

Southworth made mark on region

(Third of four articles)

By Bob Zybach

Some words in the English language are singularly offensive and disturbing, and care must be taken when they are used. Such a word is "nigger." Yet to students of black history or 19th-century American literature, the word cannot be avoided.

When I hear my black friends use the word, it is usually with humor, irony or anger, and I am not offended. When my logger friends use the word, it is usually with a certain lack of sophistication or an amount of innocence, but I am offended enough to comment to them about it. When I hear white businessmen or college students use the word, I become upset and disgusted and let my feelings be known.

Typing it bothers me almost as much as speaking it, and I avoid doing so whenever possible. Still, it can be printed in a family newspaper, whereas many common terms for sex acts and body parts cannot. There are reasons for this apparent lack of sensitivity and common sense; historical accuracy and personal names are two that I am relying upon for the following account.

ALEXANDER LOUIS SOUTHWORTH was one of the most arresting and interesting figures to grace the annals of Benton County history. To friend and foe alike, he was commonly referred to as "Nigger Lou." I doubt that he took offense at the name, and am all but certain that he used it himself. If he did, it would have been with a great deal of satisfaction, as he was a man of pride and accomplishment.

Such names were common in the 1800s, and evidence can be found in newspapers and popular songs of the era, as well as in writings of novelists, journalists and essayists — both black and white.

I could have, as John Horner did in 1928, substituted the appellation of "Uncle Lou" when referring to Southworth, but I think some of the following quotes would lose their narrative power and history would be compromised in the process.

SOUTHWORTH WAS BORN on July 4, 1830, to Louis and Pauline Hunter, Tennessee slaves of James Southworth. At that time public education was not available to most black Americans and, in fact, teaching slaves to read and write was illegal in many Southern states and communities. Lou's family, as with most black families of the era, was probably illiterate and left few records.

The Hunter and Southworth families moved to Missouri in 1832, where Lou's father died of smallpox in 1850. The following year Southworth migrated with his owner to Corvallis, which was known as "Marysville" at that time.

For the next 18 years he traveled throughout the West, variously employed as a homesteader, a gold miner, a soldier in the Rogue Indian War, a dancing school fiddler and an investor in the Comstock Lode Mining Co. During that time he purchased his freedom for \$400.

IN 1869, SOUTHORTH returned to Oregon, where he opened a blacksmith shop in Buena Vista, married, and learned to read and write with the help of the principal of Buena Vista Academy. In the 1930s, the son of a local pro-slavery activist was able to recall that:

"Nigger Lew was a fine nigger. He was a fine blacksmith and lived last on Alsea Bay where his stepson still lives. He prospered and used to dress well and drive a fine black team. He was respected by all and treated almost as an equal even by the southerners."

Southworth's Alsea Bay homestead was established in 1879, four miles upriver from Waldport, and the first in that area. In 1880, a man named Jim Doty laid claim to a parcel near Lou's. In later years Southworth would be quoted as smiling and claiming that "Jim and I were the first two white men on the bay." At that time the Alsea River was still part of Benton County, as Lincoln County wasn't created until 1893.

THE MOST FAMOUS STORY regarding Southworth's life dates from the 1880 presidential election. According to legend, a terrible storm was ravaging the coast during Election Day, making it nearly impossible for the men of Southworth's precinct to cross the bay to vote.

Declaring "Boys, Abe Lincoln's on trial every time there is a big election in this country; so I'm goin' to cross the bay to vote or drown in the attempt," Southworth lashed two oil drums to his boat and headed toward the opposite shore. His crossing was witnessed by several bystanders and his vote was the only one cast from his community.

It was also in the Waldport area that Southworth's concern for education was demonstrated. The following story from Marjorie Hays' 1978 book "The Land That Kept Its Promise: A History Of South Lincoln County" illustrates both the diversity of the Alsea Bay community at that time as well as Southworth's standing among his neighbors:

"DARKEY CREEK SCHOOL situated in a clearing on the lower end of 'Nigger' Lou Southworth's place (Oakland Landing) was typical of unpainted clapboard-siding schools. The board members numbered four: Lou Southworth, chairman; John Turks, a German bachelor; Nick Constantine, a Greek bachelor; and William Risley, father of school-aged children. None of the members could agree.

"At one of the meetings chairman Lou said, 'I make a motion and second it myself ...'

"John Turks flew up, 'You cannot do dot! Dot is not legal!'

"Anger dominated the meeting with Lou and Nick deciding to fight. The two men went outside. Lou threw Nick into a clump of ferns, hammering hard with fists. Suddenly yellowjackets swarmed everywhere and the meeting was hastily adjourned with everyone trying to outrun the pests and no one escaping the stings."

LOU SOUTHWORTH was a man of commitment and pride. His devotion to the principles of the Republican Party caused him to risk his life to vote and, in another oft-repeated story, caused him to change churches when his fiddle playing was characterized as conduct "unbecomin' to a Christian."

In later years, at the age of 85, he supported himself by carrying advertising banners along the streets of Corvallis. Rather than be ashamed of his occupation, he remained a happy man who could take satisfaction in his ability to remain financially independent and productive, even at so advanced an age.

During his lifetime, Southworth may have been the only black Mason in Oregon, and is also believed to be the only black member of the Oregon Pioneer Association. He is an important figure in Benton County history and truly "a credit to his race." The human race.

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