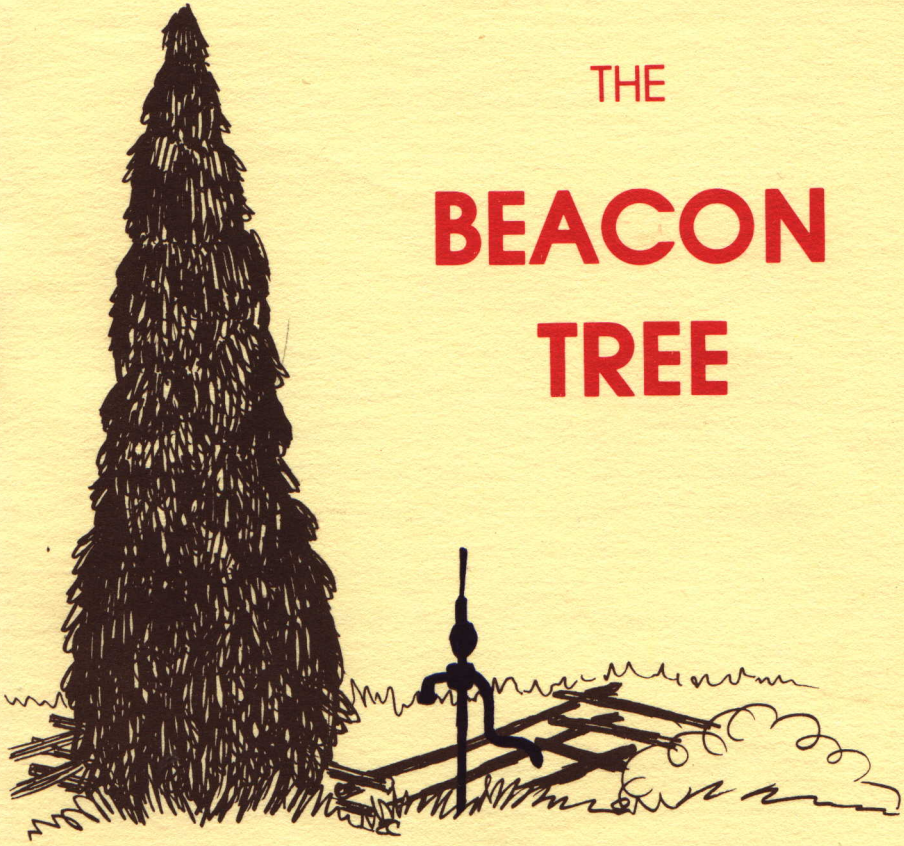

THE BEACON TREE

A TALE OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, UTICA, MICHIGAN

AMERICAN REVOLUTION BICENTENNIAL
1776-1976

The publication of this material has been made possible by the Will L. Lee Memorial Fund. Prior to his death in 1953, Mr. Lee had served for fifty-three years as a teacher and superintendent of the county schools.

The fund will be used to publish oral and written history pertaining to Macomb County which has not been previously available to its residents.

A copy will be placed in each of the county libraries and public high schools by the Macomb County Historical Society.

THE BEACON TREE

A Tail of the Underground Railroad

by Libereta Lerrich Green
Utica, Michigan

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Patricia S. Sawyer

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A Bicentennial Project of the
Macomb County Historical Society

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The Underground Railroad was so named because railway terms were used to describe the means by which escaped slaves were secretly conveyed to the northern states and Canada. Transport was generally by darkness or disguise, i.e., "underground," stopping places were known as stations, those assisting the runaways were called conductors, and the designation packages or freight was used in reference to the escaping slaves themselves.

Peter D. Lerrich, farmer, Sec. 29, Shelby Township was born in Warren County, New Jersey, May 20, 1810, son of Isaac and Elizabeth Daniels Lerrich; the former born in Buck's County, Penna., of English lineage. Mr. Lerrich came to this country May 19, 1835 and purchased 220 acres in Sec. 29 N.E. and also 160 acres of the N.W. quarter Sec. 29; in all he owned 679 acres in Michigan and Illinois. He married Sarah F. Fishbaugh, daughter of Joseph and Margaret Oglethorpe Fishbaugh. Margaret's grandfather was General James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia. Mr. & Mrs. Lerrich were parents of 10 children, among whom were Maj. Isaac N. Lerrich, William F. Lerrich, both in the 5th Michigan Vol. Inf., and Libereta, who married Addison J. Green.

