

# The Underground Railroad in Monroe County

By HENRY LESTER SMITH, Ph.D., Bloomington, Ind.

AS has been the case in too many questions of historical interest, particularly those having only a local bearing, so in the case of the Underground Railroad in Monroe county, no record has been preserved from which an account could be written. This question has been neglected, until now there are very few people living who have any first hand information to give.

The source of the material for this paper, therefore, has been largely the statements of people who remember the stories told by those who were actually engaged in aiding runaway slaves to escape to Canada. An attempt has been made to check any errors that may have slipped in through a lapse of memory by comparing the statements of several different individuals concerning each particular bit of information. Particularly was this method used in connection with the story of "Tony," about whom more will be stated later in the paper. Documents, newspaper clippings, and letters bearing on the subject of the Underground Railroad I was unable to find. About a dozen people were consulted who remember something about specific instances of aid offered to runaways, but I was able to find only three people who had actually taken part in the escape of slaves. These persons were W. C. Smith, who was rather intimately connected with several cases, T. N. Faris, who helped escort to safety the last runaway that passed through this section, and Thomas Kilpatrick, who was one of several into whose custody was placed a negro that was escaping by way of a Monon train.

Generally speaking, the people of Monroe county were rather luke-warm in regard to escaping slaves. They weren't actively engaged one way or the other. The small group of people that was actively engaged in aiding fugitives came originally from South Carolina. Some of them were influenced to

move from South Carolina largely because of the slavery question. In fact, the church with which they were connected, the Reformed Presbyterian church, was undergoing a rupture, one of the factors of which was the question of holding slaves. The break in the church came in 1833. Those who remained in the church were staunch Abolitionists and many of them who had not already left South Carolina before that time left then. Many, however, had noticed the drift of things, and had moved before the break came. Monroe county, Indiana, was one of the stopping places. Several of these people entered land in Monroe county, as early as 1816. From that time on they continued to arrive until a few years before the Civil War. When the split in the church came in 1833 there were in Monroe county members of both factions. Two churches resulted from the rupture. Among the people here, though the slavery question was not a paramount issue in the break-up, practically all were agreed on the slavery question, so they continued to work together in the interests of Abolition.

The main motive actuating the majority of those who aided escaping slaves in this community then was a religious motive. That accounts for the persistency with which they carried on their work and for the risks they ran in performing what they considered their duty.

Among those in the vicinity of Bloomington who took the most active part in aiding escaping slaves were Thomas Smith, James Clark, Rev. J. B. Faris, John Blair, Samuel Gordon, Samuel Curry, William Curry, Robert Ewing, John Russell, D. S. Irvin, W. C. Smith, T. N. Faris, Austin Seward, and John Hite, while they didn't take an active part, were nevertheless in sympathy with the people who were doing the work, and thus encouraged and supported the cause. The greatest activity of all of these men was between the dates of 1845 and 1860. Many of them were active only a few years before 1860. Thomas Smith and James Clark were leaders in the movement from the very beginning.

The leading "slave catchers," as they were called, who were active in this community were William and Jess Kersaw and Cornelius Mershon through the entire period, and Isaac and James Adkins during the latter part of the period.

The first station immediately south of the Bloomington station was at Walnut Ridge, a few miles this side of Salem, Indiana. There were some Reformed Presbyterians at that place who were interested in aiding slaves to escape. Rev. J. J. McClurkin, who was pastor there for a while, was active in the cause. Isaiah Reed, a member of the congregation there, came to Bloomington several times with negroes. A great many people in that community harbored and fed the negroes while they stopped there for a rest, and for hiding. Farther south still, at Washington, Davies county, lived William Hawkins, colored, a son-in-law of Knolly Baker, a barber in Bloomington. Hawkins, being acquainted as he was with the people of Bloomington who would help the negroes, gave the negroes directions and assistance on their journey north toward Bloomington. In the early days of the Underground Railroad the first station north of Bloomington was at Mooresville, a Quaker settlement. A little later on some Reformed Presbyterians moved near Morgantown and after that Morgantown became an intermediate station between Bloomington and Mooresville. At Morgantown James Kelso and John Cathcart took charge of the negroes. Mr. Cathcart usually harbored them until an opportunity could be found to take them to Mooresville. Mr. Kelso took the negroes from Morgantown to Mooresville. He sometimes even came to Bloomington to help negroes through to Morgantown. Generally, however, the Bloomington people looked after that part of the work.

