

Ric Schumacher
The Underground Railroad
Honors Seminar

Reflections on Ripley

As a young boy, growing up in the inner city before civil rights, my life was and is surely different from the majority of my honors seminar classmates. An old man sitting in class with young people we are worlds apart. The race riots that helped usher in the era of civil rights was for me an experience not a history lesson. I remember National Guard trucks parked in full view of my front door. I remember an African American woman who recounted sitting on her front porch with a shotgun proclaiming, "I'll shoot 'em before they'll burn my house." I remember talking with a woman who faced the dogs and fire hoses in Selma. History takes two forms, the one that is studied and the one that is lived.

Maybe having lived a part of the civil rights struggle overshadows that part of history I studied so long ago. Vague memories about the Underground Railroad are quickened by a propensity for the History Channel. It has been said that experience is the best teacher, and next to that must be the reenactment and museums that attempt to provide a little of the flavor of the events of days gone by. A long comfortable bus ride to Ripley Ohio, an air-conditioned, DVD and restroom-equipped bus light years different from the buses protesters rode in the 1960's. Trying to imagine what life was like for slaves and abolitionists more than a hundred years before can be staggering.

Injustice has always been a part of human history and maybe it always will. When the call to fight injustice goes out, only a precious few answer. Maybe that is because it is risky to speak out against that which is wrong and to stand up for that which is right. Precious few are willing to risk all that they have even their lives to bring about change. It is so much easier to go along to get along. History will not remember those who are unwilling to risk something to obtain a greater good. The early residents of Ripley Ohio now stand as icons in the civil rights movement. The Reverend John Rankin and freed slave John Parker are more well known than the many others that participated in the history of the abolitionist movement in Ripley. It is John Parker's story that touched me most deeply. This story has the potential to be a block-buster movie. Parker's life has all the elements of the Horatio Alger rags to riches, all the innovative spirit of Andrew Carnegie and the call to justice of the Lone Range. Why don't we know more about this man and his story?

His Promised Land is the title of the autobiography of John P. Parker a former slave and conductor on the Underground Railroad. This powerful story is edited by Stuart Seeley, Sprague professor emeritus of history at Morehead State University in Kentucky. I bought this book at the John P. Parker Museum in Ripley, Ohio. I read the entire book on our bus ride home. When we read references to the Promised Land in relationship to the abolitionist movement, we are led to recall Moses leading the children of Israel out of bondage and slavery in Egypt. For the Israelites, the Promised Land was a place, a definite location. Author and mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote, "the Promised Land is not a piece of real estate". I would suggest that for John P. Parker, Promised Land was not piece of real estate, but was a place in his mind and heart where freedom was born and blossomed. The forbidden fruit of freedom for slaves he would

taste and as a former slave, he would lead countless individuals to freedom as a conductor of the Underground Railroad.

In an age when fewer and fewer people are willing to risk the loss of personal freedom or personal property in the advancement of a cause, remembering the heroic acts of those from bygone days gives us hope for the future. It has been said that history repeats itself; it does not. History is but a oral or written record of the events of the past and experiences of people whose lives we choose to remember. History does not repeat itself people do. Until today's people are willing to learn from past, and are willing to emulate the qualities demonstrated by John P. Parker there will be no new heroes.

The past has taught us, the present prepared us and the future invites. The only question that remains is, what are we willing to risk, what are we willing to sacrifice to ensure that all people are free.

Dorothy L. Macklin
Ohio Underground Railroad
Reflection Paper on the Ripley, Ohio Touring
Spring Semester 2009

*Steal Away. Steal Away.
Steal Away. Steal Away to Jesus.
Steal Away, steal away home
Steal Away home. I ain't got long to stay here.*

*My lord, my lord, he calls me.
He calls me by the thunder.
The trumpet sounds within a my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here.*

It is 4:30 a.m. and I hear my husband rushing me, telling/yelling for me to hurry up as the bus will depart promptly at 6:00, the lyrics to the song “Steal Away” in a good way chastised men. I wondered if I slowed him down, would he dare leave without me? Would we have to drive separately or would he wait for me in the car with an attitude? Then I entertained within my mind, what if THIS was akin to the call of the actual Underground Railroad? Placing it in perspective, this system which was created to free slaves did not have a mechanism to account for those running late. Therefore, I sped up and we were able to meet our group without further incident.

