The Iowan
July 1956

With a strong pro-southern element in the state, abolitionists excercised great care in guiding their colored charges along

THE IOWA UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by CURT HARNACK

ACROSS the southern half of Iowa a century ago ran a vast network of routes traveled by slaves escaping to freedom. Iowans of New England background were most prominent in helping the slaves, but since the national fugitive slave law made it a crime to aid the runaways, the utmost secrecy prevailed.

"Negroes escape to Canada as easily as if they traveled on a railway which ran beneath the ground!" said a southern slaveowner. In popular imagination this mysterious "underground railroad" was thought to consist of tunnels from house to house or from town to town, where Negroes were hustled to escape bondage. Although few tunnels actually existed, many antislavery Iowans constructed secret chambers in basements, compartments in walls and hiding places under floors. Here Negroes would hide until their white friends could guide them to the next friendly house, usually under the cover of night.

The friends of the slaves were often highly religious and felt it their moral duty to befriend the Negroes. Of the religious sects, Quakers and Congregationalists seem to have been most active. They looked to the Mosaic law to justify their activities: "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose, in one of thy gates where it liketh him best; thou shalt not oppress him."

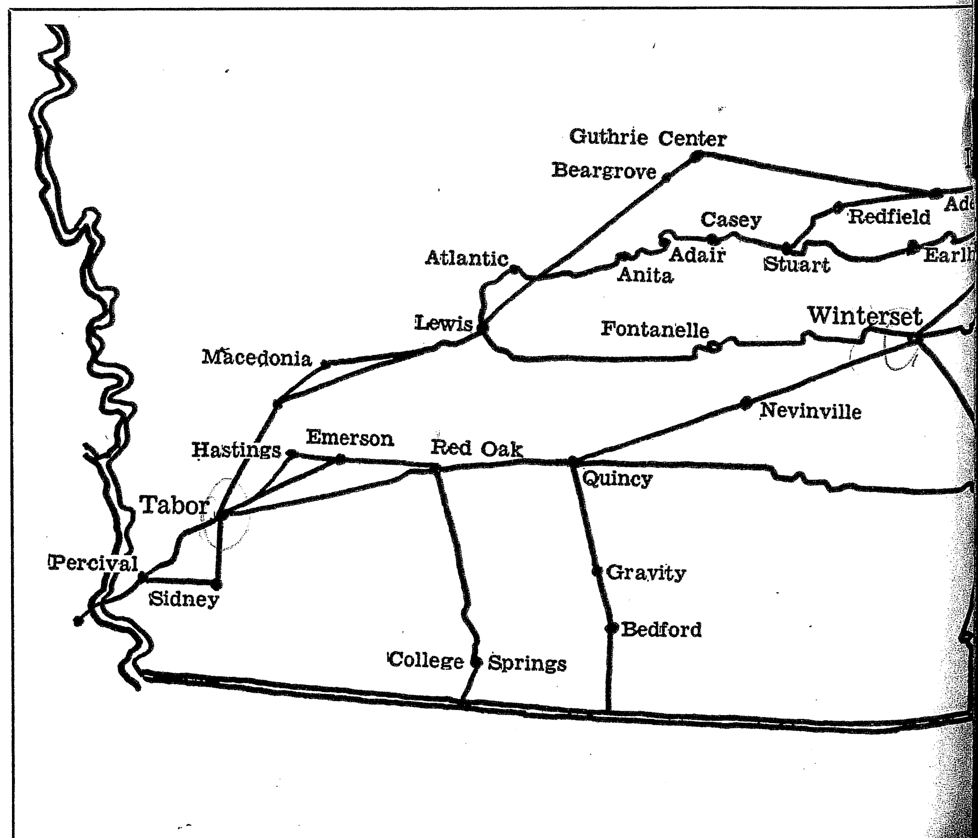
John Brown embraced the cause with religious zeal, and finally, with four Iowans in his "army" attacked the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. It was on Iowa soil that Brown drilled his meager band of troops before starting for Virginia to lead a slave rebellion. In the Quaker community of Springdale he found sympathetic friends — as elsewhere along Iowa's underground railroad.