The negroes usually made their escapes during the summer time or the fall, because they could get their food easily, being able to live on fruits and thus avoid stopping at houses where they might be detected and captured. Occasionally, however, they came through in the winter time. The case of Joel Bee is the most striking example of this kind, and for that reason the story is given as complete as I have been able to work it out.

Joel Bee had made his way north as far as Salem and after passing that town, which was always considered a dangerous one for negroes, he found himself at the break of day in a corn field. It was a little cold and he longed to go to a farm house, but considered such action too dangerous and

decided to hide in a corn shock. Later in the morning men came out and began shucking corn. Nearer and nearer they approached him so that it was impossible for him to shift his position, to walk about and get warm. He sat quiet so long that his feet were frozen. More than that, he barely escaped being discovered. The huskers were gradually approaching the shock he was in. About noon they began on the one next to him. Before they finished it, however, Joel was delighted to hear the dinner bell ring and to see the men leave their work for dinner. During the noon hour he escaped to a nearby woods where he stayed until night. At dark he began his painful journey north, crippling along on frozen feet. He finally made his way to Samuel Gordon's, three miles south of town, the first stopping place near Bloomington, for practically all runaways. As was customary, because of the fact that Mr. Gordon's house was rather public, being on the road, he took Joel the same night of his arrival to Thomas Smith's, two miles southeast of Bloomington. Here Joel Bee stayed for several weeks until his feet were cured. Dr. Joseph McPheeters, Thomas Smith's doctor, doctored the negro and kept quiet the fact that he was being harbored there. During the stay of the negro, J. C. Smith, who was at that time attending Indiana University, taught him to read and write. Later on, after he reached Canada, he wrote back here telling about how he was getting along. He also wrote to some friend in the South directing how his wife and child might find their way north. Some time later they came through bearing the letter with them. The letter was written so that it could not be understood except by some one who had known the writer. The mother and child stayed with Thomas Smith until they could be conveniently sent on. They were brought here from Washington by Hawkins, the colored man who had friends in the South and had married a Bloomington woman through whom he became acquainted with the people here who would aid slaves to escape.

Adkins watched closely for Joel Bee when he went through here but he failed to find him. Joel Bee stayed here longer than the most of the slaves although on one occasion when it was for some reason or other difficult to find the time or means to take them on their way, two stayed at Robert

Ewing's two or three weeks, and helped him harvest. They were frightened most of the time because on their way up here one of them had, in a quarrel, hacked a man with a corn knife and they thought the man's friends might be after him. The best record for time that was ever made was made by a negro named Britton, who was just three days on the road between his Kentucky home and Canada.

The following are a few experiences that have been related to me. They throw some additional light on the situation. Rev. James Faris, who took a very active part in the Underground Railroad business in Monroe county, was initiated into the work in South Carolina in a way that would have discouraged most men from continuing it. While a young man teaching school in South Carolina, he witnessed an auction. One slave that was to be sold learned that Mr. Faris had some money and begged so hard that finally Mr. Faris agreed to purchase him and take him to Philadelphia, where Mr. Faris was to enter the seminary and where the negro was to work and pay him back.

The trade was made. The following is a copy of the terms of the sale:

HOPEWELL, S. C., Nov. 29, 1819.

Sold to Mr. James Faris my negro man Isaac, for six hundred dollars, and I do hereby warrant and defend the property of the said negro man Isaac to the said James Faris his heirs and assigns forever.

(Signed) A. PICKENS

(Seal)

I am indebted to Mr. T. N. Faris for the privilege of making this copy from the original, which he has in his possession. The negro proved to be a rascal and ran away shortly after reaching Philadelphia. Later on Mr. Faris had a family by the name of Crassen willed to him, by a man in South Carolina, who wanted to free them, but could not because of the South Carolina law. Mr. Faris brought this family of five or six to Indiana and freed them here. For several years after they were freed, Mr. Faris held himself responsible for them and looked after their welfare.

