

*Facts and findings that
shed striking new light on
the history of slavery
in America*

By
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THE "REAL" UNCLE TOM

Josiah Henson

PRACTICALLY every American knows of Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But few Americans know that a major source of inspiration for the fictional Uncle Tom was an actual slave born in Maryland in 1789. His name was Josiah Henson, and he helped provide a model for Mrs. Stowe's black hero.

Why is this important after all these years? Because Josiah Henson, the "real" Uncle Tom, is so totally different from the fictional Uncle Tom—and much of our thinking about black Americans has been deeply influenced by Mrs. Stowe's creation. Her greatness lay in her burning anger at the fundamental moral outrage of slavery—that one human being could own another human being. But she knew practically nothing about slavery as it was practiced in America. She mentions almost casually that Uncle Tom runs his master's farm, but never gives readers a glimpse of him at work. Instead, she spends endless pages describing Tom as a simple, easygoing man who forgives everybody, white and black, for the abuses that they heap upon him. He is sold South into the hands of the monstrous slave owner, Simon Legree, and is alternately beaten and worked almost to death, but never loses his faith, or turns on his tormentors.

To be called an Uncle Tom is thus an insult today. Several years ago, an Akron woman even sued a Cleve-

large one. They seem somehow symbolic of sex."

The second: "I am on a basketball team wondering whether I will be a 'forward' or a 'guard.'"

The third: "I am showing my friend Dawn the clothes in my closet. She suggests that I sew some buttons on my jeans. I walk among the rooms of the house (although I live there, I am unfamiliar with it) and am surprised to find the bedrooms adequate for several guests. They are spacious and clean."

At first glance, these dreams did not even appear connected. Then Barbara recalled that the previous day she had discussed her ambivalence about motherhood with some friends. At the time, Barbara was in her early 30s and childless.

She applied the creative-monologue technique. "I am a field," she began, "and I am about to be planted. . . ." In just a few words, it had become apparent that the field was a womb symbol and that Barbara's heart felt she was ready for pregnancy. This immediately suggested a possible meaning of the second dream: Barbara wondering whether to go "forward" into pregnancy or "guard" against it.

The third dream contains a pun that places it in the context of the

night's dream as a whole. Dawn points out that Barbara's jeans (genes) are in poor condition—a dream cartoon expressing Barbara's doubts about her heredity. Barbara wrote, "I had earlier dreamed that I accused my mother of being the cause of my brother's mental troubles. The present dream shows my unconscious concern about passing on these problems to my offspring. But I am shown that my house (which I always associate with myself and my potentialities) is larger than I realize and that there is plenty of room for guests (babies?)."

A few weeks after the dream, Barbara wrote to say that she was pregnant and was delighted about it.

THE aim of the dream game is to look for whatever message your dreams have to give you. It is important that you make your own assessment and not allow yourself to be swayed by someone else's interpretation. If your efforts to understand a dream fail, then ask your own dreaming mind for help. Before falling asleep, ask your dreams to give you the meaning of a certain elusive symbol, or even to replay a puzzling dream in terms you can understand. We have found this technique to be extremely effective.

No Escape Claws

A FISHERMAN friend told me that one doesn't need a top for a crab basket. If one of the crabs starts to climb up the side of the basket, the other crabs will reach up and pull it back down. Some people are a lot like crabs.

—Charles L. Allen, *The Miracle of Love* (Revell)

land newspaper for libel because it applied this name to her—and she won \$32,000 in damages. But if the woman—and the rest of us—had known the “real” Uncle Tom, she would have been proud to be called one of his spiritual descendants.

Portrait of a Man. Consider the picture that the “real” Uncle Tom gives us in his autobiography. Josiah Henson’s father received 100 lashes, and his ear was cut off, for attacking a white overseer who tried to molest his wife. Josiah and his mother were later sold separately, and the boy almost starved to death from neglect until he was bought by his mother’s new master. But these experiences did not break Henson’s spirit. He set himself to “out-hoe, out-reap, out-husk, out-dance, out-everything every competitor.”

At the age of 22, Henson married “a very well-taught girl, belonging to a neighboring family,” and was soon “master of every kind of farm work.” When he caught the white overseer defrauding the owner of the plantation, he reported him. The owner instantly dismissed the overseer, and gave Josiah his job. Henson was soon raising “more than double the crops, with more cheerful and willing labor, than was ever seen on the estate before.” For many years, not only did he superintend planting, raising and harvesting crops of “wheat, oats, barley, potatoes, corn, tobacco,” but he took them to market, bargained skillfully, and brought home the profits to his mas-



Poster for the dramatized version of
“Uncle Tom’s Cabin”

WARSHAW COLLECTION, SWITZERMAN INSTITUTION

ter, Isaac Riley—a man, Henson stated bluntly, who “was coarse and vulgar, and utterly incapable of managing his affairs.”

Riley even mismanaged the money Henson made for him. He drank heavily and became involved in a lawsuit with his brother-in-law. In 1825, the master staged a scene of servility that we might easily attribute to the fictional Uncle Tom himself. He came into Henson's cabin one night and began to groan, “I'm ruined! They've got judgment against me, and in less than two weeks every slave I've got will be put up and sold. There's only one way I can save anything. You can do it, Sic. Won't you, won't you?”

In a final plea, he threw his arms around Henson. He explained that he had a brother in Kentucky, and wanted Josiah to take the slaves to him. Safe on his plantation there, they could not be seized.

University of Adversity. Henson agreed, and took 18 slaves, his wife and two children to Amos Riley in Kentucky. Riley immediately appointed Henson his overseer, and the slave succeeded in managing this bigger enterprise as successfully as he had run the farm in Maryland. He also became friendly with a local Methodist minister, and began earning money as a part-time preacher.

