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A VERMONT SKETCHBOOK

1. UNCLE TOM'S CABIN AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN VERMONT *by* CYRUS FRENCH WICKER

During the week of August 9-15, 1953, in the Dog Team Playhouse at Middlebury, there was presented the most recent, as far as is known, in the long series of stage performances of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Based on the well-known book by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which became the best seller of its time, the play likewise set an unmatched record for number of performances in the history of the American drama. The book, printed in 1852 and followed shortly by the "Key," swept the North with unbounded popularity, 300,000 copies being sold the first year and over 1,200,000 by August of 1853. The first stage production, dramatized by George L. Aiken, took place less than five months after publication.

Such overwhelming success was due not to the story itself which is now generally regarded as vague in plot, lacking in literary merit and unfair in its presentation of only the most evil sides of slavery, but rather to the circumstance that it appeared at the crucial moment in the struggle between freedom and slavery then dividing the nation on matters of the rightness of slavery itself, the admission to the Union of new slave or free states with resultant control of an equally divided Congress, and, underlying all the issue of states' rights versus federal union—conflicts which could be ended only by war between the states.

Book and play together inflamed anti-slavery feeling in the North beyond endurance and met with a storm of denial and abuse throughout the South, so bitter that Mrs. Stowe was impelled to write and publish within a year transcripts from letters and documents tending to confirm the truth of each important incident and scene. This was known as the "Key," printed in 1853, in a paper-bound edition which is now extremely rare. A copy of the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in two volumes, with autograph of Harriet Beecher Stowe, together with the Key, were loaned by the writer to the Middlebury Players during the week of performances.

How many versions of the story have been written for stage production, in how many languages and how often performed during the past century may never be known. Something may be inferred from

the fact that in the current Broadway production, "The King and I," the story of Uncle Tom, of Simon Legree, and of Eliza crossing the ice from slavery to freedom, was presented in spectacular oriental setting by the royal court players of Siam, directed by an English governess and staged for the entertainment of the children of the king; in his own country at that, halfway around the world, where color line is indistinguishable, bloodhounds very unlikely, and natural ice inconceivable. No one who witnessed the performance, whether on Broadway or in Thailand, will forget the artificial snowflakes, represented by stars of silver which, held full face or edgewise, appeared to float and fall; the direful bloodhounds (King's retainers, on all fours, wearing ceremonial costumes and pagoda-crowned headdresses, sniffing along Eliza's trail with shrill barbaric cries); Simon Legree, translated into a Siamese devil with mask and horns, and the undulating yards of pale grey silk which, their motion stilled at the bidding of a frost fairy, became the glittering sheet of ice across which Eliza fled, bearing a Siamese doll. It takes some story to survive a hundred years, traversing space and time, and the Players of Middlebury are to be congratulated in bringing a centennial memorial performance to Vermont.

It is altogether fitting that this play should have been given in the state of Vermont and in the town of Middlebury since both were prominent in the operation of that mysterious Underground Railroad by which during decades before the Civil War fugitive slaves were guided, cared for and protected in their flight across free territory into Canada. It will be remembered that George, Eliza's husband, escaped by that route.

Slaves escaping from their masters were not, under Federal law, free even in Vermont. The Vermont state constitution, adopted before admission in 1791 to the Federal Union, expressly abolished slavery among all its citizens and by a later Act, passed by the State Legislature in October, 1786, penalized the traffic in slaves, or the removal from the state of Negroes or mulattoes, by levying a fine of \$100 on each offender and ordering the sum to be paid to the injured party.

The Act recites:

all the subjects of the Commonwealth, of whatever color, are equally entitled to the inestimable blessings of freedom . . . and the *idea* of slavery is expressly and totally exploded from our free government.

