

The Clay Horse

Milton Howard Gregg, age 32, and Susannah Day Gregg, age 29, were quite comfortably located in her father Israel Day's home in Meigs County, Ohio - along the Ohio river. During Milton's tenure with the 140th Regiment Ohio Guards during the Civil War, Susannah had moved home with her parents, as she had no livelihood as a young wife and mother of 5 children; Oliver Clark, who was ten; Nancy age nine; "Kemper" age five; Catharine (our grandmother) then four years of age; and Barbara Elizabeth about seven months old. Israel, age fifty—nine had found himself deeply involved in the northern cause, an ardent abolitionist, he was engaged in the activity of assisting the run—away slaves who could get across the Ohio into free territory, safely to other Underground Railway stations farther north, sometimes as far as the Canadian border and to freedom.

Israel and Barbara Yeater Day, his wife, were moderately well—to—do and had a cozy home, built just above the flood plain of the Ohio river in a lovely timbered setting. There were many limestone caves in the area, springs of cool water, and abundant wild life. The home was built on a high limestone rock foundation, and consisted of a large living, dining area with kitchen at one end. There was a large rock fireplace and a lovely carved mantle. (Both he and Gregg were artistic in the carving with a pocket knife. Susannah too, had an artistic talent. We have some of her crayon drawings preserved. That trait is passed on into the present generation.) The upper part of the walls was of split logs. There was a bedroom, and recently since Susannah and Milton had come, Israel had added a smaller lean—to, shed—like bedroom, for their convenience and privacy. Today, we would consider the cabin charming and rustic.

It was with mixed emotion that Susannah stood at a small table near a small open window that looked down on the Ohio, now within its banks. Barbara was busy with some scraps she was cutting for quilt blocks. The Greggs and Day's were planning to move westward as soon as "things" could be readied. It was the fall of 1865 - just after the Civil War had ended in April 1865. What courage it must take to start westward into unknown, uninhabited land, with a baby and small children. Life at its best was rugged for the frontier women. She was a bit uneasy, as Milton and her father had already been away for three days. Running the slaves northward was dangerous business, Ohio was a free state and not all their neighbors felt as they did. Congress had recently passed the Fugitive Slave law which made it a crime to aid the runaways. Milton was a Methodist preacher,

and felt it his duty to try to obtain freedom for every person - black or white, bond or free.

Under her feet was a braided rag—rug that concealed a small trap door in the floor, underneath was a crudely boarded enclosure where someone could be safely concealed for short periods of time. It was cramped, but safe - The door was never opened when the three smaller children were about, always they were put into the bedroom or were asleep. Clark and Nannie were sworn into secrecy - not to even hint that they knew of its existence)— Susannah was preparing supper for herself, Barbara, and the children, mixing some coarse corn meal into a hoe—cake sort of bread that would be fried somewhat like a pancake on the hearth. Already simmering, was a young squirrel that she had brought down with the rifle, for like most frontier

women she knew how to use a gun. She was thankful that they had a cow - there was butter for the hot bread, and milk for the children, who were husky and healthful except Nannie, who had a continual dry, cough. She was about ready to call the children in from play, baby Barbara was asleep in the swinging cradle that Israel had built when Clark was small, and had been passed down to the youngest child.

Suddenly the dogs - every frontier family had several - to warn of approaching stranger or animals, to help hunt, and track larger game, and help herd the cow - began to bark and ran down toward the river, although they were not vicious. Through the gathering dusk she saw a large, negro man running up from the banks of the river; somehow, he had managed to swim or paddle across, or possibly he had been ferried across by friends, for the current was quite swift.

She hurried outside to call the dogs, just as a panting, youngish mulatto negro came to the doorstep. "Please Missus - hide me" - he explained that they were on his trail and not far behind. He had been so well informed that he had

no doubts about being at the right cabin, for it was distinctive in its appearance. She hustled him and the children inside, and as the dogs were now quiet it was apparent that no one was close on his track at present. She asked that he sit by the fire and dry himself and his wet clothing, as she gave him a garment of Israel's. He was husky and muscular, larger than Milton. The Gregg's were rather slight in build, with dark curly hair. Their background was French, with a trace of Indian - for the grandfather had married a comely squaw. Milton always said that he was one-fourth Native American Indian! And proud of it!