THE BEACON TREE

Libereta Lerrich Green

Memories of Way Station, on U.G.R.R., "Under Ground Rail Road" (so called) at Spring Hill Farm, so named from the Spring-in-the-Hill, a hiding place for runaway slaves in territorial and ante-bellum days. Located in Shelby Township, Macomb County, Michigan.

In the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty, I was five years old, not old enough to go to school but just old enough to want to know the whys and wherefores about everything and must have stumped my mother for answers not too untruthful, for truthful answers she did not dare and the most convenient whopper seemed to be "I hear your father calling, think he wants something." And he in turn would be asked by me, "Why was our house built way off here forty rods away from the road making us travel west and back again east that long distance to get to our nearest village, Utica, Michigan? The boys said this morning 'twas most a mile farther to go to school than it would be if you'd put up the buildings 'tother side the farm where they belonged." And his answer would be, "Mother and I thought that it would be better to build here to be near the Spring-in-the-Hill, we must have water, you know." "But why not live on the road and have a well like other folks?" was answered that "Mother and I thought as the spring was already here, we ought to use it, the Lord wouldn't have put it here if He hadn't wanted it used, would He?" which was much more truthful than poetical and silenced my tongue but not my thoughts, as to why the bricks around said spring, that held the water back, were so wide, wide enough for a man to walk on, and why it looked like the inside of a log house in back of the water with the logs so nicely fitted and grovved, and why the little ramshackled door at the bottom of the hill that always shut itself, was kept covered with a grapevine, running on nails; and why the vine never

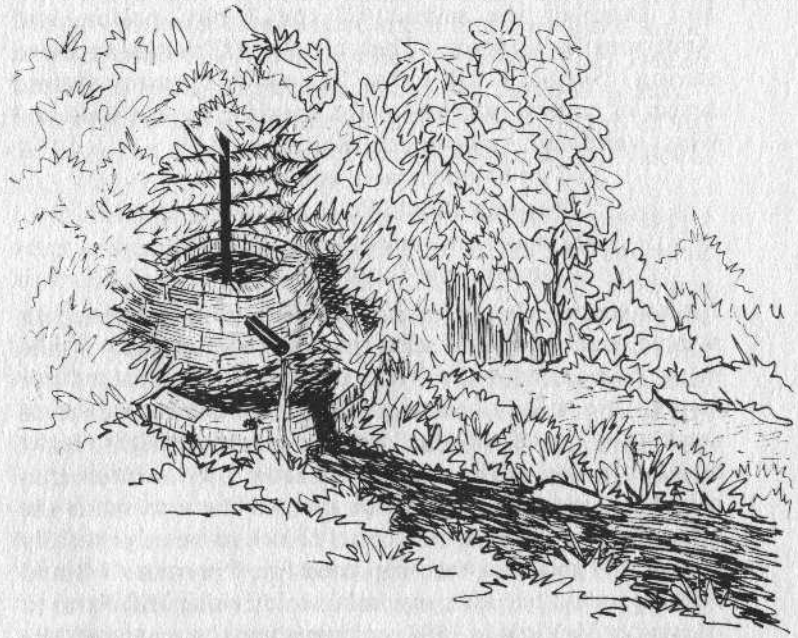
stuck fast to the door by tendrils as other wild vines did; and why we were told to always hang up the vines just as we found them "to keep the water cool." And why did the fried cake crock get empty so quickly? It did not seem reasonable that a six gallon crock could empty itself so often, but I was told if Mother did not complain about it, I needn't.

In looking backward seventy odd years it seems funny how gullible my child mind was, but from infancy we understood that being a lineal descendant of the great General James Oglethorpe, my mother would be immune from all deceit and littleness, but yesterday as I stood beside the grave of the first interment in the Utica Cemetery (my grandmother's) and read "Elizabeth Daniels, Consort of Isaac Lerrich and William Cougle," and read in her Bible (that I have) that Elizabeth Daniles, the daughter of Josephens Daniels, who came to America from Holland in the year 1756, was the mother of Peter Lerrich my father, I thought, judging from present-day history, he had a claim to honesty, as well, and incidentally his daughter, I, also.

