

Hiram Young

By TED STILLWELL

Special to The Examiner

Hiram Young was born a slave on a Tennessee plantation. As a youth, he began whittling out handles for rakes, hoes and axes used by the slaves on the farm. His master paid him extra for this work, and he saved his money for the ultimate purchase of his freedom.

Romance stepped in, however, and altered his original idea. He met and fell hopelessly in love with Matilda. To keep the children of this marriage from being born slaves, Hiram paid his master \$800 for Matilda's freedom. Since the children of a union such as this assumed the legal status of the mother, they were born free but Hiram remained a slave. After they moved to Jackson County with his master, abolitionist George Young, Hiram was finally able to purchase his own freedom for \$1,500.

When the trail-day pioneers were funneling through Independence in the late 1840s, Hiram set out to use his skills as a woodworker and apply that trade to the vast overland trail business. He built a long crude shed on north Liberty Street near the present water tower at U.S. 24. Young built ox bows and wagon wheels for a number of years and then began constructing the entire covered wagon.

His wagons were sturdy, heavy, cumbersome affairs. They had long deep beds, covered with heavy cotton canvas. The wheels and spokes were made of wood with a metal tire wrapped around the outside edge. A man 6 feet tall could stand up inside one of them and they were designed to haul as much as four tons (8,000 pounds) of merchandise across the westward bound trails.

Of course, Young was only one of the many wagon builders in Independence, but it has been general knowledge that the wagon pictured on the Independence City Seal is one of his wagons.

Young turned his skills into a vast fortune, becoming one of the wealthiest men in Jackson County. The 1860 census listed his real estate at \$36,000 and personal property at \$20,000. He lived in a well-furnished home and invested heavily in real estate along the Blue River. Young received generous government contracts for wagon building and saddles. His success angered many whites, sometimes creating problems for him.

Young was often seen at the old slave market on East Lexington buying young men to work in his wagon shop. He never treated them as slaves but paid them the going wage of five dollars a day that was applied to their eventual freedom. Always remembering his own experience as a slave, he treated them generously, but trained them rigorously so that each one of them would be able to be totally independent when they were freed. Young also assisted many people of Irish descent in the same way as they suffered nearly equal discrimination on the streets of Jackson County at that time.

During the Civil War, Young fled Jackson County with his family, only to return to find his shop totally destroyed by the war. Although getting up in age, he rebuilt and continued his business. The use of horses had supplanted the use of oxen, but his reputation as a maker of ox yokes had traveled far. Orders for the yokes poured in from Mexico. Four or five hundred yokes would be loaded and shipped at one time.

When Hiram Young died in 1882, he was accorded an unusual honor. He was buried in the white section of Woodlawn Cemetery. A park has been named in his honor along Noland Road between Lexington and East Walnut.

The Examiner is in the process of publishing a book containing several of the stories from this column and should be available soon at both The Examiner offices in both Blue Springs and Independence, and at the Blue and Grey Book Shoppe on the Independence Square.

Ref: Jackson County Pioneers, Pearl Wilcox and The Examiner files.

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