The visitor was neat in appearance, and very well mannered. He had been a trusted house servant, helping care for his master's children. He seemed friendly

and kind and her children clustered around him for he had taken up some blue clay- from a pot or crock holding clay - the children were always modeling some-

thing from the clay which baked hard and durable. (Later many dish and pottery factories moved into the area due to the high grade clay available.) His quick

fingers were modeling a horse.

Susannah fed her family and guest, and by the flickering candle light he told how his master had been killed in the Civil War, and his property, land, and slaves sold. He had been purchased by a master, not so kind, and had decided to

try for freedom in the northern states. He finished the horse which was well done, and set it near the fire to bake. He had gone outside and plucked small branches to strengthen the legs. It's ears were erect and the tail long. He

explained that he would find some chalky rock and make a white blazed face, and three white stockings like the horse of his former master. After securing the latch, Susannah invited him to sleep on some comforters on the floor while she and the children retired to the bedroom for the night. She felt no fear - the dogs were chained for the night outside and would warn of any intruder or danger.

The next day was uneventful, and yet Milton and Israel had not returned... In mid-afternoon Clark reported that "someone was coming", some men and horses were being ferried across the river. Hastily Susannah concealed the negro beneath the trap door.

(I 'bust make an explanation not clear to me. Susannah is mentioned as going to stay with her parents during the war. But Barbara was not present at the time of this incident; apparently; although Gram-ma did say she was cutting quilt blocks, I did not give enough attention to detail. Perhaps Barbara retired to the bedroom! leaving Susannah to handle the situation.)

Before long three persons approached, two young mulatto's and their owner, and their dogs. The negroes stopped with the horses some distance from the door, as the white man approached the cabin. Fortunately, Israel had instructed the young Gregg's well in a method of wiping out traces of tracks in the dusty lane. They rode their stick-horses with a leafy branch at the end, back and forth, dusting out the tracks but yet appearing to simply be playing. Susannah and Clark held back their own dogs while those accompanying the man, as they drew near, suddenly began to yelp and sniff the ground, being "trackers" they had scented the man they were trailing. They came close to the house foundation yelping and baying. The high rock foundation had no openings and was a perfect barrier. Politely the white man asked if he "could look around" as he was following a run-away slave and he seemed to have come this way. It didn't take him long to look into the crude barn, cow—shed building, and he asked to look inside the house. Susannah quietly seated herself in the old rocking chair, on the rug with baby Barbara in her lap, as the man made a quick look around, and then began to question her, about the whereabouts of her men folk. She truthfully told him that they had taken a load of fireplace wood into the town about 6 miles distant, which they hoped to sell for money to buy scanty provisions - salt, coffee, wheat flour, and always ammunition.

The wood was a handy cover—up for underneath would be hidden the Under—ground Railway "passenger". Arriving at their destination, the next station, they would wait until dark to unload the wood and the "passenger" would be conveyed to yet another station or hidden if necessary until a suitable time to safely transport him on. Grandmother told how Susannah and the children often rode on top of the wood for a trip into town to visit friends, and adding to the "ordinary—trip" appearance of their journey. Milton would cut green leafy branches which they held umbrella—like over their heads for a shield from the hot sun. On one such trip they were stopped and questioned over and over by some suspicious officers who were to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. Susannah pinched the baby causing her to cry, and admonished Milton to "hurry—up" as the baby was hot, and hungry, and tired, and they were yet some distance from town. The ruse worked and the men allowed them to continue their journey.