The first recollection of queer things happening must have been in the year '49 or thereabouts, as my sister Sarah, three years younger than I was just learning to walk.

Early one morning in June, Mr. Narramore, our nearest neighbor on the west and Mr. Fuller came, each with a yoke of oxen and a sleigh tho there was not a bit of snow anywhere in sight, and my father got out his oxen "Star" and "Bright" with the old sorrel horse "Mike" in the lead and all went to the cedar swamp, a tract of one hundred acres along the north side of Spring Hill Farm, leaving Mr. John Waters and John Narramore digging a hole at the top of the hill over the spring in the hill. They dug and threw out the dirt until their heads were out of sight. After several hours my mother called to them, "They are coming" and handed a short ladder down to them saying "I hope it won't cave," and it didn't.

Presently old Mike came in sight, then the three yoke of oxen and their drivers, then the three sleighs on which lay an immense cedar tree. The roots lay on the first sleigh, the top of the tree hung off the back end of the third and last one. They got as close to the hole as they dared to without caving it in, unhitched the oxen, changed the first sleigh tongue for a long chain reaching across the hole just dug and several feet beyond to which the oxen were hitched and made to pull steadily, till the sleigh with the tree roots tipped down into the hole, John Narramore and Mr. Waters straightening up the tree with pike poles.



Then they all knelt around the tree and prayed and I listened and wondered what was meant by "Black brethern," "down-trodden race," "Brothers and sisters in servitude" and such. Then each one of us were given clippings to throw on the roots, that were cut from the only anti-slavery paper of that time, called the *National Era,* the publisher of the story, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* as a serial just as it was written week by week by Mrs. Stowe. Then Mother sang "Roll on the Liberty Ball," while the men all shoveled in the dirt and tramped it around the roots, brothers William and Isaac, aged nine and seven, valiantly helping with fireshovel and dustpan. (These same brothers, in the 60s served and bled with the Fighting Fifth Michigan Infantry and sampled the menus of the Libby prison and Andersonville stockade.) Then my sister Cleantha appeared saying "Supper is all ready," at which I got my second saucer of custard in payment for speaking a piece loud and clear, standing in my wooden chair:

"Yo do to others as I would
That they should do to me,
Will make me honest, kind and good
As every child should be."

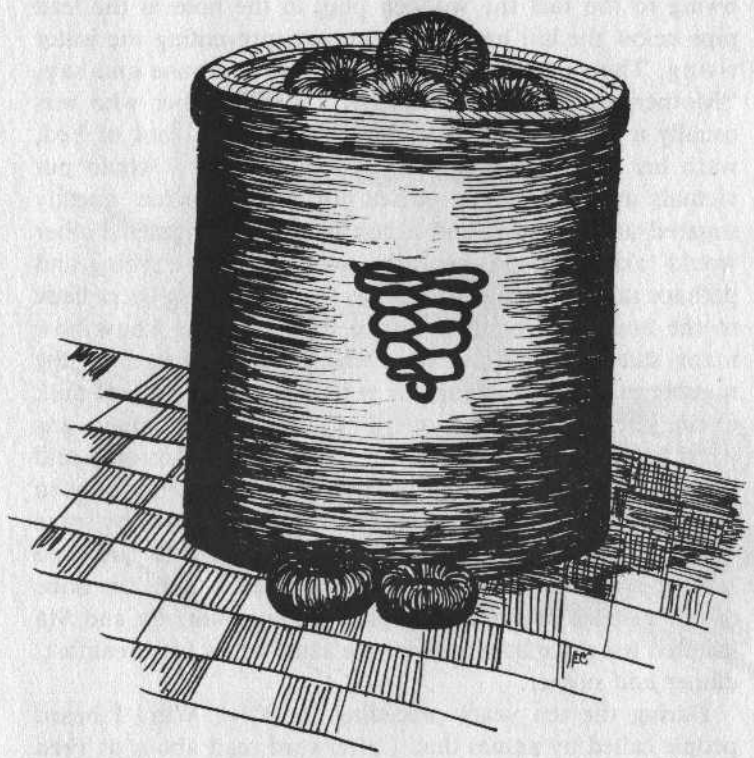
After supper Mrs. Narramore came. She said the tree just planted could be plainly seen from her home, nearly a mile away. She called it the "Beacon Tree." I corrected her saying, "No, it isn't beacon, it's cedar," thinking she meant the kind of wood. Mother said we were both right, but I noticed it was never called "Beacon" to uninterested neighbors who were told it was planted there to shade the pump and keep the water cool. If it had been generally known why and what that tree stood for, I presume it would be there today, but after my father sold Spring Hill Farm to Alexander McVittie in 1888, or thereabouts, a tenant of Mr. McVittie's needing fence posts cut it down; but many dark skinned men and women have blessed the day they sighted the "Beacon Tree." They had been instructed to locate it just twenty-four miles directly north of Detroit City Hall and just twelve miles directly east of Pontiac Court House, in Township 3 N., Range 12 E, Section 29, County of Macomb, State of Michigan.

