

Peter Rice

Among the older settlers in and around Gilman, Iowa, there are few, if any, who did not know Peter Rice, or, as he was better known, "Nigger Pete".

I recall him vividly, as he was the first Negro I had seen, and I associate that ebony face with all colored folks I have since met. The questions, "Where was he born, and where did he come from?" were often asked. Even Pete himself could not have answered, for no public registry was kept of slaves. He used to say, when questioned about his early life, "I was born down South some place. I didn't know nothing about the State lines. I know that it was by a lonely mountain ridge with a spring hard by. I also recollect a large woman we called 'mammy', who gave us something to eat and cooed us to sleep. The Northern soldiers came into our country, and I was hungry and I just walked away. I was scared many times for fear the master with the bulldog might come and catch me, so I kept pretty close to the captain's tent. When the regiment came North, I followed, and we crossed over the big Mississippi River. When we got on the other

side, Captain Stoddard he say to me, 'Now, sonny, you stand on the sacred soil of Iowa where slavery never existed. You are free.' That sounded good to me, and I always think what the old captain said, but I was not so sure how long the freedom might last."

It was under those circumstances that "Nigger Pete" arrived in Iowa with the returning troops after the Civil War and became a member of the William H. Stoddard family when in his teens. He could not write or read, but he was finally taught to write his name. That was as much schooling as he had. In the course of a few years he got a job with the Beale Brothers in Gilman, and remained in their employ as long as he was able to work. He soon became proficient in the care of livestock, and was useful in and about the grain house and yards of the Beale Brothers. He also developed such reliable knowledge of the value of hogs, cattle, and horses that the firm sent him into the neighboring counties to buy stock.

Many stories can be told of Pete in Gilman, where he became in a short time a sort of a prominent character in the community. A woman of his own race happened to be employed in the town, and as they were both lonely they agreed to get married. This wedding was the talk of the town and the largest wedding ever held, for the boys

furnished not only music, but also the wedding cake and presents.

Pete was always a lover of horses, and in buying cattle and hogs for the firm he drove his own team. One day a man rode a fine black mare into town, which attracted Pete's attention. He asked the man how much he wanted for this mare, and the fellow replied he would take sixty dollars in cash. Pete was not long in making this bargain, and counted out the money. The next day he purchased a saddle, and prepared to ride his favorite animal around town to show what a good purchase he had made. The mare had never been saddled so when Pete mounted she began to buck and kick, much to the enjoyment of the citizens of the town, but not so much to the satisfaction of Pete, who could not get off without being thrown. The last they saw of him that day was as the mare galloped north along the Le Grande road with Pete still clinging to the mare's neck with both arms.

After this humiliating ride he skulked in his tent for a few days devising a way to get rid of this obstreperous animal. He hoped to make a trade. Presently he found a farmer named Peter Peterson, also a lover of good horse flesh, who lived a few miles north of town and had not heard of Pete's equestrian exhibition. The boys used to say that

Pete's reason for trading off this handsome mare for a bay scrub was because she was so black lightning bugs followed her around in daylight. The trade was made, and Pete was to get ten dollars to boot. It was not long before the irate farmer returned and wanted to trade back, as the mare had kicked herself out of her harness and kicked out the front end of the wagon box. Pete never got the boot money.

Pete was often invited to go to Chicago with stock but he refused, saying that Iowa was good enough for him. Here he was a free man with the right to own property, and his oath was as good as anyone's. He was a faithful servant who always looked after the property of his employers. In the winter he would sit in the cold office all night, going out every now and then to see if the stock in the yards was all right. He was always good natured, polite, talkative, and a booster for the State where he had found good friends and a comfortable home.

With age came sickness and other cares. Though ignorant of his parentage, carried by the tides of war to a strange but hospitable land, and fearful of losing his freedom, he made the best of his opportunity. As his vision dimmed he could perceive in retrospect the misery and degradation of slavery which he had escaped. In his declining

years he was grateful for his good fortune. At last his dark eyes were closed forever.

Glimpses of such humble and unselfish lives can be found in many localities. The story of Peter Rice — his faithfulness, his love and respect for those who befriended him, and his character — is worthy of commemoration. Few who came to Iowa loved the State more or served it more loyally. Born a slave, he achieved distinction in a free society and among people of a different race.

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