But almost everywhere in Iowa, southern sympathizers fought the friends of Negro runaways. The Fort Madison *Plain Dealer* of May 27, 1857, warns the people of Denmark who openly and defiantly helped the slaves:

> To the disgrace of the County and State, Denmark has the name of being a rendezvous of men, who occasionally engage in *negro-stealing,* at the same time professing the religion of the gospel. Men of less shrewdness have been hanged —have received their just deserts — for engaging in practices of which respectable citizens of Denmark have been accused.

The movement across Iowa on the underground railroad was north and east, with most of the slaves coming up from Missouri. A few from the Deep South struck west, then north into Kansas, Nebraska and across Iowa. Although Iowa was a "free state," Negroes who arrived were never safe until they reached Canada and the British flag. Therefore "agents" would run their cargo of slaves at night to the next "station," where a new "conductor" and his crew of "engineers" would take over. Thousands of slaves were thus transported to the Mississippi River towns, then into Illinois to one of the Great Lakes ports, where ship captains busily ferried the slaves to final safety.

Iowa's underground railroad system started in the west and south and worked east to the



It is as impossible to estimate how many slaves escaped through Iowa as it is to tell how many Iowans helped them. But the abolitionists, who believed slavery should be ended, were distinctly in the minority in those years before the Civil War. Prior to 1850 only one New Englander for every six Southerners settled in Iowa. In only a few towns, such as Tabor, Salem, Denmark and Springdale were the abolitionists in a clear majority.

Many Northerners did not believe it their business to interfere with the "peculiar institution" of slavery — a view that Abraham Lincoln shared early in his career. They saw the abolitionists as troublemakers, trying to stir up an issue better left alone. Since no underground railroad activity could be carried on completely in the open, out-of-the-way towns were best for stations; less-traveled roads were safest. Even at the beginning of the Civil War, the Governor of Iowa said in a letter to Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase: "the southern half of our state is strongly pro-slavery . . . ."

The underground railroad was never an organized system, and most of the conductors didn't know the whole route. However, some outstanding abolitionists like J. B. Grinnell, Dr. Blanchard of Percival, and Reverend J. Todd of Tabor grasped the extent of operations in Iowa. From letters and recorded anecdotes, historians have been able to reconstruct the principal routes and many of the stations.

Clinton house was famous "station" in underground network for runaway slaves.

Major documentation on Iowa was done by Professor W. H. Siebert of Ohio State University, who began before the turn of the century when many agents and conductors were still alive. Letters from Iowans reveal the exact location of farmhouses, give names and cite incidents. Many of the routes and stations changed frequently as they became well-known and therefore more closely watched by slave-catchers and federal men.

Methods for aiding slaves developed by trial and error, and successful schemes spread by word of mouth. No man was more in authority than anyone else; only the cause was important. Every member of the network was responsible for doing his best when the "call" came — whether it be at two a.m. on a wintry night and Negroes arrived to be transported, or whether he was asked to risk his life by making a day-run only a few hours ahead of an armed posse of slave-catchers.

Occasionally a note in code would be sent to notify an advance station agent that slaves were on the way. This one was sent from Low Moor to a man in Clinton:

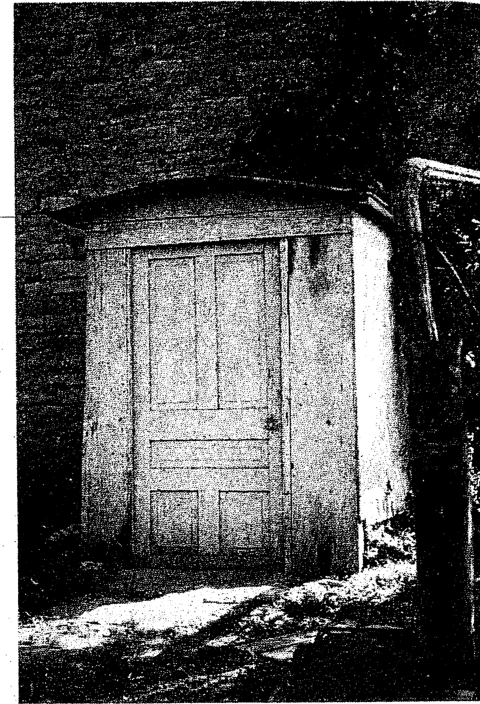
> Dear Sir: By tomorrow evening's mail, you will receive two volumes of the "irrepressible Conflict," bound in black. After perusal, please forward, and oblige,
>
> Yours truly, G.W.W.