These instructions could be given by agents in the cause in all states east of the Mississippi River (and farther west for aught I know) who with the leadership of John Owen, were banded together to "Roll on the Liberty Ball," share and share alike in the dangers and fines of those caught in helping slaves to freedom. When Warden Gilbert gave a fleeing woman in Connecticut and a little boy some supper and was fined one hundred thousand dollars, Peter Daniels Lerrich in Michigan paid his share two hundred dollars. I have been told that this woman and her child spoken of was the Eliza and child of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fame, but I doubt it.

All through the 50s, a man visited us frequently that I never saw come nor go, at which I wondered why and what his business was. His name was Charles C. Foot. And one time I listened in the hall and heard Father say, "Where are they?" Mr. Foot answered, "Down to Detroit in the haymow at the Finney House barn. The hay is getting low, the stable men would be glad to get the bounty on them, it's over $4,000 on the bunch. The catchers are watching the ferry night and day with the best blood hounds and I saw one of the dogs snuffing around the barn this morning. Do you think your place would hold them all?" Father said, "It will hold sixteen if they stand up, come and see it." And to my great astonishment, they went out to the hill where the pump was stopped long enough to raise and lower the pump

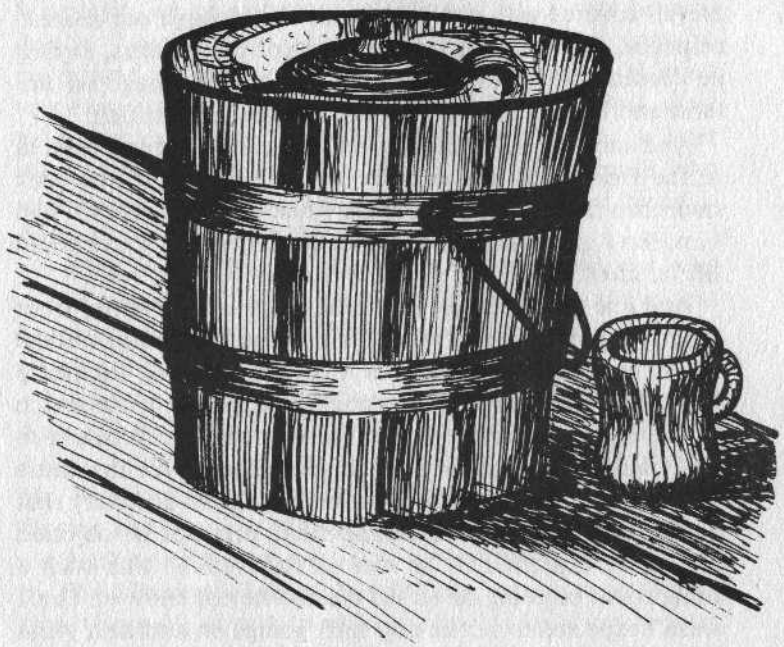
handle a few times, then paused under the "Beacon Tree" while my father pointed north, east, south, west and Mr. Foot took off his hat like he was going into church. Then Father stepped up to the fence, made of long tamarack poles reaching from the pump at the top of the hill to the side of the little ramshackled door that opened into the spring in the hill. Father motioned to Mr. Foot, they felt of the top pole all the way down hill and I wondered why that top pole shone so and why it was so slippery. Not until I was old enough to read stories, did I realize that a person that slid down that fence dropping off into the water and dodging into the opening to the spring could put dogs off the track, for the spring overflowed; a little run of water about a foot wide emptied into Clinton River, forty rods exactly east of the becon cedar and one-half mile west of the third lock on the Mt. Clemens and Kalamazoo Canal. These directions were given to our "sable friends," who came to us via the east and Mt. Clemens or Port Huron.