Through Mr. James Blair I was able to gather some of the experiences his father, John Blair, had in connection with the Underground Railroad. Mr. John Blair was particularly interested in this work for a few years just previous to the

Civil War. On one occasion Kersaws had a colored woman and child just below the depot somewhere. The Abolitionists did not know just how to get them away, so they arranged for Mr. Blair, whose Abolition tendencies were not at the time known to Kersaws, to go to Kersaw's and ask for some money that one of them owned him. Kersaw told him that he could pay it the next day, that a man was coming up on the morning train from Louisville to claim a colored woman and child that he was holding in custody, and that as soon as he got his reward, he would gladly settle. The next morning Mr. Blair was at the station and was taken in by Kersaw to help watch the woman and child. Kersaws felt safe because they thought they realized that Mr. Blair was financially interested. During the wait a fight began which was not a rare occasion at that time. Kersaws left their charge with Mr. Blair and went to see the fight. In the meantime Mr. Blair succeeded in letting the mother and child escape into the hands of some of the Abolitionists that were in waiting and when Kersaws returned Mr. Blair upbraided them for leaving the whole task to him, claiming that he had had too much to do. "You've played smash," he complained. "I had too much to watch and they got away." At another time Mr. Blair was passing Aunt Myrears' residence on the site of the present electric light plant. Aunt Myrears' was the place in town that negroes were run in for safety. She saw Mr. Blair passing, and according to previous understanding sent a negro to follow him. The negro was so anxious that he kept gaining ground and getting too close for Mr. Blair's comfort. Walk as fast as he could, however, he could not keep in the lead and was finally overtaken by the time he reached the present site of the Monon Stock Yards. By that time the negro could contain himself no longer and cried out, "Massy, Massy, how far is it to Canada?" Mr. Blair directed him to the Robinson farm where John Russell met him and later took him to Ewing's.

W. C. Smith, who, of all persons yet living, had the closest connection with the work of the Underground Railroad, related a great many experiences that he had personally. Among them was the following:

On one occasion a negro came through by himself and

got to Thomas Smith's. Isaac Adkins had heard of his arrival but had been unable to locate him. He set his forces to watching in the hope that they might get a glimpse of him. In the meantime, Adkins went to Louisville presumably to find someone to claim him. He failed to come back that night, so Thomas Smith became a little uneasy and sent his son, W. C. Smith, down there the next day to watch. He got as far as New Albany and located Adkins and his crowd there, so he stayed around until he learned that they were not coming to Bloomington until the next train. Someone of the Adkins crowd was drinking and noticing Will Smith he remarked for his benefit that they would get that nigger or kill someone trying. Mr. Smith concluded that he would be at least as safe with a weapon as without one, so he crossed the street and bought a Colt revolver. That quieted things down in a little bit. Coming up on the train things came near breaking out again. The Adkins proposed a vote on the presidential candidates. Will Smith, to avoid trouble, voted for Filmore. Only one voted for Fremont. They were about to put this one off the train, but because of the conductor's remark that just one would not amount to much, and also because Will Smith voted unexpectedly for Filmore to avoid their trap they quieted down. The rest of the trip to Bloomington was made without excitement. Thomas Smith met the train at the depot and later succeeded in transferring the negro to Robert Ewing's. No one ever suspected Robert Ewing of harboring slaves. The Adkins crowd stayed around several days before giving up the hunt, but they failed to find their negro.

It was customary at that time to put advertisements in the papers in regard to runaway slaves. Sometimes the advertisements would be accompanied with the picture of "the nigger" running away, and the reward that would follow his capture. Frequently this advertising was done by large posters which were scattered through the country. The reward was paid as soon as the negro was delivered to Louisville. The statement was made to me by two individuals that in at least a few instances when the negro proved not to be the right one he was sold anyway to pay for the expense of his capture.

Among the white families with which runaway negroes usually stayed in this community were those of Thomas

Smith, Robert Ewing, and John Blair (and Mrs. Myrears, colored). They did not often stop at Sammy Gordon's or the Faris' as they lived directly on the road.

#### THE STORY OF TONY

Toney was a negro who escaped from his master in Kentucky and undirected made his way to Monroe county where he was caught by the Kersaws one Saturday night. James Clark, an elder in the Presbyterian church, found out about the capture the following morning on his way to church, and sent word by Tommy Moore to Thomas Smith, who lived two miles in the country southeast of town. Mr. Smith came to town and together with Mr. Clark secured a writ authorizing them to take Tony from the Kersaws. At that time the Kersaws lived on the east side of the square where the Wiles Drug Store is at present located. Their place of business was in the marble work shop on the site where the old Presbyterian church used to stand. The trial for the possession of Tony took place before Judge David McDonald. The negro was free; after which he went into the Kersaw house to get his bundle of clothes, and while there he was persuaded by the Kersaws that Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark were trying to get possession of him, not for the purpose of trying to get him through to Canada, but for the purpose of taking him back to the South. The Kersaws promised him that if he would stay with them they would take him through to Canada. Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark failed to get possession of Tony, as the Kersaws would allow no one to come around their house. In the meantime the judge had disappeared and could not be found. Some students, originally from the South, had by this time joined the Kersaws, and had threatened to shoot anyone who made an attempt to enter the Kersaw house. One of the students was from Alabama and his father was a slave holder in that State. Finally the feeling got so high that a group of the students decided to attack Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark, but were persuaded from their purpose by Austin Seward, who told them that these men stood too high in the community



