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INDIANA'S PART IN THE MAKING OF THE STORY "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN."

BY JACOB P. DUNN.

[This article appears also in the Indianapolis News, September 2, 1911. Mr. Dunn has long been interested in matters pertaining to Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.—EDITOR.]

A PROPOS of the new biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, by her son, Charles Edward Stowe, and her grandson, Lyman Beecher Stowe, there is a side light on the biographical accuracy of the former that is of especial interest to Indiana people, in the remarkable letter from him published in the last number of the Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History, in the article, "A Station of the Underground Railroad," by W. D. Waldrip, teacher of history in the Richmond high school. The article refers to the activities of Levi Coffin, "president of the underground railroad," at Newport, Wayne county (now Fountain City), Indiana. Mr. Waldrip states that he obtained much of his information from John Wright Johnson, an aged Quaker preacher, and a nephew of Levi Coffin, who, among other things, told him that "Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe had visited Newport twice, once while he was at the home of Mr. Coffin, and once in after years," and that "much of the information about slave life, and particularly the story of Eliza, was secured by Mrs. Stowe at Newport." Desiring further information, Mr. Waldrip wrote to Charles Edward Stowe, and received in answer the letter printed on pages 67 and 68 (Vol. VII, No. 2, June, 1911), of the Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History, part of which is as follows:

"With regard to the story of the visit of Mrs. Stowe to the house of the old Quaker, Mr. Coffin, you know as much as I do, and that is nothing at all. I doubt, if Mrs. Stowe was still living and in possession of her faculties, if she would remember anything about it. She always said herself that the orginal of Eliza

was a young woman and her child, who were taken off the place of old Van Sant at night by Professor Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher. Yet I think it by all means probable that there was a foundation to the story and it was not made up entirely of whole cloth. I do not know that Mrs. Stowe was ever in Indiana. She was in narrow circumstances for eighteen years after the marriage of my father and had heavy cares. She would not have gone to Indiana without reason. Can you locate either of her brothers, Charles or William, in that State as ministers of the Presbyterian church? If you can, you have established the probability of a visit to that State, made by her; otherwise it is improbable that she ever made such a visit. If she did visit Indiana before writing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' it was when she had no more idea of writing the book than of paying a visit to the moon."

If this statement could come to the eye of Mrs. Stowe, in the spirit world, the shade of Hamlet, which might naturally be near her, would be moved to repeat, "Oh, wonderful son, that could so astonish a mother." One can imagine her saying: "Is it possible he does not know that I lived in Cincinnati from 1832 to 1849; and that his uncle, Henry Ward Beecher, commenced his ministry at Lawrenceburg, Indiana, only twenty miles away in 1837; and went from there to the Second Presbyterian Church at Indianapolis, where he remained from 1839 to 1847. Is it possible he does not know that his uncle Charles was stationed at the Second Presbyterian Church of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, from 1844 to 1851?"

In reality Mrs. Stowe did not always say that the original of Eliza was the woman who was taken from her home to Van Zant's. On the contrary she states expressly in the Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, that the original, as to personal description, was a quadroon girl who attracted her attention while visiting in Kentucky. But as to the incident of crossing the ice, which was a well-known fact, she expressly states in the last chapter of "Uncle Tom," in the Key and in the introduction mentioned above, that she used the historical incident. She even used the

woman's name—Eliza Harris—which was not her real name, but one given to her by Mrs. Coffin, to conceal her identity until she got to Canada.

Indeed, the reference was well understood all through the Ohio valley; and Levi Coffin himself mentions it in his "Reminiscences," as follows: "The story of this slave woman, so graphically told in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' will, no doubt, be remembered by every reader of that deeply interesting book. The cruelties of slavery depicted in that remarkable work are not overdrawn. The stories are founded on facts that really occurred, real names being wisely withheld, and fictitious names and imaginary conversations often inserted. From the fact that Eliza Harris was sheltered at our house for several days, it was generally believed among those acquainted with the circumstances that I and my wife were the veritable Simeon and Rachel Halliday, the Quaker couple alluded to in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

The caution of "wisely withheld" names was of no force as to Eliza Harris, because she was safe in Canada, but it did affect a feature of the story that was almost as remarkable as the escape over the floating ice. The man who met Eliza on the north bank of the river, near Ripley, Ohio, was not a Kentucky neighbor, as described by Mrs. Stowe, but the Rev. William Lacey, of Newport, Indiana, an agent of the underground railroad, who started her on her way, over that line, without the intervention of the "senator" of Mrs. Stowe's book. The story as told completely shielded the identity of those actually concerned in the escape.

Possibly Mrs. Stowe never met Levi Coffin, but it is incredible that she did not know of "the president of the underground railroad," for he was very active at Cincinnati for years, and finally moved there in 1847. Naturally, Mrs. Stowe would put little in writing concerning it, on account of the security of both the agents and the escaping slaves; but in one of her letters reminiscent of Cincinnati life, she naively mentions "the underground railway, which, I may say, ran through our house." Her father,

her husband, and her brother, Henry, were all aggressive anti-slavery men, and if Henry, in particular, was not in touch with the underground railroad, it was the only known thing in which he felt a deep interest that he ever did keep out of. It is well known that he was a friend of Hiram Bacon, whose house, west of Malott Park, was the Indianapolis station; and, also, that he at times stayed over night at this house, and preached at Washington Church, which Mr. Bacon had built.

