

Ex-slaves became prominent in early Benton County

(First of four articles)

By Bob Zybach

In the 1820s and 1830s, before the creation of Benton County, slavery was practiced in this area by local Kalapuyans and by the Hudson's Bay Company servants and "free trappers" who passed through.

For the most part, slaves were used to perform tedious tasks and errands for their owners. Their lives were considered to be of little value, except for what use and pleasure they provided their owners. By the time of the Civil War, in 1861, the practice had been largely confined to the buying and selling of young women on the Siletz Indian Reservation, on the western side of the county.

In a journal kept by Royal Bensell (Benton County representative to the Oregon State Legislature in 1868 and 1876, and subsequently elected mayor of Newport on four occasions), the entry for March 9, 1864 notes that "these Indians, all (of) them, sell their women to any persons wishing to purchase. Prices (are) according 'to age and appearance,' some \$5 and others \$50, and the whole tribe or tribes will see that the bargain is sustained."

The 1871 "Reports on Indian Affairs" by Oregon Indian agent Joel Palmer reported that the "women are bought and sold like cattle ... daughters are loaned, hired or sold at from 12 to 16 years of age ... One of the worst features of this degrading system is, that it extends to the whites ..."

To put these dates in perspective, one need only realize that people are living today who can still recall Bensell before

his death in Newport in 1921.

Black slavery in Benton County was far more rare than Indian slavery, partially because it was made illegal in Oregon in 1844, and partially because so few people of African ancestry have ever lived in Benton County.

According to U.S. census records, the "Negro population" for the county in 1850 was given as 10; 80 years later, in 1930, as nine. Of this small number, several of whom had begun their lives as slaves in southern states, it is surprising how many gained prominence and influence as free individuals in their adopted home.

Perhaps the best known member of this obscure group was Reuben Shipley, who donated Mount Union Cemetery to the county in 1861 on the condition that black people could be buried there. The cemetery gained its name as a show of unity with the anti-slavery northern forces.

Reuben Shipley was born in Kentucky around 1800. According to Elizabeth McLagen, a Corvallis native and author of "A Peculiar Paradise: a History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940," Shipley was sufficiently skilled and trusted that he became overseer of a large plantation in Missouri and was put in charge of the education of his owner's son, Robert Shipley Jr.

It was during this time that Reuben married a woman from a neighboring plantation and became the father of two sons of his own. When the white Shipley family emigrated to Oregon in the 1850s, Reuben was promised his freedom if he helped with the relocation.

It was his plan to earn enough money

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to also purchase his wife and children's freedom, and then move them to a new home in Benton County. Before the plan could be completed, however, his wife died and the boys' owner subsequently refused to sell them.

Eldridge Hartless, a pioneer of 1846, was ridiculed in the local press by an anonymous letter writer for giving Shipley a job after he had gained his freedom. Despite the public disfavor, Hartless stuck by his friend, and Reuben was able to save \$1,500 from his employment and purchase an 80-acre farm between Corvallis and Philomath.

A prominent local landowner, William Wyatt, suggested that the hill on Shipley's farm would make a good site for community burials, and Reuben's subsequent two-acre donation became the county's first cemetery.

The most famous case of black slavery to occur in the Pacific Northwest involved Nathaniel Ford, a founder of Rickreall and one of the original builders of the Applegate Trail.

Ford came to Oregon in 1844, accompanied by two of his slaves, Robin and Polly Holmes. When Robin found employment in a local mill, Ford refused to allow the couple to keep their own children, claiming them as his own property.

A legal suit was filed in 1852, and Judge George H. Williams (a prominent Democrat who damaged his own career by writing a lengthy anti-slavery letter published in the Oregon Statesman in 1857) granted the children the freedom to rejoin their parents. This did not stop Ford from collecting \$750 from Reuben Shipley for 16-year-old Mary Jane Holmes a few years later.

Reuben and his young bride settled down on his farm and became well-known and respected members of the local community. They attended nearby Beulah Chapel Church and raised six children, three boys and three girls. A locust tree planted for shade alongside the family's cabin became, in time, a local historic landmark.

In 1873, during a visit to relatives in Salem, Shipley's daughter contacted smallpox and died. She was buried next to her father, who died the same year, in the cemetery that adjoined their home. Mary Jane eventually moved to Portland, where she lived with her son, a Southern Pacific Railroad employee.

Although Mary Jane's second, and only other known, husband was named Drake, the family is buried in adjoining plots under the name "Fricklin." A commemorative marker at the entrance to the cemetery recognizes the contribution of these Oregon Trail pioneers; ex-slaves that lived to gain freedom and helped to build a new life and an enduring community in the Willamette Valley.

Bob Zybach is a historian and cultural resource specialist for OSU Research Forests. Each Thursday in February, he is writing about black pioneers in Benton County.