

LeRoy's Underground Railroad History Trail

by Lynne Belluscio

A week ago, I had the opportunity to take a group of students from Buffalo on LeRoy's underground Railroad route - - up Bernd Road, over the bridge at Jug City, then north on East Bethany Road, crossing Route 5 to Keeney Road. Turn right on Randall Road, then left down West Bergen Road and right on Seldon Road and back to LeRoy on Lake Road. It's a 17 mile history trail. It's a great little Sunday afternoon drive to take with your kids and everyone gets to learn a bit about LeRoy's part in this horrific story of people escaping to freedom. LeRoy students don't learn about LeRoy's URR route in school, so I hope parents and grandparents share this important part of our local history.

The story of the Underground Railroad is the story of the perilous journey that enslaved people took before the Civil War. It's a story of slaves, freemen, bounty hunters, and men and women caught in a moral dilemma that forced many to take drastic measures that often had serious or fatal consequences. Elijah Huftelen was a teenager when he helped take care of the horses of Daniel McDonald, the "conductor" on the stop in LeRoy. Many years after the Civil War, Elijah wrote two small books, "Lights on the Underground Railroad," and "The Underground Railroad." From these two small pamphlets, we were able to put together LeRoy's story.

Prior to 1850, people seeking freedom could cross into a free state and could remain there with no fear from the government returning them south, but in 1850, with the thought of staving off a civil war, Congress passed the Compromise of 1850.

There was a lot of concern that the balance of free and slave states would no longer be maintained, so the Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state. The Territories of Utah and New Mexico were organized with the option of slavery to be decided by a popular vote. Texas dropped their claim to land north and west and the federal government assumed \$10 million of Texas debt. The slave trade was abolished in the District of Columbia, but not slavery itself. But the most grievous part of the compromise was the strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act. Now, federal agents were ordered into the northern states to capture escaped slaves and to return them to their owners. And bounty hunters were everywhere. Even free people and freed slaves could be taken into custody and returned south to be sold. Slaves carrying free papers watched as the papers were torn up and

burned in front of them. And they had no legal recourse. They were not allowed to seek legal counsel or hire a lawyer. Even freed people in the north headed to Canada.

It was relatively easy for escaping slaves to travel up the east coast, from city to city where there were large populations of African Americans. A new face was not noticed. But imagine how difficult it was to head for the Canadian border through small towns like LeRoy where everyone knew everybody. A new face - - even white would elicit, "Who's that?" Imagine what it was like for an escaped slave. I am certain, that that is why the route through LeRoy passed west of town, through an area with few houses and many fields planted with corn to hide in. And remember most people traveled at night so as not to be seen. Imagine finding a safe house, only to be told to "Stay between the railroad tracks and the creek. Cross the bridge if the water is high. If not you can cross where it is shallow. Then strike out through the fields and find a dirt road going north after going over the state road. Head north until you find a cemetery and ask for the "Medicine Man." He will give you some food and he can help you to the next stop. His has fast horses."

Young Elijah Huftelen took care of Daniel McDonald's horses and noticed that they were dark with no white markings. They often would come back in the morning all lathered up, having gone a long way during the night. Daniel McDonald told everyone that he prepared medicines for people and often had to deliver them at night at the last notice. Even his wife and children did not know of his secret life. Young Elijah only discovered his employer's secret life after seeing groups of strangers getting into the carriage and going off with MacDonald. After the LeRoy route was discovered, MacDonald moved his "station" west, and took young Elijah with him. Elijah eventually returned to LeRoy, and raised beautiful lilies which he shipped to New York City. Only as an old man did he tell the story of working on the Underground Railroad. He wrote: "A full history of the Underground Railroad will never be written. It cannot be for it was a spontaneous organization of such nature that no records were kept. The few who may be left, bound by the force of habit, still keep their secrets and will probably take them to the grave." Elijah Huftelen is buried in the front row of the Langworthy Cemetery on Keeney Road.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN LEROY



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