

## Comment by the Editor

### SLAVERY IN IOWA

The story of the Emancipation Day celebration at Fort Madison in 1942 recalls the early days in Iowaland when the shadow of slavery, that "peculiar institution", lay across the area of the Louisiana Purchase. Slavery was the antithesis of democracy, freedom, and individual responsibility — three characteristics which undergirded the frontier — but it satisfied a perverted human desire to exploit the labor of the less fortunate.

That the shadow of slavery did cross the prairies of Iowa is indicated by frontier incidents, by census records, and by court decisions. The first "slave" mentioned in Iowa history was the young Indian lad given to Father Marquette by the Indian chief at the mouth of the Iowa River. Indians frequently spared women and children of their enemies, keeping them as servants, wives, or adopted children.

When the first white traders, soldiers, miners, and government representatives began to sift into the Iowa area, a few brought Negro slaves with them. The Missouri Compromise had prohibited



slavery north of Missouri, but the frontier paid scant attention to legal technicalities. Isaac R. Campbell, living on the present site of the city of Keokuk in 1834, had with him a slave named John who, it was said, was saving money to buy his freedom. Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, who came to Fort Des Moines near the mouth of the Des Moines River in 1834, had a mulatto slave woman as a family servant. She left Iowa with the Kearny family, still a slave.

When the Methodists at Dubuque built the first church in Iowa in 1834, three contributors are described as "collered", two donating twenty-five cents and one fifty cents. All three were said to be slaves. Some four years later a pioneer named Shapley P. Ross brought to Bentonsport two Negro slaves. He later sent the woman back to Missouri and the man ran away. About the same time Josiah Smart, an educated man who had chosen life on the frontier with an Indian wife, purchased two female slaves in Missouri and kept them as servants at his home at the Indian agency on the site of Agency. A contractor who built some of the buildings is also said to have brought two women slaves to do the cooking for his crew.

After the establishment of the Territory of Iowa in 1838, the status of the few slaves in the area was questioned. In 1839 a Missouri slave



owner attempted to repossess a slave named Ralph whom he had permitted to go to Dubuque to earn money with which to purchase his freedom. In the first decision it rendered the Territorial Supreme Court declared that Ralph was not a fugitive slave because he had come to Iowa with the permission of his master and he was not a slave under the Iowa law because Iowa did not recognize slavery. He had defaulted on the terms of a contract, but slavery was not a penalty for that.

When the census was taken in 1840 the enumerator reported one hundred and seventy-two free colored persons in Iowa Territory, about one-third in Dubuque County. In spite of the Missouri Compromise and the decision of the Iowa Supreme Court in the Ralph case, he also listed sixteen slaves in Iowa, all in Dubuque County. Was Ralph still listed as a slave? There is no record.

No slaves were recorded in the census of 1850, but the Dred Scott decision of 1856 again threw the shadow of slavery across the country, until the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment made freedom the law of the land. There was once slavery in Iowa; it might be well for all Iowans, white as well as Negro, to celebrate its disappearance.

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