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Underground Railroad in Iowa

The ever-increasing number of fugitive slaves who sought to cross Iowa on their way to freedom brought the Underground Railroad into existence. Needless to say, it was not a subterranean railroad with high-speed, well-equipped, electric trains. The term "underground" was applied to the railroad because of the secrecy of its operations and the mystery with which the whole system was shrouded. Its roadbed was the ordinary highway of traffic. Its rolling stock consisted of the buggies, oxcarts, wagons, and other vehicles at the command of early Iowa settlers. Occasionally it was possible to use the steam railroad as a means of conveyance, but more often passengers travelled from station to station on foot.

There were no well lighted and comfortably furnished depots at frequent intervals along the line, nor was there a corps of persons who gained their livelihood by promoting the road or by serving as

conductors and engineers on the trains. No fare was charged and the conductors, in many instances the most influential citizens, rendered their services whenever the occasion demanded, without thought of compensation. They also supplied the depots, which varied from a room in the conductor's home to a cave in his back yard.

The Underground Railroad in Iowa was only a part of a complete system with trunk lines and branches which extended through practically all of the northern States. The main line entered the State in its southwest corner near Tabor, passed through the towns of Lewis, Des Moines, Grinnell, Iowa City, West Liberty, Tipton, DeWitt, and Low Moor, and crossed the Mississippi River at Clinton to connect with a route in Illinois.

Most of the fugitives who came from Nebraska and Missouri and entered Iowa in the southwestern part of the State first boarded the Underground Railroad at or near the town of Civil Bend (now Percival), about five miles east of the Missouri River and twenty-five miles north of the northern boundary of Missouri. From this point fugitives were conveyed to Tabor. This was a very important station because here the entire population was in sympathy with escaping slaves and practically every family was ready to do anything to help the fugitives. Sometimes the slaves were escorted to the next station on foot, sometimes they were driven in buggies or oxcarts or wagons.

In the western part of the State the problem was a comparatively simple one. The population was still quite sparse and the chances of detection correspondingly small. But it must be remembered that every person aiding a slave to escape was a violator of the fugitive slave law and as such rendered himself liable to fine and imprisonment. So even here the promoters were compelled to exercise continual vigilance lest they and their passengers be apprehended. It was necessary to have agents promptly at their posts so that no time would be lost in forwarding the passengers. Notices must be sent ahead telling of coming passengers, warnings of approaching danger must be given, and necessary funds had to be provided. The responsibility for carrying out these matters devolved upon the conductors of the road.

All along the route of the Underground Railroad were families willing to make their home a station for the refuge and forwarding of runaway slaves. It was not always possible to dispatch the passengers to the next station immediately and in such cases they were concealed in the homes of promoters, in their garrets or cellars, sometimes in caves on or near the premises, and quite frequently in outbuildings until a favorable opportunity for a "fitting" presented itself. Most of the trains were dispatched at night and indeed the darkest and stormiest nights were preferred for the operations. Sometimes passengers remained at a station for days at a time

until an opportunity for sending them on should present itself or be created by the conductor.

In this manner fugitives passed through the various towns — from Percival to Tabor, through Lewis and Des Moines to Grinnell. Here it was almost certain that the well known J. B. Grinnell would take care of the fugitives. He had a room in his home which was very appropriately called the "liberty room" and was devoted to the harboring of passengers on the Underground Railroad. No doubt this made a very comfortable station. When John Brown came to Grinnell with his band of fugitives from Missouri on that cold night in the winter of 1858-1859, it was in this room that the fugitives were cheered and given an opportunity to rest. Thus with rests at frequent intervals the fugitives continued their journey from town to town. After Grinnell came Iowa City, then West Liberty, Tipton, Low Moor, and finally Clinton.

