

# Hiding slaves was risky business

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nessee and Kentucky to freedom in Canada. Even though Indiana outlawed slavery, the system's bounty hunters were still very active within the borders of the state. Three of the leading slave-catchers in the Midwest were the Kersaw brothers, Jess and William, and a Cornelius Mershon. Isaac and James Adkins also made their living at the trade of tracking down runaway slaves.

**THE ADVERTISEMENT** of missing slaves was done through ads in the newspapers and posters. Sometimes the wrong runaway was captured, but he or she was sold anyway at Louisville to pay for the advertising and the expenses of the hunt.

The trail of the underground railroad in southern Indiana led from the home of a free black named William Hawkins in Daviess County at Washington. Bloomington was the next stop. Farther north were the stations at Morgantown, also operated by the Reformed Presbyterians, and another one at Mooresville, manned by some Quakers.

Understandably the business of hiding runaway slaves was risky, since the bounty hunters had the authority of the owners to retrieve them and the prospect of a reward upon successful completion of their mission.

One slave, a Joel Bee, wrote about his experiences in his run for freedom from a Kentucky plantation. With frozen feet he hid in a corn shock and longed to ask for shelter in a nearby farmhouse. Realizing it was too risky, he stayed hidden while some farm hands were actually working on the shock in which he was hiding. Miraculously the workers abandoned the shock and began working on another.

Bee, despite his frozen feet, made his way farther

north into Monroe County to the home of Samuel Gordon, three miles south of Bloomington. Since Gordon's house was close to the road, Bee was duly transferred to the home of Thomas Smith on Pickwick place.

Because of his frozen feet, Bee had to be treated by Dr. Joseph McPheeters, who said nothing about his patient. Smith's son, J.C., who was a student at Indiana University, took the opportunity to teach Bee to read during his convalescence.

After Bee reached Canada, he sent a couple of letters. One was directed to Bloomington to announce that he had arrived safely. The other, to his wife and child back in Kentucky, was written in a code that told them what route to follow to find their way to him in Canada. No doubt the route included the stop at the home of the Smiths.

Bee's wife and child were delivered to Bloomington by Hawkins, who traveled with them all the way from his station at Washington.

Other Monroe Countians who harbored or assisted runaway slaves — out of conviction and compassion — were James Clark, Rev. Faris, John Blair, D.S. Irwin, W.C. Smith, T.N. Faris, Austin Seward and John Hite.

The Wylie House at 2nd and Lincoln streets and the Millen Stallknecht House on Bryan Streets are also reputed to be former slave stations. (As a child I was shown a basement room in the Wylie House and told it was used to hide runaway slaves.)

Smith was also to leave his mark on Bloomington by giving the Reformed Presbyterian congregation an acre of his land for a meeting house and selling for \$10 a half acre for the Covenanter Cemetery, which is located at the corner of High Street and Moore's Pike.