Eventually, the Maryland Riley agreed to sell Henson his freedom for \$450. Henson put \$350 down and gave Riley a note for the balance, which he expected to raise by more part-time preaching. But Riley was

true to his low nature: he wrote a letter to his brother saying that Henson's manumission papers were not to be given to him until he paid another \$650.

Henson decided to escape only after he realized that the Kentucky Riley, as crooked as his brother, was planning to sell him without any consideration for the fact that he was a husband and father. Henson engineered the escape with his usual skill, taking his wife and four children with him. Helped by friends, they survived a grueling journey northward and, on October 28, 1830, crossed Lake Erie and stepped on Canadian soil, free.

In Canada, Henson helped start a sawmill which shipped “good prime black walnut lumber” to Boston, where it sold for \$45 per thousand feet. Part of the profits went to the founding of a manual-labor school at Dawn, which was “well attended by colored children, whites and some Indians.” Henson later made several trips to the South and helped to lead 118 other slaves to freedom.

In 1851, Henson sailed to England to raise money for the school and to exhibit his timber at the London World's Fair. When he, the only black exhibitor, met the Archbishop of Canterbury, the churchman asked, “From what university, sir, did you graduate?”

“The University of Adversity,” Henson replied with a smile.

The archbishop was amazed to learn that Henson had spent most of his life as a slave. “How did

you learn our language so well?"

Henson explained that he had made a point of listening carefully to good speakers, and imitated only those who spoke most correctly. Again, the contrast between Josiah Henson's speech and the thick dialect spoken by Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom is startling. (A sample: "It goes agin me to hear one word agin Mas'r. Wan't he put in my arms a baby? It's natur I should think a heap of him.")

Fresh Light. At least as startling are the new findings about slavery discovered by a new generation of unbiased historians. The fresh light they cast on the slave experience makes it clear that Josiah Henson was not unusual. On the contrary, it was common for black men to rise to the level of overseer on Southern plantations. Only 30 percent of plantations with 100 or more slaves employed white overseers, and on smaller plantations the overseer was almost always black.

Moreover, managing plantations was by no means the only goal to which a black might aspire. A number of slaves worked in iron manufacturing in the South. The Oxford Iron Works in Campbell County, Virginia, one of the South's largest iron works in the early 19th century, was staffed and run almost entirely by black slaves.

About 27 percent of the adult male slaves in Charleston before the Civil War were skilled artisans—blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers. They operated as virtually free men.

A slave carpenter or shoemaker would and could advertise his services, negotiate his own contracts, receive and pay money, find his own place to live and do business. He was reminded of his slave status when he was required to pay a fixed percentage of his income to his master.

Field hands also earned substantial sums in reward for higher productivity. Some planters even entered in profit-sharing arrangements with their slaves. One Alabama planter set aside one third of the profits from the plantation for himself, and allowed his slaves to keep two thirds, out of which they paid all their expenses.

Triumph of Spirit. A dramatic summary of these new insights about slavery was recently published by two economists, Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. Using computers, massive research and sophisticated mathematical techniques, Professors Fogel and Engerman summarized research on some 250,000 slaves in their book *Time on the Cross*.*

The story of Josiah Henson dovetails with many of their findings on slave life. Henson's happy marriage at the age of 22 was the rule rather than the exception. Although Henson's mother encountered a promiscuous overseer, such men were rare. Combining statistics on the number of mulattoes in Southern census data and the work of geneticists on gene pools, Fogel and Engerman have

*Published at \$8.95 by Little, Brown & Co.

concluded that no more than one or two percent of the Negro children born on slave plantations were fathered by white men.

Black men and women did not lose all their pride and humanity in slavery. They forced the planters to give them more humane treatment than most people have realized. They tacitly demanded rewards for their work. Sometimes the demand was passive—a refusal to do a good job. And fear that a slave would run away to the underground railroad was a deterrent to the use of force by his master.

Actually, most Southern planters were not soul-less Simon Legrees, but hardworking businessmen who studied the latest techniques in scientific farming and took their responsibilities seriously. Many of them did not like slavery, but were baffled at how to eliminate it. They saw the results of decent treatment in their bank accounts: slave plantations were between 19 and 53 percent more productive than comparable farms in the free North. In 1860, the South, considered as a separate

country, would have ranked as the fourth-richest nation in the world.

At the same time, the new insights about slavery enable us to appreciate from a fresh perspective the fierce resentment that black men felt against the system—especially talented black men like Josiah Henson. They resented the fact that they could be forced to labor without receiving a fair share of the profits. And especially they resented the constant possibility of being sold, abused, unjustly punished—without hope of any redress or protection.

Slavery was unquestionably an evil that had to be uprooted from America's soil. While all Americans agree on this today, it is time we realized that most of the men involved in the system were not evil. Nor did many of the black men and women who were trapped in the system passively succumb to its worst tendencies. On the contrary, they found room for opportunity and achievement. Their story is a triumph of the human spirit over adversity that they should be proud to have recorded.

Pay-Offs

A LEARNED professor agreed to do a lecture on Persian pottery for the BBC. The BBC man said, "I'm afraid the fee will be just £50."

"Quite all right," said the professor. "You shall have my check in the mail by tomorrow."

—Dee Wells, quoted by John F. Baker in *Publishers Weekly*

A 12-YEAR-OLD girl decided to sell her horse and, after consulting her father, agreed to ask \$700 and take \$500 if necessary. A prospective buyer called and asked the girl how much she wanted for her horse.

"The most we'll take," she replied in a businesslike voice, "is \$700 and the least we'll take is \$500."

—Hugh Park in *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*