In the eastern part of the State, Underground Railroading required great care and precaution in order to avoid detection, but the promoters were equal to the occasion and resorted to various means for forwarding the passengers. On one occasion John Brown was able to secure railroad passage for his band of fugitives. Through the good offices of William Penn Clarke, of Iowa City, and J. B. Grinnell, a box car was obtained and held in readiness at West Liberty. The fugitives were then dispatched to this place from Springdale and, after spending

the night in Keith's Mill (an old grist mill near the station), were loaded into the empty freight car. The car was then attached to a train bound for Chicago on the Rock Island Railroad. At Chicago the famous detective, Allen Pinkerton, took the party in charge and dispatched it to Detroit.

All passengers, however, were not as fortunate as this band. Most of them had to go from station to station by the slower methods of horse-drawn conveyance or on foot. At Iowa City William Penn Clarke and Dr. Jesse Bowen were always ready to aid the cause. It was in the latter's home, situated on Iowa Avenue between Governor and Summit streets, that John Brown was concealed during his last night in Iowa City when he was hard pressed by a band of men bent on capturing him because of his "nigger stealing".

After a "stop-over" in Iowa City passengers might be ticketed to one of several stations. Perhaps they could be taken to Springdale to partake of the hospitality of the Quakers, and from there to West Liberty. Perhaps conditions were favorable for making a longer run and the train might go directly to West Liberty. At this place the old grist mill which harbored John Brown's band of fugitives would probably serve as a waiting room.

The next stop was generally Tipton. For reasons known to the operators the railroad did not run into the town. As is sometimes the case with the steam railroads of to-day the depot was on the outskirts of

the village. The Humphrey home situated about two and one-half miles south of Tipton was an important station on the Underground Railroad. A member of the family has related that it was not unusual for whole families of colored folk to remain at their home over night. The next day it was Grandfather's task to carry them farther on their way. Daylight did not prevent the operations of this conductor. He would load the human freight into his wagon and cover them with blankets, thus disguising them as bags of grain.

Once more the train was in motion. On the long lonely stretches of the road between the Humphrey home and Posten's Grove — a distance of about fifteen miles — curly heads and black faces often popped out from among the "grain sacks" to survey the country through which the train was passing. When strangers appeared the command was to "duck". Needless to say the order was promptly obeyed and the passengers became part of the load of bags of grain which, to all appearances, Grandfather was hauling to the grist mill. When Posten's Grove was reached this venerable old conductor had completed his "run". He transferred his passengers to the care of other conductors who in turn relayed them to DeWitt, next to Low Moor and finally to Clinton — the last Iowa station on the Underground Railroad.

The final stages of the trip through Iowa were the most difficult and perhaps therefore the most inter-

esting. In the eastern part of the State population was more dense and hence a greater number of persons were opposed to the Underground Railroad. This necessitated greater vigilance and more detailed and complete organization. The number of persons engaged in the work was also greater in proportion to the work to be done. Some of the prominent agents in DeWitt were Captain Burdette, Judge Graham, and Mrs. J. D. Stillman. These people could be trusted to take care of the fugitives and to send them on to Low Moor when they thought conditions favorable. In this latter town were G. W. Weston, Abel B. Gleason, B. R. Palmer, J. B. Jones, Lawrence Mix, Nelson Olin, and others who were anxious to tender their services.

The guiding spirit and chief promoter of the Underground Railroad at this place seems to have been G. W. Weston. It devolved upon him especially to see that agents and stations were in readiness, to provide the necessary funds, to give warnings of approaching danger, and to advise the master of the next station about coming passengers. On one occasion G. W. Weston sent the following letter to C. B. Campbell at Clinton:

Low Moor, May 6, 1859.

Mr. C. B. C.:

DEAR SIR—By tomorrow evening's mail, you will receive two volumes of the "Irrepressible Conflict" bound in *black*. After perusal, please forward, and oblige

Yours truly,

G. W. W.

This is typical of the correspondence carried on between stations. Such were the train dispatches. They served the purpose of telling the agent at the next station of the coming of fugitives, together with a pretty accurate idea of the number; and the peculiar wording in which the information was couched often told of the age, complexion, and sex of the comers.

