

Farmington evidence scarce

Underground railroad lingers in legend

By LYNN ORR

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 gave birth to a concerted effort to help escaped slaves reach freedom in Canada, commonly referred to as the Underground Railroad.

Although hard evidence of Farmington's link in the Michigan escape route is non-existent, the legend has persisted to this day.

"Because the law provided severe penalties for helping slaves escape, hardly anything was put in writing," says Paul Schreiber, a member of the Farmington Historical Commission.

"It's just one of those things like King Arthur and the Round Table," he comments. "There's probably some basis in truth, but it's hard to prove."

The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad but an escape route roughly following the tracks of the Michigan Central Railroad from the Ohio River to Canada. Those homes, barns and warehouses where people harbored escaping slaves along the way were called stations.

Plymouth was one of the major stops along the route to cross the St. Clair River, and Farmington homes may have been used as an alternate route.

"WHEN IT WOULD get hot in other places, they would head for some of the less populous places like Farmington," Schreiber surmises.

In 1965 a Farmington Senior High student, Debra Halperin, theorized that Farmington was a link in an alternate route in a research paper she wrote on the Underground Railroad for English instructor Lee S. Peel.

Ms. Halperin based her theory on an old book, "Negroes in Detroit," which she located in the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library.

"This route was used only when di-

rect passage to Detroit was blocked by the watchfulness of slave hunters and must be regarded as a detour rather than a regularly used route," wrote Ms. Halperin, quoting the 19th century account.

Whether rumor or fact, a number of Farmington homes have long been regarded as Underground Railroad links, with the Philbrook Tavern prominent on the list.

In "Farmington: A Pictorial History," published in 1971, Peel sought to bury rumors of underground tunnels and slave cells in the basement of the Philbrook Tavern, now a residential home on the corner of Eleven Mile and Power Rd.

Since the home adjacent to a loamy area, the possibility of tunnels has to be ruled out, Peel wrote, adding that evidence of tunnels could not be found.

ANOTHER STRUCTURE often connected with the legend is the home of Nathan Power, son of Farmington's founder Arthur Power, located on Gill Rd. south of Grand River and now an annex of the Oak Hill Nursing Home.

Power moved into the house around 1860, and his diary confirms his attendance at Abolitionist meetings and his enthusiasm for the cause. Power was a Quaker, and many Michigan members of the church were outspoken opponents of slavery.

In 1963, Ms. Halperin interviewed the then owner of the building, a Mrs. Mazur, who insisted that the house was used to hide fugitive slaves. She pointed out various closets in the cellar that conceivably could have been used for that purpose.

Power's extensive diary, however, fails to make any mention of the harboring of escaped slaves. Power makes two references to blacks in the diary in 1869 and 1870. He writes that a black man, James Mills, helped him erect a fence and in another section

writes of the presence of a black man at breakfast.

Power was often referred to as the conductor of Farmington's Underground Railroad station, according to an account by Lillian Drake Avery writing in the May 30, 1924 edition of the Farmington Enterprise.

Mrs. Avery also recorded that resident Palmer Sherman, a contemporary of Power, recalled finding blacks in his barn, "a spillover from Nathan's."

Nathan Power's brothers Ira and Abram were also linked by persons who knew them interviewed by Ms. Avery to the hiding of fugitive slaves, as was Ethan Lapham, who owned a home at 2025 Farmington Rd., just north of Eight Mile.

John Power, son of Abram, told Mrs. Avery that he sometimes got a glimpse of a black man and saw his mother coming from the direction of the barn with a plate.

Another scrap of evidence which has been cited to support the legend was the presence of a black family in Farmington since around 1830. Great-grandmother of Farmington resident Wellington Hullin, Ellen Wilson is presumed to have stopped in Farmington before making her way to Canada and returned to the area when she attained Canadian citizenship.

Peel writes that Hullin recalled going to a house at Eleven Mile and Power with his grandmother but could only speculate that the visits were connected to her early involvement with persons who may have helped her escape.

"In total, the whole gamut of evidence is thin in a number of areas, but the legend is simply great nevertheless," writes Peel.

"Every community, big or small, needs its legends on which to speculate, on which to feed its young, and to which, over the years, new bits and pieces can quietly be added."



Once the Philbrook Tavern, this stately residential home, located on Eleven Mile and Power Road, is rumored to have been part of the underground railroad.



Now an annex of the Oak Hill Nursing Home, the house housed fugitive slaves on their way to freedom in Canada. (Staff photos by Harry Mauthe)

Tell-tale prints are handy identification

To the unfamiliar eye, they look alike—a series of similar swirls, lines, waves and loops.