Thomas Mitchell, founder of Mitchellville, was proprietor of a famous frontier inn and a sympathizer in the Negro cause. He once sent this note to his friend, J. B. Grinnell:

> Dear Grinnell: Uncle Tom says

ssissippi River. Leading abolitionists centers included: Tabor, Grinnell, Salem, Denmark, Winterset, Tipton, Clinton and Oskaloosa.

Lewellen house, Salem, was scene of famous trial in which case was dismissed after slaveowner, Ruel Daggs, failed to produce warrants for arrest of nine Negroes.



Slave hunters were shown this door to regular basement of the Pearson house.

if the roads are not too bad you can look for those fleeces of wool by tomorrow. Send them on to test the market-price, and no back charges.

Yours, Hub

Several operators developed elaborate code signals to communicate with one another when conditions were not safe. Some historians look upon the hand-signals and cryptic words as an unnecessary elaboration or a kind of game that operators developed. However, Isaac Brandt, an early Des Moines postmaster who was a station agent, told of a visit by John Brown and the signals he used. "Hello" meant "all's well"; the slaves concealed in Brown's wagon were referred to as "fodder," and a hand to the tip of his ear meant he understood.

A letter in the Siebert collection from Reverend E. S. Hill of the Tabor region says, "That there were secret signs between some of the operators seems certain, yet this does not seem a definite part of the system as many of the operators report there was no special sign or means of communication."

Tabor had a wide reputation for being a "hotbed of abolitionism," and any Southerners on their way West who accidentally stopped there overnight with slaves were very likely to find them gone by morning. Once Reverend Todd, upon receiving a slave woman whose would-be captors were in hot pursuit, dressed her up to look like his wife, with veil, cloak and gloves. He drove her in his buggy to Lewis, over fifty miles away, in broad daylight. This same minister kept in his barn one winter 200 rifles which had been sent by the Massachusetts-Kansas State Committee for John Brown's use in Kansas.

From Lewis a route led to Fontanelle. Abner Root, son of a station agent there, once related this about his father's activities:

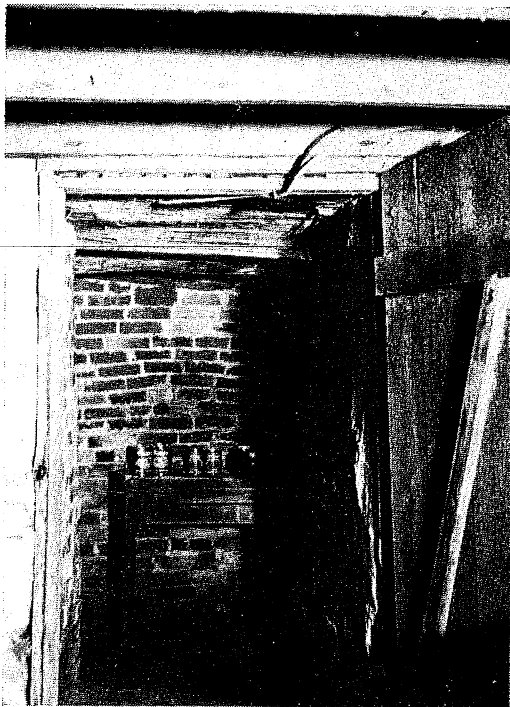
> On one cold midwinter evening, when there was just enough snow on the ground to make good sledding, John Brown called at the door of my father's house with seven Negros. He said, 'Take these people to ———— at Winterset before light tomorrow morning.' With these words he quickly drove away. While father was hitching up the sled my mother took the cold and hungry Negroes into the kitchen and gave them some hot food and coffee. The sled once ready the Negroes were deposited in the bottom in a prone position and then covered with heavy blankets, for fear some one would see them while enroute to our destintation. In this manner we drove the thirty-six snow covered miles to Winterset and deposited our human freight at the next station.