As we left the parking lot of the Liberty Plaza in route to Ripley, I could not help but to acknowledge the irony of our travels. Here we were embarking upon a journey in the quest of understanding how others sought and obtained independence while departing from a local geographical area whose name epitomizes freedom—Liberty!

The tour to Ripley, Ohio, brought back memories of a popular game that I and many others have played during our childhood—Hide & Go Seek! Yet, generations later, it still continues to feed the intrigue of its participants. However, for those seeking freedom in the early 1800's, the benefits of this real life scavenger hunt were literally a matter of life or death. The reward for winning at this game meant a better life; however, for those caught, the end results were either death or returning to the life they tried to escape.

The experience also reminded me of the spirituals that were sung by my elders, such as *Wade in the Water*, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *Go Down Moses*, *Gonna' Lay Down My Burdens*, *Down By the Riverside* that provided encrypted codes and messages to aid those on the freedom trail.

As I listened to our tour guide, Betty Campbell, she shared the personal conviction as lived by the Presbyterian minister, Reverend John Rankin, and his family. He preached and lived a message that it was wrong to own a human life. I even discovered that Rev. Rankin even adopted a young black female who lived with the family until the age of twenty-five.

When Rev. Rankin discovered that his own brother acquired a slave, he used the influence of his relationship to convert and transform his brother's behavior. The thirteen letters he crafted, denouncing his brother's behavior, were eventually printed and circulated. These letters became widely regarded for its definitive expression and sound articulation against slavery.

Since slavery was a profitable commerce, it should not be surprising that not everyone appreciated Rev. Rankin's personal thoughts, feelings and writings. This would upset the economy. As a result, he, along with others of like mind, was subject to persecution via prosecution. The legal sanctions that could be levied against him were six months in jail and/or a large fine. Each was an economic sanction which was meant to cripple the energy of the anti-slavery movement. Thus, Reverend Rankin would have to play the game of hide and seek in real life.

The lives of his entire family were also threatened as a result of aiding and abetting others to secure their freedom. He selected the site at the top of a steep hill purposely making it difficult for opposition to approach his dwelling without being seen. The Rankin family used lanterns in the windows to convey to slaves it was safe to seek a place of refuge. Today, his home rests upon the highest elevation visible when looking up from the Ohio River. Today, the actual home serves as a beacon of hope and symbol of commitment to a vision.

Another interesting personality was John Parker, a free black abolitionist and conductor of the Underground Railroad, who had firsthand experience being the one sought after. John experienced this through trial and error, yet displayed the self determination and will power to overcome adversity in his life. John was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1827. He was the son of a black woman and his mother's white owner. Parker was sold at the age of eight and taken to Mobile, Alabama. His owner, a doctor, encouraged him to learn the trade of iron molding. He was also very creative and was successful in obtaining several patents for his inventions.

John also had a temper which affected his interaction with others on occasion. To keep him from being sold as a farm hand, John convinced a widowed patient of the doctor to buy him for 1,800 dollars. Two years later he was able to buy his freedom, utilizing the same skill his captors had encouraged. He moved from Albany to Cincinnati starting a family. John chose to reach back and help others, by continuing to advance himself in his field of work. He was then able to own his own business. He embraced diversity before it was popular, hiring blacks and whites in his foundry. He was not easily intimidated as he stood in the middle of the street carrying a firearm.

John, using the cover of the night, would sneak across the river into Kentucky to help fugitive slaves and those who wanted to be free back across the Ohio River. He never housed any of the slaves; this would be too obvious. Furthermore, he did not want to risk endangering the lives of his wife and children. As he would cross the river, I felt it was interesting that he would interrogate via posing questions to insure that the freedom seekers really were serious and committed to the journey.

I found it fascinating that education was extremely important to Mr. Parker. His last will and testament included a clause that disinherited any heir that pursued his business. I also

thought it was really extraordinary that to date, no one has been able to produce a photograph or portrait that identifies what he looks like.

As an African American, not subjected to the atrocities of slavery, I am appreciative of the sustained presence and rich history of unassuming towns such as Ripley, OH. It is now recognized as the bedrock of the anti-slavery movement. As the first real Civil Rights Movement in our country, I am thankful for the model that reveals blacks and whites working together to rid our communities of this social ill. While my own family history is extremely limited, I cannot help but to wonder if any of my ancestors' accessed freedom via the Ohio River corridor. Nevertheless, I left Ripley proud to be a resident, with a newfound appreciation of the state whose branding says, "Ohio, the heart of it all."