To fastidious housekeepers they're the messy smudges that children leave on walls mirrors.

But to the police, fingerprints are the only sure way to identify a thief or a murderer.

In an age of plastic surgery, they're one feature that is impossible to alter.

"Fingerprints are widely used as a means of identification. They can't be changed or altered," said Lt. John Santomaro of the Farmington Police Department.

Many fugitives have tried to get rid of the telltale prints, only to learn that the pain and expense were useless.

"Dillinger tried to burn his off. But then, he was still the only person with burned prints. And when they grew back, the scars in the prints were unique to him, too," he said.

EACH PERSON HAS a unique set of fingerprints. Not only are the patterns different from person to person but each finger has a different set of lines and swirls.

The lines and swirls may look alike but experts have divided them into different categories.

The swirling, elliptical pattern, generally associated with fingerprints in cartoons and comic strips are called whorls.

Each line in the fingerprint is a ridge, which is counted for purposes

of categorizing the prints, according to Sgt. Murray Switzer of the Farmington Police Department.

Deltas, the v-shaped lines which jut into the ridges are used as the criteria to determine if a set of fingerprints is readable.

Other lines in a fingerprint are arched. Some appear to be oval shapes, known as loops. Lines that branch out are known as branches.

To elude leaving a unique calling card on all they touch, most persons know enough through television and novels to wear gloves.

But if the gloves are rubber, or of a porous material, the prints could be picked up from the inside of the glove.

IT TAKES ABOUT 20 MINUTES to fingerprint both hands, some fingerprints are harder to take than others.

It depends on the circumstances, according to Switzer.

Persons who do manual labor and the elderly have stiffer fingers.

"They're not as pliable and are hard to roll back and forth on the ink pad and the card," Switzer said.

"Relaxed, soft muscles make it easier to take fingerprints. Stiff, tense fingers are hard to print," he said.

As with other services, the price of processing fingerprints has risen for the law abiding.

Farmington residents will pay \$10 and non-residents will give \$12 to have their prints taken.

Non-criminal requests for finger-

prints are received from persons who need them when applying for concealed weapons permits, liquor licenses, visas and city and state employment clearances.

Bloodmobile stops for Harrison students

The Farmington School District and the local Red Cross are sponsoring a bloodmobile at Harrison High School, 2905 Twelve Mile.

The bloodmobile will be at the school from 4 p.m.-9 p.m., March 29.

Everyone over 18 years old and under 66, who is in good health is welcomed to donate. This includes teachers and others who live outside the area but wish to join the program.

LIT applauds best students

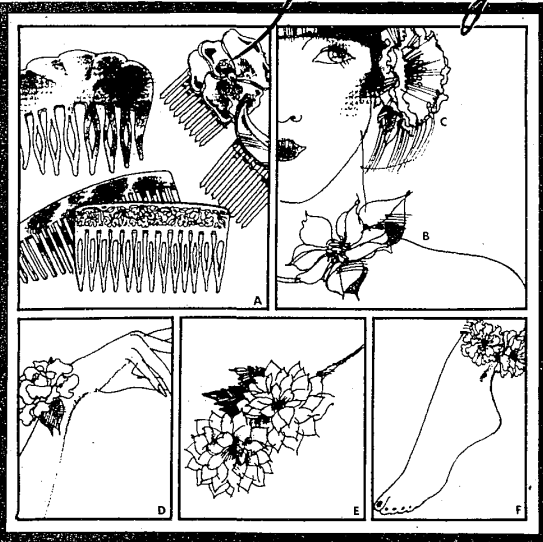
Students from Farmington and Farmington Hills were among those who were named to Lawrence Institute of Technology's dean's honor roll for the fall term.

Among the students are: Tim Ciranni, a graduate of Henry Ford High School, who is majoring in Industrial Management; Vicki A. Cooper, a graduate of Lutheran West, who is majoring in chemistry; James Eckel, a graduate of Farmington High School, who is majoring in electrical engineering; Kerry M. Lafer, a graduate of Berkley High School, who is majoring in architecture; Karen L. Morrison, a graduate of North Farmington High School, who is majoring in electrical engineering and Frederick Schreck, a graduate of Groves High School, who is majoring in architecture.

Another Farmington resident included on the list is Mark Steinmeyer, a graduate of Farmington High School, who is majoring in electrical engineering.

ALSO ON THE LIST is Diane Young, a graduate of Our Lady of Mercy High School, who is majoring in industrial management.

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Sgt. Murray Switzer of the Farmington Police Department examines a set of fingerprints that he has just finished transferring onto a card. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)