to be shot down without involving a great many people in the shooting affray. Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark finally went home leaving the negro in the possession of the Kersaws.

Early Monday morning the Kersaws started with Tony toward Louisville. Tony noticed the direction in which they were going and began to feel that he had been duped. He racked his brain to remember what Sammy Gordon had told him just after the trial before he went to the Kersaws for his bundle of clothing. Mr. Gordon had felt that there was some danger that the Kersaws might fool the negro and had consequently instructed Tony that if ever he got into trouble again and wanted protection to come to the Gordon home. He described the place, a one story log cabin with a two story brick at the end of it, a few miles south of Bloomington. The negro was told to snap the large gate latch and Mr. Gordon would understand the signal and would come out and take him in. The negro remembered this house since he had passed by it when he first came to Bloomington.

The Kersaws proceeded southward with Tony until they finally came to the residence of Mr. Fleener, the father of Nick Fleener, a few miles north of Salem. By that time the negro was tired since he was unused to riding, and with weariness as an excuse he went to bed early. During the night Tony heard Mr. Fleener urging the Kersaws to tie him. They argued, however, that they could take Tony anywhere and that he had all the confidence in the world in them and they would rather not arouse his suspicions. Tony immediately planned to escape, but he did not wish to make the attempt without his clothes, so he decided to wait until morning. The next morning he watched his chance and while his captors were not looking he slipped into a nearby cornfield and made his way into the woods where he stayed until night. At nightfall he started north again and two or three nights later made his way back to the Gordon's. The Kersaws finally tracked him to Gordon's but before they discovered that he had been there some of them reconnoitered about Thomas Smith's place east of town. That very fact warned Mr. Smith that Tony had escaped and immediately guards were stationed to be on the lookout for him to protect him. Mr. Gordon brought Tony to Mr. Smith's the same night that he reached the Gordon farm,

and Mr. Gordon was back home before daylight the following morning. Tony was kept at the home of Mr. Smith for over a week. W. C. Smith, Thomas Smith's son, was not let into the secret, but he noticed the following day that his father and his uncle, Mr. Curry, as they were putting up hay would frequently go back to the rear part of the loft, so he decided to see what was back there and discovered Tony.

For several days the Kersaws stayed about the place on the pretext of gathering blackberries. They had guards on all the roads and vowed that Tony would never escape. In the meantime Mr. Kelso, from Mooresville, had been notified and arrangements were made whereby Mr. Smith was to deliver Tony to him at a point north of town as agreed upon through correspondence. The time for delivering Tony came to hand. The ways of escape were guarded. Finally two wagons were loaded, one a covered wagon with the ends closed, which was driven by Mr. Curry, the other Mr. Smith drove, which was an open wagon filled with sacks of grain. Tony was in this wagon under the sacks. Mr. Smith and Mr. Curry started towards town. Mr. Smith drove his team up to the square and began to mingle with the people, and especially with those whose curiosity had been aroused by the covered wagon. Mr. Curry had intentionally looked a little guilty and driven somewhat nervously through the town and out east towards Unionville and Morgantown. After he got a short distance from Bloomington some of the pickets reported that he was whipping up his horses and before long he was followed by a crowd of Kersaw sympathizers. He was finally overtaken but nothing was found in the wagon. In the meantime Mr. Smith unhitched his horses from where they had been and started north. As it was in the dry season and there were no mills here the farmers had to take their grain away; and in view of the fact that the suspicion was directed towards the Curry wagon, no one suspected the negro's being in the wagon driven by Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith proceeded unmolested, delivered Tony to Mr. Kelso at the designated point, and proceeded to the mill. No one ever discovered how the negro escaped. Some even decided that he had never returned to Bloomington, and consequently was not at the Smith residence when it was being watched.