If Mrs. Stowe visited her brother, Charles, during his seven years' stay at Ft. Wayne, she might naturally have stopped at Newport, for she would have to pass it in going from Cincinnati to Ft. Wayne, and so the testimony of Friend Johnson is quite credible. But it is absolutely certain that she visited Henry Ward Beecher at Indianapolis, for there are plenty of witnesses living who testify to that. Moreover, it is almost equally certain that she got her character of Uncle Tom here, from Uncle Tom Magruder, a very religious old negro, who was freed by the Noble family, and who, with his children, was cared for by them here.

As to the originals of characters, one fact must be borne in mind, which was never better expressed than by Mrs. Stowe herself in the Key in these words: "This work, more, perhaps, than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered—grouped together with reference to a general result, in the same manner that the mosaic artist groups his fragments of various stones into one general picture. His is a mosaic of gems—this is a mosaic of facts." It is in this feature of the book that its exaggeration lies. Nobody would say that a mosaic was a reproduction of nature, although every stone in it was natural. In the story, a mass of isolated facts, "grouped together with reference to a general result" about a small number of people, leaves the impression that it was a picture of slavery as it existed in general. This it was not, but it was an appalling picture of the everyday possibilities of slavery, based on actual facts.

The principal characters are also mosaics, as illustrated above in the case of Eliza. Mrs. Stowe states in the Key that the chief feature of the Uncle Tom character, putting religious duty above obedience to his master, was taken from the Rev. Josiah Henson. But she had met Henson but once before she wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and that was early in 1850, while at her brother Edward's, in Boston. She had no knowledge of him in his family surroundings; and the Indianapolis claim is that she got the material for her personal sketch here, just as she got that for Eliza in Kentucky. The nearest a contemporary statement of this, of which I have knowledge, is in the Indianapolis Journal of February 24, 1857, on the occasion of the death of Uncle Tom, and from it I take the following:

"To those unacquainted with Old Tom, the most interesting circumstance connected with him is the probability that he gave the name and the leading features of the character to Mrs. Stowe's celebrated hero. Of course no one knows that to be the case, but there are some circumstances which give it an air of probability. The coincidence of the character and the name are not much in themselves, but connected with the fact that Henry Ward Beecher, during his residence here, was a constant visitor of Uncle Tom's, well acquainted with his history, and a sincere admirer of his virtues, the coincidence becomes more suggestive. We have even been told that Mrs. Stowe herself sometimes called to see the old man. 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' too, was the name of his home among all of his acquaintances, and was a familiar phase here long before Mrs. Stowe immortalized it. At all events, we know it is the impression with all the friends of Mrs. Stowe, and her brother, in this city, that Old Uncle Tom was the original or at least the suggestion of the hero of the cabin."

This opinion appeared in various Indianapolis papers repeatedly, at later dates, and it would be strange, if it were not well founded, that none of the numerous friends and admirers of the Beechers received a denial of it, which would necessarily have broken the universal faith in the tradition. It may be added that

there is another confirmation of it, not noted in the Journal article. Uncle Tom had two children, Moses and a girl, Louisa, who was considerably younger. But there lived with them another man, of about the age of Moses—they were all middle-aged people when Mrs. Stowe knew them—whose name was Peter. He had been a slave of Judge Isaac Dunn at Lawrenceburg, and some time after the slaves in Indiana were freed, in 1820, Peter became lonesome, and Judge Dunn made arrangements for him to live with the Magruders, whom he had known at Lawrenceburg. The family therefore corresponded exactly to Uncle Tom's as described in Chapter IV of the book, of Mose, Pete and the baby.

After Uncle Tom's death the children lived for some years in a cabin in Wabash street, opposite the present Empire theater, but later Louisa was furnished a home, at what is now 454 Highland avenue, by Mrs. George Frank Miller. She lived there till her death, on September 7, 1900, at the age of ninety-two years. It is the tradition in the Noble-Davidson family, derived from the Magruders, who always confided in their "folks," that Mrs. Stowe not only visited Uncle Tom, but wrote part of her book in his cabin. This is, of course, incorrect, as it is known that Mrs. Stowe did not begin writing the book till late in 1850. It is probably based on the fact that she took notes of things that Uncle Tom said, for she was at the time writing commonly for publication; and in the winter of 1850, before "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published, she wrote to her husband, "I can earn \$400 a year by writing." Her "New England Sketch," in Hall's Western Monthly Magazine for April, 1834, brought her a prize of \$50.

Charles Edward Stowe puts a peculiar negative stress on the fact of things happening before his mother thought of writing the book; but every identified fact in the book happened before that time; and every identified character came to her notice before that time. Her whole life had been a preparation for it, for she grew up in an anti-slavery atmosphere from childhood. She had many interesting experiences with slavery, especially during

her residence in Cincinnati, when occurred the anti-abolition riots of that city, and the mobbing of the office of Birney's Philanthropist. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" must have been written chiefly from experience, not research, for she began it late in 1850, and the publication began as a serial in the *New Era*, on June 5, 1851. Indeed, she says in her introduction, after detailing her personal observation: "It was not for many years that she felt any call to make use of the materials thus accumulating."

In view of all these facts it can hardly be questioned that Indiana contributed materially to the making of the book.