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LETITIA CARSON, PIONEER BLACK WOMAN

By George B. Abdill

I don't recall who first mentioned Letitia Carson to me; perhaps it was Harriet Munnick, that teacher, historian and dean of Northwest authorities on our French-Canadian pioneers. At any rate, it was ten or twelve years ago that the first references to her piqued my interest and a file on her was gradually accumulated. I mentioned her to the late Lavola Bakken, research historian for me at the Douglas County Museum, and she also became interested, gathering additional material for our file from Dr. Kenneth L. Holmes, teacher, author and historian at the Oregon College of Education in Monmouth, Oregon. At any rate, here is the story of Douglas County's early black woman, pieced together from many different sources.

The 1850 U.S. Census for Benton County contains the first mention of this unusual woman. It bears an entry for David Carson, a 50-year-old male born in Ireland. In this household is Letitia, aged 36, a female born in Kentucky; Martha, aged 5, a female Mulatto born in the Rocky Mountains, and one Mulatto male, Adam, 1 month old, born in the Oregon Territory.

The next mention of this family is to be found in the Benton County records and also in the microfilm files of the Salem "Oregon Statesman" for October 17, 1854. David Carson died and Letitia Carson, "a black woman," filed an action against Green B. Smith, administrator of David Carson's estate, ". . . to recover the value of her services rendered in the territory to the defendant from the year 1845 to 1852." Luticia (the first mis-spelling of her name) had been a slave in Missouri but came to Oregon and served her master faithfully until his death. Her attorneys were D. Smith, Grover & Thayer; attorneys for the defendant were Logan & Kelsay. In the absence of circumstances which would imply an agreement to pay, the jury disagreed - 9 for and 3 against - were discharged and the cause continued.

From the evidence at hand, it would appear that David Carson was both Letitia's owner, master and husband, and the father of her mulatto daughter and son. The trail then fades in the antiquity of time until "Aunt Tish" Carson and her children appear in Douglas County. For many years she reportedly made her home with the Hardy Elliff family near Galesville (present vicinity of Azalea) in the upper Cow Creek Valley, where she worked for the Elliff family and also served as the community midwife.

In the Douglas County marriage records, Page 154, there is the record of the marriage of her daughter, Martha. The affidavit, Page 271, is signed by Joel Thorn and Peter Groslois, and in reference to the marriage of Martha Carson and Narcisse Lavadore on the 19th of January, 1868, states: ". . . said Lavadore is half Indian and said Carson is half Negro." The South Umpqua Historical Society's yearbook of several years ago, "Pioneer Days In Canyonville," mentions this marriage.

The "Roseburg Plaindealer" microfilm for 11 August 1877 reports that one Andrew Carson, a colored man referred to as "... a darkey" attacked Miner Spivey near Canyonville. This almost certainly has to be Letitia Carson's mulatto son, Andrew, born in the Oregon Territory in 1850.

A former resident of the Canyonville area, now deceased, knew Carson very well. Carson was locally known by many as "Jack Tish" and farmed in the Canyonville area. He was widely known for his gentleness and ability to train and handle horses and may have been employed around Canyonville's livery stables at one time. My informant said that at one time Carson operated a horse-powered hay baler and was rather seriously injured when his arm became entangled in the gears attached between the sweep and the tumbling rod.

