

Duckins' Story told at his Grave

Tales of Earlier Days

In last week's story about John Duckins, I left you hanging regarding the unusual things about his life. I did not want to tell the story ahead, knowing it would be presented at the Sunday Walk in the Cemetery. Duckins' was represented at his grave by Bill Harris, who presented the character in a sincere and dignified manner.

You will remember that Duckins was born a Kentucky slave, but escaped in about 1855. After several jobs in the East, he came to Mauston and bought a 40 acre farm for \$300. This was a respectable start for the young black man, with plans for marriage.

The story has been told very well by Paul Wolter, President of the Sauk County Historical Society, which we present here with light editing due to limitations of space.

Wolter reports that Duckins was living in Mauston in 1863 during the Federal Draft for soldiers for the Civil War. His draft name came up and he dutifully reported to Prairie du Chein for enlistment. He was turned down due to his race! Moreover, he was told he would still have to pay the \$300 that a draftee could pay to opt out of the draft!

This left Duckins with little choice but to sell his farm in Muston. He was only able to sell the farm for \$200, which with \$100 savings was turned over to the draft board. Now gone was the farm, his savings, and his plan for marriage. He remained single the rest of his life.

Duckins ultimately ended up living in Baraboo, perhaps living with the Maxwell and Hill families on the south side. Col. Maxwell of Baraboo was known to have harbored fugitive slaves in his cellar. During the 1870 census, John Duckins is listed as living with the Hill family. Later he lived with another former slave next to the Ringling family, four years before the Ringling boys started their circus.

Duckins ran a small livery business with a team of ponies and a buckboard. His services were sought to do everything from plowing gardens to hauling of materials. He was especially sought after to take small groups of neighborhood children in his buckboard to Devils Lake. He was very selective, not taking children unless he approved of their parents. He played the piano some also.

Duckins died in August of 1894, with many citizens following his casket to the cemetery. Despite having the respect of the community, and complimentary obituaries in both newspapers of the day, his grave remained unmarked for 21 years. In 1915 Mrs. Julia Crouch, had a small stone placed in appreciation for the many pony rides he had given to her daughter.

Today that simple headstone is almost undecipherable. A fund has been started to properly mark the grave of this interesting local character of days gone by. In a way, a new stone might be partial compensation for the double indignity suffered by this man—denial of

military service because of his race, yet accompanied by a fee for not serving his country as he had wished to!

Donations, large or small, for a suitable memorial stone are invited. They can be sent to the Sauk County Historical Society, 531 Fourth Avenue, Baraboo 53913.

