

190929_1604 Transcription

Interviewer: This is Justin Hawkins, this is the 2019 History Harvest, collection of archaeological, what was included in that?

Participant: Um, the archaeological dig done by Ball State in 20... ah I can't remember the year... 2012 they, we had an artifacts collected by an archaeologist on the Union Literary Institute site, 3 acres.

Interviewer: And this is number 14. So, also, can you explain who you are and the organization that you are the president of?

Participant: My name is Roane Smothers, I'm a Longtown descendant, and president of the Union Literary Institute Preservation Society. That society was formed in 1989, I do believe, to preserve the Union Literary Institute structure. Um, we've expanded our goal, or our mission to include all buildings of the Longtown settlement, which includes those on Indiana and Ohio side.

Interviewer: And why don't you explain a little bit of what the historic society is, with the Union Literary Society.

Participant: Well, it's to preserve the Union Literary Institute, which was a school established in 1845, started taking students in 1846, was a coeducational, non-racial, accepted blacks, whites, women, um, for higher education. It was established for black because the state of Indiana did not allow the education of African-Americans. Um, the board was made up of anti-slavery Quakers, predominantly, and African-Americans. So, it was actually a split board. Um, it is unusual that it was a manual labor school, which means that the students not only attended school, but to help pay for their education they farmed the land around them. So, they actually taught African-Americans in the 1840's about, um, agriculture. Which is something [*radical?*].

Interviewer: How does having this history give you a sense of identity, community, what does it mean to you?

Participant: What does it mean to me? Um, I grew up in Detroit, Michigan. I had some sense of my identity from my father's family that came from New York City and that lived in the Harlem Renaissance. So, I had a certain aspect of an African-American history. However, on my mother's side, we would come to Richmond, Indiana and visit her family, and sometimes my grandfather would take us up to Longtown. But at that time, all I knew it was the country where his sister lived. And so, that's all I knew of this area. I didn't know any of the history of where they came from, or what it was about. I just knew it was the country where his sister lived. I took a job in Dayton, Ohio in 1987, and started doing genealogy research to research the history of my mother's family. And from that I learned the community in Longtown, which my mother's family is a part of. Is that...?

Interviewer: Sure!

Participant: Also was a... visited the location, um, I saw graves dating before 1865. And, now, I considered myself educated, um, I was taught the basic story that we were all slaves, and that it wasn't until 1865 that we were freed. And, this community, which I thought was unusual, so I said that it had to be saved. At the same time, I took a job with City of Dayton as historic preservation planning, and learning preservation. So, when I saw the buildings here, I said this is telling a story and the buildings need to be preserved. Because, the story is best told by structures. Uh, you can tell the story but if you see nothing but farmland, it doesn't say much. But, when you see actually structures on the... you can actually tell the story a lot better. I was searching the original, the history about the community, most of it had been lost or had been

compromised by generation over generation, different stories were in a mess with different stories. So, I started documenting the history, finding the oral history, and then finding the documents that backed up the oral history. And so, I wrote the, um, I established, one of the women, Brenda Jett, she showed me the house and I knew it was pretty old, I had talked to other historian and they dated it before 1865, and I started researching that and the whole history of the community started falling out of that house. That that was the house of James Clemens, the founding father of the community. He bought land in October, 1818. And, that particular piece of land was bought in 1822. So, he was the founding father of the settlement. Um, the second family to settle was Thorton Alexander, Alexander family. They bought land in 1822, on the Indiana side of the settlement. James Clemens, his wife's name was Sophia Sellers Clemens, her maiden name was Sellers. They were from... history books say they came from Rockingham County, Virginia. On James Clemens' land patent, it says he came from Warren County, Ohio. Also, Thorton Alexander in, um, Tucker's History of Randolph County, he says his pastor Abraham Sellers brought him to this area. I went down to Warren County Historical Society and found history on the Sellers. And, they said that their great-grandfather, at the age of 87, decides to free his slaves. He came from Rockingham County, Virginia. Take his slaves over land to Warren County, where his son and nephew lived. And then, took his freed slaves up to Darke County where he purchased land. *sighs* Do you want more?

Interviewer: Well, it's really whatever you wanna share.

Participant: You can read the National Register nomination of the James and Sophia Clemens farmstead, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, also because they were involved in the Underground Railroad, it is a, um, an Underground Railroad site for the National Parks

Service Network to Freedom program. Um, currently the Union Literary Institute is currently on the Network to Freedom Service program, and we are in the process of nominated it to the National Register as an archaeological site, because the building is in such bad condition, to the National Register of Historic Places.

Interviewer: And I guess my big question for you would be what does ‘freedom’ mean to you, to this community, to your family?

Participant: Um, what I learned was, um, my family was free a long, long, long time ago. Before more white... before whites even came to this country. Um, I have African and European, Native American, Hindu, you name it, it’s in my ancestry. So, freedom... I did not know the story of free persons of color. Also, there’s a book called Anna-lisa Cox *The Land, The Sinew, the Bon.... The Sinew, The Land...* and as I thought that this was an unusual occurrence, and I wanted to say that I learned that it’s not an unusual. She found 336 pioneer African American settlements in the Northwest Territory, before the Civil War. So, it’s not an unusual occurrence, it happened all over. But, as one of the folks asked me ‘why is things still existing here?’ is because this community became so large, it took a long time to whittle the population down. Most, like my grandfather, in the 1920’s, his family left farming and took, they took skills of carpentry and masonry in Richmond, Indiana. And that’s where they lived and worked, where my mother was born and grew up. So, I still didn’t know the story of this particular area.

Interviewer: Thank you!

Participant: There’s a lot more, I just didn’t...

[end of interview]