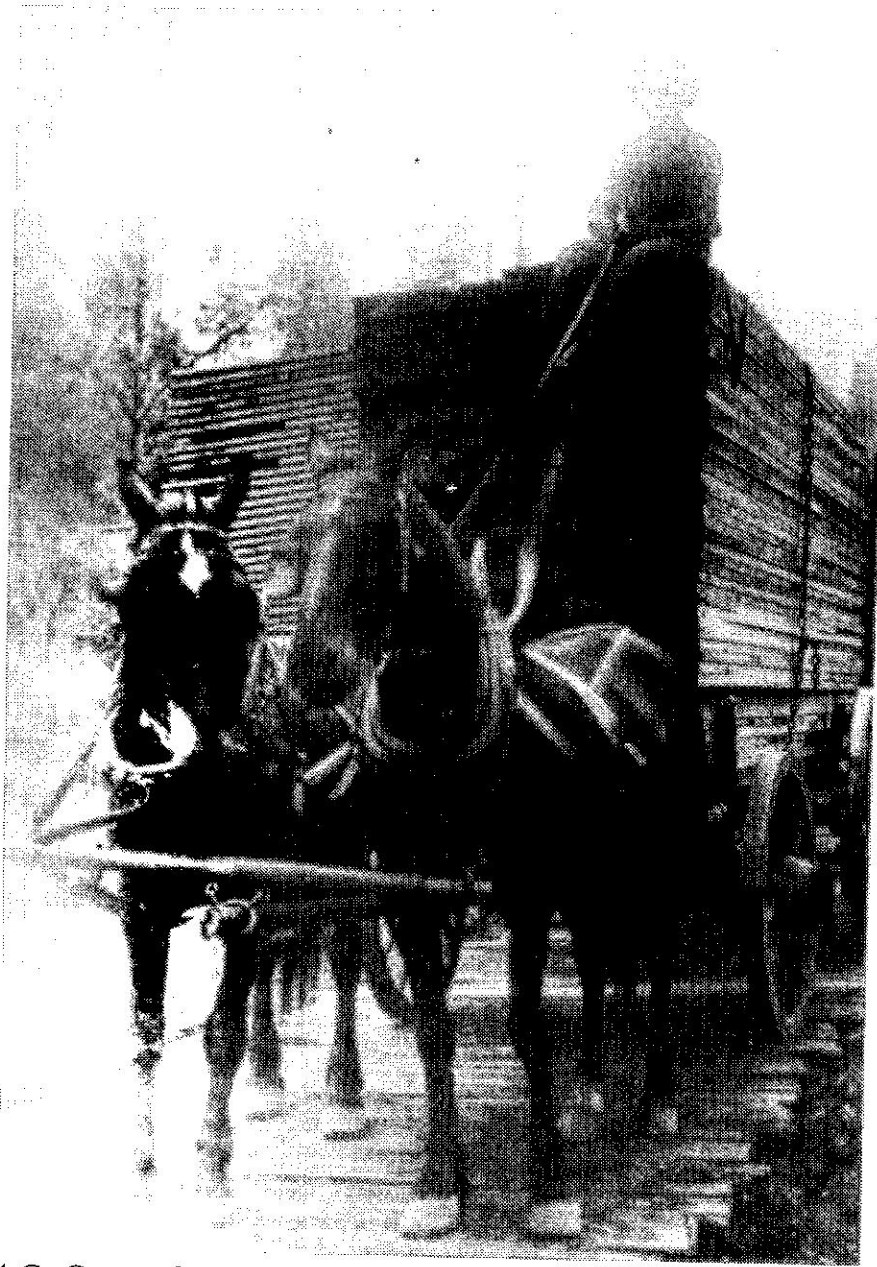
Letitia Carson's whereabouts in the ensuing years is a matter which has not yet come to light. A few years ago Dick Norlin, an employee of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, was doing some investigating of property up South Myrtle creek and came to the County Museum with some notes he had jotted down on a little graveyard he had located. Located in Section 21, Township 29 South, Range 4 West, the burial grounds were located on a knoll 100 feet west of a gate on a dirt logging road and contained nine graves. The cemetery is known as the J. Bryant cemetery, being located slightly northwest of the Bryant ranch.

The carvings on the markers are as follows: Benj. W. Cardwell, 1871-1879. Judith Cardwell, 1875-1893. John Cardwell, 1878-1900. Zachariah Cardwell, 1832-1909. Rebecca A. Holloway, 1849-1920. Geo. W. Holloway, 1843-1917. Benj. L. Stephens, 1820-1896. And there are two other stones in this cemetery; one reads "Lutiche Carson, 1888;" and the bottom of her headstone with the erroneous spelling of her name reads, "Jacksonville Marble Works, J.C. Whipp." Nearby is the last stone, marked "A.C. Carson, 1849-1922."