On admission to the Union, as might be expected, Federal laws took precedence over this purely state legislation—at least such was

the construction placed on them by the United States Supreme Court—but this opinion was never accepted by Vermont. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, a Federal law, passed two years after the admission of Vermont as the 14th state, recognized slavery as legally existing in all states of the Union, established property rights in human beings, excluded persons of color from citizenship, and held that slaves could be legally reclaimed by their masters and returned to slavery. The first known case arising in Vermont was that of Dinah, colored, born and sold as a slave but a resident of Windsor. ("Dinah and the Slave Question in Vermont," *Vermont Quarterly*, 1953; pp. 289-292). Becoming a clear case of Federal Law versus State Constitution, one side held that Dinah was a slave *de facto* and tried to introduce in court a bill of sale. The opinion, rendered by a Vermont judge, decreed that as a citizen of the state of Vermont and in obedience to its constitution she could not be held a slave.

An iniquitous amendment to this law, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, placed fugitive slaves under exclusive federal jurisdiction, allowed U. S. commissioners to arrest fugitives of color on summary process within free territory, denied them the right of hearing in court and ordered that if captured they should be returned to their lawful owners. In case of resistance the commissioner could summon bystanders as *posse comitatus* to assist him in subduing the prisoner. Anyone failing to do so or who assisted a fugitive to escape was subject to a fine of \$1,000 and imprisonment up to six months, thus making the protection or aiding of escaped slaves extremely hazardous. A report to Congress filed at once by the Vermont Legislature retorted that this was unwarranted encroachment by the Federal Government on the sovereignty of the states by which citizens of color not only of Vermont but also of all free states could be reduced to slavery with impunity and was followed by Personal Liberty Laws passed by the Legislature. In the matter of fines, these laws set out that any person who attempted to hold a slave in *Vermont* should on conviction pay a fine of not more than \$2,000 or be incarcerated in the State prison for up to ten years.

With Federal laws, Federal agents and the Federal courts against them, armed with writs and power of arrest without trial, Vermonters stood almost alone. Armed force being unavailable, the only way to get escaping slaves into Canada, even across free territory, was "underground," a method well known to us and used throughout Europe during the last war. Hundreds of anti-slavery societies had sprung up over Vermont, and from these emerged the organization by

which fugitives were secretly aided and cared for in stations and sub-stations along the several routes, hidden by day and by night and carried on toward Canada. Of this Underground Railroad Rowland E. Robinson, Vermont's beloved author, says:

a line of the Underground Railroad held its hidden way through Vermont, along which many a dark-skinned passenger secretly traveled, concealed during the day in the quiet stations, at night passing from one to the other, helped onward by friendly hands until he reached Canada and gained the protection of that government . . . the star-guided fugitive might well feel an assurance of liberty when his foot touched the soil that in the old days had given freedom to Dinah Mattis and her child, and draw a freer breath in the State whose judge in later years demanded of a master, before his runaway slave would be given up to him, that he produce a bill of sale from the Almighty. [*Vermont: a Study of Independence*; 1892]

The Underground Railroad in Vermont had five entrances and two main routes. One led from other New England states via Brattleboro and up the Connecticut River and its affluents to Montpelier, or over the lower passes through the Green Mountains (smugglers' routes since earlier times) into the valley of Otter Creek; thence through Middlebury, Vergennes, Ferrisburg and Charlotte to Burlington, not far from the border. Another entrance was from the Hudson Valley northward through Bennington and Rutland, joining with the first at Middlebury. Both routes were overland and slow, as traffic in contraband by Lake Champlain was considered precarious. The writer's grandparents had a sub-station just off Otter Creek in the North Ferrisburg "Hollow," the main station being Rowland Robinson's home, "Rokeby." Other neighboring stations were the McNeil farm and the homes of E. H. Converse and Elijah Alexander in Charlotte. The Anti-Slavery Society of Ferrisburg and vicinity, of which Mr. Robinson was at times chairman, had 200 registered members.

Into the tense situation that persisted in the decade preceding the Civil War, came "Uncle Tom's Cabin," accentuating dramatically the fate of the three principal characters: Uncle Tom brutally whipped to death on the plantation, Eliza fleeing the hard way, and her husband escaping by aid of the Underground Railroad. As a child the writer was shown by his grandmother the small room back of the woodshed, reached only through an opening from the attic above, itself covered by movable planks and the huge iron soap kettle, where fugitives might spend the days in security. At such times Father would relate how he, with a hundred or so villagers from the "Hollow" would gather each Wednesday at the postoffice to await the arrival of the

post courier from nearby Vergennes, bearing the latest issue of the *National Era*, the weekly publication in which the enthralling story of Uncle Tom was serialized. Years later, a boy of eighteen, his diary records how he watched the arrival of that same courier, his horse lathered with hard riding, shouting even before his bundle of mail was thrown to outstretched hands that Sumter had been fired upon. The diary stopped; for on that day he formed in line with others and like another ancestor, William Wicker of Shoreham, who drew three days "rations" under Ethan Allen at the taking of Ticonderoga, himself drew first rations in the Vermont militia.

