

## Commemorating Emancipation

Thursday, August 27, 1942, was a hot, humid day in Fort Madison, Iowa. A carnival was in full swing along the river front. Hundreds of lights flickered on the ferris-wheel and merry-go-round while the monotonous music blended with the raucous noises of the barkers, the voices of excited children, and the overtones from the milling crowds of people.

A scant four blocks away from the carnival stands and the Father of Waters, in Old Settlers' Park, the major share of Fort Madison's Negro population — with a considerable number from Burlington, Ottumwa, and Keokuk — were participating in an all-day celebration in commemoration of Emancipation Day.

Under the auspices of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Fort Madison, pastored by the Reverend A. L. Preston, the people were revelling in this day which one of their group said "really and genuinely belongs to us as American Negroes." There was historical significance in this celebration on the banks of the Mississippi River for Iowa had furnished a soil in which freedom could develop.



On December 28, 1846, Iowa became the twenty-ninth State of the Union and the fourth commonwealth to be created out of the Louisiana Purchase. The three States previously carved from the Purchase — Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri — all permitted slavery, thus making Iowa the first free State to be organized from the magnificent territory secured from Napoleon in 1803.

Historically Iowa had received the heritage of freedom from the old Northwest Territory. The prohibition of slavery in the Iowa area was proclaimed by the Missouri Compromise, and in 1839 the Supreme Court of the Territory of Iowa, in its first decision, ruled that slavery was prohibited in Iowa and that the laws "should extend equal protection to men of all colors and conditions". The Constitution of 1846 declared in forceful language: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this State." The Constitution of 1857 included the same prohibition.

Just how important freedom was regarded by the early Iowa pioneers was well defined by the brilliant Congregational minister of Burlington, the Reverend William Salter, when he wrote: "To breathe the air of freedom, to live where labor was honored, and there were no slaves, was



the inspiring motive, more than any other, which led the people of Iowa to make it their home." A decade and a half after Iowa's admission to the Union the outbreak of Civil War hostilities began. Iowans immediately, and with nearly unprecedented enthusiasm, rallied to the support of the Union.

Being fully aware that emancipation must occur, President Lincoln, late in July or early in August, 1862, announced to the cabinet his determination to issue such a proclamation. Upon the advice of William H. Seward, Secretary of State, Lincoln impatiently awaited something approximating a Federal military victory as an opportune time to issue an emancipation proclamation applying to slaves in the disloyal States. The Union victory at Antietam, Maryland, on September 18 and 19, 1862, presented the desired background.

On September 22nd the President issued his preliminary proclamation to the effect that on January 1, 1863, "all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforth, and forever free". By this pronouncement President Lincoln set free 5,000,000 Negro slaves. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Con-



stitution forever prohibited the institution of slavery anywhere in the United States.

Since the time of the Emancipation Proclamation American Negroes have celebrated various dates as Emancipation Day. According to Laurence C. Jones, principal of the Piney Woods School, the date most generally observed in the southern States is January first, the date the Proclamation went into effect. September twenty-second, the date when the Proclamation was issued, is the second most widely celebrated day. In other sections of the country, other dates are used by the Negroes for the celebrations. According to *The Negro Year Book* for 1931-1932, the dates of the celebrations usually have some connection with the date that slavery happened to be declared abolished in a particular State or community. "The Negroes of Texas celebrate June 19, the date in 1865 when General Robert S. Granger, who had command of the military district of Texas, issued a proclamation notifying the Negroes of Texas that they were free. Some emancipation celebrations may have reference to the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, particularly the ratification of this amendment by an individual state. . . . The observance in Illinois and some other Middle Western states, of August 2, 3, or 4 may have to do



with the abolishing of slavery in that state on August 2, 1824."

These statements do not explain why the celebration at Fort Madison was held on August twenty-seventh; nor did the speakers give any explanation of the choice of this date. Possibly it was just a convenient date for an outdoor meeting. At any rate the celebration was held on the last Thursday in August.

Picnic tables had been pulled close together and bounteous baskets of food were rapidly disappearing. Numerous cases of pop and containers of ice cream were located near a conspicuous sign advertising "Chicken barbecue — Southern style." Happy people were participating in the hilarity of the occasion — eating, laughing, and making merry.

Neatly dressed children, scrubbed until their black faces and arms fairly shone, raced about with ample supplies of food in both hands and mouths, doing their share toward having a glorious day. William Shepherd, assistant chairman, and Lillian Shepherd, secretary, of the Bethel congregation, were efficiently keeping the activities moving along. At dusk the supper hour came to an end. The tables were cleared and the few who had to leave did so, but quietly and quickly some seventy-five colored citizens gathered around



the circular bandstand to listen to the speeches of the evening.

The invocation was given by the Reverend Mr. Parker from Ottumwa who prayed fervently "for the boys who have gone — some to the North, some to the South, some to the East, and some to the West. Bless those who are directing the affairs of the government . . . remembering the stories that have come down to us of the days of bondage, tonight we have come together here to give Almighty God thanks for his kindness and goodness."

The first speaker of the evening was L. C. Burton, mayor of Fort Madison, who welcomed those gathered in Old Settlers' Park. Mayor Burton spoke of the obvious unfairness of racial discrimination, reminding his listeners, however, that the public schools of the State of Iowa had so far done far better by the Negro people than had the churches. Continuing, the mayor admonished his audience, "self-pity is nearly as bad as discriminatory practices. Self-pity obliterates some things which you may have accomplished. In fact, through self-pity you might lose what you have gained by emancipation." Many of the people present had sons and husbands fighting abroad and Mr. Burton concluded his remarks by pointing out that "even though there are some inequali-



ties in the armed forces, you may rest assured that colored boys who are fighting will have the best of equipment and hospitalization, along with good and ample supplies of food."

The main address of the evening, "The Heritage of the American Negro", was delivered by the Reverend E. C. Allen, for twenty years pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Davenport, Iowa. As the minister took his place on the bandstand, his commanding appearance, his kindly and warm personality, and the genuine interest he manifested in his theme, seemed to dramatize, temporarily at least, his entire race. Tall and handsome, possessed of a rich, full voice, the speaker recalled the memorial erected by the children of Israel beyond the Jordan River and declared that the Negroes, like the Israelites, should be prepared to explain "when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean you by these stones?" The minister reminded his listeners that the black man possessed, by nature, a religious personality. He emphasized that "better Negro citizenship will come from better Christian treatment — not only from those of the opposite color, but from one's own fellow-men." Southern "justice" was deplored by the speaker, who reminded those present that the mode of justice exemplified by lynching would



serve to make Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese Emperor more bold and inculcate in them a feeling of superiority over the American way of life.

In his concluding remarks the minister proudly recalled the exploits of the heroic Crispus Attucks, who led the attack which resulted in the Boston Massacre, and the "ebony giant", Black Sampson, of Brandywine Creek fame, along with other American Negro martyrs who had unselfishly given their lives for the cause of liberty and freedom. Reaching a fervent pitch the pastor drove home his final remarks. The Negro, he said, "can point to a clean record so far as the American flag is concerned. Never has the hand of the Black Man blemished the white of purity. Never has the Black Man's hand been raised in opposition to loyalty to his flag."

As the crowd settled back after this stirring address the minister of St. John's African Methodist Church in Burlington rose, lifted his arms reverently above the crowd, tilted his head so that he might look into the twinkling stars above, and pronounced the benediction on the day's activities. He closed with words that are music to the Negroes' ears, and yet have a strange interpretation in the American social order — "and now tonight we are free."

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