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ELIZA HARRIS, OF "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN" Notoriety

Reference: By the Writer.

About 1830, Eliza Harris, a slave lived very happily with her family on a plantation in Kentucky, across the Ohio river from Ripley, Ohio. Her husband was owned by another planter, but they were often together, owing to the kindness of their Masters. Eliza had had three children, but two had died and she was very fond of her remaining two year old baby boy. One evening she over-heard her Master talking. He was very much in need of money, and had decided to sell her baby to secure the money he needed. Eliza could listen to no more, for how could she part from her baby? She became frantic and decided to take her baby and escape to Canada. She did not wait, but slipped out and went several miles to the Ohio River; she found the ice broken up and was at a loss as to what to do. There were no bridges those days, and of course no raft could cross in the ice jam. She went to a house near by and remained over night. Next morning she heard horses approaching and knew her Master was coming. She picked up her baby and clasped it to her bosom and ran for the river. Reaching it she jumped on an ice cake and as it sank, got onto another. Thus by crawling, jumping and lifting herself and baby from one cake of ice to another she finally crossed the river. Sometimes she sank into the water, almost to her shoulders, and was nearly frozen in the ice-water; but she kept praying that the Lord would save her and her baby.

She finally reached the other side; William Lacey, a brother of Maj. M. H. Lacey, of Fountain City, Indiana, pulled her up the bank to safety. He had watched her cross and had expected to see her sink out of sight any minute. He took her to the home of Rev. John Hankin, Ripley, Ohio, where she and her babe were cared for until they were able to go on. There was no danger of her master getting across the river, until the ice jam was gone.

From Ripley, she was taken to Cincinnati, and put on one of the Underground Railroad Lines, presumably coming from Hamilton, Ohio, to Richmond; where no doubt she remained over night with Samuel Charles and family who kept an Underground Station on their farm, just east of Richmond in what is now Glen Miller Park. Part of the old home remains, and the wash house, where many fugitive slaves have laundered their clothes while waiting their change to start on their journey North. Eliza and her baby, must have stayed here long enough to get rested; for she had not recovered yet from the shock of the trip across the River. From here she went to New port (Fountain City) to the home of Levi and Catharine Coffin, where she remained two weeks or more, until she was well enough to travel. They sent her on to the Station of Levi, Zimri and Berias Bond at Cabin Creek, near Georgetown, Randolph County. The Bonds had built their home with a puncheon floor over an underground room, which was arranged for the hiding of fugitives. This floor was fastened down to the floor with pegs. One of these pegs was arranged so that it could be removed and milk poured through the hole to a container beneath. In this way the slaves, who were hidden there were kept from starving when the house was surrounded by guards.

Sometimes they kept slaves 2 or 3 weeks not being able to get them away, because of the guards, who were constantly watching the house.

From there Eliza and her babe went to an ancient house 2 1/2 miles north of Pennville, in Jay County. It was located on the Quaker Trace Road and we do not know how long she remained here. From here she went to Greenville, Ohio and on to Sandusky, Ohio, where she was taken across the Lake to Canada and located in Chatham.

In 1854, Levi and Catherine Coffin and their daughter, and Laura S. Haviland, of Michigan, were on a visit to Canada attending a meeting. At the close of the meeting a woman came up to Mrs. Coffin, seized her hand and exclaimed: "How are you, Aunt Katie? God bless you!" etc. Mrs. Coffin did not recognize her at first, then found it was Eliza Harris, whom she had befriended at her home in Newport years ago, when Eliza was seeking her freedom.

The Coffins visited Eliza in her home and found her comfortable and contented.

"Once upon a time,
So the story goes,
Many strange things happened
As every body knows.

So 'll tell a story
Parts you've often heard,
There are other phases
That may seem absurd.

How a colored Mammy
With her babe so sweet
Started out for Freedom
And the things she'd meet.

How she crossed on ice blocks
O'er the river deep,
And landed with her baby
Most frozen in a heap.

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How by kind assistance
From hearts that were fine,
She reached her destination
The Canadian Freedom Line."

-- Flora Mae Harris