From Winterset a route led straight to Des Moines; one of the underground stations was located where the state historical building now stands. Once in Des Moines the Negroes felt somewhat safer and even more eager to reach final freedom.

Turning east from Des Moines, Mitchell's Tavern offered a haven for the runaways, and there were several hospitable places in the Newton area.

J. B. Grinnell became so notorious as a friend of the slaves that at one time there was an offer of a reward for his life. In February of 1859 John Brown with twelve slaves abducted from Missouri stopped at Grinnell's house. Together the two abolitionists

Underground room was discovered when a shed on farm near De Witt was torn down. It is assumed it was used for hiding slaves because of construction, proximity of farm to former Wapsipinicon ferry and lack of other use.



Access to secret slave-hiding basement was by trap door. Present door was cut years later.

Keosauqua's Pearson house with double basement protected fugitive slaves. Second floor was used for church services during pre-Civil War days.

plotted a way of getting the slaves to freedom. The fugitives slept in the "liberty room," where the guns of Brown and his guards were stacked. Part of the Grinnell house is still standing, although it has been moved from its original site in Grinnell.

Since Missouri authorities had offered $3,000 for the capture of the Brown party, the Iowa City postmaster, Sam Workman, was busily planning to trap them; the marshal at Davenport farther east had a warrant for Brown's arrest. But Brown by-passed Iowa City and found haven in Springdale, while Grinnell went to Chicago to get a boxcar for the transportation of Brown and his band from Iowa to Chicago. Although the superintendent refused permission for Brown to transport the Negroes on the railroad, he gave Grinnell a draft for $50.00 to help Brown's cause.

A few days later at West Liberty, Brown managed to have his twelve Missouri slaves put in a freight car attached directly behind the locomotive. As the train started for Davenport and Chicago, a passenger recognized Brown and discovered the slaves. He threatened to reveal to U.S. officials what was going on and have Brown arrested. At this point Brown and his armed men moved in and persuaded the passenger to be quiet. The conductor, an Englishman and sympathizer with the abolitionists, looked the other way.

When the train stopped in Davenport U. S. Marshall Laurel Summers marched on board with a posse. But they did not examine the freight car and they didn't catch Brown. Later, an underground railroad agent in Davenport wrote: "From a window of the old Burtis Hotel I was greatly relieved to hear the train crossing the bridge to Chicago, where the Negroes landed safely next morning."

Historians often point to two factors in the underground railroad which helped precipitate the Civil War. The slave-catchers hired by the Southerners represented the whole South to many Northerners — and these men were often thugs, whose insensitivity to the suffering of the slaves shocked even the people who were indifferent to the slavery question. Thus an image of the South arose, characterized chiefly by brutal slave-masters and suffering Negroes.

Secondly, the slaves who dared to run away were often the most maltreated; frequently they were plantation field hands who had gotten into trouble with the overseer. Only Negroes who found their situation unbearable would attempt to travel thousands of miles, often on foot, through all seasons, to gain their freedom. Northerners came to know the slavery system through these runaways.

One such desperate slave was Aunt Polka, who arrived near Keosauqua on a snowy, cold night. With a baby in her arms and dragging a little boy, Aunt Polka ran from her would-be rescuers because she thought they were slave-catchers. Finally they convinced her of their friendship and her story came out. She had started from Mississippi with fourteen children and only a bag of cornpone. Two boys and two girls were left with Negro families along the way. The remaining eight of her children died from hunger, exposure or illness. Aunt Polka traveled no farther than Keosauqua; she stayed there until her death and was popularly referred to as "the wild tom of the woods."

In southeast Iowa the most important underground railroad town was the small Quaker community of Salem. Founding father Isaac Pidgeon believed every Christian should follow the dictates of his conscience. He was so successful in helping runaways that Missouri slave owners finally posted patrols along the Des Moines River bank. Although slave hunters lurked on the roads to Burlington, Salem conductors were skillful in evading them.