When the fugitives arrived in Clinton it was usually C. B. Campbell who sought a place for them to stay. Quite frequently he would secrete them in the attic of his home, a small frame building near the corner of Sixth Avenue and Second Street. On other occasions fugitives were kept in a cave, used as a cellar, in a garden belonging to J. R. and A. Bather, or in the garret of their home until the next train was ready to start. It happened at one time that two fugitive slaves — a man and his wife — were being concealed in this garret when a message was received from DeWitt that slave catchers were in hot pursuit. This place of concealment was thought to be too much suspected and it was deemed best to have a "fitting" as soon as possible.

Andrew Bather undertook to convey the fugitives out of the town. He procured for the occasion a covered family carriage which belonged to H. P. Stanley. In this he transported them to Lyons to which place C. B. Campbell had gone to hire a skiff to convey them across the river. The river was full of ice and it was only after paying a high price that

the owner of the skiff agreed to make the crossing. During this trip the woman, whose complexion was so fair as to give her the appearance of a white woman, represented herself as the owner of her husband.

Not all of the fugitives passed through the stations which we have mentioned. Many never reached any of them. There were at least three parallel lines of the Underground Railroad branching from Tabor and running eastward to the Mississippi. Besides these main lines there were innumerable branch lines and "spurs" which connected with the main lines. The presence of so many routes was due to the fact that not all of the escaping negroes entered Iowa in its southwest corner. They came into the State at various points along the southern border wherever the opportunity existed. In fact the great majority of the slaves effected their escape alone, and completed the first and in many respects the most difficult part of their journey towards freedom unaided.

Negroes talked among themselves of the land of freedom off to the north and told each other of the Underground Railroad. They knew there were hosts of friends who would help them on to ultimate freedom if they could only be reached. With this knowledge many slaves took their lives in their hands and escaped from their masters, hiding in the woods or caves by day and progressing slowly and cautiously at night trusting that somewhere they

would reach this Underground Railroad of which they had heard.

Along the southern border of Iowa were many negroes—some of them slaves and some of them free—who made it their business to aid their escaping brethren. Very often they did little more than ferry them across a stream or direct them to the home of some abolitionist friend. A negro could render such services with comparatively little risk to himself. Having once obtained the exact location of the first Underground Railroad station the traveller need only exercise precaution against being seen by his enemies. He need not fear a lack of welcome, regardless of the hour at which he might present himself to the station master. The timid and uncertain knocking at the door would invariably be recognized by the family as the signal of the arrival of a new passenger.

In the southwestern part of the State there were several short routes with initial stations at Croton, Bloomfield, Lancaster, and Cincinnati, all of which no doubt connected with some main line and had their Iowa terminals along the Mississippi. Farther east was the Quaker village of Salem, conveniently surrounded by numerous woods and streams, which made hiding in this vicinity quite easy for the negroes. At night they could proceed to almost any of the Quaker homes, for practically without exception the Quaker families were known to be friends of the escaping slaves. Through the village of Denmark,

about seventeen miles from Burlington, connection with the Underground Railroad's trunk line could also be conveniently made. Here was the home of Dr. George Shedd, a rather bold and independent operator. Practicing medicine was his chosen profession but on the side he talked abolition quite openly and privately worked slaves northward to Canada.

Not all the slaves who set out to seek their freedom attained their object. Negroes represented a considerable sum of wealth and naturally southern slave-owners were very reluctant to see their property disappear. It is small wonder then that those who suffered loss of slaves should term the Underground Railroad directors "nigger-stealers" and exert every effort to recover their property. In doing so they very often resorted to methods which put them in unpleasant positions. The story is told of Mr. Nuckolls of Nebraska City, Nebraska, who lost two girl slaves in December of the year 1858. He correctly guessed that they had escaped into Iowa and promptly began the hunt for them at Tabor.