Well, at dinner that day Father said he guessed he's put up a load of wheat for an early start to Detroit in the morning as he wanted to bring back a load of plaster. Mr. Foot said he would help but very soon disappeared. I didn't hear the fanning mill going but when I hunted eggs that night, the bags full of something were piled high on the wagon, the horses stood harnessed. Several days after I noticed those same bags were stuffed with hay and did not see any with plaster. The next night as I went to the pail for my good night drink of water, I noticed Mother was taking her second batch of bread from the thirteen-loaf brick oven. She had just filled the fried cake crock, but it evidently sprung a lead during the night. My comments on same next morning were cut short by a raising of the eyebrows that I knew meant "Silence."



My father was always the first one stirring in the morning and the first chores he did about four a.m., winter and summer, was to take a pail and go to the pump for water, but very often the water would not respond to the pumping, owing to the fact the wooden plug in the hole in the lead pipe below the hill had been removed, preventing the water rising. Then Father would return to the house and say, "Mother, the pump has run off," when Mother who was usually a heavy morning sleeper, would bound out of bed, wash her hands and without stopping to dress, would put victuals in one pail, the coffee pot of hot coffee, already sugared and creamed and a cup in the other; then Father would take a pail on each arm, go down to the spring and perhaps take two pails of water to the barn, bring them back to the house full of milk before Mother could know how many star boarders she had, which was indicated by the number of fingers sticking out as he carried the pails of milk to the kitchen table. But one time, he got his come-up-ans when he announded with gusto, "The pump's run off" and had taken his usual cargo of victuals to the spring only to find the door open, the lead pipe cut off and stolen by some enterprising hunter who probably wanted it to run into bullets. Anyway that's where they decided it went to; none of our colored brethern were guilty, course not; Pa and Ma laughed for three days and we ate sandwiches for breakfast, dinner and supper.

During the ten years preceding the Civil War, I heard people called by names that I afterward read about as Fred Douglass, Peter Jaxon, and a jolly old lady that we called "Aunty." Pa and Ma called her "Sojourner" and the neighbors called her "Mrs. Truth." And many times we'd be wakened by strange voices or loud rappings on doors and presently we'd hear footsteps going from room to room as if



hunting for something lost, strayed or stolen. If any of us kids wakened, we were asked if we had heard the cat in the room by Father or Mother. If we wondered at strangers hunting out cat, we were told we dreamed it. We soon learned that the command to say no more about it must be obeyed. To my knowledge, none of our black brethern were ever discovered with us by slave catchers, though our nearest neighbor, Jay Phillips, watched out for many years, saying he needed the bounty money to pay the mortgage on his farm and being a strong pro-slavery man felt justified.

