "horseblock" watching for us. Would we stop on our return for a basket of fruit, always ripe before ours?

One day he questioned Mother on how to raise ducks. This was a surprising inquiry from one so successful. Sensing his seriousness, Mother told him in great detail her understanding of the problem. He asked many questions. Finally fully satisfied that Mother knew how to care for ducks, he asked permission to present us children with a duck and her newly hatched brood. The ducks thrived and because of their unusually brilliant coloring were our delight.

The years accumulated for Uncle Tom. The time came when he could no longer care for himself. Even now he could not live with his daughter. He sold his tiny place and, with the proceeds and his savings, went to the county farm as a paying guest. He was happy there, living to a ripe old age, full of quiet dignity, a respected and self-supporting member of the community. Once a year he would receive an invitation to visit Uncle William for a week-end to attend again our meeting where he would see all his friends.

In the Springdale Cemetery is his grave with the inscription on the tombstone:

Thomas W. Jenkins

Called as a slave

Richard Lewis

Died Dec. 9, 1902

Aged 83 years old

This excerpt is taken from Jeannette Mather Lord, "John Brown: They Had a Concern," *West Virginia History*, 20:3 (April 1959), 163-83. It appears here with the permission of the West Virginia Archives and History.