Matters in Vermont had before that time come to a showdown with the federal administration. By the Dred Scott Decision [*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 19 Howard 393; 1856] the United States Supreme Court held, 5 to 4, that Scott (and hence all Negro slaves and their descendants) by reason of his color could not be a citizen of the United States or of the free state (Illinois) where he resided; that as such he was property, had no personal rights whatever but remained a slave and must be returned to Missouri, a slave state. The decision split a Congress already divided between free and slave states and produced violent repercussions in Vermont. Let praise be given to our ancestors who, when the momentous decision was announced, met in Montpelier in extraordinary session and passed a Resolution denouncing the Federal Government and Judiciary for denying to the governments and peoples of the several states the right to determine for themselves the status of their citizens and affirmed that such opinions of the Supreme Court had no binding authority upon the people of the sovereign State of Vermont. In words that sing like a flung lance our Vermont legislators, the writer's grandfather among them, went on record:

NOTWITHSTANDING the Decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, any slave entering the territory of the free and sovereign state of Vermont became thereby a free man, and the State of Vermont would defend his freedom by force of arms if necessary.

[*Report of the Select Committee on Slavery, Dred Scott Decision; Acts and Resolves, 1858, pp. 42-44, in the writer's library in Ferrisburg.*]

Though few Vermonters realized it, this was secession, three years before South Carolina even thought of it. No armies marched, no Fort Sumter was fired upon, but as in Europe during World War II, when tyranny was overpowering and arrogant, Vermonters hesitated not an instant to proclaim state sovereignty in matters of conscience

and common humanity, but upheld their state constitution in abolishing slavery and extended that right of personal freedom not only to its own citizens of color but also to such other Americans as came seeking its protection. Thanks to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Underground Railroad the fugitives were passed by Vermonters through to freedom under the very eyes of Federal authorities armed with formidable writs and legal penalties and, when the time was ripe, Vermonters fought, without secession, in Congress and out, for state sovereignty within Federal Union, at whatever hazard and whatever cost.

2. ON THE TRAIL OF BALLADS *by* HELEN HARTNESS FLANDERS

From time to time, Dr. Arthur W. Peach has requested articles about ballads from the Helen Hartness Flanders Ballad Collection at Middlebury College. I have reread a few of the articles lest I repeat myself here.

All of them tell of the Vermont Committee on Traditions and Ideals, of which Dr. Peach was chairman, serving the Vermont Commission on Country Life, in 1930. He assigned to me the task of finding old songs as learned by ear and sung in Vermont. What one singer knew from overseas or here, say in pioneer days, and had cared to remember from older generations, should be available in book form to other Vermonters. Dr. Peach reasoned thus, because he had heard such traditional singing. I, in turn, knew only music from the printed page. I expected to find very little of this hand-me-down singing.

The field proved overwhelmingly rich. I was granted an assistant, Mr. George Brown of Melrose, Massachusetts. We went our separate ways during the summer of 1930. The most important songs from our joint collecting were published in *Vermont Folksongs and Ballads* the following year. My work was ended; the committee disbanded; we had done our part. But with those folksongs in book form, in the hands of readers the country over, the mails were bringing me many additional songs it was a delight to recover. No one else was preserving this heritage for Vermont. I happened to be the focal point for much correspondence as well as for new material within the state. I continued collecting. By 1940, Miss Marguerite Olney, an experienced musician, became my associate. Shortly she became an experienced ballad-collector. The collection expanded. New England traditional songs were added. I deeded the collection as a cumulative gift to Middlebury College in 1941. Now in 1953, there are some 8000 and more items at the Carr Fine Arts Building in Middlebury.