

Celebrating Freedom at the Emancipation!

By

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On September 22, 1863, African-American families in Gallia County, Ohio organized a grand celebration of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The next year they did it again...and they've never stopped. Each year for 137 years, the family festival known as "The Emancipation"—featuring speeches, song and remembrance—takes place in this corner of Appalachia. It's the only continuous celebration of the Emancipation in the United States, offering a combination of reunion, religion, and historical resources. Plans are already underway for Emancipation #138.

How did the people of Bidwell, Gallipolis, Vinton, Rio Grande and other small towns keep this celebration alive so long? Respect for their roots is the driving force...People here care deeply about tradition, about families, and most certainly, about freedom.

"To me it's for the kids to learn, to see what's happened and progress through the years," says Ernest Walker, a retired Navy Veteran and autobody shop owner. Walker calls himself a "pinch-hit grandpa" because he helps friends take their kids to after-school events and other activities. At the last Emancipation, he gave transportation to Raymond Cousins, a 12-year old trampoline champion, who helped raise the flag and led the gathering in the pledge of allegiance.

Gallia County, a quiet Appalachian area of woods and small farms along the Ohio River, has an unusually-enlightened history. Forty-three years before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, three brothers who owned a Virginia plantation apparently changed their minds about slaveholding. They bought 265 acres here known as the “Lambert Lands” and deeded it to their former slaves and children, to help them live in freedom. Thirty families originally settled there. Later, as the Civil War loomed, this area became a haven for the mixed-race children of slaveowners, says Alice Conner Coleman, a Chicago resident who visits the Emancipation each year to learn more about her father's people. “They brought their half-black children here and set them free. They kept them in groups to be safe,” she explains.

Coleman loves history, and is frustrated that others don't seem to care. “Most people aren't paying attention about interracial children, because they don't study history. All over the world there are mixtures. Here the mixture is Indian (native American), Irish, Black and whatever,” she says. Coleman spends a lot of time in the History Barn, where dozens of 3-ring binders full of clippings and historical documents are spread out for people to leaf through and learn from. “I come back here every year. It's fun. The first year I came I didn't know anybody. Now, I know everybody. Most of the people knew my people, and they're so friendly,” she says.

Small town isolation may help preserve the traditions, too, says Ohio University professor Adath Ward Randolph, as she turns binder-pages. “The people here are secluded in a way many other communities aren't. So knowing your heritage matters.”

Barbara Scott, a local historian, assembled 35 of these large binders herself. “I remember one year a young man came. He'd been trying to find his people for a long time. Looking through one of my books, suddenly he stopped, pointed at a picture, and said 'Here is my grandmother!' Tears just started running down his face,” she says. Knowing her efforts to preserve memories

are so important keeps Scott actively involved, and drew her son Christian in to participate as well.

Barbara Scott's own great-grandfather 'stole' his wife from a plantation owner down south, so the story goes. "The girl, Mary Agnes Wilson, was crying to think she'd be sold into slavery," says Scott, "and this young soldier, Joseph Smith, came along and said, 'No. I won't let that happen. I won't let them sell you.' He said he loved her, he would take her to freedom...and he picked her up onto his horse, and carried her across the Ohio River, right to this place. They settled in Buck Ridge," she says, giving a firm nod to settle that story.

Due to their interracial heritage, many Gallia County African-Americans are light-skinned. One curly-haired blond, Tijana Justice Mullins, lives on part of the Lambert Lands. Like most local adults, Tijana has been coming to The Emancipation "forever," beginning in early childhood. Later on, she carried her own daughter Standela on her hip to enjoy the scene. Today Standela, grown and married, sings the old Underground Railroad song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, on the main stage as she too carries on the tradition.

History draws some; still others come for the food. Photographer Herman Mayo's eyes light up like sparklers. "Food...Oh yeah...whatever you could want! One guy has roast pig. A lady I know fries fish up. There's cornbread, chicken, bean dinners...."

Herman omitted the cream pies, cakes and cobblers, especially on Sundays. This is a delicious place to blow a diet.

But the real feeding at this event does not come from the home-cooked dinners. The Emancipation's truest purpose is to feed the soul. Each year the program committee, under dedicated volunteers like Luella Henry, works to bring in inspiring speakers. The Rev. Jesse Jackson has appeared here, as have other regional and area celebrities. Henry yearns to bring in a

real crowd-pleaser, someone like Danny Glover or Oprah. “I just want to make it better each year, to draw the young people in,” she says. Henry writes letters, makes calls and does everything she can on a limited budget to build a program that’s interesting and meaningful, and she’s wide-open to sound advice on improvements.

Perched on the bleachers as the gospel songs ring out, Dr. Robert Lawson, management consultant from nearby Portsmouth, brings his two youngest children, James and Michael, to share the Emancipation experience. “It’s like what Marcus Garvey said, ‘A people without a knowledge of their past is like a tree without roots.’ To be anything or go anywhere, you need to know where you came from and how difficult the struggles were, so history does not repeat itself,” he says.

Everyone is welcome at the Emancipation. Visitors have come from as far away as Canada, New Mexico, even England. So if you’re in the area come September, don’t miss the 138th Emancipation, Sept.22-23, 2001, at the Gallia County Fairgrounds, Gallia Ohio. Bring the family, and help make history.