Thus is marked the final resting place of Letitia Carson and her mulatto son, Andrew C. Carson. The Health Division, Department of Human Resources, Portland, has furnished the Douglas County Museum with a copy of the Oregon State Board of Health's Standard Certificate of Death for Andrew C. Carson, signed by L.C. Melvin, M.D., of Roseburg, Oregon, on September 13, 1922. The certificate lists him as a laborer, a single male of white and Negro race; it states that he was born September 15, 1849, and was 72 years, 11 months and 29 days of age at the time of his demise; his place of birth is given as Oregon and his father is listed as "David Carson, a white man from the Southern states." No maiden name is entered for his mother but under "Birthplace" is listed, "In the South - full blood Negro."

Dr. Melvin attended him for several days, states he last saw him alive on Sept. 12, 1922, that death occurred at 5:45 A.M. on Sept. 14th and was caused by senile dementia. The information was supplied by a niece, Mrs. Alice Lava-dour, of Adams, Oregon.

However, the story does not end in the Bryant cemetery beneath the stone with the misspelled name. A short distance west, Letitia Creek flows into South



A.C. Carson, better known as Jack Carson, was the mulatto son of Letitia Carson. Both lie buried in the cemetery up South Myrtle Creek. This photo shows him driving a team and wagon load of lumber from some small sawmill down Cow Creek from Glendale. It is the only known photo of him.

Fred Weaver collection, Douglas County Museum

Myrtle Creek, is listed on the maps of the area, and was evidently named in honor of Letitia Carson.

But there is more, and still more - in an article entitled "Slaves and Free Men; Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860" by Quintard Taylor in the Summer, 1982, issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 2, two mentions are made of "Luteshia" Carson, our own Letitia.

A recent conversation with Stephen Wert of the Roseburg office of the Bureau of Land Management took place between Mr. Wert and myself at the lower Garden Valley home of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Bacon. Mr. Wert is employed as a soils scientist by the BLM and a part of his duties is to classify and name the different types of soils in the county. He had located an unusual and unnamed type of particular black soil near Letitia Creek and without ever having heard of the colorful story of Letitia Carson, Douglas County's pioneer black woman, Mr. Wert had named the soil type Letitia."

THE OLD CEMETERY

A postscript by Portia Schiltz

The old cemetery off South Myrtle Road, Myrtle Creek, where Letitia Carson is buried, occupies land referred to as The Stephens Place. Mrs. Betty Briggs Hanna of Myrtle Creek is a descendant of the Stephenses and the Holloways buried there.

George Washington Holloway was her great grandfather. He was born Feb. 22, 1843 and died Nov. 23, 1917. His wife was Rebecca Ann Stephens. They were the grandparents of Mrs. Hanna's mother, Edith Holloway.

Mrs. Hanna says there are many more graves on the plot than those now marked with stones. She remembers several more markers.

She and her sister, Mrs. Louise Briggs Winebarger, were present at the last burial there. She remembers that her grandfather, Elisha Jackson Holloway, received the coffin of a relative shipped to Myrtle Creek, apparently by train. He hauled the coffin up the hill to the cemetery in a wagon. His small granddaughters were witnesses to the burial. They believe Charles Benjamin Holloway, a brother of Elisha, was buried that day in the fall of 1939.

The sisters lived less than a mile from the old cemetery and when they were children they walked there many times. Mrs. Hanna remembers with sadness a gravestone with a lamb. It marked the grave of a little child that was scalded to death.

The Cardwell family had married into the Stephens family, hence the Cardwell stones.



The sport of kings was once also popular in Douglas County. This photo, taken about two miles east of Canyonville near the summit of the first hill on the road to Days Creek, shows J.B. Fullerton in jockey's silks training a race horse. Man at the right is the late Bob Couglar, for years a Canyonville barber.

Clyde Fullerton collection, Douglas County Museum