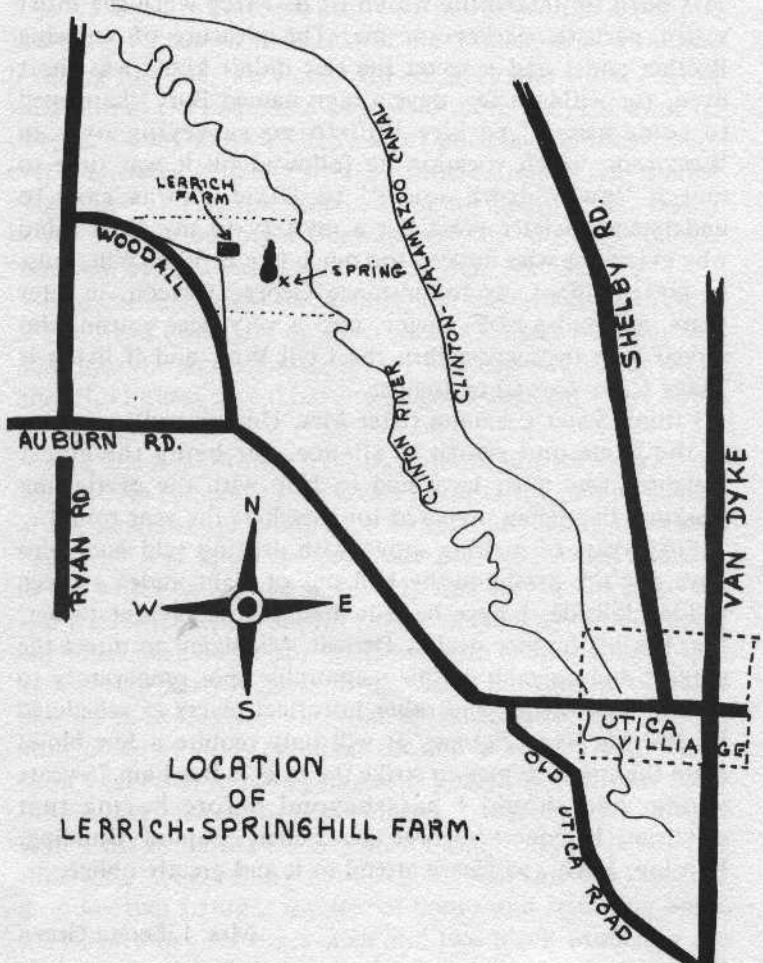
And one time, right in daylight, the slave catchers came in at the front door just as Peter Jaxon slipped out the back door into the smokehouse, if they had had dogs, they'd had him, tho I guess they'd have to be good dogs for Peter could lift an anvil.

And one time Brother Will came home late (or early) from a party. He thought to water his horse at the pump, instead of the horse trough some rods away, and finding the pump "run off" slid down the tamarack pole and struck a match to see where to dip the water. He was very much surprised and frightened at the faces of three negroes in the miniature log house back of the spring. It was with great difficulty that he was restrained from exposing them; not that he objected but, as he expressed it, he was so flabergasted that such a thing could be going on all his life and he not know it. Tho I wasn't expected to notice any such goings on and dear Aunt Libbie, who shared the bed with me, "Never heard a thing," Will's oft repeated assertion, "I'll tell Jay, I'll tell Jay Phillips," caused my memory to hearken back to the morning that I forgot my school books and returning home for them, saw four black men and two black women at the dining table. Mother was in the storeroom upstairs looking for necessary clothing to cover their nakedness. Father was in the cellar after the wherewithal to quench their hunger. 'Tis hard to determine which of us three were the most scairt, parents, darkeys or me. The pleasure of knowing Brother and I had a secret the rest didn't know was short lived, for within a few days a man named Burt "happened to come along" to hire Will to go surveying over in Wisconsin, which vocation he followed till it was time to march "away down south" to Dixie. 'Twas easy to understand in later years but a mystery to my child mind why every one who noticed too much like Brother Will, must be gotten rid of, as for instance George Deacon, in later years, a popular M.E. divine, also a very dear cousin who served with distinction thru the Civil War, and if living is Judge C.W. Cowell of Denver.

I think Sister Cleantha (later Mrs. Underwood) was wise to the game and sworn to silence, for being the eldest daughter, she must have had to help with the everlasting cooking, like being prepared for threshers the year round.

Fifty years of melting snows with drifting sald and rains have put the Spring-in-the Hill out of sight under a green sodded hillside. I have been invited by the present owner, Mr. Weeks, lumber dealer, Detroit, Michigan, to direct the digging and opening of this memorable spot preparatory to the marking of this and other historical places as scheduled by *The Michigan Farmer*. It will only require a few blows from the spade or pick to strike the bricks. But I am 76 years young, and should I pass beyond before having that privilege, I request George N. Fuller, Capitol Building, Lansing, Mich., to please attend to it and greatly oblige.

Mrs. Libereta Green



LOCATION
OF
LERRICH-SPRINGHILL FARM.