

Transcription:

PAGEANT DEPICTED INCIDENTS IN THE JOHN RHODES CASE

Activities of Underground Railroad Shown on the Stage

UNIQUE PORTRAYAL of Local History

Cast Composed of Descendants of Tomlinson Family

A pageant, "The John Rhodes Case," which depicted an incident of the antebellum days in Hamilton county and was unique in that the members of the entire cast were descendants of the well known Tomlinson family, who were connected with the activities of the underground railroad in Hamilton county before the Civil war, was given in a most realistic form at the home of Esther Tomlinson, two and a half miles north of Westfield, Saturday night. Nothing exactly like it was ever attempted in the county before and three women who were eye witnesses to some of the scenes shown in the pageant were present and said the story was well told.

One hundred and twenty-five automobiles brought over 400 people to see the pageant. They were from every part of Hamilton county and some from adjoining counties.

John Rhodes was the real name of a real slave who came to this county in 1844, and all of the incidents shown in the pageant actually occurred in that part of Hamilton county. The three women present who remembered Rhodes, the members of his family and some of the events were Jane Doan, of Plainfield, aged ninety-two; Esther Tomlinson, on whose farm the play was given and who is eighty-five, and Mrs. Abbie Carey, aged eighty-four, a sister of Esther Tomlinson and who lives just across the road from the Tomlinson farm. Every incident which the pageant attempted to portray was of special interest to them. In conversation with a friend during the evening, Mrs. Doan recalled that one morning she awoke to find her shoes and stockings were gone. When she made inquiries about them she was told by her mother that they had been given to a colored girl.

The stage consisted of beds of two hay wagons joined end to end. A curtain of canvas was stretched before the footlights. The site was between the barn and house. The yard was well lighted with electricity and a flood light, arranged especially for the occasion, made the stage as light as the noon day sun.

Out to the east was a road marked as leading to Westfield, which played an important part in the drama. A short distance north of the highway was a hay stack which also figured prominently in the evening's entertainment. On one end of the stage was an old fashioned cook stove on which meals for the slave owner were prepared. There was a fire in the stove and they made hot coffee.

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Photo of Asher Tomlinson

Caption: Author of the pageant, "The John Rhodes Case," presented by descendants of the Tomlinson family at the Esther Tomlinson home, Saturday night.

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(Continued from page 1.)

All of this was arranged on the same farm once owned by Robert Tomlinson and on which some of the incidents occurred.

James Tomlinson, of Indianapolis, impersonated John Rhodes and he did a real job of it. With his face blacked with cork he seemed to be perfectly at ease before the foot lights. His wife, Louanne Rhodes, was represented by Ruthanna Schlemmer, of Wabash. Seth Hinshaw, of Adams township

made a very good Singleton Vaughn, which was the actual name of the Missouri slave owner who came to Hamilton county in search of John Rhodes. Raymond Horney and John W. Williams impersonated slave hunters and were supposed to have come to Indiana with Vaughn to look for Rhodes.

Morton Tomlinson was the driver of the wagon who was supposed to carry Rhodes and his family to Noblesville and the colored family was supposed to have delivered Rhodes and his wife and children to Joseph Bailey, an early settler of that community, who was impersonated by Finley Tomlinson. The latter's wife was represented by Mrs. Ethel Horney.

Finley Tomlinson, who, impersonating Bailey, was supposed to be the leader of the assembly at the cabin where the slave owners called to get possession of Rhodes. The slave hunters included Raymond Horney and R. A. Hicks.

Singleton, the slave owner, ordered dinner for his men, the pageant went on to show, in a cabin that was then located on what is known as the Charles Hiatt farm in the vicinity of where the West Grove Friends church is now located. A splendid menu was prepared by Ida Hicks, Lelah Williams, Miss Williams and others. Hershell Hill and John Hicks foraged some in the community and got a few chickens for the dinner.

Following the dinner the scene of the pageant shifted to No. 1 school house in Washington township, now located on the Lafayette Pike. That was the fork in the road and there was the turning point in the story – whether the family of John Rhodes was to be taken to Noblesville for trial or Westfield, which was then one of the stations on the underground railroad. While leading up to this point the procession had the slave hunters in the lead, then came the Rhodes family on the wagon and the slave sympathizers were in the rear. The leader of the trouble at No. 1 was Henry Bray, father of Perry Bray, a local rural mail carrier, who was impersonated by Finley Tomlinson.

Daniel Jones, a Quaker of the old school, who was represented by John M. Williams, determined that the Rhodes family should not fall into the hands of the slave owners, jumped into the wagon, caught the reins of the horses and told the crowd that he was going to Westfield and if they did not want to get hurt to get out of the way.

Presumably, by a pre-arranged plan, the pageant showed that the Rhodes family left the wagon under the cover of darkness and hid in a hay stack on the farm where the pageant was given. Suspecting that the colored family was secreted somewhere about the farm, three of the slave owners came to the Tomlinson home that evening and asked that they be permitted to remain all night. They were accommodated. They were represented by C. H. McGuire, Wallace Baber and Grant Wagner. The Robert Tomlinson family was represented by Robert Tomlinson, Jr. as the husband, Mrs. Ethel Horney as the wife, and the children included Mary Emily Tomlinson, Hershell Hill, John Hicks, Myrtle Marion Wagner and Ruthanne Wagner.

Milton Tomlinson, one of the pioneer settlers of that community, was very well represented by Dr. Tomlinson, of Cicero. He conducted the Rhodes family across the dismal swamp in the vicinity of Deming one night, to keep them away from the slave owners.

Some time later, the pageant showed, Vaughn brought an action in the United States district court at Indianapolis for the possession of the members of the Rhodes family, the defendants being Asa Beals, Owen Williams, David Anthony and Christopher Williams, all of whom were prominent men in Washington township in their day. The pageant portrayed the court scene with S. Tomlinson, of Plymouth, as Judge; Morris Tomlinson, superintendent of the Westfield schools, as attorney for the plaintiff, and Curtis Tomlinson, of Barnesdale, O., as the lawyer for the defendant.

The story ended with the acquittal of Rhodes, who, it was held, had been a resident of Illinois, which was a free state, a sufficient length of time to make him a free man. The pageant was arranged by Asher Tomlinson, one of the leading citizens of Washington Township and who still resides in the Chester neighborhood.

There was a reunion of the Tomlinson family at the Esther Tomlinson homestead, Saturday, which was attended by 150 guests and practically all of them remained for the pageant. Russell Tomlinson was chosen president of the meeting and Mrs. Zon White, of Charlottesville, secretary.