

IN CIVIL WAR TIME

Reference – Sarah Emery Merrell, 1710 Monon Avenue, New Albany, Indiana

According to Sarah Merrell, her mother Elvira Lee often talked of her experience in Kentucky, as a slave, and as a free Negro. When she grew large enough her special duty was to care for the master's children. The master was a very well-educated man and often taught his children their lessons. Elvira studied as the white children studied and then wheedled them to get their father to hear her lessons each night. Therefore, by the time the white children were old enough to send away to school, the little colored girl had a fair education in the common school subjects.

She was about 16 years old when the Civil War began. The men drilled in a large field belonging to Captain Hall, her master, before they went to camp. There were often times during the war when it was very dangerous for the officers to come home and visit their families.

One night Captain Hall spent most of the night of his visit home, in Elvira's cabin, as he had received word that the soldiers were going to search his home for him. Next morning as he looked over the stables, Uncle Ed (Elvira's father) saw a man sneaking about the grounds and warned Captain Hall who immediately left,

taking Uncle Ed along and going along a blind trail following Green River.

On this particular occasion, the colored folks having learned that the “master” was on a visit home, gathered ‘round the big house to see him, not knowing , of course, that he had slipped away. Soon soldiers came from every direction and searched the plantation. (Morgan’s men were only about 15 miles away.) These soldiers questioned all the slaves closely but could find nothing out from them. They searched everywhere in the “big house” and in the slave cabins; they shot into the trees and beat the shrubbery. Finally an officer said, “Old Aunty, here, has told the truth – there is no man here,” and they went away.

Another time, Captain Hall was shielded by Mrs. Hall. She told the soldiers that she had a very sick child and when they asked what the matter was, she said, “The doctor wasn’t sure but he thought the child had the small pox.” This disease was very much feared by the soldiers and they soon left the place.

After the War, Captain Hall gave his Negroes one acre of ground for a school and another acre for a church and cemetery. Elvira Lee taught the school thus being one of the first Negro teachers. The school was first held in one of the Negro cabins and then a school building was erected but prejudice against it ran so high that it was burned within a few weeks. However, the Government soon ironed out these difficulties and Sarah Merrell

said, "Mother lived to see the Negroes getting an education as well as the white children."

Elvira Lee later married Edward Lee who had been a Union soldier and moved from Hart County, Kentucky to New Albany, Indiana where she died six years ago. She helped to organize one of the first Negro churches here and lived until all the other charter members had died.

[Source: VF BLACKS; Iris L. Cook, District No. 4, Floyd County WPA]