Some of the principal houses used for underground stops can still be found in Salem. Writes Mrs. Don Watson, a former Salem resident: "One of these houses is the Herbert Garretson home. In it there was a hole in the kitchen floor where one slave could hide. Another house is owned by my father, Jay Long. It has bars on the basement windows yet and two doors inside that were hiding places."

The Ruel Daggs case, famous in the history of the Iowa underground railroad, took place in Salem. In the summer of 1858 nine slaves owned by Ruel

(Continued on page 44)

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Farm Messiah

(Continued from page 43)

economical and excellent cattle feed is available. "With normal pastures the average Iowa farmer could feed from two to three times as many cattle as he has been carrying," Garst has said.

But Garst is not optimistic about immediate widespread acceptance of this cattle feed. "It is generally true that there is a seven years' delay in any new agricultural development between positive proof and general acceptance. That was true of seed corn, combines, rubber-tired tractors, fertilizer, and it will be true of the general widespread use of corncobs and silage in the place of hay. It won't come with great rapidity, but it will surely come."

Garst's other enthusiasms have ranged from economical farm buildings and storage pits to his current great interest in hybrid sorghums. He believes that the hybrid sorghum is the coming crop in drought-prone areas and planted large acreages of it himself last year with success. There are few fields in agriculture, practical or theoretical, in which Garst and his family are not interested. They adopt new ideas and new methods with a salesmanager's zeal. Heavy use of nitrogen fertilizer in continuous corn and sorghum programs for better fields is one of their main interests. Conservation-minded, the entire family takes delight in transforming blighted plots of land into pleasant acres of grass and ponds.

As you might suspect there is even a Garst farm plan. The one being expounded in the Southside Cafe of Coon Rapids where Garst holds court is one that calls for a direct subsidy to livestock producers based on 50% of the difference between price and parity. It is pointed out that the livestock producer is a middleman between the feed farmer and the consumer, so that the grant would be spread equally.

Whatever Garst and his family tackle, you may be sure they do so with conviction and enthusiasm. Many observers feel that the publicity Garst has had on his agricultural theories and his success with seed corn could be put under one heading: salesmanship. It is an unfair criticism. Garst is certainly a salesman, as are his sons and many of his associates. But they speak from considered thought, experience and a vast knowledge of farming in many phases. Innovators they certainly are. And sometimes they are inclined to work from premises drawn from their large-scale operation that may not apply so readily to the smaller farmer. But the main objection stems from the fact that they are just too good in putting their ideas forward.

When asked about his personal philosophy Garst simply says: "Stay happy and alert." His business motto reads: "If it's sound, it'll sell." And sell Garst will — with a gospel fervor. No wonder Garst is the first American businessman to make capital out of modern-day Communism.

Underground Railroad

(Continued from page 23)

Daggs of Missouri escaped to within one mile of Salem. Slave hunters overtook them just as three Quakers from Salem arrived on the scene. The Iowans demanded that the fugitives be allowed to go to Salem, where the slave hunters' claim could be properly presented before a justice of the peace.

Although the Southerners vowed the Iowans would have to "wade in Missouri blood before the Negroes would be taken," the men from Salem insisted on the due process of law. When the men and fugitives arrived in Salem a crowd quickly formed and followed eagerly to Justice Lewellen's home. A few minutes later the case was dismissed, since the plaintiffs couldn't produce warrants for the arrest of the Negroes. There was a moment of stunned silence. A Salemite, Paul Way, called: "If anybody wants to follow me, let him follow." Two of the Negroes did, and the others left later. Soon all of them were on their way to Canada.

But the Missourians promised vengeance against Salem. A few days later an armed band on horseback literally besieged the town. Search parties combed through every "nigger-stealing" house, looking for runaways. Word had traveled along the underground and there was not a Negro in Salem. Many families continued eating their dinners as the Missourians ransacked their houses.

