

The Escape of Isaac Berry

By Unknown

My father was a slave, born in Kentucky. When his master died, his slaves were divided out among his children. My grandmother and all of her children fell to one of the girls, who married James Pratt from Missouri, and went there with her slaves, near St. Louie (they call it St. Louis now). My father, Isaac Berry, ran away when he was twenty-seven, in 1859.

This Jim Pratt was a poor man and a gambler, and he would hire out his slaves. But it was the understanding Mrs. Pratt's slaves wasn't ever to be whipped. My father farmed with the other slaves; one of his sisters cooked in the big house, the other cooked for the slaves. They had to cut all the nice meat off the ham, and give bones to the slaves—hog heads and things like that, hambone, and cornbread—it was hearty food of course. The white folks had biscuits, but not the slaves. I can remember my father telling this to illustrate how different our life was to his.

You would see your brothers or sisters put on the block and auctioned off, like a steer or a hog. My father said that when Mr. Pratt sold one of his brothers, Harvey, down the river, it hurt him so that he decided to run away if he could.

Someone had given my father a little colt, and Mrs. Pratt said he could raise it himself. It was a natural “racker”—that's the way horses were taught to run. (Everybody rode horseback down there.) Jim Pratt sold the racker to pay a gambling debt. Then Mrs. Pratt called my father aside and told him, “I'm afraid Mr. Pratt will sell you too one day, down the river, and if you can run away, and think you can get away, you have my permission to go.”

My father was a great hunter, for deer and wild turkeys, and he sold them to a lady in St. Louis who kept a hotel. (Her name was Mrs. Tousey.) She gave him a dollar and a half for a deer saddle, and then the rest of the deer he took back to Jim Pratt's folks, to help feed the slaves, you know. That way he saved up money enough to buy his food when he ran away. He had a friend, Albert Campbell, a free colored youngster, in Quincy, Illinois, who arranged to help him get across the Mississippi River by boat.

A white man had taught my father to play on the violin. He'd play “The Devil's Dream” and things like that—the colored people was great for dancing—and often when he went to play at a dance he wouldn't be back until Monday morning early. And there was nothing said so long as he got back in time. So he told Jim Pratt he was going to play at the dance, and left the farm Saturday night. He got a colored man to ride with him to the place where Albert Campbell would meet him with the boat. When he reached the Mississippi, which was quite a ways from the farm, the water was so high over the bank the boat couldn't get to him though he could see their light, and they could see his light.

Isaac hid in the brush along the river, away from the landing, all Saturday night and Sunday, without anything to eat. Then a white man came along in a boat, with his wife and two children, a boy and a girl. They were coming down the Mississippi. My father told them that he was working in Quincy and had to get across, and offered them a five-dollar gold piece. (A lot of the money was gold then.) It was the wife who said, “Let's carry him across or he'll lose his job; we can wait for breakfast.” He helped row the boat across to Quincy. They'd have set the bloodhounds after him, if he hadn't crossed the river.

He got on the railroad and started walking. There was a \$500 reward for him dead or alive. (Someone left a newspaper on the seat on the train when my mother come later on and she seen

it. Jim Pratt followed him too, clear to Detroit.) He came to a little country store and waited until kind of late, then pulled his hat down over his face, and went in and bought a loaf of bread and some cheese—or sometimes only crackers. You see he didn't know how he'd have to be saving of his money.

He walked along the tracks, and hid in the daylight. Only once in all the time did he step in the daylight to wash and shave in a little river, and two white men stopped and asked him where he was going and where he was from. He told them he was going to Michigan City, and that he would sell his life dear, though they was two against one. You see he was afraid; he'd been afraid all his life. He laid out his razor—it was a long blade with a handle—and his revolver. And they said they wasn't going to bother him.

He walked to Ypsilanti on the railroad. His shoes was all wore out, and his socks, and his feet got all swelled up, and his legs all swelled up. (You know sometimes when I think about it I want to cry, a human being getting treated that way.)

When he got to Ypsilanti he met a colored man going to work; he had his dinner pail with him. And he asked my father, "Are you a runaway slave?" And my father said, "It's none of your business what I am." He was wore out with people asking him questions. The other man said, "I can see from your shoes that you've come a long way. You see that house up the railroad a ways—that's where I live. You go there and tell my wife to give you breakfast, and then you go to bed and stay there till I come home; I'll be home at six o'clock." So he went on to the house, and the old lady took care of him, and he went to bed and slept all day—he said his feet and legs were so sore. He was walking three weeks. That night the house couldn't hold all the colored people that came there. And they gave him carpet slippers and socks, and took up a collection and gave him quite a lot of money. In the morning one old fellow took him down to the railroad and said, "You get a ticket for Detroit, and when you get there take a ferry to Canada, just about a mile across the lake, and then you'll be under the lion's paw."

When he got to Windsor he looked up Aunt Celia Flenoy, a little black woman who was Albert Campbell's aunt. She got him a room with a colored man, and he got work on the street, at fifty cents a day. "I'm a free man now," he said.