Satisfied that no one was hiding in the cabin, after looking into the bedroom the stranger was ready to leave when suddenly he noticed the clay horse drying by the fireplace corner. - Susannah had already noted that he had been riding a beautiful bay horse with white blazed face and three white stockings. "Who made this clay horse?" he sternly asked. Somewhat taken back, but quickly recovering her composure Susannah had to reply that she did for she knew it was too well done for him to believe that a child could have modeled it. The man had seen identical horses made for the children of his home, it was evidence to him that the negro he sought had

been here. Handing Susannah the bowl of clay he ordered her to model another. Putting Barbara down and breathing a quick prayer, her skillful fingers began to shape the clay. She had made crude dolls and objects for the children, but to make a horse, that would be a reasonable likeness of the one he held; - that was something else! But a head, and two ears had begun to take shape, and he seemed satisfied with her efforts, when suddenly the sound of wagon wheels and voices outside indicated that Milton and Israel had returned. They made a quick survey of the boys holding the horses, and the baying dogs and quickly came inside. The stranger spoke to them explaining that he had followed

a run—away slave to this area and asked if they had seen anyone along the trail. Of course they hadn't, and Susannah interrupted to ask if they had sold the wood. He replied that he had, for 500, and produced some coffee and a small bag of the fine wheat flour to prove it. He assured her that he had orders for three more loads, thus preparing an excuse to go into town again in case they were watched.

Soon the Gregg household breathed a sign of relief as the south—of—the—river group went back to the waiting ferry man. They had outwitted the slave owners once more. Fearing they were watched, accordingly the next day Israel and Milton busied themselves cutting another load of fireplace wood. They waited another day and again Susannah and the children accompanied them to deliver another "passenger" to the next station, with the young slave hidden under the wood, cramped and uncomfortable, but hopeful for freedom.

Gram—ma would tell this incident as if she actually remembered it although she was only half—past four years old.

Perhaps she did remember - it was a tense, emotional situation. I'm sure I recall when Gram—ma was baptized into the R.L.D.S. church. Dad and Uncle Willie, Aunt Belle and mother protested her "Mormon" baptism and became quite angry that she wanted to be baptized. Grandpa John told them to "shut up", if Kit wanted to be baptized that was her business. They wouldn't even go. I remember riding on the spring seat as Grandpa drove the wagon to Grand River just west of Allendale. There was a deep pool of water just north of the bridge, and there Gram—ma was baptized by Elder H. A. Stebbins. Grandfather had put extra boards across the wagon box, and Mrs. Mull who lived next door north, Mrs. Neal who lived down the hill west, and Mrs. Hammer who lived in the big house now owned by Ruckmans, went along. All were already members of the R.L.D.S, church. Grandpa and Grandma lived in the house just northwest, across the road, from the church in Allendale. The DeWayne Staton family live there now. I also remember Gram—ma "washing off" by dipping her wash cloth into the water in an old wooden washing machine tub. She needed to change into dry clothes, and I had walked into the room as she was washing her bare bosom. She scolded me for coming into the room, and secretly I was puzzled as to why she thought she should "wash off" when she had just been in the water. I know I remember for no family member was there to tell me about it later. Gram—ma would have heard the story of the clay horse told and retold many times, but I feel she actually did remember.

The Gregg's began to make plans for their immediate departure westward, for they knew they were being closely watched and felt unsafe. Plans had to be made to leave the comfortable

Ohio home. The two best horses were sold to obtain

money for the heavy covered—wagon that they would need for the trip, and to purchase salt pork, salt, shells, a supply of corn meal and other necessities for the long journey. The remaining horse was blind in one eye and would be hitched to a light spring—wagon, with a seat in front and a space behind for the pots and pans, bedding, extra clothing and supplies that were needed daily. Susannah drove the horse and wagon, with the children. Milton and Israel drove the ox—team with their tools, and furniture and bedding, and led behind the cow that would supply the family with milk. Clark walked behind with the other cows and calf, and the dogs followed or ran ahead to explore. The trail was not good, and frequently the axe had to be used to get through. Susannah and the children could go faster than their clumsy oxen pulling the wagon, and would go some ways ahead, then stop and set up camp for the next meal.

This story sets the stage for another of Gramma's delightful reminiscences, *Coming to Missouri by Covered Wagon*.

Pansy Young Rinehart 17 August, 1988

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