In Denmark, not far from Salem, two New England Congregationalists, Julius Reed and Asa Turner (both ministers) were antislavery leaders. According to Cecil Turton of Ohio State, who studied the Iowa underground activities, Denmark was perhaps the second most important town in southeast Iowa.

One of Reverend Asa Turner's parishioners, Theron Trowbridge, had slaves hiding in his house one Sunday morning. Although slave hunters were reportedly near, Trowbridge wanted to attend church services as usual. Before leaving his house he fixed poisoned

(Continued on page 47)

Underground Railroad

(Continued from page 44)

biscuits for the bloodhounds and told his son to feed the animals if they came near. The custom was adopted by other abolitionists.

Even though all the Mississippi River cities were important in the underground railroad, no single town was predominantly abolitionist, and some historians hold that most of them were pro-slavery — or at least believed in a non-interference policy. Muscatine was largely pro-slavery, according to Turton, and the abolitionist activity was centered solely in the small Congregational Church there, which was frequently referred to sarcastically as Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Davenport was the scene of Dred Scott's claim on liberty, and the ensuing case which finally ended in the historic Supreme Court decision, made Scott the most famous slave of the century. His owner, Dr. John Emerson, lived briefly in Davenport with Dred Scott. Since according to the Missouri Compromise, Iowa was a free state, Dred Scott claimed that having lived here made him free, too. The Supreme Court decision went against him: "Dred Scott is a Negro slave, the lawful property of the defendant."

The Dred Scott decision only fanned the ardor of the Iowa abolitionists. They worked for the day when all slaves would be free, and many finally gave their lives for this cause. The first Iowan to be killed in the conflict that was later to develop into the Civil War was Edwin Coppoc of Springdale. Edwin's Quaker mother apprehensively watched her two sons depart for Harper's Ferry. "I believe you are going with old Brown," she said. "When you get the halters around your necks, will you think of me?"

Later, when her prophecy came true, Edwin Coppoc wrote just before his execution: "Thank God the principle in which we are engaged will not die with me and my brave comrades. By the taking of my life . . . Virginia is but hastening on the glorious day when the slaves will rejoice in their freedom."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks are due Fred DeWitt of Griswold for information on western Iowa, particularly the routes in that section.

Astray in Hawkeyeland

(Continued from page 6)

Science" in Mason City to test completed BunaB's and carry on research in advanced models. Crowder will say that the "New Improved No. 7 BunaB" is a direct result of such research.

Fun is the key word for Snav's employees. The annual 4th of July picnic starts May 11 and continues until Oct. 15. The annual New Year's eve party is still going on.

Actually, the leg pulling routine has snowballed. Crowder started the gag by giving the BunaB to a few friends in Mason City. They in turn passed them on to other friends and the thing kept going until it spread across the country.

"Why, the BunaB is better known in New York, Dallas or Los Angeles than in Iowa and Mason City," said Al.

The device is even getting in the political ring. A fellow by the name of John Taylor of Salem, Ohio, is running for Lt. Governor of his state on the BunaB ticket.

"We even got an inquiry from Dun and Bradstreet," said Crowder. "We had to write them and admit that all our business is conducted on a cash basis and we weren't interested in credit."

It's hard to believe that so much fun can be bought for a mere 48 cents. Even at two for a dollar, the "New Improved No. 7 BunaB" is a real bargain.

Crowder gets letters, cards and telegrams from every section of the United States concerning his "product." One gentleman wrote recently, "Oppo is poop spelled inside out. What the heck is BunaB?"

One of the Lockheed aircraft plants in California ran the BunaB through its testing laboratory recently. The written report returned to Crowder states, "The New Improved No. 7 BunaB does everything it claims."

Which is nothing.

—*Drake Mabry*

Letters to the Editor

(Continued from page 2)

the Police more bouquets and fewer brickbats.

MRS. PAULINE MULFORD
Iowa City

This letter concerns a piece in the Astray in Hawkeyeland column in the last issue. We have also had some correspondence with Mr. Peter Roan, Iowa City city manager, about it.

In fairness, I would like to clear up a few misimpressions here. First, a news story was our source for reporting that the Iowa City city fathers were unhappy over missing the funds that

(Continued on next page)

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