First, he took precautions to guard the crossings on Silver Creek and Nishnabotna River over which his slaves would be required to pass on their way east. Then he began his search, but a train had promptly been fitted out and the passengers dispatched before Mr. Nuckolls arrived at Tabor so his quest availed him nothing. Knowing Tabor to be an

abolitionist center he decided to make a more thorough search believing that his slaves were hidden in one of the many stations in the town. With perhaps twenty men to aid him he began a systematic investigation of the Tabor homes — often gaining entrance only by force and violence. At one home he met with more than ordinary rebuff so he struck the remonstrating person over the head, inflicting permanent injury. The result of the search was that Mr. Nuckolls did not recover the girls, and he had several thousands of dollars worth of damages to pay besides.

The monotony of the life in the Quaker village of Salem was at one time somewhat relieved by the attempted recovery of nine escaped slaves belonging to Ruel Daggs from Clark County, Missouri. In the beginning of June of the year 1848 this band of slaves was successful in evading the patrols which Missourians maintained on the roads to the Quaker village, until they were about a mile from the town. At this point, while hiding in the bushes, they were discovered by Messrs. Slaughter and McClure, two slave catchers. Without losing any time these two men proceeded to lead their "catch" back to Missouri. They had scarcely started on their way when they met Elihu Frazier, Thomas Clarkson Frazier, and William Johnson, three stalwart Quakers from Salem. One of this party demanded that the slaves be taken back to Salem where the captors would be given the opportunity to press their claims before

the Justice of the Peace. Naturally this did not meet with the approval of Slaughter and McClure but the Quakers persisted. One of them stood his ground to the extent of putting aside his proverbial Quaker passiveness, and declared that he would "wade in Missouri blood before the negroes should be taken." Before such determination the Missourians agreed to stake the outcome on "due process of law", and the party repaired to the village.

No small excitement was created by their approach. Every citizen joined in the procession towards Justice Gibbs's office in the home of Henderson Lewelling. The room proving too small, the court adjourned to the meeting-house. After a hearing the case was dismissed because the plaintiffs were unable to show warrants for the arrest of their captives. For a moment every one seemed at a loss to know what to do next. Suddenly Paul Way called out: "If anybody wants to foller me, let him foller." Two of the negroes evidently did want "to foller" and seized the opportunity. In a few moments they were on horseback and on their way to freedom. The remaining negroes in the party were taken in charge by friends. Slaughter and McClure left the village in great anger promising to return to wreak vengeance.

A few days later a large number of well-armed Missourians paid Salem a visit. They veritably besieged the town and sent searching parties to every "nigger-stealing house". Thomas Frazier's home

was the first to be singled out for detailed investigation. As a matter of fact there were slaves hidden here, but in strict accordance with Underground Railroading methods, he was warned of the coming visit. Before the party came he "side tracked" his passengers to some nearby timber. The station master and his family were quietly eating dinner when the Missourians arrived and with curses and threats announced their purpose of searching his home. In true Quaker fashion they were quietly told to do so. The search was fruitless. Other homes were visited with as little regard to the rights and feelings of the owners and with similar results.

It is possible to tell only a part of the story of the Underground Railroad in Iowa. All the methods used in the transportation of fugitive slaves have not been described, nor have all the stations and their agents been named. To do so would be an impossible task. It must be remembered that this was an Underground Railroad. Its operations were secret. The stories that have come down to us constitute but a fragmentary record. Generally the train masters kept no dispatch books or records of train schedules or of passengers, for should such records fall into the hands of those who tried to enforce the fugitive slave law they would constitute most incriminating evidence. Enough of its story is known, however, to show that as an institution the Underground Railroad has played its part in the history of the State. Not only did it bridge the gap

between slavery and freedom for thousands of fugitives, but the hazards and adventures of the traffic served to lend fascination to the frontier life; and the story of the operation of the system gives a picture of the ideals, the character, the resourcefulness and the fearlessness of the early settlers of the State.

JACOB VAN EK